

2015

SYNOD THEME: “And in Antioch the Disciples were for the first time called ‘CHRISTIANS’ Acts 11:26b”

Our theme this year is a follow-up of the themes for the past few years which focused on Christian family i.e. children, youths, mothers and fathers.

Our focus this year is on the word ‘Christian’ following the record of St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostle, we discover how the early church grew beyond the imagination of the Priests and Sanhedrin – who are religious leaders of Judaism. The disciples faced persecutions of one sort or the other. One thing that was common from the way they reacted to persecution is that they received the persecution with joy. (Acts 4:18-end, 5:40-42). Those who had been scattered by the persecution with Stephen scattered to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. They went with the gospel as they proclaimed it mostly to Jews. In Antioch however, some gentiles were converted. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to investigate, and he was pleased with what he found. This Barnabas went to Tarsus to bring Saul (Paul) to Antioch.

The name Christian, from very early times is distinctive title of the followers of Jesus Christ. It occurs only thrice in New Testament i.e. Acts 11:26, 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16.

Time and Place of Origin: The information available to us at this point comes from Acts 11:26. It was in Antioch and in connection with the mission of Barnabas and Saul to that city that the name arose. The distinctive practices of the group called Christian include a baptism in the name of Jesus, regular attendance at instruction given by the Apostles and fellowship on a household basis, which Luke the Evangelist described as the breaking of the ‘bread and prayers’ (Acts 2:41-46). This was the practice of the first church. The Jerusalem believers had no exclusive claim on the term church, despite its Old Testament association, and the mixed assemblage of Jewish and Gentile believers which was formed at Antioch in the Orontes was without ceremony called “the Church” (Acts 11:26, 13:1). However, Antioch was the model of the new church, and not Jerusalem. This model was to appear all over the world. It was founded by Hellenist Jews. Here, believers were first dubbed Christians or Christies by their gentile neighbours (Acts 11:26).

It has sometimes been suggested that the infrequent use of Christian in the New Testament points to a considerably later origin and that the author of Acts had no better reasons for assigning it to so early a date than the fact that the founding of the first Gentile church appeared to him to be an appropriate occasion for its coming into use. But apart from St. Luke’s well established claim, as the historian of Christ and early Christianity, to have traced the course of all things accurately from the first, his own non-employment of the word as a general designation for the disciples of Christ suggests that he had no reason other than a genuine historical one for referring to the origin of the name at all.

Authors of the Name: It is exceedingly unlikely that it was originally adopted by the Christians themselves. As the New Testament shows, they were in the habit of using other designations: (a)

'The disciples' Acts 11:26, (b) 'the brethren' Acts 9:30, Rom.16:14, (c) 'The elect' Rom.8:23, Col.3:12, (d) 'the saints' Acts 9:13, Rom.12:13, 'believers' (Acts 5:14, 1 Tim.4:12) 'the Way' (Acts 9:2, 19:9). But in New Testament times we never find them calling themselves Christians. In Acts 26:28, it was king Agrippa who employs the name. It came from the pen of the Apostle Peter in 1 Pet.4:16, the context which shows that he is using it as a term of accusation on the lips of the church's enemies.

It cannot have been applied to the followers of Jesus by the Jews. The Jews believed in the Christ i.e. 'the anointed one' the Messiah: and they ardently looked for Him to come. But it was their passionate contention that Jesus of Nazareth was not the Christ. To call His followers Christians was the last thing they would have thought of doing. Rather, the Jews referred to them as "this sect" Acts 28:22 cf 24:5,14) or Nazarenes (Acts 24:5 cf John 1:46).

Almost certainly the name owed its origin to non Christian Gentiles of Antioch. As these Antiochenes saw Barnabas and Saul standing day-by-day in the market place or at the corner of the streets, and proclaiming that the Christ had come and that Jesus was the Christ, they caught up the word without understanding it and bestowed the name of Christians on the preachers and their followers. Probably it was given, not as a mere nick name, but as a term of convenience. Yet, doubtless it carried with it a suggestion of contempt.

The Spread of the Name: Originating in this casual way, the name took deep root in the soil of human speech, and the three passages of the New Testament in which it occurs show how widely it had spread within the course of a single generation. In Acts 26:28, we find it on the lips of a Jewish ruler, speaking in Caesarea before an audience of Roman officials and within 20 years after it was used in Antioch.

A few years later St. Peter wrote to 'the elect who were sojourners of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (1 Pet. 1:1) and without suggesting that 'Christian' was a name which had yet adopted as its own, he assured that it was perfectly familiar to the elect. Outside of the New Testament we find Tacitus and Suetonius testifying that the designation 'Christian' was probably used in Rome at the time of the Neronian persecution (CD 64). We learnt that it was employed in Roman court of law as Pliny would ask, the questions he was himself accustomed to "Are you a Christian?" He would put this to persons brought before him on a charge of being followers of Christ. "I am a Christian" was Polycarp repeated answer to those who urged him to recant. It was natural that those who were called to suffer as Christians should come to glory in the name that brought the call and the opportunity to confess Christ. So, a name given by the outside world in a casual fashion was adopted by the church as a title of glory and pride.

The meaning attached to the Name: The original meaning was simply 'a follower of Christ'. The Antiochenes did not know who this Christ was of whom Barnabas and Paul spoke, so, little did they know that they mistook for a proper name what was really a designation of Jesus. But taking it to be His personal name, they called Christ's disciples 'Christians' just as Pompey's followers had been called Pompeians or the adherents of Herod's dynasty Herodian.

On its adoption by the church, deeper meaning began to be read into it. It testified to the dignity of the Church's Lord – 'the Anointed One' the rightful King of that kingdom which has no end. It

proclaimed the privileges that belonged to Christians themselves for they too were anointed with the oil of God to be a holy generation, a royal priesthood, a chosen people and a people belonging to God (set apart). Moreover, in Greek, the word, Christos (anointed) suggested the more familiar word Christos ('gracious'). It is possible that St. Peter himself is playing on the word 'Christ' when he writes (1 Pet.2:3). If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious (Christos). And by and by we find Tertullian reminding the enemies of the church that the very name 'Christians' which they gave to Christ's people in error, is one that speaks of sweetness and benignity. Thus Christians are people who belong to Christ. Christians are little Christ's. Our expectation in looking at the place of children, youth, mothers and fathers in the last four Synod are summed up in our theme, 'In Antioch the disciples were first called Christians'. We are Christians and we need to examine ourselves daily in the mirror of the Bible; examine the expectation of Jesus from us. A survey of what led to the name 'Christians' in Antioch shall reveal the characteristics of Christian. It will also give us a complete assessment of Christians.

According to the submission of Luke the Evangelist as recorded in the Acts of the Apostle, we have the following records. In Acts chapter 1, Luke said that Jesus Christ appeared to the Apostles over a period of forty days and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem until the promised gift of the Holy Spirit has come upon them. On one of the occasions of His appearances the apostles asked Him, 'Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Jesus said to them,

It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witness in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:7&8).

The above shows what shall be the mission of the apostles. The Holy Spirit will empower them to witness. So the apostles' identity is witnessing. This was what John the Baptist did as a forerunner of Jesus. In John 1:6-8, we have this;

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only to witness to the light.

The Apostles were careful in adding to their number when the place of Judas Iscariot was declared vacant. The qualification of the one who was to occupy the vacant post is stated as follows;

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22).

The event of the Pentecost was the fulfillment of the promised Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit was the occasion Peter used to proclaim Jesus to the crowd in Jerusalem who were amazed and perplexed and asked one another, 'what does this mean?';

Peter said among other things; 'men of Israel, listen to this; Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men put him to death by nailing him to the cross... God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear'. (Acts 2:22-23, 32-33).

The outcome of Peter's address on the day of Pentecost was the addition of three thousand to their number same day. The practice of the new members was described by Luke as;

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer... All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods they gave to everyone as he had need... Acts 2:42, 44 & 45. This practice is again reiterated in Acts 4:32 which reads;

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own. But they shared everything they had.

Foremost in the mission of the early church fathers is the proclamation of Jesus death and resurrection. The address of Peter to the crowd that the healing of the lame man from birth was based on this fact. In Acts of the Apostle chapter 3 verses 14 & 15 read;

"... But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses".

Other testimonies of the first church fathers about Jesus resurrections abound in the following passages – Acts 4:33, Acts 5:30-32. Stephen one of the seven deacons and the first church martyr bore testimony to the risen Christ before he was stoned to death – Acts 7:56-57.

The message of the resurrection is the core of the Christian gathering. This was what Jesus commanded the women to go and tell His disciples, that He arose, on the resurrection day – Matt.28:1-10, Mk.16:1-8, Lk.24:1-11 & John 20:1-18.

It is necessary here to add that the followers of Jesus did not deviate from the great commission of our Lord Jesus Christ as He said, I quote:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.'

The above shows that a Christian is a witness. He is commissioned to testify to his or her encounter with Jesus. He or she is embolding by the Holy Spirit to spread the News. Our witnesses to the risen Christ is supposed to be taught to others by our words, action and life.

The example of the Antioch church is our guide. The theme of our Synod is not complete until we have the whole record which states;

... 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 large company of people; and in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians.

The above shows

- (a) The Greek observers gave this nickname to the disciples.
 - (b) The name came from their observation of the words and conduct of believers
 - (c) The name was used to persecute the disciples during Nero persecution "Are you a Christian? If you confess to be one, you are persecuted and killed like Polycarp in A.D 64
 - (d) The first disciples now became a new religious group which emerged out of Judaism
 - (e) Today we who gather together at the Synod are Christians
 - (f) Some of us distinguished from others by calling ourselves 'Born again Christians'
- (a) Antioch experience
 - (b) Nero persecution – Name anathema
 - (c) Name became recognized
 - (d) Today – people even ask – Are you a born again Christian. Discrimination – Identify with Christ.

In order to actualize the above we need to be Barnabas and Saul of our generation. According to Acts 11:24. Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith in chapter 4 verses 36 & 37 read;

Thus Joseph who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas (which means, son of encouragement) a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

As for Saul who was later called Paul, we have his profile as a man after having encountered with Jesus, considered all that matter to him before as loss. In Philippians 3:8, he said "Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord"

He summed up his new life in Galatians 2:20, I quote:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Hence, a Christian is the one who is alive for Christ. All his thought, words and action are controlled by Christ. That is why Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17, I quote, 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come'. Like Paul, the nature and gene of sin must die in us before we can claim to be Christians. It is when we identify by faith, with the death of Jesus that His risen life would manifest through us. To identify with the death of Jesus we need to surrender our lives to His service. We have to do what the disciples in Antioch did, that is giving our time, talents and treasures for him and creating quality time for the instructions in the Holy Scripture and doctrine of our church. The section one of our theme reads "And when he

found him (Saul) he brought him to Antioch. So, for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. Acts 11:26.

Christians today lack the instructions from the Lord. Many prefer to attend prayer sessions whenever the opportunity offers it than to attend Bible study. Whereas, Joshua as a leader in Israel was instructed by God thus;

Do not let this Book of the law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Joshua 1:8.

I therefore charge you as beloved members of the Diocese to henceforth give yourselves to instructions from the Scriptures and Doctrine of the Church. The church today must wake-up from slumber of Sunday, Sunday attendance of the church activities to weekly activities in order to grow in faith and to identify with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hosea 4:6 says;

My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children.

I therefore conclude with what Peter prescribed as confirmation of Christians' call and election as he said in 2 Pet.1:5-11.

For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Your Bishop & Friend.

+ *Olubayo Ilesa.*