

April 10, 2016 “A Better Word?” Acts 11:19-26

I know I told this story once before. I am telling it this morning because it goes to the point of this particular message. What does the word Christian really mean? And is there a better word to describe us, given that it appears the word Christian is used by the population at large to mean many different things.

My story. And it is my story. I was following my normal routine, and it was about 10:30 pm, might have even been 11:00. I was lying in bed doing something on my IPAD, that's an Apple computer in a tablet format. I received an email from Bryan Hupe, one of our elders here at St. Andrew's. He had been watching the late news on CBC, Peter Mansbridge, and they had carried a story about a United Church Minister who is involved in a legal battle to keep her position and standing because she is a professing atheist. Does not believe in God. She has since made it clear that she was not asked whether she believes in God when she was ordained. Bryan's request of me was...comment please.

It is not my job and it is not my style to critique other denominations, but I set out to explain how such a situation could occur in a denomination that calls itself a Christian Church, and is recognized as such across Canada and even by governments. You see there is the fundamental problem with the word Christian. This minister does not see how being an atheist, could limit her being a Christian minister. It evokes the question what does the word Christian mean? And it becomes obvious fairly quickly that different groups of people define the word Christian very differently.

By now you should know what I do when I have a question about the meaning of a word. I turn first of all to the Oxford

2.

Dictionary. A singular authority on the meaning of words. It starts out really well. “Christian (Person) believing in, professing or belonging to the religion of Christ; of Christ or his religion.” Not bad. I'm not keen on the focus on the religion part but I understand how the editors of the Oxford got there. But listen as it continues: “(person) showing character consistent with Christ's teachings of genuine piety, Christlike;”...now the real slide begins... “civilized, decent (person).”

And you might wonder how could that be? How come no references to the Bible? How come not one really basic theological comment? The answer lies in the portion I read to you from Acts chapter 11:19-26, and specifically in the last verse of that passage, verse 26 which says, “When Barnabas found Saul (who would become Paul) he (Barnabas) brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” The KJVersion says essentially the very same thing. “The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.” That's the direct quotation.

A new thing had happened that the disciples of Jesus had not expected and did not anticipate. To their amazement, faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, and the new life that springs from that faith had leapt over a cultural line. At the time of the resurrection of Jesus, all of Jesus followers, all of the disciples, had a common background. They were Jews. They were accustomed to putting the great questions of life to the written Scriptures of the Old Testament. They were schooled and culturally conditioned to live in the context of the Old Testament Law, and certainly as a belief and moral code, the Ten Commandments. But as a result of obeying Jesus command to carry

the faith to others, they discovered a new and receptive audience...the Gentiles. All the cultural groupings of the ancient world who were not Jewish. Some of them were atheists, some of them were agnostics, some of them worshipped other gods. And they found new faith in Jesus, in God as He is made known in the Old Testament, and their lives were changed under the leading of the disciples whom they discerned were filled with the Holy Spirit of God. And in Antioch this new group of believers, primarily Gentile in background, under the leadership of Saul, who would become known as the apostle Paul, and Barnabas, in Antioch, they were first called Christians. The disciples were first called, Christians. By whom? Who was it that called them Christians for the first time in Antioch?

When we read Luke's letter to Theophilus, it becomes very clear, the disciples and this infant, predominantly Gentile church, did not call themselves Christians. They used the term, the disciples. So who called them Christians in Antioch? And why did they use that word? And what did it mean in the mouths of those who used it?

I will answer all of those questions in a minute. First you need to know this. The word Christian appears in all of the New Testament documents only 3 times. In not one of the passages in which it appears is the word actually defined. There is no Biblical definition of the word. Why? Because the disciples of Jesus, Paul and Barnabas and their followers who became the church in Antioch, learning the gospel, hearing the stories about Jesus, His teachings, His miracles, and yes, His crucifixion and resurrection, as the means whereby God forgives sin when people exercise faith, the disciples and the early church did not invent this word or use it. Christian. So

we have no Biblical definition of the word Christian.

The 2 other texts in which the word Christian is found are informative. In this portion Paul is on trial. He has been before the Roman Governor at Ceasarea, his successor Festus, and finally King Agrippa. The process has been long. Paul as a Roman citizen has appealed to Caesar. Festus and Agrippa are trying to figure out exactly what the charges against Paul should be as his Jewish accusers have made many charges but been unable to prove any of them. Paul is allowed to speak in his own defence, and Paul always believed an opportunity to speak, was a gift of God, and so he proclaimed the risen Christ and testified concerning his own conversion. At one point Festus interrupted Paul's statement to say, "You are out of your mind, Paul!" and "Your great learning is driving you insane!" Paul is permitted to continue. When he is finished, Agrippa shakes his head and says, "Do you think in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian!" Agrippa and his queen, Bernice rise and leave, and Luke learns that Agrippa made the comment to Festus... "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar." It is clear the term Christian means they are "those kind of people!" Trouble makers and not of our kind.

The last time the word Christian is used in the New Testament, ironically it is in the 1st letter of the apostle disciple-become-apostle, Peter. 1st Peter 4:15-16 says this: "If you suffer (followers of Jesus) it should not be as a murderer, or thief, or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." You see Peter understands that being a Christian has become a legal charge in the Roman Empire, and it leads to real suffering. He would be charged as a Christian and crucified. Most of the 11

surviving disciples would be charged as Christians and killed in one way or another. In other words a Christian, is someone like a murderer, a thief or a meddler in the eyes of the world.

And the net result, is that in our time, the word Christian can mean one who follows Christ, but it can also mean a person who is civilized. Has manners. Or is decent, meaning honest, a good person who has not killed anyone recently. And everything in between.

I am not a dreamer. We are not about to abandon the word Christian. But you need to know that the reason we have, to some extent, lost that word is that it is not precisely defined in Scripture. It was not the word used in the infant church. Further, there is a “better” word. A stronger word. A word that is Biblically defined. And for that very reason you might even say it is a scary word. Most of us do not think we measure up to this other word. It is the word the 11, the 120 in the Upper Room on the evening of the resurrection used to describe themselves. It is the word used to describe the 3,000 who were converted when the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost...what some Christian historians call the birth of the church. It is the same word used to describe Paul and Barnabas. And the word is here in Acts 11 verse 26. “The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” The disciples. And yes, that is the word Jesus used to describe his followers.

And starting next week for a number of weeks what I am going to do during this time is to examine the meaning of that term. This is no wild goose chase. You heard the muddy definition of the word Christian from the Oxford Dictionary. As a tease, as a first taste here is what the Oxford says about the word disciple. “#1 One

6.

of Christ's personal followers, especially one of the 12 apostles; any early believer in Christ.” That's what the Bible says. So let's in the coming weeks turn over the rocks and kick the tires of this word that says amazing things about who we are in this particular time in history...and never loses sight of whom it is to which we belong. You are God's children through your faith in Jesus Christ. Disciples!

Let us pray.....

Heavenly Father, it is more than a little scary to see and hear the meaning of the words by which we are described. Through the power and presence of Your Holy Spirit, lead us in this quest in the midst of which we might discover the meaning of our discipleship, and how best we can serve the Lord Jesus as our Redeemer and King. Amen