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MINISTRIES

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Torah Terminology: Should We Call Ourselves “Christians”?

In the Scriptures, the apostles were known as “Christians.” In Acts 11, we learn that this term was invented in the city of Antioch:

Acts 11:26

...And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Once the term was invented, it became quite popular. It became so widely known that the Jewish king Agrippa knew what it was:

Acts 26:28

And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”

Not only did other people call the apostles Christians, but the apostles themselves also used the term. Peter uses it in his first epistle:

1 Peter 4:14-16

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

So, the apostles were called Christians, both by others and by themselves. However, some people argue that we, today, should not call ourselves “Christians.” In this teaching, we will address this issue. Should we, as followers of Messiah, call ourselves “Christians”? And if not, then what *should* we call ourselves?

Let’s start by examining what “Christian” means. There is a Greek term, *christos*, which means “anointed one,” and this term is translated into English as “Christ.” This means the same thing as the Hebrew word *mashiach*, which is where we get the word “Messiah” from. Both of these terms are used in the Bible: *mashiach* is used in the Hebrew Scriptures, and *christos* is used in the Greek ones.

“Christian” comes from another Greek word, *christianos*, which means “follower of *christos*.” To put it in English, “Christian” means “follower of Christ,” or, “follower of the anointed one.” Of course, “Christ,” “Messiah,” or “Anointed One” are all titles that are given to Jesus, or Yeshua, as he was known in Hebrew. “Christian” means follower of Yeshua.

We are followers of Yeshua, and we believe that the apostles set a great example of how to follow him. Since “Christian” is such an accurate descriptor for what we believe, and since the apostles called themselves “Christians,” it seems only natural that we would use that term as well. So, then, why do some argue that we should abandon the word “Christian” and go by another name?

Well, the reason they say we should call ourselves something else is because “Christian” does not mean the same thing to us that it meant to the apostles. There are many people today who call themselves “Christian,” but who do not follow the teachings of Christ. For example, Christ taught that the Torah, the law of God, should be upheld (Matthew 5:17-20), but there are many who call themselves “Christian” and reject the Torah. Christ said he came to gather “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:5-6; 15:24), but there are many who call themselves “Christians” who say that Israel has been replaced. Christ and the apostles kept the seventh-day sabbath, and the festivals of YHWH, such as Passover, but there are many who call themselves “Christians” who do not keep these days, and instead celebrate unbiblical holidays, such as Christmas and Halloween. In addition to this, there are many modern doctrines and practices associated with “Christianity” that would have seemed utterly bizarre to first century Christians. When people hear the term “Christian” today, they think of people who go to church on Sunday, only read the New Testament, and believe that if you’re not baptized the correct way or have the correct ideas about the Trinity, then you’re not “saved.” This is all a far cry from what “Christian” meant in the first century. So, some argue that we should call ourselves something besides “Christian” in order to separate ourselves from the baggage that the term “Christian” has acquired over the course of history.

This is not an entirely unreasonable argument. The meanings of words do change over time, and in order to communicate clearly, we should adapt to those changes. If calling ourselves “Christians” gives people the wrong impression about us, then perhaps it would be good to call ourselves something else. But, before we jump straight to the conclusion that we should abandon the term “Christian,” we should consider what the alternatives are, and whether those alternatives are any better.

So, what criteria can we use to evaluate whether another term is better than the term “Christian”? Well, let’s consider the good points and the bad points of this term. The good points are: the word was used at the time of the apostles, and by the apostles themselves; the word accurately describes what we believe (we follow Christ’s teachings); and the word is easily recognizable. What are the bad points? The one bad point is that the term “Christian” carries baggage with it that could give people the wrong impression about us. So, as we look for a replacement for the term “Christian,” we are looking for a term that has all of the same good points as “Christian,” and none of the bad points.

As we mentioned, the apostles themselves used the term “Christian,” and this is one of the good points of the word. It would make sense then, if we are going to replace the term, to use another term that the apostles themselves used. After all, if we don’t, then we are sacrificing one of the good points of the term “Christian”—we are, in effect, distancing ourselves from the apostles. So, did the apostles use any other terms to refer to themselves? Well, as a matter of fact, they did. So, let’s examine those other terms, and see if they would work out better than the term “Christian.”

The first term to consider is “the Way.” This term is used numerous times in the book of Acts. This is

how Paul refers to himself in Acts 24:

Acts 24:14-16

But this I [Paul] confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.

Paul describes “the Way” as believing in everything in the Law and the Prophets, and also believing in the resurrection of the dead—a resurrection which Paul believes is made possible through Christ (Acts 4:1-2). We are not told where the name “the Way” comes from, but there are many scriptures that could have inspired the term. Isaiah 40:3 says, “[Prepare ye the way of the LORD \[YHWH\]](#).” In Matthew 7:14, Yeshua said, “[the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few](#).” Perhaps most famously, in John 14:6, Yeshua said, “[I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me](#).” “The way” is also used to describe the early Christians in Acts 19:9, 23; and Acts 24:22.

So, “the Way” shares two of the good points with the term “Christian”: it was used by the apostles, and it does describe their beliefs, at least, to a degree. “Christian” describes one’s beliefs much better, because it means “follower of Christ.” If I say, “I am a follower of the Way,” that tells people that I follow *something*, but it’s pretty vague. There are lots of “ways” that a person could follow. So, it is not quite as descriptive as the term “Christian.” Still, there are plenty of scriptures that use the term “the Way,” so it still seems like a viable option. So, then, are there any drawbacks to using this term? Well, unfortunately, “the Way” carries the same baggage that the term “Christian” does. There is a well-known Christian organization called “The Way International” that has been around since 1942 (<https://www.theway.org/about-us/the-way-international/>). If one types “the way religion” into a search engine, this organization takes up most of the front page. So, if we were to say that our religion is “the Way,” we would constantly have to explain that we are not affiliated with “the Way International.” We would end up saying, “I am a follower of the Way. Not the Way International—that is a different organization. I believe in the law and the prophets and the teachings of Christ.” People would respond, “oh, so you’re a Christian, right?” We would then explain that, yes, we are, but we keep the sabbath and the food laws and so forth. This is all fine, but we could have accomplished the exact same thing with a lot less explanation by just calling ourselves “Christians” to begin with. So, the positives of the term “the Way” are not quite as good as the positives of the term “Christian,” and it has equally bad negatives. Using “the Way” as a replacement doesn’t seem to make much sense.

We can still try another option though. The apostles also called themselves “Nazarenes.” This term is even older than “the Way;” it originated with Christ himself:

Matthew 2:23

[And he \[Yeshua\] went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.](#)

So, Christ was called a “Nazarene,” referring to his home city, Nazareth. We see that the apostles were called “Nazarenes” as well in Acts 24:

Acts 24:5

[For we have found this man \[Paul\] a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.](#)

So, “Nazarene” was a term used by the apostles. It describes our religion better than the term, “the Way,” because it directly refers to Yeshua, who was from Nazareth. Another point in favor of this term is that this is what Jews call Christians today: the Hebrew word for “Christians” is *Notzrim*. So “Nazarene” is even more recognizable than “the Way” is. Unfortunately, it has the same negative feature that “the Way” does. There is already a very popular organization that goes by this name. The “church of the Nazarene” is a huge, worldwide Christian organization. They describe themselves as “the largest denomination in the classical Wesleyan-Holiness tradition” (<https://nazarene.org/>). They were founded in 1908, and they have been very successful. So, if we called ourselves “Nazarenes,” we would constantly be explaining that we are not part of that particular church. Just like with “the Way,” we would not gain anything by calling ourselves “Nazarenes” rather than calling ourselves “Christians.” We would always be explaining that we are not part of the “church of the Nazarene,” but we are still followers of Christ. This is needlessly complicated, since we could just call ourselves “Christians” to begin with. “Nazarene” has all the same drawbacks as “Christian,” and it confers no additional advantages.

Since “the Way” and “Nazarene” are not as good as the term “Christian,” do we have any other options left? Well, there is one more significant term that the apostles used to refer to themselves, and that is “believer.”

Acts 19:18

Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.

1 Thessalonians 2:13

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

(see also: Acts 5:14; 10:45; 16:1; 1 Corinthians 14:22; 2 Corinthians 6:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:7; 1 Timothy 4:12; 6:2; Titus 1:6)

Unlike “the Way” and “Nazarene,” this term doesn’t carry any institutional baggage. There is no “church of the believers,” or at least, none that is widely known. “Believer” is an accurate description of us, because we are believers in Christ. So, this term was used by the apostles, it is accurate, and it carries none of the baggage that the other terms do. Seems like a slam dunk, doesn’t it? Well, not quite. The problem with “believer” is that it is simply not descriptive enough. When we as Christians speak to each other, we know what we mean by “believer.” We mean someone who believes in Christ just like we do. But if we tell an unbeliever that we are “believers,” then that doesn’t really convey any meaning to him. Sure, he knows that we believe *something*, but *everybody* believes something. We might as well tell him that we are an “eater” or a “breather.” In order for the term “believer” to communicate anything of substance, it would need to be part of a phrase: “believer *in Christ*.” This is much more descriptive and useful. But we don’t need this phrase, because we already have a word that means “believer in Christ,” and that word is “Christian.” When we say we are “believers in Christ,” what people will think is, “they are Christians.” So, why not just call ourselves “Christians” in the first place? Why should we use three words to do the job of one?

So, in the final analysis, we do not see anything wrong with calling ourselves “Christians.” The term was used by the apostles, and it accurately describes what we believe. There has been baggage attached to the term for the past 1,900 years, but baggage has been added to all of the descriptive terms from that time, and so that problem is unavoidable. No matter what term we use to refer to ourselves, ultimately

we will have to explain what we mean when we say that we follow Christ. It is also worth noting that, just like the term “Christian” has taken on baggage over time, it can also lose that same baggage. If enough Christians act as good representatives of Christ’s teachings, rather than representatives of later man-made traditions, then the term “Christian” will go back to its original meaning in people’s minds. They will start to think of Christians as people who follow Christ. The only way that can happen is if those who obey the Word of God continue to call themselves “Christians” just like the apostles did.

As a side note, there is one more term that we think is noteworthy, even though the apostles didn’t use it: that term is “Messianic.” As we mentioned before, the word “Messiah” comes from the Hebrew *mashiach*, which means “anointed one,” just like the Greek *christos*. “Messianic,” then, would mean “follower of Messiah,” just like “Christian” means “follower of Christ.” Basically, it’s the exact same term, with the same basic meaning, but without the baggage that is attached to the term “Christian.”

Many groups today call themselves “Messianic,” so it is becoming more and more recognizable. Besides the fact that it is modern, there are two downsides to this term. One is, “Messianic” was originally shorthand for “Messianic Jewish.” Messianic Judaism has a set of specific beliefs that are typically associated with it, including the belief that those who are born Gentiles do not have to keep the law of Moses. If you disagree with those beliefs, there may be some confusion that results from calling yourself “Messianic.” However, there are groups that call themselves “Messianic” but are not Messianic Jews, so in the future, the term may not have the same connotations that it does right now. That brings us to the second downside, which is that we don’t know what connotations will be attached to the term “Messianic” in the future. It could come to acquire the same kind of baggage as the term “Christian,” and if it does, then it will have the same problems as the term “Christian.” It all depends on how the people who adopt this name choose to behave.

This brings us to our final point. Ultimately, what we call ourselves is far less important than what we *are*. We can call ourselves followers of Christ, using any kind of terminology we see fit, but the real question is, are we following Christ? It’s much more valuable to focus on walking like Christ than it is to focus on what we *call* our walk. So, whatever you choose to call yourself, we would urge you to live up to the name that you take on, and to represent Christ well with your life. As Peter wrote:

1 Peter 4:16

Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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