

Part 21: Marks of the Evangelical Christian

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“Are you a Christian?” That’s what my daughter asked her friend on the playground the other day. Her friend responded, “Yes, well, I think so? I believe in God. Does that mean I’m a Christian?” My daughter, said a question that all of us should be humble enough to admit when we share the gospel: “I’m not sure actually.” So she came home and asked me, “Dad, what does it mean to be a Christian?”

She knew there was something about God—but she also knew that on its own sounded off. But if she wanted her friend to know what it meant to be a Christian, she wanted to know the true weight of it.

Our political discourse has highlighted the vanity and emptiness of titles without meaning. One who takes the name of their party—but fails to embody the full weight of it is often called a “RINO,” a “republican in name only,” or a “DINO,” a “democrat in name only.”

This is all the more important when we consider the third commandment God gives his people which is: “You shall not take the name of your Lord in vain.” What’s often flattened to simply mean, “Don’t curse,” was intended to be viewed through this broader lens: if you are going to claim to belong to God—then you shouldn’t take that lightly. To take the name in vain politically would be to be a RINO, or a DINO. To take the name in vain biblically is harmful to the witness of God and personally foolish at best and eternally dangerous at worst. So, what does it mean to not be a “CHRINO,” a Christian in name only?

Well, today’s passage is hugely helpful to this end because no one claims the name, instead it is bestowed upon the believers in Antioch as **Acts 11:26** tells us “in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.” That title has become the most universal name for God’s people ever since. To be God’s people, is not only to take the name of God—but to take the name of his Son, Jesus Christ. It’s the distinguishing mark between Jews and the church in Acts. It’s what separates believing churches today from other monotheistic religions like Islam or Mormonism. And it’s the distinguishing mark you would need to have certainty on “What makes a Christian?”

That’s what we will look at today. We will answer two questions from our passage: **What is a Christian and what is a Christian life?**

We are going to see these two questions answered in five ways in this text. First, in answering the critique of the Jewish Christians, Peter shows us that a Christian is anyone who **Repents by the will of Jesus**. But what is a Christian life? Well, in Antioch we see that a Christian **Preaches the good news of Jesus, Rejoices in the work of Jesus, Remains faithful to the purpose of Jesus, and Rests in the name of Jesus**.

Let's begin this morning by answering the first part of the question: What is a Christian?

It's important that we understand this question first. As we will see Christians act, live and work in a distinctly Christian way. But living as a Christian is secondary to being made alive as a Christian. Living like Christ is not how one is saved by Christ.

So how then, is one saved? If we can't answer that question we default into what is often called legalism. And that's how the Jews responded when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem. **Acts 11:1-3**, "Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him saying, 'You went to the uncircumcised and ate with them.'"

So when the Gentiles, non-Jews, were counted as Christians apart from conformity to these extra laws—these Jerusalem Jews were rightly upset. These men were Christians, but they thought that if one were to be a Christian they had to believe in Jesus and become righteous according to the keeping of the Old Testament laws of circumcision and diets. Notice how they didn't take offense that the Gentiles heard the word of God, only that they didn't think they properly responded to it!

They rightly wanted to fight for clarity of conversion and right boundaries of the church—but they had the wrong boundary. They thought that if these Gentiles were truly saved—they would conform their lives according to Jewish customs. Conversion was a sort of cultural conformity.

Conversion implied change for sure. To be converted, but to not change is by definition to not be converted. But what is the guideline of conformity? Peter answers this by showing how the distinguishing mark of the Christian is conformity to Jesus. He defines that act as our first point this morning: A Christian repents by the will of Jesus.

Don't miss this. Peter outlines this "in order" (vs. 4) so that neither they, nor us today miss this monumental mark. In describing the events we saw last week we read: **Acts 11:12-18a**, "And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way.' When they heard these things they fell silent."

Who is responsible for the salvation of the lost? Well, on one hand, it's God and God alone! Did you notice the work of God in this text? It was God who gave a vision to Peter and to Cornelius. It was the Spirit of God who compelled Peter to go without showing distinction. It was the message of Jesus which Peter was preaching when God's Holy Spirit fell on the Gentile converts. And to defend the baptism he gave the converts to welcome them into the church, what did Peter say, "Who was I to stand in God's way?"

The Bible makes it clear, and the church has long confessed, that salvation is the work of God and God alone. Peter here describes it as a gift of God. Paul says in Ephesians 2:9, this salvation is "the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

This is why we our church is named, Sovereign Hope. When the Jews saw the clear work of God—this sovereign work changed their complaint to praise. Luke tells us **Acts 11:18b**, "And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.'"

Notice that important word in verse 18, “also.” God granted these Jews salvation, and he has also granted these Gentiles salvation. Through what means? Repentance.

And there’s the big distinction that we cannot miss! When I do membership interviews I often ask someone to share with me in 15 seconds what the “good news” of the gospel is. And after hearing their answer I say, “That’s great news! But how do you know that good news applies to you?” Here we see how—repentance. That’s what makes the good news—good news for you.

Repentance is the humble and only response of truly hearing the gospel. When we hear the message of the cross, that we are sinners living in open rebellion against the only good and loving King and that apart from faith in his Son who died in our place for our sins we will never be saved, we cannot simply say, “Ok.” That is, unless we don’t believe it!

But if we believe it, it is the only right response. Repentance is the work of our great undoing. Repentance undoes all the wrath and condemnation we worked hard to incur. But it’s not because we did the work—repentance is the work of acknowledging Christ’s work.

For those Christians who wrestle with assurance—it is here we find our greatest sign of confidence. How can you know you are saved? Look nowhere else but here: have you repented. It’s only the gospel that can make the admission of our failures the assurance of our success but that’s exactly it. God grants repentance. We cannot on our own turn to God, we cannot on our own grieve our sin, we cannot on our own give Christ the throne. So if God has granted you repentance—then you should have confidence that you are saved.

If you’re not a believer. That’s all it takes to be converted. That’s the answer to my daughter’s question.

And yet, that’s not all our conversion does. As we just saw, repentance leads to life.

It carries us deeper into a life of Christ, and that’s what we see as Luke takes us to the town of Antioch north of Jerusalem. If repentance is the work of God to grant salvation to sinners—then what does the Christian life look like? Here we see our second point: A Christian **Preaches the Good News of Jesus**.

Read with me, **Acts 11:19-20**, “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

If you’ve followed politics at all, you’re well aware of the mysterious voting block titled, “evangelical Christians.”

What is an evangelistic Christian? Well, to repent means that we see our sins against God’s glory as the greatest sin—and therefore we repent. And to live as a Christian means that we see God’s glory as the greatest good—and so we live for and call others to a life lived for his glory.

That’s what the word “Evangelical” means in a linguistic sense. “Evangel” means “good news.” And to be a Christian is to be by default concerned with the good news of God in every facet desiring to see it more clearly in your life—and to see God glorified in the salvation of the lost.

That's what these men from Cyprus and Cyrene begin to do in Acts 11. They begin "preaching the Lord Jesus Christ." They are literally "Euangelizoing," or "good newsing." And they aren't caught up with the physical lines of demarcation—these unnamed Christians actually outpace the majority of the church by realizing the gospel that saved them—saves anyone who comes by repentance.

And here we see how the gospel keeps us from legalism—we no longer conform to the demands of the law, whether it be cultural or biblical. But it also keeps us from liberalism—the idea that once we are saved we can do whatever we want because of grace.

Notice their message was the good news of "the Lord Jesus Christ." "Lord" is a political work the Greeks would have understood, "Christ" is a religious one the Jews understood. They are more than names, they are roles. To preach salvation by grace through faith is to call someone to a specific "Christ," a messiah, and that messiah is also, "Lord," a ruler. The whole of our life is conformed to him for our joy. This is the good life that repentance produces.

True Christianity has in it an impulse, and power by the Holy Spirit, which slowly moves us away from participation in worldly and sinful aspects of culture while simultaneously turning us to the people inside of any culture.

Because God grants you the Holy Spirit—he has granted you these two impulses. We seek to glorify Christ in our lives, and we seek to call others to Christ through the work of evangelism.

We often only keep things to ourselves when we don't think they are that great, or if we are worried that too much interest will diminish our own joy in the product.

But being brought out of slavery and bondage to sin into fellowship with the Triune God is the greatest good the world can know. And the gospel is not limited in its size. It is infinite. The blood of Christ cleanses all, it's a fountain flowing forever, never will it run dry. We can no more diminish the atoning power and love of God than we could drain the ocean with a thimble. And there's no limit of access. In fact, it's for those who are lame, dead, deaf, dumb and blind.

When Peter saw the conversion of the lost in Caesarea he said, "How could I stop it?" When these nameless, but not forgotten saints saw the need of the lost in Antioch they said, "How can I be silent?"

Sharing Christ with others is costly. It's costly because it involves us telling others that their greatest joy is in a God they cannot see, and that everything they see so clearly and love so deeply in this world is actually dragging them down with numbness into eternal hellfire. It's hard to think on your feet. But it's harder when it seems your feet are on the ceiling and your message appears upside down.

But look at the hope Paul gives us: **2 Corinthians 5:18-20**, "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting us to the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."

Church, have you considered this text? Notice what God gives to us. He gives us in Christ Jesus a ministry. He gives us a message. But, he does not give us any risk. Why? God makes his appeal through us. Open your mouth and let God speak. A lion might have to work to find its roar, but a Christian needs only to open its mouth to find God's power.

I can't tell you how true that is. I've seen in my weak efforts, and in my fumbling and bumbling--God never fails. Whether the person I'm sharing the gospel believes or not, I can tell you that every time I preach Christ, I believe. And that's worth it.

When we begin to see the work of God in our work for God—we are lead more and more to our third point. A Christian **Rejoices in the Work of Jesus**.

Barnabas is sent up by the church in Jerusalem to see and verify of God's work among the Gentiles in Antioch, and this is what we see: **Acts 11:21-23a**, "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God he was glad..."

I want to quickly touch on two things here. First, notice and be encouraged that when we preach Christ, Christ's hand is with us. Let me ease your burden here--you cannot and will not save anyone. As the church faithfully shared the gospel of Jesus to the lost, who did the work? Jesus did. His hand was with them--and he brought belief and repentance to others as well.

The great commission includes a great comfort, "That I will be with you always even to the end of the age." Ministry for Jesus is difficult. But when we know Jesus is the sovereign Lord, the exclusive savior, and the King of Kings, ministry with Jesus is joyful. His work, will work. We never work alone. Not in our evangelism, not in our sanctification, not even in our worship.

Some of us are prone to self-pity and anxiety because all we are able to take hope in is what we see in our own works or our own efforts. But if we begin to fix our gaze on the work of Jesus all around us we become happily less self-assessed and amazed at the powerful works of Jesus.

Do you realize that if you were here today, and you genuinely worshipped Jesus in song, if you genuinely prayed to God in prayer--then you have seen Jesus do a miraculous work! There's nothing natural in us to do any of that! What if you started to see the hand of Jesus at work in places where he is already working! How much more joyful would we be?

That's the framework Barnabas had. He wasn't amazed at the work of these men—he saw the grace of God and he was glad. Gladness in life is the fruit of a God-centered life. When God's glory is our glory—we find an unshakable joy.

If we expect our joy and our gladness to come from the things of the world then we will be as fickle as the world. But if our joy is attached to the work of Jesus, then we will find joy in all things for Jesus is never not at work.

And we see how he works in us as we see our fourth point this morning: A Christian **Remains Faithful to the Purpose of Jesus**.

Rejoicing at the conversion of the church in Antioch, Barnabas sets himself to care for the growth of the church in Antioch: **Acts 11:23b-26a**, "He exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people."

On scholar said that Barnabas, whose name means "Son of Encouragement," was "the man with the biggest heart in the church." And here we see the pastoral theology of a man who loved seeing people grow in Jesus: He exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose. So much so, that he went and got Saul because he knew these believers, like all believers, need to be continually taught God's word and God's way.

When we come to faith in Jesus we have a new purpose. We have new marching orders and those become the primary focus of our lives. We are constantly assessing how we are progressing at work, in the gym, in our studies. But do we plan, prioritize and assess our steadfastness to God's goals in our lives?

What are those goals? Well, that we might know and love God better, that we might serve and worship better, and that we might help others do the same. But notice how everything influential in this text stemmed from something ordinary.

Why do we see Barnabas' clear joy, his wise counsel, and his zealous labor? Because he was a good man full of the Spirit and of faith. As Barnabas set himself to be a holy Christian, he found himself to be a more happy and a more helpful Christian.

Moreover, as the church was being taught, as the church was pursuing their own faithfulness to the Lord what happened? Many people were added to the Lord! There's no shortcuts to success! God wants to do much through his church and that comes when all of us are committed to our own faithfulness to Jesus. There's no wasted movement here. All of it matters.

That's why we are taught to pray, "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done." And if we want to see God's will done--we should commit ourselves to steadfast growth in holiness, steadfast assembly in the church, and steadfast love for the lost.

And here lastly we see our final point: A Christian **Rests in the name of Jesus**.

Acts 11:26, "And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians."

I love how this is a name the church didn't take for themselves. This was a nickname given by the citizens of Antioch. This in itself is astounding. Remember the Christian church was growing out of the Jewish scriptures and practice. Yet they were so distinctly fixated on Jesus that their nickname was not: "Biblians," nor "Abrahamians," nor even "Godians," "Peterians," or "Paulians," they were Christians. A name that means, Christ people.

These Christians were not named Christians, and then they acted like Christians. They were Christians, and were then seen and named as such by the world. Dear church, what would the world call you?

We are so concerned about how we are seen in this world--but do we care to be seen as this? What if you were never called "influential?" What if you were never called, "Mommy?" What if you were never called, "Boss," or "sweetheart," or "Doctor," or "dad," but at the end of the day you were called by those around you "Christian."

Would that give you peace? Other names are good. Other names might save you money on your car insurance—but it's only this name, and its namesake who gave his life to grant you repentance, that means anything eternally.

And it's only that name that brings us peace when we fail. If my Christianity rests in Tyler's performance. I'm doomed. Peter, who here defended Gentiles belonging to the church later lapsed for a moment back into legalism. If his rest was in his own work, the not even Peter could have assurance.

But our name reminds us of our rest. We rest in Christ and his work. When we are faithless, says Paul, he remains faithful for he cannot deny himself.

And when that name, is your name, when you take not his name in vain—we do not receive it in vain either. For in the name of Jesus is our abiding joy and deepest hope.

In closing I want to read a quote from Gregory of Nyssa reflecting on the name we have in Jesus: **"This man knew the significance of the name of Christ for us, saying that Christ is the "power of God and the wisdom of God." And he called him "peace," and "light inaccessible" in whom God dwells, and "sanctification and redemption," and "great high priest," and "passover," and "a propitiation" of souls, "the brightness of glory and image of [God]," and "maker of the world," and "spiritual food," and "spiritual drink and spiritual rock," "water," "foundation" of faith, and "cornerstone," and "image of the invisible God," and "great God," and "head of the body of the church," and "the firstborn of every creature," "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep," "firstborn from the dead," "firstborn among many brothers," and "mediator between God and humanity," and "only begotten Son," and "crowned with glory and honor," and "lord of glory" and "beginning" of being, speaking thus of him who is the beginning, "king of justice and king of peace," and "ineffable king of all, having the power of the kingdom," and many other such things that are not easily enumerated. When all of these phrases are put next to each other, each one of the terms makes its own contribution to a revelation of what is signified by being named after Christ, and each provides for us a certain emphasis. To the extent that we take these concepts into our souls, they are all indications of the unspeakable greatness of the gift for us."**

And that, is why we joyfully, through repentance and grace, desire to be above all things—Christian.