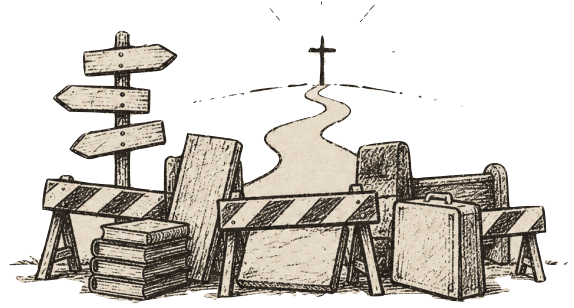


# ALONG THE WAY

## When Christianity Gets in the Way of Jesus



Jesus made an extraordinary claim: *“I am the way.”*

Not I will show you the way.

Not I will give you a system for finding the way.

Not Here are the beliefs, practices, structures, and traditions that constitute the way.

***I am the way.***

*The Way* is a person. And yet, over two thousand years of following Jesus, we have accumulated an enormous amount of stuff along the Way.

Theology. Denominations. Traditions. Worship styles. Political assumptions. Church models. Leadership structures. Cultural expectations. Vocabulary. Behavioral expectations. Ideas about what Christians should look like, sound like, believe, practice, and prioritize.

Many of these things aren’t wrong. Some are beautiful. Some are helpful. Some emerged from faithful people trying to understand Jesus and follow Him within their particular place and time.

The problem begins when something along the Way becomes a requirement for the Way.

## The Center Keeps Getting Bigger

Every community has things it values. Every church has convictions. Every tradition has interpretations. Every culture develops practices and language that help people make sense of their shared experience.

But something subtle happens over time. Jesus is at the center. Then we add our theology. Then our interpretation of that theology. Then our denomination. Then our understanding of church. Then our expectations about worship. Then our assumptions about leadership. Then our political and cultural perspectives. Then our vocabulary. Then our expectations about what a mature follower of Jesus should look like.

Eventually, the center becomes enormous. And the larger the center becomes, the smaller the circle becomes.

People aren’t simply being invited to follow Jesus anymore. They are being invited to follow Jesus and adopt everything we have accumulated around Him.

Jesus is still there. He’s just becoming harder to see.

## **When Unity Becomes Uniformity**

The Church is astonishingly diverse. Different nations. Different languages. Different cultures. Different histories. Different personalities. Different perspectives. Different experiences.

The picture Revelation gives us isn't one culture eventually winning. It is people from every tribe, language, people, and nation gathered around Jesus. Notice what creates their unity.

It isn't sameness. It is Jesus.

But we often confuse unity around Jesus with uniformity around us. We become uncomfortable when someone follows Jesus differently than we do. We divide over secondary questions. We build churches around increasingly specific theological, cultural, and methodological identities.

We find people who already think like us and call that community. Then we wonder why people outside our circles struggle to imagine themselves inside them.

## **The Things Along the Way**

What if some of the things we fight hardest to protect were never meant to define the Way? What if they were simply things we encountered along the Way?

A particular church model might help us follow Jesus. A denomination might help us understand Scripture. A tradition might connect us with generations who followed Jesus before us. A worship style might help us express something deeply meaningful. A theological framework might help us put language around mysteries we are trying to understand.

Those things have value. But none of them said, "I am the way."

Jesus did.

That distinction matters enormously. Because when something that helps us follow Jesus becomes something others must accept before they are allowed to follow Jesus with us, we have changed its function.

A tool becomes a boundary. A perspective becomes a requirement. A tradition becomes a test. A preference becomes an expectation.

Something that once helped people along the Way now stands in the Way.

## **The Harvest Makes This Uncomfortable**

Entering the harvest exposes how much we have added. When you develop genuine relationships with people who don't share your Christian vocabulary, assumptions, history,

politics, theology, or church experience, you begin discovering how much of what you considered Christianity was actually Christian culture.

That discovery is uncomfortable. It has certainly been uncomfortable for me.

Because the harvest keeps forcing a question: Is this Jesus, or is this something we added along the Way?

That question has changed how I see ministry. If Jesus is already at work in the harvest, then my responsibility isn't to transport an entire religious culture into that space. It is to recognize Him there, follow Him there, join Him there, and trust what He does next.

That means a Kingdom Expression around a dinner table in Paris doesn't need to look like a church in Orlando. A conversation in a London flat doesn't need to reproduce an American ministry model. A group gathering in Tokyo doesn't need to inherit someone else's cultural expression of Christianity before it becomes legitimate.

Jesus doesn't need us to make people like us before they can become like Him.

## Clearing the Way

What if one of the most important things the Church could do right now isn't add something new? What if it is remove some things?

Not abandoning truth. Not eliminating conviction. Not pretending differences don't matter. But becoming courageous enough to examine everything we have accumulated and ask: Does this lead people toward Jesus, or have we made it part of the entrance requirement?

Imagine what might happen if Jesus became easier to see. Imagine communities with deeply held convictions and enormous capacity for difference. Imagine followers of Jesus who don't panic when someone asks uncomfortable questions. Imagine churches secure enough in Jesus to allow people to explore, wrestle, disagree, discover, and grow.

Imagine unity that doesn't require uniformity.

Perhaps the future of the Church doesn't require another model, method, program, strategy, or pathway. Perhaps some of our most important work is much simpler.

Look at everything we've placed along the Way. Hold it up to Jesus. Keep what helps us follow Him. Release what has become an obstacle. And keep moving.

Because Jesus never said our theology was the way. He never said our denomination was the way. He never said our church model was the way. He never said our culture was the way.

He said, *"I am the way."*

And we keep adding things along the way, until people can barely see *the Way*.