

The Significance of the Name 'Christian'

By Malcolm H. Watts

According to Acts 11.26 'the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch'. This would have been about AD 43, some ten years or so after the Lord Jesus left this world. What the Bible does not tell us, however, is who invented the name 'Christian'. It does not seem to have originated within the church. Luke tells us that the believers were so 'called', which suggests that others gave them the name. Among themselves, the Christians were known as 'disciples', 'brethren' or 'saints'. In the early days they do not seem to have used the word 'Christian' very much, if indeed at all. Apart from the reference to it in Acts 11, there are only two occurrences of it in the New Testament: in Acts 26:28 where the Herodian prince,

Agrippa II, says, 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian'; and in 1 Peter 4:16 where mention is made of it as the term of accusation on the lips of the church's persecutors, 'If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed.' There is no example of it being used by Christians and this indicates that it was not chosen by them.

Nor is it likely that the Jews coined the word. They believed that those belonging to 'this sect' were heretics of the worst kind and they tended to use words of reproach when referring to them. They called them 'Galileans' or 'Nazarenes'. To have linked the sacred name of 'Christ' with the followers of Jesus would have looked far too much like a concession that Jesus was the Christ, the promised

Messiah, and that His disciples were God's true and faithful people. These were the things the Jews passionately and vehemently denied. They would therefore be the very last to confer such a title upon believers in Jesus.

More could be said in support of the view that the Gentiles gave them this name. Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria, was where the first church was planted among the Gentiles. Whereas in the past the Jews had witnessed the emergence of churches and had devised their own nicknames, the Gentiles were those who now needed a name for them and they might well have come up with such a name as 'Christian'. Conybeare and Howson assure us that 'the people of Antioch were notorious for inventing names of derision, and for turning their wit into the channels of ridicule.' Certainly in its form the name is similar to others of known heathen origin, e.g. Pompeians. The evidence does tend to favour the opinion that the name originated from the Gentile community in Antioch.

From whatever quarter the name proceeded, we are sure that it was divinely ordered - and perhaps even divinely given - and for the fulfilling of an ancient prophecy. 'The Lord God shall ... call his servants by another name.' (Is 65:15, cf. 62:2)

What the name 'Christian' signifies

(1) The name shows clearly and unmistakably that Christ is the object of faith. It is He in whom we believe and on whom we must rely for salvation. Belief in a system of theology will not save us; neither will belief in a code of ethics. Christ alone can save and in Christ alone we must trust if ever we are to experience the salvation of God. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.' (Acts 16:31)

It is as 'Christ' that He is preached to us in the Gospel and it is as 'Christ' that He must be trusted. What do I mean? 'Christ' is a Greek word meaning "the Anointed One" and this has obvious reference to those Old Testament anointings by which men were set apart to special tasks. Such were prophets (1 Kings 19:6), priests (Exod. 30:30) and kings (2 Sam 2:4). The Lord Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit, so that He might be our prophet, revealing to us God's way of salvation; our priest, offering Himself a sacrifice for our sins; and our king, delivering us from death, judgment and everlasting hell. This is the One in whom we must believe. We must rest with child-like trust on what He has said. We must look to Him, who bled and died for sinners, for our acceptance with God. In all our failure and shame, we must call upon Him to save us, who only has the power and ability to do it. This is what shows a man to be a 'Christian'.

(2) This name also suggests the wonderful relationship believers have with the Saviour. In Bible-times, as now, when a woman married, she took the name of her husband (Is 4:1). If we are entitled to receive Christ's name - calling ourselves 'Christians' - it can only be because faith brings us into a real and intimate union

significant change in the person who receives it. It is the sign and symbol of new life. The Lord gave, for example, new names to Jacob and Peter; they were indications of the new characters they were to become (Gen 32:28; Jn 1:42; cf. also Acts 4:36; 13:9). There must surely be something of that idea here. When we

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with Him. This is exactly what the Bible teaches. Believers are said to be 'joined unto the Lord.' (1 Cor 6:17) Let others boast of their riches, honours and pleasures. We glory rather in the fact that Christ is ours in the bonds of an everlasting covenant, and we joyfully sing: 'My beloved is mine; and I am his.' (Song 2:16) 'Happy is that people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is that people, whose God is the Lord.' (Ps 144:15) Before, while separated from Christ, we knew only sin, loss and misery; but now, Christ having been received as Saviour and Lord, we are blessed beyond our highest expectations. Christ shares with us His priceless possessions: the treasures of His grace, as well as the inheritance of His eternal glory. We have become 'heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ' (Rom 8:17).

(3) A new name marks a

respond believingly to the Gospel, we are called 'Christians', and not simply because we have a close and precious relationship with Christ, but because, through God's transforming grace, we are different people. Read this for yourselves in God's Word. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor 5:17).

(4) The title was no doubt suggested to the people of Antioch by the use which disciples make of the actual name of 'Christ'. That name was not only prominent in the church's worship and preaching, but when someone, on profession of faith, was baptized, baptism was administered "in the name of Jesus Christ." (Acts 2:38; cf. 1 Cor 1:13)

To call a name on something was an accepted way of marking ownership (Num

32:42; Deut 3:14; 2 Sam 12:28). The modern English idiom is 'my name is on it', that is, 'it belongs to me'; and when the name of Christ was called over a baptized person, it publicly stamped that person as Christ's property.

God's will, as it is revealed in His Word, does not allow for secret discipleship. In baptism and then through the rest of life, you are to let it be known that 'that worthy name by the which ye are called' openly testifies to the fact that "ye belong to Christ." (James 2:7; Mk 9:41).

(5) When someone's new name included a part or the whole of God's name, it was a sign that the covenant promise was wonderfully fulfilled - 'I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people'. God was in that new name as a sign and pledge that He would be in that person's life and experience.

Into Abram and Sarai's names was inserted the letter "h", one of the letters of "Jehovah" (Gen 17:5, 15), and this at the very time when God was assuring them of His presence and help. 'I will establish my covenant ... to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.' (v.7). Oshea's name received a similar addition. 'Moses called Oshea, the son of Nun, Jehoshua.' (Num 13:16) Now why was this? The answer must be because Oshea was to know that God was with him in a very remarkable way. God said to him: 'I will be with thee: I will not fail

thee, nor forsake thee.' (Josh 1:5)

Believers are called 'Christians' because their privilege is to know the sweet and abiding presence of Christ (Matt 28:20; Heb 13:5).

(6) In any study of this name the obvious ought not to be overlooked. Those who were followers of some leader were usually called after him, and by a term ending just like this one. There were Caesareans, Pompeians, and Herodians. These early disciples were called 'Christians' because they were followers of Christ. 'The proper import of this name', wrote Robert Hall, 'is a follower of Christ: it denotes one who, from mature deliberation and an unbiased mind, embraces the religion of Christ, receives His doctrine, believes His promises, and makes it his chief habitual care to shape his life by His precepts and example.'

'Follow me!' is still the call of Christ, and our plain duty as Christians is to do just that (Matt 9:9; 10:38 etc). There is a great need today for the revival of genuine, practical Christianity.

'Ye different sects, who all declare,
"Lo, here is Christ!" or, "Christ is there!"
Your stronger proofs divinely give,
And show me where the Christians live.'
(Charles Wesley)

(7) Here is a name which binds people together. Other names tend to divide, but

this name unites. The Gospels tell us that when the Lord Jesus died the inscription on His cross "was written in Hebrew and Greek and Latin" (Jn 19:20), the three main languages of the earth, as if suggesting that the message of redemption had to be published to all the nations. What results from this preaching of Christ? Men and women of different races, cultures and languages are converted to Him, and in the Christ of the Scriptures they find their unity. With this in mind, we notice something very striking about the word 'Christian'. As R. B.

Rackham says: 'The word is Greek, the idea Hebrew, and the form Latin.'

Party names and all man-made distinctions should be forgotten, for what really and ultimately matters is Christ.

'We, being many, are one body in Christ' (Rom 12:5; cf. Gal 3:29; Col 3:11).

May God's blessing rest upon all who are Christians indeed!