



4. Believer and disciple ... synonymous?

The question. Are the words "*believer*" and "*disciple*" synonymous in the Bible ... describing the same people? No, they are not synonyms. The "*Disciple or believer*" article posted on the www.MyDisciplemaker.org site provides a detailed explanation of the difference between them. This answer, on GoodQuestions, is a follow-up to that comparing *receiving salvation by faith to becoming a disciple by works*. The answer provided here would be more meaningful if you read that other article ... linked from the bottom left of MyDisciplemaker's homepage.

Believing in Jesus. Please do not skip over this paragraph even if you already know that you are born-again. This is an important part in answering the disciple-believer question. To establish a personal relationship with Jesus, a person must believe in Him for salvation. Another of our sites, www.911GOD.org, describes how to do that. If you have any doubt about your salvation, you should visit that site ... make a 911 call to God if you need to get right with Him. Salvation is a gift received by *faith alone* in *Christ alone* based on *His work alone*. That gift is free to us because Jesus paid the full price. It is correct to say that some words are used somewhat interchangeably in the Bible to identify the followers of Jesus. In many cases, what is written about each applies equally to all ... saints, brethren, believers, members of the Body, disciples, etc. To enter into the family of God requires the exact same thing no matter what label is used afterwards to describe His children. "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*" Ephesians 2:8-10. That passage makes it clear that salvation is by grace, through faith, and not of works. Good works are important as a consequence of salvation ... but not as a prerequisite for it. That is important in understanding the difference between a believer and a disciple.

Prerequisites to be a disciple. In the MyDisciplemaker article, *Disciple or believer*, the prerequisites for being a disciple are described in detail as four distinctions. Each is works-based and very different from the faith-only step of becoming His child. Briefly described, the four distinctions (prerequisites) are: (1) Abiding in the Word, John 8:31-32, (2) Loving one another, John 15:8, (3) Bearing fruit, John 15:8 ... that verse actually says that one becomes (the definition of the Greek word translated as "*prove*") a disciple by bearing fruit, and (4) Taking up one's cross to follow Him as a disciple, Luke 14:25-33, in denying relationships and self, paying the great price, and renouncing all claims to all. These require our effort and our sacrifice ... while salvation was accomplished exclusively by His effort and His sacrifice. One must be a believer to become a disciple. However, the prerequisites above are excluded from what it takes to become a believer because salvation is "*not by works.*" They are included in the *good works* that should follow salvation described in Ephesians 2:10. If becoming a disciple were the same as becoming a believer, then there would be a conflict between the many *faith-only* verses and the ones mentioned above. However, since the two are not the same, there is no conflict. We cannot add the works required to be a disciple to the *faith-only* basis of the free gift of salvation. Salvation is a gift, Romans 6:23. Moreover, a free gift is not free if we must pay to acquire it or keep it. Salvation is free to us. Being His disciple is costly to us ... very costly.

Deception? Every disciple is a believer. Therefore, every statement in the Word about a believer applies to a disciple. However, not every believer is a disciple ... many believers falling short of even attempting to meet the requirements mentioned above. If we say that the high threshold one must cross to become a disciple is required to become a believer, we have a serious problem in addition to our denying faith-only salvation. If disciple and believer are synonymous, we must conclude something very problematic and condemning about the church today. A very significant percentage of those sitting in the pews of evangelical churches are not His disciples as defined in the New Testament. If disciple equals believer, then a very large number of those in the pews are not saved. However, they have believed ... and are saved even though they fall short of being disciples. The evangelical church has not deceived multitudes of unsaved pew-sitters into thinking that they are saved when they are not. Rather, the church has fallen short of fulfilling its commission to make disciples, Matthew 28:18-20. The deception for some may be in not raising the bar ... in not teaching and training believers to be disciples.

Persecution and disciples. There was an interesting phenomenon in the early church. Severe and organized persecutions came against it in wave after wave. During intense persecutions, zeal and commitment in the church was intense. The high price exacted from those who followed Christ kept the uncommitted away. The church, during those times, had a high concentration of disciples. However, there were valleys between the peaks of persecution in which the cost of following Jesus was perceived as greatly diminished. During those lulls, the less committed found their way into the church. One can imagine that attendance rose further as hiding believers (not disciples) came out of their caves of denial and returned to the church. In those lulls, the percentage of disciples in the church diminished ... only to rise again with the next wave of persecution. In my mission trips to central Europe, I saw a similar downward shift. With the demise of the effects of communism, zeal and commitment in the church gave way to casual obedience and stunted growth as the church became less persecuted and more westernized.

What about you? There is a significant difference between being a believer and continuing to become a disciple. Being just a believer has great benefits ... just as childhood does. However, there is so much more when one grows to become His disciple. *Tadpole* and *frog* are neither synonyms nor antonyms. The former, to be fully developed, must become the latter. Similarly, *believer* and *disciple* are neither synonyms nor antonyms. The term *believer* is indicative of birth ... the term *disciple* is indicative of growth. Are you a disciple ... on your way to being one ... or ready to start the exciting and challenging journey? The resources of the MyDisciplemaker site may help you on your journey.

This Good Questions answer, copyright 2004 by Acts One Eight, Inc., may be copied unchanged for free distribution ... but only with this copyright statement attached. Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible. Please visit www.ActsOneEight.org to access more information, Bible eLessons, daily devotionals, and Bible training courses on our multiple sites. Please send any questions or comments to contact@GoodQuestions.org.



Acts One Eight, Inc., PO Box 50200, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80949 USA.