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CHURCH
HISTORY

IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

UPDATED  EDITION



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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CHAPTER 1

AWAY WITH THE KING!

The Jesus Movement

CHRISTIANITY IS THE ONLY major religion to have as its central event the humiliation of its God.

“Dear dying Lamb,” believers sing,
“thy precious Blood
Shall never lose its power,
Till all the ransomed Church of God
Be saved to sin no more.”

Crucifixion was a barbarous death, reserved for agitators, pirates, and slaves. Jewish law cursed “everyone who hangs on a tree” and the Roman statesman, Cicero, warned, “Let the very name of the cross be far, not only from the body of a Roman citizen, but even from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears.”

Part of the victim’s punishment was to be whipped and then to carry the heavy crossbeam to the place of his own death. When the cross was raised, a notice was pinned to it giving the culprit’s name and crime. In Jesus’ case, INRI: *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum* (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews).

Pontius Pilate, Jesus’ Roman judge, apparently intended it as a final thrust of malice aimed at the Jews, but, like the cross itself, Jesus’ followers found a special meaning in the message.

JESUS AND THE CHURCH

Jesus was a Jew. He came from a Jewish family; he studied the Jewish scriptures; he observed the Jewish religion. Any serious study of

his life makes this so clear that many people have asked if Jesus ever intended to create that company of followers we call the church. Albert Schweitzer, the famous missionary to Africa, believed that Jesus was obsessed with a dream of the impending end of the world and died to make the dream come true. Rudolf Bultmann, an influential German theologian, taught that Jesus was a prophet who challenged people to make a radical decision for or against God. Other Christians have held that Jesus' kingdom was a brotherhood of love and forgiveness. If he founded a society at all, they say, it was an invisible one, a moral or spiritual company—not an institution with rites and creeds.

This anti-institutional view of Christianity is so widespread that we had better face the question straightaway. Did Jesus have anything to do with the formation of the Christian church? And if he did, how did he shape its special character?

The gospel writers picture Jesus as retracing the steps of Israel. Reminiscent of Israel, Jesus spent time in Egypt, entered the Jordan (baptism), was tempted in the wilderness, called twelve apostles (like twelve tribes), spoke God's word like Moses (Sermon on the Mount), preached five sermons (compare the Pentateuch) in Matthew, performed mighty deeds of deliverance (signs, wonders, and exorcisms), and confronted imperial powers. Where Israel had failed, Jesus had been a faithful Son. His followers were to take up the task of being God's servant people. He worked with a faithful band of disciples, he taught them about life in what he called "the kingdom of God," and he introduced them to the new covenant that bound them together in forgiveness and love.

Granted, that simple company lacked many of the laws, officials, ceremonies, and beliefs of later Christendom, but it was a society apart. Jesus made a persistent point about the special kind of life that separated the kingdom of God from rival authorities among men. Little by little his disciples came to see that following him meant saying no to the other voices calling for their loyalties. In one sense that was the birth of the Jesus movement. And in that sense, at least, Jesus "founded" the church.

PALESTINE IN JESUS' DAY

During the days of Jesus, Palestine never lacked for loyalties. It was a crossroads of culture and peoples. Its two million or more people, ruled by Rome, were divided by region, religion, and politics. "In a day's journey a man could travel from rural villages where farmers tilled their fields with primitive plows to bustling cities where men

enjoyed the comforts of Roman civilization. In the Holy City of Jerusalem, Jewish priests offered sacrifices to the Lord of Israel, while at Sebaste, only thirty miles away, pagan priests held rites in honor of the Roman god Jupiter.”

The Jews, who represented only half the population, despised their foreign overlords and deeply resented the signs of pagan culture in their ancient homeland. The Romans were not just another in a long series of alien conquerors. They were representatives of a hated way of life. Their imperial reign brought to Palestine the Hellenistic (Greek) culture that the Syrians had tried to impose forcibly on the Jews over a century before. All the children of Abraham despised their overlords; they simply disagreed about how to resist them.

Centuries earlier the prophets of Israel had promised a day when the Lord would deliver his people from their pagan rulers and establish his kingdom over the whole earth. On that day, they said, he would send an anointed ruler, a messiah, to bring an end to the corrupt world of the present and replace it with an eternal paradise. He would raise the dead and judge their actions in this world. The wicked would be punished, but the righteous would be rewarded with eternal life in the kingdom of God.

According to the book of Daniel and other popular Jewish writings, the Lord’s kingdom would be established only after a final cosmic struggle between the forces of evil, led by Satan, and the forces of good, led by the Lord. It would end with the destruction of the existing world order and the creation of a kingdom without end (Dan. 7:13–22). This belief, along with ideas about the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment, was in Jesus’ day very much a part of popular Jewish faith.

Out of the distaste for life under the Romans, several factions arose among the Jews, each interpreting the crisis in a different way. The Jesus movement was one of them.

One group, the *Pharisees*, emphasized those Jewish traditions and practices that set them apart from pagan culture. Their name means *separated ones*, and they prided themselves on their strict observance of every detail of the Jewish law and their extreme intolerance of people whom they considered ritually unclean. This piety and patriotism won respect among the people.

On the other hand, some Jews found Roman rule a distinct advantage. Among them were members of Jerusalem’s aristocracy. From this small group of wealthy, pedigreed families came the high priest and the lesser priests who controlled the temple. Many of them enjoyed the sophisticated manners and fashions of Greco-Roman culture. Some even took Greek names. Their interests were represented by the

conservative political group known as the *Sadducees*. At the time of Jesus, these men still controlled the high Jewish council, or Sanhedrin, but they had less influence among the common people. Another party, the *Zealots*, were bent on armed resistance to all Romans in the fatherland. They looked back two centuries to the glorious days of the Maccabees when religious zeal combined with a ready sword to overthrow the pagan Greek overlords. Thus the hills of Galilee often concealed a number of guerrilla bands ready to ignite a revolt or destroy some symbol of Roman authority in Palestine.

Finally came the *Essenes*, who had little or no interest in politics or in warfare. Instead, they withdrew in protest to the Judean wilderness, believing the temple of Judaism to be hopelessly compromised. There, in isolated monastic communities, they studied the Scriptures and prepared themselves for the Lord's kingdom, which they believed would dawn at any moment.

Scholars typically identify the Essenes as the occupants of the Quran community who copied ancient manuscripts and wrote commentaries. These documents, called the Dead Sea Scrolls, were discovered in 1946.

Jesus had to call for the loyalty of his followers without confusing the purpose of his mission with the objectives of these other parties among the Jews. It was a tough assignment.

Judaism Now and Then

The Pharisees' version of first-century Judaism has survived and evolved to become the Rabbinic Judaism we know today. The destruction of the temple in AD 70 changed the character of Judaism. The Roman resolve to quash revolutionary movements made the Zealots (a protest seeking political revolution) and the Essenes (a protest seeking purity) impracticable.

The Sadducees were the aristocratic power brokers who operated the temple, and they saw their vision of Judaism vanish with the temple's destruction. The destiny of Judaism was left to the "book people" (the Pharisees), who sought to direct the entirety of their lives by the instructions of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Pharisees' book-oriented version survived once the temple was destroyed and Roman power silenced revolutionary voices.

JESUS' MINISTRY

Jesus chose to begin by recognizing a new movement in the Judean wilderness led by a prophet named John. The ford of the Jordan, just north of the Dead Sea, was one of the busiest parts of the whole region,

so John the Baptist got the crowds he wanted to hear him. Wearing a garment of camel's hair, his eyes ablaze, he stood on the riverbank and warned all who passed by to repent of their sins and prepare for the coming day of judgment by receiving baptism in the Jordan. Israel first entered the land by crossing the Jordan; Jesus began his ministry at this pivotal place.

Many thought John was the promised Messiah, but he vehemently denied any such role. He explained his mission in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Matt. 3:3). He was, he claimed, only the forerunner of the Messiah. "I baptize you with water" he said, "but . . . he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16).

John's call to repentance and righteousness drew Jesus to the Jordan. He found in John's message the truth of God, so "to fulfill all righteousness" he submitted to John's baptism and soon afterward began his own mission, proclaiming, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

Jesus, however, rather than remaining in the desert, chose to begin his mission in Galilee, a land of gentle hills and warm, green valleys. During those early weeks and months he traveled from village to village throughout Galilee, preaching in synagogues in the evening and on the Sabbath. Carrying a bundle of bread, a wineskin, and a walking stick, he hiked along the dusty highways. He probably dressed as any other traveler, in a rough linen tunic covered by a heavier red or blue mantle.

On a typical day Jesus would set out at dawn and walk mile after mile. Toward sunset he would enter a village and proceed to its synagogue. As one popular history puts it, "There he probably received a warm welcome from the townspeople, who often had no resident rabbi and relied on the services of wandering teachers like Jesus. When the lamps had been lit and the men of the village had taken their places, Jesus would seat himself on the raised central platform" and begin reading a passage from the sacred Scriptures. In a clear, forceful voice he would announce the fulfillment of some prophecy or relate some parable.

The main theme of Jesus' teaching was the kingdom of God. What did he mean by that? Did he believe in a dramatic intervention of God in the history of the world? Or did he mean that the kingdom is already here in some sense? He probably meant both. The two can be reconciled if we recognize that the phrase stands for the sovereignty of a personal and gracious God, not a geographical or local realm.

Jesus taught that the rule of God was already present in saving power in his own person. And he offered proof of the point. His miracles of

healing were apparently not just marvels; they were *signs*, the powers of the age to come already manifest in the present age. "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons," he once said, "then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). Yet he feared that his cures would be misinterpreted, that people would see him as just another magician, and he often cautioned those he healed to be silent.

Of course, the news spread, and before long people in every town and village in Galilee were talking excitedly of the new wonder-worker who could cure the blind, the lame, and the sick with the power of his voice and the mere touch of his strong carpenter's hands. Soon large crowds gathered wherever he spoke.

Jesus' growing popularity aroused controversy, especially among the Pharisees, who hated to see people following a man who had never studied under their learned scribes. They didn't hesitate to question his credentials openly.

JESUS' MESSAGE

Jesus welcomed their challenge for it gave him a chance to contrast his message of repentance and grace with the self-righteousness of the Pharisees.

On one occasion, probably as pilgrims were on their way to Jerusalem for one of the great feasts, Jesus told about two men who went to the temple to pray. What a striking contrast they made! One was a Pharisee; the other, surprisingly, was a despised tax collector.

With a touch of showmanship, the holy man took his stand and prayed, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:11-12). That, at any rate, is what he prayed to himself, and it was not a hollow boast. Pharisees excelled in those works of righteousness—fasting and tithing—that set them apart from wicked men.

The fault of the prayer was in its spirit of self-righteousness and its cruel contempt for others. The Pharisee alone was righteous, and all his fellow mortals were included under one sweeping condemnation.

The tax collector believed he was religiously compromised. By working to collect taxes for the Romans, he broke faith with his own people. Sensing his own feeble religious standing, he stood at a distance, the very image of contrition. His eyes were downcast, his head bowed in guilt. His prayer was a sob of remorse, a cry for mercy: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

"I tell you," said Jesus, "this man went down to his house justified rather than the other" (Luke 18:14). The contrast between the piety of