

## 8. *JESUS NEVER COERCED FOLLOWERS OR ASKED FOR ASSENT TO A CREED*

**H**istorically, one of the most effective means of spreading Christianity has been by war and political oppression. This is basically true of most major religions. It is almost axiomatic that missionaries follow in the footsteps of soldiers. In the same way that the Spanish Conquistadors paved the way for Catholic missionaries in the New World, so too did Muslim soldiers prepare the way for their mullas all across Northern Africa and into Spain.

Throughout history there have been many examples of the use of political coercion to make people Christians. The Roman Empire under Constantine was one of the first examples, followed by the forced conversions of European nations such as Russia. Christianization by force also followed among various peoples in all the years of European colonization in North America, South America, Africa, Australia, and Asia.

Other coercive means that have been used to force conversions include torture, forced marriages, economic threats, promises of material gain, and societal pressures. All of these are examples of influences brought to bear on individuals and groups at one time or another by institutional Christianity. Such measures are by no means a thing of the past. Today, institutional Christianity rules over huge ecclesiastical empires that wield power not only due to their influence over large populations but also because of their economic and political clout. There can be great advantage to be allied with such institutions and there can be severe consequences for those who do not cooperate with them.

### **How people come to faith in Christ**

It needs to be said very clearly: People do not become followers of Christ because they have been conquered by a Christian army or converted by decree; people do not follow Christ because they have been assimilated by a Christian culture; people do not turn to Christ because they accept the religion of missionaries who come in the wake of conquerors; people don't come to faith in Christ because they are coerced into taking on the outward trappings of a Christian institution.

People come to Christ in the same way that the first followers came to him. They hear about him through the words and examples of believers, they express interest, they ask questions, they get to know who he is and what he teaches, they consider the consequences of living with him, and—should they chose to do so of their own volition—they accept him for who he is, become his students, learn from him, and do what he says. This is why Christ sent his students to make students. He didn't just send them to “do evangelism” and he certainly did not form them as a lethal military force to cow whole nations into submission. Followers of Christ become students of Christ. They accept him into their lives not only as their savior but as their teacher: they listen to his words; they learn his words; they follow his words.

Following him is a part of accepting him. Anyone accepting him, accepts where he goes, what he does, how he thinks, and what he wants. To ignore any of these essentials of his life is to ignore him. To not go where he goes is to reject him; to not speak and think as he does is to reject him; to not want what he wants is to reject him.

### **There are many false Christs**

Political or military coercions are not the only false paths to Christ. There are also fake Christs who deceive many. They come in various garbs. Some are individuals who claim to be another coming of Christ (such as many cult leaders). Others are individuals who claim to be infallible representatives of Christ such as the leaders of the various churches that believe their leaders are present-day apostles or representatives of Christ on earth. To accept any one of them is also a rejection of Christ.

Other false Christs are simply new versions of him. They are assumptions about Christ which do not correspond to the Jesus Christ of the scriptures. Such false Christs exist in the minds or the teaching of the great majority of the followers of cultural Christianity. (See chapter 2 for a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon.)

There is only one Christ, however, who is the true Christ, and he cannot be removed from his first-century place in history and from what eyewitnesses first wrote about him. They define forever the Jesus Christ who lived among a few chosen men, who taught them, who was an example for them, and who sent them to be his messengers. All the other Christs are the figments of men's imaginations. They are false Christs.

### **How people are led to Christ**

Leading people to Christ is best done the way Jesus did it himself and the way that his students did it. They never tried to sweet-talk anyone into the Kingdom of God. They were always honest about the consequences of following Christ—including the negative ones. They made it clear that Jesus was the focal point of belief. Following

him meant learning from him, obeying him, living like he lived, and thinking like he thought. They never promised prosperity, prestige, or pleasure. Quite the opposite. They said that any follower would share the rejection of Christ and the humility of Christ. Though Jesus promised an abundant life, that abundance was of a different kind than that in the world.

The message of Jesus' first students was never superficial, contrived, or figurative. Instead it was anchored in the historic person of Christ. Paul said *if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then your faith is useless*. It included a comprehensive and detailed overview of his life and exactly what it meant to believe in him. The writing that tradition calls the Gospel of John (which more accurately should be *The Testimony of a Student of Christ*) was written *so that the reader might believe that Jesus is the Christ and that believing he might have life in his name*. That testimony is over twenty-five pages long in a modern translation. All of the information in that document was considered important by the author to achieve his purpose. It is a comprehensive source-level presentation of Jesus Christ and what it means to believe in him. It cannot be improved on.

It is the words of the first students of Christ, the writers of scripture, that establish for all time the sources of the message and the teachings of Jesus.

### **The deception of creeds and theologies**

A creed is essentially a shortened, summarized version of some topic of scripture, whereas a theology is an expanded and detailed explanation. The purpose of a creed is to focus on the essentials of a topic, whereas the purpose of a theology is to fit even the smallest details of scripture into a unified system of thought. Creeds are written as correctives to specific views considered heretical, whereas theologies are comprehensive systems of interpretation.

Both creeds and theologies reformulate the scriptures and give them a new contextual framework. A reformulation of information is not necessarily a wrong or useless thing to do—translations are also reformulations into another language—but serious problems arise when these new forms add something to the scriptures, subtract something from them, create new contextual surroundings for them, or when they replace the scriptures in importance and authority.

A reformulation of a text only makes sense if the text is adjusted to meet the requirements of accurate translating. In this case it's the text in its entirety and in its contextual framework that remains the boundary of the reformulation. The original text provides the check and balances that a translator is expected to respect and follow. Creeds and theologies, however, severely violate this principle. They do not limit themselves to the tight principles that guide the translating process.

Shrinking the scriptures, as the creeds do, is not only inappropriate, but an affront to the authors of scripture. We have no reason to think that the authors themselves have not included what is absolutely necessary in each text. Why would we assume they have included information that is superfluous? If they were indeed commissioned to write the words that convey the will and knowledge of Christ, why should we not assume that each and every word they wrote was in some way necessary? And why would anyone, living after the writers of scripture, assume to know what in the scriptures needs emphasizing and what could be left out of them?

Though it may seem logical to try to fish out the most important points in a text, who is going to be the one to make this decision? Who has this authority? Who has this right? Who has this understanding? And what would the original writers think about this practice? It is true that they used information from other scriptures in their writings, but they were the writers of scripture. They *did* have the right and the authority to do that. No one living after the writers of scripture, however, has the right to reconstruct them, restate them, resize them, or reformulate them into pieces of literature that are put on an equal footing with the scriptures themselves.

A creed is meant to make certain aspects of scripture more precise. This is an interesting concept because it assumes that the scriptures can be made more precise. It would seem more in keeping with the nature of the scriptures themselves to assume that they have been written as precisely as possible, particularly if they are considered a revelation of God. There is certainly nothing wrong with trying to translate a text as precisely as possible. But, as previously noted, in that situation the text itself is constantly the check and balance of the translation. The translation should not add or subtract anything from the text. It should not manipulate the text in any way.

The problem with creeds and theologies is that there are no specific or complete texts that they are translating. The Nicene Creed, for example, is not a translation of any text of scripture. At the very best it is the translation of various phrases, clauses, and sentences that can be found in the scriptures. But that is also not true because the creed introduces new concepts that cannot be said to be translations of any words or phrases used in the scriptures. Examples are *All-sovereign, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance*.

The Nicene Creed, for example, in places does bear some semblance to the beginning of what tradition calls John's Gospel, a portion of scripture that also explains the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. One would think it would be sufficient to use John's writing as a definitive statement about the nature of the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All are mentioned in great detail and all that is mentioned about them was written by one of Christ's closest students. How can one improve on that? In addition, the information in John concerning the nature of God is included within the context of a complete writing.

Is it not so, that taking a portion of a writing out of its context is a questionable practice that can easily lead to unintended meanings? The creeds, however, go far beyond simply lifting a portion of scripture from its literary context. They create something new out of snippets of scripture, extra words and phrases, and newly formulated sentences. The result is supposedly a precise formulation of what the scriptures really mean. This is not only bad translating but it is an affront to the writers of the scriptures. The result is a text that has no counterpart in the scriptures.

The fact that certain creeds are actually considered holy or equal to scripture only goes to show the extent to which men have dared to add their two cents to the scriptures. The creeds clearly do not have their source in anyone who knew Christ personally. They should not enjoy the recognition of anyone who values the words and teachings of Christ.

### **Theologies**

Theologies are quite similar to creeds except that they are meant to be comprehensive explanations of the meaning of scriptural topics and themes. Examples of classic theological categories are Theology Proper (study of God), Christology (study of Christ), Soteriology (study of salvation), Ecclesiology (study of the Church), Eschatology (study of last things), Angelology (study of the angels), Pneumatology (study of the Holy Spirit), and Hamartiology (study of sin).

The methods of the theologians include heavy doses of text mixing. This means that portions of scripture from many contexts are collected and reworked into overviews and explanations. It is not surprising that there are a great variety of outcomes. There are dozens of theologies in the world. Some are so elaborate that they require multiple volumes and thousands of pages to contain them.

Theologians often use small portions of scripture as springboards to build imposing superstructures of belief. The Catholic dogma surrounding the pope, for example, is based on a single verse of scripture which requires a great deal of creative interpretation. Protestants have been no less creative in their establishment of the powerful office of the pastor. It, too, is based on a single verse which requires just as much inventive supplementation. The Christian scriptures, however, make no mention of a pope as a universal leader of the ecclesia or of pastors as local leaders of ecclesias. Priests, of course, are also not mentioned as leaders in the ecclesia. It's only through the manipulations of the respective theologians that popes, priests, and pastors have been invented as in the ecclesia.

Theology and tradition often form a kind of unholy tandem. Certain traditions are in need of the legitimacy of the scriptures and it's the theologians who are given this task to make this tie-in. Their favorite tools are assumptions and text-mixing.

### **The Jewish connection**

Creeds and theologies are not new. They were the tools of the Jewish teachers at the time of Christ which allowed them to rework the scriptures into more palatable forms. They created, for example, a huge body of teachings surrounding a commandment in the writings of Moses: *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy*. As the years progressed, page after page of explanations and requirements were added to the commandment. The original purpose of the command was lost, and the added requirements became far more important to the leaders.

Jewish leaders constantly confronted Jesus with the requirements of these writings and accused him of violating scripture. He, in turn, pointed out to them that through their traditions they were invalidating the words of God. It enraged them. The world has changed little over the centuries. Today Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Mormon, and other “Christian” leaders also become angry when their creeds, theologies, and traditional practices are criticized. They consider them not only equal to the scriptures, but because many of their traditions negate the teachings of the scriptures, they prefer them to the scriptures.

### **Creeds and theologies are still being written today**

It should not be thought that the process of writing creeds and theologies was a practice of the ancient past. Much to the contrary. If anything, more creeds and more theologies than ever before are being written by influential teachers and by institutional authorities. Our age, as much as any earlier age, has a plethora of authoritative leaders and teachers who have no qualms about producing authoritative literature and expecting their followers to give their opinion the same weight as scripture. The present age is also a time in which powerful voices can be heard expounding the scriptures in every imaginable variation. Even the most scurrile and bombastic voices attract their followings. It often seems that the more worldly and opulent the venue is, the more popular is the message. Hundreds of groups with distinct theologies populate the religious scene and label themselves as Christian.

As always, the result of human creeds and theologies is the loss of the scriptures. They are added to, rearranged, given new contexts, and new identities.

### **Plans of salvation**

Plans of salvation among Protestants are an example of modern forms of creeds. Similar kinds of restated scripture include papal bulls, affirmations of faith, apostolic pronouncements, certain specific policies in schools, churches, parachurch organizations, missions, and monastic orders, and the sayings of the founders of many churches, orders, and parachurch organizations.

The problem with creeds and their modern counterparts, the “plans of salvation,” is that they leave out huge portions of scripture. In doing so they make the fatal mistake of automatically leaving out large portions of information about Jesus Christ. As a result, most people who hear the presentations have little input about who this Jesus Christ is, what his purpose is, and where he will lead them. Certain “essentials” are dealt with in the creeds, but they are only a small sampling of who Christ is and they neglect information about Christ that might cause many to have second thoughts about following him.

Will people want to follow him if they know it means sharing his suffering? His rejection? His commitment to personal sacrifice? His role as teacher and example? His role as a humble servant? His commitment to the scriptures alone? His opposition to religious hypocrisy? His associations with people from all walks of life? His down-the-ladder instead of up-the-ladder life style?

John’s testimony hides none of these descriptions of Christ. It makes it crystal clear exactly who Jesus is, how he thinks, where he is going, and where he will lead his followers. The creedal messages of Christianity do not do this. They reinvent Jesus and his message. They ignore what they don’t want to hear. They prefer a Christ who has none of the “edge” to him that was so true of the controversial Jesus in the first century who so sobered and threatened those around him. Instead, the creeds focus only on a few “essentials,” stay mostly positive, and ignore the bulk of the scriptural testimony about him.

### **Salvation is a message in the scriptures, not in the creeds or the plans**

The message of salvation is a message *in the scriptures* about Jesus Christ. It is not a short creed; it is not four easy steps in a booklet; it is not an impassioned plea by a speaker using a choreographed presentation.

The testimony that one of Christ’s students wrote (*Gospel of John*) has the stated purpose that the reader believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God so that when he believes, he would have life in his name. The document required a thirty-foot long scroll to hold the text. The writer was concerned above all that the reader knew all that needed to be known about Jesus Christ in order to know what it meant to accept Christ into one’s life. That meant being aware of who Christ was and what he would do and what he would expect when he came into a person’s life. This is the true issue of belief: Do I want Jesus Christ in my life to do what he wants to do? To go where he wants to go? Do I want to invite this Jesus Christ into my life?

The true issue of salvation is Christ. It has little to do with what I or anyone else might hope to obtain by turning to Jesus. Inviting Christ into my life does not take place when I tell him I want him in my life to help me do what I want to do. That’s not faith

in Christ. That's nothing but opportunistic religion. Inviting Christ into my life also does not take place when I invite any one of the many Christs who are the inventions of religious traditions. There is only one Jesus who is truly the eternal Son of God, and that is the one who lived in the first century.

Nowhere in the scriptures is accepting Christ portrayed as an easy decision for anyone. People struggled mightily with what they were going to do with Jesus, and this included his closest students. It is interesting that people willingly "came" to him when they knew little about him. Crowds gathered quickly. When people heard there was a miracle-doer nearby they hurried to see him and meet him and perhaps ask a favor of him. The more they heard him speak, however, and the more they became informed of his purposes and his life, the more they pulled back from him. It sobered them when they got up close to him, because they learned how he lived and how he would want them to live. Most people ended up rejecting Christ because of this. Most decided to live life the way they wanted to live it.

Today, most people reject the genuine Christ as well. They are willing to flock to a Jesus who will do miracles for them or be their personal benefactor, but they want little to do with a Savior who lives and thinks and speaks as did Jesus of Nazareth at the turn of the first millennium. Nothing has changed. The great majority of the many who say they are Christians are simply following the crowds or they have accepted some caricature of Jesus.

The point is that people who have the life of Christ have accepted the Christ of the scriptures. Only in them is a complete picture of the Son of God. They do not offer cut-down versions of him as do the creeds or the plans of salvation. They demonstrate the struggles that all kinds of people had with accepting Christ, and show what he does when he is truly the savior, lord, and teacher in a person's life. It's in these writings of Jesus' closest students that we truly witness first-century people meeting the Son of God and being faced with what it means to believe in him.

### **Those who follow Christ**

A follower of Christ should stand out. As Jesus once pointed out, a tree can be identified by its fruit. Those who follow Christ should also be recognizable because of their distinctive fruit. This means that their words and actions should conform to the teachings and examples of Christ.

What kinds of information and behavior are distinctly of Christ?

Given the particular characteristics of much of Christianity, one might think that church membership or the attendance at worship services would be indicators of Christ-like behavior. But neither of these issues are ever a topic in any of the

scriptures. The following, however, are examples of common teachings in the scriptures:

A follower is a student of Christ. It would be impossible to follow Jesus and not listen to him, not learn from him, not hunger and thirst for his understanding, not be growing in his wisdom, not be interested in his words, and in short, not be interested in becoming like him. And a student of Christ would want others to become his students as well. In fact, being a student and making students would be their goal in life. How could it not be? The most basic relationship that one can have with Christ is the student-teacher relationship. It is the relationship Christ modeled with his first followers and it is the relationship he wanted his own students to promote when he sent them into the world.

A follower lives in the light as Christ is in the light: This means that a follower does not love the world nor the things in the world—possessions, prestige, pride, pleasure—but desires instead to do the will of God. In other words, a follower cannot be divided in his or her loyalties. There is no such thing as following Christ and following other voices as well. A follower accepts the Son of God as he is and is ready to fit into his plans. A follower does not have a personal agenda nor does a follower accept anyone else’s agenda.

A follower has confidence in the writings of the eyewitnesses of Christ and is wary of the thoughts and traditions that have no basis in the scriptures. A follower pays attention to the instructions, warnings, corrections, and directions of the writers of scripture, dealing with them not manipulatively but contextually, with an eagerness to accept them, and with respect for the intent of each individual writer.

These are some of the characteristics of a follower of Christ. There are many other “fruits” that make a follower recognizable as well. Each of the scriptures mentions various attitudes, deeds, tasks, and responses that are the marks of a follower of Christ.

The above observations about following Jesus, though obvious in the scriptures, are seldom emphasized by the leaders of traditional Christianity. Though they would not deny them, the impression they give to most people is that the most common behaviors of a follower of Christ are church membership, the celebration of holy days, participation in worship services, giving assent to the creeds, tithing, and being a good and moral person. The more liberal leaders of Christianity would think it quite enough for a follower to simply be born in a Christian country or family, as a law-abiding citizen.

More conservative leaders would insist that following Jesus cannot mean just belonging to a church. Many of them would say that only churches that “preach the Bible” and “have born again leaders” are true churches. They would further insist that a follower be one who has “made a decision for Christ.”

These more conservative leaders include not only Protestants but Catholics, Orthodox, and those of other less mainline churches as well. Many of these conservative or fundamentalist leaders can be quite adamant about their particular brand of church being the only true church and their members being the only true followers of Christ.

Though conservative churches may seem to take more seriously some of the content of the scriptures, a closer look reveals that in practice there is often little difference between their members and the members of other more liberal churches. Even in conservative churches, the “follower of Christ” continues to be typified by church participation, be it ever so minimal, and the leading of an outwardly moral life. The fact that members may have little interest in being students of the scriptures and at the same time have considerable interest in the things of the world is seldom an issue, neither for the leaders nor for the rank and file of conservative churches. Many conservative churches are actually vocal proponents of the health and wealth gospel which equate pleasure, possessions, and prestige with the blessings of God.

To summarize: The practice in most of the churches of Christianity shows that church membership, minimal church participation, and the maintaining of a general morality is considered typical behavior for one considered to be a Christian or a church member in good standing. Those who would go beyond this minimum—by attending a Bible study, by sending their children to a Christian school, by going on a mission outreach, or by supporting a missionary—are considered particularly devoted and exemplary in their belief.

### **The example of Christ is ignored in most institutional churches**

“Being a Christian” has become a cultural lifestyle that is quite common of a large percentage of the Christians of any given population in the western world. One must ask: What about the scriptural teaching concerning the follower of Christ? What about the goal of being a student of Christ, learning the scriptures well, and helping to make students of others? What about being a student who “walks in the light as he is in the light”? What about being a student of Christ who does what he says? What about being a student who “does not love the world nor the things in the world”? Why is it that these teachings and the many principles that relate to them are so easily ignored, and that a minimal participation in the ceremonies of a church can become so crucial?

It can't be because these teachings of scripture are unknown to the leaders of Christianity. They certainly are known to them. In much the same way that the

instructions in the Jewish scriptures were also not unknown to the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Rabbis, and the scribes. Jesus said the problem was that they preferred their own teachings and traditions to the scriptures. The scriptures were replaced by the opinions of influential Jews. The same could be said of the leaders of Christianity today and their treatment of the scriptures. Though giving lip service to them, they effectively negate them by allowing traditional opinions and teachings to replace them.

### **In Christianity, “special” followers intercede for the church rank and file**

One way the scriptures are explained away is by shifting their force to different recipients. In other words, the particularly challenging instructions in the scriptures are not applied to the common man or even the common leader. Instead, they are assumed to be only for those who are specially chosen to be exemplary. Only the heroes of the faith are expected to fulfill the characteristics of a follower of Christ. These are the apostles, the saints, the missionaries, the monks, the hermits, the nuns, and the church founders. The impression is given that it's only these people who can fulfill the injunctions of scripture, and they do it for everyone else.

The veneration of the saints among the Catholics, the glorification of the saints on the icons of the Orthodox, and the honoring of the heroes of the faith among the Protestants are all reactions to the teachings in the scriptures that refer to the characteristics of those who follow Christ. By relegating such characteristics to a chosen few and by giving that chosen few a representative function for everyone else, many teachings in the scriptures can be safely disregarded as relevant for anyone else. There is no indication in the scriptures, however, that following Christ is something that someone can do for someone else. Nor is there any teaching that following Christ will ever be a phenomenon of a culture or of a majority of a population. The opposite is true. The scriptures teach that faith is found only among those who take a narrow path. It is never the mark of those who follow a broad road.

The follower of Jesus is not one who is swept along with the crowds. Instead, the follower follows Christ. It is as simple as that. He goes where Christ goes and that is never where the crowds want to go. The follower suffers the same rejection as did Christ, takes the same positions as did Christ, refuses hypocrisy as did Christ, does the will of God as did Christ, refuses the temptations of the world as did Christ, prefers to please God rather than men as did Christ, lives humbly without complaining as did Christ, refuses to follow the traditions of men as did Christ, and dedicates his life to being a student of the scriptures and to making students of the scriptures as did Christ.

### **Taking language seriously**

It should be clear to anyone that the words *Christian*, *Christianity*, and *Christendom* are much too general and inclusive to be useful terms in a discussion about the content

of faith and the fruit of the actions of a person truly following Christ. Even the word *Christ* has to be carefully addressed because of its confusion with imposters and the emptying of its content by so many.

Christianity has little to do with the Christ of the first century and his teachings or his example. The first-century Christ who so enraged the leaders of the Jews would most likely have the same effect on many leaders of Christianity today who prefer their own traditions and their own teachings to those of the teachings of Christ. Much of Christianity has settled into the institutional practice of a typical religion and enjoys the prestige, profit, and acceptance that most religions exact from their cultures.

The fact that people would use the reputation of Christ and falsify his message for deceptive and other very human reasons is a danger that almost all the Christian scriptures address with a warning. Already during the life of Christ and during the work of the apostles, people had begun to manipulate the words of Jesus and his students to capitalize in some way on his influence. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul referred to the presence of false apostles whom the Corinthians had come to prefer over the true apostles, and in his letter to the Thessalonians he warned the readers about being deceived by information from visions, speeches, or forged letters that represent the truth in a different way than had already been given to them.

In many ways the history of Christianity is the history of the misguided, deceived, power-hungry, misinformed, manipulated, and sidetracked individuals and movements that intentionally or unintentionally set up religious caricatures of the message of Christ. Sometimes in this long and sad history, one can catch glimpses of people who recognize the folly of the Christianity around them and who set about to “return to the foundations” or “reform the church” or “return to the life and teachings of the Savior.” Often the ones we continue to hear about fall once again into the deceptive teachings of some teacher, tradition, or institution.

It can only be assumed that there were also those who resisted the temptations or the threats that turned so many heads. They were the ones who perceived the meaning of Christ and took seriously his example of resisting worldly temptations. Like their teacher, they no doubt suffered the pangs of rejection, were counted among the undesirables of their culture, and were ignored in the national pantheons of important people. They went unheralded, being satisfied that the student is not greater than the teacher.

Historically, the followers of Jesus have remained obscure much in the same way that the first followers were obscure and went unnoticed except by people who had an eye to see how unique they were. This does not mean that they were completely forgotten or ineffective as witnesses for Christ. For those who were searching and for those who constituted the “good ground” in which the seeds of the words of God could grow,

these people walked in the light as Christ did. He, too, shared this obscurity with his followers and ultimately he was counted among the criminals. Though he was a great light, few recognized him and few accepted him.

### **The seed of faith**

Coming to Christ or becoming a Christian are concepts that are understood in many different ways within the wide boundaries of Christianity. There are those who say it is a decision to be made, an aisle to be walked, an experience to be had, a prayer to be said, a ceremony to be absolved, an immersion to be undertaken, an invitation to be answered, a church to be joined, a task to be accomplished, or a life to be lived.

Whatever one might think, the scriptures are clear that coming to Christ means accepting him. Jesus Christ is the issue. Whatever one may think of belief, faith, trust, following, or accepting, they all have to be directed toward Jesus Christ. Not a redefined Jesus or a false Jesus, but the Jesus who lived in the first century and who corresponds to all that the writers of scripture wrote about him.

The scriptures have the last word in the matter of believing and following Christ, and they often approach the matter far differently than do the theologies, the creeds, the plans of salvation, the church traditions, and the many teachers throughout the ages of Christianity. Jesus' parable of the seed planter is a small example of many. It is very instructive in understanding what really takes place when the message of Christ is planted in someone's life.

“Now listen to the parable of the seed planter: When someone hears the word about the Kingdom of God and does not understand it, the evil one comes and takes what was sown in his heart; this is the seed sown along the path. The seed planted in rocky soil is the person who hears the word and immediately receives it gladly, but it takes no deep root in him and does not grow long. When trouble or persecution come because of the message, he quickly falls away. The seed planted among thorns is the person who hears it, but worldly goals and the temptation of wealth smother the message, so it produces nothing. But as for the seed planted in good soil, this is the person who hears the message and understands. He bears fruit, producing a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.” (Matthew 13:18-23)

This parable demonstrates a side of the inner dynamic that takes place in people who are exposed to the message of Christ. Some do not accept it, some accept but allow no root to take hold, some accept but allow the world to smother it, some accept and produce varying amounts of fruit. The fruit that is meant by no means includes things like going to church on Sunday or taking a tour of the Holy Land. The fruit refers to the character, the attitude, and the example of Jesus Christ.

It is interesting that this parable assumes that the seeds that are sown are truly the message of Christ. Those who have heard a false message have never had the seed planted in them, and many are the false messages about Jesus Christ within the halls of Christendom. This explains why so many “Christians” bear no semblance to Jesus Christ at all. His seed is not and never was in them.

Christianity with its worldly and very human traditions corresponds very much to the wishes and needs of the people who either did not accept the seed of the message, uprooted it, or smothered it. The religion of Christianity provides such people with the trappings of a message and a religion that professes to be Christian, but which reflects few of the teachings or examples of Christ. The Judaism of the first century was very much like this. It had the trappings of people who professed to be the children of Abraham, but it did not reflect his faith and obedience.

Are there people who do bear the fruit of Christ among the multitudes of Christendom? Undoubtedly there are. Jesus also ran into believers among the Jews. There were not many but they were immediately recognizable by their complete recognition of Christ and by their willingness to listen to him and do what he said. Listening and doing are the main roots of plants that bear the fruit produced by the message of Christ. Such people stand out. They have no interest in pleasing men. Their whole interest is in Christ. They make no pretenses, follow no human voice, swim against the stream of popular religion, are willing to suffer for their allegiance to Christ, and have the goal of being students of Christ and of encouraging others to be his students.

Just as Jesus was found among the lost and rebellious peoples of Israel, so too, are there followers of Jesus today among the lost and rebellious peoples of Christianity. Like Jesus, they too, are often rejected and seen as opponents, but their love for the people and their willingness to bear his shame are part of the fruit that is evident among those who allow his seed to grow in them.