

NAMING THE CHRISTIANS

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According to Acts 11:26, Jesus' followers were first called "Christians" at Antioch, the capital of Roman Syria. The author of Acts, who wrote the third Gospel, is traditionally identified with Saint Luke; and whether Luke was the author or not, his name makes an easy reference. Dating when Acts was written is contentious, but the arguments usually resolve themselves into an early date before Paul's death in AD 64, sometime early in the second century, or an intermediate date in the last decades of the first century, perhaps in the eighties. The early and late dates have fewer supporters and more endorse the intermediate date.¹ It is tempting to try to date when Christians were first called by that name at Antioch based on a tentative chronology for Acts as a whole, which on most schemes would place it around AD 42. This may not have been the case. Although some have argued for Luke having been a Jew, more see him as a gentile convert probably born at Antioch (Eusebius says of Antiochian parentage). In the classical world, affection for their city was stronger than vaguer loyalties. Luke would have been proud of his home city (as Paul was of Tarsus) and he may have taken the first opportunity of its mention to note that was where Christians were first called by that name, not necessarily implying that the event occurred where it falls in the apparent chronology of Acts.²

Whether there were enough Christians at Antioch about AD 42 to generate a slang name among its minority of Latin speakers is debatable. Regarding Antioch, the third city of the Roman Empire, a multilingual and multiethnic city, one estimate puts its population at about 250,000. Even if

1. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 51–55; Alexander "Acts," 1028; Seim, "Luke–Acts," 397.
2. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.4.6; Reisner, *Paul's Early Period*, 10–28, 110–14.

this is exaggerated, a population of 200,000 would make the Jewish community very small and its Christian component even smaller. How the Christian movement reached Antioch is unknown. The Pentecost story with its list of Jewish visitors to Jerusalem “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5) makes no mention of Antioch or Syria and such visitors might be considered too near to warrant inclusion, but in the scattering after Stephen’s death, believers are mentioned as fleeing to Antioch (Acts 11:19), datable to about AD 35 depending on the date for the Crucifixion. Even if Stephen’s martyrdom was in AD 33, that still leaves only about nine years for a Christian church to grow at Antioch before AD 42, hardly long enough to attract enough attention in a population of 200,000 or more to give rise to a street nickname.³

That Latin speakers at Antioch were the first to coin the word “Christian” is evident from the name, and would have been originally the Latin *Christiani*, later used in the Vulgate. Luke’s Χριστιανοί is a hybrid, a plural Greek noun with a Latin component. The singular *-ανός* ending is borrowed from the Latin *-ianus* indicating derivation from someone’s name, as with *Domitianus* from *Domitius*, *Valerianus* from *Valerius*, and had originally been used to denote adoption, but by the first century, was becoming a common name form on its own. In the plural form *-iani*, it was used as a collective corresponding to the English *-ites* and *-ists*. As the seat of Roman rule in Syria, Antioch would have had many Latin speakers. The governor controlled three to four legions (the number varied), and alongside a military presence in the capital and the governor’s staff, there would have been Roman merchants and sightseers at the city’s famous pleasure suburb Daphne. Whether the first person at Antioch to coin the word “Christian” was in the administration, a soldier, or a member of the populace is unknown, but the word has the earmarks of street or barracks language. Luke would have recognized the word’s Latinate origin as his own name Lucas was a Greek formation of the Latin *Lucius*.⁴

In AD 42–44, Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch where the young church included gentiles along with Jews, and although the chronology of

3. Butcher, *Roman Syria*, 106; Finegan, *Handbook*, 367–68.

4. Keener, *Acts*, 1847–50; Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 817; Butcher, *Roman Syria*, 411; Casson, *Travel*, 116–17; Jones and Spawforth, “Daphne,” 817; Fitzmyer, *Gospel*, 41–47; Marruchi, *Christian Epigraphy*, 6–7; Le Bohec, *Imperial Roman Army*, 232.

Acts has often been read to imply that this was when believers were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26) when Paul was at the meeting in Jerusalem with church leaders in AD 49 explaining the inclusion of gentiles, he made no mention of Christian as a name. If that name was already being bandied about at Antioch, he would have known it and perhaps chosen not to use it as emanating from gentiles, and after the Jerusalem meeting, the letter sent to believers at Antioch addressed them not as Christians but as “our brothers of gentile origin” (ἀδελφοῖς τοῖς ἐξ ἐθνῶν) (Acts 15:23). In AD 49, even if church leaders knew the name “Christian,” they were not using it.

In the same year as the Jerusalem meeting according to Suetonius, the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome following disturbances *impulsore Chresto*, an event that found an echo in Acts 18:2. *Impulsore Chresto* has been taken to be Suetonius’s muddled version of *impulsore Christo*, implying that the riots in Rome’s Jewish community were due to Christian proselytizing and an angry reaction. It is true that the Romans continued to confuse *Christus* with *Chrestus* into the next century, and as late as AD 430, a semi-literate Christian inscription had the form *Crestianorum*, but Suetonius writing at the end of the first century certainly knew the word *Christianus* as he used it in connection with Nero’s persecution in AD 64. He does not use that word in connection with the AD 49 riots, and whether his *Chrestus* should be read as *Christus* remains conjectural. *Chrestus* was a common slave name, and it is possible that the riots were caused by some unknown individual of that name. Even if the riots were indeed due to orthodox Jewish anger over Christian proselytizing, Suetonius’s source does not seem to have included the word “Christian.”⁵

Luke’s next mention of the word “Christian” after placing its origin at Antioch comes in Acts 26:28 at Paul’s trial before Festus and King Agrippa, when Agrippa reacts to Paul’s speech asking if Paul thinks he can persuade him so quickly to become a Christian. The event can be dated to about AD 60. Agrippa II ruled a small kingdom comprising parts of modern Lebanon and Jordan, and he was controller of the Jerusalem temple and, in Roman

5. Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4; Levick, *Claudius*, 121–22; Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 1.4; Clarke, “Rome and Italy,” 470–71; *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* 3004, 5247, 5313, 6740a, 7891, 7381; Marucchi, *Christian Epigraphy*, 337. As a slave name Chrestus came from the Greek Χρήστης and χρηστικός (“useful”), but like many loanwords, acquired a life of its own without pejorative associations (see LSJ 2006–7).

eyes, the leading secular Jew. Luke's source could have been someone present at the trial friendly to Paul, or Paul's recollection, and the implication is that by AD 60 the word "Christian" was known to Agrippa and that he would have assumed Festus knew it also; though, as Festus was a very new governor, that is not very likely. However, as someone anxious to burnish his Jewish credentials, it can be asked whether Agrippa would have used a word that essentially meant Messianist. He may have known the word, but, aware that the trial outcome would be reported back to the Jerusalem priesthood, he may well have avoided a loaded term. That he used the word is not impossible, but, writing about fifty years later, Luke may have used a term that everyone would recognize in his own day.⁶

If Agrippa did not use the word "Christian," what did he use? Most likely, he used one by which Christians were known to the Jewish authorities. When the Jewish leaders accused Paul before Festus's predecessor Felix (Acts 24:5), they described him as a Nazarene, and Agrippa was likely to have known them by that term perhaps more than as Christians. In his defense before Felix, Paul rejects "Nazarene" and "sect" (Acts 24:14) in favor of the "Way."⁷

The "Way" (ἡ ὁδός) was used in its basic sense of route but also for a way of life or moral or religious standpoint. It had antecedents in Judaism and philosophy and was used in the Pauline churches along with the phrase "new Israel," but the scattered Christian congregations may not at this stage have had a common self-descriptor and perhaps identified their beliefs after the apostle or disciple who founded them as in 1 Cor 3:4. Jewish Christians would still have identified themselves as Jews; gentile Christians perhaps as having adopted Jewish ways, a term in vogue among some Romans by the end of the century.⁸

Arguments about the authorship of First Peter moot the significance of the word "Christian" in 1 Pet 4:16, traditionally attributed to the apostle writing from Rome before his death in AD 64. Peter's authorship is widely doubted, and the letter is perhaps dateable to the nineties of the first century

6. Grant, *Jews*, 159, 166–68; Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 764–65; Johnson, *Acts*, 439–40; Nicoll, ed., *Expositor's Greek Testament*, 2:512–13.

7. Green, ed., *Dictionary*, 449; Parkes, *Conflict*, 77–78; White, *From Jesus to Christianity*, 296.

8. BDAG 691–92; LSJ 1199; Pathrapankal "Way"; Green, ed., *Dictionary*, 668; Cassius Dio, *Hist. rom.* 17.14.2.

or the opening decades of the second. If it was by Peter, it shows that Roman Christians were using that name themselves before AD 64, and if Peter did write it, he could have learned it at Antioch where an old tradition makes him its first bishop. However, if, as is likely, Peter did not write the letter, then that evidence for the name “Christian” being used at Rome before AD 64 falls to the ground. When Peter reached Rome is obscure, but given his standing in the church, he would certainly have been accorded the premier rank, and tradition makes him Rome’s first bishop. Jerome’s *Chronicle* (following Eusebius) places him at Rome in AD 42, but that is far too early, and all that can be said with any certainty is that he was in Rome by AD 64 and had been there long enough for the tradition to grant him a leadership role and an apocryphal encounter with Simon Magus.⁹

In AD 64, a great fire destroyed large parts of Rome. When the populace accused the emperor of having started it to clear room for his grandiose new palace, Nero threw the blame on the Christians. How Nero heard about the Christians is obscure. Josephus claims his wife Poppaea Sabina had Jewish sympathies and the palace staff included slaves from the deceased freedman Narcissus which included some Christians addressed by Paul in Rom 16:11. Since Rome’s Christian community included both Jews and gentiles and the Jewish leaders would have been anxious to avoid another expulsion, they may have suggested the term “Christian” to make it clear that the Jews as a whole were not involved. Some specific but common identifier was needed and Suetonius’s contemporary Tacitus claims that the word “Christian” was one used by the rabble (*vulgus Christianos appelabat*), and his use of the imperfect *appelabat* suggests that the *Vulgus* already knew Christians by that name before the fire. Like the Latin speakers at Antioch, they would have used it as a street name, not very different from similar names used to describe Rome’s two popular racing teams, the Greens (*prasiniani*) and the Blues (*venetiani*).¹⁰

According to Tacitus, the character of the city prefect Titus Flavius Sabinus was above reproach, and he would have been thorough. As church

9. Best, *1 Peter*, 49–64; Eve, “1 Peter,” 1263; Dalton, “First Epistle of Peter,” 903–4; Michaels “Peter”; Elliott, “Peter”; Matera, *Galatians*, 87–89; Canivet, “Christianity,” 59; Acts Pet. 4–28; *Book of the Popes*, 1.

10. Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; Gray-Fow “Why the Christians?”; Balsdon, *Life and Leisure*, 320–21; Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1450, 2028.

leaders, Peter and Paul would have been among the first victims. Tacitus claims that the Christians were convicted not so much for arson as for hatred of the human race (*odium humani generis*); but while arson was a crime under Roman law, hatred of the human race was not. Arson would have been the charge initially but after the first convictions it would have been rapidly superseded by the simple accusation of being a Christian, guilt being presumed.¹¹

From Nero's persecution onwards, the name "Christian" became the official Roman term for arresting and convicting members of the church. In reality, until the mid-third century, persecution was always local and spasmodic, but at every trial, the accused was asked, "Are you a Christian?" and admission was enough to secure conviction. As governor of Bithynia in AD 115, Pliny the Younger conscientiously asked each accused individual the question three times (a formulary used elsewhere), and the emperor Trajan endorsed his approach. Another emperor, the philosophic Marcus Aurelius, saw Christian defiance as mere "stubbornness" (ψιλήν παράταξιν) in not denying they were Christians. But his contemporary the philosopher-turned-Christian Justin Martyr complained that punishing people for the name was meaningless and behavior was what counted. However, the name continued to be enough until AD 313 and Constantine.¹²

When Nero identified his victims as "Christians" in AD 64, the church faced a dilemma. Should it accept the name? Believers knew they were members of a local church (ἐκκλησία) and that it was a part of the greater church, but that name covered them collectively. There is no evidence for a church-wide name for individuals before that date. Even if First Peter was written before Peter's death, it only proves that the name "Christian" was known to believers at Rome, and despite the name having been coined earlier by outsiders at Antioch (a city Peter knew), it is unknown whether local believers there ever accepted the name for themselves. It is possible that "Nazarene" was still used by Jewish Christians as that name persisted in a later sect along with the Ebionites, and the Pauline churches may have used their own terminology.¹³

11. Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.

12. Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 10.96.3; Marcus Aurelius, *Med.* 11.3; Justin Martyr, *I Apol.* 1.4; Stephenson, *Constantine*, 174.

13. Cross and Livingstone, eds., *Oxford Dictionary*, 1133; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 139–40; O'Brien, "Church II."

For church members to accept being called “Christians” meant agreeing with a name given them by their persecutors and arising from pagan back street slang. Yet, since they could be arrested and face charges under that name, they had little choice. It had one redeeming feature. It gave believers a common name whatever local church they belonged to, and it reinforced the idea of a universal church. By the beginning of the next century, church leaders were using the term freely. Reputedly a disciple of John the Evangelist, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (martyred in AD 107), in his letters, uses not only the word “Christian” but also “Christianity” (Χριστιανιτός), perhaps its first coinage. The word “Christian” occurs in the Didache (late first or early second century), and when bishop Polycarp was martyred in AD 155, he declared “I am a Christian” (Χριστιανός εἰμι).¹⁴

The term “Christian” began as a probably contemptuous street name in Antioch when Latin speakers discovered a strange new Jewish sect in the city’s cosmopolitan crowd. It would have struck them as bizarre belief in a man who died and rose again. As a street name, it appeared again later in Rome, either independently or brought there by Romans returning from Antioch. It was an outsiders’ name, basically meaning the “Christists” or “Christites,” and assuming that “Christ” was a name, not a title. It was not a name that Christians themselves used at this time. Jewish Christians might have called themselves “Nazarenes,” which is what the Jewish leaders called them; others may have called themselves after the apostle or disciple who founded their local church. Picked up from the Roman crowd, “Christian” was the name used by Nero and those around him when he cast the blame for the Great Fire on this strange new sect. From then on, it became Rome’s official term for the followers of Christ. Perhaps surprisingly, it was taken on by Christians themselves, serving as a common unifier for all the scattered believer communities and becoming a badge of honor.

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