

What's in a Name? (Part 1)

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." So says Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, trying to get her lover to shed his last name, Montague. "Deny thy father and refuse thy name," she asks. Or, if he swears his love, "I'll no longer be a Capulet."

God seems to think names are important: "A good name is to be more desired than great wealth" (Proverbs 22: 1).

The name of God is important.

- In teaching His disciples to pray, Jesus said, "'Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name" (Matthew 6: 9; Luke 11: 2).
- Jesus came in it (John 5: 43).
- In Mary's great praise song (*The Magnificat*), she says, "For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is His name" (Luke 1: 49).
- Jesus did His works in it (John 10: 25).
- God's name is glorified in Jesus' death and resurrection (John 12: 28).
- Jesus asks the Father to keep His followers in it (John 17: 11).
- The saved will have it written on their foreheads (Revelation 14: 1).

The name of Jesus is important.

- All the prophets bear witness of it (Acts 10: 43; James 5: 10).
- In informing Mary and Joseph of their impending birth of his son, God's angel told him, "you shall call His name Jesus" (Matthew 1: 21; Luke 1: 31).
- Those who believe in it become children of God (John 1: 12).
- Disciples gather in it (Matthew 18: 20).
- Repentance for forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in it (Luke 24: 47).
- Sins are forgiven for the sake of it (1 John 2: 12).
- Disciples are commanded to baptize in it (Matthew 28: 19; Acts 2: 28; 10: 48; 22: 16).
- Those who abandon everything for the sake of it will inherit eternal life (Matthew 19: 29).
- Believers have life in it (John 20: 31; 1 John 5: 13).
- Everything a disciple asks for in it will be done (John 14: 13-14; 15: 16; 16: 23-24).
- The Holy Spirit is sent in it (John 14: 26).
- It is the only name by which we can be saved (Acts 4: 12).
- Disciples will be hated and persecuted because of it (Matthew 10: 22; 24: 9; Mark 13: 13; Luke 21: 12, 17; John 15: 21; Revelation 2: 3).
- Those who are reviled in it will be blessed (1 Peter 4: 14).
- Those who use it are to abstain from wickedness (2 Timothy 2: 19).
- Disciples are to do everything in it (Colossians 3: 17).
- Paul encouraged believers to be united by it (1 Corinthians 1: 10).
- The Apostles healed by it (Acts 4: 10).
- They commanded demons by it (Acts 16: 18).
- They were prepared to die for it (Acts 21: 13).
- Every knee will bow to it (Ephesians 2: 10).
- Elders are to anoint the sick in it (James 5: 14).
- The saved will have it written on their foreheads (Revelation 14: 1; 22: 9).
- At the coming of Christ, it will be written on His robe (Revelation 19: 16).

There are other important references to names:

- Every family in heaven and on earth derives its name from the Father (Ephesians 3: 15).
- Jesus calls His sheep by name (John 10: 3).
- He gave Peter, James, and John new names (Mark 3: 16-17).

- Disciples are to greet each other by name. (3 John 1:14).
- The names of the saved are in the book of life (Philippians 4:3; Revelation 21:27).
- Anyone whose name is not in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

Anyone who suggests that names are never important simply isn't reading his or her Bible.

The questions that are explored in this issue of *ET&N* are:

- Does God give generic or specific individual names to His followers?
- Is so, what are they?

Then

"You will be called by a new name which the mouth of the LORD will designate" (Isaiah 62:2).
 "My servants will be called by another name" (Isaiah 65:15).

We only know of four individuals in the New Testament who were given new names: Cephas (Peter), James and John (Boanerges), and Saul (Paul). The first three were given by Jesus Himself (Mark 3:16-17), but Saul took on Paul sometime during his first missionary journey, and we have no evidence that it was God-given. Some have suggested that he took the name in honor of Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Cyprus to whom he evangelized. It is certainly very possible that Paul changed his name in order to eliminate the stigma the name Saul had among the church.

It was commonplace in the early days of the church for new believers to take on a new name to commemorate their new births, but the practice was not universal, and it wasn't done for any other disciples in the New Testament. So it does not appear that the "new name" Isaiah prophesied applied to all individuals.

Individuals who placed their faith in Christ Jesus were referred to by many descriptors:

- **STONE** (1 instance) - "You also, as living **stones**, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood..." (1 Peter 2:5)
- **SHEEP** (many instances, but only once outside the Gospels) - "Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the **sheep** through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord" (Hebrews 13:20).
- **ALIEN/STRANGER** (2 instances) - for example, "Beloved, I urge you as **aliens and strangers** to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul." (1 Peter 2:11)
- **AMBASSADOR** (2 instances) - for example, "Therefore, we are **ambassadors** for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:20)
- **CITIZEN** (2, both by Paul) - for example, "For our **citizenship** is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20).
- **SOLDIER** (3, all by Paul) - for example, "Suffer hardship with me, as a good **soldier** of Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 2:3)
- **PRIEST** (6 instances) - for example, "But you are A chosen race, A royal **priesthood**, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9)
- **MEMBER** (6, all by Paul) - for example, "...because we are **members** of His body." (Ephesians 5:30)
- **HEIR** (12 instances) - for example, "Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and **heirs** of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?" (James 2:5)

- **SERVANT/MINISTER** (25, mostly by Paul) - for example, "As to all my affairs, Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information." (Colossians 4: 7)
- **CHILDREN (of God, of promise, of Light)** (33, over half by John) - for example, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called **children** of God; and such we are." (1 John 3:1)
- **SAINT** (57 instances) - for example, "For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the **saints** have been refreshed through you, brother." (Philemon 7)
- **BRETHREN/BROTHER** (185 instances) - for example, "Therefore, if food causes my **brother** to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble." (1 Corinthians 8:13)
- **DISCIPLE** (253, all in the Gospels and Acts) - for example, "The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the **disciples** continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem." (Acts 6: 7)

Now

Based on the list in the **Then** section, is it clear what individuals followers of Jesus are to be called? Based on numbers alone, "disciple" gets the nod, but it is never once used in the letters of Paul, Peter, or John. It appears that the term fell out of use very early, perhaps because one could no longer be a disciple in the traditional sense to someone who was no longer around physically. "Brother (brethren)" is the next most frequent on the list, but that has overtones of linguistic exclusivity in our time, and "sisterern" is just too cumbersome.

"Saint" is the third most-used descriptor. Some years ago (back in CompuServe days), I spent some time evangelizing in chat rooms using the name "StLionhart." I would have used StLionheart (from my name, Richard), but CIS was limited to 10-letter names at that time. I caught a lot of flack from a few Catholics—"Who do you think you are, calling yourself a 'saint'?" was the typical complaint. I tried to respectfully point out that "saint" was a descriptor applied in the New Testament to all believers, not just a few special people recognized by the Roman Church, but that didn't seem to placate them.

"Child of God" is the next most used, but that's hardly an adequate term since in some sense at least, everyone is a child of God, and it's used by many who hold no allegiance to Christ Jesus. In addition, "children" is sometimes used pejoratively (see Galatians 4: 3; Ephesians 4:14; Hebrews 12:8). The only other term used sufficiently to consider it common in the New Testament is servant (which means little in western society) or minister (which has clerical connotations). Reading the Bible on airplanes, I sometimes get asked if I'm a minister. My answer is always "yes," and then I explain that all followers of Jesus are ministers, but the point often gets lost in the translation. "Stranger" is one you can sometimes hear at church, but it usually carries an unspoken accusation, as it "Hi, stranger!"

What's a stone-sheep-alien/stranger-ambassador-citizen-soldier-priest-member-servant/minister-heir-child-saint-brother-disciple to do?

You may have noticed that I left "Christian" off that list. Interesting, the name most followers of Christ bear today was not popular until after the Apostolic Age and was initially used derisively: "The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." This was a name applied by non-believers to ridicule disciples' faith in a crucified criminal. The second use has overtones of sarcasm and comes while Paul is being held in Caesarea pending his extradition to Rome. "Agrippa replied to Paul, 'In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian'" (Acts 26:28). There is no evidence that Agrippa ever did accept Christ, and he appears to be taunting Paul. Of course, Paul gladly accepts the name with typical Pauline irony: "...I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains" (Acts 26:29).

The most compelling use of the term "Christian" comes in Peter's first letter, written probably around 60 A.D. and addressed to churches in what is now the western half of Turkey. "If anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name" (1 Peter 4:16). The context is persecution so, again, it probably refers to what the persecutors were calling Christ's followers. Like Paul, Peter turns the table on those seeking to belittle the church—"glorify God in this name that non-believers use to mock you," he seems to be saying.

Luke's comment about Antioch, Paul's response to Agrippa, and Peter's advice to persecuted believers all seem to be saying "don't take the bait of being called a Christian."

So, for those seeking to strictly observe New Testament Christianity, the term "Christian" is not the right choice. There is no evidence that followers of Christ Jesus ever addressed each other as "Christians" during the New Testament era.

Of course, there is also no evidence that they objected to the term, and it wasn't long before the use of the term "Christian" was adopted throughout the church. It is used once in *The Didache* (ca. 80), three times in 1 Clement (ca. 97), 14 times in Ignatius' seven authentic letters (ca. 107), 13 times in the letter of Mathetes to Diognetus (ca. 130), five times in the letter to the Philippians about Polycarp's martyrdom (ca. 155), and many times in Justin Martyr's Apologies (ca. 160). Any connotation of scorn or derision was long since forgotten, and followers of Jesus gladly wore the name "Christians."

Today, there is no stigma attached to "Christian," but there are still Christian terms that bear negative overtones for many—fundamentalist Christian and the redundant born-again Christian, for example. It's okay to be Christian, just not an extreme one!

So what's in a name? However we believers refer to ourselves, there is one thing of which we can be certain:

"For this reason also, God highly exalted [Christ Jesus], and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name..." (Philippians 2:9)

Discussion

Perhaps I left things hanging a bit in Part 1 because a few subscribers asked if I was criticizing the use of the term "Christian" to describe individual followers of Christ Jesus. Not at all! I wear the name without reservation. My primary point was that "Christian" wasn't a term that New Testament followers ever applied to themselves, but that its use quickly became commonplace.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: What's in a Name? Part 2

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