

# CHAPTER 1

## How Did We Get Here?

The story of how we got to this point in the Christian faith stretches back thousands of years. It began around 3,500 years ago when Moses presented a series of laws and blessings from God to the Israelites. For approximately 1,500 years, this set of beliefs was refined and added to until it evolved into a complicated, extremely rule-based religion. I call this the old way.

Later, Jesus presented a new way of living, found in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in the four Gospels. This new way was focused on internal conversion and based on the love of God and love of neighbor, which became a new paradigm for God's people.

This simple yet profound message of Jesus, known to early Christians as "the Way," spread rapidly during the first few centuries after His death, despite organized governmental resistance. Once Christianity became the official state religion, the church began to refine and add to the message of Jesus, ending up with what is often a complicated rule-based religion. This is the same sort of complication that happened with the message of Moses, a process that I will explore later in this chapter. We will also examine the story of what has happened to an important religious relic during the past twenty centuries as a metaphor for this change to the message of the Way.

In our present day, we have arrived at the point where this changed message is not connecting with people. This evolved version of Christianity is one many people are having problems with. Known as the "Nones," these people are still spiritual and perhaps believe in God, but they identify with no particular religion. We will explore more about these Nones later in this chapter.

## The Old Way

To fully understand just how revolutionary Jesus's message was, we need to look at the belief structures of His time. Religion in the ancient world was based on what has been called transactional theology. In simplest terms, this means, "You do something for me, and I will do something for you." Both pagans and Jews followed this line of theology. Some, like the Canaanites, took that belief to the horrifying extreme of sacrificing their infant children.

The book of Deuteronomy in the Bible codifies this transactional belief quite well:

And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. (Deuteronomy 28:1–6)

More blessings follow in these verses as well as curses on the same things if you do "not obey the voice of the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 28:15).

Thus, you can see that the religion of the Old Testament tied prosperity to strict observance of the laws that Moses had laid down. Failure to observe these laws, however, brought misfortune and ruin.

This transactional theology manifested itself in two ways. The first way was an extremely rule-based religion. By the time of Jesus, Jewish legal scholars had developed a list of 613 *mitzvot*, or "commandments," to direct the Jewish people to lead lives pleasing to God. With

such a lengthy list of rules, there was an understandable emphasis from the religious authorities on strict adherence to the letter of the law in order to comply with all of these rules. Common people in their ordinary lives could inadvertently violate one of these many rules and would be condemned by the scribes and Pharisees. What got lost in this rigid enforcement of the rules is the reason behind them—the desire to please God. We see Jesus at His most critical moments in the Gospels when He confronts the scribes and Pharisees over their preoccupation with the fulfilling the external requirements of the law while ignoring the internal personal qualities, or virtues, which true compliance with these laws requires in order to please God. In one such confrontation, Jesus says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others, You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (Matthew 23:23-24) The religious laws on tithing had evolved to include the smallest of produce from herb gardens: mint, dill and cumin, and the scribes and Pharisees meticulously gave a tenth of these spices as the law required. These were the external requirements of the law, but Jesus saw from the attitudes and treatment of the common people by these religious authorities that they lacked the internal essential qualities of justice and mercy and faithfulness to truly follow the law and thereby please God.

The second manifestation of this theology was the belief that misfortune is a direct result of sin or being in disfavor with God. When something bad happened to a person, they and especially those around that person searched for reasons why God was inflicting punishment.

Remnants of this theology exist in Christianity today. Proponents of the so-called prosperity gospel teach that God wants you to be prosperous and that you only need to follow God’s laws to receive material abundance. We also see the belief that God will punish us for the

smallest infraction, either here or after death, and some Christians perform intricate rituals to stay on God's "good side."

The point can be made that both beliefs miss the mark. The latter view of an angry God is perhaps the most problematic when it comes to understanding our relationship with God. A study of history, along with our own life experiences, reveals that all too often bad things happen to good people. Perhaps this realization that bad things do happen to good people is one of the problems the Nones have with contemporary Christianity. A person taught from an early age that the secret to a trouble-free life involves just following all the religious rules can be quite disillusioned to learn that following the rules is no guarantee of avoiding bad experiences in life.

## **A New Paradigm**

The word *paradigm* describes a model, pattern, or way of thinking about a subject. The teachings of Jesus throughout the New Testament present a new paradigm for God's relationship with humanity.

The new paradigm presented by Jesus in this sermon discards the concept of transactional theology. In its place, Jesus provides the concept of a loving heavenly Father who pours out an unconditional love on all of us without the requirements of transactional theology. Our thankful response to this gift of love, Jesus preached, is to live a life pleasing to God.

In contrast to the externally focused religious practices taught by the Pharisees of Jesus's day, this new paradigm of Jesus focuses on the internal self and its development. The conversion of this inner self from an inward, ego-centered focus to an outwardly focused love of God and our neighbor is what the core message of Jesus is all about. This conversion drives the many expressions of love that constitute living a life pleasing to God.

In the four Gospels, there are numerous accounts of Jesus teaching what is necessary to live a life pleasing to God. The disciples had several years to absorb this message, so they were able to teach it to converts later on. Most of us, on the other hand, were only taught the rules and beliefs of our particular religious tradition. Unless we belong to a faith tradition that includes this correct message, we are left to understand and learn this inward conversion message of Jesus on our own.

When we look at the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we can find many places where this new-paradigm message of Jesus is taught. I admit that it is difficult to tease out this message from all of the other information in these books. Fortunately, we have a gem of wisdom in the Gospel of Matthew known as the Sermon on the Mount.

What is so unique with the Sermon on the Mount is that it presents a complete set of guidelines for living this God-pleasing life. In my mind, there is no greater presentation of this new paradigm than the Sermon on the Mount. It has been called the greatest sermon ever delivered.

## **The Way—Early Christianity**

The rapid spread of Christianity in the first several centuries after the death of Jesus is quite remarkable. Aided by an extensive Roman road network, secure sea lanes, and common languages, the message of Christ was blown, like dandelion seeds, by an apostolic wind to all corners of the Roman Empire and beyond.

A seed needs the proper conditions to germinate and grow, and Christianity faced some difficult conditions in its early years. The Roman Empire considered Christianity a *religio*

*prava*—an illegal and depraved religion. For this reason, Christians of that time were subjected to discrimination and periodic forms of persecution, up to and including martyrdom.

In spite of this, the seeds of Christianity sprouted and flourished all over the Empire. Known to early Christians as “the Way,” this underground movement grew despite the active efforts to suppress it. The obvious question is why this spread of Christianity happened. The answer lies in the stark difference between existing Roman beliefs and this new religion.

Romans worshipped multiple deities, each one having a specific area of influence. For example, Mars was the god of war and Venus was the goddess of love, beauty, and fertility. Mythology portrayed these gods and goddesses as petty, fickle, vindictive, requiring regular sacrifices and devotions to ensure protection and good fortune. The one God of the Christians, on the other hand, which Jesus described in the Sermon, was a loving Father who knew what you needed before you asked and who provided good things without you even having requested them. This implied a direct relationship with a loving God.

While Roman beliefs about the afterlife were diverse, and often contradictory, early Christian teachings stressed an external heavenly reward for good deeds for “those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21 CEB). Jesus is quite clear in the Sermon as to what these good deeds look like. This clear, promised heavenly reward is in stark contrast to the vague concepts of the pagan beliefs of that period.

Roman society was highly stratified in a pyramidal form, with the patricians at the top, plebeians in the middle, and slaves at the bottom. Power, wealth, and rights were concentrated at the top, decreasing as you went down the pyramid. Slaves had no wealth or rights at all. Women had less social standing, no matter which class they belonged to. St. Paul’s message to the Galatians must have struck a chord with the lower classes: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”

(Galatians 3:28). This egalitarian sentiment flowed from Jesus's message in the Sermon and was practiced by Christians throughout the Empire. There are even records of women serving as priests and deacons in the early church. For example, St. Paul's letter to the Romans mentions a woman named Phoebe as being a deacon of the church in Cenchreae (Romans 16:1).

Finally, Jesus's call in the Sermon for us to show mercy, to have a pure heart, to act as peacemakers, and to treat others as we would like to be treated engendered a spirit of love and fraternity in the early Christian church. In Roman society, which had few or no social services, the early Christians were known for their care of the sick and the homeless and for their adoption of orphans. These actions were visible by all levels of Roman society and, by themselves, garnered a large number of converts.

Early Christianity, i.e., the Way, can be seen as an alternative to Roman society, providing the things which that society and prevailing religious beliefs could not or would not provide. The egalitarian and compassionate nature of this early church must have struck a chord in the hearts of the lower classes who were constantly oppressed within the power structure of the Roman Empire. A promised heavenly reward for those who did good deeds was an attractive incentive for joining the Way. Pagan beliefs had no such guarantees. Pagans who constantly tiptoed through the minefield of appeasing multiple gods and worrying about ticking off any number of them must have found the message of a single loving God very attractive.

### **Both Relic and Metaphor**

For the first two centuries of its existence, Christianity existed and grew, despite official discrimination and periodic deadly persecution. As it grew, and encountered other religions, Christian missionaries felt compelled to explain things that Jesus did not explain during His

lifetime. These were subjects like the nature of Jesus, the relationship between Jesus and God the Father, and even the relationship between God and the physical world. A number of beliefs, such as Gnosticism, Arianism, and Manichaeism, evolved in an attempt to answer these questions.

The world changed with the accession of Emperor Constantine and the subsequent Edict of Milan in 313 AD. This edict granted Christianity legal status and toleration throughout the Roman Empire. Moreover, Constantine became patron of the church, building churches and granting money. He saw his role as the enforcer of doctrine, eliminator of heresy, and upholder of ecclesiastical unity. Acting in this role, Constantine called a series of ecumenical councils to resolve the issues raised by beliefs such as Arianism, and to determine what the correct doctrine should be concerning the nature of Jesus and His relationship to God the Father. Out of these councils, the concept of *orthodoxy* developed. From Greek, this concept, meaning correct opinion, implies the acceptance of the doctrines defined by various creeds and ecumenical councils. The result of these ecumenical councils was the persecution of the beliefs newly deemed heretical. The subsequent history of Christianity has been littered with the persecution of those not maintaining orthodox beliefs. After the Reformation, this concept of orthodoxy has resulted in many different Christian denominations, each espousing different sets of beliefs.

The concept of orthodoxy also gave rise to another concept called *orthopraxy*. This means correct conduct or right worship and implies that only certain conduct or methods of worship are acceptable. Church development of doctrine also included changes in liturgy and worship as well as administration of the sacraments. The creation of different Christian denominations as a result of the Reformation also meant new norms of conduct and worship.

Valencia Cathedral in Spain is home to a very interesting object, which I see as a metaphor for how Christianity has evolved. Known as the *Santo Cáliz* (Holy Chalice), this object is claimed to be the actual cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. While there are a number of



claimants to this title, the Holy Chalice does have some strong evidence to support its claim to authenticity. The simple stone cup is composed of a type of deep red agate that is only found in the area between Palestine and Egypt. Archeologists have examined this cup and, from its style and fabrication method, have determined that the cup was made between the second century BC and the first century AD.<sup>1</sup>

While the Vatican has not formally accepted the Holy Chalice as authentic, it has named Valencia as one of the world's "Eight Holy Cities," as well as a "City of the Holy Grail."<sup>2</sup> Both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI used the Holy Chalice during celebration of the Holy Eucharist when they visited Valencia.

From its appearance, it is hard to imagine that the Holy Chalice was actually used by Jesus. The simple agate cup is mounted on an elaborate gold base, decorated with pearls, emeralds, and rubies, and has two gold handles. The handles and base are decorated with a medieval pattern, and the base includes a chalcedony stone center, which contains Arabic inscriptions. From the style and decorations, the handles and base are clearly of medieval origin. Over time, the Spanish monarchs who had possession of the Holy Chalice added embellishments to the agate cup. Whether created out of piety, penance, or some other motivation, these additions only served to detract from the simple cup at the heart of this relic.

This religious relic can also be seen as a metaphor for the evolution of Christianity over the past two millennia. The simple message of Jesus contained in the Sermon on the Mount was added to and embellished over time until the original intent of the message was obscured.

What we have after nearly two thousand years of Christianity are a myriad of different denominations, each having different doctrines and standards of conduct and worship. In my opinion, these strongly held beliefs often drown out the simple yet profound message of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. However, if we squint really hard, we can still see the simple and

beautiful cup of His message. These changes to the cup are an allusion to the gilding, or the over-complicating, of the Word of God. I'm afraid, in doing this, we have drifted back to the externally focused type of religion that Jesus taught against. Like the Pharisees, we have become obsessed with the letter of the law and the proper performance of rituals. The focus now is more on the practices than on the inner conversion we experience, as taught by Jesus.

### **The Rise of the “Nones”**

Over the past few decades, experts have noted a disturbing trend: the number of people professing no religious preference, known as the “Nones,” has grown significantly. Indeed, stories abound of churches in Western Europe with magnificent structures but with no congregations.

Writing in *The Spectator*, journalist Damian Thompson noted that the number of UK residents identifying as Anglican fell from 40 percent of the population in 1983 to 29 percent in 2015. Thompson observed that, if the trend continued, Anglicanism would disappear in Britain by 2033.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, the PEW Research Forum conducts religious landscape studies of the American population. The results of these studies mirror what is seen in Western Europe. The latest survey released in 2023 revealed that 28 percent of US adults are now religiously unaffiliated.<sup>4</sup>

The PEW surveys show that, while overall belief in God or some higher power is still relatively high, the linkage of that belief to a particular form of worship continues to decline.<sup>5</sup> The reasons for this apparent contradiction remain unclear. Is the current unprecedented prosperity and instant technological access somehow dulling people's desire for a relationship

with God? Is the message that earlier generations found compelling no longer connecting with the current generation?

Perhaps the disconnect is more personal. Is an unpleasant experience as a child or growing up in a household with little or no religion to blame? Or perhaps it is a disconnect with their own beliefs and the “angry God” paradigm. It may be that layers of dogma and teaching have obscured the original message of Christ, making an already questioning generation more skeptical.

Contrast this steady decline in the number of believers in the West with the rapid spread of Christianity in the first and second centuries AD. This belief system, the Way, was so powerful that many believers accepted martyrdom rather than abandon it.

Even today in a country such as Iran, where professing faith in Jesus can subject you to persecution and conversion from Islam is punishable by death, Christianity is growing. The Hudson Institute cites sources who say that Iran today has the highest rate of Christianization in the world. Much of this growth they attribute to Muslims leaving their faith to convert, with most of this growth being in evangelical Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

Other sources cite the marked increase in Asian Christians, especially in Korea, India, and China,<sup>7</sup> the “impressive growth, energy, and vitality of indigenous churches” in Africa,<sup>8</sup> and the growth of the Protestant Churches in Latin America.<sup>9</sup> Much of this growth is attributed to evangelism by local Christians, as opposed to missionary activity by established global churches. What impressed me the most when reading these reports is just how much this growth resembled the explosive bottom-up growth of Christianity in the first few centuries after the death of Jesus.

I use the term *low dogma* often in this book, so it is important to define what I mean by the term. Dogma in the religious sense is a set of beliefs that have been laid down by an authority and are held as incontrovertibly true. While some religious beliefs are necessary for a religion to

function, there is a tendency to add layers of dogma as time goes on to explain the mysteries or blank spaces of the original belief set. Those of us raised in a Christian faith tradition can probably think of a few examples of this type of layered dogma.

Examples in the Bible and elsewhere demonstrate that added layers of dogma are not necessary for a religion to spread. The simple, original message of Jesus is what I mean by low dogma.

We can look to the New Testament for examples of this low-dogma message and its effect. One such example is when the apostle Peter spoke to the crowd on the day of Pentecost. After Peter preached the message of salvation, “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41 NIV). The message preached by Peter on that occasion was the words that Jesus taught him, not the ideas of a simple, relatively uneducated fisherman. This is exactly the type of low-dogma message I am referring to.

Is this type of message, so simple and lacking in dogma and yet so powerful, the one that the Nones need to hear? Let’s investigate this message that Jesus presented in the Sermon on the Mount to see just what power it had to attract so many converts.

## **What Is the Sermon on the Mount?**

The Sermon on the Mount is found fairly early on in the Gospel of Matthew. It follows Jesus’s calling of the disciples Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Matthew tells us that after calling these disciples, Jesus began his healing ministry (Matthew 4:18–23).

Jesus’s fame as a healer became so great that crowds followed Him around, seeking His healing power (Matthew 4:23–25). Taking note of the crowd following him, who were no doubt

clamoring for His healing powers, Jesus led His disciples up a mountain where he could instruct them. Once up the mountain with a little peace and quiet, He began to teach His disciples (Matthew 5:1–2). This is why it is called the Sermon on the Mount. I often refer to it as just the Sermon.

I have arbitrarily divided the Sermon into four parts: the Beatitudes; Leadership, the Law, and Piety; Standards for Living; and the Summary Parable. Of these four sections, I believe that the Beatitudes and the standards for living have the most direct impact on how we should direct our lives in this modern era. I will therefore devote more time to a discussion of these sections.

The most famous part of the Sermon is the presentation of the nine Beatitudes. Some biblical scholars say there are eight Beatitudes, but I count “blessed” nine times. Nine is a significant number in biblical understanding as it signifies divine completeness. These Beatitudes, as we will learn, are a step-by-step plan for personal inner development.

The section called “Leadership, the Law, and Piety” is next. Here, Jesus presents how His new paradigm message is to be practiced in our interface with society, in our observance of the rules of religion, and in our prayer lives.

In the next section, Jesus presents standards for living a life pleasing to God. These rules may be counter to our modern way of living, but they still resound with fundamental truths.

Jesus ends this sermon with a summary parable that presents an allegory of building on rock to stress the importance of our hearing and following the words of His sermon.

The impact of the message of Jesus’s message in the Sermon cannot be overstated. It formed an integral part of the belief structure of the early church—the Way. Perhaps the most notable example of the Sermon’s impact on early Christian belief is the Didache. From the Greek word meaning “teaching,” this document lays out a code for how the early Christian believers should live their lives. The Didache contains over a dozen quotes or paraphrases from the

Sermon on the Mount, including the complete Lord's Prayer. Scholars have dated this document from the late first century to the early second century AD, so it is only one or two degrees of separation from the audience of Jesus's Sermon and his disciples. Most importantly, we can see that the early believers incorporated the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount into their rules for following the Way.

Aside from the Didache, the letter of James (also known as the "Epistle of James") attempts to present the important aspects of the beliefs of the early church. Found in the New Testament, this letter was most likely written in the early days of the church. It was addressed to the "twelve tribes scattered all over the world" and presents an argument for leading a God-pleasing life (James 1:1 CEV). This argument by James utilizes key themes and even a phrase or two from the Sermon on the Mount.

These examples show the importance of the Sermon in the development of the belief structure of the early church. This early church—the Way—was focused on living a life pleasing to God. The Sermon on the Mount can also play an important role in our own understanding of how we can live such a God-pleasing life.

---

<sup>1</sup> John L. Allen Jr., “The Holy Chalice of Valencia,” *National Catholic Reporter*, July 7, 2006, [www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/holy-chalice-valencia](http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/holy-chalice-valencia).

<sup>2</sup> Clare Speak, “7 Things You Didn’t Know About the Holy Chalice of Valencia,” *Culture Trip*, March 1, 2018, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/spain/articles/7-things-you-didnt-know-about-the-holy-chalice-of-valencia>.

<sup>3</sup> “A New Era of Religion,” *Ozy Daily Dose*, December 10, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211210233942/https://www.ozy.com/pg/newsletter/the-daily-dose/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe,” Pew Research Center, January 24, 2024, [www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe](http://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe).

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, January 24, 2024, [www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe](http://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe).

<sup>6</sup> Lela Gilbert, “Good News from Iran: A Million New Christian Believers,” *The Hudson Institute*, June 15, 2023, [www.hudson.org/religious-freedom/good-news-iran-million-new-christian-believers-lela-gilbert](http://www.hudson.org/religious-freedom/good-news-iran-million-new-christian-believers-lela-gilbert).

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya, “Christianity in Asia,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, June 25, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.219>.

<sup>8</sup> “Christianity in Africa,” *Encyclopedia of World Geography*, accessed March 22, 2024, [www.geography.name/christianity-in-africa](http://www.geography.name/christianity-in-africa).

<sup>9</sup> “Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region,” PEW Research, November 13, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>.