

Acts 11:26

The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch

It is said that Abraham Lincoln once asked his associates a question that ran like this

- If you call a dog's tail a leg, how many legs would the dog have?
- They replied, 'Five'
- 'You are wrong,' said the great man, 'the answer is four'
- You can call dog's tail a 'leg' if you like, but it's still a tail.
- The point being that things are what they are whatever you might call them
- But this prompts an investigation 'the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch'
- In one sense, the new name is neither here nor there
- What was it about the believers at Antioch that gained the new name?

Antioch of Syria was one of 16 cities of that name dotted around the Mediterranean

- Antiochus being a family name in the Seleucid dynasty
- Syrian Antioch is now in a part of Turkey and only a small unimportant town
- But in New Testament times it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire
- Don't you just hate that? When someone tells you that something is third
- I nearly always want to know what the other two are – Rome and Alexandria

The point that Luke is making is that the good news of Jesus is spreading

- Through the faithful witness of the followers of Jesus
- Jerusalem was the capital of the Roman province of Judea
- And the good news of Jesus has been proclaimed there
- Antioch was the capital of the Roman province of Syria
- 300 miles north of Jerusalem
- And now the good news of Jesus is being proclaimed there

This reminds me that on many occasions my father preached at Modbury Baptist Church

- I don't think it was his fault that it is now closed
- And, considering that I preached there once too, I hope it is not my fault either
- One evening, in about 1972, I met an elderly man there who was a retired Thatcher
- 'I hear you have come out from Plymouth,' he said.
- 'I went there once ... before the war ... lot of shops'
- 14 miles from Modbury to Plymouth did not seem a very long way even back then
- but we must face the fact that in New Testament times 300 miles was quite a journey
- and Luke is describing the spread of the gospel across the known world

Syrian Antioch boasted a population of over 300,000 (possibly more)

- A place where the cultures of east and west met
- It was populated by Syrians, Greeks, Romans, Phoenicians and Jews
- It was culturally diverse and very cosmopolitan – like most cosmopolitan cities
- It was known for both its sophistication and its vices
- Just outside of the city was the park, Daphne, and the temple of Apollo
- Daphne's pleasure park, with its verdant groves, became a den of immorality
- With a reputation to match that of Soho in London

It is against this background that the believers are first called 'Christians'

- The fact that Luke writes that they were first called 'Christians'
- Suggests that the name did not originate with the believers themselves
- They were more likely to use names like 'believers', 'brothers' or 'saints'
- Or followers of 'the Way' (Acts 9:2)
- Generally the Jews called the disciples the Nazarene sect (Acts 24:5)
- The Gentiles must have heard the believers speak so often of Christ
- That they applied the suffix 'ian' to the word Christ – meaning 'Christ people'
- The Jews would not have given them this name
- Since Christ is the Greek word for Messiah
- The very fact that the 'Christians' were distinguished from the 'Jews' is notable
- They are no longer a Jewish sect but a growing movement of Jews and Gentiles

Although by no means as noble a name as 'Christian', Methodists can tell a similar story

- When Charles Wesley persuaded two or three friends to share a serious way of life
- Reading classical literature on weekdays, and Christian books on Sundays
- And attending the weekly sermon and sacrament at the university
- The other men labelled them 'Holy Club', 'enthusiasts', 'Bible-moths'
- 'Supererogation men' and 'Methodists'
- I am always relieved to be a Methodist rather than a supererogationist minister
- Although in one sense the name Methodist was harmless, it was unflattering/abusive
- John Wesley invariably said, 'the people called Methodists'
- For though he turned it into a badge of honour, he did not really like the nickname

Although a change in popular name does not appear much to us today

- To be known as Christians rather than a Jewish Nazarene Sect
- Would prove to be decisive in Christian history
- The Roman Empire had an authorised list of *religio licita* (legal religion)
- Which extended to the believers while they were a sect within Judaism
- But did not extend to the new group of 'Christians'

My experience of nicknames is mainly from my school and college days

- At school one of my classmates told us not to call him 'Stan' (his middle name)
- Needless to say for the next five years we called him nothing else
- At college we called one of the students 'Wigan'
- I think his real name might have been 'Paul' but we always called him 'Wigan'
- Eventually both Stan and Wigan accepted it
- As did most of the other people who had nicknames
- After some time, even under protest, people accept such names
- We know the same was true regarding the early Methodists
- And we know the same was true regarding the early Christians

The early Christians were marked out by the people of Antioch in a new way

- They were different from the prevailing pagan background
- But they were not Jews
- Or even just a sect in Judaism
- They had other names that they used for themselves
- But the ordinary citizens of Antioch started calling them Christians

I WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

The fundamental thing about the name Christian is so obvious

- It is almost embarrassing to state it – but the fundamental thing is ‘Christ’
- It is an identification with the name
- For many people today ‘Christ’ means little more than a swearword
- But really it means ‘Anointed One’, ‘Messiah’ or ‘Saviour’
- The very essence of being a Christian is looking to Jesus Christ as ‘Saviour’

The message that the Apostles preached, that we can discover from the book of Acts

- Is a message that boldly proclaims ‘Jesus is the promised Saviour’

‘God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power ...
He went around doing good and healing all who were under the
power of the devil, because God was with him.’

(Acts 10:38)

The critical question has to be how Jesus of Nazareth can be Saviour – then and today

- The message continues that the death of Jesus was part of God’s plan
- The enemies of Jesus ‘killed him by hanging him on a tree’ (Acts 10:39)
- The Apostles realised that his death was sacrificial
- He died to secure forgiveness for all those who trust in him
- So that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved

But how can a dead person do anything to save me today the critic might reply

- God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen (Acts 9:40)
- That is the resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved
- Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead
- He is glorified now and in eternity
- All must repent and believe in him
- Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (9:43)

The pagans at Antioch called the believers Christians – belonging to the party of Christ

- Because Jesus was the centre of their conversation, the centre of their lives
- Their new life of faith in Jesus was so different from the old life
- That they, in accordance with the teaching of Jesus, accepted it as a new life
- Life begins with birth, so they saw the new life as beginning with the new birth
- Not surprisingly with a new birth they gained a new name
- The believer is spiritually born again into a new family and takes a new family name
- The new family name is the name of Christ – the name Christian
- These days we are familiar with scientific methods, such as DNA testing
- But often we do not need such methods
- Some years ago a friend gave me a photograph of my Dad at school in 1938
- I was looking at it when someone called in
- ‘Which one of these children is my Dad’, I asked
- it’s easy it’s the one who looks like Fiona
- without hesitation from the 30 or so children he picked out my Father

They were known as Christians because they were believers

- they were known as Christians because they were Christlike
- thoroughly Christian in word and deed
- the pagans in Antioch had not known Christ
- but they could form a picture of what he was like from these Christians

II ARE YOU A CHRISTIAN?

Things have changed in Britain in the last half century, even in my adult years

- because I seem to be at the threshold of change I'll divide society into two groups
- those older than me and those younger than me
- to those older than me Christian means little more than outwardly decent person
- there are a lot of outwardly decent people around
- people who don't do others any harm
- by contemporary standards they lead decent lives
- they go to work, pay their mortgage, pay their bills, bring up their children
- and they would even do you a good turn if you needed them to help you out
- I have more or less accepted that to older people that is 'christian' (small 'c')

However, against the backdrop of paganism at Antioch there were doubtless similar people

- They did not do others any harm
- By contemporary standards they led decent lives
- They went to work, paid their way, brought up their children
- And they probably would help a friend in need
- In short, they were just good citizens
- Alongside these were the community of Judaism
- Many of them would have done their best to be morally upright
- They would lead 'good lives' and follow their religion
- But it was not decent people or even religious people that gained the name 'Christian'
- It was not people who were decent but people who were different
- To be a Christian is about believing, it is about being, it is about becoming

Luke opened his account of the gospel's proclamation at Syrian Antioch

- With the same words with which he began the story of the mission to Samaria (8:4)
- Those who had been scattered – by the persecution (11:19)
- Persecution came not because of how they lived but because of what they believed
- The core beliefs of the New Testament Christians are plain for us all to see
- Jesus was the promised Saviour
- The death of Jesus was part of God's plan
- God raised him from the dead as he promised
- The resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved
- Jesus is glorified now and forever
- All must repent of their sins and believe in him
- In our society religious beliefs are regarded as a 'private matter'
- But it was not so in New Testament times, is not so in other parts of the world
- And may not always be so here in Great Britain
- If Christians were persecuted here as in other lands, who would be Christian then?

To own the name 'Christian' is a matter of believing, it is also a matter of 'being'

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

(Mark 8:34–38)

And yet there is nothing static about being a Christian

- It is also a matter of becoming
- For Christians are called to be disciples, followers, learners, apprentices
- But none of those implies are being called upon to stay the same
- Indeed each one is about change and movement
- Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome, a tough place to be a Christian

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.

(Romans 12:2)

To be a Christian is a matter of believing in Christ

To be a Christian is a matter of being in Christ (disciple, follower, learner, apprentice)

To be a Christian is a matter of becoming like Christ – living up to the name

Alexander the Great was once presiding at a court martial – when a young boy:

- Accused of cowardice and running away in the heat of battle, was brought before him
- The Emperor asked the young boy his name, 'Alexander, sir' the boy replied
- Again the Emperor asked the boy his name, 'Alexander, sir'
- The third time he asked, this time more loudly:
- 'Young man, what is your name?'
- 'Alexander, sir' the boy replied
- at which the Emperor leaped from his throne, grabbed the terrified young soldier
- and said to him; 'Young man – change your behaviour or change your name!'

The Christian bears the name of Christ – it cannot be a private matter

- it is trusting that Jesus is the promised Saviour, who by his death and resurrection
- has defeated unbelief and sin, death and the grave – a matter of believing
- and calls us now to give up life where self comes first, for life where he comes first
- a life, so different from the old life, that we are born again
- a matter of being a person who bears a new name, fitting for a new life
- but that is not the end, just the beginning, for a Christian is growing
- into maturity – into the Christlike person that he would have us be

III WHAT NAME DO OTHER PEOPLE GIVE TO YOU?

In actual fact there are quite a few nicknames in the Bible

- to Simon, the fisherman from Galilee, Jesus gave the name 'Peter' (the rock)
- on the night that Jesus was arrested, Peter suddenly found himself
- in the wrong place at the wrong time – a servant girl said that he was 'with Jesus'
- Peter replied with oaths and curses
- I was not with him, I do not sound like him, I do not know him
- But when the Lord turned and looked at Peter he went outside and wept bitterly
- And after the Lord had risen from the grave he met with Peter
- So that Peter who had denied him three times could affirm him three times
- And after Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came, Peter who had denied him
- Was the first to proclaim Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, risen, glorified, Lord and Christ
- The new man, Peter, was bold to tell the good news

To a man, Joseph, a levite from Cyprus, the apostles gave the name 'Barnabas' (Acts 4:36)

- Barnabas means son of encouragement or exhortation
- Barnabas move to Jerusalem and later sold a field and gave the money to the poor
- He is described as 'a good man and full of the Holy Spirit'
- A man of integrity – outstanding for the quality of his life, a life of godliness (11:24)
- When new Christians at Antioch needed support and encouragement, Barnabas went
- He had a generous Spirit and rejoiced when God was at work in and through others
- Young, enthusiastic Christians can cool off – that's where a steady encourager is good
- Barnabas shared with others in teaching them the scriptures
- For being well-grounded in the Bible is good for our spiritual equilibrium
- Barnabas encouraged others to persevere in their relationship with Jesus
- When someone needed to go to Saul, who had hated the believers, Barnabas went
- When someone needed to take a gift to the believers in Jerusalem in a time of famine
- Barnabas and Paul went together

Saul of Tarsus was persecutor-in-chief of the followers of Jesus

- As the gospel spread from Jerusalem through Judea and further afield
- So he hounded them more vigorously and set out for Damascus to persecute them
- If Saul was his Jewish name, after he became a Christian he became 'Paul'
- It is true to say that many educated people had a Greek name
- He was talented and educated
- But the name Paul means 'little' – 'the least of the apostles'

Peter, Barnabas and Paul – three very different men, three very different ministries

- Three giants of the Christian faith
- For they were Christian believers – Christ crucified, risen, coming in glory
- The exemplified what being a Christian was all about
- For they were becoming more Christlike
- Worthy of the name of Christ
- They believers were first called Christians at Antioch