

## ‘The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch’

The keeping of Lent, which this year runs through the whole of March, has always been associated with penitence and penance, often these days in the form of giving up some enjoyable luxury. But from the early centuries it has also been a time for learning about the faith: those who were already Christians would often attend the instruction provided during Lent for catechumens, the converts who were being prepared for baptism on Holy Saturday. These days, as part of our spiritual sprucing up in preparation for Easter, we often echo this practice, for example by some form of study, such as a lent-course, directed reading, or themed sermons. In some years to tie in with this means of observing Lent, I have looked at the origin of one or other of the Creeds. This year, I’ve decided to explore something even more basic: the very name by which we are known, ‘Christians’.

We read in Acts 11 v. 26 that ‘The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch’. Clearly, this was a word coined by others to describe a newly identifiable group: it was not the disciples themselves who thought up the name. Later, in Acts 26 v. 28, we see it used by King Herod Agrippa II. Faced with St Paul eloquently repudiating the charges against him, Herod Agrippa rather scornfully remarks, ‘You think it will not take much to win me over and make a Christian of me’. This event took place in c. AD 59, by which time ‘Christian’ had evidently become established as a pejorative term. But almost immediately the so-called ‘Christians’, followers of Christ, adopted the term for themselves. We see evidence of this in Acts 16, vv. 1 and 2, where we are told that Timothy was the son of a ‘Jewish Christian’ mother and was well thought of by the ‘Christians’ at Lystra and Iconium; and the term is used also in I Peter 4 verse 16.

It’s worth digging a bit deeper to see if we can learn more from the word itself. As it appears in Acts, it is, of course, in Greek: Χριστιανὸν (Christianos). The first element of the word, Χριστ, Christ, means ‘the anointed one’. In terms of its meaning it is the Greek equivalent of Messiah in Hebrew. So the first half of the word accurately acknowledges that the new sect believed they were following the Christ, the Messiah, ‘the anointed one’, for whom the Jews had long been hoping. However, the last part of the word, -ανὸν, -ianos, which conveys the meaning ‘adherent of a group’, ‘a follower’, is not a Greek construction at all. It is, rather, a common Latin one (-ianus), which was quite freely added to names to form a collective term. What we see in the New Testament is its direct transliteration into Greek script, so forming a linguistic hybrid: Greek for the first half of the word, and Latin-origin for the second half. Latin was, of course, the official language of the occupying power, even though the lingua franca in the eastern Mediterranean was Greek. So perhaps the term Christianos grew up among those complaining about the sect to the Roman authorities, for whom the meaning of this made-up word would have been transparent, economical and effective. Maybe that’s how Herod Agrippa, an agent of the Roman imperial power, had come to know it. It was, though, a very good one-word description and it is no wonder that the community of believers quite quickly adopted it.

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