

## 1. JESUS NEVER FOUNDED A RELIGION

So many traditions have been built up around the person of Jesus Christ that it's a challenge to separate fact from fiction. The eyewitness accounts about Jesus document a very different person than those portrayed by the various institutions and cultures of traditional Christianity. It is not a small problem. The manipulation of information simply about Christ himself is so pervasive that an entire chapter has been included to deal with the topic. (See Chapter 2, *Jesus Never Resembled the "Christs" of Christianity*.)

One of the most disturbing traditions about Christ has him cast in the role of a religious founder, thereby making him resemble all those men who were influential in the beginnings of the world's religions. Trying to place him in this category, however, is like trying to make the sun into one of the planets. Jesus Christ is utterly unique. Not only is he different than any founder of a religion, but his teachings can by no means be considered the framework of a religion.

### **The uniqueness of Christ**

Jesus stands out in many ways. His prehistory is unique: His life was prophesied hundreds of years in advance. He was awaited by people who knew what to expect and whom to expect. His birth, death, and resurrection were unique: They are not embedded in the stuff of legend, but of history. They were accompanied by events rooted in time and space, and were documented at a time when hundreds and even thousands were still alive and had witnessed these events. His claims were unique: He not only called God his Father, but made so many other seemingly outrageous claims that the Jewish leaders labeled him a blasphemer and evil. His purpose was unique: He came to be a once-and-for-all sacrifice for man's sin.

Any one of these observations about Jesus would make him unique. All together they make it impossible to associate him in any way with the founders of any of the world's religions. In fact, one of the most unique things about Christ is his utter lack of religiosity. He was, quite simply, one of the nonreligious people of history. For those who understood him, his life and words meant nothing less than the end of religion for all time.

### **The characteristics of a religion**

Religions are normally considered to be systems of belief in a supreme being. In this sense a religion is more than simply the belief in a god or gods. It also includes certain elements of institutionalization including the standardization of practices, the establishment of hierarchical structures of leadership, and their registration as a legal entity. Thus, a religion is something a person can join, participate in, and identify with institutionally. Considered from this standpoint, Christianity is obviously a religion. Though it does not have a unified institutional framework, Christianity nevertheless has come to encompass a network of many institutions—all of which have histories that include their establishment, their standardization, and their legal status. This, however, is not what Jesus intended with his message.

If Jesus had wanted to found a religion, then he grew up in the perfect culture for it. The Jewish scriptures begin the contextual framework for the life of Christ, and they promote the kind of institutionalization typical of other religions such as prescribed sacrifices, altars, temples, prophets, a code of behavior, priests, sacred objects, holy days and feasts.

Now, when we turn to the Christian scriptures which record the life of Christ, his teachings, and the messages of his first students, do they do the same? Do they promote an institutionalized Christian religion? Do they demonstrate the same characteristics as Judaism and other religions?

At first glance it might seem so. The Christian scriptures report that Jesus Christ began his life as a child of Jewish parents. They further report that he recognized and accepted the Law of the Jews, and he considered himself to be uniquely the son of the Jewish God. Everything about him up to and including his baptism by John, the prominent prophet of the Jews, was thoroughly Jewish. But then came an abrupt change.

### **Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God was the end of religion**

From the time Jesus began to spread his own message about the Kingdom of God, he seldom missed an opportunity to pull the rug out from under the religion of the Jews. The Jewish leaders were very aware of what he was doing. Very quickly the leading Jews saw him as a threat to their religion, called him a blasphemer, and plotted to get rid of him.

Though Jesus' most direct attacks were actually against the hypocrisy of the pseudo Jewish leaders, he also made it clear to them that his own words and authority were much greater than those of Moses or the prophets. In doing this, his aim was not to usurp or dismantle the Jewish scriptures. Instead, his claim was that he was *fulfilling*

the most stringent demands of the Law of Moses and *surpassing* them with a much greater message and a much greater law.

The result is that after the death and resurrection of Christ, a completely new relationship to God was made possible. No longer were intermediaries or sacrifices or altars or works of the Law of Moses necessary. Jesus mediated his own message; Jesus made himself the sacrifice; Jesus initiated his own law—the law of love. Jesus, who claimed to be one with God the Father, also claimed to become one with those who accepted him into their lives. It is no wonder that he appeared to turn the religious world of the Jews—and all other peoples—upside down.

Almost everything was surprising about Christ. Though a man, he claimed to be the Son of God. But unlike what one might expect of a “Son of God on Earth”—a concept not at all strange to the Greeks at the time—he allowed no one to bring sacrifices to him. Instead, he became a sacrifice himself. In other words, he came not to be placated, but to do the placating himself. Such a thought was utterly unknown in any culture. Even his closest students had difficulty grasping this intent of Christ. They wanted to hear nothing of his purpose to die for them.

Christ’s message and example were unprecedented and circumvented the religions of his day. His own death for humanity meant that all other sacrifices became unnecessary. He himself was the Lamb of God. No longer was there any need for altars or temples; the only remaining temples were the bodies of each individual believer. No longer was there any need for priests as mediators; each believer in Christ became a priest. No longer were the people of God a genetically, historically, or institutionally defined population; instead they were the members of Christ’s own family, born into it not by any natural process but through their faith. No longer did the worship of God require rituals or celebrations of holy days; instead worship became the giving of oneself as a living sacrifice and the transforming of one’s mind to know and do the will of God.

### **The Christian scriptures are remarkably void of the characteristics of a religion**

Jesus and his students erected none of the typical signposts of a religion: There are no records of Christ leading a ritual, establishing worship services of any kind, planning a ceremony, or instructing his men to standardize any sort of special meetings. Peter and Paul are also not recorded to have had an interest in passing on any sort of religious practices, ceremonies, or the observance of special days. There are also no records that they ever considered any structure or place to have had any special significance even though all the places of Christ’s miracles, birth, death, and resurrection were known to them. Though it was done in later centuries, Jesus’ students never built a monument or a sanctuary to commemorate any of the events in the life of Christ.

When one considers that the world in which Christ lived was saturated with religious formality and populated by deeply religious peoples—the Jews, the Greeks, the Romans, and many others—then it becomes strikingly apparent that Jesus Christ distanced himself from all religious approaches to honoring God. Instead, in the place of the artifacts and rituals of religion, Jesus placed at the very center of his teaching the *words* that he was saying and the *response he expected from his students to those words*.

He considered his own words to be spirit and life. He identified God as the source of those words and called Him his Father. Jesus said that he always did what the Father said and that this is what pleased the Father. The center of everything Christ represented was the *relationship he had with his Father and his willingness to hear and do what his Father said*. It was a relationship of complete trust and obedience. This is what he passed on to his students. Above all, he wanted them to listen to the words he spoke, to take them seriously, and to follow them with faith and courage.

This was what was completely new and unique about Christ. He and God the Father were in the most intimate of relationships. There was nothing otherworldly or distant about the way Christ related to his Father. This was unknown to religions. Religions always seek to placate a god, a goddess, or many gods. They do this through sacrifices, sanctuaries, cleansings, ceremonies, celebrations, rituals, and mediators. The institutions of Christianity, in their many forms, continue to maintain these elements of religion.

### **Jesus' life and message demonstrate the opposite of religious practice**

The message of the Christian scriptures is that God has satisfied His own demand for righteousness through His Son and that He has done it once and for all. Christ taught that people cannot garner God's acceptance by practicing any religion. The Jews were told they couldn't even do it by following the Law of Moses which God gave to them Himself. Instead, God sent His own Son to satisfy the requirements of the Law. Thus, the issues for an individual hearing the message of Christ are not religious ones but personal ones: Should I accept the Son of God as my Savior and Lord? Should I become his student and do what he says? Religion becomes completely irrelevant in view of the message of Christ.

Jesus' life and his words cannot be contained in a religion. He did away with all middle men; he desires no places of worship or services of worship; he demands no formalities; prayer for him is best done in the privacy of one's own home; he desires no religious practitioners; he is pleased when a man or woman take his words seriously like students. He offers nothing less than a personal and intimate relationship with himself. He came to be a once-and-for-all sacrifice for man's sin; he offered a free gift of eternal life; he made every believer into a priest; he made every believer into a

temple; he proclaimed a law of love; he called his words spirit and life; his followers were not authorities but servants. And all of this he called the Kingdom of God. He promised to be present with believers until the end of the age, and he promised to come again to complete all of God's purposes.

### **To be related to Christ is to be in his family**

The result of the revelation of God in Christ is not religion but family. Jesus' only holy-of-holies is the family and the home. The important relationships in the teachings of Christ are not formal titles, but *father, son, brother, sister, husband, wife, and children*. The essence of Christ's ecclesia, the Greek word usually translated *church*, was never explained in institutional terms but in the dynamic terms of family and even of Christ's own body. His invitation to people was to accept him into their lives and to share both his life and his rejection. Few ever take him up on this offer, but to those who do he gives the right to become children of God. (See chapter 3, *Jesus Never Taught that the Church Was an Institution*, for a more detailed discussion of the ecclesia of Christ.)

### **To be a follower of Christ is to be his student**

The highest expression of living with Christ is not formal worship but serious study. No one ever knew the life of Christ better than his students. Christ lived with his students, expected them to learn his words, and expected them to go and make students of others. Nothing is more basic to the life of Christ than this process. It is this life with his students that is so richly documented in the writings of the Christian scriptures, whereas in the same scriptures there is no mention of Jesus or his students ever instituting any kind of worship services.

Jesus has no need for religious rites; he has no need to be placated; he has no need to maintain distance; he has no need for anyone to approach him with religious formality; he has no need for religious deference of any kind. Jesus Christ desires the hearts and minds of serious and courageous students who will follow him just as his first students did and just as their students after them did.

Not only is the information in the Christian scriptures not indicative of any religion, but they teach that religious practices snuff out the life of a person's relationship to God. This is what Paul meant when he warned the Galatians in the strongest of words not to try to mix the Law of Moses with the message of Christ. He also told the Colossians to not let anyone judge them based on food or festivals or new moons or Sabbath days. It's when a person's relationship to Christ becomes institutionalized into a religion that people lose sight of Christ who lived so unceremoniously and so personally with his students in the first century.

The message of Christ and the example of Christ both testify that God desires to live with people on a personal and not an institutional basis. The real test of this relationship is whether a follower is willing to take the words of God's Son seriously. God the Father has a vested interest in how people relate to His Son. This is the essence of what *personal* means. The relationship He most desires with men and women is that they take his words seriously, learn them, trust them, and follow them. People who do that are endeared to the Father.

It's in observing Christ with his students that we see the kind of relationship that he set about to create for himself with them. He set the example of what a meaningful life is and we can't improve on it.

Though 'being a student' may sound too dry or academic to be considered the focus of what God most desires from his children, of all human activities study is by far the most effective process for drawing near to something or someone. Only a person who is willing to study and learn can draw close to the essence of a matter; only people willing to study and learn can intimately learn to understand something completely; only through study and learning can a person become completely familiar with a subject or a person. Anyone who wants to be up close and personal with Jesus Christ is well-advised to become an alert and serious student of his words.

### **Jesus taught none of the tenets of religion**

Not only did Jesus not found a religion, he made all religion unnecessary. He did not begin Christianity; instead, men did that who used his name for their teachings. He led no worship service; obedience to his words was the only way to honor him. He built no sanctuary; the presence of God in a person's life was his only temple.

He established no holy days; every day was important to him and could be a person's last day. He wore no special clothes; external things were not important to him. He carried no special symbols; his words were what made him different. He wanted no sacrifices of things or animals; the giving of one's self was his desire.

He rejected all religious showmanship; he cared only about what God thought. He founded no institution; his ecclesia was his family and part of his own body. He founded no country and commanded no armies; his Kingdom of God was not of this world. He had no desire to become an object of veneration; his favorite roles were those of friend, teacher, and Lord.

Jesus' words and teachings are very different from those of the founders of religions. He did not claim to be a receptacle or a revealer of the will of God. Instead, he claimed to be God. He told the Jews that *before Abraham was, I am*. It was a clear reference to deity. The Jews understood it as such and wanted to kill him for his blasphemy. He

claimed to be the Son of God and called God his Father. Again the Jews wanted to kill him for his insolence. *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father*, he said. Time and time again he claimed to be one with God, to be the Messiah whom God would send into the world, to be the one bringing salvation to the world.

He made no attempt to institutionalize his message. He sought no governmental approval; he kept all authority for himself; he expected his followers to be the servants of one another; he saw his followers belonging to the Kingdom of God with its own birthrights and its own ecclesia. It was to be as intimate to him as his own body. It was to be his own family. He and he alone was to be the head of it.

Nor were the men who knew him the best—the students he later called his apostles—sent to institute the world’s newest religion. They were sent to be his eyewitnesses and to make students of others just as he had made students of them. They did not build buildings or organize armies or set up hierarchies or begin living as religious people in any way. Their writings give no evidence of religious practices. During their lives they were persecuted and rejected by the great majority who heard them, in the same way that Jesus had been rejected by most of the people who knew of him.

### **Jesus did not found Christianity**

Christianity is a huge caricature of the message of Christ, and as such, it is very similar to the caricature of the Law of Moses known as Judaism that confronted Jesus when he walked among the people of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. It was a shock for the Jews to hear Jesus state publically that the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Rabbis, the scribes, and all those who followed their lead were by no means the children of Abraham. To make sure he wasn’t misunderstood, he used hard and direct words to make clear to them exactly who their father was.

This enraged the Jewish leaders. They thought of themselves as the followers of Moses and as God’s chosen people who were governed by His law. They could point to many ways that they were examples of piety and sacrifice. Among the leaders of the Jews were men who were great soldiers, thinkers, writers, and patriots of Judea. The city of Jerusalem and its temple grounds were famous in the world. Every year hundreds of thousands of Jews from many countries came to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. In view of all this, it was preposterous to them that they could possibly be dismissed as being on the wrong track, much less belong to the enemy of God. They were surrounded by too much evidence to the contrary.

Jesus, however, had no illusions about the religious culture in which he lived. Like John the Baptizer before him, he characterized what was going on with that generation in extremely critical ways. As far as Christ was concerned, the Jews had constructed

Judaism to their own liking and in doing so gave only lip service to the words of God in the scriptures.

### **Christianity is tied to traditions**

Christianity includes many practices and beliefs that cannot be traced back to anything Christ ever taught or exemplified. From the monumental pomp and circumstance of the Vatican to the hand-waving rhythm-laced concerts of American charismatics, they all ply their religion in the name of Christ in spite of the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, the humble man from Nazareth, was never one to behave like a scarlet-clad Cardinal or a swinging worship leader. Putting his name on such behavior is like calling a joke a prayer.

There always have been and still are many imposters of Jesus. The name of Christ has been used by countless groups in order to lend credence to their own traditions. Whether out of mean intention or sincere but blind naivety, the practice has created a deceptive picture in which the words and life of Jesus Christ are equated with the many-caricatured faces of Christianity. The genuine Jesus lived in the first century and taught a group of Galilean students whom he later sent into the world to give eyewitness accounts of his life and teachings. These accounts are the only reliable information we have about the historical Jesus Christ.

It's an old trick to set up a straw man and put words in his mouth. Jesus was faced with the same problem on a monumental scale in the first century. The leaders of the Jews were the perpetrators. They presented themselves as the children of Abraham, and they surrounded themselves with all things Jewish: Jerusalem, Judea, the temple, their history, their leaders, their altars, their Law. Nevertheless, Jesus didn't accept their characterization of themselves. He said their father wasn't Abraham; he told them their true father was the embodiment of evil himself. It was a de-masking that enraged the Jews.

It is very similar today with Christianity. It is so huge that its sheer inertia alone can cause anyone who dismisses it as bogus to appear ludicrous. Christians, too, surround themselves with many supposedly Christian things: Cathedrals, churches, denominations, art works, music, missions, famous leaders, and long, influential histories. It's unthinkable for most adherents of any one of the many variations of Christianity that their church could possibly exclude Christ. There's a multitude of reasons, however, why Jesus would be just as unwelcome in the many halls of Christianity today as he was in the influential circles of Jewish Jerusalem.

How did the Jewish misrepresentation happen? How could the leaders and the crowds of the Jews venture so far from the words of the scriptures to literally become anti-Jews? Jesus said it happened because the people were following instructions that had

nothing to do with the scriptures. He called this information the traditions of their elders. In his opinion traditions that supplement and modify the scriptures have a destructive impact. Paul, one of these Jewish leaders who had gone so far astray and later found his way to Christ, called such information a curse. Jesus called it the product of the evil hearts of men.

People have difficulty rejecting traditions because they are often prestigious, time-honored, and have the feel of familiarity. Both Christ and Paul, however, saw them as dangerous because they replace the scriptures and deceive many. Jesus always confronted the people who preferred traditions to the scriptures.

### **The history of Christianity does not reflect the life of Christ**

It is generally assumed that Jesus founded the religion of Christianity. It seems as logical and matter-of-fact as the air we breathe. As with many universal assumptions, however, a few moments of reflection reveals many cracks in it. The most obvious is the huge diversity among the many churches and groups that make up Christianity. They represent so many different beliefs and practices—some hostile to one another—that it's impossible to relegate them to the teachings of a single founder.

Another problem involves Christianity's track record. Any standard history of Christianity confronts a reader with wave after wave of bizarre religious behavior that has nothing to do with the teachings or examples of Christ. Almost any text will suffice, because the history of Christianity is well-documented. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* by John McManners is an example of a well-written volume that surveys the impact of two thousand years of Christianity. In it he calmly records atrocities, forced conversions, inter-church wars, religious-political intrigues, oppression, greed, pride, hypocrisies, waste, pomposity, and gross materialism. All of this is recorded with such matter-of-factness that a reader can easily be duped into thinking it is normal or acceptable.

The history of Christ would never have been known had it not been for the writings of his own students. Jewish writers ignored him even though he was their most remarkable son. Greek and Roman writers ignored him as well.

The history of Christianity that is typically taught in textbooks focuses on the prominent spokesmen and the influential events of institutional Christianity. It typically calls the well-known churchmen of the second through the fourth centuries the "church fathers" and essentially begins the juggernaut of church history with the advent of the Roman Caesar Constantine and the establishment of Rome as the center of the church world. In this traditional history it was the church councils of the fourth through the seventh centuries which assumed authority and established the institutional underpinnings of what history calls Christianity.

Thus, church history becomes the history of Rome and Constantinople, of monasticism and the papal wars, of the founding of Christian nations through war and conquest, of the crusades, of the Inquisition and the Conquistadors in the Americas, of the Reformation and the Counter-reformation, and of the missionary movement and the founding of denominations and prosperous sects in the later centuries.

All of this is understood by most people to be the history of what Jesus Christ set into motion. His influence is seen taking shape in Christianity. It is, however, the history of institutional Christianity and is most certainly *not* the history of the genuine followers of Christ. It is impossible to imagine them or Jesus Christ having anything to do with the great themes of a typical history of Christianity.

What would Jesus care about the early battles of bishops for supremacy? The influential books written to commentate the scriptures? The inquisitors rooting out heresy? The monks living in isolation? The crusaders sent to win back Palestine? The reformers establishing authoritarian state churches? The building of huge cathedrals? The mass conversions of whole nations?

All of that has little to do with the history of those who take seriously the words and examples of Christ. In much the same way, the many writings of the Jewish elders in the first century and in previous centuries had little to do with the faith of Abraham or the Law of Moses. Christ exposed their writings as fraudulent. The same is true of what is typically written about the history of Christianity. It is erroneous if a reader thinks it is the story of Jesus Christ's working in the world. It is actually a history of what man's traditions have made of the message of Christ.

It needs to be expressed clearly that the historical label *Christianity* is not a description of the people who follow the teachings, intentions, or examples of Jesus Christ. Christianity includes so many hundreds if not thousands of wide-reaching beliefs and traditions that it has a range of meaning that renders it useless. The end result is that no one can possibly know what any particular person understands when hearing the word *Christianity*.

Jesus obviously did not create such a religious conglomeration; nor did he model anything remotely analogous to Christianity; nor did he teach anything compatible with Christianity. The word *Christianity* is a term people simply apply to any or all segments of institutional religions that in some way or another identify themselves with so-called *Judeo-Christian* values or beginnings. As such, Christianity is a historical misnomer. It does exist as a collection of somewhat similar religions, but all of its parts have only a superficial relatedness to the actual life and words of Jesus Christ.

It's only the first-century scriptures that testify to the words of Christ and his students, and only they can be trusted to present reliable content of the teachings of Jesus and provide a true touchstone to the life of Christ and the life of his first followers. If these writings—and these writings alone—are used as the litmus test of the influence of Jesus Christ in the world, then any history of his followers should be the story of those who exhibit the same attitudes and behaviors that were typical of Jesus Christ and his first followers.

Thus, though it is difficult to do, one must always remember that the history of Christianity is *not* the same as the history of those who have followed the first-century Christ. These are two different stories. Christianity is one thing, people who follow Christ is quite another. This does not rule out overlap, but we have enough source documents, in particular the writings of the first students of Christ, to identify with precision the content of the message of Christ and the characteristics one would expect of those who take this message seriously. These are the ones who are his followers. They are unusual in many ways and should not be confused with the people traditionally called Christians who adhere to any of the one hundred and seventy-six institutional churches that according to the *2009 World Almanac and Book of Facts* make up Christianity in the United States of America alone.

### **The followers of Christ are not a mighty or privileged crowd**

The Christian scriptures are documents that cover many aspects of Christ, his message, and those whom he taught. With these followers begins the history of Christ and the influence of his followers in the world. All who desire to document the lives of those like them, should take Christ and his first students as the examples of what they are looking for in the evidence of history. In other words, their tracking hounds should sniff first at the feet of the first-century master and his students and only then be sent to locate the trails of those who in later centuries shared the aroma of the lives of these men.

Where will the followers of Christ be found? First of all, we know they will not be many. They will not be found traveling the broad highway of Christianity or populating the mighty bastions of Christendom. Christ was clear about the remnant nature of those who would be willing to follow him. Secondly, we know that they will not be treated well. Jesus was also clear about this. None of his followers would be greater than their teacher. His rejection would also be theirs. The followers of Christ are quite simply much like Christ. They share both his attitude and his treatment. They will be found among the insignificant; they will be counted among the critics of hypocritical religion; they are despised by those who desire prestige, possessions, and pleasure; they are easily overlooked and ignored because they seek no recognition whatsoever from man. Their one desire is to please God and they will be quite content to do it with His knowledge alone.

Jesus was like this and so were the men he called his apostles. Their characteristics will also be the characteristics of those who follow Christ. Since Christianity with all of its external religiosity is little more than a caricature of Jesus teachings, any history of Christianity has to be a history of caricatures.

Only on the periphery of the history of Christianity will readers be able to catch site of the followers of Christ. They are not people who are interested in Rome or Constantinople or even Jerusalem; they have no interest in the power plays of prominent bishops; they have nothing to do with the injunctions of imperial houses; they have no need to have their views and beliefs forced onto the masses; they have no interest in temples, altars, monuments, pilgrimages, relics, or ceremonies; they pay no attention to the pronouncements of councils or the decisions of Christian institutions.

In short, the followers of Christ in any age are people who have little fame and who desire none. They are content to identify themselves with Christ alone. They are concerned only about pleasing him. Their chief interest is to know and follow his words.

### **The value—and the danger—of the history of Christianity**

The history of Christianity can be enlightening or instructive, but one must realize that there is a strong element of deception about any such history. As long as one is aware that any history of Christianity is essentially a history of caricatures, then much can be learned, many warnings can be perceived, many wasteful and destructive paths can be recognized, and the ends of much folly can be seen. But if one is led to believe that the story in any way represents the message of Christ or the Kingdom of God that he proclaimed, then only great misunderstandings can result. It is interesting that the Jewish scriptures make the very same distinctions between those people, events, and records of history that reflect the genuine elements of the faith of the children of Abraham and those which go completely contrary to it. In fact, the “faith of the remnant” of the people of God as opposed to the “unbelieving hearts of the majority” can be understood as one of the major themes of the Jewish scriptures.

The same principle of differentiating between what is genuine and what is contrived is continued in the Christian scriptures. It can be seen in Jesus’ denunciation of the leaders of the Jews, in his description of the narrow way of faith and the broad way taken by the majority, in the warnings of deception which permeate many of the letters of scripture, and in the aberrant “messages of Christ” that had begun to circulate even at the time of the apostles. On many occasions Paul was forced to denounce beliefs and practices that had begun to influence followers.

As long as a reader of any history of Christianity understands that the message of Christ was under attack from the time of its very inception—think as far back as the

killing of the children around Bethlehem—and that it is to be expected that many will be the attempts to change it, supplement it, and in any imaginable way render it unrecognizable, then the information in such a history can be contextually considered. In order to do this, however, a reader should have a very clear idea as to what Jesus actually taught his students and how he actually lived and expected them to live. Without this understanding, it will be impossible to recognize those few who have walked the narrow path in following Christ. Instead, the proud, powerful, wealthy, and attention-getting institutions of Christianity situated on the broad highways will be all that is seen and it will seem that they are what Christ intended.

### **Jesus and his students were the genuine Jews of the first century**

If someone were to write a history of true Judaism and come to the first century, they would be making a mistake to write about the Sadducees, Pharisees, etc. In fact, almost the entire culture had ceased to be Jewish. The historian would have to write about people like Christ and his students and some of the odd assortment of individuals who show up in the reports about him. They are the only ones who remained true to the Jewish scriptures. They were the remnant that remained faithful.

The great majority of Jews had become something different from what was embodied by Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets of Israel. The true children of Abraham looked to the scriptures, whereas those following the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Rabbis gave their allegiance to their own teachers and their own traditions. Isn't the same true today concerning the message of Christ? There are a few who look to Christ and his teachings alone. The great majority gives its allegiance to its own teachers and traditions. The sum total of these traditions is what has become known as Christianity.

The only true history of Christ and His followers is the two volume piece of literature that tradition calls Luke and Acts. (The author called them his first and second reports and both are directed to a man named Theophilus.) These two works give any historian clear windows into the life of Christ, the teachings of Christ, and the life and teachings of his first students. These should provide enough perspective to locate the followers of Christ in later centuries. Based on these two historical documents, it is impossible to think that Jesus or any of his students could be the perpetrators of institutional Christianity.

### **The role of the Romans in creating the institutional nature of Christianity**

For the Romans, Christianity became little more than another state religion with a different god. The difference is that it claimed universality which was not usual to the Greeks or the Romans. Christ was turned into the god of the Romans. The Roman bishop became Christ on earth. Rome became a holy city. The papal authorities were copies of an earlier Etruscan leader. Latin became a holy language. Rivals were

persecuted. Unity meant acceptance of the dominance of Rome. The church became an institution whose authority was granted by the Roman Head of State. Though other versions of institutional Christianity had already developed, Roman Christianity became the first truly powerful example of institutionalized Christianity.

The result is that the original content of the message of Christ, supplemented and interpreted through influential teachers as well as the Roman imperial office (Constantine), morphed into a religious network of hierarchical authorities, laws, holy places, holy things, holy practices, holy days, and a mass membership of all Roman citizens who were unwilling to oppose the decree of Constantine. The people were made dependent on the working of this network to keep them acceptable to the new Christian god. (A small *g* is used because few Roman citizens had any reliable information about Jesus Christ and most of them assumed that they were being asked to recognize the god of another people, which was not uncommon in their history.)

It's when the Roman version of institutionalized Christianity began to dominate in the huge Roman empire that the stage was set for the preoccupation of historians with the phenomenon of Christianity. It was assumed that this powerful institution was the natural extension of the first-century events surrounding one Jesus of Nazareth. The same mistake is made today. Any and all modes of Christianity are automatically thought to be in some way rooted in Jesus Christ or related to him either as true expressions of his will on earth or as well-meaning but somewhat errant versions of the same.