

# What Is A Disciple?

The word disciple occurs frequently throughout the Bible and [‘discipleship’](#) is something that the Bible references often. But what does the word *disciple* actually mean? And what does it mean to be a *disciple of Jesus*?

## What Is A Disciple?

Our English language Bibles were translated from manuscripts written primarily in two languages; Hebrew (in the Old Testament) and Greek (in the New Testament). The translative history of the Bible is a fascinating journey, from an academic and historical perspective, and is well worth exploring. You can [read more about the translation process here](#).

In the original language of the New Testament, the word *disciple* is translated from a Greek word, *mathētēs* (μαθητής), from *manthano*, meaning “to learn”. *Mathētēs* therefore means (unsurprisingly) *a learner, a pupil or a scholar*. More accurately though, it means to be a learner *in the style of an apprentice*, that is, someone who not only accepts the views of their teacher but is also practising the same so as to eventually become like their teacher (Matthew 10:24, Luke 6:40).

It’s a word that would have been in common use during ancient times and its meaning was applicable beyond a Christian or religious setting (ie as a disciple of Plato or Socrates). Although the word has several applications, in the widest sense it refers to those who accept the teachings of anyone, not only in belief but also in life and practice.

## Who Is A Disciple Of Jesus?

When we come to the Bible, we see the word *disciple* used most

often in the context of a follower of Jesus and sometimes of John the Baptist (Matthew 27:57, Luke 14:27, Matthew 11:1, John 3:25). Throughout the gospels, it's the only name used for those who followed Jesus, and even those who had only been baptised with the baptism of John the Baptist (and hadn't received the Holy Spirit) were called disciples (Acts 19:1-4).

It would be accurate to say that a disciple of Jesus was someone who [believed the teachings of Jesus](#), who surrendered to his leadership, and who endeavoured to imitate his life.

When we move into the early history of the church (found in the book called the Acts of the Apostles), we see these disciples began to be called *Christians* (from the Greek word Χριστιανός (Christianos), meaning “follower of Christ”) (Acts 11:26).

## The Acts Of The Apostles

The book of the Acts of the Apostles provides a unique glimpse into the story of the early Christians, and to a time when these disciples of Jesus took their faith and began boldly proclaiming it to the world. In Acts, we are observing the very birth of Christianity – the movement which recognised and preached a resurrected Jesus as the promised saviour and king of the world.

The Book of Acts opens with this introductory paragraph by its author, Luke, also one of the four Gospel writers and one of Jesus' 12 closest disciples:

*“Dear Theophilus, in the first volume of this book I wrote on everything that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he said goodbye to the Apostles, the ones he had chosen through the Holy Spirit, and was taken up to heaven. After his death, he presented himself alive to them in many different settings over a period of forty days. In face-to-face meetings, he talked to them about thing concerning the kingdom of God.” |*

## Acts 1:1-4, MSG

The book's narrative describes the disciples as first-hand witnesses to the resurrected Jesus; witnesses to the astonishing truth of the Gospel message, and how they took that Good News to the world, beginning first in Jerusalem, then moving throughout Judea and eventually to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8).

The interactive map below shows the power of their witness to the gospel message, demonstrating not just areas where professing Christians are the majority of the population, nor where Christianity has been declared the national religion, but also the true extent of the global spread of the gospel since the first century. It's a powerful, visual reminder of God's promise to save people "from every tribe and language and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9)

## What Was The Good News?

Peter the Apostle, when making his speech to the Jews in Jerusalem after the day of Pentecost, summarised the Good News in this way:

*"Jesus the Nazarene, a man thoroughly accredited by God to you – the miracles and wonders and signs that God did through him are common knowledge – this Jesus, following [the deliberate and well-thought-out plan of God](#), was betrayed by men who took the law into their own hands, and was handed over to you. And you pinned him to a cross and killed him. But God untied the death ropes and [raised him up](#). Death was no match for him...All Israel, then, know this: There's no longer room for doubt – God made him Master and Messiah, this Jesus whom you killed on a cross. Change your life. Turn to God and [be baptised](#), each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is targeted to you and your*

*children, but also to all who are far away—whomever, in fact, our Master God invites.” | Acts 2:26-40, MSG*

Peter is attesting to the validity of Jesus of Nazareth, as God’s appointed saviour and king. He is witnessing to the truth of the resurrected Jesus and the confirmation of his true identity as Son of God. And he is urging his listeners to believe this truth, to surrender their lives to Jesus and receive God’s promise of forgiveness of sins and the hope of life, even after death. In short, he is urging them to become disciples of Jesus, followers and imitators of the Christ. He is urging them to become Christians!

The number of people who heard his message and believed his words on that day was incredible! The book of Acts tells us that over 3000 people [were baptised](#). And not only that, every day their number grew as God added those who were saved. (Acts 2:47)

*“That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptised and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, [the life together](#), the common meal, and the prayers.” | Acts 2:41-42, MSG*

## **The Teachings Of Jesus: The Gospel Of Good News**

Peter was, in reality, only reconfirming the teachings of Jesus; that of the Good News of salvation for humanity and truth of the kingdom of God; God’s rightful rule and sovereignty over all the earth ([Matthew 16:27](#), [Luke 21:26-27](#), [James 2:5](#), [1 Corinthians 2:9](#), [Numbers 14:21](#), [Psalm 22:27](#), [Habakkuk 2:14](#)).

*“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” | Mathew 4:23, NIV*

*“Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. “The time is fulfilled,” He said, “and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the gospel!” | Mark 1:14, BSB*

*“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, for the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed.” | Isaiah 61:1, NLT*

*“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” | Matthew 9:13, ESV*

*Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.” | Luke 17:20-21, NKJV*

## **How Do I Become A Disciple?**

Becoming a Christian and becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ **is the same thing**; we just don't really use the word disciple much anymore. The basis for us to become Christians remains the same as for those in the first century, who were Jesus' followers. So what is it that makes us a *disciple of Jesus*? What is it that makes us a *Christian*?

We need to look no further than Peter's words to the people at Jerusalem (Acts 2:22-42):

- We must believe that Jesus was **God-sent and God-endorsed, as the appointed saviour and king of the world**. We acknowledge that Jesus came as one of us, [like](#)

us in every way, so that he could defeat sin and death on our behalf (1 John 4:14, Galatians 4:4, John 3:16, Hebrews 2:14-17, Romans 5:12).

- We must believe that Jesus **died for the sins of the world** and was raised to life, never to die again (1 John 2:2, John 4:42, 1 John 3:5, Acts 2:32, Acts 3:15, 1 Corinthians 6:14, Romans 8:11).
- We must be **convicted of our sin, acknowledging our need for God's forgiveness and recognising that the name of Jesus is the only name under heaven by which humanity can be saved** (Ecclesiastes 7:20, 1 John 1:9-10, Romans 3:23, James 1:15 Acts 4:12, 1 Timothy 2:5).
- We must believe in the teachings of Jesus and **surrender to his guidance and leadership in our life**, not only as an apprentice to a teacher, but as a willing subject of God's designated King. Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth, he has first claim on our affections, he is the motivating force in our decisions and the final judge of our soul (Matthew 28:18-20, Isaiah 9:6, Luke 1:33, Acts 10:36, 1 Corinthians 15:27, Colossians 1:27, Romans 8:10, Ephesians 3:16, Acts 10:42, John 5:22. 2 Timothy 4:8, James 1:21, 1 Peter 2:25).
- We must **follow the example of Jesus and be baptised**, as directed in Mark 16:16. Baptism is God's arrangement for a person to gain a clean conscience based on their faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We choose to end one kind of life and begin another and the way of demonstrating that choice is to be baptised 'for the repentance of our sins'. The Bible compares baptism to burial, 'dying' to our past course of life and beginning a new one as a Christian, dedicated to God and saved through Jesus (Matthew 3:15, Matthew 10:28, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, Colossians 2:12, Mark 16:16, Matthew

28:19-20, Ephesians 4:4-6).

Written about 300 years after the birth of Christ, [the Apostles' Creed](#) summarises foundational Christian beliefs taught by the early church and is a bold declaration of our faith in Jesus Christ. It particularly affirms the teachings regarding Jesus, that of his virgin birth, his crucifixion, his death, and his subsequent resurrection; core elements of the gospel of good news. It is a primary statement of faith shared by Christians around the world, uniting them in common union with the work achieved in and through Jesus.

## Not Just A Disciple Of Jesus But Family Of God

Welcome to the family! When God puts you in Jesus, He also puts you [in community](#). When you believe and are baptised, you become a disciple of Jesus – a Christian – but not only that, you also become a valued member of God's family (1 Corinthians 12:27, Galatians 4:7, Romans 8:17, Galatians 3:26, 1 John 3:1-2, Ephesians 2:18-19, Ephesians 3:14-19). Becoming a Christian means you join a great cloud of faithful witnesses to the truth of the resurrected Christ (Hebrews 12:1), as believers of the message of Good News and disciples of Christ the King.

*"If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved." | [Romans 10:10, NIV](#)*

<https://vimeo.com/113801439>

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# True Religion

Religion is defined as “a cultural system of designated behaviours and practices, world views, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organisations, that relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual elements.”

Yet, there is no actual consensus among scholars as to what precisely constitutes a religion.

Nearly 85% of the world’s population identifies as being religious, claiming affiliation with one of the five largest religions; [Christianity](#), [Islam](#), [Hinduism](#), [Buddhism](#) or forms of [folk religion](#). These different religions all have distinct rules, regulations and beliefs that form part of that particular religion.

Christianity is the world’s largest religion, with over 2.4 billion followers. Growing out of Judaism – its earliest converts were Jews who were followers of Jesus Christ in the first century – it quickly spread from Judea into Asia Minor and then further abroad. By the fourth century, Christianity had become the official state religion of the [Roman Empire](#). Christianity has, in fact, played a major role in the shaping of western civilisation.

## What Is Religion?

When the [Latin](#) word *religio* found its way into the English language as *religion*, around the 1200s, it took the meaning of “life bound by monastic vows” or monastic orders. It eventually came to distinguish the domain of the church and the domain of civil authorities.

Yet the ancient and medieval world understood the word *religio* quite differently. For the ancients, it carried a meaning of *individual virtue of worship*, never as doctrine,



practice, or actual source of knowledge. In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, there is no precise equivalent of the English word *religion*. The Greek word *threskeia*, used in the New Testament, is sometimes translated as religion, however, the term was more correctly understood as 'worship', well into the medieval period.

In the Quran, the Arabic word [\*din\*](#) is often translated as religion in modern translations, but up until the mid-1600s, translators expressed *din* as law.

Religion, in itself, is a modern, western concept and it was understood in quite a different way by those who lived in the ancient world. Today, religion would perhaps be explained as a system of rules or practices governed by certain beliefs. The ancient world would have viewed this concept as *law* and saw *religion* quite differently; as the idea of worship or reverence of God or the gods, careful pondering of divine things and piety, or diligence.

## Religion Has A Bad Reputation

Discussion about religion is often long, complex, divisive and inconclusive. It doesn't come as any surprise that the IPSOS Global Poll released in 2017 shows that a majority of Australians (63%) believe that religion does more harm than good. Only one in four Australians say religion defines them as a person.

Religion has been much maligned – and [\*perhaps with good reason\*](#). Unfortunately, when men and women get their hands on religion, it is often for the purpose of control and manipulation of others. Many [\*terrible acts\*](#) have been committed 'in the name of religion' and supposedly with a divine blessing – yet God is often furthest from the minds of those perpetrating such acts. In reality, God is often the last priority; intolerance is the driving force behind many actions that claim permission on religious grounds.

*“Christianity itself has a long history of such intolerance, including persecution of Jews, crusades against Muslims, and the Thirty Years’ War, in which religious and nationalist rivalries combined to devastate Central Europe.” | [The New York Times](#)*

## What Is True Religion?

The aim of this article is not to impress on any reader the ‘rightness’ of our particular beliefs or doctrines. Whether a man or woman chooses to be religious, or not, should be a deeply personal consideration, without manipulation or coercion from others.

Rather, it is intended to be an honest examination of what ‘true religion’ should be for any committed Christian, professing belief in Jesus’ saving work and God’s divine plan for the world.

If we have accepted Jesus as our saviour, our beliefs and our practices must line up and work together in harmony. We must profess and practice true religion, not merely an inadequate form, which hasn’t touched our hearts. Timothy warns against a form of godliness, which appears righteous from the outside but in reality denies the power that godliness has to radically transform us (2 Timothy 3:2-5).

The word *religion* is only used a few times in the Bible. But the concept of religion, as it was originally understood, actually permeates the entire Bible. True religion, at its core, is about the relationship between God and ourselves and how this transforms us from the inside out.

This understanding began early on in the book of Genesis, where men began to call on the name of God (Genesis 4).

*“Now men began to worship God, not only in their closets and families, but in public and solemn assemblies. The*

worshippers of God began to distinguish themselves: so the margin reads it. 'Then began men to be called by the name of the Lord' – or, to call themselves by it. Now Cain and those that had deserted religion had built a city, and begun to declare for irreligion, and called themselves the sons of men. Those that adhered to God began to declare for Him and His worship, and called themselves the sons of God." | Benson Commentary

Another commentary has this to say:

"The name of God signifies in general 'the whole nature of God, by which He attests His personal presence in the relation into which He has entered with man, the divine self-manifestation, or the whole of that revealed side of the divine nature, which is turned towards man'. In Genesis 4, we have an account of the commencement of that worship of God which consists in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, or in the acknowledgment and celebration of the mercy and help of God. Those of the family of Seth began, by united invocation of the name of God of grace, to found and to erect the [kingdom of God](#)." – Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament

True religion – pure religion – is the acknowledgment of our need for God's mercy, our worship of Him and what He has done for us and the application of His character in our lives, because of our thankfulness.

True religion is the seamless unity of believing *and* doing and it's demonstrated throughout the Bible by countless examples of [faithful men](#) and [women](#). (Hebrews 11:1-40). It's an **active faith**, shown by both word and deed and not just empty talk.

"Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster

*before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless ('the fatherless and the widow') in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world." – James 1: 26-27, MSG*

Jesus put it in another way:

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" Matthew 22:37-39, NIV*

And again, in Hosea:

*"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." – Hosea 6:6, BSB*

## **What True Religion Isn't**

True religion isn't rules-based or rituals-based but is instead firmly rooted in faith. Faith, in response to God's action in our lives, [alters everything about us](#); our daily relationships, our perspective on life, our interactions with family, neighbours, friends and community. When God is present and completely sovereign in our lives, when we adhere to God and declare for Him and His worship, God calls us His children and part of His family. This is religion in its purest and most true form.

God's gift of freedom is easily perverted and often squandered by men or women placing religious burdens and rituals on their fellow man. Jesus condemned the religious leaders of his day for exactly this, commenting that *"they tie up heavy, burdensome loads and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them..."* (Matthew 23:4).

God is not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways. He is a deeply real and loving Father who invites us into a personal relationship with Him. It is always an invitation, never coercion or guilt-driven; we are given space and freedom to answer His invitation. [Through Jesus](#), we have been set free and are invited to participate in God's saving work with humanity.

How important it is for any sincere and genuine Christian to constantly promote this extraordinary message of God's grace and ensure we don't unwittingly return to a life of rule-keeping, which God finds no pleasure in.

What people need to see and experience from us is **true religion** – active, transformative and inspiring. The kind of religion that Jesus demonstrated every day.

*“Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, **then Christ died unnecessarily.**” | Galatians 2:21, MSG*

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The modern concept of the meaning behind the word religion is an abstraction that involves distinct sets of beliefs or doctrines. Its usage, in this way, began with texts from the 17th century, resulting from events such as the splitting of Christendom during the Protestant Reformation and globalisation in the age of exploration.

However, the word religion, from the Latin *religio*, meaning ‘to bind’, is a word which in the ancient and medieval world was used to refer to *individual virtue of worship; respect for what was sacred, and a reverence for the divine*. It described an attitude of *being* rather than *creed*.

You may be interested to read more in the article: [From Religion To Cruciformity](#).

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# The Gospel Of Good News

When we think of the gospel, we can tend to think of it in only 'New Testament' terms. We might be of the impression that the gospel was something that came about around the time of Jesus and subsequently spread throughout the world by his followers. While this is somewhat true, upon more extensive reading we learn that the message of good news is much older than we thought. Yes, it concerns Jesus but it was preached long before his actual birth. In reality, it's a message as old as time itself and its inception stretches right back to the garden of Eden. And it's a message of good news and hope for all people!

## A Little Background On The Word "Gospel"

"Good news" is the English translation of the Koine Greek word 'euangélion' (εὐαγγέλιον) (εὖ eû "good" + ἄγγελος ángelos "messenger"). In Old English, it was translated as 'gōdspel' (gōd "good" + spel "news"). The Old English term was retained as 'gospel' in Middle English Bible translations and has subsequently been carried forward into Modern English translations.

*Incidentally, our modern word, evangelise or evangelist comes from the original Greek and carries the same meaning – one who preaches or tells good news, a 'messenger of good'. The writers of the gospels are sometimes known as the Four Evangelists, for this reason.*

The message of 'good news' is taught throughout the books of

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and it's certainly no coincidence that these books are collectively known as The Gospels.

## But What Is The Good News?

The Gospel is described as "the good news of the Kingdom of God and the things which concern Jesus Christ". Jesus himself preached about the coming kingdom of God, together with John the Baptist. Later, men like Paul the Apostle and Peter continued the message of good news

*"Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God." – Mark 1:14, KJV*

*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' . . . And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom . . ."* – Matthew 4:17, 23, NIV, KJV

*"But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptised."* – Acts 8:12, HCSB

*"For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!"* – Acts 28:30-31, NIV

## In The Beginning...

[God's purpose](#), from the beginning was populate earth with people He could call His family, who were like him in every way. God created humans with this in mind and established the principle of **free choice**. He wanted us to **choose** Him, to **want** to be like Him. This kind of living, that reflects a desire to honour God and manifest His character to the world

is what God calls the beginning of the kingdom of His son ([Colossians 1:13](#)).

Unfortunately, when given the choice, humanity chose wrong. We acted in a way completely foreign to God's character. Motivated by pride and selfishness and driven by impatience, we chose to "make ourselves like God" on our terms, not His. This choice, the first act of sin in the world, brought about its awful consequence – mortality, and being driven from God's presence in shame and disappointment. This is the story of Adam and Eve and their banishment from the garden of Eden.

## Jesus Is The Good News

Yet God didn't give up. His desire to be at one with us, to complete His purpose with humanity, was so intrinsic that He immediately put in place a plan to bridge that ravine, to heal the breach between Himself and His creation. He did not allow His purpose to be compromised by our choice. This extraordinary plan was revealed in [His son, Jesus](#).

*"Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."* – 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, BSB

The saving acts of God, due to the work of Jesus on the cross and Jesus' resurrection from the dead, bring reconciliation ("atonement") between people and God and it is a message of hope for the whole world (Luke 14:15-24). Through Jesus, we have forgiveness of sins and the blessing of God's grace.



# The Message Isn't New

It would be easy to assume that the gospel was introduced by Jesus during his earthly ministry. Yet, this message isn't new at all – it's much older than that and, in fact, Revelation 14:6 calls it 'the eternal gospel', "proclaimed to all those who dwell on earth."

In Galatians 3:8, we read the following: "Scripture foresaw that God would justify the [Gentiles](#) by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." Here, Paul is referencing a time in Abraham's life, [shortly after he left Ur](#), when God blessed him and told him the purpose He had with him.

*"I will bless those who bless you, but I will put a curse on anyone who puts a curse on you. Everyone on earth will be blessed because of you." – Genesis 12:3, CEV*

This blessing is further clarified by the words of Peter the Apostle in Act 3:28, where he was addressing the Jews, Abraham's descendants. He tells them, "You are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in your descendants shall **all the families of the earth be blessed**. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to **bless you**, in **turning away every one of you from his iniquities**." (Act 3:25-26)

Jesus Christ himself revealed that the Kingdom of God has been prepared for us for far longer than we can imagine.

*"Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." – Matthew 25:34, ESV*

God's plan of blessing has been in place since the beginning.

It was made known to Abraham and he was promised a descendant who would fulfill God's promise of blessing for the world, first to the Jewish people and then, to all peoples of the world. In this way, Abraham was able to look forward in faithful anticipation of the future when the saviour would be born, to fulfill the promise of blessing made to him. Jesus confirms this, when speaking to the Jews (who doubted he was the one who had been promised).

*"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." – John 8:56, NIV*

## **Our Purpose Is God's Purpose**

Our purpose and the reason for our creation is to be part of God's family. The good news is that through Jesus, we can be! We can become part of God's family and part of His kingdom community right now, saved through the work of Jesus. Not only that, we can look forward to a future that is full of hope and blessing, trusting in God's promise that has been established from the beginning of the world.

God has great plans for you, if you choose to accept them. The gospel message is one of hope and blessing and **everyone** is invited to take part.

*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." – Jeremiah 29:11, NIV*