

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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THE BIBLE WORD “CHRISTIAN”

Acts 11, 24, I Peter 4

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INTRODUCTION: This morning I want to speak with you about the topic of salvation. It’s been a while since I’ve preached specifically about this topic, even though I always weave a Gospel message in with every message.

A few weeks ago, one of my sons told me about a trend happening among college students today. They are saying, “I am not a Christian. I am a follower of Jesus.” That’s a contradiction in terms. I believe I know where the idea comes from, but it’s been taken out of context. There is a popular Christian writer who said the word Christian has been so politicized that in many cases it’s lost its meaning. For example, in some parts of the world, when you are born, your birth certificate declares you either a Christian or a member of some other world religion. And so, people grow up thinking they are Christians regardless of whether they’ve made any move toward Jesus at all. Clearly, that’s politicizing being a Christian.

And in many cases, in our own country, the word “Christian” has taken on a meaning of its own. For example, we say that Christmas is a Christian holiday, and of course I would agree. However, there is so much around Christmas that has nothing to do with the birth of Jesus. I can easily see how a non-Christian would be confused.

Also, in our own country, the heretical teaching of the prosperity Gospel and other heresies masked as Christian teaching further mis-define what it means to be a Christian.

A few years ago, a Christian author wrote about this and said, with all the misunderstandings about being a Christian, it’s possible for people to call

themselves Christians and have no idea about Jesus. So, he proposed that true believers start saying, “I am a follower of Jesus.” However, he didn’t mean for people to say, “I am not a Christian.” If you are truly a Christian, then you are a follower of Jesus. If you are a follower of Jesus, then you are truly a Christian. This morning, I want us to look at the true meaning of being a Christian and a follower of Jesus.

Acts chapter 11 tells us when the word Christian was first used. I heard an ignorant person once say, “The word Christian is not in the Bible. It’s a made-up word.” Well, all words are ‘made-up’ at some point, and “Christian” is indeed a biblical word.

IN THE BOOK OF ACTS, THE WORD “CHRISTIAN” WAS UNIFYING

Let’s look at the first time the word Christian is used:

SCRIPTURE: Acts 11:19-26

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

²² *News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.*

²³ *When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.*

²⁵ *Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

EXPLANATION: Most of the time when we use the word “disciple,” we mean the “the twelve disciples,” but in this case the word “disciples” simply means followers of Jesus. Apparently though, the word “disciple” wasn’t a strong enough descriptor. We see in this passage the believers were dispersed all over the place. They went to different cities where different languages were spoken, where there were different cultures. The Gospel of Jesus was first preached to the Jews and many believed... so we had Christian Jews. Then in verse 20 we see that the Greeks heard and many of them believed, so we had Christian Greeks.

The church in Antioch heard about the conversion of the Greeks, and they sent Barnabas to investigate. He in turn went to get Paul (who was called by his former name Saul in this chapter), and they discipled the new believers.

These new believers had to be called something. Those who once didn’t speak because of religious and ethnic differences now shared the same belief in this risen savior. After the Resurrection, Jesus was referred to several times as Christ Jesus instead of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the name given to him by the angel and some may say it reflects his humanity. Christ means “messiah” or “anointed one” and reflects his deity.

Jesus came as the Messiah, but only his resurrection proved he was the Messiah. So, the name change from Jesus Christ, or Jesus Messiah, to Christ Jesus, or Messiah Jesus puts the emphasis of his role of Messiah, or Christ, at the beginning of his name. We can safely say that Messiah means “risen Lord”.

The word Christian means “little Christ” and since we know that Messiah means risen Lord, we can safely say that Christian means “little risen Messiahs” or “little risen Lords.”

In Antioch, the name that was chosen to describe this new group of people unified behind one belief was to call them not “little Jesuses”... but “little Christs.”

So, we return to my original statement at the beginning of the message. If we say we are followers of Jesus, we might not give the full explanation. We could be saying we are followers of the teaching of Jesus and that would be a good, true statement, but not complete really. But when we say we are Christians, what we are saying is that we are followers of the resurrected Christ.

Yes, the word “Christian” can be very volatile because of how it’s been misrepresented by non-Christians and Christians alike. But the definition is not really up to us. It’s been defined in the Bible. Those who believed in the resurrected Messiah were called Christians. If the definition of the word has been marred and even changed over the years, it’s up to us to let the resurrected Christ live in us in order to show the lost and dying world what a Christian is and to bring hope to believers in life beyond the grave.

We see the life of the early church in the books of Acts. There were trials, joys, sorrows, martyrdom, healings, what appeared to be success, and what may have appeared to be failures. We see the church focused on unity and sound teaching. We see a natural byproduct of joy by people whose lives were changed by becoming Christians.

NEXT, THE WORD “CHRISTIAN” IDENTIFIES BOTH BELIEFS AND LEADER

Identifying a person as a Christian means that person has particular beliefs wrapped around one leader.

The word Christian spread to the point that even royalty heard it and became familiar with the name.

In Acts 24:5, Paul was brought before the governor and was accused of stirring up trouble.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 24:5

“We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect⁶ and even tried to desecrate the temple;”

EXPLANATION: Governor Felix listened to the accusations and Paul spoke. Felix had him placed under guard but gave him some freedom to see his friends. A few days later, Felix wanted to see him again. Acts 24:24 tells us Paul spoke about faith in Christ Jesus, righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, and Felix became afraid and sent him back to jail. Felix’s term expired and there was a new governor, Festus. He also spoke with Paul and wasn’t sure what to do. The Jewish leaders wanted Paul dead, but the Roman governor found nothing worthy of death.

King Agrippa came for a visit, and Governor Festus told King Agrippa about Paul. The king was curious and wanted to hear Paul for himself.

When Paul spoke before King Agrippa, he gave his personal testimony. He was prepared and ready. Governor Festus spoke up and said that Paul was insane. Paul replied:

SCRIPTURE: Acts 26:26-29

“The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

²⁸ Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

²⁹ Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”

So we see that when King Agrippa said the word “Christian”, no one coaxed him to say it. This means between Acts 11 and 26 the name Christian spread to the point that royalty far away knew it. And when Agrippa used the term, he understood its definition. You need to read Acts 26 and Paul’s powerful testimony and sermon. You’ll see that he spoke about the resurrected Messiah, the Christ... and then he asked Agrippa to say whether he believed the prophets.

King Agrippa was a smart man because he knew Paul was witnessing to him and persuading him to become a Christian, but he wasn’t really that smart because he didn’t profess Christ at the most opportune time.

The third and final time we hear the word “Christian”, it is related to suffering.

THE WORD CHRISTIAN IS NOT A TICKET TO A LIFE OF EASE

SCRIPTURE: I Peter 4:12-16

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵ If you suffer, it should not

be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.

¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

EXPLANATION: Peter wrote to the believers in Asia Minor who were under the oppressive Roman government. Scholars differ as to whether the persecution was discrimination or government-sanctioned or government-tolerated physical persecution. Based on the serious wording of First Peter, I believe it was physical persecution.

If there is anything that is a threat to the meaning of the word Christian today, it comes from the belief that being a Christian vets you for success and a life of ease. Nothing could be further from the truth. If you look at the followers of Jesus, you see that they came from all kinds of different economic backgrounds. Some were privileged people. Some were not. A common thread with most of them was facing life challenges.

I want to propose this for your consideration: if you've had a life of complete ease as a Christian, something is wrong. I don't believe it's possible to become a Christian and face no challenges. Surely, as a Christian you've been burdened by someone who is lost without Christ. Surely, you've been burdened to the point of losing sleep and not being able to shake the need to pray for them. Surely, you've been burdened with trying to figure out how to witness to someone.

I don't believe that becoming a Christian is a ticket to a life of ease. In many cases, it is a ticket to a life of unrest.

I want to go back to go back to Acts 11. I want to point out to you the first action of Christians after the scripture says they were identified as Christians.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 11:27-30

During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

CONCLUSION: Listen folks – the first action these people took after the scripture identified them as Christians was helping others unselfishly. They helped people far away that they did not know. We see that Christians also helped each other.

People who just a year earlier hated each other... people who just a year earlier would not even speak to each other...these people were no longer identified by their race or nationality or their old religion. They were now identified as Christians. The old identifiers as a Jew, or a Greek, or a Roman, or a Carthaginian, or whatever – all those old identifiers were inadequate.

These people from their mixed backgrounds were now united to help each other and others in need. In their previous lives, they had been taught to take all they could, to acquire all they could. In their new lives as *Christians*, they were to do just the opposite. Give, love, accept, encourage!

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