

Chapter 1

CHRISTIANITY IS DIFFERENT

Whether you are a believer or a skeptic, please don't fall for the lie that Christianity is pretty much like other religions. It isn't. Jesus Christ is unlike any other religious leader in what He says and does. And His followers said some pretty unique things as well. To see what I mean, let's look at some other religions.

Jesus Does Not Resemble Man-Made Gods. When people invent a religion, the gods inevitably think like us and behave like us. Just look at the ancient Greek gods. They were powerful and immortal, but they were also deeply flawed. They fought, killed, kidnapped, and stole. ¹ They married, had children, and committed adultery. ² They exacted revenge, often without regard to fairness or justice. ³

Similarly, the gods of other religions consistently exhibit human failings. When Krishna, the Hindu god, appears in human form, he steals, he humiliates young girls by taking their clothes while they are bathing naked in a river, and he performs many mischievous acts. The Japanese god, Susa-no-wo, wreaks havoc on the earth, while the god, Oh-kuni-nushi, tries to steal Susa-no-wo's possessions and kidnap his daughter. In Mesopotamian mythology, the goddess Ishtar tries to kill a human, Gilgamesh, as well as his friend, Enkidu, because Gilgamesh would not marry her. The Egyptian god, Osiris, is murdered through the trickery of the god, Set. The Hawaiian goddess, Pele, seduces a young Hawaiian prince, Lohiau, and then leaves him to pine away for her until he dies.

Even in monotheistic Islam, we see these human elements in the Qur'ân's portrayal of Hell, where Allah exacts eternal, excruciating, and pitiless revenge against unbelievers. Similarly, the Qur'ân's view of Heaven is decidedly anthropocentric, with a cornucopia of earthly delights such as abundant food and drink, luxurious clothing, and even sex. ⁴ Allah caters to human beings in Heaven while acting like a bitter and vengeful human being in Hell.

In each case, it is easy to imagine a human being inventing the religion, because the gods think and behave like humans. In contrast, the Jesus of the New Testament doesn't seem like anything a human being would invent. What normal person would come up with the strange and eccentric idea that people should pray for their enemies? Or act with mercy, kindness, and forgiveness toward those who mistreat them—as Jesus and His disciples advocated? ⁵ That is not how a normal person thinks or acts.

The New Testament contains many such counter-intuitive notions. While human wisdom tells us to seek happiness and security through wealth and possessions, Jesus taught that poverty is better than riches, because money impedes devotion to God. ⁶ Contrary to human nature, the New Testament instructs us to avoid judging or condemning others. ⁷ Few people value qualities such as gentleness and humility, often disparaging them with derogatory terms like "wimp" and "loser." Yet the New Testament champions those who are meek, humble, weak, and self-giving, while reproving the arrogant, boastful, pretentious, and vain. ⁸

Jesus and the New Testament authors did not seek acclaim by pandering to public opinion, either. Some of what He said and did was not merely counter-intuitive, but downright unpopular.

He condemned divorce except in cases of adultery.⁹ He sanctioned the payment of taxes to the hated Romans, and His disciples encouraged people to obey the oppressive Roman government,¹⁰ the same government that had cruelly and unjustly executed Jesus. He associated freely with the dregs of society: prostitutes, tax collectors,¹¹ and other notorious people,¹² while aggressively challenging the religious leaders of His day.¹³

And as if trying to scare away followers, He warned about the persecution and suffering His disciples must expect.¹⁴ Indeed, the New Testament frankly states that Christianity is sometimes difficult and that certain sacrifices are necessary.¹⁵ This message of suffering and sacrifice was no more inviting in Jesus' day than it is today.

Jesus' wisdom and cleverness must be considered, because they are extraordinary. Think about the memorable stories He told, such as the story of "The Good Samaritan." Even most unbelievers know this story, or at least know of it, in which Jesus depicts the love we are to show to others through this tale about a man who helps his enemy simply because he is in need.¹⁶ Or consider the story of "the Prodigal Son," in which Jesus illustrates God's love for us through a father's love for a son who made some terrible choices.¹⁷

Jesus told many wonderful stories like these (known as parables) to teach moral and religious truths in a way people would remember. He even mixes in some humorous images, like a person with a log in his eye trying to take a speck out of his brother's eye,¹⁸ or a person who would carefully avoid consuming a gnat and then blithely swallow a camel.¹⁹

Jesus was so smart that He consistently outwitted His opponents. For example, the Jewish leaders asked Him if people should pay taxes to Rome. "No" would bring down the wrath of the Romans, who of course insisted that the money be paid, but "Yes" would upset many among the Jewish people, who loathed the Romans and their oppressive taxes. After pointing out that the coins used to pay the tax are Roman coins, Jesus responded: "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).²⁰ Thus, He silenced his enemies.²¹ When Jesus was challenged by the Jewish leaders to state His authority, He cleverly responded with a loaded question of His own which they refused to answer.²²

Even Jesus' miracles are different. In most religions, the gods' miracles demonstrate their power, but seldom their goodness. In contrast, Jesus' miracles almost always helped people: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, raising the dead.²³ Never did Jesus use His power to harm a person.²⁴ He rebuked two of His disciples for merely suggesting that He do so.²⁵

And then there is the bizarre and counter-intuitive notion of grace.²⁶ This principle, which has no parallel in any other major religion, proclaims that we cannot earn God's favor through religious practices, righteous behavior, or charitable deeds—but that God gives us immortality if we will merely love and trust Him.²⁷

Of course, the simple fact that much of the New Testament runs counter to the way people normally think and live their lives does not by itself prove that it came from God rather than men. I would not ascribe divinity to a book that advocated wearing wet clothing during bitterly cold weather—although that would certainly be counter-intuitive—for the simple reason that it doesn't work. Yet the principles which the New Testament espouses actually do work, whereas the conventional wisdom does not.

A psychiatrist, J.T. Fisher, has written that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount ²⁸ confirms what science tells us about how to achieve and maintain mental health. In effect, Jesus set forth a concise "blueprint for successful human life with optimism, mental health, and contentment." ²⁹

You will not find peace or happiness in wealth, but you can find both in Christ. Hatred and revenge solve nothing—the residents of the Middle East have been proving this for many decades, with no end in sight. Yet mercy and forgiveness can change enemies into friends. Arrogance generates resentment and hostility, while meekness and gentleness restore calm and often resolve disputes peacefully.

And as it turns out, the strange doctrine of grace makes far more sense than those religions which try to please God through proper behavior. For we cannot *earn* anyone's love, least of all God's. Nor can we ever be good enough to meet His standard of perfection. Fortunately for us, the New Testament says we don't have to, because He loves us anyway. ³⁰

Unlike other religions, God in the New Testament is not merely a judge, deciding whether or not our behavior and religious practices measure up. He is instead a loving Father who embraces us even though we do not deserve it. All we have to do is stop resisting (for He will not force Himself on us) and give ourselves to Him.

Jesus is also different in what He says about Himself. Christianity makes two bold assertions, both grounded in historical fact: (1) that its founder, Jesus Christ, claimed to be divine (that is, God, or at least God-like), and (2) that He died, was buried, and then came back to life. The first assertion is made relevant by the second. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, He was merely a charlatan or a deluded madman. But if He came back from the dead, then we must seriously consider everything He said, including what He said about Himself.

Jesus' Claims of Divinity. We will discuss Jesus's resurrection in Chapter 2. But we must first address that other bold assertion—that Jesus claimed to be divine. Did He really say this about Himself, or was this something that, like Buddha, was concluded by His followers long after His death? ³¹ Well, Jesus made at least nine claims that show that He thought He was much more than a mere man. He seems to have actually believed He was God. Those nine claims are:

1. He thought He was perfect. ³²
2. He claimed to be eternal. ³³
3. He said He was the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God, and He considered Himself equal with God. ³⁴
4. He taught that following or rejecting Him was the same as following or rejecting God. ³⁵
5. He insisted that He had come from Heaven, and He spoke about Heaven as if He'd been there. ³⁶
6. He predicted His own death—and, more importantly, His resurrection. ³⁷
7. He believed His death was necessary to save the world. ³⁸
8. He claimed to have authority to forgive sins. ³⁹
9. He didn't bother to cite any type of authority to validate what He said or did.

The first seven are pretty obvious claims of divinity. If I say I am immortal, or perfect, or equal with God, I'm making claims no ordinary human being has any right to make. And if I say I

have come down from Heaven, and that if you reject me you are rejecting God Himself, you would have every right to question my sanity.

But those last two—forgiving sins and not citing authority—don't seem quite so obvious. So let's take a closer look at them.

Forgiving sins would not be anything special if Jesus were merely forgiving wrongs done to Himself. After all, that is what Christians are supposed to do.⁴⁰ But as C.S. Lewis pointed out, Jesus did much more—He forgave people for wrongs they had done *to other people*.⁴¹ Only God may do that. Therefore, by claiming this authority, Jesus was placing Himself on an equal footing with God.

The ninth and last claim of divinity is that Jesus never cited authority for what He said. For example, in His famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, He says:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

—Matthew 5:27-28

Here Jesus lays down a new moral rule—or, if you prefer, a new interpretation of an old rule—and provides no authority whatsoever for doing so, other than His own say-so: “You have heard . . . but I say. . . .” Unlike scholars and prophets, Jesus did not claim that His authority came from Scripture or a vision from God, or from any book or person. His word was enough. And He did this repeatedly, in many different contexts.⁴² The common people immediately noticed the difference:

When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

—Matthew 7:28-29⁴³

The Jewish religious leaders reacted as we would—they demanded to see His credentials: “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” (Matthew 21:23)⁴⁴ But Jesus didn't tell them.⁴⁵ The only authority He ever cited was that of God:

“For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak. I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me.”

—John 12:49-50⁴⁶

If a friend of yours made any of these nine claims about himself, you might assume he was joking. And if he convinced you that he was serious, you would think he had lost his mind. But Jesus was entirely serious, and the Jewish leaders took His claims very seriously indeed.

Nor could they dismiss Him as simply a harmless nut case. The Jesus we see in the New Testament is a remarkably wise, clever, insightful, and perceptive individual—most certainly not a lunatic. That left only one alternative in the minds of His enemies: that He was a lying, deceiving, demon of a man. Evil incarnate. And they condemned Him to death because of it.⁴⁷ But the Jewish leaders were unwilling to consider the other alternative: what if He was what He

said He was? How can we know? Well, if Jesus indeed came back to life after being dead, then we have our answer. And that is what we will discuss in Chapter Two.

Endnotes for Chapter One, "Christianity Is Different"

¹ Zeus and his fellow Olympians came to power by waging war against the Titans and overthrowing them. The Olympians then consolidated their rule by killing the giants who opposed them. Hades, god of the underworld, obtained his bride, the goddess Persephone, by kidnapping her. The messenger god, Hermes, stole cattle from the god Apollo.

² Zeus, in particular, had many extramarital liaisons.

³ For example, Artemis changed the unfortunate Actaeon into a stag when he accidentally saw her naked. And Hera struck poor Tiresias blind for agreeing with Zeus in a dispute between the goddess and her husband.

⁴ For more on this, see Chapter 8, "Islam's Credibility Problem."

⁵ See Matthew 5:38-41, 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-35; Romans 12:14, 12:17-21; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 3:8. And on the subject of treating others with mercy, forgiveness, and kindness, see also: Matthew 5:7, 6:14-15, 7:12, 18:21-35; Mark 11:25-26, 12:31; Luke 6:36-38, 9:51-56, 10:25-37, 15:11-32, 17:3-4, 23:33-34; John 8:2-11; 1 Corinthians 4:12-13, 6:7; Galatians 5:22, 6:10; Ephesians 4:31-32; Colossians 3:12-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; James 3:17-18; 1 Peter 3:8.

⁶ For example, when a man came to Jesus asking what he must do to receive eternal life, Jesus told him to sell all of his possessions, and then remarked on how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. See Luke 18:18-27. Similarly, see: Matthew 6:19-21, 6:24, 6:31-34, 19:16-21, 19:23-24; Mark 4:18-19, 10:19-27; Luke 6:20-21, 6:24-25, 8:14, 12:15-21, 12:22-23, 12:33-34, 14:33, 16:13-15; Philippians 4:11-12; 1 Timothy 3:3, 6:6-10, 6:17-19; Hebrews 13:5; James 2:1-6, 4:3-4, 5:1-6; 1 John 2:15-16, 3:17; Revelation 3:17-18.

⁷ See, for example: Matthew 7:1-5; Luke 6:36-38; Romans 2:1-3, 14:1-4, 14:10-13; 1 Corinthians 4:5, 5:12-13; James 4:11-12, 5:9.

⁸ See the following verses: Matthew 5:5, 5:21-22, 6:1-6, 6:16-18, 7:12, 11:25-26, 18:1-4, 19:30, 20:25-28, 22:39, 23:1-7, 23:11-12; Mark 9:33-37, 10:13-15, 10:31, 10:42-45, 12:31; Luke 6:29, 7:36-50, 9:46-48, 10:21, 11:43, 13:29-30, 14:11, 16:15, 18:9-17, 22:24-26; John 13:12-15; Romans 11:17-21, 12:3, 12:10, 12:16, 1 Corinthians 1:18-21, 2:3-5, 3:18-20, 4:6-7, 4:10, 8:8-13, 10:24, 10:32-33, 13:4-5; 2 Corinthians 6:1-10, 10:17, 12:7-10, 13:4; Galatians 5:22-23, 5:26, 6:10; Ephesians 4:1-3; Philippians 2:3-4, 4:5; Colossians 3:8, 3:12-13; 1 Timothy 3:2-3, 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; Titus 3:1-2; Hebrews 12:14; James 1:21, 3:5-10, 3:17-18, 4:6, 4:10; 1 Peter 2:13-14, 3:8, 3:14-17, 5:5-6.

⁹ Matthew 5:31-32, 19:9; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

¹⁰ Luke 20:19-25; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-14

¹¹ The Roman government often hired people from the local population to collect Roman taxes, and set an amount that had to be collected and delivered to the Roman government. The tax collectors were allowed to keep any monies which they were able to amass in excess of the required amount. The Jewish people despised the tax collectors because they were usually greedy, corrupt, and wealthy, and because they were viewed as collaborators with Rome.

¹² Matthew 9:10-13; Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:29-32, 19:1-7

¹³ For example, see: Matthew 6:1-6, 6:16-18, 21:23-46, 23:1-7, 23:13-35; Mark 7:5-13, 11:27-12:12, 12:38-40; Luke 6:6-11, 11:37-54, 19:1-7, 20:1-19; John 9:39-41.

¹⁴ See, for example: Matthew 5:10-11, 10:17-23, 10:28, 23:34; Mark 13:13; Luke 6:22-23, 12:4-5, 21:12-19; John 15:19-20, 16:2. That the disciples did in fact suffer persecution is shown by: Romans 8:16-18; 1 Corinthians 4:9-13; 2 Corinthians 6:1-10, 12:7-10; 2 Timothy 1:8-9, 2:3, 3:12; Hebrews 13:12-13; James 1:2-3, 1:12; 1 Peter 1:6-7, 2:19-20, 3:14-17, 4:12-16, 5:8-10; 1 John 3:13; Revelation 2:10.

¹⁵See: Matthew 10:37-39, 16:24-26, 18:8-9, 25:31-45; Mark 8:34-38, 9:42-48, 10:42-45; Luke 9:23-26, 9:59-62, 14:26-33; John 12:25; Romans 15:1; 1 Corinthians 8:8-13, 10:24; Philippians 3:8-9.

¹⁶ See Luke 10:29-37.

¹⁷ See Luke 15:11-32.

¹⁸ Matthew 7:1-5

¹⁹ Matthew 23:24

²⁰ All quotations in this book are from the New American Standard Bible translation. Italics are in the original, and indicate that the word is implied, but not literally included, in the original Greek, Aramaic, or Hebrew.

²¹ Matthew 22:17-22; see also Mark 12:13-17 and Luke 20:21-26.

²² Jesus asked, "Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?" (Luke 20:4) The Jewish leaders did not believe John the Baptist was a true prophet, but they were afraid to say so publicly for fear of the people's reaction. See Matthew 21:23-27, Mark 11:27-33, and Luke 20:1-8.

²³ See Matthew 4:23-24, 8:1-3, 8:5-17, 8:28-32, 9:2-7, 9:18-25, 9:27-30, 9:32-35, 10:1, 12:9-13, 12:15-16, 12:22, 14:14-22, 14:34-36, 15:21-38, 17:14-18, 19:1-2, 20:29-34, 21:14; Mark 1:23-26, 1:30-34, 1:39-42, 2:3-12, 3:1-5, 3:9-10, 5:1-13, 5:22-42, 6:5, 6:7-13, 6:35-44, 6:53-56, 7:25-30, 7:32-35, 8:1-9, 8:22-25, 9:14-29, 10:46-52; Luke 4:33-35, 4:38-41, 5:12-13, 5:17-25, 6:6-11, 6:17-19, 7:1-15, 7:21-22, 8:26-33, 8:41-55, 9:1-6, 9:10-17, 9:37-42, 10:1-9 and 10:17, 11:14, 13:10-16, 13:31-32, 14:1-5, 17:11-19, 18:35-43, 22:49-51; John 4:46-53, 5:2-16, 6:1-2, 6:5-14, 9:1-34, 11:1-44.

²⁴ He did, however, curse a fig tree (Matthew 21:18-19, Mark 11:2-14 and 19-21), and He indirectly caused the death of some swine when he cast demons into them, ultimately resulting in their death by drowning (Matthew 8:28-32; Mark 5:1-13; Luke 8:26-33).

²⁵ Luke 9:51-56

²⁶ "Grace" means "unmerited favor." Grace refers to any benefit that we receive from God which we do not deserve (which arguably is *any* benefit that we receive from God).

²⁷ See: Acts 15:11; Romans 3:24-26, 3:27-30, 4:1-5, 4:16, 4:22-25, 5:1-2, 5:15-21, 6:23, 10:8-13; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21; Galatians 2:15-16, 3:24-25; Ephesians 2:4-9; Philippians 3:8-9; 2 Timothy 1:8-9; Titus 2:11-12, 3:3-7; Hebrews 11:6; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:10. Also note the element of grace which is implicit in these Scriptures, in which people win Jesus' approval through love or faith, rather than by any good deeds or religious behavior: Matthew 20:1-16, 21:28-32; Luke 5:29-32, 7:36-50, 17:7-10, 18:9-14, 19:1-7.

²⁸ Matthew chapters 5 through 7

²⁹ Fisher, J.T. and L.S. Hawley, *A Few Buttons Missing* (Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1951), p. 273, as quoted in McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*.

³⁰ See Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

³¹ During his lifetime the Buddha consistently denied being more than a man. See Chapter 9, "Buddhism (And Now For Something Completely Different)."

³² In John 8:29, Jesus says, "I always do the things that are pleasing to Him [i.e., God]." See also Matthew 5:17 and John 17:4.

³³ See John 8:58, 17:5, and 17:24.

³⁴ The most explicit such statement is probably John 10:30: “ ‘I and the Father are one.’ ” For other examples, see: Matthew 14:33, 16:16-17, 26:63-64; Mark 8:29-30, 14:61-62; Luke 9:20-22, 10:22, 22:70; John 1:49-50, 5:17-18, 5:36-37, 8:18-19, 12:45, 14:6-9, 15:23.

³⁵ See, for example: Matthew 10:32-33, 10:37-40, 11:27-30, 19:29; Mark 8:34-38, 9:41, 10:29-30, 13:13; Luke 6:22-23, 7:23, 9:24-26, 12:8-9, 21:16-19, 22:28-30; John 3:14-18, 4:10, 4:14, 5:21-24, 6:27-29, 6:40, 8:12, 8:51, 10:9-10, 10:28, 11:25-26, 14:1.

³⁶ See, for example: Matthew 18:10, 22:29-30, 24:36, 26:53; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:35-36; John 3:13, 8:23, 14:2-3. And then there are verses in which Jesus implies that He knows what Heaven will be like, such as Matthew 5:3, 5:10, 5:12, 5:19-20, 6:1, 6:20, 7:21, 8:11, 11:11, 16:19, 18:1-4, 18:18, 19:21, 26:64; Mark 10:21, 13:24-27, 14:62; Luke 6:23, 10:18, 10:20, 12:33, 15:7, 18:22; John 6:38, 6:50-51.

³⁷ See Matthew 12:38-40, 16:21, 17:9-12, 17:22-23, 20:17-19, 26:1-2, 26:32, 27:62-63; Mark 8:31, 9:9-10, 9:31, 10:32-34, 14:28; Luke 9:21-22, 9:44, 17:25, 18:31-33, 24:6-7; John 2:18-22, 3:14-15, 10:11-18, 12:32-33, 14:28-29, 16:5-7, 16:16-22.

³⁸ See, for example: Matthew 16:21-23, 20:28, 26:28; Mark 8:31-33, 10:45, 14:24; Luke 22:19-20; John 6:51-58, 10:11, 10:15.

³⁹ See Matthew 9:2; Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20, 24; 7:47-48.

⁴⁰ See, for example: Matthew 6:14-15, 18:23-35; Mark 11:25-26; Ephesians 4:31-32, Colossians 3:13; and James 2:13.

⁴¹ See, for example: Matthew 9:2; Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20, 7:47-48. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis explained why this was so remarkable:

One part of the claim tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins. Now unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you; you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money?

Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book II, Chapter 3, p. 76.

⁴² For other examples, see: Matthew 5:18, 5:20, 5:21-22, 5:26, 5:28, 5:31-32, 5:33-34, 5:38-39, 5:43-44, 6:2, 6:5, 6:16, 6:25, 8:11-12, 10:15, 10:23, 10:42, 11:1, 11:22, 11:24, 12:6, 12:31, 13:17, 17:12, 17:20, 18:3, 18:10, 18:13, 18:18-19, 18:21-22, 19:9, 19:23-24, 19:28, 21:21, 21:31, 21:43, 23:36, 24:2, 24:34, 26:13; Mark 3:28-29, 7:14-15, 8:12, 9:1, 9:13, 9:41, 10:15, 10:29-30, 11:23-24, 13:30, Luke 6:27-28, 7:26-28, 9:27, 10:12, 11:9, 12:4, 12:22, 18:17, 18:29, 21:3, 23:43; John 3:3, 3:5, 5:19, 5:24-25, 6:47, 6:53, 8:34, 8:51, 8:58, 10:1, 10:7, 12:24, 13:16, 13:20, 14:12, 16:23.

⁴³ See also Mark 1:22, Luke 4:32.

⁴⁴ See also Mark 11:28, Luke 20:1-2; and see John 2:18.

⁴⁵ Matthew 21:27; see also Mark 11:33, Luke 20:8

⁴⁶ See also John 6:37-40, 6:57, 17:1-8, 17:18, 17:21, 17:22-25.

⁴⁷ See Matthew 26:63-66 and Mark 14:61-64; see also, Luke 22:66-71.