

## What They Called Themselves

Acts is a fascinating book because it records the activities and interests of the first century church. Recently I have been looking at how those first century Christians thought about their relationships with God and with one another. The terms used to describe God's people in Acts are highly instructive.

**“The church / the assembly”** – Acts refers several times to the existence of a group of people calling itself the church: “...as for Saul, he made havoc of the church...” (Acts 8:3). The Greek term for “church” (*ekklesia*) essentially means, “assembly,” or “called out.” It is helpful to note that first century Christians thought of themselves as a distinctive and united group that belonged exclusively to Jesus Christ (Acts 20:28).

**“Brethren”** – Early in the book of Acts we find the term “brethren” being used by Jewish people to refer to other Jewish people (cf. Acts 2:29). The Jews attached strong moral and ethnic overtones to this word – they did not view just anybody as a “brother.” However, within a span of just a few years the term was adopted by Christians to refer to other Christians, regardless of whether they were Jews or Gentiles: “...when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed” (Acts 16:40). What a change the Gospel makes in how we view others!

**“Disciples”** – A “disciple” is a follower or a learner from a particular teacher. John the Baptist had disciples (Mt. 9:14), the Pharisees had disciples (Mk. 2:18), Moses had disciples (Jn. 9:28), and Jesus had disciples (Jn. 6:66). In the book of Acts, those who became Christians referred to themselves as “disciples” (Acts 6:2ff; 18:23). Many Christians today need to recapture the idea that we are to be “disciples of Christ.”

**“Saints”** – “Then Ananias answered, ‘Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem’” (Acts 9:13). The word, “saint” means, “holy / sanctified one.” When an individual is baptized for the remission of his sins, he is made holy by the blood of Jesus – he becomes a “saint” (cf. Gal. 3:27; 1 Cor. 6:11). Those who belong to God ought to remember His blessing in their lives – they are the “holy ones” of God, and they are to strive to live up to that name in the world (1 Pet. 1:15-16).

**“Christians”** – “...and the disciples were first called ‘Christians’ at Antioch” (Acts 11:26). The term “Christian” means different things to different people today; however, in the first century there was no question what it meant to belong to Jesus. Agrippa heard Paul preach and proclaimed, “you almost persuade me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28). Perhaps many modern definitions of the word “Christian” might need some revision in light of what the book of Acts teaches.

**“Those who are of ‘the Way’”** – “...so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2; cf. Acts

19:9). In the first century, Christianity was viewed as a lifestyle – a “way” of life. Early Christians suffered violent persecution for their faith (cf. Acts 8:1-4). This was no religion of convenience, but it is the only way by which an individual may have access to the Father (John 14:6).

What about us? What terms would we use to describe ourselves? Shouldn't we think more deeply about our identity in the Lord?

**--JB**