

What If
Jesus Is

RIGHT?

EXAMINING
JESUS' CLAIMS
ABOUT HIMSELF
IN A WORLD FULL
OF FALSEHOODS

DOUGLAS
GROOTHUIS

Author of the
Classic *Christian
Apologetics* Textbook

LINDSEY
MEDENWALDT

Author of *Bridge-Building
Apologetics*

Here's your chance to meet the real Jesus, not the caricature of Him that culture likes to offer. Douglas Groothuis and Lindsey Medenwaldt strip away the fabrications and misunderstandings that tend to obscure the identity of the Nazarene, revealing instead His true identity and His claims that will rock your world. With clarity and creativity, they set forth the eternal hope that can be found only in Him.

LEE STROBEL, bestselling author of *The Case for Christ* and *Seeing the Supernatural*

In *What If Jesus Is Right?*, Groothuis and Medenwaldt show why we should listen to Jesus, and they also clearly explain why not to trust beckoning alternatives. Chapter by chapter, it marches to a decision: Jesus is right.

DR. MARVIN OLASKY, editor in chief, *Christianity Today*

Have you ever wondered, What if Jesus is right? Right about the best way to live and about the answers to life's biggest questions: Does God exist? Is there life after death? Who did Jesus claim to be? What did He actually teach? How can I know He is right? And most importantly, what does it mean to know Him personally? With clarity, compassion, and careful scholarship, Dr. Douglas Groothuis and Lindsey Medenwaldt guide readers through these critical questions to the hope, assurance, and life found in Christ alone. I highly recommend it.

DR. JOHN ANKERBERG, apologist and host of *The John Ankerberg Show*

Every new generation in Christianity needs its own apologists. Many skeptical questions and their answers remain timeless; others vary, depending on social trends. Little in *What If Jesus Is Right?* is new; if it were, it would be suspect! But veteran philosopher Doug Groothuis teams up with his former student Lindsey Medenwaldt, who well understands her generation's issues, to provide this wonderfully incisive and succinct survey of key reasons to believe Jesus and then to follow him.

CRAIG L. BLOMBERG, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of New Testament, Denver Seminary

In an era when the teachings of New Atheism have failed its followers and left people in a state of confusion, people are running to see if the Jesus Christianity speaks of can bring clarity and truth. This book leaves very few questions unanswered about who Jesus is, why he came, what it means for us, and how can we know that his message is true. It not only provides evidence for his claims, existence, and resurrection, but it also helps us to know that his message is so good that we must take time to taste and see.

ALYCIA WOOD, apologist at Apologetics, Inc.

What If Jesus Is

RIGHT?

EXAMINING JESUS' CLAIMS ABOUT HIMSELF
IN A WORLD FULL OF FALSEHOODS

DOUGLAS GROOTHUIS & LINDSEY MEDENWALDT

Visit Tyndale online at tyndale.com.

Visit the authors at douglasgroothuis.com and lindseymedenwaldt.com.

Tyndale, Tyndale's quill logo, *Tyndale Elevate*, and the Tyndale Elevate logo are registered and/or common law trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries in the USA and various other jurisdictions around the world. All rights reserved. See tyndale.com for a full list of trademarks owned by Tyndale House Ministries. Tyndale Elevate is a nonfiction imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois.

What If Jesus Is Right?: Examining Jesus' Claims About Himself in a World Full of Falsehoods

Copyright © 2026 by Douglas Groothuis and Lindsey Medenwaldt. All rights reserved.

Cover and interior photograph of paper texture copyright © Marjan Blan/Unsplash. All rights reserved.

Cover and interior image of handwritten word *Right* by Dean H. Renninger. Copyright © Tyndale House Ministries. All rights reserved.

Author photo of Douglas Groothuis by Cameron Bertuzzi, copyright © 2018. All rights reserved.

Author photo of Lindsey Medenwaldt by Jay Medenwaldt, copyright © 2018. All rights reserved.

Cover and interior design by Ellery Sterling

Published in association with the literary agency of William K. Jensen Literary Agency, 119 Bampton Court, Eugene, Oregon 97404.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,[®] *NIV*.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[®] Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked ESV are from taken from The ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the (NASB[®]) New American Standard Bible,[®] copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.lockman.org. Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NRSVue are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition Bible, copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked TLB are taken from *The Living Bible*, copyright © 1971 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

The URLs in this book were verified prior to publication. The publisher is not responsible for content in the links, links that have expired, or websites that have changed ownership after that time.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 979-8-4005-0148-7

Printed in the United States of America

32 31 30 29 28 27 26
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

An Invitation to Discover Jesus ix

PART 1: THE FIGHT OVER JESUS 1

1. Why Should We Listen to Jesus Today? 3
2. False Claim: Jesus Was Only a Great Moral Teacher 13
3. False Claim: Jesus Is Radically Inclusive 29
4. False Claim: Jesus Wants Us to Always Be Healthy and Prosperous 43
5. Beware of Fake Jesuses 59

PART 2: A SERIOUS INVITATION 73

6. Can We Trust Jesus? 77
7. Jesus Claims “I Am” 87
8. Jesus Claims a New Kingdom Is at Hand 101
9. Jesus Claims the Authority to Forgive Sins 117
10. Jesus Claims to Know the Truth About the Future 131
11. Jesus Calls Us to Discern 145
12. Jesus: The Resurrection and the Life 155
13. Jesus’ Claims to Divinity 171

Decision Time: Is Jesus Right? 185

Epilogue: Becky’s Journey 197

Acknowledgments 205

Notes 207

About the Authors 224

An Invitation to Discover Jesus

*My son says Jesus was just a moral teacher but not divine.
How can I use the Bible to show him that's not true?*

*My neighbor claims to be a Christian, but her view of Jesus
doesn't seem biblical to me. What does the Bible say about who
Jesus is?*

*My friend says Christians are all judgmental hypocrites but that
Jesus didn't judge anyone. Is she right?*

*I was taught that if I believe in Jesus and follow all the rules,
I can be prosperous and happy. But I've suffered some bad blows
recently. What does the Bible say about that?*

*I'm a Christian and I've heard a lot about what Jesus taught,
but sometimes I have questions and wonder if I really can trust
him. Does the Bible have answers for my doubts?*

Perhaps you can relate to one or more of these questions. Each one is a snapshot of the kinds of issues and questions we might encounter as Christians, and unfortunately, there are a lot of

misconceptions—among believers and nonbelievers alike—about what Jesus said and why his words matter today.

The good news is that the Bible provides clear answers to questions like these, and we're eager to help you find them. We'll respond to some of the common misconceptions about Christ, and then we'll dive into his own words and explore how they apply to us. We know these topics can be difficult, especially if you have loved ones you desperately want to trust Jesus. Please don't lose heart. When you're anchored to the foundational truths of the Bible and living from the love of Christ, lives and eternities *can* change. Our own stories are proof of that.

OUR STORIES OF DISCOVERING JESUS

There is no cookie-cutter design to discovering Jesus. Some of us are born into Christian families, go to Sunday school every week, and just naturally find our way to trusting and following Christ. Others of us may have never heard of Jesus before and discover him through a new friend or a group at school. Whatever our paths of discovery may be, the impact of choosing to accept Jesus as Savior is the same—a transformed life of hope in Christ. Although your story of coming to faith may be different from ours, we hope sharing our stories may help you understand how God can use any personal circumstances to point us to Jesus, no matter how “lost” our family members, friends, or neighbors might be.

DOUG

Growing up, I knew little about the Bible and nothing about its central message—the good news of God's love for his wayward creatures demonstrated through Jesus' death and resurrection. Although I was

baptized as a baby and attended church a few times as a child, by the time I became a teenager, I was a hippie, as were most of my friends. Unless you were a “Jesus freak,” a hippie was someone who lived a countercultural lifestyle, was enamored of Eastern mysticism, and was open to mind-altering drugs as a supposed gateway to enlightenment. I knew little of Jesus and had met only a few Christians in high school, none of whom told me about Jesus.

Because of my interest in rock music, a few long-haired friends and I thought it would be amusing to attend two lectures by an anti-rock-and-roll evangelist named Bob Larson. However, his warnings about the dark side of rock music—especially its associations with the occult—along with his presentation of the gospel message, bothered me. After one of his messages, a woman asked me if I knew where I would end up if I died in a car crash that night. I did not, and that unnerved me. She also asked if I thought I was a sinner. I said no. But the “hound of heaven,” as the poem puts it, was beginning to pursue me.¹

When I went to college to pursue journalism at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, I delved more deeply into Eastern religions and some esoteric teachings by the Russian mystics George I. Gurdjieff² and Pyotr D. Ouspensky. I also studied Western philosophy and was impressed by the virile atheism of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and especially Friederick Nietzsche.³ Theirs seemed a courageous choice: Throw off God, religion, and traditional morality, and carve out your own path (to somewhere). But the hound of heaven was still on my scent. He placed two signs of truth in my way—a long-dead Christian philosopher and two living Christians in Boulder, Colorado.

One night when I awoke feeling utterly alone and on the wrong side of God, I opened at random a book that had been assigned for

my modern philosophy class called *The Sickness unto Death* by Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). That book (which I still own) read me. It described a form of despair wherein one pits oneself against God to find meaning as a rebel. I wrote in the margin, “This describes me tonight.” Despite the humanistic cheers of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, the natural beauty of Colorado had worked against my attempted atheism, since I knew deep down that God was behind nature (see Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:18-21). I was fleeing God and denying God, not disproving God. Kierkegaard told me so, and I knew he was right. But the heavenly hound had yet another sign.

On weekends, I sometimes hitchhiked to visit my longtime friend Greg, who was attending the University of Colorado in Boulder. During one visit, he introduced me to two women living in his dorm, both of whom were part of The Navigators campus ministry. They were “Jesus freaks,” he said, and nice looking. But the visit did not go as planned. No romantic progress was made, and their bold and clear Christian witness gave me pause. *What if they were right about Jesus?*

Upon returning home to Anchorage the summer after my freshman year, I found that half my high school friends had become Christians, and I felt stuck somewhere between belief and unbelief. But after long conversations with several of the new converts—and some more hauntings by the heavenly hound—I called out to Christ publicly.

“I will follow you forever,” I cried out to Jesus in a group of young people in June of 1976. As a nineteen-year-old, I realized I was lost and needed Jesus Christ for direction and meaning. Jesus, in fact, had proclaimed, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). I had reached a fork in the road of life. It was either Jesus or . . . what? There was nothing else.

The only problem was, unlike several of my friends, I did not feel any different after my public confession of Christ as Lord. That troubled me. I later said to my friend Ruby, “I’m not sure if I really am a Christian.” She calmly replied, “Oh, you are a Christian.” I was, because I had trusted in Jesus Christ and confessed him as Lord (Matthew 10:32). No one is saved by an experience, but only by God’s grace, received by faith in Jesus.

My sense of being a true follower of Jesus grew over time as I learned the Bible, experienced Christian fellowship, learned to pray, shared my faith with others, and studied the reasons to believe that Christianity is objectively true (apologetics). If I had been given a profound experience at my conversion, I might not have followed up with rigorous study to make sure I was right in following Jesus.

An old and simple gospel hymn sums up my nearly fifty years as a Christian:

*I have decided to follow Jesus—
no turning back, no turning back.
The world behind me, the cross before me—
no turning back, no turning back.
Though none go with me, still I will follow—
no turning back, no turning back.
My cross I’ll carry, till I see Jesus—
no turning back, no turning back.*⁴

The resolution and dedication of this chorus echoes the desire of my soul. However, I attribute all my knowledge of God and all my interest in Jesus as Lord and Savior to the amazing grace of God alone (Ephesians 2:8; Titus 3:5-6). It is that grace that led me to devote my entire adult life to examining, explaining, and defending

the biblical message of Jesus Christ, which is rooted in the whole worldview of the Bible.

But more than academic study, which is my lifeblood as a teacher, my life has been a successful experiment of faith in Jesus through “many dangers, toils, and snares,” as the hymn “Amazing Grace” puts it.⁵ In the epilogue, I speak of the great crucible of my life as a Christian, the dementia that claimed my first wife, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (1954–2018). Even then, and especially then, the promises and presence of Jesus sustained me through horror after horror and now sustain me through a happier season of life (Ecclesiastes 3:1-7).

LINDSEY

My parents are both Christians, and I was raised in the church. My dad is a pastor, and for a time, my parents were full-time missionaries. When I was growing up, we spent our mornings watching anyone featured on the Trinity Broadcasting Network. We often went to church twice on Sunday and on Wednesday evenings too. Around age five, I walked up the long center aisle of our church and professed that I would follow Jesus—and I have ever since. Although my testimony differs in almost every way from Doug’s, it isn’t any more or less significant than his. Jesus meets us where we are, and he pursues us with relentless passion and compassion.

It wasn’t until my first apologetics class in seminary (Doug’s Introduction to Apologetics and Ethics) that I realized what had been missing in my testimony of faith—knowledge of why Christianity is rational and true. I found that although I could tell people how much I loved Jesus, I couldn’t really tell them how I knew Jesus was the Savior of the world or why he was worth following. I later wrote, “Apologetics opened up a way for me to love people in a way I never realized was possible. We aren’t supposed to only love seekers. We

are to love the skeptics and the doubters, and just telling them to ‘Let go and let God’ was *not* the way to love them. They needed real answers.”⁶

But the truth was, *I* needed real answers too—and I found them. Before my revelation in seminary, I believed in and loved Jesus, and I was saved. But since then, I’ve pursued him as he has pursued me. I now have confidence with my entire being that what I believe about Jesus is true. We’ve been given hearts and minds, and Jesus tells us to love God with all of ourselves (Mark 12:30). I do love Jesus, and now I can tell people why.

JESUS, ONE OF A KIND FOR EVERYONE

Our stories of coming to faith are part of a grand narrative of countless others who have likewise been pursued by the hound of heaven and have submitted to Jesus as Master. No one has influenced the world of religion, philosophy, or theology as widely or as deeply (even when people disagree with him). Jesus is without doubt a world-historical figure. Even those who are not Christians often invoke his sayings or principles or try to enlist him to their cause. Principles such as “turn the other cheek” and “practice what you preach” were first on the lips of Jesus (Matthew 5:39; 23:3). Even outside of Christianity, people want to claim Jesus as their own. There is a New Age version of Jesus, a Muslim version of Jesus, a revolutionary version of Jesus, and so on. But despite Jesus’ wide influence and the varying interpretations of his life and teaching, not all views of Jesus can be correct. He is not all over the spiritual map, but rather located at its very center.

No leader of any beneficial historical significance has cared more about what people thought of him—about who he was—than Jesus

of Nazareth. While dictators such as Joseph Stalin and Adolph Hitler cared about their image—since they were megalomaniacs and wanted political worship—that was not Jesus, who set up no political kingdom. In fact, Jesus’ concern for how others viewed him seems odd for someone who was humble and did not put himself above others or brag about himself. As he said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29).

Jesus tied what people thought about him—his identity—and how they responded to him, to their well-being in both time and eternity. That’s why he promised rest for the souls of all who took up his yoke. Although some teachers offer their followers practices to help them find rest, few claim to be the very source of that rest. Jesus did. He called for an individual response to the claims he made about his identity, credentials, and achievements as if everything was on the line, because it was—and is.

Doug began following Jesus in the summer of 1976, and Lindsey found Jesus in 1986. We have never looked back, nor have we ceased to be amazed at Jesus. Our hope is that all who read this book will also be amazed at Jesus. If you’ve already trusted Christ, we pray that what you read will not only strengthen your faith but also equip you to share it confidently with others. And if you’re still investigating Christianity, we pray you will find the hope and answers you seek and soon come to believe in Jesus along with us.

Let the journey of discovery begin.

PART 1

The Fight over Jesus

YOU'RE HAVING COFFEE WITH A LONGTIME FRIEND who isn't a Christian when she tells you she recently heard a podcast that featured a heated conversation between a Christian and a non-Christian. The Christian said Jesus was the Son of God who performed miracles, transformed lives by forgiving sins, and physically rose from the grave. The non-Christian said supernatural events don't happen, so Jesus couldn't be God, couldn't have performed miracles, and couldn't have come back from the dead. Your friend admits she isn't sure who to believe. She also wonders if it even matters because she thinks Jesus was a moral teacher we can learn from, whether or not we believe he is the Savior of the world.

What would you say?

Since his birth, people have wondered about Jesus. It is no small thing to consider his importance because if he is right and we can trust his words, our eternities are at stake. The chapters in part 1 lay the foundation for why Jesus matters today. Then we address some of the commonly held incorrect beliefs about Jesus and provide responses to those claims so that next time you have a friend who has questions, you'll be fully equipped to give them an answer.

Why Should We Listen to Jesus Today?

You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

1 PETER 1:23

I (Lindsey) have traveled a lot to speak about Christianity and apologetics. On one flight, I sat next to a woman named Meredith, who struck up a conversation and started sharing her spiritual beliefs with me. She didn't know anything about me, but she opened up about how she had once practiced Buddhism, believed in Christ-consciousness, and also believed some aspects of Hinduism. In other words, her belief system was all over the place. I was getting excited because I felt like I'd spent the better part of the previous decade preparing for this very moment. I'd studied Eastern worldviews, and I'd researched the New Age movement at length. I was ready to kindly tell her why those worldviews were false and why Christianity was true. I continued to listen, waiting for an opportunity to share.

After spending most of the flight telling me about her beliefs, Meredith asked me about myself. When she found out I was a Christian, she said, “Tell me about your favorite interaction Jesus had with someone.” I couldn’t believe it! This was a 1 Peter 3:15 moment. I was essentially being asked to give a reason for the hope within me, just as Peter had said we should be prepared to do. Instead of talking about the other worldviews, I got the awesome opportunity to talk about Jesus, who *is* the reason for the hope within me.

In response to Meredith’s question, I told her about Zacchaeus in Luke 19. When she asked for another example, I told her about Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4, and then I tacked on the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. She asked if I could tell her yet another. I spoke about Jesus’ interaction with the man next to him on the cross (Luke 23:34-43). This led to me sharing the gospel with her. She couldn’t seem to get enough, and yet, by this point, our plane had landed and I had another plane to catch.

What struck me most about my interaction with Meredith was her yearning to learn more about Jesus. She could have asked me anything, and yet, Jesus was on her mind. Meredith reminded me of how much Jesus matters to people, even if they’ve never made the decision to follow him.

Jesus has been inspiring people since he walked the earth, and one of the clearest pieces of evidence we have for that is the impressive growth Christianity experienced in the first century. In this chapter, we discuss how Christianity and Jesus’ message spread even in ancient times when paganism was popular, which is not that different from the reality today. We’ll also talk about why we in the twenty-first century should listen to Jesus and understand how he remains just as relevant today as he was over 2,000 years ago.

JESUS AND THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

As people in the twenty-first century who are accustomed to the quick spread of information via social media and the internet, we can find it difficult to understand the rapid spread of Christianity early on.¹ Place yourself in that context. There were no newspapers, no telephones, no World Wide Web. If something was important, it spread by word-of-mouth, by town criers, and sometimes even by pigeons (yes, messages really were sent by bird!).² In the case of early Christianity, three key factors contributed to its rapid spread: the ancient oral tradition, missionaries, and Christian compassion.

Ancient Oral Tradition

Skeptics sometimes liken the process of writing the Bible to an ancient version of the party game telephone, and as such, consider it unreliable. But that doesn't take into account how ancient oral cultures shared news. Information wasn't shared through one person whispering something to another. It was memorized and shared publicly. Apologist Wes Huff points out how important memorization was in the ancient world: "Socrates decried writing and reading because he said it would make people lazy, and they wouldn't remember things."³

Nowadays, it seems like it's a struggle for most of us to memorize just a single chapter or even verse from Scripture, but memorization was common in ancient times. Further, orators were held accountable. Because the literacy rate was so low at that time, ancient oral cultures depended on accurate recitation from people sharing information. As New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg notes, "With certain kinds of oral tradition, even greater care in preservation was required. Historical accounts were more assiduously conserved than

fictional tales.”⁴ What’s more, if a mistake was made by an orator, they were held accountable. “Verbatim reproduction is mandatory,” writes Richard Bauckham. “A mistake of even a single word by the person reciting will be emphatically corrected by the listeners in general, and if the reciter hesitates he will be assisted by the group, drawing on their ‘collective memory.’”⁵ In other words, accurate recitation was not only encouraged but also required. Can you imagine if, upon hearing your pastor accidentally misquote someone, you stood up and called him out in the middle of his sermon rather than waiting until after the service? Well, that’s what happened in ancient times. It was *that* important.

Missionaries

In addition to the orators who helped spread Jesus’ message, Jesus also commissioned some directly to share the good news, including his disciples and others who would become Christianity’s first missionaries.

When we think of the missionaries of the early church, so many of us immediately think of Paul. As you may remember, Paul’s life was transformed from one who consented to the murder of Christians to a Christian missionary following his life-altering encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road (see Acts 9). Of course, the other apostles were also missionaries, as were Jesus’ brothers James and Jude. They took seriously Jesus’ directive, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). As they traveled, the Christian message spread—from Syria and Israel to areas throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. They worked

with urgency because they anticipated Christ's second coming to be rapidly approaching.⁶

Christian Compassion

Church Father Tertullian (AD c. 145–220) noted what pagans said of the early Christians: “See how they [Christians] love one another.”⁷ The pagans did not know of any other group whose members looked out for one another. Yet, “in the midst of the squalor, misery, illness, and anonymity of ancient cities, Christianity provided an island of mercy and security.”⁸

One practical result of this compassion was the creation of hospitals in the fourth century. Led by Basil, bishop of Caesarea, monks made the “destigmatizing of illness” part of their mission.⁹ Basil “took the lead in urging others to treat the ill with dignity,” which resulted in hospitals being built in Cappadocia.¹⁰ Of course, it wasn't only Christians whom they were treating. Indeed, Christians were beginning to be known for their care of pagans as well, hence Tertullian's statement about how they provided mercy and security. Historian Bruce Shelley says, “Christian love found expression in the care of the poor, of widows and orphans; in visits to brethren in prisons or to those condemned to a living death in the mines; in acts of compassion during a famine, earthquake, or war.”¹¹ Of course, we continue to see this kind of global response from Christians in times of need, as we should, and it makes sense that Christianity grew based on the compassionate behaviors of early Christians.

Despite this legacy, Christians today sometimes represent Jesus poorly when it comes to how we treat one another. Francis Schaeffer said Christians should be known by a particular “mark,” one which Jesus described this way: “A new command I give you: Love one

another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). Of this command, Schaeffer wrote, “An *if* is involved. If you obey, you will wear the badge Christ gave. But since this is a command, it can be violated.”¹² And unfortunately, it has been. This is contrary to Jesus’ teachings, and Christians must strive to do better. “If we expect non-Christians to know that we are Christians,” Schaeffer said, “we must show the mark.”¹³

The combination of reliable oral transmission of Jesus’ words, early missionaries’ willingness to spread of the gospel to faraway lands, and Christian compassion toward each other and non-Christians caused Christianity to spread in the first century. Because of the work and persistence of the early Christian church, the hope of Christ advanced beyond time and space, making its way west and even to today.

JESUS’ CONTINUING IMPACT

Today, more than two billion people claim to be Christian, making Christianity the largest religion in the world.¹⁴ The influence of Jesus has been immense and widespread, not only through Christian churches globally, but in Western culture and history. Consider the Christian influence in literature (Dante, Milton), philosophy (Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, C. S. Lewis), music (Bach, spirituals, gospel music), and art (Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Georges Rouault). Of course, the influence of Christ’s life and teaching extends into all the world, but we have cited some of the most recognizable examples from the Western world.¹⁵

Many commonly heard statements about morality come from Jesus: loving your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39), turning the

other cheek (Matthew 5:39), practicing what you preach (Matthew 23:3), the golden rule (Matthew 7:12), being “a good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25-37), the folly of “the blind leading the blind” (Matthew 15:14), and others. Contemporary America has been referred to as “post-Christian, but Jesus-haunted,” because many people want Jesus on their side of moral and political issues, whether or not they are Christians.

We take the influence of Jesus for granted when we see a hospital called Good Samaritan or pass a Christian church or consider the work of the many Christian philanthropic organizations. Nonetheless, at the time of his death and resurrection, it was far from obvious that the life and teachings of Jesus would exercise such a global reach for the next two thousand years. Besides the books of the New Testament and a few references outside of it, historians of the day did not much consider him. Most of the written documents in ancient times focused on warfare, empires, and military and political leaders. If religious leaders were mentioned at all, it was because they occupied positions of institutional power. Thus, Jesus was not included. There is even an interesting New Testament passage that reflects this perspective.

In the aftermath of Jesus’ death, Gamaliel, a respected first-century teacher of Jewish law, cautioned his fellow members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme judicial council in Judea, not to overreact when dealing with Jesus’ disciples:

Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to

nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.

ACTS 5:35-39

Although Gamaliel's speech persuaded the council, his warning has gone unheeded over the centuries by many politicians, philosophers, and religious leaders who have tried to stop the Christian movement. As yet, they have all failed. Through the ages, millions of martyrs have died rather than betray Jesus. As the classic *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* puts it, "The history of the church may almost be said to be a history of the trials and sufferings of its members, as experienced at the hands of wicked men."¹⁶ And yet Christianity thrives across the globe.

Today, we cannot imagine a history of the world or of religion that does not speak of Jesus. His words have traveled well beyond the confines of the church and influenced everything from the schools we attend to the hospitals we visit to the music we listen to. Despite some skeptics claiming that Jesus is now irrelevant, evidence tells us otherwise. He's still giving us hope.

CONCLUSION

Although Christianity is currently the largest religion in the world by population, it's not the fastest growing. According to Pew Research Center's 2025 study of the global religious landscape, Islam was the fastest growing religion between 2010 and 2020. Muslims currently

make up more than a quarter of the world's population.¹⁷ It seems that although Christianity continues to experience growth, Christians “are shrinking as a share of the global population, as large numbers of Christians around the world ‘switch’ out of religion to become religiously unaffiliated.”¹⁸

If you're a Christian, we hope this information motivates you to be more intentional about sharing your faith and to do so with confidence. People need to know that Christianity is a religion of hope, peace, love, joy, and most of all, the way to eternal salvation through Christ. We also hope the stories of people like Meredith encourage you. Although she dabbled in other worldviews, she still found something compelling about Jesus. If you know someone like Meredith, they might be more open to hearing about Jesus than you think. And if you're still investigating Christianity, we hope you will keep reading to learn more about Jesus and his claims. Either way, our goal is to reassure you of Christianity's impact—from ancient history to now—and of Jesus' relevance in a world that is stressed, depressed, lonely, and in need of a Savior.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. The apostle Peter wrote, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15).
 - *What thoughts or emotions come to mind when you think about sharing your faith with someone who doesn't know Christ?*
 - *How would you describe “the hope that you have” in Christ?*
2. What strikes you most about the early growth of Christianity through the oral tradition, missionaries, and Christian compassion?
3. In what ways, if any, do you recognize the impact of Christian compassion today? Consider the impact of your own actions, those of your Christian community, and those of Christians globally.
4. Francis Schaeffer stated that love is the mark of a Christian. In what ways does this idea challenge you? In what ways does it encourage you?

Recommended Resources

Josh and Sean McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter* (Tyndale, 2024).

Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian*, 2nd ed. (IVP Classics, 2006).