

CHRISTIAN - A Label or A Lifestyle? **Acts 11:19-26**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Did you know that one third of the earth's population bears the label Christian? Since there are now about 6.7 billion people on the face of the earth, that means there are over 2 billion Christians in the world today...Christian at least in name...Christian by label.

According to Luke, the divinely inspired author of the book of Acts, this label was first given to followers of Jesus Christ in the city of Antioch about 15 years after Jesus ascended into heaven. It was probably NOT a complimentary term to begin with...it was probably a term of contempt. (Much like "Lutheran" was a term coined by those who opposed Martin Luther. It was used in a derogatory manner to describe those who agreed with Luther's teachings on the Bible.)

The term Christian occurs only three times in the Bible. Here, where it is used not **among** the believers, but rather it was used **about** them. King Agrippa used it as a term of derision in what many say is a sarcastic remark to the Apostle Paul (Acts 26:28). The Apostle Peter implies that the term Christian was an insult and part of the suffering believers are called to patiently endure (1 Peter 4:16).

Those who used the term "Christian" in ancient Antioch were labeling believers for being significantly different from other people, different in what they believed and different in the way they lived. Soon, the label "Christian" became a badge of honor. For this fledgling faith's first 300 years, the label Christian meant someone who believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, a believer. 'Christian' - 'believer', the terms were interchangeable.

Today, the label "Christian" is used for anyone who holds membership in a Christian church. This includes a large number of people in Europe and Scandinavia who are members of the Christian Church, the State Church, by birth and remain so until death. They go through life bearing the label Christian but maybe not really knowing who Jesus Christ is or what the Bible says he did for us and continues to do for us. Some people who bear the label Christian lead lives that are not Christlike. While others labeled Christian live good lives but maybe don't even know about or believe in Jesus.

All this suggests that if you are among those who are called Christian, you need to consider seriously whether it is merely a label you wear or a real description of your faith and your lifestyle.

One characteristic of people who genuinely belong to Christ is that they witness to their Lord. They just can't help talking about their Savior. They have a message that's just too good to keep inside. That's what is illustrated in the first part of today's text. It refers to those followers of Christ who were forced to flee for their lives because of persecution.

After Stephen was stoned to death for confessing Christ, the enemies of Jesus attempted to wipe out, to exterminate his followers completely. All they accomplished was to scatter seeds for the growth of the church throughout the Mediterranean world. Verse 19...*those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message...* They continued to talk about the Savior everywhere they went.

Now some of those scattered believers spoke about Jesus Christ only to Jews (fellow-Jews) but others took Jesus' message to GENTILES, a new direction for the church in those days. Preaching the Gospel to Greeks in the city of Antioch was an astounding thing at that time not only because they were Gentiles, but because of the kind of city Antioch was. Antioch was a large, important city filled with pagan temples and heathen immorality. Even so, the Holy Spirit powerfully blessed the witness so that "*a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.*" Before long, Antioch was an important center for Christianity. And it happened because even scattered and persecuted believers couldn't help but witness to their Lord.

It seems like the H1N1 flu, the swine flu, isn't all it was supposed to be...neither an epidemic nor a pandemic. But in these early years of the church, Christianity spread like a pandemic. CONTAGIOUS CHRISTIANITY...those who had it spread it to everyone they could. They spread it by word-of-mouth, by witnessing their faith. Christianity spreads the same way today. ARE YOU A "CARRIER"? ARE YOU INFECTED ENOUGH TO PASS IT ON?

Many who bear the name Christian wear it openly and talk about their Lord whenever they have the opportunity. They are "carriers" of the message. Many, however, wear the label so discretely that no one around them has a clue about their faith in Jesus. Now some people just never think about witnessing their faith. Others excuse their silence by saying, "I don't know enough about the Bible" or "I don't know what to say." Real witnessing is not so much a matter of "knowledge to teach" as it is an "experience to share." Once you have faced up to the devastating, damning significance of sin, once you have felt the terror of being lost and hopeless, unable to work your own salvation, then receiving through faith in Jesus, full forgiveness of sins, pardon and peace with God, simply can't leave you the same as you were before.

It's normal to talk about important, life-changing things that happen to you. And if you are convinced that other people need to have the same thing happen to them, talking about

Jesus, talking about what he has done is very natural. That's witnessing! And that's what Christians have been doing enthusiastically for 2,000 years.

Another identifying mark of a follower of Christ is seen in the individual's character. We have here the example of Barnabas. He was held in high regard by the believers in Jerusalem. They sent him to Antioch to help the fledgling church grow. Our text gives us his credentials. *He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.* His faith was obvious in his life. So it is not surprising that under his leadership the Holy Spirit caused the church in Antioch to flourish. We read that *a great number of people were brought to the Lord.* His glowing Christian character attracted people to the church where they heard the message about Jesus.

Barnabas recognized that he needed some specially qualified help. So he sought out Saul (also known as the Apostle Paul) and brought him to Antioch too. Now Paul and Barnabas spent a whole year teaching God's Word in the young church. It was the impact of the life-changing Gospel they proclaimed and lived that brought the title "Christian" out of the realm of insult and into a label to be esteemed and sought after.

You know, Christianity is easy to imitate outwardly. All a person has to do is take on the name, join a church, live a fairly good moral life and he or she can pass for a Christian outwardly.

But real Christianity, genuine discipleship, is not a matter of mere outward appearance, it is first of all an inward change. Jesus said to Nicodemus, *"...no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* What you are by yourself, by nature, leaves you totally unfit to belong to God. Your natural character is so unholy and unacceptable to God that he has to start all over with you if you are to be his.

Unfortunately, many who call themselves Christian have only superficially faced the seriousness of our sin problem. If you think of sin as little more than mistakes, then being saved is nothing more than God forgiving a few mistakes so you can go to heaven. But sin is serious. Left untreated it can separate you from God for eternity. People who don't take their sin seriously don't take their Savior very seriously either. The result is that what they are as a Christian is hardly different from what they would be without the label.

When you confess your faith in Christ Jesus as you did a few moments ago, it is the result of a complete renewal worked by the Holy Spirit. The process is the same for all of us. By the condemnation of God's law, he works a conviction of sin in your heart so that you say, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Then, by the invitation of the Gospel, he lovingly calls you to Christ, works faith in your heart, a faith which trusts the cleansing power of Christ's blood, and so makes you a forgiven child of God, a believer, a Christian.

But even more happens in this process than merely wiping clean the slate of your sins. The Holy Spirit actually works a change in you so that you really are a New Creation. Just as the old sinful nature is naturally programmed to deep self-centeredness, the new spiritual nature is God-centered and wants to serve and obey him. The old sinful nature works such things as jealousy, immorality, strife and conflict, cursing and swearing, bitterness and anger. The fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in a life is peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control. This is lifestyle Christianity, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control and, perhaps the most expected feature of true Christianity, love.

Jesus said, *“Love one another as I have loved you.”* His love was (and still is) an undeserved, self-sacrificing, unconditional love. That’s the kind of love we are to have for one another. And that’s the kind of love which is a mark of Christ’s followers. Jesus said, *“All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.”*

All men will know that you are a Christian, by lifestyle and not just by label, if you love one another. It’s so easy isn’t it? It’s so easy to slip into patterns of living that reduce the name Christian to merely a label and not a lifestyle. It’s so easy to let the sinful nature win out over the new creation. You just can’t seem to manage a bold witness for the Savior, to be more Christlike in character, to practice love toward others. The good that you want to do you fall far short of doing.

What can you do? Draw even closer to the one who made you his in the first place and in the power of his life-working Spirit. Let him work his work in you. And how is this done? It happens simply when you immerse yourself in God’s Word and are enriched by the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. It is there that you are repeatedly touched and taught by Christ. It is there that the Holy Spirit works powerfully and wonderfully. It is there that you will find the power and the desire to turn a “label Christian” into a “lifestyle Christian.” May he by his grace so work in each of us to his glory. Amen.