



The Hand of the Lord Was With Them
Acts 11:19-26

The Church at Canyon Creek, Austin, Texas
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What does it mean to be a Christian? Anderson Cooper hosted a CNN special asking that question. As you can imagine, the answers varied widely. The program overlaid a liberal versus conservative political template over Christianity, and did not talk about the Gospel or the delight of God's grace at all. And it did not define what it means to be a Christian; instead, it showed the various perceptions people have about Christians. So, what is the face of Christianity?

Is it the face of Mother Teresa or is it some cranky preacher waving a Bible in the air? Is it Billy Graham preaching the Gospel to millions or some slogan on a bumper sticker? Is Christianity the sound of a gospel choir or some street preacher telling people they are going to hell? Is Christianity about social justice or political activism?

There are so many versions and perceptions of Christianity that's it hard to find consensus on what it means to be a Christian in the 21st century. But that wasn't the case in the 1st century.

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. And the resurrection sparked a movement. The first Christians believed that Jesus was the Son of God and that everything He said was true. They were convinced, they were compelled to talk about it, and they were courageous to take a stand at great risk. And they are our mentors, and this fall our prayer is that their passion would revive our passion. The book of Acts continues to be written. We are writing our chapter every day. So the story continues, and it's still about Jesus. And the mission continues, and today, in our generation, it's up to us to take the gospel across the street and around the world.

The resurrection happened about eight years earlier, and Acts 11 describes the spread of Christianity as persecution intensified.

“Many believers of Jesus were scattered due to persecution that arose after the stoning and death of Stephen and they fled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. As they fled, they preached the word of God along the way, but only to Jews. Yet some of the believers who went to Antioch began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. ***And the hand of the Lord was with them***, and a large number of people believed and turned to the Lord. When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of God's blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord ... Barnabas then went to Tarsus to find Saul (that is Paul), and brought him back to Antioch. And both of them stayed there for an entire year teaching large crowds of people. ***And the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.***” (Acts 11:19-26)

This passage is about the name of Jesus, the message of Jesus, and the hand of Jesus. “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.” They were the first to bear the name of Jesus, the Christ. And they were “preaching about the Lord Jesus.” They shared the message of Jesus everywhere they went. And the most compelling phrase, “the hand of the Lord was with them.” God's hand was on them. Acts 11:21 is a description of the church then, and I believe, a promise for the church now! The hand of the Lord was with them and the hand of the Lord is with us. That

should fill our lives with extreme confidence. *If you give your life to His name and to His message, His hand will be with you wherever you go!* If bearing His name and sharing His message means everything to you, then His hand will be with you wherever you go.

THE NAME

About eight years after the resurrection, persecution intensified. Hundreds of families scooped up their children and were literally on the run. They were scattered all over the Mediterranean world. Yet something greater than fear of the Roman sword gripped them. It was that name. Jesus, the Christ. And “the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch” (Acts 11:26).

This verse has always grabbed my attention. Because Acts 11 is the story of persecution and fear, but also the story of conviction and courage. It’s the story of real people, people just like us, walking the ancient streets of Antioch unashamedly talking about their Savior. It’s the story of God’s hand being on them, the story of real life evangelism, and the story of impacting an entire city. And it is the story of the disciples embracing a new name. “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.”

Hopefully, His name means as much to us as it did to them. Hopefully, we too proudly and humbly bear His name. And hopefully, we too realize *there is no greater privilege or greater responsibility than bearing the name Christian.*

Antioch was not the easiest place to bear the name Christian. On the one hand, Antioch was a lavish city called the “Queen of the East” and “Antioch the Beautiful.” It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, with a population over half a million. The main avenue was a paved marble street four miles long; lined with statues, trees, fountains, and colonnades, and believed to be the first street in the world lighted at night. But on the other hand, Antioch was a dark, immoral place. People worshiped the goddess Daphne, the female lover of Apollos. Daily re-enactments of their mythical love affair were performed with sexual rituals. In spite of that, Antioch became the birthplace of the missionary movement and famous for the first school of theology. And it was because “the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.”

Just like our 1st century brothers and sisters, we too are called to bear the name Christian. They represented Christ in Antioch and we represent Christ in Austin.

The term “Christian” appears in the New Testament only three times. Its infrequent use suggests it was not a term used within the church. Those inside the church called themselves “believers,” “brothers,” “disciples,” or “saints.” “Christian” was a street term meant to be insulting. At Paul’s trial, King Agrippa sarcastically said to Paul, “In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28). So odd were these believers that the people of Antioch would say, “Who are these people? Oh, these are the people who are always talking about Christos, the Christ-people,” and with a demeaning sneer, “the Christians.”¹

The only other use of “Christian” in the New Testament is by Peter, writing to encourage persecuted believers. “If anyone suffers as a *Christian*, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God *in this name*” (1 Peter 4:16, NAS). Peter turned a name of shame into a name of pride.

One historian writes, “These believers (at Antioch) continually talked about Christ ... They were constantly sharing the good news ... They were filled and flooded with Christ. His name was on their lips and his character was being formed in them. They were making visible the invisible Christ.”²

Author Sheldon Vanauken is right when he says, “The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians,” when we are “self-righteous ... smug ... and narrow.”³ And Rick Warren is also right when he says, “Changed lives are a church’s greatest advertisement.”⁴

You are an advertisement for Christ. So, what do people think about Jesus because of what they see in you? Think about the Christ you represent.

- We bear the name of the one who bore our sins on the cross. And the moment the hammer was raised to drive the first nail into His hand, Jesus could have stopped everything. But He didn’t.⁵ He cared more about saving us than saving Himself.
- We bear the name of the one who is preparing a place for us in heaven right now, the one who promises to return and take us home to live with Him forever in Paradise.⁶
- We bear the name of the one before whom, one day, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord.⁷
- We bear the name of the one whom all of heaven is praising at this very moment. “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain ... To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever” (Revelation 5:12-13, NAS).

Hopefully, His name means as much to us as it did to the Christians in Antioch. And hopefully, we too realize there is no greater privilege or greater responsibility than bearing the name Christian.

THE MESSAGE

There’s more to being a Christian than wearing a Christian t-shirt and having a fish symbol on the back of your car.

“As they fled, they preached the word of God along the way,” and they “began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:19-20). Jesus is the message. His love, His sacrifice, His resurrection, His grace – that’s the message. Jesus is why, even though they were fleeing for their lives, they refused to be silent. The natural instinct to protect their families, the natural instinct for survival, did not silence their witness. They talked about Jesus everywhere they went. These “unnamed, unknown, unsung heroes” dared to share Christ in a dark place⁸ and they shared Christ at great risk.⁹

The gospel defined life for them, as it did for the Apostle Paul. Paul gave his life to the “cause of the gospel,”¹⁰ the “truth of the gospel,”¹¹ the “peace” of the gospel,¹² the “mystery of the gospel,”¹³ the “glorious gospel,”¹⁴ the “eternal gospel.”¹⁵ He talked about “testifying”¹⁶ and “proclaiming”¹⁷ the gospel. He talked about advancing¹⁸ and defending¹⁹ the gospel. He talked

about “suffering for”²⁰ and being “in chains for the gospel.”²¹ Paul committed his life to the gospel. “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel.”²² He did not want to do anything that might “hinder the gospel of Christ.”²³ He sighed, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:16). “I do (everything) for the sake of the gospel.”²⁴ The gospel defined life for Paul and it defined life for the Christians at Antioch.

And Jesus is the Gospel. Jesus is the message. For Peter and John, the Gospel was a person, because they knew Him. They followed Jesus for three years. They heard His teaching and they witnessed His miracles. They watched Him die on the cross and they saw Him alive again. That’s why they said, “We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). None of us has ever seen Jesus or heard His voice. Our faith is based upon hearing the Gospel as recorded in the Bible and Jesus penetrating our hearts. Jesus is just as real to us as He was to those who heard and saw Him in person.

And if you’re not a Christian at this point in your life, Jesus can be real to you too. His love and grace can be just real to you. And here’s how. All of us have messed up. All of us have felt shame and guilt and regret over something. The biggest problem in our lives is our own sin, because sin separates us from God. But no matter what you’ve done or who you’ve become, God’s love is bigger. And He is willing to forgive you of everything you’ve ever done wrong, and to give you a new life. The Bible says, “If anyone is in Christ (if a person believes in Christ), he is a new creation, the old is gone and the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus has the power to fix what’s broken. No one else can do that. Everyone needs a Savior. I need a Savior. You need a Savior.

Jesus wants to be that Savior for you. Why Jesus? Because Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin. And He supernaturally rose from the dead proving to be the Son of God and proving that everything He said was true. And the moment you believe in Him, you will be forgiven of everything you’ve ever done wrong. You will experience peace within and peace with God. And you will have the hope of spending eternity with Him in a place He called “Paradise.” And all you have to do is “confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, and you shall be saved” (Romans 10:9, NLT). Forgiveness, peace, heaven. All that is yours if you believe in Jesus.

THE HAND

The last phrase I want to highlight should fill our lives with extreme confidence. “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21). This is one of the most compelling verses in the Bible for me. It’s irresistible. It’s filled with promise. It’s attractive. Our response should be “I want that!!!”

“The hand of the Lord was with them.” This phrase appears throughout the Bible referring to the presence and power of God.

- The Lord said, “My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens” (Isaiah 48:13, ESV). The universe is the creation of His hand.

- Jesus said, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:28-29, ESV). Our eternity is in the hand of God.
- The Bible says, “The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest ... and the hand of the Lord was upon him” (Ezekiel 1:3, ESV).
- The same was true of Ezra. “I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was on me, and I gathered men from Israel to go up with me” (Ezra 7:28). Ezra was able to lead God’s people because God’s hand led him.
- David’s hope was in the hand of the Lord. “My soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me” (Psalm 63:8, NAS).
- David trusted that victory was in the hand of the Lord. “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me” (Psalm 138:7, ESV).
- David found joy in the hand of God. “In Your presence there is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (Psalm 16:11, NAS).
- David also knew this. “My times are in Your hand” (Psalm 31:15, NAS). He knew that the number of his days was up to God.
- Peter said, “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God” (1 Peter 5:6, NAS). He is mighty and majestic and sovereign, and He will do whatever He pleases.
- The Lord promises, “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10, NAS). His hand is with us to face whatever we fear, whatever intimidates us, and whatever stands in our way.

“The hand of the Lord was with them.” Think about all that means.

- It means His presence. It means we can experience and enjoy a personal, intimate, day-by-day, moment-by-moment relationship with Him.
- It means His power. It means His help when we need it most.
- It means His comfort when we are hurting.
- It means His blessing. Every good thing we enjoy comes from Him.
- It means when we walk in His name, we walk with His authority.
- It means living for His purpose, guaranteed to prevail.
- It means confidence. Knowing that the hand of the Lord is with us should fill us with extreme confidence.

Acts 11:21 is a description of the church then, and a promise for the church now. The hand of the Lord was with them and the hand of the Lord is with us ... when we step out in obedience.

However, in the book of Revelation, Jesus warns the church that unless they repent, He will remove His lampstand from the church. The lampstand represented His presence, His hand. I believe that can happen to a church. If a church is filled with conflict or gossip or sin, I believe

God will withdraw His blessing. I also believe that if the people of God are no longer about the mission of God that the presence of God moves on. And it can happen personally too. Sin grieves and quenches His Spirit. Sin closes God's ear to our prayers. Sin forces our holy God to withdraw. So, yes, His hand can come and go, in the life of our church and in our personal lives as well. That is a frightening thought.

So what if we don't feel like His hand is on us? If you don't feel God's hand on your life, it may be there's too much clutter in your life. It may be that you're too preoccupied, and you need to get rid of the clutter in your life so you can experience God's hand on your life. Or, it may be because your priorities are not aligned with His priorities. While you're doing your thing, God is doing His thing, and you need to get on board with Him. Or, you may not feel the hand of God on your life because of a lack of faith. You want it to be true, but somewhere along the way you quit believing.

When I don't *feel* God's hand on my life, I remind myself, or Kathy reminds me, that His hand *is* on my life. Holy Spirit lives in me, so God is with me. If you are true believer in Jesus Christ, His Spirit lives in you and His hand is always on you. As the Lord promised Joshua, I believe He promises us. "Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you ... Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:5, 9, NAS).

Wherever you go this week, He's going with you. If you work at HEB, His hand is on you. If you work at Dell, His hand is on you. If you're a teacher, His hand is on you. If you're a student, His hand is on you.

CONCLUSION

The name. "The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch." There is no greater privilege or greater responsibility than bearing the name Christian. ***The message.*** The message is Jesus. He is the Gospel. ***The hand.*** "And the hand of the Lord was with them." ***If you give your life to His name and to His message, His hand will be with you wherever you go!***

Acts 11:21 goes on to say, "And a large number of people believed and turned to the Lord." This should be our prayer.

"Lord, show us if we have disappointed You as a church. Show us our failing and our sin, and we will repent.

Lord, we can't bear the thought of Your hand withdrawing from us. Please Lord, fill our church with Your presence. Fill us with Your power. Pour Your blessing on us.

Lord, we long to see the fruit of the Acts church. Use us to share Your Gospel. Use us to help many believe and turn to Jesus.

O Lord, may Acts 11:21 describe us. Please bless us with Your hand."

NOTES

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), page 228.

² Gary Vanderet, "The First Christians: Acts 11:19-30," Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, January 2, 2005.

³ Charles Colson, with Ellen Santilli Vaughan, *The Body* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1992), pages 330-331.

⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), page 222.

⁵ Max Lucado beautifully writes, "Since He couldn't bear the thought of eternity without you, He choose the nails." [Max Lucado, *He Choose the Nails*, (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000), page 34.]

⁶ See John 14:2-3.

⁷ See Philippians 2:9-11.

⁸ Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974, 1979), page 76.

⁹ Bruce, page 225.

¹⁰ Philippians 4:3.

¹¹ Galatians 2:5.

¹² Ephesians 6:15.

¹³ Ephesians 6:19.

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 1:11.

¹⁵ Revelation 14:6.

¹⁶ Acts 20:24.

¹⁷ Romans 15:16, 19.

¹⁸ Philippians 1:12.

¹⁹ Philippians 1:16.

²⁰ 2 Timothy 1:8.

²¹ Philemon 13.

²² Romans 15:20.

²³ 1 Corinthians 9:12.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 9:23.