

Christian, Title

Is it true that the early Believers did not call themselves “Christians”?

In Acts 26:28, the Apostle Paul is called before King Agrippa who asks him, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” (NIV). This statement is made after Paul defends himself for believing in the resurrection of the dead and for the decisions that he made as a Jewish Believer who preached in the name of Yeshua. But was Paul going out and making “Christians” of those to whom he preached? Many people believe so, and would say that if you are not a “Christian” then you cannot be a Believer in the Anointed One or *Christos* (Χριστός).

Another place where the term “Christian” is seen in the Bible is in 1 Peter 4:15-16: “Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name” (NASU).

This is a very perplexing statement made by this disciple of Yeshua’s, who many consider the preeminent of the original twelve. Peter says “let him glorify God in this respect” (YLT), in reference to Believers being called “Christians.”

The third location that this title appears is in Acts 11:25-26: “And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the [assembly] and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (NASU).

There is considerable debate among theologians regarding what context “called” means in this passage from Acts. *LS* defines the verb *crēmatizō* (χρηματίζω), as “to take and bear a title or name, to be called or styled so and so.”¹ Many today readily assume that “Christian” is a title that was given by God to identify those who have placed their trust in His Son. However, this title, *Christianos* (Χριστιανός), only appears three times in the Bible. *AMG* indicates, “It does not occur in the NT as a name commonly used by Christians [i.e., Believers] themselves...The believers first became known as Christians as an appellation of ridicule.”² *Vine* adds that “the Christians do not seem to have adopted it for themselves in the times of the Apostles...As applied by Gentiles there was no doubt an implication of scorn...”³ The Greek seems to indicate that the term “Christian” was used by outsiders as a term of insult to the early Believers.

By the beginning of the Second Century, however, the assembly of Believers, predominantly made up of non-Jewish people, had taken this title as one of honor and it subsequently remains to this day. It is possible that the term “Christian” began to be used in great numbers at the time following the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and when anti-Semitism in the Roman Empire rose in great numbers because of the Jewish revolt. It was also at this time when many Believers in Yeshua began being barred from the Jewish Synagogue, and Jewish animosity toward them was enflamed. Many non-Jewish Greek and Roman Believers probably wanted to separate themselves from the Jewish Believers. But it is notable that the term “Christian” was never applied or used by the Apostles. You never see them calling themselves “Christians.”

The inherent problem here with the term “Christian” is that it was not given by God to His people. It was given as an insult by outsiders to the early Believers in Yeshua and consequently it stuck in certain communities. Christian is not a title that God gave to His people, but it is ultimately a man-made title.

What the Apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 4:15-16 concerning the title “Christian” was that if you suffer for the Messiah being called this, do not be ashamed. But “Christian,” which was originally implied as a term of insult, is compared to “a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler.” Peter does not say that we are to

¹ *LS*, 894.

² *Zodhiates, Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1483.

³ *Vine*, 643.

readily call ourselves “Christians.” When we as Messianic Believers are asked whether or not we are a “Christian,” we should change the focus of the discussion to the Messiah and the work that He has done in our lives—not whether we are “this” or “that.” This is because a born again Believer is one who has been spiritually regenerated by the power of God via His Son Yeshua, and continually trusts and believes in Him. **This is what each of us must be known by.** What a person is called is entirely irrelevant if there is no faithful life of obedience to the Lord, and the love of God emanating from one’s heart toward others.