

“Brand Recognition”
by Rom A. Pegram (7/8/18)

As I begin today to talk about ‘brand recognition’, let me do a little game of ‘association’. Now sometimes ‘brand recognition’ has to do with stuff; at other times, it has to do with people groups ... and that’s what I’m talking about today. Let’s give this a try...

- When I use the word ‘American,’ you know what that means, right?
- How about ‘Wisconsin Badger’? Or...
- ‘Green Bay Packer’—those who wear a certain uniform, coached by a certain coach, and play a certain game together; you’re following me, aren’t you? Now, how about this one...
- **‘Christian’?** Not so clear ... is it? Well, maybe to you... But, if I were to split you up into small groups and ask you to come up with a definition, more than likely there’d be no two definitions exactly alike!

Here’s another way to think about it: If someone approached you on the street and asked, *Are you a Christian?* ... I imagine there’d be a variety of answers to that, too.

- Some of you would say ‘yes’...
- Some of you would say ‘What do you mean?’
- Some of you would say ‘yes, but...’ needing to qualify what it means to *you*.
- There’d be some who would say ‘no’ ... and others who would reply: “Well, I am, but I’m not like those Christians over there.” ‘Right?’
- For some of you, being a Christian has something to do with the way you were raised; for others, being a Christian means ... ‘you said that prayer’ (which was the tradition I was raised in)...

So, the brand recognition for ‘Christian’ isn’t quite as simple as others, is it? To complicate things even more, for some it’s a matter of being *the ‘true brand’ of Christians...*

I’ve told this story before, but it bears telling again because it makes my point. Apparently, my Uncle Wayne was taking my dad and me, along with his son—my cousin, Marc—somewhere ... and there was quite a discussion taking place in the back seat of the car. Marc and I were having one of our famous arguments that went from topic to topic; you could tell both of us just loved arguing ... *for the sake of arguing*, as the arguments seemed to never come to an end. Marc thought he was going to shut this one down when he turned to me and said: “Well, at least we can agree on one thing; we’re both Christians.” To which I replied, “Uh uh! I’m not a Christian. I’m a Methodist!”

Folks, if you don’t believe in John Wesley, if you don’t believe in pot lucks, if you don’t believe in social justice, you aren’t of the ‘true brand’ of Christian (Methodist)! At least, that what some people think when they think of ‘Christian’...

Then, there's a group of folks today who just cringe when they hear the word, because it's been poorly represented over the years—used to support agendas that aren't really 'Christian' at all. Let's be honest: There are those out there who would define 'Christian' like this: "*Christians are judgmental, homophobic, moralists who think they are the only ones going to heaven ... and who secretly relish the thought that everyone else is going to hell.*" (If you haven't heard that one recently, you probably haven't been listening.) So there it is; 'Christian' can be defined in a variety of ways, making 'brand recognition' very difficult at best...

Now, here's the good news and the bad news. The good news is none of what we've been talking about is described in the Bible as 'Christian'. The good news *and* the bad news is that much of what you've been taught about being a Christian/Christianity is wrong ... and *I'm going to show you that* as we go through this series. But, the fact is ...

'CHRISTIAN' ONLY APPEARS 3 TIMES IN THE BIBLE ... and when it does appear, *it's not defined...*

Folks, what we're going to discover today is that 'Christian' was actually a derogatory term used by those outside the Jesus community to describe those inside the Jesus community; *those inside never used the word to describe themselves*. It's like the words ... deadhead, geek, or redneck; think about how those terms are used to describe groups of people—those on the outside using words to describe those who: Act the same way, have the same habits, dress the same way, listen to the same music, etc. It's these kinds of people that many look at and go ... 'Eewww!' So the 'eewww' people come up with words to describe others, so they'll never risk becoming '*one of those!*' And that's what was happening in Acts 11...

The NT book of Acts describes what happened after Jesus left this earth. It describes how the Church got started—how we got here. One of the things that happened when Jesus left was this: *a persecution broke out in Jerusalem against anyone associated with Jesus*. They scattered—some going to a place in modern-day Turkey called Antioch—a long way from Jerusalem...

So, the believers went to Antioch and began telling people there that '*God had done a great thing in Jerusalem ... and a man actually rose from the dead! We saw him. We were eye-witnesses and so were others we know.*' So a group of Greek-speaking, Roman-minded people in Antioch embraced this Jewish knock-off religion ... and the Church was born in Antioch...

Then, word gets back to the disciples in Jerusalem—you know, James the brother of Jesus, Peter, John, and Matthew; these guys all find out what's been going on in Antioch. But, *is this the real deal?* They need to check it out, because Jesus left them in charge. So they get *one of their own*—Barnabas—and send him up there to ensure good leadership. Barnabas goes and finds there a massive amount of people who've embraced the story of Jesus. And he's like, *I need reinforcements; I can't do this all on my own*. So, he decides to bring in a 'super-follower of Jesus'—Saul, who later became

Paul. Saul was visiting his hometown at the time, so Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Saul and bring him back to Antioch to help him. And this little snippet of scripture gives us insight into where the word *Christian* came from...

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. – Acts 11:25-26 (NIV)

So, all these folks embraced the message of Jesus in Antioch. Again, check out the last phrase of this scripture: “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch” – Acts 11:26 (NIV). They were called Christians by who? By those who were outside the Jesus community. It was a term. It was a label. If you’re a trucker, it was their ‘handle’...

But, folks, *scripture’s not the only source for our knowing where the word ‘Christian’ came from*. If you’ll indulge me for just a moment: When we look to the Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote in the late first century, we get more information regarding the brand called ‘Christian’ as well...

One of the emperors Tacitus wrote a lot about, I’m sure you’ve heard of; his name was *Nero*... Now, Nero did something extraordinary in 64 A.D. He decided he wanted to re-start the city of Rome, so he decided to burn down the old one down. He burnt the old city down, but it didn’t all go well for him, because he burned people’s homes and businesses too. So, Nero decided to dodge a speeding javelin—so to speak ... and pass blame to whom? You got it ... *the Christians!* How did I know that? Tacitus. He describes the event in this way:

Consequently, to get rid of the report [the report that Nero burned down his own city], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations [we’ll get into that later], called ‘Christians’ by [by ‘who’?] the populous.

Again, Christians didn’t call themselves ‘Christians’. Christians called themselves something else. ‘Christian’ was a derogatory term used by outsiders looking in. Folks, they didn’t even name it after the one whom these people followed! They kept hearing the word ‘Christus’ [Greek for ‘Messiah’], so they thought it was Jesus’ last name or something ... and called them ‘Christians’. Now, listen to what Tacitus says later (for those who question the Bible lining up with history):

Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the rein of Tiberius [NT says Tiberius was Emperor of Rome during the time of Jesus] at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus (Latin for ‘Pontius Pilate’). – Cornelius Tacitus

There it is; that’s Roman history, written late first century—one of the only clear examples from history that Jesus was actually crucified—put to death by Pontius Pilate.

Now, folks, the point of all this is ... it was outsiders trying to come up with a name for those who followed Jesus that called these people 'Christian'. But, *Christians didn't call themselves 'Christian'*. They called themselves something else—something much more terrifying, far more defined, far more disturbing, and something far more convicting than 'Christian'...

The truth is, you can be 'Christian' and say or do just about anything these days ... and no one can go to the Bible and say, Ah-ha, it says right here that Christians should and Christians shouldn't ... whatever! It's only mentioned three times ... and never really defined. But ... the term scripture consistently uses to describe those who followed Jesus was ... 'disciple'. If you were a 'disciple' of Jesus, there's no question about what that meant. So, perhaps there's a more important question than 'Are we Christian?'...

THE REAL QUESTION TO ASK IS NOT 'ARE WE CHRISTIAN' BUT 'ARE WE DISCIPLES'? Listen to what Luke wrote in Acts 11 (26, NIV) once again: "The disciples were called Christians at Antioch." Folks, if you asked a follower of Christ back then 'What are you?' they wouldn't have said 'Christian', but would more likely have said 'I'm a disciple.'

'Disciple' is a frightening word because *it's so well defined*; it's not vague at all (like the term 'Christian'); the NT is very clear. *Mathetes* (Greek for 'disciple') means ... a learner, a pupil, an apprentice, an adherent, or a follower. Basically, *a disciple is one who always looks to their master for guidance ... in every circumstance of life. A disciple is one who seeks direction on how to live their lives in a Christ-like way.* That's a bit different than 'Christian' isn't it?

My point in starting here is this: *A person could actually hide behind the word 'Christian', because everyone's definition is different.* But if you look at the NT and ask the question 'What were these people really about and how did they describe themselves?' ... you'll find that they referred to themselves and to each other as *disciples* ... which brings us to what may be a disturbing question: **Are we disciples?** Or, are we just Christians? Are you a disciple of Jesus ... or are you a Christian? *That's just disturbing, isn't it?*

Folks, in case you've been forced to think deeply about your faith today, and you're wondering now where you fit in, let me end with some words from Jesus himself. Here, Jesus was running out of time, but before he was crucified he pretty much asked those who were following him to 'lean in' and listen closely, 'cause he was only going to say this once' (sounds like my mom). And here's what he said (John 13:34-35, NIV): "A new command I give you...." The Greek word for 'new' here can mean unusual, strange, odd, impractical, with a sense of 'you've never thought of this before'. So, he asks them to lean in, and he says:

"...Love one another." And then Jesus elaborates: "...As I have loved you, so you must love one another." And I can almost hear the rest of the conversation now...

- Matthew, do you remember where I found you? You were a despised tax collector ... and I loved you anyway ... and I asked you to come with me...
- Nathaniel, do you remember the first day we met? You said something like 'Could anything good come from Nazareth?' You dissed my entire family, but I invited you to come follow me. Remember how I accepted you?

I want you to love another; that's what's going to characterize your relationship with each other and then he said: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." So, it also has to do with our relationship with God, too...

I'm pretty sure you're all Christians ... or you wouldn't be here. But, *are you disciples?* I want you to think about that today. Folks, if Jesus could audibly speak to us today, I believe he'd say something like this:

I want people on the outside to look in and be unafraid that you're going to ... ask them to do something, or drag them in, or that you're going to accuse them of something. I want them to be able to look in on your community and say, 'Look how the men treat the women; look how the women treat the men; look how they treat widows/widowers; look how they treat sick people; look how they even honor children and youth. O my goodness! Look at them love one another!

Folks, I believe Jesus is saying to us today ... 'go and build communities like that.' It's time, folks ... that we *re-brand the brand!* **Forget Christian—we're going to be disciples!** But, that being said, we're not going to be disciples who remember everything it says in the Bible (and Jesus knew that). We're going to concentrate on what Jesus said last—the new command; we're going to love each other—treat each other and love each other the way Jesus loved us. Can you imagine? Can you imagine what our church would look like if we did just that?

I want you to take this home with you today, especially if you're one who's been turned off by 'Christian' in the past... I know that Christianity has been poorly represented at times ... and for that ... I'm truly sorry! I am. But, please don't let that stand in the way of your getting to know Jesus—*what Jesus has done for you!* Please don't... My deepest desire is that you to come back in the weeks ahead to learn more about *that!* Would you do that for me?