

Winter 2017 Newsletter

Detroit Bible Students Ecclesia

P.O. Box 51, Southfield, MI 48037-0051
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Only Believe?

*“And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.”
Acts 16:31*

It is easy to become a Christian according to the tracts that are circulated and the appeals from church pulpits across America. The formula for salvation is merely, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.” This simple confession is considered all that is necessary to bring one into Christ and to assure one’s entrance into heaven after death. Is this really all that is necessary?

The scripture cited above contains the words of the Apostle Paul to the Philippian jailor in Acts 16. In the account, Paul and Silas had been thrown into prison for their work as missionaries for Christ. At midnight an earthquake opened the prison doors and the guard was about to kill himself thinking that his prisoners had escaped. (His life was forfeit if he lost his charges.) When Paul assured him they were still there, in his amazement, the jailor asked Paul the question, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:25-34) Paul and Silas then took the opportunity to witness to the jailor who took them to his own house and washed their wounds. He and his whole family learned about Jesus from Paul and Silas and they were all baptized that night.

To the Romans, the Apostle Paul wrote, “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For

with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” (Romans 10:9,10)

If belief in Jesus is the object, what did Jesus say? John 3:17 says, “For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.” So Jesus’ prime objective was to “save” the world. What did Jesus do to encourage the people who followed him to become his devoted disciples?

In Luke’s Gospel we read of a large multitude that was following Jesus to hear his teachings. Did he tell them, “Only believe on me”? No. It says, “he turned and said unto them, If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:25-27)

Jesus could not have made the standard of discipleship any harder! Was Jesus trying to be discouraging? Why didn’t he tell this multitude that all they needed to do was to believe? This was the best possible time for Jesus to “save” a huge number of people if only he would tell them how easy it was to become his disciples. Didn’t Jesus want to save them?



On another occasion, a rich young ruler came to Jesus to inquire of him. The account is found in Mark 10:17-26. The young man knelt before Jesus and asked, "Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" Jesus told him to observe the moral commandments of the Law. These the young man said he had practiced all his life. Seeing his sincerity, the scripture says, "Jesus loved him." This was no hypocrite. Here was a young man trying to live a righteous life but who realized there was something he was yet missing. Did Jesus tell him "Just believe on me and you will be saved?"

No. That was not what Jesus said. Instead Jesus told him, "One thing thou lackest, go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me." Mark tells us the young man went away grieving "for he had great possessions." Jesus made no attempt to call him back by softening his words, but told his disciples, "How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God." The Disciples were astonished and wondered amongst themselves, "who then can be saved?"

Tucked in amongst the series of parables in Matthew 13, is the parable of the Pearl of Great Price. (Matthew 13:45,46) In this parable, a merchant seeking pearls finds one that is worth more than anything imaginable. He sells all that he has in order to buy the pearl. The Rich Young Ruler saw the Pearl. He heard the price, but sadly his conclusion was, "I can't afford it." Discipleship and its "exceeding great" reward (2 Peter 1:4; Revelation 2:10) does not come cheaply.



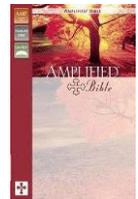
On another occasion, 5,000 men plus women and children followed Jesus to hear his teachings. This is the same 5000 that Jesus fed with five loaves and two fish. The next day, they again sought out Jesus who rebuked them by saying, "Ye seek me not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled." Jesus then told them they should labor for the "meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you." (John 6:26) So they asked, "What shall we do that we might work the works of God?" Jesus answered "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." (John 6:28,29) This is very much like Paul's words to the Philippian jailor, if only Jesus had stopped there.

But, Jesus didn't stop there. He went on to say that his flesh was "the living bread which came down from heaven." (vs. 51) He then added; "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you...He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him." (vss. 53-56) Why did Jesus say these things? He knew that very idea of drinking blood would be repugnant to the Jews. Did he want to offend the multitude? Just think of the numbers he could have added to his church if only he hadn't said such dreadful things.

Jesus made no attempt to explain. Apparently, he wanted no casual followers. The account tells us that "From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him." (vs. 66) Jesus asked the twelve he had specially called to be his disciples, "Will you also go away?" (vs 67) Peter, acting as their spokesman, affirmed their absolute reliance on Jesus by saying "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God." (vss. 68,69)

The foregoing passages of scripture appear to be leaving us with a contradiction of purpose. While Jesus seems to have made discipleship almost impossibly difficult, his Apostles seem to have thrown open the door and invited everyone in with a mere profession of belief. The difficulty arises from our understanding of what was meant when they urged their hearers to "believe" in Jesus.

In every scripture cited in this paper the word "believe," comes from Strong's 4100, *pisteuo*. Although in each of the texts we have used, this word is translated "believe," the Greek contains meanings not represented by our English word. We quote from the Introduction of the Amplified Bible:



"...let us take the sentence, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved' (Acts 16:31). What does the word 'believe' mean? It is extremely important, for multitudes are pinning their hope of heaven upon it. Yet that word long since ceased to convey, if it ever did, the sense of the original.

"Webster's long definition of 'believe' includes such synonymous expressions as, 'to place credence...apart from personal knowledge; to expect or hope...to be more or less firmly persuaded of the truth of anything, to think or suppose.' In this sense, most people believe in Christ—that He lived, that He was a perfect man Who sincerely believed Himself to be the Son of God, and that He died on the cross hoping to save sinners. But this is by no means the meaning of the Greek word which twenty-two New Testament versions out of twenty-four consulted render 'believe.' Yet they do so because there is no single better word in the English.

"The Greek word is '*pisteuo*,' and means, 'To adhere to, cleave to; to trust, to have faith in; to rely on'—**which summed up in, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved,' means an absolute personal reliance upon the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour.**"

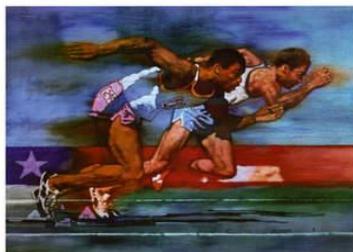
A scripture that demonstrates the full meaning of the word *pisteuo* is found in the book of James, chapter 2, verse 23. "...Abraham believed (*pisteuo*) God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God." What was the evidence of his belief? He was willing to sacrifice his beloved son. Abraham had confidence that since God had said that it would be through Isaac that the promised seed would come, God would bring him back from death. (Hebrews 11:17-19) No mere belief would have induced a man to sacrifice his only son. Abraham had "absolute personal reliance" on God.

In view of this definition of the word *pisteuo*, the Scripture in Romans, in which the Apostle Paul urges belief in the heart and confession with the mouth, would better be written, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt have *absolute personal reliance* in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man has *full confidence* unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." (Romans 10:9,10)

Today, one third of the world claims to be Christian. That is more than 2 billion people, and this does not even include all the professed Christians of past centuries. Still the world is full of sin and greed. People in the so-called Christian nations run after wealth and position and relatively few are truly concerned with the welfare of their neighbors. One needs only to look at the pages of history to find Christians killing Christians in inquisitions, in religious persecutions, and in wars, both religious and international. This hardly reflects the words of the man whose name they wear: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you." (Matthew 5:43,44) Clearly, the easy route to Christianity has let in many "tares" amongst the "wheat." (Matthew 13:24-30,36-43) Jesus told his disciples, "Strait [difficult] is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and **few** there be that find it." (Matthew 7:14) Jesus called his followers a "Little Flock." (Luke 12:32)

Jesus' Church is not some great institution of the world, but instead is composed of all the true believers who have the word of God written in their hearts. It is a "little flock" because the requirements are stringent. Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." (Matthew 16:24) This scripture and many others like it emphasize what we must do, not what we must say. Carrying a cross in the Lord's day unambiguously meant that you were on your way to death. The scripture says, "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? ...our old man [our sinful nature inherited from Adam] is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed." (Romans 6:3,6) When we come into Christ we are exhorted to "be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." (Romans 12:2)

The Christian's life is described in 1 Timothy as a fight. "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called." (1 Timothy 6:12) Paul also called it a race. "Know ye not



that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain...Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible." (1 Corinthians 9:24,25)

In the Summer Olympics just past, an interview with gymnast Simone Biles illustrated Paul's statement. She said she didn't go to dances, or to the Prom or to games or movies. She spent every day in the gym conditioning her body, preparing for the Olympics. She won the gold she sought.

We have been offered the gold of "glory, honor, and immortality, the divine nature." (Romans 2:7; 2 Peter 1:4) We must "run" our "race" with the same singleness of mind if we hope to get our reward. We cannot "win Christ" with a mere formula of words any more than wishing without working can win Olympic gold. The Apostle Paul said that all the things that he once valued in his life he counted as refuse that he might "win Christ," (Philippians 3:8)

Jesus warned his disciples that they would be despised and persecuted by the world. (John 15:18-20) Persecution doesn't happen very much in our world today, except in certain parts of the world. In nominally Christian countries there is little to fear. Christianity in these countries is a social identification. In this sort of "Christian" environment, a true Christian may still find that he is unappreciated because he does not partake of the attitudes and life-style of the world and he may be labeled, "holier than thou" by neighbors or co-workers. A true Christian spends time in God's word and seeks what is godly, not what is politically correct. Jesus said, "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! For so did their fathers to the false prophets." (Luke 6:26)

Are you a disciple of Christ? Do you really want to be one? Do you really want to be one even if it is hard; harder than just saying the right words? Being a true disciple of Jesus is a commitment to self-denial and personal sacrifice. In America today, it is easy to profess Christianity; easy to believe you are a Christian because you "accepted Jesus." But, does your life reflect Christ?

***"Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves."
(2 Corinthians 13:5)***

Please send me the following FREE booklet
WHY ARE YOU A CHRISTIAN?

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