



"Every man feels instinctively that all the beautiful sentiments in the world weigh less than a single lovely action."
—James Russell Lowell

10-Nov-17

What Makes a True Disciple? (Part One)

Among the world's more than seven billion people are upwards of two billion who identify themselves as Christians. Self-identification is fine for what it is worth, but we know that professed Christians come in many varieties with very different beliefs and practices. It seems impossible to believe that they could all be Christian, especially when so many of them live in a way that is contrary to the [teachings of Jesus Christ](#).

How can we know who is truly Christian? Is there a biblically verifiable way to identify who are true Christians and who are deceived, false Christians? What distinguishes a true disciple of [Jesus Christ](#)? Is it the keeping of God's commandments? Is it observing the [Sabbath](#) and [the holy days](#)? Is it attending a church with the right name? Is it believing specific prophecies or following the right leader? Just what is the identifying sign of a true follower of Christ?

Acts 2 illustrates how Jesus' disciples, now apostles, were first identified:

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from

heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. . . . So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "Whatever could this mean?" ([Acts 2:1-6](#), 12)

Notice that this event did not occur privately, but people from every nation under heaven witnessed the astounding miracle of God's giving of His Spirit to those He had called. [God](#) did this so that [the world](#) would know that He identified Himself with the disciples of Jesus. He did this through His Spirit inspiring the apostles to behave in a certain way.

When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He did it so that the world would see that He was identifying Himself with the people of Israel. He performed many miracles to prove that Almighty God was with them. When He "baptized" Israel in the Red Sea ([I Corinthians 10:2](#)), it was accompanied by an astounding parting of the waters, the death of the Egyptian army, and God protecting and leading Israel personally in the pillar of cloud and fire (Exodus 14).

When John baptized Jesus, God again made sure that people knew that He was with Him. With a miracle visible to many who had also come to [be baptized](#) by John, God identified Himself with His Son:

When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." ([Luke 3:21-22](#))

How does God identify Himself with the disciples of Christ today? When people are baptized into God's church, no miracle manifests itself when He sends His Spirit to live in the newly converted. They do not speak in

tongues. A pillar of fire does not appear. The heavens do not open, and no doves fly from heaven. But He does give His Spirit to those He calls, which is truly miraculous. Paul writes in [Romans 8:14](#), "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God." So, those who have God's Spirit in them are true Christians.

But we still have a problem in identifying them because we cannot *see* the Spirit in other people. To know who true Christians are, we must see the miraculous in what they do, something that is astoundingly rare in this world—something that only those with His Spirit can do. Jesus tells us what this miracle is in [John 13:34-35](#): "A new commandment I give to you, that you [love](#) one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

In [Matthew 22:36-40](#), Jesus says that God's law can be summed up in two commands: 1) "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind"; and 2) "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." What, then, is so different about His command here that He can call it "new"?

We should note that it is a command given by our Lord to the church and not to Israel. His instruction is directed specifically at His disciples about their relationship with one another. True, we can find the two great commandments in black and white in the [Old Testament](#) ([Deuteronomy 6:5](#); [Leviticus 19:18](#)), but there is a significant difference in this command.

What makes Jesus' command to His disciples new is the standard or condition that He places on their love for one another. Notice again [John 13:34](#): "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; *as I have loved you*, that you also love one another" (emphasis ours). The "new" dimension to His command is the incredibly high requirement He sets for their love: His own model of godly love. It is one thing to love one another in the same way we love and care for ourselves. It is a vastly greater love that motivates a person to give up his life for another, that sacrifices self-interest to promote the interests of someone else (see [Philippians 2:4](#)).

The "newness" then, was not in its originality, but in its extent. The practice of this kind of love would cause the world to recognize these men—and us—as disciples of Jesus. It is a love so rare and wonderful that when it happens, everyone who witnesses it takes notice. The true disciple, then, can be identified by his or her practice of the love of God. That criterion considerably narrows the field of those who are true Christians!

In [Romans 8:9](#), Paul writes, "Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His." This is only logical since only through Christ living in us by His Spirit can we reproduce His way of life. With the application of His Spirit in our lives, we can begin to produce the fruit of His Spirit, the first of which is His love: "But the [fruit of the Spirit](#) is love, [joy](#), [peace](#), [longsuffering](#), [kindness](#), [goodness](#), [faithfulness](#), gentleness, [self-control](#)" ([Galatians 5:22-23](#)).

In Part Two, we will see how two of these fruits help us understand what love is so that we can love one another as our Savior commands.

- Clyde Finklea

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Love God, Love Neighbor](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Popular music trumpets the theme of romantic love as the answer to all the world's ills, yet the composers of these lyrics have no idea as to what love really is. The fuzzy definition of love is responsible for tolerance of sin, deviancy and liberal, multi-cultural mis-evaluations. We should have a more mature understanding of love for God and love for neighbor. The outgoing concern toward other beings begins with God the Father to Jesus Christ to us. Without godly love, real love does not exist. Real love does not exist in isolation; another being must always be the object of real love. God's plan involving the reciprocal sharing of love among members of God's Family began well before the foundations of the world, at which time a possible

sacrifice for sin had to be factored in. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. The love of God, through the mechanism of His Holy Spirit, works on our inner beings (our mind and spirit), making us like Him, demonstrating the love of God, loving God with all our minds (keeping His commandments) and our neighbors (including our enemies) as ourselves. The extent that we love our brethren may be an accurate gauge as to how much we love God.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Learning to Love One Another](#)

by Geoff Preston

We may look around the church of God and wonder why so many are not being healed. Geoff Preston, suffering a chronic illness himself, uses his experiences to assure us that God is working out even these matters for our good.

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