

Acts 11:19-26 Identity: Christian. What's that mean?

19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. 22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he 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.

If people could pick one word to describe you, what would it be?

What one word would you use to describe yourself?

Maybe you've thought of your flaws that stick out like a sore thumb. "Sinner."

While that's completely accurate, think of your one status before God. Because of His great love to you, how does he see you – who are in Christ? One word to answer that, given to us today, is: "**Christian.**"

Vs.26... "The disciples" – those who believed in Jesus – "were called Christians."

God chose you before Time began. God the Son, Jesus Christ, left His home and went through unfathomable suffering to redeem you. At some point (much more recently in history), your life began. You were born into your earthly family – into our human family. And yet, you were dead in your sin. We all started out life this way: in sin and unbelief, deserving God's wrath. But God sought you out and found you. He called you by name, brought you to faith, and washed your sins away. He wrote your name in Heaven (Luke 10:20). He gave you a new name, when he adopted you into His family – His name. You are his own. God's own child. He gave you a home, an inheritance. You have been crowned with God's grace.

Barnabas came to check on the church in Antioch, he took a look at the people gathered there, and what we're told is (vs.23): "he saw the grace of God." That really says everything. The thing that makes a Christian a Christian is the grace of God (Grace = God's undeserved, gifted love you).

That's the heart of your identity as a believer in Christ Jesus.

"Christian" means something.

"Well, yeah, of course it means something," you say. "This is personal. Deeply personal. It's the most important description you could give about me."

But that "positive" description is not always called up in the minds of those outside the Church, non-Christians.

So what is their gut reaction when they hear the name “Christian”? Well, not everyone is the same. But studies here in America over the past decade have shown a trend: a declining view. One study explored 20 specific images related to Christianity, including 10 favorable and 10 unfavorable perceptions. Non-Christians who were 16 to 29 years old replied with the highest amount of negative descriptions. 9 out their top 12 perceptions were negative. Some of that, undoubtedly, comes from living in a postmodern world, where many people believe that every person deserves their own truth – all are equally accepted and valid. To state that “there is only One Truth” will often be viewed negatively in a culture where, at least to a large degree: that is the only view that **isn’t** accepted. That’s a topic worth exploring, but it’s not the topic today.

In fact, let’s not use that as an “escape hatch” to dismiss all the feedback received from those outside looking in at Christians. In many cases, they offer frank, honest observations that may very well direct us to a closer look at our defining characteristics.

Here’s what caught my attention from the study. Ranking near the top of the negative perceptions of Christianity was: Hypocritical. 85% of non-Christians 16 to 29 years old affirmed this as part of their view of Christianity.

There are many within the name “Christianity” who only communicate God’s law. So it’s little wonder that people slap the label “hypocrites” on “Christians.” All they hear from some is: “do this, don’t do that.” Then they see those very same people fail to show the love to their neighbor and to their God, which the law is really all about.

You miss the whole Christian message if all you have is law.

It’s not hypocrisy to recognize you are sinful and to come to the only one who takes that sin away – as we do. Maybe our failures come in the form of not being open in communicating just how flawed and cracked we are – how messy our lives are, if not always in ways everyone sees, in ways we and our God know. People sometimes have this idea that Christian churches are for those who “have it altogether,” and they feel before they set foot in a church “I better get myself straightened out first.”

How many people actually understand that Christianity is really all about the Gospel – God’s love for lost sinners in this world?

I love this description of the Christian Church. “It is not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners.” In other words: It’s not a place for people to step up on a pedestal and show off how great they are; it’s a place we come to confess all that’s wrong with us, to be healed by Jesus’ forgiveness and to be refreshed by his love.

How awesome it is when we get the opportunity to share that message?

Look to today’s reading for a description of that. . . **vs.19-21.**

19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Here you see God's people on the move. I bet there's so many here that can relate to that.

How many of you moved here within the last 3 years? How many of you anticipate moving somewhere new again in the next few years?

"New" isn't always greeted with enthusiasm. Maybe the new place you arrive at isn't the first place you would have chosen. I've heard Fayetteville "affectionately" described: "the armpit of North Carolina." Alright, you do have to deal with heat and humidity in the summer. Whether you feel oppressed by that, or not, count the blessings given from the Lord's hand as you live where He has planted you for a season. And just think: He is the One who has determined this place for you to live, for such a time as you end up here (Acts 17:26). What purpose does he have in mind?

Look to the account before us today.

They didn't leave their faith in Jesus behind when they moved. We also hear: right away they took the news of God's love for a lost world to others. I think of how relevant this is for our church family here at Beautiful Savior. Each time you move to a new place, think of what God gives you along with that move: a brand new group of people around you. As you take your faith in Jesus with you, you have the opportunity to share it with them.

This is something that is true as well as new people move in around you here. It is something that is true both in times of persecution and peace. We see that in the history recorded in Acts. We see it in the history unfolding in our day.

It's amazing to know the ways the Lord reaches people...

- In midst of persecution... a man in Pakistan, who is our WELS contact for the work there, in a phone conference spoke up and shared the news: "I'm sure I'll be assassinated soon." And there's every reason to believe the threat real, understanding his homeland. He had the means to move somewhere else, relocate. But he hadn't made that move. Why? So many of his friends and neighbors didn't know Jesus. "I have what they need." 120,000+ pieces of WELS Christian literature have been distributed in Pakistan. 40,000+ people in Pakistan have enrolled in a Bible correspondence study.
- In a time of peace... a WELS couple vacationing in Nepal shared a simplified catechism with a young man who was a young Christian. He read it. He liked what he read. He wanted more copies to give to people. And that man became director of our church's work in his country. Now 28,000+ people are enrolled in a Scripture learning program. 400,000+ pieces of our Christian literature have been distributed in Nepal. And it all began with the couple on vacation, who took the Word of God with them, and shared it.

That latter example isn't always one we'd think of, right? When I'm on vacation... "I just want a break from everything! I want to relax." When I am moving to a new place... "I have enough stresses to deal with in a new neighborhood - a new job - adjustments for my kids in a new school." Our first inclination may be: "Let me just find some comfort - a sense of security - in my own cultural background with people who act and talk like me! Sharing my faith with people who talk different and act different, who have different customs and culture, is just way too stressful!"

Did you hear how the majority of the Christians, here in Acts ch.11, who scattered to new places did just that? They engaged only people of Jewish background, like themselves.

As you analyze this history, I'm sure you've got an idea why. People are most comfortable with others who have shared background, with those who are much like them.

"So there!" You might be tempted to say. "Enough said! If it's in the Bible, then it's ok!"

Take a closer look. True, their faith was alive and showing. But, also true, they still struggled with their sinful natures when it came to their comfort. One's own comfort is no excuse for ignoring one of God's commands.

Are we any different? Think of what it means if we are only following God's will when it feels more comfortable. There will be lots of opportunities to "do good to all people" that we are missing. So ask: What opportunities has God placed before us to "preach the good news to all people"?

You see, Jesus didn't just die for people who look like me. He died for the world. This is the Christian message. This is the news we hear when we gather here. He takes away my sin. He takes away your sin. We gather to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Savior Jesus. God, in grace, wants all people to know His truth. He promises to go with you and me, as he leads us to step beyond the areas where we feel most comfortable, to go on to take the good news of Jesus to new places and new people.

Here in Acts ch.11, we get to see that. Some of the Christians in Antioch got out of their "comfort zone." They took the good news of Jesus with them, and shared it with people who were different than them. Different than them as far as their background, their culture and customs. But not different from them in the most important way. They were people – people for whom the Savior lived and died – so, in the end, these new people were just like the Christians who were going to them, with this one exception: they didn't yet know and believe the good news about Jesus.

"The Lord's hand was with the Christians in Antioch" – breaking down barriers between people, and ... "a great number of people with whom they shared the good news believed."

And they continued to gather together. They heard and studied the Word of God together. This was the church in Antioch. This is our church today. You and me. Christians.

So I'm leaving you with one last thought: You know who you are by God's grace, dear Christian. What purpose does God have in mind for you?

[We showed a video clip, which gave examples of God's people – throughout Bible times – taking God's Word with them. We especially noted the examples where they seized the opportunities to share the truth of God in new places with new people.]

The Peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus!
Amen.