

## What Is a Christian?

Acts 11:26

*“And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26)*

The year is A.D. 64. Nero is the emperor of Rome and the “Eternal City” itself is in flames. Plumes of black smoke billow from crackling and blackened homes and businesses. Families flee to the countryside. When the fires finally die out, two-thirds of the city is destroyed.

The great historian Tacitus, writing about this event a generation later (around 114), gives us an inside scoop on this hellish disaster. Apparently, there was more to it than just a lantern tipping or an out-of-control garbage fire. No, the word on the street was that Nero himself had ordered the fire to be ignited. A clever man, Nero knew he couldn’t stop the rumor that the fire had been set on purpose; but he might be able to cast the blame on someone else. It is in this context that we encounter the very first time the word *Christian* occurs outside the Bible. In Tacitus’ own words:

To get rid of this rumor, Nero set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty a class hated for their abominations, who are commonly called Christians.<sup>1</sup>

*Christians*. It was a name unfamiliar to most of his readers, so Tacitus felt the need to provide more explanation:

Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. Checked for a moment, this pernicious superstition again broke out, not only in Judaea, the source of the evil, but even in Rome, that receptacle for everything that is sordid and degrading from every corner of the globe.<sup>2</sup>

Fast-forward to the year 2022, and we are astonished by what we see. What was *unfamiliar* to Tacitus’ readers in the second century has now become the world’s largest religion, claiming 2.5 billion adherents. And there’s something else that surprises us: despite these mind-boggling numbers, the word *Christian* occurs only three times in the Bible, twice in Acts and once in Peter’s first letter.<sup>3</sup>

Given the fact that so many people claim the name “Christian,” we need to know what a Christian really is. We are not interested in “Christian” as a socio-cultural category; rather, we want to know what the Bible says about it. The two passages in Acts in which this word occurs are two “windows” for us to look through and find the answer. Together, they reveal: (1) *who* a Christian is (Acts 11:26), and (2) *why* someone would become a Christian (Acts 26:28).

### 1. Who a Christian Is (Acts 11:26).

Christians did not come up with the word “Christian.” In fact, never in the Bible do we find people calling themselves “Christians.” Rather, it was *non*-Christians who came up with the name, probably as a way of making fun of these people who were always talking about “Christ.” But it is important to note what Luke says about this term: it was given to people who were *disciples* of Jesus

“Disciple” was Luke’s favorite way of referring to the people who trusted in and followed Jesus, but there were other names as well, including:

- Brothers and sisters (Acts 1:15; 10:23; 11:1, 6)
- Believers (Acts 10:45; also 2 Corinthians 6:15; 1 Timothy 4:10, 12)

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1999), 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 11:26; Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16

- Followers of the Way (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22)
- Jesus' servants (Acts 4:29)

What do all these names have in common? One thing: a relationship. Whether viewing the *family* aspect of this relationship (“brothers and sisters”), the *trust* involved in this relationship (“believer”), the *lifestyle* associated with this relationship (“followers of the Way”), or the *status with God* that this relationship has brought about (“saint”), one thing is constant: Christians are people who have personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

So in reply to the question, “What is a Christian?”, the answer is clear: a Christian is a person who trusts and follows Jesus.

Two more things should be noted about this relationship with Christ:

- *It is radically personal.* - The very nature of Christ and what he did means that a relationship with him occupies the whole person, right down to the core of who you are.
- *It is completely public.* - Although it is personal, this radically personal relationship never stays private. Not only is this evident by the fact that the *non*-Christians came up with this nickname, the entire book of Acts teaches us that Christians are people who have a message to share with everyone.

## 2. Why a Person Becomes a Christian (Acts 26:28).

In Acts 26:28 we encounter the word “Christian,” from the lips of someone who was not one: the king of Judea, Herod Agrippa. “Agrippa said to Paul, ‘In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?’” The angst in Agrippa’s question is palpable. Although it was Paul who was on trial, Paul’s testimony turned the trial on Agrippa. He could not deny the *prophets*: they had indeed foretold the coming of such a Messiah (26:22-23). But neither could he deny the historical *facts* that Jesus fulfilled these prophecies (26:26-27). The best he could do was to say, in effect, “Ah, I see what you’re doing! Do you really think you can so quickly persuade me to be a ‘Christian?’”

Even though Luke does not tell us whether or not Agrippa ever came to believe in Christ, this episode shows us why a person would become a Christian. Someone becomes a Christian because they see the *facts* about Jesus and fully accept (believe) what those facts *mean* for them. This means that becoming a Christian doesn’t happen unconsciously, or automatically on the basis of birth or nationality. It doesn’t even happen by embracing a new set of moral standards. It happens when I realize, based on Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, that Jesus is God’s chosen King who conquered sin and death on my behalf; and what this means for me is that I trust and follow him.

### Discussion Questions

1. When you compare the way the word “Christian” is used today, and what it meant in the New Testament, what differences come to mind?
2. Why is it important to clear up the confusion about what it really means to be a Christian?
3. What do the other names for Christians tell us about the Christian life?
4. (This question applies to people who have worked closely with non-Christians at least for a few weeks.) Do the people close to you know that you are a Christian? If so, what do you suppose they know about Christianity if *you* were their only source of information?
5. What are your greatest obstacles to telling people what it means to be a Christian?

Behavior (“Unfortunately, I’m not a great model of Christian living”)

Knowledge (“I don’t have a clear idea of how to share with someone else what the message of Christianity is”)

Confidence (“I’m clear on what Christianity is, but I feel really nervous about talking about it”)

Forgetfulness (“I just don’t think about it at the right times”)

6. If someone *becomes* a Christian when they see the facts about Jesus and believe what those facts mean for them (he rose from the dead, so he is the Christ and my Savior and King), how would you evaluate what has happened when a person says they are *no longer* a Christian?