



Tim Pauley

PO Box 58403, Charleston, WV 25358

304.767.8430

tim.pauley@capitolcom.org

"I Am a Christian..."

Acts 11:19-26

Every elected official and legislator in the capitol is almost always identified or introduced the same way - with the "D" or "R" after their name. Then they are usually labeled by their ideology - as a liberal, moderate, or conservative. Recent events in West Virginia politics have caused much discussion about what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican. What do the parties stand for? How do they get the message out and effectively communicate what it means to be a leader or member of their party?

However, there is a label, an identification which for every person in the capitol is more important than party affiliation or ideological affinity. That is the label of "Christian". "Christian" and "Christianity" have come to mean a lot of different things in our society. So, we would ask, "What does it mean to be a Christian?" There is no other place to find the answer to that all-important question than the Bible. A good place to start might be where the early believers were first called Christians.

"I am a Christian." The young man said nothing else as he stood before the Roman governor, his life hanging in the balance. His accusers pressed him again, hoping to trip him up or force him to recant. But once more he answered with the same short phrase. "I am a Christian." It was the middle of the second century, during the reign of emperor Marcus Aurelius. Christianity was illegal, and believers throughout the Roman Empire faced the threat of imprisonment, torture, or death. Persecution was especially intense in southern Europe, where Sanctus, a deacon from Vienna, had been arrested and brought to trial. The young man was repeatedly told to renounce the faith he professed. But his resolve was undeterred. "I am a Christian."

No matter what question he was asked, he always gave the same unchanging answer. According to the ancient church historian Eusebius, Sanctus "girded himself against [his accusers] with such firmness that he would not even tell his name, or the nation or city to which he belonged, or whether he was bond or free, but answered in the Roman tongue to all their questions, 'I am a Christian.'" When at last it became obvious that he would say nothing else, he was condemned to severe torture and a public death in the amphitheater. On the day of his execution, he was forced to run the gauntlet, subjected to wild beasts, and fastened to a chair of burning iron. Throughout all of it, his accusers kept trying to break him, convinced that his resistance would crack under the pain of torment. But as Eusebius recounted, "Even thus they did not hear a word from Sanctus except the confession which he had uttered from the beginning." His dying words told of an undying

commitment. His rallying cry remained constant throughout his entire trial. "I am a Christian."

For Sanctus, his whole identity—including his name, citizenship, and social status—was found in Jesus Christ. Hence, no better answer could have been given to the questions he was asked. He was a Christian, and that designation defined everything about him.¹

Sanctus clearly demonstrated what it meant to be a Christian, even to the point of giving up his life for his faith. The term "Christian" came to be used for those who professed faith in Jesus Christ and sought to follow His Word. This was not always the case. In the earliest days of the Church believers were most simply known as followers of "The Way". In Acts 11 we find where followers of Christ first came to be called "Christians":

¹⁹ So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. ²³ Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; ²⁴ for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And

considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.
²⁵ And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

(Acts 11:19-26)

First Called Christians

The term “Christian” is only used three times in the Bible. Here, and in Acts 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16. It obviously comes from “Christ” and then adds the ending “-ian” which means “the party of”, “adhering or belonging to”. So, it was used to refer to those of the “party of Christ” or who belonged to or adhered to the teachings of Christ. Most think it was originally used as a derogatory term which the believers eventually took as a title for themselves.

Luke shares the fact that the “believers were first called Christians in Antioch” as a passing statement in an historical narrative. While there is complete proclamation in this passage of what it actually means to be a Christian, we do get some ideas by what was actually taking place among these believers.

These Christians boldly proclaimed the gospel everywhere they went. The believers from Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch and “**preached the Lord Jesus**”. A large number responded to their message and **turned to the Lord** (vs. 20-21). We do not hear the complete content of their gospel message here, but we simply need to go to the rest of this book and the New Testament to see what their message they proclaimed. These believers shared the bad news that all people are sinners and fall under the just wrath and judgment of God. Then they shared the good news that Jesus came to suffer and die to take that judgment upon Himself in our place and that “**there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved**” (Acts 4:12)

These Christians were challenged to faithfully live out their faith and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. When news of the wonderful response to the gospel in Antioch reached the church back in Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas to check things out. When he saw the grace of God at work he rejoiced and “**...Began to encourage them all to remain true to the Lord**” (vs. 23). Barnabas focused on encouraging these new believers how to faithfully follow Christ in what must have been extremely challenging circumstances in the pagan city of Antioch.

These Christians focused on the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. As this group of believers grew, Barnabas recognized he needed help. He went to find Saul in Tarsus and bring him back to

Antioch. Saul was the converted Pharisee and persecutor of Christians who was now powerfully proclaiming the good news of the risen Savior. Barnabas and Saul “**...for an entire year met with the church and taught considerable numbers**” (vs. 26). Again, we don’t have recorded the content of their teaching, but if we consider Saul’s (Paul’s) teaching in his letters, we know he always proclaimed the truth of who Christ is and all He has done for believers. He would then apply his teaching to believer’s lives and challenge them how they should live in light of those wonderful gospel truths.

So, these were people who heard and responded to the gospel message of Christ suffering and dying for sinful people and rising again so that those who respond in repentance and faith might be saved. They then shared that message with others. These believers sought to be true to their faith by living out the teachings of Jesus in difficult times. These followers of Christ focused on the teaching of God’s Word as they gathered in their local church. As a result, the people in Antioch labeled them “Christians” – those who belonged to the party of Christ; those who adhered to or belonged to Christ. This may well have been a term of derision, but the message these believers shared and the lives they lived clearly identified whose party they belonged to – the Jesus party!

What Does it Mean to Be a Christian in the Capitol?

Being a genuine Christian means the same thing for us that it did for the believers in Antioch and for Sanctus. It means we have responded in repentance and faith to the message of the gospel. It means we are seeking to be true to the Lord in our daily lives and in how we serve in the statehouse. It means we are seeking to both learn and teach the truth we find in the word of God. As we consider these things let us pray that we can faithfully say with Sanctus – “**I Am a Christian!**”

¹MacArthur, John. *Slave: The Hidden Truth About Your Identity in Christ* (pp. 7-8). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

INTERIM BIBLE STUDY

Monday, September 18

12:00 Noon McManus Conference Room (M252)
(Located near House Minority offices)