

## INTRODUCTION

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Christianity is a widespread and multi-faceted network of religions that has long been associated with the name of Christ. It is a misleading label because many of the practices and beliefs of the various institutional churches that constitute Christianity deviate so significantly from Jesus' actual life and teachings that they share little more in common with him than the letters of his name. The reason for the dichotomy? The examples and words of Christ have been replaced in Christianity by an enormous influx of human traditions. It's the purpose of this book to demonstrate the presence, the extent, and the magnitude of these traditions.

Most of the traditions included in the following chapters should be easily recognized by any reader who has had an exposure to one of the institutional churches of Christianity. The non-scriptural nature of the traditions may not always be obvious, but recognizing the lack of scriptural support for each tradition should be fairly easy for anyone who has at least a general knowledge of the content of the scriptures. For example, the observations that no writer of scripture ever referred to a building as a church or to Sunday as a holy day can be confirmed either by one's personal experience in reading the scriptures or by a brief referral to a standard concordance.

Whether a tradition is scriptural or not is a question that is of little concern for the majority of the adherents of Christianity. It is no secret that most people who would label themselves as Christians are either uninterested in the scriptures, see them as outmoded, or think of them as products of myth or legend. For all such people, this book will be of little interest. Instead, it is written for those who consider the scriptures to be of primary importance and who understand that following Christ is intimately connected with taking both his words and his examples seriously. Such readers recognize how crucial it is to differentiate between a tradition and a teaching of scripture.

One of the principles underlying the importance of recognizing the distinction between traditions and the original teachings of Christ is that *the student is not greater than the*

*teacher*. It was difficult for Jesus' first students to learn this. For them, it was often a temptation to steer Jesus in a certain direction. This is one of the seeds of human tradition: It's the thought that Jesus couldn't really have meant what he said. It's because of this tendency of the human heart to serve its own ends that a follower of Christ is constantly faced with the task of holding fast to the teachings and examples of Jesus Christ and avoiding influences that come from other sources. A purpose of this book is to encourage and aid readers in this task.

There is little proof-texting in the pages that follow. The use of individual verses in another context is a dubious and easily manipulative practice. For this reason, it is strongly recommended that the reader be actively involved in reading the Christian scriptures as this book is read. The following writings are suggested as a minimum selection: *Matthew*, *the letter by Paul to the Colossians*, *the first of Peter's letters*, *the writing by James*, and the scripture traditionally known as *John's first letter*. Suggesting them does not mean that the other writings of scripture are less important. It simply assures that at least five important eyewitnesses be allowed to represent Jesus and his teachings.

In order to document the many traditions of Christianity that will be mentioned, it would also be helpful to read a standard history of Christianity. It will provide a historical backdrop for traditions mentioned in the following chapters. If suggestions would be appreciated, then for an adequate text I would recommend *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* by John McManners. It is comprehensive and written interestingly by a respected English historian.

It is strongly suggested these sources be read alongside the present book. The topic of traditions is a threatening one and it would be unfortunate to let emotion rule the day. The words and examples of Jesus Christ should be so highly regarded that they warrant as much of a level-headed treatment as possible. Thus, it would be good, on the one hand, to allow a historian of note to document the traditions of Christianity, and, on the other hand—and more importantly—to let those men who knew Christ the best have their say about what constitutes his teachings.

It will surely come as no surprise to anyone who reads the scriptures regularly and who has some historical awareness, that there is an immense discrepancy between the track record of Christianity and the teachings of Christ. Nevertheless, it could be startling to discover how broad the range of dichotomies is, how familiar and accepted many of the traditions of Christianity are, and how unknowingly one can become entangled in them. For this reason, it's crucial to realize that much that is thought to be "Christian" in our world has little in common with Christ, and much that is attributed to Christianity is of little consequence in the Kingdom of God.

### **Jesus confronted traditions**

It should be noted at the outset that an aggressive posture of confronting traditions will be taken throughout the book. The reason for this is not to attempt some rhetorical manipulation of the reader, but to follow the lead of Jesus Christ. He simply did not tolerate traditions that lacked roots in the scriptures. His approach was not to merely point them out but to confront those who followed them.

When Jesus walked among the Jews of the first century, he was often faced with the problem of Jewish beliefs that differed from the Jewish scriptures. He used the word *tradition* (the Greek word is *paradosis*) with the Pharisees to describe these beliefs which he said came from the teachings of their elders. He was speaking of the commentary, writings, and practices of earlier prominent Jewish teachers. He pointed out that their leaders preferred the traditions of their elders to the writings of the scriptures and that in doing so they rendered the scriptures invalid. It was an exchange that greatly angered those who were addressed.

### **The deceptiveness of traditions**

Traditions often carry with them the assumption of authority and wisdom which is why they often prove to be deep-rooted problems in many areas of knowledge, not just religion. For many centuries, it was a tradition in Europe that the earth was the center of the universe. When scientists began to suspect this was not so, they discovered that the tradition was difficult to overcome. It had long developed a life of its own, permeating even into the theological underpinnings of the Catholic Church. It was a tradition that exuded wisdom and solidity. The earth was firmly established in the center of an adoring universe. Man was the jewel in the great central setting. Everything about the tradition was familiar and comfortable, and it's these elements of familiarity and comfort that give traditions their inertia and their danger.

Sporting the look of trustworthiness, traditions are often deceptive and false. They can only be revealed for what they are with healthy doses of well-documented and contextual information. The same is true of the traditions of Christianity. They can only be exposed by comparing them to the facts in the documents of scripture. These are the documented sources about the person and message of Christ. They were penned by eyewitnesses and are firmly situated in historical contexts.

### **The difference between documented sources and traditions**

It is reported in manuscripts of the scriptures that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That would be considered a fact supported by all of the historical tests that one can apply. It is information, for example, that was recorded while many of the people involved were still alive and had some knowledge of the events that accompanied his birth.

The celebration of the birth of Christ on December twenty-fifth, on the other hand, is a religious tradition. It began generations after the birth of Christ. It has no support in any documents that are sources for the life of Christ.

When these two matters are compared—Bethlehem as the birth place of Christ and December twenty-fifth as the date of Christ’s birth—they demonstrate the basic difference between historically documented information and information that is merely religious tradition.

This example may impress one as quite clear and yet at the same time it may seem to be an example of a tradition that can do little harm. After all, what difference does it make if a day for a celebration is one day or another? What could possibly be detrimental about that? This impression of harmlessness demonstrates the initial thinking that has led to the establishment and growth of many traditions.

A closer look at such a small and seemingly superficial addition to documentary evidence demonstrates that taking even small liberties with the information in the scriptures (or any source document) can eventually lead to significant problems. Observe, for instance, the question: *What difference does it make if a day for a celebration is one day or another?* You’ll notice it contains two assumptions. The first is that it is quite acceptable that a day be designated for an event in the life of Christ, and the second is that it’s quite normal to have a celebration for this event.

These are two assumptions, however, which are not based on the teachings of any writer of the Christian scriptures. No writer ever records followers of Christ either recognizing a day as the day on which Christ was born or having a celebration relating to any event in the life of Christ. There is, in fact, no mention that Christ’s birth, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension into heaven, or any of his miracles were ever celebrated on special days.

### **The snowball effect of traditions**

It is one thing to consider the choice of the twenty-fifth of December to be a small matter of historic manipulation, but quite another to ignore the monster proportions of the religious tradition long known as *Christmas*. This event is no longer innocuous or insignificant. Some would say it has become the most significant economic event of the world’s economy. Some would also say that it is the most prominent projection of the name Jesus Christ in the world. Unfortunately, it confronts even the youngest children of many nations with a cacophony of images, persons, experiences, stories, music, and expectations that have very little to do with the historical event of the birth of the Christ and the information surrounding it.

A tradition with the magnitude of Christmas becomes so overpowering in its dimensions that it’s almost impossible for people to escape its field of force. Children

grow up with the imprint of a tradition like Christmas and become inoculated to the many grotesque and bizarre elements of it. Even knowledgeable individuals who consider themselves to be serious about their faith can be observed going along with many of the more degrading, deceiving, and wasteful practices of Christmas. It's one of the characteristics of many religious traditions that they become far more appealing and beloved than what the scriptures actually teach about a matter. It was this phenomenon Jesus referred to when he talked to the Pharisees about their preference for their own traditions over the teachings of the scriptures.

### **The stigma of following Christ**

Traditions also originate and maintain their influence because few are ready and willing to follow the words and examples of Jesus. For many, his words are simply too radical, too self-sacrificing, and go too much against the grain of what people want for their own lives. Anyone who truly takes the teachings of Christ seriously will of necessity be very different than the people around them. This all adds up to a lot of unpleasantness and opens the door to teachings and practices that represent less threatening ways of "following" Jesus. Putting presents under a tree is certainly much easier than confronting religious hypocrites or being a daily example of courageous faith for a group of students.

This is why many religious traditions turn following Christ into a set of more culturally acceptable practices such as attending church services, celebrating holidays, or displaying religious symbols. The result is always the same: the actual words and examples of Christ cease to be relevant except in a very filtered and altered sense.

Following are more reasons why traditions are so appealing to people:

- 1) Vested interests: A lot of traditions are money makers.
- 2) Familiarity: People begin to think traditions are part of the natural order of things.
- 3) Personal identity and belonging: Many traditions define a person's in-group status.
- 4) Pleasure: Traditions are often excuses for celebrations, spending money, and vacationing.
- 5) Fear: Not participating in many traditions can result in ostracism.
- 6) Financial security: Many people make their living from religious traditions.
- 7) Pride: Many religious traditions appeal to the human ego.
- 8) Cover ups: Traditions often help people avoid actual truths and realities.

This list shows how religious traditions exert so much power and why dealing with them becomes a legitimate test of one's faith and courage. It was this way for Christ, for his students, and for their students.

### **Traditions blind people to bizarre behavior**

The growth of Christian traditions is a worldwide phenomenon that has produced many practices and beliefs that have one thing in common: *Their irrelevance in regard to the actual teachings or example of Christ.* In many cases these traditions have strayed so far from any scriptural basis that they appear ludicrous when one imagines Jesus participating in them. Consider the prospect of Jesus Christ kissing icons, walking around in the ornate vestments of an archbishop, or hiding Easter eggs. The fact that such practices are among the minor examples of the many traditional teachings and practices in Christianity speaks volumes to the extent of the problem.

For the people who grow up with these traditions, they usually seem normal and logical regardless of how problematic they might actually be. Their ready acceptance comes from the fact that they are often accompanied by influences that make powerful impressions on children and adults alike. Among these influences are imposing architecture, the support of religious and academic authorities, the participation of well-known personalities, the acceptance of family and friends, long years of historical development, and general cultural acceptance. Thus, the pressure to accept these traditional “truths” with little introspection can be overwhelming for the person who grows up with them.

Nevertheless, it is not difficult for people to recognize that traditions are exactly that, traditions, and not realities about Christ or his words. As stated above, many traditions appear silly when associated with Christ. They are in fact so obviously irrelevant to anything ever emanating from Christ that it is perplexing they are tolerated and continue to be promoted not only by people who consider themselves to be Christians but by people who are influential leaders in the world of Christianity. It goes to show that the power of religious traditions cannot be underestimated.

### **First-century traditional influences were similar to ours today**

At the time of Christ, Judaism in Judea and Galilee was not true to its roots. This was not evident to many, however, because in many ways Judaism was incredibly impressive. The temple grounds, even in the time of Solomon, had never been so grandiose. The Passover attracted hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Diaspora every year. Famous Jewish teachers drew hundreds of students to Jerusalem. The Pharisees and Sadducees exerted power and influence among the Jews.

As far as Jesus was concerned, however, those who called themselves Jews, including the leaders, were far from being the people of the Law. And he let them know this in no uncertain terms.

It is a similar situation with Christianity today. Much like Judaism then, it is also a religious caricature and has little to do with Christ. And like Judaism at the time of

Christ, this is also not evident to most people in “Christian” cultures because in many ways Christianity is incredibly impressive. Cathedrals and churches continue to be awe inspiring, and worship services in the world attract millions every week. Famous Christian teachers sell millions of books. Influential clergy exert power and influence in society.

Would Jesus Christ, however, agree that traditional Christianity reflects his work and will? Were he to walk the streets of Paris, Rome, St. Petersburg, Los Angeles, or Rio de Janeiro, would he recognize any of it as a reflection of his life and words? Would he be happy with the powerful ecclesiastical leaders? Would he be impressed with the mighty cathedrals and the stately churches? Would he commend their ceremonies and liturgies? Would he compliment the lifestyles of church goers?

Wouldn't Jesus Christ live and speak in any of these cities just as he did in Jerusalem? Would he not speak the truth about hypocrisy and empty religion? Would he not confront people of all kinds with the difference between the teachings of the scriptures and those of their own leaders? And would Jesus not experience the same rejection and the same animosity today as he did in the first century?

One might think the more serious minds in the religious landscape would observe the shameful and wasteful behavior accompanying many traditions, and question not only the behavior of the people but the meaningfulness of the traditions themselves. But religious traditions live a charmed life. People who should be questioning them, don't; people who should be making an issue of them, aren't; and people who should be measuring them by the teachings of scripture, make no mention of them. If there is a tabu topic, it's religious tradition. Regardless of how gaudy, out-dated, or questionable a tradition might be, it's usually left free to roam about the landscape of Christianity.

Jesus Christ was different. He seldom failed to expose religious traditions and the human teachings upon which they are based. This is one of the main reasons why people so often felt uncomfortable around him. He simply did not hesitate to point it out when people were immersed in traditions that crossed swords with the scriptures.

### **Traditions and termites**

The task of recognizing religious traditions—so not to get entangled in them—should interest every serious follower of Christ. It should be the same sort of interest that one would have about one's own health, the safety of one's children, or the soundness of one's house. Jesus Christ confronted the problem of religious tradition head on. His adamant opposition demonstrates he saw it as a cancer to the truth. Tolerating traditions is as senseless as tolerating a fire hazard in a home.

In spite of the unswerving example of Christ in this regard, it's difficult to find people who are appreciative when it is made evident to them that they are participating in a

particular practice or belief that has no roots in the scriptures. The response to such volunteered information is most often indignation, rationalizations, irritation, or indifference. Seldom do people want to follow up the reminder with a real desire to clarify exactly what is “of Christ” and what isn’t.

Imagine telling friends that you spied some termites around their house, and they respond to this observation with utter silence. Then you repeat your observation about termites only to see them change the subject. What strange behavior that would be. Most home owners would be thankful for a tip like this. Normally they would ask to be shown the infestation signs. They would express concern about the extent of the damage. They would want to take measures to rectify the situation.

Why, then, do most people respond differently to a possible infestation of religious tradition? As far as the scriptures are concerned, human traditions are far worse than an infestation of termites. Instead of being threatened by the reminder, people should be happy to have the opportunity to rid themselves of a misleading tradition that has been gnawing away at their house of faith. The fact that the topic so often hits a nerve shows how widespread the problem is and how deeply traditions can become ingrained in a people’s identity. According to the scriptures, the problem of religious traditions is a central issue, not a small one. Why? Because traditions are huge impediments to the words of scripture. They not only detract from scripture, they take precedence over it.

The information in the following chapters is meant to alert followers of Christ to the presence of many human traditions that permeate the world today and masquerade as the teachings of Christ. Foremost among these is the religion of Christianity. Chapter one demonstrates that Jesus by no means ever intended to found a religion. The following chapters address further powerful traditions.

The book concludes with an introduction to the most influential and deceptive of all the traditions of Christianity. It will come as a particular surprise. Due to its magnitude, however, it could not be handled in a single chapter of this book. Instead, an entire second volume was required for its analysis.