

The First Christians

(Acts 11:25) Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul:

(Acts 11:26) And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

This is the first of only three occurrences in Scripture of the word “Christian(s).” The other two are in 1PE 4:16 and ACT 26:28. From 1PE 4:16, we see that one should not be ashamed for suffering as a Christian. From ACT 26:22-28, we see that one can be a believer but not a Christian. Believing the truth is one thing; confessing it and living it is another because of the cost. In the days of our Lord’s personal ministry, we read:

(JOH 12:42) Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue:

(JOH 12:43) For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

Many who know the truth and believe it will not, because of the cost, commit to it. But *faith without works is dead* (JAM 2:20).

This Antioch where the brethren were first called Christians (ACT 11:26) was in Syria (as opposed to Antioch of Pisidia which was in Asia Minor, ACT 13:14). God’s covenant people have an ancient history with Syria. When Jacob (later named “Israel,” GEN 32:28) stole Esau’s birthright, he “...fled into the country of Syria, and served for a wife, and for a wife he kept sheep” (HOS 12:12). There he lived for twenty years under the thumb of his father in law, Laban (GEN 31:41), time enough that his identity later reflected it, as Moses put it when speaking of his Hebrew ancestor, Jacob: “...A Syrian ready to perish was my father...” (DEU 26:5). It seems strange to think of Israel as a Syrian but it is no more strange than our Lord, though being born in Bethlehem, being called a Nazarene because He resided in Nazareth (MAT 2:23). However, it is interesting that way back then in Jacob’s day, Syria was a place where the Holy Spirit called Israel by a different name. Of special importance is the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ in His first public discourse made a submissive, uncircumcised, immersed Syrian a reproof to Israelites (LUK 4:27 c/w 2KI 5:14-15).

Concerning Antioch, there is probably not a more fitting place for the first use of the term *Christian*. Per our text today, with two eminent apostles (Paul and Barnabas) assembling with and teaching them the doctrine of Christ for a whole year, this church was no doubt saturated with the reality that God’s program for His servants is rooted in Jesus Christ, and in no other, “...for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (ACT 4:12). He is the “...worthy name by the which ye are called” (JAM 2:7), and “...Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named” (EPH 3:14-15). Paul even calls the local church, “Christ” in 1CO 12:12.

The Jerusalem church which sent Barnabas to Antioch (ACT 11:22) had just been converted to the fact that God had opened the door of faith unto uncircumcised Gentiles (ACT 11:18), and the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile which had been *legally* taken away by the cross (EPH 2:13-14) was now eliminated *in practice*. Originally, the church at Antioch consisted of only Jews (ACT 11:19). Barnabas being at Jerusalem when the news of Gentile acceptance broke (and therefore personally

acquainted with the new concept), and Paul being God's chosen apostle to *bear Christ's name before the Gentiles* (ACT 9:15; ROM 11:13), Antioch in short order became the first truly "mingled" N.T. church. There were obviously Gentile members there by the time of GAL 2:11-12. What a great place, therefore, to harmonize the body of Christ by eliminating all false distinctions and rallying points (Jew/Gentile, circumcision/uncircumcision, Moses, Paul, etc.) with a name which unified all: Christians.

Antioch represented a paradigm shift in God's dealings with His servants on earth. From this point and forward church membership was according to one unifying trait: faith in Christ, so that believing Jews and believing Gentiles could sit at the same communion table. From this point and forward, the gospel moved emphatically toward the Gentiles under the ministries of Paul and Barnabas. It was from Antioch that the Holy Ghost ordained and sent them forth for this great work (ACT 13:1-4). After a few attempts to convert Jews met with strong Satanic rejection (ACT 13:5-45), "...Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should have first been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we **turn** to the Gentiles" (ACT 13:46). And with that, the kingdom of God "turned a corner," being taken away from one nation (Israel) and given to another that would bear fruit, as Jesus had said (MAT 21:43).

Whether the term "Christians" was one that the saints at Antioch adopted or whether it was one with which they were labelled by others is immaterial. The bigger story is that it was a term that stuck and became the default term for the servants of God. This seems to be a certain fulfillment of what the prophet Isaiah had written many years before to disobedient Israel in a chapter which clearly speaks of N.T. times (ISA 65:1-2 c/w ROM 10:20-21):

(ISA 65:15) And ye shall leave your name for a curse unto my chosen:
for the Lord GOD shall slay thee, **and call his servants by another name:**

Scripture and history are witnesses to the letter-fulfillment of these words, and Antioch was very significant in the program. Antioch became the capital of N.T. evangelism to the Gentile world. From that same area where Paul's ministry to the Gentiles began in earnest came also a not-so-coincidental line of manuscripts. Over 90% of the extant Greek copies of the N.T. are Byzantine or Syriac texts. Many Greek copies of apostolic writings congregated in Constantinople, which fell in 1453 to the Turks. In the ensuing flight, its citizens, many of whom were Christians and Greek scholars, dispersed widely into western Europe, carrying with them scores of Greek copies of the Scriptures which had two major features: 1) they were essentially consistent with one another, and 2) they differed from the Catholic manuscripts which had originated in Egypt. This sudden release of Greek scriptures into a darkened Europe caused a great awakening and production of Greek New Testaments which were translated into native languages and culminated (in English) in the Authorized Version of 1611. Perhaps God had Antioch in mind when He said, "Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples" (ISA 8:16), in that place where *the disciples were first called Christians*.

If ever there was a city-church (other than Jerusalem) that could be called the "mother church" of N.T. Christianity, it was Antioch, not Rome. Paul's gospel sprang from there to change the Gentile world, and when the esteemed (but very fallible) Peter came to Antioch, he was reproved for his dissimulation (GAL 2:11-13).