

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 21

What's in a Name?

Acts:11:26 "... and the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch."

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." These words from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* not only ask an important question, but also imply an interesting answer. The answer Shakespeare assumed is probably the same answer you may find prevalent today. Most people, like Shakespeare, would say that there is really not much in a name. After all, a rose would smell as sweet no matter what you called it. It is said that Abraham Lincoln asked some of his associates an interesting question along these lines. He said, "If you call a dog's tail a leg, how many legs would the dog have?" They replied, "Five." He said, "No. That's wrong. The answer is four. You can call a dog's tail a leg if you like, but it's still a tail." The point is that things are what they are, no matter what they're called. So, what's in a name? Do names matter then ... or are they unimportant?

Regardless of what Shakespeare thought, or what some people may think today, there *is* much in a name, biblically speaking. As we open the pages of the Old Testament, we find that names are very significant. Names mean something. Here in our text in Acts, we come upon a name by which we are all known by today as believers in Jesus. It is the name *Christian*. Our text says, "And they were called Christians first at Antioch." What does it mean for you personally to be called a Christian? Do you understand the significance of bearing the name of Christ? Does it mean the same thing to you as it did to those early believers. Is it a badge of honour or an embarrassing insult?

I invite you to consider with me today what it means to be identified with that holy name. In order for us to understand what it means to be called a *Christian*; we must apprehend the central truth involved in names. We must answer the question, "What's in a name?" and we must do it by understanding the biblical perspective on names. We need to see that in the Bible, names are symbolic. In Scripture, names have meaning for the individual. The essence of the individual was captured in the name.

When God created Adam, He gave him that name because it means "*man*." Eve was created. Her name means "*mother of all living*." God brought the animals to Adam and gave him the task of naming them all. I'm sure their names had something to do with the characteristics of each creature. In the Old Testament we see parents choosing names for their children in order to reveal a nature. Jacob was so named because he had his hand on his brother Esau's heel. Jacob literally means "*heel-catcher*." His brother Esau was so named because he was red and hairy. Judah means "*praise*." Samuel means "*asked of God*." Levi means "*joined in harmony*." Tabitha means "*graceful*." Esther means "*star*."

We also find God changing the names of certain people in the Old Testament. Why did He do this? He did it to show that their lives now had a new direction, a new meaning, a new purpose. Abram was changed to Abraham, which means "*the father of a multitude*." Sarai was changed to Sarah, which means "*princess*." Jacob's name was changed to Israel because he was a "*prince with God*." In the New Testament, Simon's name was changed to Peter, which means "*rock*." Saul's name was changed to Paul, perhaps in honour of his first convert, Sergius Paulus.

In the Bible, the names of God Himself reveal His character. They show us His nature. He is *El Shaddai*, the Strong One. He is *El-Elyon*, God Most High. He is *El-Olam*, the Everlasting God. He is *Jehovah Jirah*, the God Who Provides. He is *Jehovah Rophe*, the God Who Heals. He is *Jehovah M'Kaddesh*, the God Who Sanctifies. He is *Jehovah Shalom*, the God of Peace. He is *Jehovah Sabaoth*, the Lord of Hosts. He is *Jehovah Tsidkenu*, the Lord Our Righteousness. He is *Jehovah Shammah*, the God Who is There. He is *Jehovah Nissi*, the Lord Our Banner. And He is *Jehovah Roi*, the Lord Our Shepherd.

In Isaiah 9:6 it says of Christ that, "*His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.*" (NASB) The names of our Lord Jesus Christ abound in Scripture. He is *the Second Adam; our Advocate; the Alpha and Omega; the Ancient of Days; the Amen; the Author and Finisher of our Faith; the Blessed and Only Potentate; the Captain of our Salvation; the Chief Shepherd; the Cornerstone. He is the Dayspring; the Desire of the Nations, the Faithful Witness; the First and the Last; the Good Shepherd; our Great High Priest; the Holy One of God; the Great I Am; the Judge of Israel; the King of the Jews; the King of Saints; and the King of Kings. He is the Light of the World; the Lord of Glory; the Lord of Lords; the Messiah, the Mediator between God and Man; the Man of Sorrows; the Mighty God. He is the Prince of Peace; the Resurrection and Life; the Rock of our Salvation; the Rose of Sharon; the Root of David; the Saviour of the World; the Shepherd and Bishop of Souls; the Son of Righteousness; the Son of Man; the Son of God. He is Shiloh; the True Vine; the Truth; the Witness; the Word of God; the Lamb of God; the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.* That's who Christ is. What's in a name? There is much in a name. Names in the Scripture were symbolic.

In Scripture, names are also significant. In marriage, for instance, the wife takes the name of the husband. That is because it is a covenant relationship. In taking the name of her husband, she identifies as one with him in this covenant. To call ourselves by a name is to identify our allegiance. We all have family names which identify us. We call ourselves by names to identify our loyalty. When we come to Christ, we are baptised in the name of the Lord. We call ourselves *Christians*, and so, identify with Christ. Names really do mean something. They tell us who we are.

The old adage, "*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me*" is something we try to live by but it doesn't work very well because good names give us a positive self-image; and bad names strike at the heart of who we are. The central truth in regard to names is that names are both symbolic and significant. They tell us who we are. They identify our allegiance.

So, let's look at this characteristic term appropriated by these early Christians. "*They were called Christians first at Antioch.*" Why were they called *Christians* for the first time there in Antioch? What was it about these early believers that caused this term to be applied to them? The word *Christian* literally means '*belonging to the party of Christ.*' Some have said that it may have been used at first in a derogatory manner. But in whatever way it was first used, there were good reasons that it was applied and it has stuck until this very day. Something was going on in the lives of these believers. God was at work in their midst. They had been spectacularly born again by the power of God. They were learning to follow Jesus and to be filled with His Spirit on a daily basis. Their lives were being changed and He was the centre of it all.

One of the main reasons why I believe this term was applied to these believers is that they were thoroughly *of Christ*. They were thoroughly *Christian* in word and in deed. Christ was the centre of their conversation because He was the centre of their lives. Everywhere they went they spoke of Christ. I'm sure every person to whom they spoke heard the old Gospel story of how Christ had changed their lives. They were certainly Christians in word, but they were also Christians in deed.

These early believers in Antioch also lived for Jesus Christ. They didn't just talk the talk, they walked the walk. They allowed the life of Christ to emerge in them. These early Christians not only wanted to speak of Christ, they wanted to live for Him. They were conforming their lives to the image of Jesus Christ and this was apparent to everyone around them.

So, it seemed natural for the term '*Christ*' to be applied to these early believers. Perhaps those who applied that term desired for it to be a slap in the face. They may have said, "*Why, you people are trying to be little Christs. All you do is talk about Christ. Your whole life is centred around Him. I know what you are. You are a Christian.*" But a term which may have been meant to be derogatory was one which accurately described their way of life and so it stuck, they were proud to be called Christians.

I can imagine Barnabas running into the church office one day and saying to Paul, "*Paul, do you know what they're calling us now?*" Paul replies, "*No, Barney. What is it?*" Barnabas says, "*They're calling us Christians.*" "*Christians?*" says Paul. "*That's right,*" says Barney, "*Christians.*" Paul leans back in his lambskin Lazy-boy and says, "*You know what Barny, I think I like that. Christian. I like that a lot.*" Barnabas speaks up and says, "*Yeah, I think I like that better than the 'First Judeo-Apostolic Church of God in Christ International.'*"

"*And they were called Christians first at Antioch.*" Christians – it accurately described who they were. What's in a name? There is much in a name, fellow Christian, for you bear the name of Christ, and there is a vital consideration for every believer in so bearing that name.

One of the Ten Commandments says, "*You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.*" (Exodus 20:7) Were you aware that it is possible for believers to take the name of the Lord in vain? You might say, "*Certainly. Believers can blaspheme and curse.*" But that's not what I'm talking about. As a matter of fact, I don't think cursing or swearing is what God had in mind when He gave us all this commandment. Most people who curse don't even realise what they are saying. I believe it's possible to take the name of the Lord in vain without ever speaking a word. In fact, believers are the ones who are in danger of taking the name of the Lord in vain, not unbelievers. This is a vital point.

We have already seen how there is a great significance in names, that names identify our allegiance. We have seen how those who commit their lives to follow Christ are called by His name. They are called *Christians*. We bear His name as Christians. The Bible teaches that we can be faithful to His name.

In Revelation 2:13 it says, "*I know where you live - where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name.*" Revelation 3:8 says, "*I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.*" We can be faithful to His name.

The Bible also teaches that we are judged in the end by the name we hold. Revelation 14:1 says, "*Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.*" Speaking of heaven in Revelation 22:3-4 it says, "*No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.*"

We are identified with the name of Jesus Christ. How we live our life determines whether we take His name in vain or not. The Bible teaches that we can dishonour His name. His name can be profaned or defiled by our disobedience and our unfaithfulness.

Every believer needs a consistent testimony in daily living. The Bible teaches us that the goal of every disciple is to be conformed to the image of Christ. As we seek His face in prayer and worship and by studying His Word; as we walk in obedience and faithfulness to Him; as we daily surrender to Him and live in conformity to His Word; we will give forth a visible testimony of the grace of God. We will walk worthily of our calling as Christians.

"And they were called Christians first at Antioch." We are still called Christians today.

I'm reminded of a story about Alexander the Great. Alexander was a brilliant strategist and a mighty conqueror. He was not only a leader of men, but he was fearless in battle. Often times, he would charge forth leading his men, riding his mighty horse, *Bucephalus*. He would hurl himself headlong into the fray and be standing when everyone else had fallen. He was a very courageous man. There was not a cowardly bone in his body. He conquered the known world of his day and it is said of him that he wept when there were no more lands to conquer.

The story is told of him sitting in judgment on the battlefield. There he was judge and jury. His word was law. When he had spoken, it would be done. There on the battlefield, he would take his seat, flanked on either side by his most trusted officers. Before him would be brought all of those with charges against them. On many occasions, his judgment would be extremely harsh, especially in those situations of desertion.

Before him one day was brought a young lad. He was a fair-haired youth and very young. Alexander asked what the boy's name was. The officer presenting him said, *"Alexander, sir."* At once, the great general's countenance softened. It was as if he was flattered that the boy had his name. His men breathed a sigh of relief. Perhaps there would be some leniency for this young man, whatever his crime.

Alexander inquired as to the nature of the charge against the young lad. His officer replied, *"Cowardice, sir. He fled in the heat of battle."* The once soft countenance of the great general was suddenly transformed into an intense, tight-jawed grimace. Looking the boy squarely in the eye, he said to him deliberately, *"Son, what did you say was your name?"* The lad replied, *"Why, Alexander, sir."* Speaking again to the boy, this time in a louder tone he said, *"Young man, what did you say was your name?"* The young man answered in a stutter, *"Why, uh-uh Alexander, sir."* To that answer, the emperor bolted off his throne and grabbed the terrified young soldier and said to him, *"Young man, change your behaviour or change your name!"*

Is it possible for us to take the name of the Lord in vain? Might the Lord be saying to us, *"Christian, change your behaviour or change your name?"* Because we have the name of Jesus and are called by that name, we should live for Him lives which are glorifying to His name. The Lord loves us and will care for us and bless us regardless of our behaviour – but what about all those outside the family of God? When they look upon those who bear the name *Christian*, will it still be an insult – will it still be a name that is used to deride and attack? Or will our behaviour and lifestyle and witness be such that people see the supernatural power and person that lies behind that name?

"And they were called Christians first at Antioch." They were called Christians there because they lived for Christ. May we be called Christians today for that very same reason.