

Ask the Rabbi

Submitted Question #7 from a Taiwanese Christian:

I've listened to your recent message 'Participating in the wider Jewish Community' on Ohev Yisrael's website; just a portion of it; I'll finish it later. The topic somewhat matches what I'm now reading about Dan Juster's 'Inclusion versus Replacement'. I'm a little confused by so many 'groups' and some terms. I'm also getting confused with the term 'Christian'. Before I learned anything about Israel and Jewish people, I simply thought that whoever accepts Jesus as their own Savior would be called 'Christian', including Jews. Then I became aware that 'Messianic Jews refer to Jews who receive Jesus as 'Messiah', a follower of Yeshua. At first I thought that's just how Jewish believers refer to themselves, until I found that in the Complete Jewish Bible, in Acts 11:26, it says: 'It was in Antioch that the *talmidim* for the first time were called "Messianic". I was surprised because in my old Bible (NIV), written in English and Chinese, it says 'Christian', and the same translation in Chinese. That's how we know where the term 'Christian' comes from. But now I find that the followers of Yeshua were actually first called 'Messianic' – not 'Christian'. What is the difference between the two of them? In Dr. Juster's book, he says that Messianic Jews don't want to be called Christians. Why? And where actually does the term 'Christian' come from? It seems that it never appears in the Complete Jewish Bible.

The Rabbi's Response:

Please understand that the word "Christian" is an English word that does not appear in Acts 11:26. The Greek word there is Χριστιανούς, which means "follower of Messiah." The word "Messiah" is translated as "Christ" in most English language New Testaments, and that is why Χριστιανούς in Acts 11:26, is most often translated "Christian" (i.e. follower of Christ). If you look at the footnote at Matthew 1 of your NIV Bible, you will notice that "Messiah" is given as the equivalent of "Christ." It is a language issue because the word "Messiah" is also an English word, and does not appear in Scripture either.

Now for the second part of your question: "Why don't Messianic Jews want to be called Christian?" It is because the popular understanding of the word "Christian" is not only "follower of Christ," but also "not Jewish." The false assumption that one who follows Yeshua cannot be Jewish comes from centuries of the Rabbinical Jewish community's rejection of Yeshua, and the persecution of Jews by those calling themselves "Christians." Remember that Messianic Judaism, as a defined religious movement, had all but disappeared between the first and late 19th centuries. Most Jews today are therefore taught from childhood: "You are either a Jew or a Christian; you cannot be both and, if you start believing in Jesus, you stop being a Jew." That is, of course, theologically wrong, but it causes great sensitivity about the words "Christian" and "Christ" within the English-speaking Messianic Jewish world.

There is one other connotation of "Christian," and that is cultural as distinguished from theological. Christians typically keep Sunday, Christmas, and Easter as Holy days, whereas Messianic Jews do not. Messianic Jews keep the seventh day Sabbath, and all of the commanded appointed times mentioned in Leviticus 23, whereas a majority of Christians do not. That being said, I readily use the terms "Christian" and "Christ" when I need to better communicate in non-Jewish environments.