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# What's in a Name?

## Should All Followers of Jesus Call Themselves 'Christians'?

Edited by L.D Waterman

*Should all followers of Jesus call themselves 'Christians'? Are there situations in which it may be preferable to avoid that term? What does Scripture say? What cultural and contextual factors (rightly or wrongly) influence this decision? This is an issue which is vital in Islamic contexts, and also in post-Christian western contexts. This article consists of excerpts from email discussions among members of the Bridging the Divide network (<http://btdnetwork.org/>) (See end of article for a list of the participants.)*

*As we will see, this is a multi-faceted issue. We observe that the connection of the term to the global and historic church has both a positive and negative side. We also see that a person's opinion about the use (or non-use) of the term 'Christian' often seems rooted in deeply held values and emotional commitment—either to the global and historic church as 'our family in Christ' or to a desire to avoid major stumbling blocks that some part of the visible church presents to those outside of Christ.*

### I Objections to the term 'Christian'

**Terry:** We talked at this year's consultation about 'myths'. Let's expose a persistent myth I keep hearing: that the word 'Christian' doesn't need to

apply to 'believers in Jesus'. I keep hearing it said that in the few places it occurs in the NT it is only an 'insult-word' and applies 'only to Gentiles' not to Jewish Christians (as if somehow that justifies dismissing the fact that believers worldwide have claimed it ever since the end of the first century).

I don't really understand, from either an exegetical or an historical perspective, the severe objections to the term 'Christian'. I think the reasons for these objections really arise from the Islamic context and particular social needs that people are trying to meet rather than from Scripture. The church at Antioch which first receives this epithet was founded by Hellenized Jews who had converted to faith in Christ and evangelized Gentiles (Acts 11:19-20). So these first 'Christians' were a mixed church, Jew and Gentile (Acts 11:26). Neither can one blithely presume the term is derogatory; on the contrary, the text presumes that Agrippa recognizes that 'Christian' is precisely the 'sect' Paul is trying to get him to join, and there is nothing in the text to suggest that Paul objects or repudiates that.

This text shows that in a very short time the epithet became recognized as a self-designation by believers in Christ. And what is also overlooked is

that Luke is now writing, looking back from a point in time farther down the road when the term has become standardized. Again, in 1 Peter the readers are told to ‘glorify God because you bear this name’—not ‘deny you are “Christian” and tell everyone you are just a “believer in Jesus”’.

**Georges:** Terry, Your post on the name Christian is right on. In 1 Peter 4:16, the apostle Peter says two things:

First, do not be ashamed to suffer as a Christian, and second, praise God that you bear that name. The name here is Christian. In Acts 26:28-29, not only did Paul not object; in fact he wished that all those listening to him would become Christians. These two verses are enough to settle the matter once for all.

I know that Christianity has a bad reputation to a segment of the Muslim world, but as Dorothy Day famously said: ‘The church is a whore, but she is still my mother’.

**Benjamin:** Which Christians are not insulted as their master has been? Who can escape being insulted by dropping the name ‘Christian’? As Mordecai argued with Esther, you were born to show your identity. Do not be ashamed of it. I am not ashamed to stand by the church historic. I am not ashamed of my spiritual family. The church, spiritually understood, is like a hospital near the battle field. We have always gathered the wounded and the healers. We must never apologise for how badly it stinks and how awful it may look.

## II ‘Christian’—helpful or not?

**Rob H:** Not to stir up too much trouble (said with a smile), but a few issues.

First, I get the impact of the 1 Peter passage. But Peter’s point is to clarify that suffering for Christ is actually a good thing (as opposed to suffering for doing evil), not to mandate use of a particular label. Now, let us imagine that someone is asked at gun point, ‘Are you a Christian?’ and answers, ‘No. I am a Jesus follower’. That is basically a kind of obfuscation, and I suppose in that case the passage would apply more specifically. However, I don’t think it covers each and every instance of ‘Christian’ self-labelling.

Then, ‘bearing the name’ and ‘in the name’ and associations to a name in Scripture are not meant literalistically. We all pray ‘in the name of Jesus’ from John 14:13, but I don’t know anyone who insists on a particular pronunciation. We don’t seem to insist on any particular way of saying this so long as we are referring to the same person. Why, then, insist on ‘bearing the (literal) name Christian’? Those who offer alternatives are not, I think, offering theological oddities, but things like ‘follower of Jesus’—which are in fact, synonyms.

If what is offered up is not a synonym then I would probably agree that it is not appropriate. Here’s another one: Much is made of ‘the name’ (YHWH) in the OT, and yet we invariably use other labels to express this and no one seems to have a problem with it.

Then finally, I will hazard a guess that the reason for this particular controversy is *not* any abstract principle that ‘We should all be known as “Christians”’, but simply that the *reasons* some are giving for avoiding the label ‘Christian’ are perceived as inappropriate. That being the case, the discussion ought to be about those reasons,

not about the imposition of a label. The biblical basis for insisting on a particular label is very thin.

**Benjamin:** My purpose in my earlier reply was not to say, 'Only those who call themselves Christians are standing up unashamedly for Christ' but rather that 'the name of Jesus, Christ and Christian, even follower of Jesus' will always engender unavoidable negative reactions; let's accept that and redeem it to the best of our ability'.

Granted, the name 'Christian' is not prescriptive; no name in the Bible is, but surely we do bear the name of our Lord and of Christ in some unashamed fashion. If someone in the Netherlands, Canada or Niger asks me, 'Are you a Christian?' a simple 'yes' is very unhelpful to the person asking. What I want is a discussion that reflects: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel'. I think the latter will help me best to honour him.

Finally, did not Paul keep the name 'Jew' in spite of the terrible associations with it? Did he not redeem it in Romans 2:28? This is what I seek to do with the name of Christian: rescue it from the garbage heap of past and recent history.

**Georges:** As I walked in downtown Dearborn, Michigan one day, a volunteer was handing out tracts with Bismillah and Fatiha printed on the top of the front page. I asked him: 'Are you a Muslim?' He said, 'No, I am not a Muslim'. 'So why do you have the Bismillah and Fatiha on the front page?' He said: 'It is a good prayer'. Then I looked inside and found verses from the Bible and the Qur'an. So I asked: 'Are you a Christian then?' 'No I am not', he said. 'What are you?' 'I am a follower of Isa.' So I said: 'Do you believe in both the

Bible and the Qur'an?' He did not know what to say after that.

How many Muslims on the streets of Dearborn really believed him that he is neither Muslim nor Christian? I told him that this tract is confusing and deceptive, and that he must decide who he is and openly say it. To say you are a 'follower of Jesus' does not fool people into thinking that you are not a Christian. If you speak about Jesus and you use the Bible, you are a Christian no matter what you call yourself. All Muslims know that the *Injeel* is the book of the Christians. Who are we trying to fool?

Calling yourself a Muslim and identifying with the Muslim *Umma* is a blatant denial of Christ who said if anyone is ashamed of me, I will be ashamed of him. When Peter denied Jesus, he betrayed Jesus. He was forgiven when he repented but he never again denied Jesus. Identity in Christ; identification with his global church, is what distinguishes us from all others.

**Richard:** Georges, the word Χριστιανός generally transliterated 'Christian', has (at least according to one scholar) a meaning which can include 'follower of Christ':

The identification of the messiah with Jesus of Nazareth brought the disciples the name *Christianoi*. Compared with other names for the followers of Jesus, like disciple or believer, the word is quite rare in the NT. By its whole formation it is a word which defines the one to whom it is applied as **belonging to the party** of a certain *Christos*, very much as *Heródianos* is a technical term for the **followers** of Herod (Mk

3:6; 12:13; Mt 22:16.)<sup>1</sup> (bold type added)

A recent survey done in the city of Portland, Oregon showed that the average person on the street did not even associate the term 'Christian' with Jesus. In many cultures, the term, commonly used for the 2.2 billion adherents of some form of the Christian religion, has taken on a meaning quite removed from what Peter meant in his letter.

Perhaps the term can still be redeemed. But this is by no means the most common self-identifier used by born again believers in Jesus in the first century. Why impose it on those for whom it hinders rather than enhances their witness for Jesus?

**Georges:** Of course a Christian is a follower of Christ. But this is not what it means literally. It is only implied. I don't really understand why some people want to throw away the identity (the name 'Christian') that has identified Christ's followers for centuries. The word Christian does not need to be redeemed. It is here to stay. Only a very small number of proponents of IM [socio-religious Insider Movements] are trying to throw it away and with that action, to dissociate the few new converts from their history and global community. I really think this is unfortunate.

What people think of us should not change who we are: *We are Christians*. Peter says, 'Do not be ashamed of this

name. Praise God that you bear that name.' Doesn't Peter have some authority to tell us to praise God that we bear that name? Isn't this the word of God?

### III Negative but still with opportunities

**Michael:** There is very little explanation of the emergence of the term 'Christian' in the New Testament itself, but the evidence that is provided may indicate that the term was one the New Testament believers resisted from the start. It seems that it was never a self-chosen designation. There are three places where the term emerges (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16). The passage in 1 Peter is the only one that provides much description of the term, and in that place Peter is including the term in a list of judicial charges that believers are suffering in Asia Minor.

In the two passages in Acts, the title 'Christian' is one thrust upon the church by outsiders. In Acts 11:26, the only point being made is that it was about (or against?) the first church in a Gentile city (Antioch) where the title was first coined. Acts 11:26 does not suggest whether it was a welcome or unwelcome term. In Acts 26:28, King Agrippa uses the term in his mocking response to Paul. It is clearly, in Agrippa's mind, a title one does not want to receive.

In any case, when we come to 1 Peter, it is evident the title was one that brought shame upon those so labelled. I think it worth noting that the title 'Christian' may have been troublesome to the church from the very start.

**Robin:** Michael, although I agree with

<sup>1</sup> K. H. Rengstorf, 'Χριστιανός', in L. Coenen, E. Beyreuther & H. Bietenhard (Eds.), *Vol. 2: New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 343.

much of your post, I would differ as to the thrust of 1 Peter 4:16. I do not see anywhere in the New Testament where Christians resisted the term *Kristianos* (Christian). That is an inference that I do not see. I do not think they were tempted to be ashamed of the word 'Christian' itself but that as persecuted believers they might have had a tendency not to identify with Christ as strongly as the apostle Peter would have liked.

**Don:** All of us admit 'Xristos' is the equivalent of 'Meshiach', meaning 'Anointed One'. Why are we Christian workers with Muslims not seizing the opportunity to ask our Muslim friends what they think the word 'Christian' means? No matter what they say, this opens the door for us to talk about 'the anointing' on Jesus (and its significance) as well as our anointing—our receiving of the Holy Spirit. We are sealed by the Spirit. The Spirit is the down payment on our entrance into eternity in the presence of the Lord.

Muslims have no idea of what the real role of the Holy Spirit was intended to be. (The Quran paints a very confusing picture of 'Ruh ul-Quddus'.) This is our golden opportunity to explain—to teach what the Word of God says. Let us seize every opportunity—and the word 'Christian' is as great a one as we will ever get—to open up the door of life to those sitting in the gloom of their Muslim darkness.

**SH:** Don, I agree—let us use any opportunity to share Christ and talk about what God's gifts are for us in Christ, the Holy Spirit being the pinnacle as Christ living in us.

By the way, in my part of the world (West Africa and especially Senegal)

Christians have a bad reputation only when our Muslim neighbours do not have a personal relationship with them. They probably just accept the general connotation of Christians as wine drinkers and pork eaters, and are the beach head of Western immorality. Where they come in contact with the few believers in Christ here, however, they are usually very positive and regard them as some of the best friends they can have. So, I think, the responsibility lies with us Christians to come into contact with our Muslim neighbours and share our faith with them. They can discern the people with good intentions and an upright life that reflects Christ. Let us not be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ in word, deed and through our life.

**Rob H:** Michael, this seems like a valuable insight for the exegesis of 1 Peter 4:16. *Christianos* might be a case of a label that is used by persecutors in the context of persecution as if a modern government had a designation for 'religious deviancy' called A34 (a totally random example). In such a situation Peter might say: 'If you suffer for stealing, you should be ashamed. But if you suffer as an A34, don't be ashamed.'

I suppose we should be cautious here, given the fact that the point of 1 Peter 4:16 is to encourage believers who are being persecuted, not so much telling believers what to call themselves.

**Michael:** Rob, This is a great point. I don't think the background to the title 'Christian' has much bearing on whether or how we use that specific title today. Rather, I think it illustrates the fact that believers in Jesus don't generally get to pick the titles by which the

culture around them identifies them.

It would appear (from passages like Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23) that the NT believers had adopted some of their own, more desired self-designations, like 'The Way' (along with other self-designations, like 'disciples'). The title 'Christian' is one that was evidently imposed on them from outside (cf., Acts 11:26), and *perhaps* was a less-than-appreciated label. In any case—whether it was a welcomed title or not—it was a designation placed upon them from outside by the culture in which they lived.

You are right; the title could have been 'A34ers' or anything else. But, as the title by which the surrounding society came to know them, Peter urged the believers to own the title *and fill it with good meaning*. The major thrust of the first epistle of Peter is for believers living on the margins of Roman society, under a cloud of misunderstandings about their faith and practices (1 Pet 1:12), to persevere in good works and charity that clears up those misunderstandings and brings honour to Christ. As part of that message, he urges them to accept the title by which the surrounding culture already knows them and fill it with good meaning by the lives and witness they bear.

So, as you note Rob, the point is not so much about the specific title 'Christian', but it does show us something about the way titles for the Jesus-movement develop. Sometimes we have the privilege of creating our own labels; sometimes we are stuck with the labels imposed upon us by the culture where we live, and we need to overcome a title's bad connotations with lives of patience, charity, and goodness.

**Richard:** This is a great dialogue. It seems to me that the bottom line to this discussion is that any term in whatever language we are working which associates one with Jesus as one of his followers should be boldly embraced—even if it is used in a derogatory manner. On the other hand, terms which associate one with a particular country, politics, lack of morality, etc. may need to be avoided.

**Rob H:** Michael, I agree that even if Christians did not necessarily own the term, they seemed willing to work with it. The example in Acts 26 is similar to the one in 1 Peter. Paul does not quibble with Agrippa, 'Well, actually, we don't call ourselves *Christianos*, etc...'

Then in 1 Peter there are the parallel formations:

'If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed' (4:14).

'But if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed' (4:16).

Peter connects the two, thus elevating *Christianos* from perhaps a negative connotation to a positive one. As 'Christianity' became Latinized and the original impact of the term faded, one can see how it would have been natural to use it as a self-denomination. Perhaps these examples illustrate the early Christian's flexibility in regard to descriptors? The question, 'What should we call ourselves?' does not seem to be a concern.

**Rob A:** It seems 'Christian' was a term of derision for the early believers. Probably 'Christian' was not their preferred self-identification but was a pejorative, mocking and demeaning epithet coined in Antioch, where they had a history of minting new clever jargon to cynically label and mock public figures. It is not



surprising that first in Antioch, the new Followers of the Way were condescendingly called 'Christians'.

The context of 1 Peter is clear that it is was a distasteful term to the followers of Jesus. And yet Peter instructs them when it comes to this jab at their identity, not to be surprised at the sufferings but instead to welcome this form of suffering.

If we are faithful in giving glory to Jesus through our actions and our words, then let the community come up with a name that fits. If it is a label that is associated with Jesus Christ that needs redeeming, based on others, misbehaviours, then redeem it through good behaviour. The label that was meant to insult can be turned into a synonym for redemption and forgiveness such as the meaning associated with 'cross'. But regardless, our duty is to follow Jesus in the same way he bore undeserved shame and scorn: so others find redemption.

#### IV The Apostle Paul's use of 'Christian'

**CJ:** I would start with the apostle Paul on the denial of the term 'Christian' for Christians. He certainly knew the term 'Christian' (Acts 26:28), but himself refused to use it. In front of the Jewish council, he defended himself as a Jew (Acts 28:17-30). In fact, it's my understanding that in spite of his knowledge of the term and its definition, nowhere in any of Paul's writings does he refer to himself or any of the believers as 'Christians', though sometimes English translations of the Bible misquote him. This did not however seem to cause controversy in the early Church. There are no recorded debates with

Peter over whether or not Paul should have affirmed his 'Christianity' in front of the Jewish Council.

**Georges:** CJ, I want to only comment on what you wrote, that Paul 'refused to use' the word Christian. I wonder where you got that from? Note Acts 26:28,29.

Why would Agrippa use the identifier 'Christian' referring to Paul? There is a simple answer: Paul was known to be a Christian and it was during the period when he pastored Antioch that 'followers of the way' began to be called Christians (Acts 11:26).

Paul did not deny. Nothing in the text even implies that. I believe he wanted to go beyond the term and said that he wishes everyone to be like him. It may well be, no one knows for sure, that Paul felt a bit limited by the term and without denying it he wanted to point out that there is more to it than an identity. There was no question that he was identified as a Christian.

Peter challenged 'Christians' to be proud that you bear that name (1 Peter 4:16). Christian is 'Christ-one'. There is no escaping that category no matter what we say about ourselves.

**CJ:** I have to deal with what the Scriptures actually say, not what I think might be implied or what I wish was there. Though I agree with you that I went a bit far using the term 'denial' for Paul's (non)use of 'Christian' as a title, I can't go beyond the term 'avoid' when I look at his witness.

Georges, what you see in the Agrippa exchange is Paul cleverly distancing his 'what I am' from Agrippa's term 'Christian', in order to avoid incriminating himself unnecessarily. It was pragmatic and political, but he avoided



the term 'Christian' even though his testimony did an amazing job of describing his Christianity.

During Paul's discussion with the Jewish leaders in Rome, again and in spite of Paul's knowledge of the movement as being called 'Christian', he presents himself as a Messianic Jew. For the sake of the gospel, he avoided the term 'Christian', once again.

He avoided the term with Agrippa, and with the Jewish Council in Rome, while preaching the gospel in both exchanges! And he does not use the term once in the whole of his writings to refer to any of the believers. Please show me otherwise if I have missed something. He certainly knew the term, and its implications, and yet on the occasions in Acts when he has the opportunity to embrace it, or in his many letters to the believers, he opts out. Paul is very clearly either uncomfortable with the term 'Christian' or is strategically avoiding it for the sake of mission. I cannot say that his avoidance is passive, nor that his overt lack of use or affirmation is accidental or meaningless. He is a scholar after all.

Paul is smarter than to casually forget the already important designation of 'Christian'. I believe he felt that 'Christian' implied something 'other than Jewish', and that's why he avoided it.

What we have in present times is hundreds of thousands of people who affirm for themselves the definition of 'Christian' as Paul did, while avoiding the designation 'Christian' as Paul did, and for the same reasons: 'Christian' is either incriminating (Agrippa), or implies a division between themselves and their cultural alliances to whom they are witnessing (Jewish Council).

Paul was the first to model that in mission, affirming the meaning of 'Christian' is much more important than affirming the form: Christian.

**Mark:** Dear CJ, you are bold to be so sure about Paul's reasoning. The term 'Christian' is used in the NT, but not all that often: once in Peter, and twice in Acts. This suggests it was rarely used by believers when the NT was being written.

The implication also seems to be that it was a term of derision or stigmatization, used by outsiders. They were 'called' Christians in Antioch—apparently by others. Agrippa also uses the term as an outsider, rejecting the identity it references. The use in 1 Peter 4 also fits: the author is writing about charges laid against believers: better to suffer for being a 'Christian' than as a 'murderer' or a 'thief' or some other kind of 'criminal'.

Kenneth Samuel Wuest took this view (*Word Studies from the Greek New Testament*), that it was a term of derision used by outsiders. This reading also fits with the way the term was used by secular sources from the 1st century.

It seems that perhaps the term only took off for use by believers at a later time, perhaps precisely because, as Peter implies in 1 Peter 4, believers did not wish to be 'ashamed' that they were accused because they 'bear that name'.

So it seems plausible that the term Christian was at first a term of derision and accusation used perhaps by disbelievers, but the believers refused to be ashamed to be accused of bearing the name of 'Christ'.

So on reflection I'm inclined to see Paul and the label 'Christian' differ-

ently from you, but the problem is, the evidence isn't really there. It's all highly speculative. Absence of evidence is not evidence. A bit of epistemic doubt can be a good thing. You are reading a great deal between the lines—boldly going where others fear to tread. I admire your spirit, but am disinclined to walk that road with you.

On balance I think it is pretty hard to know what to make of what Paul thought about this label 'Christian', given the paucity of references in the NT, and the suggestion that it was an outsider's term after all. There's not enough here to provide a foundation for IM practice. And what there is points us towards being willing to accept a negative label if it means we 'bear the name'.

## V Historical perspective

**Georges:** Even if the word Christian was completely absent from the NT, it is not absent from history. The church fathers, annals, historical records have one name for all those who believe in Jesus Christ: they are Christians. *History* is the best argument we have. There is no debating that the label Christian has continued to identify the disciples of Christ until now. It is the one word that unites all Christian denominations and sects, Catholic, Orthodox, Melkite, Nestorian, Jacobite, Protestant, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal and a myriad others. This is the Holy Cosmic Church.

We may choose many other labels to express what we mean by 'Christian' but it is really playing a game to replace it with any other title, no matter how wonderful that title maybe. It will always return to the fact that we are identified with Christ.

**Rick:** A review of current word meanings would indicate that 'history' is often not the best argument for communicated meaning. Take the word 'gay' for example—we could happily describe ourselves by that word but even though we could prove that 'historically' it has a certain meaning, it is understood today quite differently.

I do agree with what I think is the central point you were defending, which is that we want to be accurate in our communication with others. If the things you identified as being attributed to those who call themselves 'Christian' were what the person I was talking with understood, than I would be excited to be identified as a 'Christian'.

But if I am uncertain, or suspect that the meaning understood by the person that I am talking with is not as I would describe it, I would not use it. It has nothing to do with shame but rather a recognition that words have multiple meanings and I want to be accurate in my communication. For the sake of accuracy I consider the other person's understanding of the word to be more significant/important than mine.

## VI Dealing with negative connotations

**Don:** Instead of abandoning this word 'Christian' because all Christians sin, why not take advantage of this reality and explain what Christ is doing in us now (forgiving us, redeeming us, transforming us), and point out that the process will be completed at the time of his return? And then invite our Muslim friends to enter into this experience.

Labels are an effort to define a thing or name a person. The word 'Muslim'

connects its bearer to the person of Muhammad, the genius who invented the word and founded a religion upon himself as the pre-eminent Muslim. We have the right to choose a word that defines us in terms of our allegiance to Christ. That word is 'Christian'.

**Gene:** Don, if we were simply talking about naming objects, I would agree with you. But this discussion is really about naming the 'other': the people from whom we differentiate ourselves.

All societies have some group(s) that are part of their self-identity, but as the antithesis of themselves. For example, for many people who served in the US military during the Cold War the 'other' are Russians. Their 'name' or label represents much more than they are personally, and those representations are for the most part negative.

For many Muslims, Christians are the 'other'. The term means much more than a designation of their religion; it is a statement of everything that makes them different from us. That is the problem that many insiders have with using the term.

I think the insiders I know want to clarify what the differences about them are: i.e. 'following Jesus', and what they are not, i.e. culture. That is why the label Christian does not fit. Again, we must remember that what matters in communication is not what you or I think, but what they and the communities around them think.

**Rob A:** Gene, I understand what you are saying. I empathize with our brothers and sisters who want to differentiate their true belief from negative associations and misperceptions are about the term 'Christian' or whatever name is used for Christian. What I under-

stand from 1 Peter 4:14,16 is, 'Do not turn away from the term *even though* it is misunderstood or used slanderously.'

**Gene:** Rob, I think what you cited from 1 Peter 4 is particularly important. But I would urge us to read the verses together. When Peter says, 'if anyone suffers as a Christian' in v. 16, it is directly connected to 'for the name of Christ' in v. 14. Thus, it is altogether important whether or not people are connecting the word Christian to the person of Jesus Christ.

The context of 1 Peter was clearly believers being mocked on account of Jesus, being derided for associating themselves with his person, and it was a blessing precisely because they were being identified with him personally.

This is simply not the same as someone being accused of joining an alien culture, which is what the term Christian often means today in an MBB [Muslim Background Believer] context. Therefore I have trouble with your exegesis as it seems you ignored the context. But perhaps I misunderstood your argument?

**Benjamin:** I have really valued this stream of exchanges about the term 'Christian'. Allow me to affirm both Rob's text and final conclusion ('I am glad to have this interaction') and Gene's insights that Christianity today is also derided as 'an alien culture'. I would add that this is true both among Muslims and secular-western communities.

This is what I take away from everyone's exchanges: If Paul's reference to 'Christian' in Acts 28 were the only reference in Scripture, we would have a possible case to postulate that he

avoided it –and by extension, we might too, and especially today. That Peter, the apostle to the Jews no less, would endorse this term and override any avoidance of it, converts the ‘derivative name’ into a badge of honour. All of church history has obeyed Peter in this regard; so must we.

## VII ‘Negative label’ or ‘essence of belief’

**Rashid:** Rob, It seems that we have to differentiate Christian as a ‘negative label’ and Christian as an ‘essence of belief’. What Peter says, I think, means ‘Christian’ as an essence of belief, not as a label. The problem for most followers of Jesus in Muslim countries, I think, is that the communities understand the term Christian as a label of ‘alien culture’. Besides, especially in my context, most ‘Christians’ cannot show themselves to be followers of Jesus, so the community sees them only as those who apply ‘alien culture’.

**Rob A:** Mark and Rashid, I completely understand what you are saying about our faith being confused as a foreign western faith. It is a wrong presumption on their part. However, is this something unusual in history? The path of being a follower of Jesus is to suffer and be viewed negatively much of the time (1 Peter 4:12).

I too wish we could find some way to make everyone understand the difference between western culture associated with our faith and true believers, no matter their culture. But I am not ready to move away from a Name associated with my Saviour even if it is misunderstood.

## VIII Conclusion

### LDW: Summary

In this valuable discussion, a number of important points have been made. Among them are:

- The name ‘Christian’ does not appear to be one that early believers chose for themselves. They chose for themselves other self-descriptions.
- The point of 1 Peter 4:16 is to encourage persecuted believers not to be ashamed of being associated with Jesus. The goal in this epistle is not to tell believers what label they should use for themselves.
- ‘Bearing the name’, ‘in the name’ and other associations to God’s name in Scripture are not intended to require literal use of a specific word, and we don’t normally apply them that way.
- Throughout church history, ‘Christian’ (and its cognates) has been the most common descriptor of Jesus’ followers throughout the world.
- The connection of the term to the global and historic church has both a positive and negative side.
- A person’s opinion about the use (or non-use) of the term ‘Christian’ often seems rooted in deeply held values and emotional commitment—either to the global and historic church as ‘our family in Christ’ or to a desire to avoid major stumbling blocks that some part of the visible church presents to those outside of Christ.
- Any descriptors believers choose (or have placed upon us) can be used as opportunities to clarify God’s truth and present the reality of life in Christ.

- It's vital to differentiate Christian as a 'negative label' and Christian as an 'essence of belief'. 1 Peter refers to 'Christian' as an essence of belief, not as a label. The problem for followers of Jesus in Muslim countries is that the communities generally understand the term Christian as a label of 'alien culture'.
- Our goal in all our communication should be to convey as accurately as possible to our hearers the reality of the Good News in Christ and our relationship with him. In some cases the term 'Christian' will best accomplish this purpose; in other cases a different description may better accomplish that purpose.

### The Authors:

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**Richard Jameson** (pseudonym) has served for twenty five years in various parts of the Muslim world.

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**Robin Hadaway** served for 19 years with the IMB in Brazil, Tanzania and N. Africa, where he worked for seven

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