

## Called Christians

(Acts 11:26 ~ the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch)

Acts 11:19 - 30

This period in the life of the Early Church was one of huge expansion: we have seen how the God the Holy Spirit in the space of about ten years created a springboard for the gospel to go to the ends of the earth. He did this through two key personalities: Stephen & Philip, and two key conversions: Paul & Cornelius (Mordecai Ham 1934 led Billy Graham to Jesus). The move forward was personified by leaders and duplicated by the saints: this is every Christian by the way, made holy by the power of the cross. Antioch was the key: Persecution got the nameless saints there, Faith build on their legacy, Paul & Barnabus consolidated them into Jesus, & Compassion flowed in the first offering to be given away to others less fortunate. Expansion was the natural consequence such godly explosive Holy Spirit DNA. The reaction of the world was as it always is: Persecution of the Saints (in this case Peter) led to his deliverance and more prayer, and judgment upon Herod. Acts 11:18 summarizes the reaction of the Jerusalem Apostles: "So then God has granted even the gentiles repentance unto life": an epoch making declaration by these conservative leaders. As Alan showed us last week, God had put the matter beyond doubt by bestowing the Holy Spirit on a Gentile Household. So the conversion of the first gentile through Peter led to the systematic evangelization of the Gentiles by Paul.

### **Greek Mission initiated by Fools for Jesus! V19-21**

So this northwards expansion by those who had accepted Jesus as Lord results in evangelistic activity fanning out across the empire: an ancient Diaspora: we saw in 8:4 they preached the word wherever they went, telling the message (11:19). Persecution was a spur to evangelization: the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Geographically they went to

Phoenicia (Lebanon), Cyprus (Barnabus & Lucius' home 13:1). Culturally they initially spoke only to Jews but in Antioch to Greeks also (this predates the decision in Jerusalem). Antioch was a key centre (3<sup>rd</sup> City of the Empire) and there was no more appropriate or strategic place to launch a springboard for worldwide mission (India and China were destinations from Antioch). God blessed their faith.

### **Greek Mission was endorsed by Barnabus (v22-24)**

The Jerusalem church heard that Gentiles had received the word of God (as in 8:14 & 11:1) and wanted to ensure themselves that all was well and nurture this new multi-cultural church so they sent Barnabus. The man with the biggest heart in the church: this time no apostles, no laying on of hands, he saw for himself and let it go: he exalted them, taught them, and basically said: more Lord! And more were added (2:41,47. 5:14): additions **not to the church but to the Lord**. When we see the Lord adding to the Lord so that the Lord is both the object and subject, sources and goal of all evangelism we have to repent all self-centered, self-confident concepts of Christian Mission.

### **Greek Mission consolidated by Saul (11:25-26)**

The humility of Barnabus and his sense of God's strategy are amazing: he brings Saul to Antioch (he's at Tarsus from 8 years previously: 9:28-30, his life had been threatened when preaching in Syria and Cilicia: Galatians 1:21, he had suffered physical persecution 2 Corinthians 11:23f, and been disinherited by his family: Philippians 3:8). This confirmed Saul's calling as an apostle to the Gentiles (9:15,27) and started a one-year teaching ministry to young believers. What did he teach? About Jesus, Jesus & Jesus (his life, death, resurrection, exaltation, His promise of the Spirit, present reign and future coming). We need to do the same with the young Christians we have here at St Andrews: they are being added to Jesus! Now Antioch was famed for its wit and nicknaming, first called the believers Christians (Acts 26:28, 1

Peter 4:16). Previously they had been called: disciples (6:1), Saints (9:13), Brethren (1:16, 9:30), Believers (10:48), those being Saved (2:47) & People of the Way (9:2).

### **Greek Mission is authenticated by Good Works (11:27-30)**

Agabus prophesied a famine, and this resulted in a generous response from the Antioch church. Each gave according to their ability (v29) and this led to action: the money was sent via Saul & Barnabus (v30). Evangelists, then teachers, now famine relief: Galatians 2:10 gives us an account of the trip. Why was the Jerusalem church in need: because of their extreme generosity mentioned in Acts 2/4. The collection was for the brothers (and sisters) living in Judea. Karl Marx wrote in 1875: "from each according to their ability to each according to their need". How sad that believers did not introduce him to Jesus!

So lets look especially at the best, the greatest, the most significant of all names, a name loaded with meaning and implication for those who bear it and those who hear it: the name "*Christian*". It is the given name of those having Faith in Jesus Christ, the people of Jesus, and the christening or naming took place at Antioch in northern Palestine.

In a darkly sinful place, a deeply worldly place, a decidedly pagan place (not so different from the reality of Canterbury), they stood out as examples of a different humanity, a better humanity. In a tangible way their demeanor and speech conveyed the truth that they didn't belong to Antioch, or indeed to this earth at all. They belonged to Heaven, because they embodied the Kingdom of God. And they embodied the Kingdom of God because they belonged to Christ. They embodied Him. They reminded people of Him. They loved Christ, lived Christ, breathed Christ, proclaimed Christ, and ministered Christ into the lives of others. Christ was their all, and for them He was in all, and through all.

I believe that in this 21<sup>st</sup> century we need to be clear about this all over again. Christian brothers and sisters, Canterbury and the wider world needs to be reminded of the origin of our name - that it is an objective description of who we belong to and who we follow. I repeat, they were not dubbed Christians at Antioch just because they were good people (although they were), or because people approved of them (which some did). They were called Christians because they were Christ's people. Jesus Christ was their Lord.

And that is what a Christian is today: for that is what you and I claim we are. That is our brand name. We may be good examples of the brand or poor ones, strong in faith or weak in faith. But so long as we accept Jesus as Saviour and submit to him as Lord we are Christians. To say that someone is a Christian solely because they seem to us to observe Christian standards of behaviour is to fall into a trap. And it drives a coach and horses through Acts 11. You simply cannot have the virtues of Christianity without the person of Jesus Christ.

And it was exactly this *person presence* - the manifest presence of Christ, his zeal for God in them, his life transforming Spirit, the radiance of his being in his redeemed people - that earned them the name Christian.

Brothers and sisters, if you know and love Christ; if he lives in you by his spirit; if you are walking daily with him, however falteringly, then wear that name with honour because it is truly yours. You may know or, more likely, imagine that you know a hundred people more loving, more forgiving, more caring, and more upstanding than yourself. But I urge you not to doubt your Christianity, because that is not the test, thank God. Commitment to Christ is. It's essentially a marriage. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in spiritual sickness and in health, you belong to Christ and He belongs to you. And for that, you are fit to be called a Christian.

Now I know the objection people raise against all this. It

implies, so they say, that behaviour doesn't really matter. That you can love the Lord and do as you like! But that is misguided, even mischievous. Paul faced this objection and demolished it every time (e.g. Romans 6:1). It overlooks the facts of Jesus teaching about holiness, and ignores the fact that Jesus Christ transforms human lives.

Christianity as I have defined it is no sinners' charter! It's not *'love the Lord and do as you like'*. When we love Jesus, our values change. They become *'Love the Lord and do as He likes.'* Hearts and minds that are truly Christ-filled desire above all else to be pleasing to their Lord. So profession and possession go hand in hand.

If we can sum up all the very best in human qualities in the phrase 'a good person', then not every good person may be a Christian, but every Christian should, indeed must, be a good person.

So what do these truths about our name imply for us in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Quite a lot really, but let me just say two key things.

### 1 'Christian' is not a name to be assumed lightly

When two people get married the woman usually takes the man's surname. That's not purely for convenience. It strongly and openly signifies their union. It proclaims that these two people have become one flesh and one family.

Becoming a Christian means entering into living relationship with Jesus Christ - as Rabbi and Disciple, teacher and pupil, master and apprentice, brother and friend. It's fantastic, but it's demanding - a daily adventure with the Lord of the universe.

And as the marriage ceremony warns, it's not a contract to be entered into lightly. There's a cost, and Jesus said that anyone who contemplates taking the family name must count

that cost before signing up.

It is an enormous privilege to bear Christ's name before the world - and an awesome, awesome responsibility. We will never ever deserve it, because it was bought for us with the blood of another. But by the grace of God and the help of the Spirit we can increasingly bear it worthily and fulfill the responsibilities it brings.

## 2 'Christian' is not name to be conferred carelessly

It is all too easy to fall into a trap here. We see certain evidence in people - high moral standards, virtuous living, possibly even see church-going, Bible reading, respect or even admiration for Jesus as a great moral teacher etc. And putting all these things together, and out of a desire to be complimentary we say, "*Ah, there goes a Christian.*" And that may well be the case! Certainly Jesus said that people would be known by their fruits. By that he meant that the most reliable indicator of their devotion to him is their resultant Godly living.

But Paul also reminds us that Godly living includes a right attitude of the heart, mind and tongue, as well as the deeds we do. "*If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord", and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*"

So let those of us who own the name of Jesus be charitable about expressing opinions about who is saved and who isn't. Pastoral necessity sometimes dictates that such judgments be made. But remember - man looks on the outside. Only God looks on the heart. Our judgment is at best imperfect and inadequate because we simply do not have all the facts - about anyone. But the Lord does, so He knows. Remember the advice of Paul to Timothy "**The Lord knows those who are His.**" (2 Tim 2:19). And that knowledge is perfect, and loving, and merciful, and his judgment beyond reproach. We call it gracious

omniscience.

**To sum up..**

In case I have inadvertently made the name "Christian" seem a tad exclusive, let me put that right. There is no doubt that in the mind of the Lord "Christian" denotes an inclusive family. He desires everyone to come under that name.

Jesus desired it for his unworthy Jewish contemporaries *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not."* (Luke 13:34)

Peter expressed God's yearning for the whole gentile world when he described God as *"...not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance"*. (2 Pet 3:9)

One further point. To bear the name Christian is not to become a clone of every other Christian. There IS a family likeness, and it is the likeness to Christ. But "Christian" is a name that denotes unity and not uniformity. Christians are all one in Christ Jesus, but you are not meant to be a carbon copy of your neighbour, nor they of you (thank heaven!).

Within the unity of the Spirit we are a diverse people. We are all on a journey of faith that began at the cross when we acknowledged Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Each of us is at a different stage of that journey, as recent testimonies here have so wonderfully highlighted. Some of us are strong where others are weak, and vice versa. Some of us may have greater faith than others. Some have found themselves satisfactory answers to many of the hard questions of life while others are still struggling with them.

Some among us might see these differences as a sign that the church is weak. I would say that it's simply how God's people are and have always been. It's part of discipleship - growing up

in Christ and into Christ. Following the Lord Jesus, until that glorious day dawns when this life is over and Eternity takes over from time, and we see no more as in a mirror dimly, but face to face. And then, all fears will be dispelled, all doubts fly away, all mysteries will be solved and (as Paul says) *"we shall know even as we are known."*

Until then, Christian, hang onto this word from Scripture. It's a promise made through Paul to the church at Philippi but it has neither a sell-by nor a use-by date. Let's take it as our own. He says *"Be confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ."*

What's in a name? If it's the name Christian - then life in all its fulness here, and the promise of Heaven beyond. Wear it well!

Pastor David

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