

Do You Know Who I Am?

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Acts 11:19-30



There's a story, probably apocryphal, about a famous celebrity paying a visit to a restaurant. The waitress serving them doesn't recognise the person, who has been expecting some sort of preferential treatment. The celebrity, with nose firmly put out of joint, demands better service, with the shouted question "Don't you know who I am?"

The waitress, without pausing, turns to the tannoy microphone and announces across the crowded restaurant, "Can someone help please? I have someone here who doesn't know who they are." Ego firmly deflated, the story ends with the celebrity storming out. There's a part of me who wants to be that waitress...

Such is the risk of having a name, or a face, that people are meant to recognise. As long as you don't mind the lack of privacy, and there are plenty of celebrities who complain that they can't even pop down to their local corner shop without being mobbed, it can have its advantages. For each celebrity who wishes they could buy an unhindered pint of milk, there are an equal, if not greater number, who will be delighted that they get so many freebies and perks for being a "face" or a "name".

The peak of this has to be when your name becomes associated with a certain trait or characteristic, when you become an eponym. Whether this is something to be celebrated depends on what your name comes to

represent. I'm not sure that Machiavelli would be too chuffed with the way his name gets bandied around, particularly as he might not have been as Machiavellian as we assume. Likewise, who would want to be a Jonah or a Judas, whose names are so closely associated with disaster or betrayal?

But how about those who put in a Herculean effort to achieve something, who stand as a Titan among their peers (the Greeks provide us with quite a few eponyms, such is the lasting legacy of their legends and myths). And then there are the more modern names, as we might want to describe the pandemic as plunging the world towards a Kafkaesque reality or forcing us to live within an increasingly Orwellian society. People familiar with both authors' body of work will understand immediately the sort of image conjured up by these names.

And so, we turn to our Bible reading to find the first use of the label Christian (Acts 11:26), given to believers by the Greek speakers of Antioch. This is in itself quite interesting, as it highlights a common misconception that even we might have been labouring under. The pagans of Antioch, encountering for the first time the word Messiah, or "Christos" in Greek, make the assumption that this is a surname, not a title. As was common then, and may be seen in part today, those who followed a certain person in philosophy or lifestyle adopted their leader's name. These followers of Mr Christos, therefore, must be Christians, just as followers of Aristotle were Aristotelians, etc. Even the way that we like to translate the name as "Christ-like" would just get a knowing nod from the crowd; after all, any good disciple would want to emulate their master in dress, manner and speech.

Of course, this might help in part answer the question that Jesus posed to his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" (Luke 9:18). The simple answer to these Antiochian Greeks would have been Mr Christos, the carpenter's son. Aside from the theological responses from Peter and his friends, the Jews would have known him as Yeshua Bar-Joseph (Joshua, son of Joseph), but that's just adding a layer of complexity to the debate (except that they could have been called "Bar-Josephians", but that's hardly likely to have caught on).

So, why were they known by the name of their leader, particularly as their leader a) wasn't around and b) had never published anything? A Greek philosopher would find his (or occasionally her) disciples faithfully following them in all their mannerisms, such as dress sense. It would have been the first century equivalent of the replica football shirts that supporters wear nowadays. I can almost imagine the crowds around Antioch, with names such as "Plato", "Pythagoras" and "the original Socrates" (not the Brazilian footballer of the 1970s and 80s) emblazoned on the back of their replica robes.

As much of the communication was verbal, with idiosyncratic styles and specific words and phrases identifying the originator of the thought being expressed, time was taken by the faithful follower to memorise and mimic their idol's speech patterns and vocabulary. Even minutiae such as stance and hand gestures would be faithfully copied, so there was no doubting their allegiance (Zeno stood like *this*, but Parmenides stood like *that*).

So, for the Antiochian believers to be known as Christians, they must have been doing something noticeable to enable them to be identified as followers of somebody that their pagan neighbours had never met. Was it in the manner of their homespun Nazarene dress, or did they all speak in faux Galilean-accented Greek that mimicked Jesus to their neighbours?

It's highly unlikely that either of these are the case, though it might have been amusing to see. It was more about the words that were spoken by the followers of Mr Christos; that would have mattered deeply in a society where days and weeks could be spent happily listening to eulogising philosophers (we will explore this further in Paul's visit to Athens as found in Acts 17:16-34).

The message of the Gospel would have been different in Antioch than it was in Jerusalem. There was no point telling the pagans in Antioch about a long-awaited Messiah, which had gone down a storm among

the Jews at Pentecost, as they weren't expecting one. Instead, they spoke of Jesus as the King who would bring freedom from sin and shame; the gift of God's grace that was so evident to Barnabas when he arrived for a visit (Acts 11:23).

A philosopher King, but also a practical one. We read at the end of the passage that the threat of famine was foreseen (helpfully, the confirmation that this did indeed come to pass has given clues to historians in dating Luke's writing). The response of these emulators of Mr Christos wasn't to become insular, looking only after number one, but to make sure that everyone within the Christian community across the region didn't go without.

So, we are left with the question, how do people identify Christians today?

Is it by their dress sense (stereotypically woeful), or their devotion to quiche at any social gathering? Is it in their dour seriousness and inability to have fun (again, a stereotype that sadly hits the mark too frequently)? Is it in their strict adherence to archaic laws that are so out of step with modern life that they are almost illegal (or so some would say)? Is it in their judgementalism, hypocrisy and finger-pointing condemnation of others who don't fit in with their narrow worldview (ouch!)?

Or is it in the unconditional love that they have for their neighbour, that flows from the same love that they have for God and that God has for them? Is it in their devotion to Christ, to emulate him through life and the desire to meet him after death? Are Christians known by their willingness to meet the stranger, offering the same welcome into the family of God that they received? Is it in the understanding of their continuing need for the limitless grace of God that was bought at such high cost and that they can't achieve salvation without God's help?

Looks like we've got some work to do...

Amen.

(Photo by [Allie](#) on [Unsplash](#))