**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-043. A NICKNAME ACCEPTED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch."*

*Acts 11:26*

Nations and parties, both political and religious, very often call themselves by one name, and are known to the outside world by another. These outside names are generally given in contempt; and yet they sometimes manage to hit the very centre of the characteristics of the people on whom they are bestowed, and so by degrees get to be adopted by them, and worn as an honour.

So it has been with the name Christian. It was given at the first by the inhabitants of the Syrian city of Antioch, to a new sort of people that had sprung up amongst them, and whom they could not quite make out. They would not fit into any of their categories, and so they had to invent a new name for them. It is never used in the New Testament by Christians about themselves. It occurs here in this text; it occurs in Agrippa's half-contemptuous exclamation: You seem to think it is a very small matter to make me--me, a king!--a Christian, one of those despised people! And it occurs once more, where the Apostle Peter is specifying the charges brought against them: If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf (1 Peter 4:16). That sounds like the beginning of the process which has gone on ever since, by which the nickname, flung by the sarcastic men of Antioch, has been turned into the designation by which, all over the world, the followers of Jesus Christ have been proud to call themselves.

Now in this text there are the outside name by which the world calls the followers of Jesus Christ, and one of the many interior names by which the Church called itself. I have thought it might be profitable now to put all the New Testament names for Christ's followers together, and think about them.

**I. So, to begin with, we deal with this name given by the world to the Church, which the Church has adopted.**

Observe the circumstances under which it was given. A handful of large-hearted, brave men, anonymous fugitives belonging to the little Church in Jerusalem, had come down to Antioch; and there, without premeditation, without authority, almost without consciousness-- certainly without knowing what a great thing they were doing--they took, all at once, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, a great step by preaching the Gospel to pure heathen Greeks; and so began the process by which a small Jewish sect was transformed into a world-wide church. The success of their work in Antioch, amongst the pure heathen population, has for its crowning attestation this, that it compelled the curiosity-hunting, pleasure-loving, sarcastic Antiocheans to find out a new name for this new thing; to write out a new label for the new bottles into which the new wine was being put. Clearly the name shows that the Church was beginning to attract the attention of outsiders.

Clearly it shows, too, that there was a novel element in the Church. The earlier disciples had been all Jews, and could be lumped together along with their countrymen, and come under the same category. But here was something that could not be called either Jew or Greek, because it embraced both. The new name is the first witness to the cosmopolitan character of the primitive Church. Then clearly, too, the name indicates that in a certain dim, confused way, even these superficial observers had got hold of the right notion of what it was that did bind these people together. They called them Christians --Christ's men, Christ's followers. But it was only a very dim refraction of the truth that had got to them; they had no notion that Christ was not a proper name, but the designation of an office; and they had no notion that there was anything peculiar or strange in the bond which united its adherents to Christ. Hence they called His followers Christians, just as they would have called Herod's followers Herodians, in the political world, or Aristotle's followers Aristotelians in the philosophical world. Still, in their groping way, they bad put their finger on the fact that the one power that held this heterogeneous mass together, the one bond that bound up Jew and Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, bond and free into one vital unity, was a personal relation to a living Person. And so they said--not understanding the whole significance of it, but having got hold of the right end of the clue--they said, They are Christians! Christ's people, the followers of this Christ.

And their very blunder was a felicity. If they had called them Jesuits that would have meant the followers of the mere man. They did not know how much deeper they had gone when they said, not followers of Jesus, but followers of Christ; for it is not Jesus the Man, but Jesus Christ, the Man with His office, that makes the centre and the bond of the Christian Church.

These, then, are the facts, and the fair inferences from them. A plain lesson here lies on the surface. The Church--that is to say, the men and women who make its members--should draw to itself the notice of the outside world. I do not mean by advertising, and ostentation, and sounding trumpets, and singularities, and affectations. None of all these are needed. If you are live Christians it will be plain enough to outsiders. It is a poor comment on your consistency, if, being Christ's followers, you can go through life unrecognised even by them that are without. What shall we say of leaven which does not leaven, or of light which does not shine, or of salt which does not repel corruption? It is a poor affair if, being professed followers of Jesus Christ, you do not impress the world with the thought that here is a man who does not come under any of our categories, and who needs a new entry to describe him. The world ought to have the same impression about you which Haman had about the Jews--Their laws are diverse from all people.

Christian professors, are the world's names for each other enough to describe you by, or do you need another name to be coined for you in order to express the manifest characteristics that you display? The Church that does not provoke the attention--I use the word in its etymological, not its offensive sense--the Church that does not call upon itself the attention and interest of outsiders, is not a Church as Jesus Christ meant it to be, and it is not a Church that is worth keeping alive; and the sooner it has decent burial the better for itself and for the world!

There is another thing here, viz.: this name suggests that the clear impression made by our conduct and character, as well as by our words, should be that we belong to Jesus Christ. The eye of an outside observer may be unable to penetrate the secret of the deep sweet tie uniting us to Jesus, but there should be no possibility of the most superficial and hasty glance overlooking the fact that we are His. He should manifestly be the centre and the guide, the impulse and the pattern, the strength and the reward, of our whole lives. We are Christians. That should be plain for all folks to see, whether we speak or be silent. Brethren, is it so with you? Does your life need no commentary of your words in order that men should know what is the hidden spring that moves all its wheels; what is the inward spirit that co-ordinates all its motions into harmony and beauty? Is it true that like the ointment of the right hand which bewrayeth itself your allegiance to Jesus Christ, and the overmastering and supreme authority which He exercises upon you, and upon your life, cannot be hid? Do you think that, without your words, if you, living in the way you do, were put down into the middle of Pekin, as these handful of people were put down into the middle of the heathen city of Antioch, the wits of the Chinese metropolis would have to invent a name for you, as the clever men of Antioch did for these people; and do you think that if they had to invent a name, the name that would naturally come to their lips, looking at you, would be Christians, Christ's men? If it would not, there is something wrong.

The last word that I say about this first part of my text is this. It is a very sad thing, but it is one that is always occurring, that the world's inadequate notions of what makes a follower of Jesus Christ get accepted by the Church. Why was it that the name Christian ran all over Christendom in the course of a century and a half? I believe very largely because it was a conveniently vague name; because it did not describe the deepest and sacredest of the bonds that unite us to Jesus Christ. Many a man is quite willing to say, I am a Christian, who would hesitate a long time before he said, I am a believer, I am a disciple. The vagueness of the name, the fact that it erred by defect in not touching the central, deepest relation between man and Jesus Christ, made it very appropriate to the declining spirituality and increasing formalism of the Christian Church in the post-Apostolic age. It is a sad thing when the Church drops its standard down to the world's notion of what It ought to be, and adopts the world's name for itself and its converts.

**II. I turn now to set side by side with this vague, general, outside name the more specific and interior names--if I may so call them-- by which Christ's followers at first knew themselves.**

The world said, You are Christ's men; and the names which were self-imposed and are now to be considered might be taken as being the Church's explanation of what the world was fumbling at when it so called them. There are four of them: of course, I can only just touch on them.

**(a)** The first is in this verse-disciples. The others are believers, saints, brethren. These four are the Church's own christening of itself; its explanation and expansion, its deepening and heightening, of the vague name given by the world.

As to the first, disciples, any concordance will show that the name was employed almost exclusively during the time of Christ's life upon earth. It is the only name for Christ's followers in the Gospels; it occurs also, mingled with others, in the Acts of the Apostles, and it never occurs thereafter.

The name disciple, then, carries us back to the historical beginning of the whole matter, when Jesus was looked upon as a Rabbi having followers called disciples; just as were John the Baptist and his followers, Gamaliel and his school, or Socrates and his. It sets forth Christ as being the Teacher, and His followers as being His adherents, His scholars, who learned at His feet.

Now that is always true. We are Christ's scholars quite as much as were the men who heard and saw with their eyes and handled with their hands, of the Word of Life. Not by words only, but by gracious deeds and fair, spotless life, He taught them and us and all men to the end of time, our highest knowledge of God of whom He is the final revelation, our best knowledge of what men should and shall be by His perfect life in which is contained all morality, our only knowledge of that future in that He has died and is risen and lives to help and still to teach. He teaches us still by the record of His life, and by the living influence of that Spirit whom He sends forth to guide us into all truth. He is the Teacher, the only Teacher, the Teacher for all men, the Teacher of all truth, the Teacher for evermore. He speaks from Heaven. Let us give heed to His voice.

But that Name is not enough to tell all that He is to us, or we to Him, and so after He had passed from earth it unconsciously and gradually dropped out of use by the disciples, as they felt a deepened bond uniting them to Him who was not only their Teacher of the Truth which was Himself, but was their Sacrifice and Advocate with the Father. And for all who hold the, as I believe, essentially imperfect conception of Jesus Christ as being mainly a Teacher, either by word or by pattern; whether it be put into the old form or into the modern form of regarding Him as the Ideal and Perfect Man, it seems to me a fact well worthy of consideration, that the name of disciple and the relation expressed by it were speedily felt by the Christian Church to be inadequate as a representation of the bond that knit them to Him. He is our Teacher, we His scholars. He is more than that, and a more sacred bond unites us to Him. As our Master we owe Him absolute submission. When He speaks, we have to accept His dictum. What He says is truth, pure and entire. His utterance is the last word upon any subject that He touches, it is the ultimate appeal, and the Judge that ends the strife. We owe Him submission, an open eye for all new truth, constant docility, as conscious of our own imperfections, and a confident expectation that He will bless us continuously with high and as yet unknown truths that come from His inexhaustible stores of wisdom and knowledge.

**(b)** Teacher and scholars move in a region which, though it be important, is not the central one. And the word that was needed next to express what the early Church felt Christ was to them, and they to Him, lifts us into a higher atmosphere altogether,--believers, they who are exercising not merely intellectual submission to the dicta of the Teacher, but who are exercising living trust in the person of the Redeemer. The belief which is faith is altogether a higher thing than its first stage, which is the belief of the understanding. There is in it the moral element of trust. We believe a truth, we trust a Person; and the trust which we are to exercise in Jesus Christ, and which knits us to Him, is our trust in Him, not in any character that we may choose to ascribe to Him, but in the character in which He is revealed in the New Testament--Redeemer, Saviour, Manifest God; and therefore, the Infinite Friend and Helper of our souls.

That trust, my brethren, is the one bond that binds, men to God, and the one thing that makes us Christ's men. Apart from it, we may be very near Him, but we are not joined to Him. By it, and by it alone, the union is completed, and His power and His grace flow into our spirits. Are you, not merely a Christian, in the world's notion, being bound in some vague way to Jesus Christ, but are you a Christian in the sense of trusting your soul's salvation to Him?

**(c)** Then, still further, there is another name--saints. It has suffered perhaps more at the hands both of the world and of the Church than any other. It has been taken by the latter and restricted to the dead, and further restricted to those who excel, according to the fantastic, ascetic standard of mediaeval Christianity. It has suffered from the world in that it has been used with a certain bitter emphasis of resentment at the claim of superior purity supposed to be implied in it, and so has come to mean on the world's lips one who pretends to be better than other people and whose actions contradict his claim. But the name belongs to all Christ's followers. It makes no claim to special purity, for the central idea of the word saint is not purity. Holiness, which is the English for the Latinised sanctity, holiness which is attributed in the Old Testament to God first, to men only secondarily, does not primarily mean purity, but separation. God is holy, inasmuch as by that whole majestic character of His, He is lifted above all bounds of creatural limitations, as well as above man's sin. A sacrifice, the Sabbath, a city, a priest's garment, a mitre--all these things are holy, not when they are pure, but when they are devoted to Him. And men are holy, not because they are clean, but because by free self-surrender they have consecrated themselves to Him.

Holiness is consecration, that is to say, holiness is giving myself up to Him to do what He will with. I am holy is not the declaration of my estimate I am pure, but the declaration of the fact I am thine, O Lord. So the New Testament idea of saint has in it these elements--consecration, consecration resting on faith in Christ, and consecration leading to separation from the world and its sin. And that glad yielding of oneself to God, as wooed by His mercies, and thereby drawn away from communion with our evil surroundings and from submission to our evil selves, must be a part of the experience of every true Christian. All His people are saints, not as being pure, but as being given up to Him, in union with whom alone will the cleansing powers flow into their lives and clothe them with the righteousness of saints. Have you thus consecrated yourself to God?

**(d)** The last name is brethren,--a name which has been much maltreated both by the insincerity of the Church, and by the sarcasm of the world. It has been an unreal appellation which has meant nothing and been meant to mean nothing, so that the world has said that our brethren signified a good deal less than their brothers. 'Tis true, 'tis pity; pity 'tis, 'tis true.

But what I ask you to notice is that the main thing about that name brethren is not the relation of the brethren to one another, but their common relation to their Father.

When we call ourselves as Christian people brethren, we mean first this: that we are the possessors of a supernatural life, which has come from one Father, and which has set us in altogether new relations to one another, and to the world round about us. Do you believe that if you have any of that new life which comes through faith in Jesus Christ, then you are the brethren of all those that possess the same?

As society becomes more complicated, as Christian people grow unlike each other in education, in social position, in occupation, in their general outlook into the world, it is more and more difficult to feel what is nevertheless true: that any two Christian people, however unlike each other, are nearer each other in the very roots of their nature, than a Christian and a non-Christian, however like each other. It is difficult to feel that, and it is getting more and more difficult, but for all that it is a fact.

And now I wish to ask you, Christian men and women, whether you feel more at home with people who love Jesus Christ--as you say that you love Him--or whether you like better to be with people who do not?

There are some of you who choose your intimate associates, whom you ask to your homes and introduce to your children as desirable companions, with no reference at all to their religious character. The duties of your position, of course, oblige each of you to be much among people who do not share your faith, and it is cowardly and wrong to shrink from the necessity. But for Christian people to make choice of heart friends, or close intimates, among those who have no sympathy with their professed belief about, and love to, Jesus Christ, does not say much for the depth and reality of their religion. A man is known by the company he keeps, and if your friends are picked out for other reasons, and their religion is no part of their attraction, it is not an unfair conclusion that there are other things for which you care more than you do for faith in Jesus Christ and love to Him. If you deeply feel the bond that knits you to Christ, and really live near to Him, you will be near to your brethren. You will feel that blood is thicker than water, and however like you may be to irreligious people in many things, you will feel that the deepest bond of all knits you to the poorest, the most ignorant, the most unlike you in social position; ay! and the most unlike you in theological opinion, who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.

Now that is the sum of the whole matter. And my last word to you is this: Do not you be contented with the world's vague notions of what makes Christ's man. I do not ask you if you are Christians; plenty of you would say: Oh yes! of course! Is not this a Christian country? Was not I christened when I was a child? Are we not all members of the Church of England by virtue of our birth? Yes! of course I am!

I do not ask you that; I do not ask you anything; but I pray you to ask yourselves these four questions: Am I Christ's scholar? Am I believing on Him? Am I consecrated to Him? Am I the possessor of a new life from Him? And never give yourselves rest until you can say humbly and yet confidently, Yes! thank God, I am!