

## What Makes a Church a Christian Church?

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Acts 11:19-30

Acts 13:1-3

**11** <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

<sup>22</sup> News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

<sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> 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.) <sup>29</sup> The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. (NIV)

Did you have a nickname? I have had a couple. One of my nicknames was "Shenandoah." You can probably figure out how I got that one. When I was in college, I was called "string bean." If you had known me then, you would figure that out.

The disciples at the church in the city of Antioch received a nickname. That is where the disciples were first called Christians. We are not exactly sure who gave them the nickname. Some say God gave them that name through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. Others say it was at first a name of derision which they wore as a compliment. For my purposes, I don't need to get into that debate. However they got the name, it was certainly extraordinary to be named after Christ.

It is an interesting fact that the name Christian only appears three times in the Bible. One is when Peter talks about suffering as a Christian. Another is when Agrippa asks Paul, “Do you think in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Then there is the before us now, the first instance. Some wonder if the rareness of the word means that the title was not important. I would suggest the opposite. The fact that both Peter and Herod Agrippa used the term shows it was in popular usage. Add to that the fact that Luke felt the need to explain where the name Christian came from. What does this name mean? Some translate it “follower of Christ,” “adhering to Christ” or even “belonging to Christ.”

I simply want to ask the question, “What does it mean to call a person or a church Christian? We like to put the name Christian or Church of Christ on our signs, but do we exhibit the qualities necessary to be considered people like Christ. So let’s examine that, using the church at Antioch as an example.

#### I. A Christian Church is an Evangelistic Church.

**<sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.**

This great church was founded by people whose names we don’t even know. This church’s most notable mission was initiated by people whose names we don’t know. There are many anonymous heroes in the book of Acts. We don’t know what motivated them, but they decided to take the Old Testament prophecies and the great commission seriously by inviting Gentiles to accept the gospel and become members of the church.

So, the Antioch church was diverse—including Jews and Gentiles. I suppose it was awkward at first—bringing in all those people who did not know much about the Old Testament and didn’t know how to sing any of the Psalms. I hear tell that some started bringing ham to a church supper. Because of the potential scandal, the church leaders sent Barnabas up to check things out and he heartily approved of what they were doing.

Sam Shoemaker was a celebrated preacher and was an advisor to the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. He once wrote a poem that talks of the importance of remembering those who need the gospel. He called it “I Stand by the Door.” Here is a portion of it:

“The most tremendous thing in the world  
Is for men to find that door - the door to God.  
The most important thing any man can do  
Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands,  
And put it on the latch - the latch that only clicks  
And opens to the man's own touch.  
Men die outside that door, as starving beggars die

On cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter -  
Die for want of what is within their grasp.  
They live, on the other side of it - live because they have not found it.  
Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,  
And open it, and walk in, and find Him...  
So I stand by the door.”

## II. A Christian Church is a Faithful Church.

**<sup>22</sup>News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.**

As word got out about what was happening, the leaders in Jerusalem sent out Barnabas to investigate the matter. He was a man who had a nickname, too. His name was Joseph, but was known as the “Son of Encouragement.” What Barnabas saw was evidence of the grace of God. He was happy with what he saw. So he encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. There is in that statement an admonition to perseverance. He wants them to keep it up, but he is able to encourage them to keep it up because they have been faithful. They have been faithful to the commands and teachings of Jesus. A church that abandons the teaching of Jesus can hardly be called a Christian Church.

## III. A Christian Church is a Benevolent Church.

**<sup>27</sup>During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup>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.) <sup>29</sup>The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. <sup>30</sup>This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.**

Sometimes people try to pit evangelism against benevolence. This is wrong. They belong together. What God has joined together let not man put asunder. Many church groups that have abandoned a personal gospel have specialized in benevolence and social action. This is a great mistake, as is specializing in evangelism and forgetting benevolence. The same Jesus who told us to go into the world and preach the gospel also told us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give a cup of cold water to the thirsty and visit the sick and imprisoned.

In the case of the Antioch church, they were determined to help the impoverished brothers and sisters at the mother church in Jerusalem.

How can we claim to love Christ and not love the people he loved? I read the story of an

instructor from a dog training workshop in Salt Lake City who determined that a dog's disposition can be tested by the owner. If the owner will fall down and pretend to be hurt, a dog with a bad temper will tend to bite him. A good dog will show concern, and may lick the fallen owner's face. A woman named Susan Matice attended the class and then decided to test her two dogs. While eating pizza in her living room, she stood up, clutched her heart, screamed and fell to the floor. Her two dogs looked at her, and then they looked at each other, and then they raced to the coffee table for her pizza. I know dogs are man's best friend, but sometimes their own needs trump the needs of others. Can we remain conscious of the needs of others? We can't solve all the problems, but we can solve some.

#### IV. A Christian Church is an Outward Focused Church.

**13 <sup>1</sup>Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. <sup>2</sup>While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." <sup>3</sup>So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.**

One of the extraordinary things about the Antioch church is that they were determined to become a missionary church. They had a love for people they were never likely to meet. To accomplish their mission they gave of their best. There were prophets and teachers in that church, but when the Holy Spirit told them to commission Barnabas and Paul for this great work, they did so. They gave of their best.

The Coca-Cola Company is a company I greatly admire. Their product is known and consumed all over the world. How did that happen? I read that the company had this motto, posted in the company's headquarters: THINK GLOBALLY, BUT ACT LOCALLY. That is what the great Commission requires of the church. We are local entities that serve our localities, but also have a vision for the world.

So, the name Christian lives on. The emperor Diocletian set up a stone pillar on which was inscribed these words: "For Having Exterminated The Name Christian From the Earth." That didn't happen, did it?

One day a father was trying to teach his little boy what a Christian should be like. When he finished his talk, the father got a question that shook him to the core: "Father," asked the boy, "Have I ever seen a Christian?" I would like to believe if that boy had attended one of our churches, he would not have had to ask that question.

When I was in grade school, my friend, who was also named Michael, and I got sent to the principal's office. When we were ushered into the office, he asked us our names. When we told him he asked me to get a book off his bookshelf. It was called *An Encyclopedia of Names*. He told me to look up the name Michael. The book's definition was "One who is like God." He then said, "That's something to live up to isn't it, boys?" It wasn't until later when I studied a little Hebrew that I discovered the book didn't have it exactly right. It was more of a declaration of God's priority than a description of a human. I am glad I didn't know that

when I was growing up. That principal's lesson rang in my ears for some time and probably saved me from getting into more trouble. It wasn't until I left the office that I saw on the principal's nameplate that his name was Michael, too. We have been given the name Christian. That's something to live up to, isn't it?