

## 2. JESUS NEVER RESEMBLED THE “CHRISTS” OF CHRISTIANITY

The traditions of Christianity come in many shapes and forms. They essentially function as add-ons to scripture. They are deceptive beliefs and practices that have the appearance of genuineness. They can be as simple as an assumption about the looks of Christ—depictions of him with long flowing hair, for example—or they can be huge fabricated inventions such as the intricate hierarchical system emanating from the Vatican. These traditions share the assumption among people that there is some truth to them.

Thus, traditions are much like Trojan horses. People accept them without questioning their validity. Deceptive traditions concerning the person of Jesus Christ have slipped into many cultures in this way. They cause people to understand Jesus in a way that he was never depicted in the scriptures. Following are some of the more common traditional myths about Jesus:

*The benefactor of a particular nation.* Some see Christ as the special protector and promoter of their country. The Roman Empire was the first political entity to see itself as the favorite of Christ. Many followed. In modern times countries such as Italy, Ireland, England, Poland, Spain, and the United States have deeply embedded traditions that their countries have been chosen by God to fulfill a holy purpose. (See chapter 10, *Jesus Never Sought Political Power*, for a detailed analysis of nationalistic traditions of Christianity.)

*The personal benefactor.* Some see Christ as a kind of celestial Santa Claus. His main purpose is to help, serve, promote, protect, enrich, and come to the rescue of the individual. In this garb he shares the characteristics of the doting grandfather, the lucky charm, or the personal protector god of many religions.

*The world changer.* In this role Jesus is understood as the motor behind bettering the world. He is transformed into a humanist Christ, a social-welfare Christ, a unification Christ, even a Marxist Christ. As a promoter of world peace, this Jesus is a revolutionary who stands in the vanguard of human rights. The fact that the real Jesus gave up not only his human rights but emptied himself of his right to be God is lost on the followers of this tradition.

*The head of institutional Christianity.* In this function, Jesus gives a seal of approval to all that transpires within the walls of corporate Christianity. He sanctifies every appointment, he undergirds all funding, and he silently resides over the countless ceremonies and dedications performed in his name. The fact that most ecclesiastical enterprises have very little to do with one another is not a contradiction to those who ascribe loyalty to this non-profit Jesus.

*The pagan god of Christians.* Jesus can be seen and esteemed in many churches in exactly the same way as were the gods or goddesses of Greece and many other cultures. This image can be quite objective in works of art or it can be more subjective in the minds of many who frequent the sanctuaries of Christianity. It is understood that Jesus is in the holy place to be worshiped, to be placated, to be praised, to receive prostrations, to be given sacrifices, to be pleaded with, or to be given various liturgical services. Priests, pastors, and other mediators stand between him and the worshipers; sanctuaries house him; altars stand before him; liturgies are offered to him. This tradition completely eradicates the Jesus of the scriptures who delights in the simple prayer at home, who has himself made the sacrifice of sacrifices for mankind, who desires for every believer to be a priest and come to him, and who is praised and honored when people simply listen to him and do what he says.

*The little voice in the ear.* This is a very convenient Jesus. He makes his will known in a very personal way. He'll tell anyone exactly what they need to know and they can be sure it is his will. No one can doubt the person who has heard the voice of Jesus. He is a very personal friend and has the propensity to tell individuals very advantageous things. "The Lord told me" or "the Lord led me" are the favorite phrases of those who follow this traditional Jesus. They have only moderate interest in the scriptures, because the Lord's will is always available to them through the quiet voice.

*The folk Jesus.* He shows up at funerals, weddings, baptisms, ceremonies of all kinds, and listens in when grace is said at Thanksgiving dinner. When everyone is watching the big game on TV he's down there on the field when a running back bends a knee after scoring a touchdown. He's lovingly referred to as "the man upstairs." He loves it when batters make the sign of the cross before stepping up to the plate. He has a special feeling for people who wear gold or silver crosses around their necks.

*The theological Jesus.* He is very concerned that the scriptures be rewritten into well-defined systems of belief. He is particularly impressed when men invent words to clarify concepts in the scriptures, and when they extract texts from various scriptures combining them in imaginative ways to create completely new truths and insights. He gifts the great scholars and inspires the

great speakers who interpret the theologies for the lay people. The fact that there are hundreds of divergent theologies does not bother the followers of the theological Jesus.

*The medieval Jesus.* His image is the one most commonly propagated in the art museums of the world. This Jesus is surrounded by the religious trappings of a Holy Roman Catholicism reminiscent of the European Dark Ages. He can appear as a miniature adult baby in the lap of a luminous virgin Mary or as a wavy-haired, melancholic, robed figure, bathed in the soft glow of light streaming from heaven. He fits well in the dark and cavernous halls of great cathedrals.

These traditional understandings of Jesus exist in the minds of many who seldom ever question whether such a Jesus could possibly be genuine. That’s the way it often is with human traditions. They are simply accepted without thinking.

### **How to test for a traditional Jesus**

To detect a traditional understanding of Christ, it is often instructive to simply try to imagine the Jesus Christ of the scriptures speaking or acting in one of the ways that is typical for the followers of institutional Christianity. For example, try to imagine the Jesus of the scriptures making any of the following statements:

*We need a bigger sanctuary.*  
*Make sure your kid is in a good youth group.*  
*Don’t forget to go to a worship service on Sunday.*  
*Time to put up the Christmas decorations.*  
*We should have a discipleship class at least every other week.*  
*Put Joe’s name on the prayer list. He’s having his wisdom teeth out tomorrow.*  
*Let’s start a fund-raiser for the stained-glass windows in the chapel.*  
*When do we organize a go-cart night for the youth?*  
*Let’s get that new rock group to come in for a praise meeting.*  
*Who’s preaching at our yearly revival meeting?*  
*Just make sure your leaders have seminary degrees.*  
*Don’t question what the pope says.*  
*Don’t forget to pray to Mary, the apostles, and the saints.*  
*Be sure that every big city has a Catholic cathedral and a First Baptist Church.*  
*I really enjoy it when people ring bells, light candles, and chant songs.*  
*We need more pictures and statues of me.*  
*It’s great when people have parties and give each other gifts on my birthday.*  
*Make sure you get to Jerusalem and Rome at least once in your lifetime.*

Such statements sound ludicrous coming out of the mouth of Christ, and yet each one of them goes back to traditions that are accepted without question in the institutions of Christianity and which, in total, require billions of dollars of resources each year.

The Jesus who lived in the first century spoke much more sobering and weighty words, and he taught remarkable principles of life. The men who knew him taught the following precepts in their writings:

*Fathers are the heads of their homes. They should love their wives, teach their children, be examples of faith to them. Anyone who doesn't take care of his own family is worse than an unbeliever.*

*Leaders should be men who have been proven in their own family and who stay humble. They should not be lovers of money, should know the scriptures well, and should follow the Lord's example.*

*People should come together to encourage one another to love and good deeds ... and remember: Love is doing what Jesus told us to do.*

*Believers serve (worship) Jesus when they give themselves like living sacrifices and when they are transformed in their minds to do the will of God.*

*People who are Christ's students do what he says.*

*Followers should expect to be treated like men treated Jesus.*

*Lead people to be Christ's students, and teach them to do everything that he taught his students.*

*Don't love the world nor the things in the world. Don't desire possessions, prestige, or pleasures.*

These words and teachings recorded by his students reflect the Christ who actually lived in the first century, who claimed to be the Son of God, who had a group of students who later documented his teachings, his death, and his resurrection. In the same way that Jesus made students of his teachings during his time on earth, so too did they live to make students who in turn were expected to do the same. This is essentially what life with Jesus Christ is all about. We learn his words and follow his example so that we can help others do the same.

**Christ’s approach to things holy, neutral, and evil in his culture**

Jesus’ life defines and demonstrates forever God’s will for how a man should live on the earth. He was the perfect example of a man who was truly in the world but by no means a part of it. On the one hand, he was so common as a man that the scriptures make nary a mention of his looks, his voice, his clothing, or his mannerisms. On the other hand, he was so different among men that even his own students often pulled back from him and feared what he might do or say next. He always knew what the right behavior was for every situation, and he had the courage to do it without worrying about impressing someone or fearing what others might think.

What practices and attitudes in his own culture did Christ consider to be of God? Which ones did he simply accept or tolerate with little comment? And which ones did he neither accept nor tolerate? These are important questions because they give us deep insight into how we should interact with the people around us today. We need to know what we should be willing to tolerate and when we should draw a line in the sand.

There were certain things Jesus considered holy in the sense of being essential: *the scriptures; his own teachings and authority; the goal of pleasing God and not men, the marriage relationship, children, believers, and obedience.*

There were things Jesus accepted with little comment: *the spoken and written languages; the Roman laws and taxes; the ways people ate, worked, traveled, and clothed themselves; racial differences; social differences.*

There were things Jesus did not accept or tolerate without criticism: *Jewish traditions; authority of non-scriptural leaders; hypocrisy; striving for possessions, pleasure, or prestige; childish, cowardly, or indulgent behavior; good intentions not based in truth.*

These lists, which are by no means exhaustive, demonstrate how very different Christ was in terms of his values and in terms of what he accepted and what he did not accept. In many ways he proved to be an exact opposite to the typical man on the street either then or today. It is instructive when we compare his approach to life with that of the followers and leaders of Christianity today. Consider the following examples:

<b>How Jesus approached people in his culture</b>	<b>How the leaders of traditional Christianity often approach the people in their cultures</b>
<p>Jesus basically lived the life of a poor man. He described himself as one who had no place to lay his head. He never tried to attract anyone to himself by promising them a life of pleasure, prestige, or status. He chose to please God instead of men.</p>	<p>They love their titles. They strive to be honored in the world. They love to build impressive buildings and put on public ceremonies. They often live in comfortable homes and receive generous salaries. They are faithful representatives of the religious institutions that give them authority.</p>

Jesus was never impressed by religiosity. He taught his followers not to be like hypocrites who parade their piety. Even most of his miracles were done in the presence of only a few. The one time he really did put on a show—his transformation on a mountain—it ended on a sour note for the three who were present: After seeing the incredible sight, Peter was so impressed, that he suggested they build chapels there. God Himself, however, turned out the lights and told them to simply do what His Son told them to do.

Jesus was open and honest with people. He told them the truth whether it was advantageous for him or not.

Jesus' priority was to make students of the men with whom he worked. His goal was to send them out to make more students.

Jesus was concerned about the purity of the scriptures. He honored them alone. He confronted those who preferred the traditions of men to the scriptures.

Jesus was serious and sober. He was not a comic. He recognized the dangers in the world. He warned people about being childish or worldly. He mourned the spiritual condition of the Jewish and Greek cultures around him.

Jesus' appearance was never mentioned in the scriptures. He came across as common, poor, unimpressive, and having few influential friends.

They are experts in religion. They spend millions of dollars every week putting on services of worship, ceremonies, and concerts. They rival the ancient Greeks in their pompous rituals and showy demonstrations of piety. They love to pray in public and draw attention to their religious fervor.

They are experts at saying what people want to hear. They seldom say anything to jeopardize their own position or their own financial basis. They overlook and downplay the failings of their own members. They coddle the rich.

They have no intention of making students like Jesus did. Each is content to be the main teacher for "their flock" for years. They like to have the people dependent on them. They know that if they were to truly live and speak the truth like Christ that most of their church members would leave. Instead, they prefer to be surrounded by an admiring and growing crowd of followers.

They are masters of their own traditions. They make little effort to detect traditional influences and eradicate them. They don't confront their own flocks who follow traditions. Most have little access to scriptural sources and if they do, only to a limited degree. They show little interest in encouraging anyone to learn scripture sources.

They are partakers of the good life. They like to entertain and be entertained. They are often worldly and downplay the evil and deviousness in the world around them. They show little interest in being men of sorrow as was the Lord. They show little interest in putting their fingers on the dark secrets of people's lives as the Lord did.

They often dress to be noticed as religious leaders and love to be surrounded by the paraphernalia of religion such as sanctuaries, art works, sacred music, and impressive ceremonies.

Anyone can expand this list. It only involves comparing the attitudes, practices, and words of Christ with those of the leaders and followers of traditional Christianity. Choose the leaders of any institutional church and make your own comparisons. Though this is a threatening exercise, it is extremely eye-opening. Anyone should be able to recognize that what is now known as Christianity is a far cry from anything Christ ever taught or demonstrated.

### **The anomalies of traditional Christianity cannot be explained by cultural adaptation**

Cultural adaptation is a constant topic in many theological circles because it offers an attractive means of explaining many of the obviously worldly and unscriptural practices of much of Christianity. There are those who would like to say, for example, that the building of beautiful church buildings and the increased investment in entertainment-rich services is a cultural necessity in an age in which people are so influenced by media and technology. It is a way of “speaking their language” or “catching their ear” which would be impossible otherwise.

There is a certain logic—even passion—in such reasonings. They ignore, however, the cultural imperatives they should emulate—the principles that can be observed in the life and words of Christ. If something needs to be culturally adapted, then it is the way Jesus went about communicating with his students, the crowds, and the religious leaders. The cultural equivalents of these principles are not achieved by building fancy buildings, installing multimedia systems, and adopting modern methods of public relations. These are the kinds of measures that do not seek to emulate what Christ did but which seek to be attractive to people and lead to increased membership growth. *Growth* is the key word that drives most efforts among those who advocate cultural adaptation. Though it is not wrong to adapt the message of Christ culturally, it is not what many institutions of Christianity have done. Instead they espouse the growth-equals-success philosophy that is such a powerful influence in Christianity today.

### **The best focal point for cultural adaptation is the example of Jesus Christ**

Cultural adaptation is not a bad concept, but like all topics, it should be studied in the context of the words and examples of Jesus Christ. No communicator who ever lived could ever match Jesus for cultural adaptation. He crossed the greatest cultural divide there is—between God and man—and communicated the greatest of all messages. He did it thoroughly, without any deceit or hypocrisy and left a perfect example of communication for all of his students. It only makes sense that we can learn what cultural adaptation is all about by observing the master in action. Unfortunately, this is not the approach that interests the leaders of traditional Christianity. Rather, they typically assume that cultural adaptation is somewhat like doing public relations with the goal of achieving acceptance and membership growth. Cultural adaptation,

however, should not be measured by the degree to which people accept or prefer a particular practice. Instead, it should be judged according to its degree of adaptation to the example of Christ. This is why the best question to begin with is *How did people respond to the words and actions of Jesus?* This is a key question because a similar response by listeners will indicate a similar understanding. Cultural adaptation is only achieved when the responses are similar to those elicited by Jesus.

### **Jesus adapted his message to people's real needs, not their perceived needs**

It's the responses of people to Jesus' words and deeds that show us exactly what we should expect from the same kind of communication with people today. The fact that people often responded negatively, even violently, to Christ should show us that effective cultural adaptation seldom means cultural acceptance. Jesus told people what they needed to hear and he did for people what they needed to have done for them. Seldom, however, were either of these services appreciated. There is no reason to think that the situation will be any different today.

It has to be assumed that no one has ever adapted better to a culture than Jesus Christ, and yet his words and his actions were accepted by very few. Many, in fact, saw him as a threat and wanted to do away with him. Whatever success he had was certainly not the kind that is usually meant when people discuss the goals of cultural adaptation.

The fact is that Jesus Christ was not successful in worldly terms. Yes, there were often crowds around him, but they were often fickle and ultimately they turned on him. Even in the general society Christ's efforts bore little of the fruit that anyone could call success. Within a generation of his life Israel was laid waste and its people were scattered throughout the world. His success was in a sphere that few had eyes for. He called it the Kingdom of God. This is why it is wiser to evaluate efforts of cultural adaptation on the basis of the response and impact they have. They should be similar to the response and impact at the time of Christ.

### **Who was Jesus Christ? What was his purpose? What did he teach?**

Following is a short list of what the scriptures teach about Jesus:

- Committed to the Jewish scriptures: The Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms
- Unique Son of God
- Personal and patient
- Serious, sober, and sad
- Focused on student/teacher relationship
- Humble but direct
- Personal with God
- Confronted hypocrisy



Manipulated no one  
 Surprised only by faith  
 Resisted temptations promising prestige, possessions, or pleasure  
 Embraced sacrifice out of love  
 Embodied grace and truth  
 Offered a Kingdom of God  
 Confronted evil spirits  
 Did miracles without fanfare  
 Claimed to be the Jewish Messiah  
 Came to fulfill the Law of Moses  
 Rejected by the Jewish leaders and people  
 Executed by the Roman military  
 Came back to life and appeared to many  
 Sent his students to make students among all peoples  
 Offered eternal life  
 Initiated a law of love that extended even to enemies  
 Gave the right to be a child of God to anyone who accepted him

Though a list like this helps to orient one to the uniqueness of Christ, it does not come close to the information in the scriptures. To get the real facts, comprehensively and in context, one must read at least the two pieces of scriptural literature that were specifically written to introduce people to Jesus Christ. The first is the writing that tradition calls the Gospel of Mark but which bears as its own title the words *The Introduction to the Message of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. The second writing tradition calls the Gospel of John though the text itself refers to it as the *testimony of a student of Christ*. The first writing is an introduction and answers the question: Who is Jesus Christ? The second is a testimony and answers the questions: Why did he come, and what does it mean to believe in him? The purpose of the first is to introduce Christ. The purpose of the second is to lead a reader to believe that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing he or she would have life in his name.

Reading both of these writings gives a reader everything he needs to know about initiating a relationship with Jesus. All the other Christian scriptures are addressed to people who have already begun to follow Christ. Only these two are specifically addressed to people who have not yet learned of Christ and not yet begun to consider his claims and what they might mean for themselves.

It is always an eye-opener to read each of the scriptures alone, without allowing them to be filtered and interpreted through the perspectives of any of today’s institutional forms of Christianity. One will find these writings focused on issues that are markedly different from those deemed important by the leaders of the cultural Christianity that has developed over the centuries.

In the scriptures one sees not only the crowds but also Jesus' closest family and students struggling with what it means to truly accept and follow him. One sees the attraction to his love and kindness, but also the shock at the way he confronts hypocrisy and unequivocally speaks the truth to everyone. Daunting also is his insistence on living a life of sacrifice. The scriptural record shows many initially being attracted to him. After seeing and hearing him up close, however, very few accepted and followed him. Most, in fact, rejected him along with those who had chosen to follow him.

Today, it is not different. Though there is a large religion known as Christianity which encompasses hundreds of very diversified kinds of teachings—and many different pseudo Christs—there are still today only a few who accept and follow the same Jesus Christ who lived in the first century. They seek to live as obscurely, as irreligiously, and as modestly as he did; they associate with all kinds of people as he did; they take the scriptures seriously as he did; and they embrace the purpose of his first followers to be his students and to make students of others.