

For the

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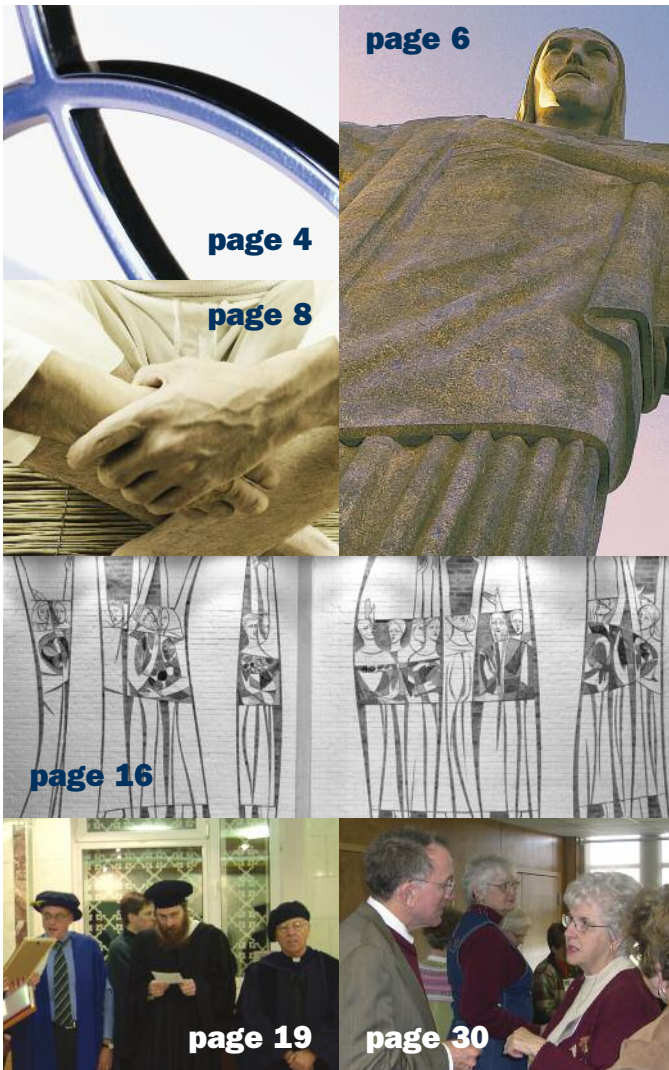
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In communion with Christ our identity is fundamentally altered. Here we are Christians—not because we merely act, speak, or think like Jesus—but because Christ Himself lives within us. At Christ’s altar our families and ethnicities are forgotten; our careers, economic status, as well as every other earthly association, must be left behind.

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Christ in a pagan world is not about the past. It is about a very real present. This is true because our culture is filled with cults, the occult, neo-paganism, Wicca, the New Age Movement, etc.

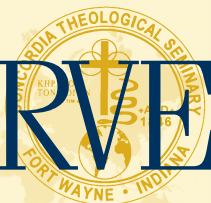
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By Dr. Naomichi Masaki, Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Supervisor of the Master of Sacred Theology (S.T.M.) Program at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

While the joy in the forgiveness of our sins remains firm because of the Lord’s gifts in baptism, the world into which we are placed each day is ever changing. As the “mainline” churches continue to decline in membership “spirituality,” the impulse to seek communion with the Divine is thriving.

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“... And in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians”

(Acts 11:26). If I were to ask you to stand up and introduce yourself, what would you say? First, you would most likely tell me your name; you might tell me about your family; some might speak about their ethnicity; others might refer to their education or careers. In other words, when we consider our identity, we immediately consider those things that shape our lives in this world. We think of parents, family, education, careers, and the like. We describe ourselves in terms of those things that shape our present existence in this world.

However, if we were to ask a member of the church at Antioch, “Who are you?” I suspect we would get a very different answer. Instead of referring to his personal name and family, rather than describing his ethnicity, career, or education, a member of the church at Antioch would likely answer before all else: “I am a Christian.” The truth of this statement is evident in the stories of the early martyrs. In the middle of the second century a severe persecution broke out against Christians in Lyons and Vienna.

The account of these martyrdoms tells of a certain deacon of the church named Sanctus. It tells us that no matter what question was put to him, Sanctus would simply respond with the words, “I am a Christian.” Thus, the ancient account records the interaction this way: “... but he (Sanctus) resisted them with such determination that he would not even tell them his own name, his race, or the city he was from, whether he was a slave or a freedman. To all their questions he answered in Latin: ‘I am a Christian!’” The record of his martyrdom goes on to say that “the pagan crowd heard not another word from him.”

For these early martyrs, their identities were not essentially determined by their families, birthplaces, ethnicities, careers, bank accounts, or anything else in this world. Rather, their identities were wholly shaped by their relationship to God; and it is this relationship to God that is represented in the simple confession: “I am a Christian.”

But what does such a confession actually mean? What does it mean that the disciples were, for the first time, called Christians at Antioch?

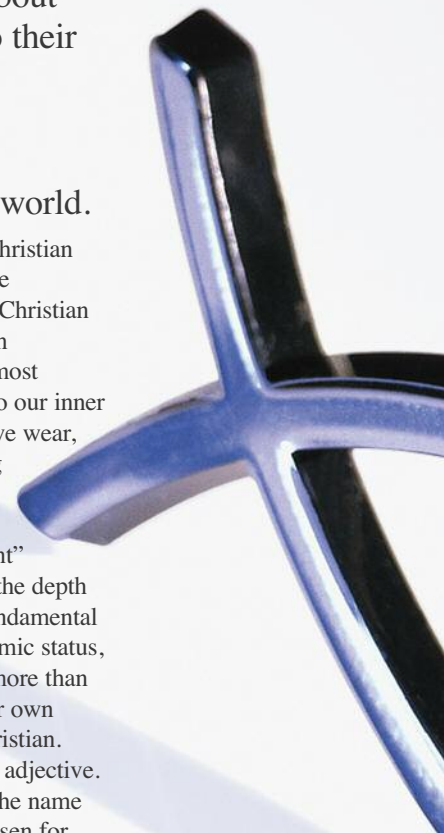
For us living in modern America, the name “Christian” is merely an adjective, that is, it is a word that describes merely one

aspect of our present existence. We go to a Christian church; we live by a Christian philosophy; we associate with Christian people; we promote Christian values. In other words, being a Christian is an important part of our lives (maybe even the most important part). However, it is not essential to our inner being. Christianity is like a winter coat that we wear, but only when the weather demands it. Being Christian merely affects our appearance in this world—our reputation, our religion, our words, thoughts, and deeds. Yet, as “important” as being Christian is for us, it rarely reaches the depth of our humanity. Being Christian is not as fundamental as our being human. Family, ethnicity, economic status, career—these things determine our identity more than the apostolic faith. Few of us would trade our own personal names for the common name of Christian.

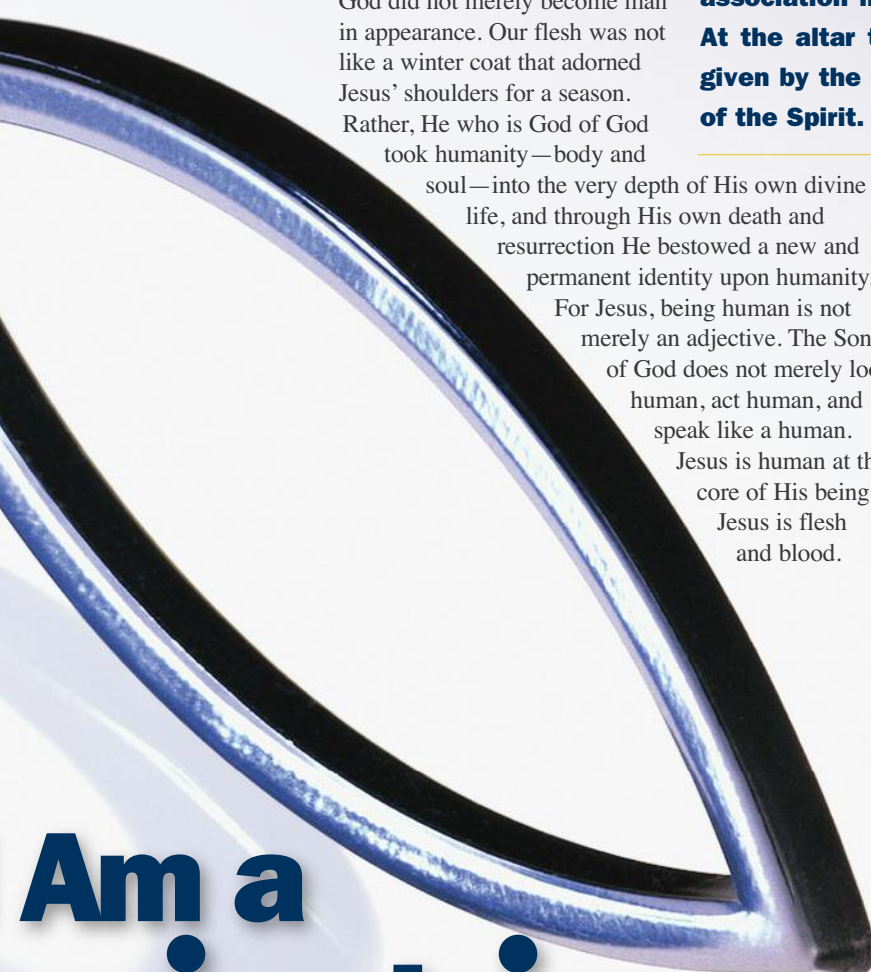
For us, the word “Christian” is merely an adjective. It describes one aspect of our earthly lives. The name Christian represents the religion we have chosen for ourselves. However, this is not at all true for the disciples of Antioch. For them, the name “Christian” is not an adjective but a noun. It not only describes one’s life; it is his life. Being a Christian is more fundamental than personal names, families, or ethnicities; it is more essential to their being than careers or economic status. Indeed, based upon the

testimony of the ancient martyrs, being Christian is more essential to their existence than eating, drinking, or breathing; it is more necessary than heart, soul, mind, or body. To be called Christians means that these disciples at Antioch found the whole of their identity in God. And this is true because God had first found His

For us, the word “Christian” is merely an adjective. It describes one aspect of our earthly lives. The name Christian represents the religion we have chosen for ourselves. However, this is not at all true for the disciples of Antioch. For them, the name Christian is not an adjective, but a noun. It not only describes one’s life; it is his life. Being a Christian is more fundamental than personal names, families, or ethnicities; it is more essential to their being than careers or economic status.



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identity in them. In Jesus Christ, God assumed our human nature into His own being. The Son of God did not merely become man in appearance. Our flesh was not like a winter coat that adorned Jesus’ shoulders for a season.

Rather, He who is God of God took humanity—body and soul—into the very depth of His own divine life, and through His own death and resurrection He bestowed a new and permanent identity upon humanity.

For Jesus, being human is not merely an adjective. The Son of God does not merely look human, act human, and speak like a human.

Jesus is human at the core of His being, Jesus is flesh and blood.

Yet, the Son of God abides in flesh and blood so that flesh and blood men like ourselves might abide in Him. By giving our human nature a home in the depth of His being, He gives us a share in His own divine and eternal identity. Here lies the mystery of Holy Baptism, the

Sacrament of the Altar, and the hearing of the Word. Christ’s own identity as the Son of the Father lives in us as we pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” When we partake of Christ, we become one with Him—flesh of His flesh, bone of His bones. In communion with Christ our identity is fundamentally altered. Here we are Christians—not because we merely act, speak, or think like Jesus—but because Christ Himself lives within us. At Christ’s altar our families and ethnicities are forgotten; our careers, economic status, as well as every other earthly association must be left behind. At the altar there is only Christ given by the Father in the power of the Spirit. He is given to be our identity, our breath, our food, drink, and sustenance now and forever. In communion with Christ, the confession of the martyrs becomes our confession. We are Christians. To Christ be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Professor James G. Bushur serves as an Assistant Professor of Historical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

1 Cf. Herbert Musurillo, trans., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 69.

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By Professor James G. Bushur