

Biblical Use of “Christian”

In Freedom’s Ring, Number 48, I injected this one-liner: “The term ‘Christian’ is used only three times in the Bible---as a noun, never as an adjective.” A reader responded with a one-liner: “What is the point of the above statement?”

As you regular readers know, I often throw out statements or questions to provoke thought rather than to prove some point. I supposed that you would possibly review your understanding and use of the appellation in light of the sparse reference in the Scriptures. Even if no earth-shaking new concepts were discovered in your new consideration, a reaffirmation of your belief and your use of the word could be profitable.

In view of the very common usage of the term “Christian” today, any concerned reader must be surprised to see it only three times in the Scriptures. Adding to that is the fact that there is no record of a disciple claiming to be a Christian or of referring to another believer as a Christian. In the first appearance of the term (Acts 11:26) probably ten years after Pentecost, Luke says “they were called Christians,” not “they called themselves Christians.”

This suggests that the citizens of Antioch, as they saw this new kind of religion developing in their city, attached a sort of nick-name or derisive name to this group arising from the Jewish synagogues without identity with the Jews. In Luke’s other mention of the term (Acts 26:28) there is further evidence of the scornful use of the name. When Paul pressed Agrippa to admit belief, the Jewish king expressed his disgust to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” There must have been a special sneer as he pronounced that prejudicial term “Christian” which he, as a Jew, would presume to identify them with a false Messiah, Jesus. Paul wisely let that matter drop. In response to Agrippa, Paul did not identify himself as a Christian nor plead that his hearers become Christians, but that they “become what I am.”

Did not Peter tell disciples that they should wear that name? Here let me inject comments of Vine (A Expository Dictionary of NT Words): “Though the word rendered ‘were called’ in Acts 11:26 might be used of a name adopted by oneself or given by others, the Christians do not seem to have adopted it for themselves in the times of the Apostles. In 2 Peter 4:16, the Apostle is speaking from the point of view of the persecutor; cp. ‘as a thief,’ ‘as a murderer.’ Nor is it likely that the appellation was given by Jews. 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 call them Christians. The author or origin of this denomination, Christus, had, in the reign of Tiberius, been executed by the Procurator, Pontius Pilate.’ From the second century onward the term was accepted by believers as a title of honour.”

Now, back to the question: what is my point in raising this question? It is not to contend that we should not use the appellation signifying an adherent of Jesus. It is not to declare that it is wrong to use it as an adjective describing that which pertains to Christ, though we have no scriptural precedent for such. It is more a caution against the ambivalent, diluted meaning fostered in common usage. The adjectival meaning may stray questionably when used to describe such a broad spectrum of things as a trait, a book, a nation, a teaching, a creed, a newspaper, a school, a church, a denomination, a sect, a cult, a hospital, a culture, education, music, art, philosophy, and many other such things. These are things rather than persons.

My point is to further make readers aware that many present-day beliefs and practices which may seem to be an inherent part of our religion also may be without authority or based on weak interpretations. Under this heading we may do well to restudy the designations we have made of different capacities and functions (elders, deacons, ministers, evangelists. etc.) in the community of believers. Our beliefs and practices concerning organization, functions and purposes of assemblies, the role of women, individual vs. collective responsibilities, the distinction between gospel and doctrine and between evangelists-preachers and prophets-teachers and pastors---all these and other aspects should be subject to critical and unbiased review. We might be as appalled with our discoveries as some may be by my contention that “Christian” was not a divinely appointed name for us to wear.

These are not issues on which our eternal security is based, though the patternist may seek to define and enforce dogmatic details of them. There is room for varying understanding and practice for no inspired writer made them essentials to discipleship.

Just one more common misconception will illustrate my point, and then I will let you relax. God created a nation through whom the Messiah would come. He did not want a kingdom, or else he would have created one. God planned for a spiritual kingdom which in due time he inaugurated through Christ. The earthly kingdom was born out of rebellion and brought woes upon God’s people (1 Sam.8). Yet, in spite of all that, a host of believers are eagerly expecting a restoration of that earthly kingdom at any moment with Jesus ruling over it! That earthly kingdom was not in God’s plans; it was a diversion from his plans; and it is not in his plans! The King rules over his spiritual kingdom now!

Let the word of God be our guide, not to anchor us to the past, but to chart our present course.

(For more about the name “Christian,” see “Free To Speak,” Chapter 17.) (November 2000) []