

# **BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #134:**

## **THE NAME “CHRISTIAN”: FROM HEAVEN OR FROM MEN?**

**By John Temples**

The people of God go by several different Biblical names or descriptive terms: disciples, brethren, saints, the church, the body of Christ, believers, the elect, etc. All these names are Scriptural, meaningful, and important. But the most precious and meaningful name you and I wear is the name CHRISTIAN. This is the name that above all others identifies us and denotes the relationship we have with the Lord.

The name “Christian” is of course a Biblical name, coming from the Greek word *christianos*, meaning an adherent of the religion of Christ; but you may be surprised to learn that such an important name occurs only three times in the Bible, all of them in the New Testament. Here are the three references:

- Acts 11:26--“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”
- Acts 26:28--“Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘You almost persuade me to become a Christian.’”
- 1 Peter 4:16--“Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but rather let him glorify God in this matter [in this name, ASV, ESV].”

Let us think about this precious and distinctive name we wear under seven headings:

1. The *significance* of the name Christian--what it means.
2. The *suitability* of the name.
3. The *seriousness* of it.
4. The *source* of it.
5. The *simplicity* of it.
6. The *safety* of it--our confidence in wearing it.
7. The *scope* of it.

### **FIRST: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NAME “CHRISTIAN”**

As discussed above, this name means “pertaining to or belonging to Christ and His religion.” The ending of the name, “-ian,” is a suffix meaning “of, belonging to,

resembling, or following.” A “Floridian” is a citizen of the state of Florida. A “Rotarian” is a person who belongs to the Rotary Club and affirms all that the Rotary Club stands for. A Christian is one who belongs to Christ.

Notice also that the name “Christian” is a unique and specific name. “Believers,” “disciples,” and “brethren” are general terms, but “Christian” can mean only one thing: that its bearer is a follower of Jesus Christ. If you wear the name of Christ, you are saying that you believe in Christ and you belong to Christ. You have a *legal* and *loving* relationship with Christ.

## SECOND: THE SUITABILITY OF THE NAME “CHRISTIAN”

It is entirely suitable, fitting, and appropriate that a member of Christ’s church should wear His name. In Bible times, a student might take on the name of his teacher as an honor to him or her. A bride wears the name of her husband. The redeemed one wears the name of his Redeemer.

You would think that all followers of Christ would want to wear the name of the Savior. Yet many people prefer man-made religious names or additions to “Christian” which glorify some human being or human creed. For example:

- The name “Baptist” honors John the Baptist or the practice of baptism in the Baptist church.
- The name “Seventh-day Adventist” calls attention not to Christ, but to two unscriptural doctrines: the Sabbath day being the Christian day of worship and the idea of an advent or return of Christ to the earth to reside and rule here.
- The name “Mormon” honors a fictitious individual who supposedly wrote part of the Book of Mormon.
- The name “Presbyterian” honors a particular system of church government (by presbyters or elders).
- The name “Lutheran” pays homage to Martin Luther. It’s interesting, though, that Martin Luther said: “I ask that my name be left silent and people not call themselves Lutheran, but rather Christians. Who is Luther? The doctrine is not mine. I have been crucified for no one. St. Paul in 1 Cor. 3:4-5 would not suffer that the Christians should call themselves of Paul or of Peter, but Christian. How should I, a poor stinking bag of worms, become so that the

children of Christ are named with my unholy name? It should not be dear friends. Let us extinguish all factious names and be called Christians whose doctrine we have.”

(<http://www.lutherquest.org/walther/articles/nameLuth.htm>)

If you want to honor an individual, it is entirely appropriate and common to take that individual's name. But if you want to honor Christ, it is very IN-appropriate to call yourself by the name of some man, woman, or human doctrine.

### THIRD: THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE NAME “CHRISTIAN”

When you wear the name “Christian,” you are not just claiming adherence to some social institution, you are claiming a relationship with a member of the Godhead. Not only is it the name of a divine Person, but it is a *family* name. Paul said, “For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Cvhrist, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named” (Ephesians 3:14-15).

How serious is a family name? Wars have been fought over family names or family honor. What if your family name were bin Laden? Or Hitler? That would be serious! Also, to wear the name “Christian” means you are *claiming to be married* to Christ. Romans 7:4 says, “Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, *that you may be married to another*, even to him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God.” How serious is marriage?

The name “Christian” should not be worn lightly.

### FOURTH: THE SOURCE OF THE NAME “CHRISTIAN”

Where did the name “Christian” come from? Did the early disciples just one day decide, “Well, since we follow Christ, why don't we call ourselves Christians”? Or was “Christian” a nickname or term of insult coined by the enemies of the church? Sadly, the latter is the view of many. Vine's Expository Dictionary says of the name Christian, “As applied by Gentiles there was no doubt an implication of scorn, as in Agrippa's statement in Acts 26:28. Tacitus, writing near the end of the first century, says, ‘The vulgar [common people] call them Christians.’” One modern version,

the Common English Bible, renders Acts 11:26, “It was in Antioch where the disciples were first labeled ‘Christians.’”

I want to set the record straight as to why the name “Christian” is not only not a term of insult, but is a divinely-given appellation for the people of God. Here are three reasons we know this:

*First, Christians are specifically commanded to glorify God in this name.* Burton Coffman says, “This is the only name specifically commanded by an apostle as the one in which the Lord's people should ‘glorify God’ (1 Peter 4:16). And how, it may be asked, does the name ‘Christian’ worn by God's people glorify the Father in heaven? This is done by its emphasis upon the name of Christ, the name literally meaning ‘of Christ.’ Herein also appears the utter impossibility of such a name having been given by the instigation of Satan. It is contrary to the nature of Satan to suppose for even a moment that the evil one would have concocted a name with so much of Christ in it.” (Coffman's Bible Commentary, notes on Acts 11:26)

*Second, the word “called” in Acts 11:26 (“the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch”) is a special word in the original Greek pointing to God as the source of the name.* The most common Greek word for “call” in the New Testament is *kaleo*, which meant “to invite, to summon, or to designate by naming.” However, the word found in Acts 11:26 is not *kaleo*, but *chrematizo*. Of this word, Vine's Expository Dictionary says “[it meant] primarily to transact business, then to give official pronouncements.... [It] came to signify *the giving of a divine admonition or instruction or warning.*”<sup>1</sup>

In fact, in every passage where *chrematizo* is found, the reference is to a divine communication or warning. Here are some examples:

- Speaking of Joseph and Mary, Matthew 2:12 says, “Then, being *divinely warned* in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.”
- Hebrews 11:7 reads, “By faith Noah, being *divinely warned* of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household.”

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<sup>1</sup> Under the entry “call,” noun definitions, Vine gives a cross reference to “admonish,” where this quote is found.

- Paul said in Romans 7:2-3, “For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. 3 So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be *called* an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man.” Who “calls” such a woman an adulteress? Certainly no human judge or court would label her such. GOD calls her an adulteress!

So the special Greek word for “called” in Acts 11:26 strongly implies that the name “Christian” came from heaven, not from men.

*Third, the giving of the name “Christian,” and the timing of it, is a fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy.* In Isaiah 62:2 we find this glorious promise: “The Gentiles shall see your righteousness, and all kings your glory. You shall be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord will name.” Notice the sequence of events:

- The Gentiles would see (experience, receive) the righteousness of God.
- After that, the followers of God would be given a new name.
- This name would be bestowed by God.

When did the Gentiles see the righteousness of God? Not any time in the Old Testament period. A few Gentiles became part of the nation of Israel by proselytization, but the masses never entered into covenant relationship with God. After the church began in AD 33, there was still no widespread conversion of Gentiles; the gospel was preached only to Jews. A few years after Pentecost, that all changed with the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius. The record of his conversion is in Acts 10 and 11. Notice this amazing timeline:

- Acts 11:1 proclaims that “...the Gentiles had also received the word of God.”
- When this news became known to the disciples in Jerusalem, “...they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.’”
- Soon after, the apostle Paul came to work with the church in Antioch (Syria), and within a short time...
- *“The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (Acts 11:26).*

So in order, (1) The Gentiles heard and obeyed the gospel, beginning with Cornelius--they saw the righteousness of God. (2) The followers of Christ became known after that as "Christians." The lining up of all these events with the prophecy of Isaiah 62:2 cannot be coincidence. And what did Isaiah specify as the source of the new name? "The mouth of the Lord." Not His enemies!

#### FIFTH: THE SIMPLICITY OF THE NAME "CHRISTIAN"

This name is nondenominational, transcending all human religious names. It is the only name under which all followers of Christ can unite. To be "just a Christian," without any surnames or qualifiers, is simply beautiful and beautifully simple.

#### SIXTH: THE SAFETY AND SECURITY OF THE NAME "CHRISTIAN"

Any member of a manmade denominational church ought to be concerned that he or she cannot find the name of their church in the Bible. But if I wear only the name "Christian," I know I am wearing a name that God approves of. It is a name I can read in my Bible. I know I am obeying Peter's command to "glorify God in this name." I can be confident that I wear the same name that Peter, Paul, John, and the other first-century Christians wore.

#### SEVENTH: THE SCOPE OF THE NAME "CHRISTIAN"

This name is unique and specific, yet worldwide in its scope. It includes all who obey Christ in any nation and in any time period after Pentecost. Members of the church of Christ are accused of being narrow and sectarian. Well, truth is narrow! If it takes immersion in water to become a faithful Christian,<sup>2</sup> then it is wrong to say it doesn't. So in one sense the name "Christian" is narrow. But it is broad enough to include all who truly obey the Lord. Anywhere the seed of the gospel is planted, a true New Testament church can grow, with its members not called by any human name--"just Christians."

So the name "Christian" is the most important and most sacred name you can wear. It is the name God gave us (Isaiah 62:2, Acts 11:26). It honors His Son. It is non-denominational. It is exquisitely appropriate and fitting. Let us wear it proudly,

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<sup>2</sup> Which it does--see Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, Colossians 2:12.

and urge others to be “Christians only,” without any alterations or hyphenated additions. --John Temples