

THE VALUE IN A NAME

by Steve Morrison (info@BibleQuery.org)

Early Christians Bear the Name

1 Peter 4:16 “However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”

In the past, God spread the gospel through the courageous witness of the early followers of Jesus. Despite great opposition and temptation to blend in, the early church stood up, refusing to compromise. And in these days God speaks to the world through our faith, especially in the midst of trials. We can enjoy our heritage of how the world was transformed, but we should remember with honor the great challenges and opposition pre-Nicene believers endured. Jesus’ followers were not killed for merely believing Jesus was a good guy. Rather, while their bodies were battered, bruised, broken, and burned; their heads were unbowed to any other gods.

Pliny the Younger was a Roman governor who put early believers to death, and this is what he wrote about them to Emperor Trajan in 112 A.D. “They [Christians] were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to do any wicked deeds...”

They were ridiculed for their faith, such as by the 2nd century satirist Lucian: “The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day - the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account... You see, these misguided creatures...” (*Death of Peregrine* 11)

Those in the church were not only killed and ridiculed, but they were also seduced to compromise. Couldn’t you still follow Christ and

also turn back to the Law of Judaism? The Book of Galatians answers that a definitive “no”. Could we still call ourselves followers of Christ, but turn our backs on our Creator and believe in other gods too, as Gnostics taught? Satan’s lies could be tempting, not just from the standpoint of personal comfort, but the lure of many more people listening to your message, if you just mix the message with other religions. It would seem that you could bear burdens better if you consent to be yoked with unbelievers, but then whose burden would you be bearing?

But as great as all these challenges were, the faith of the early church was even greater. They recognized these dangers and stood fast against them. They knew whose they were, and why they were there.

Our Identity in Christ

We must pay more attention, therefore, to who we are, lest we sabotage our own witness. We were all sinners, no better or worse than other people, who hated or ignored God. We were all deserving of God’s wrath. But God in His mercy sent Jesus, His only begotten Son, to die on the cross for our sins. He did not escape the cross by “switching out” as many Muslims say; rather because of His great love for us, Jesus chose to “switch in” to take our load of guilt upon Himself, because it was too heavy for us to bear. We have died with Christ and we are raised with Christ. Our identity to ourselves has died, and now our identity is wrapped up in His life. When some accept Christ God lets them go to Heaven right away - as martyrs. Others of us stay here, because God has a job for us to do, not just to do witnessing, but for us to be His witness.

Who are we? The Bible says we are ambassadors, we are brothers, children, kings, and priests.

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However other people can be those things too. But distinctly and uniquely, we are called Christians.

Bearing the Name in Scripture

Acts 11:26b “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” Very early on, the followers of Christ were known as Christians.

Acts 26:27-29 ‘King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.’ Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?’ Paul replied, ‘Short time or long- I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.’” If you stand up for Christ, non-believers will see you are a Christian.

1 Peter 4:16-17 “However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.” (17) For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” Even if you suffer for bearing the name, Peter the apostle commanded us to praise God for bearing the name Christian. Some people may have objections to being called a Christian, and part 2 discusses those.

Despite persecution, and despite counterfeits, let us look to God’s word and have courage to bear the name we are commanded to praise God for – Christian.

Early Believers on Bearing the Name

Couldn’t we silently be Christians and hide the truth of what we are? But if we are to be a witness,

then of what would we be a witness? Here is what early writers who claimed to follow Christ said.

Ignatius, disciple of the Apostle John (100-116/7 A.D.) Ignatius asked the Ephesian believers to pray, “that I may be found in the lot of the Christians of Ephesus, who have always been of the same mind with the apostles through the power of Jesus Christ.” *Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians* ch.11 p.54.

Evarestus’ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c.169 A.D.) ch.10 p.41 “And when the proconsul yet again pressed him, and said, ‘Swear by the fortune of Caesar,’ he [bishop Polycarp] answered, ‘Since thou art vainly urgent that, as thou sayest, I should swear by the fortune of Caesar, and pretendest not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a day, and thou shalt hear them.’” Polycarp was also a disciple of the apostle John.

Tertullian (198-220 A.D.) “For he who confesses himself to be what he is, that is, a Christian, confesses that likewise by which he is it, that is, Christ. Therefore he who has denied that he is a Christian, has denied in Christ, by denying that Christ is in him, while He denies that he is in Christ, he will deny Christ too.” *Scorpiace* ch.9 p. 642

The anonymous *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* is even stronger. In book 5 ch.4 p.438 it says, “But he that denies himself to be a Christian, that he may not be hated of men, and so loves his own life more than he does the Lord, in whose hand his breath is, is wretched and miserable, as being detestable and abominable, who desires to be the friend of men, but is the enemy of God, having no longer his portion with the saints, but with those that are accursed; choosing instead of

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the kingdom of the blessed, that eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels: not being any longer hated by men, but rejected by God, and cast out from His presence.”

Are you of the same faith as the early Christians? Part 3 has many more quotations from the 41 pre-Nicene writers who used the word “Christian” of themselves.

It is not enough to believe, we must stand firm and persevere. Like the Christians addressed in the book of Hebrews, we should not lose heart but stand firm in the name of Christ.

More than being brave, let us be obedient and don't deny who we are.

Objections Answered

1 Peter 4:16 “However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”

So far I have showed from scripture that we should bear the name Christian. I have documented how early witnesses for Christ bore the name of Christian. Now I want to answer the objections some Christians have today to following 1 Peter 4:16.

Bearing the Name “Christian” in Scripture

Acts 11:26b says that the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. Acts 26:27-29 shows that Agrippa recognized that Paul was a Christian.

A C5 person told me that they were first called Christians in Antioch but it does not say that they

themselves used that name. Likewise Acts 26:27-29 shows an unbeliever, not a follower of Christ, calling Paul a Christian.

These verses introduce the name of Christian. There is no hint that it was not proper for followers of Christ to not call themselves Christians. This is an argument from silence by the C5 person; the verses do not imply that followers of Christ did not call themselves Christians, or that they should not do so. Most pointedly, Paul does not correct King Agrippa or deny that he is a Christian.

However, in 1 Peter 4:16 the apostle Peter tells us to praise God that we bear the name “Christian.” If we are commanded to praise God bearing that name, shouldn't we obey?

A C5 person said that this usage of the word “Christian” was given in the context of suffering. While it is true that the context of the verse is suffering, Peter's command is that we should rejoice in the label “Christian”, even in light of the suffering which may come from bearing the name.

They might listen better if you bear a different name

Besides calling ourselves Christians because scripture says we are to bear the name, a second reason is external unity, that we publicly identify with other Christians around the world and in different ages.

One objection is that if you are identified as a Christian, then Muslims will be less willing to listen to you about your beliefs. But if you call yourself a Muslim, then they will listen with open arms to what you say about Jesus. You can tell them that Muslim means submission, and a true Muslim is anyone who submits themselves to following God. Of course you have to do this in a

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way where the Muslim does not think you were lying earlier.

But, regardless of whether they call you a liar to your face or not, Muslims will see you as that, and tell others that Christians are liars. I wish I could tell you that nobody sharing Christ has ever done this; it is sad that I have learned otherwise.

They might listen more if you at least don't bear the name

Even if you do not try to tell Muslims you are Muslim too, at least don't tell them you are a Christian, but rather a follower of Jesus. It is true, in all senses, that you are a follower of Jesus.

Some today say they follow Christ but do not want to be known as Christians. But are “stealth Christians” a witness? If you deny you are a Christian, you are denying you are the same as the early Christians. While you don't have to say you are a Christian as the first thing out of your mouth, you must never deny that you are a Christian.

“Christians” have done some evil things

Some people calling themselves Christians have in fact done some very un-Christlike things.

This argument presumes that Muslims cannot understand there are true and false Christians. Idi Amin, Tamerlane, and others have butchered large numbers of people and called themselves Muslims. Do more peaceful Muslims think even for a moment that they should stop calling themselves Muslims because of what some did? The actions of evil, false Christians do not mean we should go against 1 Peter 4:16 and not praise God that we bear the name Christian.

But Middle East Christians don't need to follow western Christian traditions

Christians should all agree that it is not necessary for Christians in one culture to dress, speak, or live like Christians in another culture.

This is true, but this an objection can be just a smokescreen for rejecting doctrines of the Bible, including the deity of Christ and Jesus being the Son of God. If you are going to reject what the Bible teaches, at least be honest and say you are rejecting what the Bible has said, and do not be dishonest. If someone is really not a Christian, he should not represent to others that he is one.

But what if I don't believe what Christians believe?

Others don't want to be known as Christians because they do not see unity between themselves and Christians.

They might be right. Ephesians 4:3 says that we are to preserve the unity of the spirit. We are not to invent unity with any who would not follow.

If you do not believe the foundational doctrines that Jesus is God, and that Jesus is the Son of God, then you have a valid point; you should not call yourself a Christian. If you reject what is said in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, and the writings of Paul, Peter, and the other writers, you are not only not a Christian, but you are not following the same Jesus that Christians follow.

If the gospel you are sharing is not on the foundational Christian doctrine, your converts would be as close to Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Christian Scientists as to Christians.

But if you do not accept these foundational Christian doctrines, then you must agree that you cannot ethically or honestly solicit money to evangelize from Christian churches who hold to Christian foundational doctrines.

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Let us look to the faith of the early followers of Jesus

Jesus knew He was going to die, and He chose apostles to preserve His message after Him. Not only did he choose twelve, but He also had seventy disciples and others. God ensured that His message and the key doctrines were preserved in the community of faith. And besides the Bible, 35 pre-Nicene Christian writers wrote how Jesus was the Son of God. Some of these writers have many volumes preserved, and some only a page or two. 31 pre-Nicene writers wrote on the deity of Christ. You can read what they said on these at www.BibleQuery.org/History/ChurchHistory/WhatEarlyChristiansTaught.htm.

Above all, let us look to Jesus

Jesus could have skipped the crucifixion; all He had to do was either run away in the Garden of Gethsemane, or else deny that He was a king and the Messiah. Jesus went so far as to pray that the cup be passed from Him. We too will have temptations to take the easy way out.

We must pay more attention, therefore to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away, like the audience of the Book of Hebrews might have wanted to do. Today some Christians can be tempted to lose heart and turn back from bearing Christ's name, but like the early Christians of old, we must take courage and bear the name of Christ.

Praise God We Bear the Name

Imagine an ex-Muslim Christian killed after saying he was a Christian. Would you tell His family and friends that his suffering was for nothing, that he should never have had a Christian

witness, but should have been quiet that he was a Christian? Would you wish he had not told anyone he was a Christian?

1 Peter 4:16 “However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”

Despite Ridicule, Bear the Name

Theophilus of Antioch (168-181/188 A.D.) Even though he is mocked by being called a Christian, Theophilus has a whole chapter on what it means that they are called Christians. *Theophilus to Autolycus* book 1 ch.12 p.92

Irenaeus (182-188 A.D.) uses the word “Christian” 11 times. Here is one place: “Thus God and the Father are truly one and the same; He who was announced by the prophets, and handed down by the true Gospel; whom we Christians worship and love with the whole heart, as the Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things therein.” *Irenaeus Against Heresies* book 3 ch.10.5 p.426

Hippolytus (222-235/6 A.D.) “For we observe that our discourse has been serviceable not only for a refutation of heresies, but also in reference to those who entertain these opinions. Now these, when they encounter the extreme care evinced by us, will even be struck with admiration of our earnestness, and will not despise our industry and condemn Christians as fools when they discern the opinions to which they themselves have stupidly accorded their belief.” *Refutation of All Heresies* book 4 ch.45 p.42

Origen (225-254 A.D.) “since he frequently calls the Christian doctrine a secret system (of belief), we must confute him on this point also, since almost the entire world is better acquainted with

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what Christians preach than with the favourite opinions of philosophers. ... And yet the mystery of the resurrection, not being understood, is made a subject of ridicule among unbelievers.” *Origen Against Celsus* book 1 ch.7 p.399

Despite Suffering, Bear the Name

Justin Martyr (150 A.D.) “For we are accused of being Christians, and to hate what is *excellent* (Christian) is unjust. Again, if any of the accused deny the name, and say that he is not a Christian, you acquit him, as having no evidence against him as a wrong-doer; but if any one acknowledge that he is a Christian, you punish him on account of this acknowledgment.” *First Apology of Justin Martyr* ch.4 p.164. In some parts of the world, times have not changed much. But we should respond as early Christians did.

Evarestus’ Martyrdom of Polycarp (c.169 A.D.) ch.10 p.41 “And when the proconsul yet again pressed him, and said, ‘Swear by the fortune of Caesar,’ he [bishop Polycarp] answered, ‘Since thou art vainly urgent that, as thou sayest, I should swear by the fortune of Caesar, and pretendest not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a day, and thou shalt hear them.’”

The Octavius of Minucius Felix (210 A.D.) ch.37 p.196 “How beautiful is the spectacle to God when a Christian does battle with pain; when he is drawn up against threats, and punishments, and tortures; when, mocking the noise of death, he treads under foot the horror of the executioner; when he raises up his liberty against kings and princes, and yields to God alone, whose he is; when, triumphant and victorious, he tramples upon the very man who has pronounced sentence against him! For he has conquered who has

obtained that for which he contends.... And do you not perceive, O wretched men, that there is nobody who either is willing without reason to undergo punishment, or is able without God to bear tortures?”

Clement of Alexandria (193-217/220 A.D.)

“Accordingly they persecute us, not from the supposition that we are wrong-doers, but imagining that by the very fact of our being Christians we sin against life in so conducting ourselves, and exhorting others to adopt the like life.” *Stromata* book 4 ch.11 p.423

Firmilian of Caesarea to Cyprian (256 A.D.)

“So that from this also a severe persecution arose against us of the Christian name; and this after the long peace of the previous age arose suddenly, and with its unusual evils was made more terrible for the disturbance of our people.” *Letters of Cyprian*. Letter 74 ch.10 p.392

Despite Disunity, Bear the Name

Anonymous Treatise Against Novatian (254-256 A.D.) ch.8 p.659 “Then shall it be fulfilled that He says, ‘I also will deny them.’ But whom will the Lord Christ chiefly deny, if not all of you heretics, and schismatics, and strangers to His name? For ye who were some time Christians, but now are Novatians, no longer Christians, have changed your first faith by a subsequent perfidy in the calling of your name.”

Firmilian of Caesarea to Cyprian (256 A.D.)

“But if this unity which cannot be separated and divided at all, is itself also among heretics, why do we contend any more? Why do we call them heretics and not Christians? Moreover, since we and heretics have not one God, nor one Lord, nor one Church, nor one faith, nor even one Spirit, nor one body, it is manifest that neither can baptism be

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common to us with heretics, since between us there is nothing at all in common.” *Letters of Cyprian* letter 74 ch.26 p.397

Seventh Council of Carthage (258 A.D.) p.568
“Another Secundinus of Carpi said: Are heretics Christians or not? If they are Christians, why are they not in the Church of God?”

Despite Fake Christians, Bear the Name

Adamantius (c.300 A.D.) asks his debate opponent Megethius, “If now I should show that he [Paul] was not present [at the crucifixion], but even persecuted the members of the Church after this, would you become a Christian?” “Megethius: “But surely I *am* a Christian?” Adamantius: “How can you be a Christian when you did not condescend to bear the name of Christian? You do not call yourself a Christian, but a Marcionite.” *Dialogue on the True Faith* first part ch.8e p.46

Being in Christ is being a Christian

Tertullian (198-220 A.D.) “For he who confesses himself to be what he is, that is, a Christian, confesses that likewise by which he is it, that is, Christ. Therefore he who has denied that he is a Christian, has denied in Christ, by denying that Christ is in him, while He denies that he is in Christ, he will deny Christ too.” *Scorpiace* ch.9 p. 642

Ignatius, disciple of the Apostle John (100-116/7 A.D.) Ignatius asked the Ephesian believers to pray, “that I may be found in the lot of the Christians of Ephesus, who have always been of the same mind with the apostles through the power of Jesus Christ.” *Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians* ch.11 p.54. May we be found in the lot of the Christians too.

If you ever have to choose between avoid suffering and obeying God by bearing the name Christian I hope you choose to obey God.

Quote from all 41 pre-Nicene Christian writers at www.BibleQuery.org/History/ChurchHistory/WhatEarlyChristiansTaught.htm.

Suffering for Being a Christian

Imagine if you were a Christian back in the time of the early Church. People were not just killed, but cruelly tortured first, and through it all, they could have escaped if they had just denied they were Christians. It is estimated that about 50,000 Christians died for their faith prior to 325 A.D. Since we have so many examples in the lives of God’s people who have gone before us, let us not lose heart, but rather persevere.

How Important is it to be a Christian?

Cyprian of Carthage (246-258 A.D.) “We must endure and persevere, beloved brethren, in order that, being admitted to the hope of truth and liberty, we may attain to the truth and liberty itself; for that very fact that we are Christians is the substance of faith and hope.” *Treatises of Cyprian*. Treatise 9 ch.13 p.487

Christians of Vienna and Lugdunum (177 A.D.) vol.8 p.779 “He was also eager to serve his neighbour in any way, he was very zealous for God, and he was fervent in spirit. Such being the character of the man, he could not bear that judgment should be thus unreasonably passed against us, but was moved with indignation, and requested that he himself should be heard in defence of his brethren, undertaking to prove that

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there is nothing ungodly or impious amongst us. On this, those who were round the judgment-seat cried out against him, for he was a man of distinction; and the governor, not for a moment listening to the just request thus made to him, merely asked him if he himself were a Christian. And on his confessing in the clearest voice that he was, he also was taken up into the number of the Witnesses, receiving the appellation of the Advocate of the Christians,”

Christians of Vienna and Lugdunum (177 A.D.)
“vol.8 p.781 For while those who confessed what they really were, were imprisoned simply as Christians, no other accusation being brought against them, those who denied were detained as murderers and profligates.”

Christians of Vienna and Lugdunum (177 A.D.)
vol.8 p.782 “Attalus also was vehemently demanded by the mob; for he was a man of mark, He entered the lists a ready combatant on account of his good conscience, since he had been truly practised in the Christian discipline, and had always been a Witness of the truth among us. He was led round the amphitheatre, a tablet going before him, on which was written in Latin, ‘This is Attalus the Christian;’ and the people swelled with indignation against him.”

Christians of Vienna and Lugdunum (177 A.D.)
vol.8 p.782-783 “Present at the examination of these was one Alexander, a native of Phrygia, a physician by profession. He had lived for many years in Gaul, and had become well known to all for his love to God and his boldness in proclaiming the truth, for he was not without a share of apostolic grace. He stood near the judgment-seat, and, urging by signs those who had denied to confess, he looked to those who stood round the judgment-seat like one in travail. But the mobs, enraged that those who had formerly

denied should now confess, cried out against Alexander as if he were the cause of this change. Then the governor summoned him before him, and inquired of him who he was; and when Alexander said he was a Christian, the governor burst into a passion, and condemned him to the wild beasts. And on the next day he entered the amphitheatre along with Attalus; for the governor, wishing to gratify the mob, again exposed Attalus to the wild beasts. These two, after being tortured in the amphitheatre with all the instruments devised for that purpose, and having undergone an exceedingly severe contest, at last were themselves sacrificed. Alexander uttered no groan or murmur of any kind, but conversed in his heart with God; but Attalus, when he was placed on the iron chair, and all the pans of his body were burning, and when the fumes from his body were borne aloft, said to the multitude in Latin, ‘Lo! this which ye do is eating men. But as for us, we neither eat men nor practise any other wickedness.’”

Passion of the Scillitan Martyrs (c.180-202 A.D.) p.286 “Saturninus said: I will not lend mine ears to thee, when thou beginnest to speak evil things of our sacred rites; but rather swear thou by the genius of our lord the Emperor. Speratus said: The empire of this world I know not; but rather I serve that God, *whom no man hath seen, nor with these eyes can see*. I have committed no theft; but if I have bought anything I pay the tax; because I know my Lord, the King of kings and Emperor of all nations. Saturninus the proconsul said to the rest: Cease to be of this persuasion. Speratus said: It is an ill persuasion to do murder, to speak false witness. Saturninus the proconsul said: Be not partakers of this folly. Cittinus said: We have none other to fear, save only our Lord God, who is in heaven. Donata said: Honour to Caesar as Caesar: but fear to God. Vestia said: I am a Christian. Secunda said: What I am, that I wish to be.

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Saturninus the proconsul said to Speratus: Dost thou persist in being a Christian? Speratus said: I am a Christian. And with him they all agreed. Saturninus the proconsul said: Will ye have a space to consider? Speratus said: In a matter so straightforward there is no considering. Saturninus the proconsul said: What are the things in your chest? Speratus said: Books and epistles of Paul, a just man. Saturninus the proconsul said: Have a delay of thirty days and bethink yourselves. Speratus said a second time: I am a Christian. And with him they all agreed. Saturninus the proconsul read out the decree from the tablet: Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda and the rest having confessed that they live according to the Christian rite, since after opportunity offered them of returning to the custom of the Romans they have obstinately persisted, it is determined that they be put to the sword. Speratus said: We give thanks to God. Nartzalus said: Today we are martyrs in heaven; thanks be to God. Saturninus the proconsul ordered it to be declared by the herald: Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Januaria, Generosa, Vestia, Donata and Secunda, I have ordered to be executed. They all said: Thanks be to God. And so they all together were crowned with martyrdom; and they reign with the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, for ever and ever. Amen.”

Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas (c.201/205

A.D.) vol.3 ch.2.2 p.701 “Then they came to me, and my father immediately appeared with my boy, and withdrew me from the step, and said in a supplicating tone, ‘Have pity on your babe.’ And Hilarianus the procurator, who had just received the power of life and death in the place of the proconsul Minucius Timinianus, who was deceased, said, ‘Spare the grey hairs of your father, spare the infancy of your boy, offer sacrifice for the well-being of the emperors.’ And I

replied, ‘I will not do so.’ Hilarianus said, ‘Are you a Christian?’ And I replied, ‘I am a Christian.’ And as my father stood there to cast me down *from the faith*, he was ordered by Hilarianus to be thrown down, and was beaten with rods. And my father's misfortune grieved me as if I myself had been beaten, I so grieved for his wretched old age. The procurator then delivers judgment on all of us, and condemns us to the wild beasts, and we went down cheerfully to the dungeon.”

Practical Matters

So does this mean the first thing you should do in a Christian-hostile environment is announce you are a Christian? No, that is not necessary. Early Christians were often quiet about their faith, sharing privately during times of persecution. However, they drew the line at denying they were Christian. So you can tell people you are a Christian using tact, but do not throw away the name Christian.

You can see a chart on which early Christians taught which doctrines on the church at www.BibleQuery.org/History/ChurchHistory/WhatEarlyChristiansTaughtOnChurch.htm.

All Bible verse quotations are from the NIV.
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