



Chapter One

THE WAY IS LOST

I don't want to be a "Christian" anymore.

Don't get me wrong. I believe in Jesus Christ. I love him with everything that is within me. I echo the beliefs of those who have gone before me . . .

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
And in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, dead, and buried.
He descended to the dead;
On the third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven,
And sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The Holy Christian Church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting.
Amen!'

But there's the problem. It is the power of that simple statement of belief that has me troubled. This creed represents a faith that is no longer captured by the word "Christian." So maybe this is a better way to say it:

I can't abide by the term "Christian" anymore.

I guess we could say that the term has lost its meaning, but that would be missing the point. The problem is not that the word has lost its meaning; the problem is that it has taken on a new meaning. The word has been hijacked. It no longer means what it is supposed to mean, and I can't live with that anymore. I don't identify with what "Christian" has come to mean. In fact, the idea of calling myself a Christian is distasteful.

Maybe it is different in other parts of the world. But in North America, I have seen "Christian" come to mean out-of-touch, ultra-conservative, angry, fake, and hypocrite. In the United States, a Christian is a Republican who lives in a nice neighborhood in a nice house and visits the poor on mission trips.

I'm sure I have just offended many readers who will stop reading now, put this book down, and write nasty letters to the publisher. If that's how they feel, I guess it's probably best that they stop reading now. But in case you haven't set the book down already, realize that I'm not trying to make this up.² It may be from personal experience, but I feel as if Christianity has become more identified with politics and issues that we stand for (or against) than it is identified with following and becoming like Jesus Christ. Not that these things can't be a part of what it means to follow Jesus, but what bothers me is that we have made it *the* identity and *the* way to follow Jesus. In some way, we have it backward.

We live in a North American culture where Christianity has been the predominant religion for many years. A Christian culture—a Christian way of doing life has developed. And over time, it has become distorted. We start identifying the faith with the culture until the one has replaced the other. Instead of the faith shaping the culture, the culture has shaped the faith. So now, being a Christian has come to mean one thing—one way of following that has been immersed in, filtered through, and distorted by our culture's values. The result is that we have a consumer mindset, an entertainment-

obsessed, materialistic, reactionary way of following Jesus. It is very different from a way of following Jesus without that cultural distortion.

Now, realize that we can't do our faith in a vacuum—completely separate from culture. That is impossible. We can't eliminate culture—we exist within culture. (Culture is the way we do life—we all need to eat, but the way we prepare food, what spices we use, whether we use forks or chopsticks—that is a part of culture. It would be silly to try to remove all that and eat raw food with our hands off the floor. That is not what I'm trying to say.) All religion exists in culture. However, “The continuing challenge of Christianity is to live in the kingdom of God within our particular time and culture, without letting the culture overpower the kingdom.”³ I would contend the challenge is living out the kingdom without creating a false Christianity—and thinking that we are influencing our culture, when it is actually the other way around.

LOSING THE WAY

I don't mean to sound bitter. Honestly, it just makes me sad. I keep wondering how this happened. I want to use a different term, a different word to identify my faith. A long time ago, followers of Jesus were known as that—they were called “followers of the Way.” Maybe that would work better. I don't know. All I know is that . . .

At some point, we lost something.

I want to go back. I want to go back to a day when Christianity meant something more—when it meant something honorable, and it was not something to be embarrassed about. When you said the name “Christian,” people knew what kind of person you were and that realization made them feel safe, comforted, at peace, and at times convicted by the Holy Spirit. Maybe when they heard the word, they might even smile.

Could it be that we have put on so many layers of our own culturally-corroded, sin-veined, suburban-selfishness flavored, bland brand of Christianity that we can't recognize the real thing anymore? Is it possible that we have molded Jesus into our own image (instead of the other way around) to the point that we don't recognize him in our lives anymore? Is it possible that the image of him is so distorted and disfigured that when we actually try to

share Christ with our friends and families, he is rejected? Is it possible that his twisted visage is only a horrible Dorian Gray portrait,⁴ and not a true representation of the real, eternal, living Son of God?

Every year my family buys me one of those daily tear-off-page calendars that sit on your desk. I always get the one with words on it. It is like a daily dictionary. I tear off and save my favorites. One recent word of the day was *soi-disant* (pronounced, “swah disahhn.” You can say it with a snooty French accent for effect, if you like). The word means, “so-called, or self-styled.”⁵ It means we define something for ourselves. If someone was bragging, they might call themselves a “great leader,” and if you disagreed with them, you might say, “Yeah right, more like a *soi-disant* leader” (meaning “in your own mind, by your own definition, you are a great leader”).

SOI-DISANT BELIEF

I think that term describes it well; *soi-disant*—self-labeled, self-created, self-believed. “So called.” I think it applies here. What we have created is a *soi-disant* Christianity. A Christianity defined by self. We have changed the word “Christian” to represent a religion we have created to suit our desires. It is something of our own devices, to meet our own needs. We have put layer upon layer of Christian culture (Christianese) and self-serving interests on top of it. We have buried Jesus so far underneath our trappings that we could completely live out this *soi-disant* religion without ever really believing in or surrendering⁶ to the real, living, New Testament Christ.

8

I used to like Christian music (not the “everything sounds the same Nashville cookie cutter radio play” stuff, but the real creative cutting edge or real spirit of worship stuff). Sometimes the good music can be hard to find, so I would spend hours listening at a Christian book store. One time, I thought I had found an album worth trying, so I got in line to make my purchase. In line ahead of me was another shopper, a well-dressed woman who was holding a small dog in her arms.

I don’t know what kind of dog it was, but it had all of its fur pulled into little tufts, rubber-banded together. So there were dozens of fur poofs jotting out, all with small, twisted rubber bands at their base. It must have taken hours to pull all that fur into little tufts like that.

The lady behind the counter noticed it too, and made a comment. “What a beautiful dog!”

The woman made no hesitation. “Yes it is,” she proudly declared. “The dog’s name is ‘Honor.’ You see, we asked God for a championship show dog, and God gave us this dog. God *honored* his promise to us. Honor has won several dog show competitions, and is one of the best show dogs in her category.” Both the store clerk and I smiled for a moment, a bit caught off guard by her enthusiasm.

Now I don’t know if it was the setting (surrounded by the stuff of our consumer Christian culture—right there at the checkout were “Testamints,” breath mints with crosses on them—I mean, seriously . . .), and I don’t know why it hit me the way it did. I love dogs; I grew up with dogs in the house my entire life. I don’t have anything against dogs. But something was bothering me. By the time I got to my car, the weight of that moment hit me.

SHOW DOGS???

Is that the best understanding we have of the kingdom of God—show dogs? That is what we pray for, and trust God for? Is that what our Christian faith has become? Is that what Jesus desired and hoped for us when he died on the Cross? Show dogs?

I am not trying to purposely offend anyone, but maybe our idea of faith should be challenged at this point. When did Christianity become so turned upside down? When did it become about us? It just seems that Christianity has morphed into something it wasn’t meant to be, and everyone just accepts it as the real thing. If I am being judgmental, I pray for your forgiveness and mercy. Seriously. I mean it. I don’t want to judge, lest I be judged. Obviously, I can’t know the heart or motives of someone in line ahead of me at the bookstore. However, it seems to me that when we have formed our lives around things that are very insignificant and have no eternal consequence whatsoever, we aren’t very interested in following the will of God, or surrendering our lives to whatever God may desire to do with it. At that point, we are more interested in pursuing our own will and dreams (like our dreams of having a champion show dog) and taking God along for the ride. I mean seriously, on Judgment Day, is Jesus going to run up to this woman

and say, “Am I glad that you prayed for that champion show dog—I was really afraid that Satan was going to steal another dog show championship away from the kingdom of God.” Maybe I’m wrong, but that doesn’t seem like following God in obedience, it seems like *leading* God on a leash and calling on him to give us what we want to make us happy. *Soi-disant*.

OK. I’m sorry. I guess I’m being too hard on this lady (by the way, if you happen to know her, or you see any lady with a rubber-banded fur dog in a Christian bookstore, you might recommend that she not buy this book).⁷ I am being too hard on her—because I know I’m no different. I’ve bought into the same layered, buried, personal consumer kingdom faith. I would prefer that God cater to my whims instead of me surrendering to being a follower of the Way. Maybe the only difference between me and the dog lady is that somehow, deep down, I feel that I’ve lost something—I’m missing something. It aches inside me. Maybe that lady thinks a dog-centered Christian life is what it is supposed to be. I don’t. I *know* I’ve turned Christianity into something that allows me to live unchanged, and live for myself, and it is tearing me up inside. When I compare that life to what I read in the Bible, I know that my life and the life depicted there are not the same. And when I start being honest with myself, and look at the glimpses of Jesus we have in the New Testament, and compare them to what I *think* I know of him—it makes me sad.

10

When did God change from the great giver of life to a MasterCard for our selfishness?

What if I have been living out my so-called Christian life, and I have got it all wrong?

WOULD WE KNOW IF IT WAS WRONG?

Think about this for a minute. What if everything you have heard, know, and understand about Christianity—is wrong? Is it possible? Could it be that we have so distorted the faith that most of what we believe and know about it is completely off base? Oh sure, there are some cracks in the cover-up where the light gleams through, there are moments and glimpses of truth, but for the most part, is it possible that we have misunderstood, misinterpreted, and undone much that Jesus did and taught?

Now, for those of you who disagree with me on that point, consider this. It may be possible that we are so far gone, our understanding is so distorted, that we don't even realize it. When someone would speak the truth to us, we would think they were lying or exaggerating. But we have to open our minds to the possibility that we don't understand Jesus and the Way to follow him. We must consider the possibility that we have been following a way that is so distorted *and so widely accepted* that everyone around us believes it, so that the distorted picture seems like the real thing.

Don't think that is possible? This is exactly the situation during the time when Jesus walked the earth. There was a religion (the Jewish religion) that had gotten so far from what it was supposed to be about that much of Jesus' recorded ministry is spent arguing with their religious leaders and turning their idea of following God on its head.

Don't believe me? Let's take a closer look at an example from the Bible. Let's start with the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5—7.

JESUS AND THE LAW

Some quick background—Jesus is talking to a Jewish audience. The Jewish people were those who believed in God and followed God's law based on what had been revealed to them in the Old Testament. Jesus starts walking his hearers through the “Law of God,” but what he says about it is not what they know. In fact, it is so different from their understanding that he starts with a disclaimer! What he is about to say is so different from what they understand to be the truth that he has to tell them ahead of time that he knows and believes that this is the law of God—God's holy word passed down to them. He is about to tell them truth that has been so hidden underneath their religious understanding that it is going to sound wrong to them—so he reminds them that he really does think the law of God is important, and that he affirms and respects it.

He affirms the law with a spoonful of sugar to help them swallow the medicine of truth. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is

accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-19). Did you catch that? What he is about to say next is not abolishing the law, but *fulfilling* it.

Then comes the sucker punch, the slap in the face that they were not expecting: “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). What? We have it wrong? What we have been taught is not the real thing—not a true understanding of righteousness? You mean the way we have been following is not the real way? Not enter the kingdom? He must be kidding . . .

But he is not kidding. Jesus goes on to explain. “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you . . .” (Matthew 5:21-22a). OK, we have to slow down here or we will miss it. Let’s break this down. “You have heard that it was said . . .” What was said? “Do not murder.” But where does that come from? Who said it? It is a direct quote from the Old Testament, from the law of God—actually from the TEN COMMANDMENTS. OK, so it is a direct quote from God himself. Written by the finger of God on some stone tablets and given to Moses, and passed on to the Israelites, the Jewish people—God’s chosen ones.

Then Jesus does something very interesting. He makes a correction. “But I say . . .”

We have just said that Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. He is not making a correction in the TEN COMMANDMENTS, is he? Why would he make such a sharp contrast? Jesus makes this contrast because even though he is quoting the law of God, that is not what the people are hearing. They had so buried the law of God under their interpretations, under their traditions, under their culturally influenced understanding of it, that they no longer *heard* the real thing. Jesus is not correcting the law, he is letting the people know that they have missed the real thing. They have created a way of doing the law that is not the real way. So Jesus is pointing them back to what it was intended to be.

Jesus then goes on to explain the meaning behind the law. It is about the heart. Truthfully, you can keep that commandment by staying in bed all day, and never going near anyone. But the intent of God's law is about more than murder as an act. Jesus says watch your words, and even if someone has something against you (whether or not you have something against them), go and repair the relationship. You see, this law is about love.

The religious leaders and Jewish people had made it about just barely keeping the law. "Don't murder" became carefully defined, including clarifying times when it might be acceptable to kill someone. Jesus cuts to the chase and explains the original intent—not figuring out when you should kill or not kill but instead, seeking love and actively finding the way to restore the relationship with those who hold a grudge against you.

Jesus keeps going, following the same pattern:

You heard this (from God, but it has not been rightly understood)

But I say (correcting the interpretation)

The law is then correctly explained.

He does this with adultery, divorce, swearing, the "eye for an eye" principle, and what it means to love your neighbor. He also redefines giving, prayer, fasting, and what treasure is. The people and their leaders had so badly misinterpreted their religion that they thought as long as you don't touch the person, you can think whatever you want about them. So long as you didn't sin with your body, you could sin in your heart as much as you wanted.

They thought that loving those who love you was enough, and that it was acceptable to hate those who hate you. But that is far from the heart of God, and if we want to be God's children, we must become like him and love even those who hate us. They thought that prayer and fasting were religious medals to be put on display, but that's not true when you follow in the way of Jesus. Following the practices of his way is more about living for God and not caring what other people think or trying to impress them.

Jesus walks them through this, not because the law of God was broken or should be rejected, but because it had been so misunderstood and twisted that it no longer reflected what it meant to follow God's way.

Are we like the people of that day? Do we desperately need Jesus to come and re-interpret and re-examine us to see if we are really following his way?

Could it be that the way of Jesus we are showing the world around us is not the real way?

Could it be that the world looks at Christians as strange, irrelevant, narrow-minded, and hypocritical, not *in spite* of how we have lived out our faith, but precisely *because of it*?⁸

WHAT'S MISSING

I think I know what the problem is. We have lost touch with something at the core of this way of believing and following. We are missing the most important ingredients. It is like leaving out an ingredient when baking a cake; it doesn't taste right. So if we back up and rewind to before a cake is a cake, we see it is a mix of separate ingredients that are each made up of other ingredients. A cake is made up of flour, eggs, and milk, and the flour, eggs, and milk are made out of building blocks (molecules, for you science types). If we go back far enough, we get to the elements—those primary core ingredients upon which everything else is built—which make up the ingredients that make up the mix that makes up the cake.

That is what is missing.

14

We are not just missing key ingredients, we are missing elements. The core of the core. The main ingredient of the main ingredient. You know if you break us down, we human beings are composed of elements. We are made up of the same elemental compounds as everything else. We are gas and metal and mostly water. And if we were missing one of those key elements, we would not have life.

But I'm not trying to talk about chemistry here. I'm trying to talk about life. Living. Spirit.

We are missing spiritual elements. And we are dying.