



**"FOR IF YOU WALK ON THIS ROAD, IT IS
IMPOSSIBLE TO GO ASTRAY."**

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For if you walk on this road, it is impossible to go astray

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Introduction

Two thousand years after his life, the figure of Jesus Christ remains one of the most influential and yet misunderstood spiritual teachers in human history. While institutional Christianity has built elaborate theological systems and hierarchical structures around his name, a careful examination of Jesus' original teachings reveals something far more radical and transformative: Jesus was a divine mystic whose central message was about the Kingdom of God within every being, and whose purpose was to transform his followers into beings like himself—into Christs.¹

This understanding of Jesus stands in stark contrast to the institutionalized Christianity that emerged in the centuries following his death. As Jesus himself warned, "For if you walk on this road, it is impossible to go astray."² Yet the road that institutional Christianity has often taken appears to diverge significantly from the path Jesus himself laid out. The divine mystic who taught direct experience of God within has been transformed into a singular divine figure whose followers must access God through institutional mediation rather than through their own divine nature.

Key Insight: Jesus' central message about the Kingdom of God within every human being represents a profound threat to institutional Christianity because it eliminates the need for external religious authority, suggesting instead that each person has direct access to the divine through their own inner being.

This research paper (Part One) will focus exclusively on Jesus and Christianity, examining the evidence that Jesus was a divine mystic whose teachings were meant to transform his followers into Christ-like beings. It will explore how his message about the Kingdom of God within challenges the very foundations of institutional Christianity, despite his explicit warnings not to seek the Divine in churches or through preachers. This analysis will set the foundation for Part Two, which will reveal deeper aspects of what Jesus was really teaching about the nature of human divinity and spiritual transformation.

I. Jesus as a Divine Mystic

A. Historical Context of Mysticism in Jesus' Time

To understand Jesus as a mystic, we must first place him within

the rich context of mystical traditions that existed in first-century Palestine. Far from being a spiritual innovator in a vacuum, Jesus emerged within a complex tapestry of Jewish mystical traditions, influenced by Essene practices, Pharisaic wisdom, and possibly even Hellenistic mystery religions.³

Jewish mysticism of the period included apocalyptic traditions that emphasized direct visionary experiences of heavenly realms, as well as wisdom traditions that sought union with divine Sophia (Wisdom). The Essenes, with whom some scholars believe Jesus may have had contact, practiced ascetic disciplines aimed at spiritual purification and direct communion with God.⁴ These traditions provided a foundation for understanding mystical experience as a legitimate form of religious knowledge.

Scholar Gershom Scholem notes that Jewish mysticism of this period was characterized by "the possibility of intimate communion between man and God," a theme that would become central to Jesus' teachings.⁵ This historical context helps us recognize that Jesus' mystical teachings were not unprecedented but represented a powerful articulation and development of mystical currents already present in his cultural milieu.

B. Evidence of Jesus' Mystical Teachings

Evidence for Jesus' mystical orientation can be found throughout the canonical gospels, though it becomes even more explicit in the Gnostic texts discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945. In the canonical gospels, Jesus repeatedly speaks of a direct, experiential knowledge of God that transcends intellectual understanding or ritual observance.

For instance, when Jesus says, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), he is expressing a mystical unity with the divine that goes beyond mere theological assertion.⁶ Similarly, his statement that "the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:38) reflects the mystical experience of divine indwelling and interpenetration characteristic of mystical consciousness.

The Gnostic texts provide even more explicit evidence of Jesus' mystical teachings. In *The Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus declares, "The Kingdom of God is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father."⁷ This emphasis on self-knowledge as the path to divine knowledge is a hallmark of mystical teaching across traditions.

In *The Dialogue of the Savior*, Jesus teaches, "The one who seeks is the one who reveals. That for which you are seeking is

within you."⁸ He further states, "The living God dwells in you and you dwell in him." These teachings point to a mystical understanding of the divine as immediately present within human consciousness, accessible through direct experience rather than through external religious mediation.

C. Jesus' Understanding of His Own Divine Nature

Central to understanding Jesus as a divine mystic is examining how he understood his own relationship to the divine. The evidence suggests that Jesus did not see himself as uniquely divine in a way that separated him ontologically from other humans. Rather, he understood his divine nature as a realization of the potential divinity inherent in all human beings.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus prays that his followers "may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (John 17:21). This suggests that Jesus understood the unity he experienced with God as something that could and should be shared by all his followers.⁹

Even more explicitly, in *The First Apocalypse of James* from the Nag Hammadi library, Jesus tells James, "Free yourself from this blind idea, that you are merely the case of flesh which encircles you. Then you will reach Him Who is. Then you will no longer be James; rather you are the One Who is."¹⁰ This teaching suggests that Jesus understood his own divine identity not as unique to himself but as a realization of the true nature of all human beings.

This understanding stands in stark contrast to later church doctrine, which emphasized Jesus' unique divinity and the unbridgeable gap between his nature and that of ordinary humans. As theologian Marcus Borg notes, "For Jesus, the decisive question was not whether one believed in his divinity, but whether one followed his path of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being."¹¹

II. The Kingdom of God Within

A. Analysis of Luke 17:20-21

One of the most profound and revolutionary statements attributed to Jesus appears in Luke 17:20-21: "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you" (NKJV).¹² This statement represents a radical departure

from the prevailing Jewish expectation of the kingdom as a future political reality and points instead to an immediate, interior dimension of divine presence.

The Greek phrase translated as "within you" in the KJV and NKJV is "entos hymon," which has been variously translated in other versions as "in your midst" (NIV, NASB, NET), "among you" (NLT, HCSB), and "in the midst of you" (ESV). This variation reflects an ongoing scholarly debate about the precise meaning of Jesus' words.¹³

There are three main interpretations of this phrase:

1. **The Kingdom is Inward:** The kingdom of God is essentially inward, within the human heart or consciousness.
2. **The Kingdom is Accessible:** The kingdom is within reach if one makes the right choices.
3. **The Kingdom is Present in Jesus:** The kingdom of God is in the midst of people in the person and presence of Jesus.

While traditional Christian interpretation has often favored the third option, the first interpretation aligns most closely with Jesus' other teachings about the immediate accessibility of divine presence and with the mystical understanding of divine indwelling. As biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan notes, "The Kingdom of God is not something that comes from outside of you to save you. It is something that comes from inside of you to transform you."¹⁴

B. Jesus' Other Teachings About the Inner Kingdom

Jesus' statement in Luke 17:20-21 is not an isolated teaching but part of a consistent emphasis on the interior dimension of divine presence throughout his ministry. In numerous parables and sayings, Jesus points to the kingdom as an inner reality that transforms from within rather than an external reality imposed from without.

In the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32), Jesus compares the kingdom to a tiny seed that grows into a large plant—an organic process of inner development rather than external conquest.¹⁵ Similarly, in the parable of the leaven (Matthew 13:33), the kingdom is compared to yeast that works invisibly within dough, transforming it from within.

Jesus' teaching that "the pure in heart shall see God" (Matthew 5:8) further emphasizes that divine perception is a function of inner purity rather than external religious observance. His statement that "rivers of living water will flow from within"

those who believe in him (John 7:38) uses the metaphor of water—a symbol of life and spirit—flowing from within the person rather than being poured in from outside.¹⁶

In the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus is even more explicit: "If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you."¹⁷ This teaching directly challenges any attempt to locate the divine in external places or forms.

C. The Revolutionary Nature of This Teaching

Jesus' teaching about the kingdom within represented a profound challenge to the religious understanding of his time and continues to challenge institutional Christianity today. In first-century Judaism, access to God was mediated through the Temple priesthood, ritual purity laws, and sacred texts interpreted by religious authorities. The idea that ordinary people could directly access the divine within themselves without institutional mediation was revolutionary.

This teaching democratized access to God in a way that threatened religious power structures. If the kingdom of God is within each person, then religious authorities lose their privileged position as gatekeepers to the divine. As religious scholar Karen Armstrong notes, "Jesus was not telling people what to believe in, but how to look. He did not insist that his disciples accept this or that doctrine, but invited them to see things differently."¹⁸

Key Insight: By teaching that the kingdom of God is within, Jesus shifted the locus of divine authority from external religious institutions to the individual's direct experience of God. This represents a fundamental threat to any religious system that claims exclusive authority to mediate between humans and the divine.

This teaching also challenges the temporal orientation of religious hope. Rather than projecting divine fulfillment into a future apocalyptic event or afterlife reward, Jesus located divine presence in the immediate now, accessible through a shift in consciousness rather than through historical or eschatological events.¹⁹ This immediacy of divine presence remains a revolutionary concept that challenges institutional Christianity's

tendency to defer spiritual fulfillment to an afterlife or future judgment.

III. Transforming Followers into Christ-like Beings

A. Jesus' Formula for Transformation

At the heart of Jesus' mystical teaching lies a formula for spiritual transformation that enables his followers to become like him. This formula is encapsulated in his core message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). While this statement has often been interpreted as a call to moral reform or a warning of impending judgment, a deeper analysis reveals it as a profound invitation to spiritual transformation.²⁰

The Greek word translated as "repent" is "metanoia," which literally means "beyond mind" or "change of mind." It refers not merely to feeling sorry for wrongdoing but to a fundamental shift in perception and consciousness—a transformation in how one sees reality.²¹ As religious scholar L.J. Milone explains, "To repent is to transcend the mind by not thinking and by faith. It is also to recognize our mental identifications and let them go."²²

The phrase "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" points to the immediate accessibility of divine presence. The Greek word "engiken," translated as "is at hand," indicates something that has drawn near and is now present. Jesus is not announcing a future reality but an immediate possibility—the conscious enjoyment of divine unity, a state of spiritual consciousness in which we are one with God.²³

This formula for transformation involves both an immediate shift in consciousness (metanoia) and an ongoing process of spiritual development. When Jesus says, "Follow me," he announces the Gospel not only as an experience to enter into but also as a path to grow into. This "both/and" dynamic suggests that transformation is both instantaneous and progressive—a sudden awakening followed by a lifelong journey of embodying that awakening.²⁴

B. Evidence That Jesus Intended His Followers to Become Like Him

Throughout the gospels, there is compelling evidence that Jesus intended his followers to become like him—to embody the same divine consciousness and express the same divine qualities that

he manifested. This stands in stark contrast to later Christian theology, which often emphasized the unbridgeable gap between Jesus' divinity and human nature.

In John 14:12, Jesus makes the remarkable statement, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." This suggests that Jesus expected his followers not only to equal but to surpass his own spiritual accomplishments.²⁵ Similarly, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his disciples to "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48), setting divine perfection as the standard for his followers.

The Gnostic texts are even more explicit about Jesus' intention to transform his followers into beings like himself. In *The Gospel of Philip*, Jesus teaches: "You saw the spirit, you become the spirit. You saw Christ, you become Christ. You saw the Father, you shall become the Father. You see your Self, and what you see you will become."²⁶ This teaching directly states that the purpose of Jesus' ministry was to enable his followers to undergo the same divine transformation that he had experienced.

Key Insight: Jesus did not come to establish himself as a unique divine being to be worshipped from afar, but rather as a prototype of what all humans could become through spiritual transformation. His mission was not to be the only Christ but to be the first of many Christs.

This understanding is further supported by Paul's teaching that believers are being "transformed into the same image [as Christ] from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18) and that Christ is "the firstborn within a large family" (Romans 8:29). These passages suggest that Christ's divine nature was meant to be replicated in his followers, not merely admired from a distance.²⁷

C. The Mystical Path Jesus Taught

The mystical path that Jesus taught his followers involves several key elements that recur throughout his teachings. These elements constitute a practical methodology for spiritual transformation that enables individuals to realize their divine nature and become Christ-like.

First, Jesus emphasized self-knowledge as divine knowledge. In the Gnostic tradition, Jesus' statement "Know yourself" is considered one of his central teachings.²⁸ This is not mere

psychological introspection but a profound recognition of one's true nature beyond ego identification. As the *Gospel of Thomas* records Jesus saying, "When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father."²⁹

Second, Jesus taught the letting go of identification with external forms. His teachings on non-attachment—"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matthew 6:19)—and his emphasis on the lilies of the field and the birds of the air (Matthew 6:25-34) point to a liberation from identification with material possessions and social roles. This letting go creates the space for divine consciousness to emerge.³⁰

Third, Jesus emphasized the role of faith and inner silence in spiritual transformation. His frequent withdrawals for prayer and his teaching that true prayer happens in the "inner room" with the "door shut" (Matthew 6:6) suggest a practice of contemplative silence that allows for direct communion with the divine.³¹ This silence is not merely the absence of noise but the presence of receptivity to divine reality.

Finally, Jesus taught that transformation involves both immediate awakening and progressive embodiment. The parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32) illustrates how the kingdom begins as a tiny seed of awakening that gradually grows into a full manifestation of divine life. This suggests that becoming Christ-like is both an instantaneous recognition of one's true nature and a gradual process of allowing that nature to permeate one's entire being.³²

Together, these elements constitute a mystical path that leads to the realization of one's divine nature and the transformation into Christ-consciousness. This path is not about acquiring new information or adhering to moral rules but about experiencing a fundamental shift in identity from separate ego to divine Self.³³

IV. Jesus' Criticism of Religious Institutions

A. Analysis of Matthew 23

Perhaps nowhere is Jesus' critique of religious institutions more evident than in Matthew 23, where he delivers a scathing indictment of the religious authorities of his day. This chapter provides crucial insight into Jesus' view of institutionalized religion and its potential to obstruct rather than facilitate genuine spiritual experience.

Jesus begins by acknowledging the legitimate teaching authority of the scribes and Pharisees who "sit on Moses' seat" (Matthew 23:2) but immediately criticizes the gap between their teaching and their practice: "They do not practice what they teach" (Matthew 23:3). This establishes a fundamental principle of Jesus' critique: authentic spirituality must be embodied, not merely professed.³⁴

Jesus then identifies several specific problems with institutionalized religion. First, religious leaders "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them" (Matthew 23:4). This refers to the tendency of religious institutions to impose complex rules and requirements that burden followers while the leaders themselves find ways to avoid these burdens.³⁵

Second, Jesus criticizes religious leaders for their focus on external appearances and public recognition: "They do all their deeds to be seen by others" (Matthew 23:5). This emphasis on outward show rather than inner transformation represents a fundamental distortion of spiritual practice, turning it from a path of genuine transformation into a means of social status and ego enhancement.³⁶

Most significantly, Jesus accuses the religious leaders of "shutting the kingdom of heaven in people's faces" (Matthew 23:13). This striking accusation suggests that religious institutions, rather than facilitating access to divine reality, can actually prevent people from experiencing it. By setting themselves up as gatekeepers to God and imposing their own requirements for divine access, religious authorities can block the direct, unmediated experience of divine presence that Jesus taught was available to all.³⁷

B. Jesus' Rejection of Religious Hierarchy

Central to Jesus' criticism of religious institutions is his rejection of hierarchical structures that create spiritual inequality among believers. In Matthew 23:8-10, he explicitly challenges the hierarchical titles and positions that were common in religious institutions of his time:

"But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah."

This teaching directly challenges any religious system that elevates certain individuals as having special access to God or

special authority to interpret divine will. Jesus insists on the fundamental equality of all believers before God, with himself as the only legitimate teacher and God as the only true Father.³⁸

In place of hierarchical leadership, Jesus advocates a model of servant leadership: "The greatest among you will be your servant" (Matthew 23:11). This inversion of traditional power structures challenges the very foundation of institutional religion, which typically operates through hierarchical authority.³⁹

Jesus' rejection of religious hierarchy is consistent with his teaching about the kingdom within. If the divine presence is directly accessible within each person, then external authorities cannot legitimately claim exclusive access to God or special authority to mediate between God and others. As theologian Walter Wink notes, "Jesus' entire ministry was an assault on the hierarchical assumptions of his day."⁴⁰

C. How Religious Institutions Block Access to the Kingdom

Jesus identifies several specific ways in which religious institutions can block access to the kingdom of God. Understanding these mechanisms helps clarify why Jesus saw institutional religion as a potential obstacle to genuine spiritual experience.

First, religious institutions often create unnecessary intermediaries between people and God. By establishing a priestly class or spiritual elite with special access to divine wisdom, institutions can foster dependency rather than empowerment. Jesus challenged this by teaching direct access to God through prayer (Matthew 6:6) and by tearing the Temple veil at his death (Matthew 27:51), symbolically removing the barrier between humanity and God.⁴¹

Second, religious institutions tend to focus on external conformity rather than inner transformation. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for cleaning "the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence" (Matthew 23:25). This emphasis on outward compliance with rules and rituals can create the illusion of spirituality without the reality of inner transformation.⁴²

Third, religious institutions often substitute ritual for direct spiritual experience. Jesus quoted Isaiah in his critique of the religious leaders: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" (Matthew 15:8-9). When ritual becomes an end in itself rather than a means to direct

divine encounter, it can actually prevent the very experience it was designed to facilitate.⁴³

Key Insight: Jesus did not oppose all religious forms or practices, but he consistently challenged any religious system that placed institutional authority, ritual conformity, or doctrinal orthodoxy above direct, transformative encounter with the divine presence.

Finally, religious institutions can block access to the kingdom by fostering fear and guilt rather than love and freedom. Jesus criticized religious leaders for binding "heavy burdens" on people (Matthew 23:4) and for traversing "sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Matthew 23:15). This suggests that religious institutions can create psychological barriers to divine experience through fear-based teaching and guilt-inducing practices.⁴⁴

V. The Threat to Institutional Christianity

A. Ecclesia vs. Church

To understand how Jesus' teachings threaten institutional Christianity, it is important to recognize the distinction between the "ecclesia" that Jesus spoke of and the "church" that developed after his death. The Greek word "ekklesia," which is translated as "church" in many English Bibles, actually means "assembly" or "gathering" and refers to a community of believers rather than an institutional structure.⁴⁵

Jesus used this term only twice in the canonical gospels (Matthew 16:18 and 18:17), and in neither case does he appear to be establishing a hierarchical institution. Rather, he seems to be referring to a community of followers who share his vision and embody his teachings. As biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan notes, "Jesus was not establishing a church but proclaiming a kingdom."⁴⁶

The transformation of this fluid, egalitarian movement into hierarchical institutions with centralized authority, fixed doctrines, and elaborate rituals represents a significant departure from Jesus' original vision. This institutionalization process, which accelerated after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, shifted the

focus from direct spiritual experience to institutional membership and doctrinal conformity.⁴⁷

Perhaps most significantly, the institutional church replaced the concept of "sacred people"—individuals transformed by divine consciousness—with "sacred places" like churches and cathedrals. This shift externalized the divine presence, locating it in special buildings and rituals rather than within the human heart, directly contradicting Jesus' teaching that the kingdom of God is within.⁴⁸

B. The Challenge to Religious Authority

Jesus' teaching about the kingdom within poses a fundamental challenge to religious authority. If each person has direct access to the divine through their own inner being, what role remains for religious authorities who claim special access to God or unique authority to interpret divine will?

This challenge is particularly acute for institutional Christianity, which has historically operated through hierarchical structures of authority—from the papacy to local clergy—who claim special status as mediators between God and ordinary believers. Jesus' teaching that "you have one teacher, and you are all students" (Matthew 23:8) directly undermines this hierarchical model.⁴⁹

The Protestant Reformation partially addressed this issue with its doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers," which challenged the Catholic Church's monopoly on divine access. However, even Protestant denominations have typically maintained some form of clerical authority and institutional structure that mediates between individuals and God.⁵⁰

Jesus' mystical teaching goes further than the Reformation, suggesting not just that all believers have equal access to God but that the divine presence is immediately available within each person's consciousness. This radical democratization of spiritual authority threatens any religious system that positions itself as a necessary intermediary between humans and the divine.⁵¹

C. The Challenge to Religious Dogma

Beyond challenging religious authority, Jesus' mystical teachings also threaten religious dogma—the fixed doctrines and beliefs that define orthodox Christianity. If direct spiritual experience is the primary source of religious knowledge, as Jesus' teachings suggest, then external doctrines and creeds become secondary at best.

This prioritization of experience over belief is evident in Jesus'

emphasis on transformation rather than intellectual assent. When he says, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20), he establishes transformed character, not doctrinal correctness, as the criterion for authentic spirituality.⁵²

The Gnostic texts make this challenge to dogma even more explicit. In *The Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus warns against those who claim to know the way to God through doctrine: "If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you."⁵³ This suggests that no external teaching, no matter how orthodox, can substitute for direct inner knowing.

Institutional Christianity has historically defined itself through creeds, confessions, and doctrinal statements that establish boundaries between orthodox and heretical belief. Jesus' emphasis on direct spiritual experience challenges this approach by suggesting that truth is not primarily propositional but experiential—not something to be believed but something to be known through inner transformation.⁵⁴

VI. Jesus' Warnings About Seeking the Divine in External Forms

A. Jesus' Warnings Against Seeking God in Temples or Through Preachers

Jesus repeatedly warned against the tendency to locate the divine in external forms such as temples or to access God through human intermediaries like preachers. These warnings constitute a direct challenge to institutional religion, which typically operates through sacred spaces and authorized teachers.

Regarding temples, Jesus made the radical prediction that "the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (John 4:21). This statement to the Samaritan woman directly challenged the notion that God's presence is specially located in designated sacred spaces. Instead, Jesus taught that "true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23), suggesting that authentic worship is an inner reality rather than an external location.⁵⁵

Jesus' cleansing of the Temple (Matthew 21:12-13) can be understood not merely as a protest against commercial activities but as a prophetic action symbolizing the end of temple-based religion. His prediction that "not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (Matthew 24:2) foreshadowed

not just the physical destruction of the Jerusalem Temple but the spiritual obsolescence of temple-based worship.⁵⁶

Regarding human teachers and preachers, Jesus warned, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!" (Mark 12:38-39). This caution against religious professionals who enjoy status and authority suggests that such figures can become obstacles rather than aids to genuine spirituality.⁵⁷

B. The True Temple as the Human Body/Spirit

In place of external temples, Jesus taught that the human body/spirit is the true temple of divine presence. When he said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19), John explains that "he was speaking of the temple of his body" (John 2:21). This statement radically relocates divine presence from external sacred spaces to the human form.⁵⁸

This teaching was later developed by Paul, who asked, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?" (1 Corinthians 6:19). This understanding of the human body as the true dwelling place of God represents a fundamental shift from external to internal spirituality, from sacred spaces to sacred people.⁵⁹

Key Insight: By teaching that the human body/spirit is the true temple, Jesus initiated a radical relocation of the sacred from external institutions to the individual human being. This shift threatens any religious system that claims special access to God through designated spaces or authorized personnel.

The implications of this teaching are profound. If each human being is a temple of divine presence, then no external building or institution can claim exclusive access to God. If the divine dwells within the human heart, then no priest or preacher can claim unique authority to mediate between humans and God. This understanding fundamentally challenges the basis of institutional religion, which typically operates through sacred spaces and authorized intermediaries.⁶⁰

C. The Misunderstanding of Jesus' Message

by His Followers

Despite Jesus' clear warnings against seeking the divine in external forms, his followers soon began building the very institutions he had criticized. This misunderstanding of Jesus' message represents one of the great ironies of Christian history.

Within a few centuries of Jesus' death, Christianity had developed elaborate hierarchical structures, designated sacred spaces, and authorized intermediaries between God and ordinary believers—precisely the external forms that Jesus had warned against. As theologian Harvey Cox observes, "The history of Christianity can be seen as a gradual shift from the kingdom of God to the church of God."⁶¹

This misunderstanding was not universal. Throughout Christian history, mystical movements have emerged that sought to recover Jesus' original emphasis on direct spiritual experience. From the Desert Fathers and Mothers to medieval mystics like Meister Eckhart and Julian of Norwich to modern contemplatives like Thomas Merton, these individuals and communities have attempted to return to Jesus' teaching about the kingdom within.⁶²

However, these mystical movements have typically been marginalized or even persecuted by institutional Christianity, which has often viewed direct spiritual experience as a threat to established authority. The fate of mystics like Eckhart, who was condemned for heresy, illustrates the tension between Jesus' mystical teaching and institutional religion.⁶³

This pattern of misunderstanding continues today. Despite Jesus' explicit warning not to seek the divine in temples or through preachers, millions of Christians continue to believe that church attendance and pastoral guidance are essential to spiritual life. As religious scholar Elaine Pagels notes, "What is extraordinary about these [Gnostic] texts is that they show us that the early Christians we call Gnostics were essentially saying, 'If you think going to church makes you a Christian, you've completely misunderstood Jesus' message.'"⁶⁴

Conclusion

This examination of Jesus as a divine mystic reveals a spiritual teacher whose message was far more radical and transformative than institutional Christianity has typically acknowledged. Jesus taught that the kingdom of God is within each person, accessible through direct spiritual experience rather than through external religious forms. He intended his followers to undergo the same divine transformation that he had experienced, becoming Christ-

like beings who embody divine consciousness in human form.

This understanding of Jesus stands in stark contrast to the institutionalized Christianity that emerged in the centuries following his death. While the church has often portrayed Jesus as a unique divine being whose followers must access God through institutional mediation, Jesus himself taught the direct accessibility of divine presence within the human heart. While religious institutions have typically operated through hierarchical authority and doctrinal orthodoxy, Jesus emphasized the equality of all believers before God and the primacy of transformed character over correct belief.

The implications of this contrast are profound. If Jesus was right that the kingdom of God is within, then institutional Christianity's emphasis on external forms—sacred buildings, hierarchical authority, doctrinal conformity—may actually obstruct rather than facilitate genuine spiritual experience. If Jesus intended his followers to become like him, then the church's emphasis on his unique divinity may prevent believers from recognizing and realizing their own divine potential.

As Jesus himself warned, "For if you walk on this road, it is impossible to go astray." The road he laid out was not one of institutional membership or doctrinal orthodoxy but of inner transformation through direct experience of the divine presence. This road remains available today to anyone willing to look within rather than without for the kingdom of God.

Part Two of this research will explore what Jesus was really talking about when he spoke of the kingdom within—the nature of divine consciousness, the process of spiritual transformation, and the practical methods for realizing one's divine nature. This deeper understanding will build upon the foundation established in Part One, revealing the full implications of Jesus' mystical teaching for contemporary spiritual seekers.

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