

The Church in God's Program

Lesson 3

The Nature of the Church

The Names for the People of the God

A Responsible Assembly

One way to understand certain aspects of the nature and attributes of God is to understand the names of God. The same is true regarding the people of God. In this study we will look at the names given to God's New Testament Children, and in doing so come to a better understanding of the nature and character of His people as recorded in the New Testament. Hopefully, this study will give us insight into the early church, but even more, help see what the modern church is supposed to be like.

In Lesson two we discussed the Nature of the Assembly from the God's perspective. The People of God are God's because of His initiative. From the divine perspective God's people are *The Elect* of the Father, *Members of Christ's Body*, having *Fellowship in the Spirit*.

This week we will focus on New Testament names for people of God from a human perspective. Some of these were affectionate names used to refer to one another. Other names were coined from outside of the Christian community. Each name tells us something about the nature or character of the early Christians.

Believer- the faithful

The New Testament refers to The Elect as Believers, or the Faithful ones. The human response to the divine initiative is that of "belief" and "faithfulness". The Greek term *πιστοι* is translated according to the context of its usage.

Several passages bring together both the divine initiative of God's "setting apart (saint)" and the response of those that He calls to set apart. *Πιστοι* is translated "faithful" in following passages.

Eph 1:1 From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints [in Ephesus], the faithful in Christ Jesus.

Col 1:2 to the saints, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ, at Colossae. Grace and peace to you from God our Father!

Sometimes participial form "all those that believe" is used to describe the early Jerusalem Church:

Act 2:44 All who believed were together and held everything in common,

Act 4:32 The group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one said that any of his possessions was his own, but everything was held in common.

Questions for consideration:

What was so special about being designated as saints (set apart ones)?

Is the term saint restricted to a select few? That is, “the faithful”? Or is Paul referring to all the believers as saints and using the word “faithful” as a means of describing what these saints were?

How should the descriptions “saints” and “faithful In Christ Jesus” be applied for modern believers? Is the designation something that has to be earned, or is it something that has already been attained?

“All who believed” in Acts 2:32, 44 is closely associated with a spirit of unity before possessions. Is this a characteristic of all believers, or is the author simply referring to an attribute of these specific believers? What would the people of God be like in our age if it were a characteristic of modern believers?

The Way.

The early Jerusalem church appeared to have preferred the being called The Way, over other designations. The term is probably a reference and an association to Jesus’ claim, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me.” Thus, the Way would be equal to being Faithful to (believing in) Jesus Christ as the means to salvation, and a commitment to proclaiming this “way”. It is also likely that, since the early church was predominately Jewish, the title “The Way” referred to those Jews who broke the traditions of Judaism and were teaching Jesus way, which went contrary to the laws of traditional Judaism.

Act 9:2 and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, either men or women, he could bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Act 19:9 But when some were stubborn and refused to believe, reviling the Way before the congregation, he left them and took the disciples with him, addressing them every day in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

Act 19:23 At that time a great disturbance took place concerning the Way.

(others: Acts 22:4; 24:14, 22)

Questions:

Why would the believers prefer to have called themselves “the Way”? What would such a designation have implied?

If the name is an association with Jesus' claim to be "the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me" would that have meant that the old way was ineffective for salvation in their view? Is this term exclusive of any other "Way" of obtaining salvation?

Is it possible for a church to teach another way to the Father, than "the Way" presented by Jesus? Can the believers make the error of teaching that the Church is the way to the Father, just as the Jews made the error that Israel, or the Law was the Way?

Disciples

The word literally means "a learner" and refers to one who is an adherent or student of a certain leader, thus following his teaching.

John 8:31 Then Jesus said to those Judeans who had believed him, "If you continue to follow my teaching, you are really my disciples

Questions:

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?

Is it possible to know the teachings of Jesus, yet not be a disciple of Jesus?

What are the teachings of Jesus that we should follow them? Is his teaching a code of conduct, or something else?

Christians

The name Christian is only used three times in the New Testament. It was not chosen by the followers of Christ, but was coined by pagans at Antioch, probably in derision, in keeping with the Antiochian propensity for nicknames.

Act 11:26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught a significant number of people. Now it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.

Act 26:28 Agrippa said to Paul, "In such a short time are you persuading me to become a Christian?"

1Pe 4:16 But if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but glorify God that you bear such a name.

Regardless of the original source, the name Christian identifies the assembly as disciples, or followers of the Christ. Thus, it could be seen as equal to "the faithful" referred to earlier. It was this name that would become the most adopted term of identification of followers of Christ.

Question:

When you ask someone, “What is your religion?” How do they respond?

Do they ever say, “I’m a Christian”? or, do they say I’m Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Assembly of God, Charismatic, Pentecostal, Catholic, Protestant, etc.?

Are we quick to associate ourselves with Christ, or some subgroup? Does this demonstrate unity of the faith, or a division of the faith?

Brethren

The name Brethren focuses on the responsibility of believers to the family of Christ. All members of the church of Jesus Christ belong to the Universal family of God as and are therefore related to each other in Christ. This universal family binds people who would otherwise be separated by ethnicity, nationality, color, custom, etc.

Rom 8:29 because those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Eph 6:23 Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1Ti 6:2 But those who have believing masters must not show them less respect because they are brothers. Instead they are to serve all the more, because those who benefit from their service are believers and dearly loved.

Mat 8:1 After he came down from the mountain, large crowds followed him.

Do you know of anyone that uses the term brother, brethren, sister or sisters today within the context of the church assembly?

If so, is your reaction to the use of these terms positive or negative? Why?

There are denominations that refer to themselves as “Brethren” (United Brethren, Grace Brethren, Plymouth Brethren, etc). Why did they choose this designation? What is your response to these titles?

Summary: The above names of the early believers give us some insight into the perceptions of believers in the early church regarding their view of themselves and how they responded to the names given them outside the movement. As disciples, they were students of the teachings of Jesus. The name Christian is a term pegged by outsiders, recognizing that these people were followers of Christ, and adopted by the Christians. Calling themselves the Way, indicates that the early believers saw themselves as commissioned with a message of the way to

salvation. The name “believer” explains that they believed in the message of Christ, and faithful indicates that these people were committed to living a life that exemplified Christ’s teachings. Brethren seems to imply the concept of family associated with all believers.