



Christianity isn't Jesus' fault

Simply put, Jesus didn't found Christianity.

He wasn't even a "Christian"!

Christianity as an institution developed long after Jesus walked the earth. And by definition, a follower of a religion can't be the foundation on which the religion is based.

Christianity has given Jesus a bad name. And now more than ever, it's crucial for believers and nonbelievers alike to have a genuine conversation about Christianity's faithfulness to Jesus' message and mission. Only through open-minded, well-intentioned dialogue will the Jesus of the gospels — and the truth he represented — be set free.

Today Jesus is often depicted in a way that bears little resemblance to the charismatic leader who gave hope to the downtrodden two millennia ago. An exceptional, extraordinary human being, Jesus was revolutionary in his thinking and boldly challenged the social conventions of his time. He was inspirational to his followers, who saw him as the leader of an important and radical social movement. By promoting unity, acceptance and inclusion, Jesus sought to break down barriers that divide.

But Jesus never intended to found a religion, much less be the object of its devotion. Jesus' disciples and the early Christian Church made him into something else. Institutional religion distorted Jesus' identity by making him divine. Church leaders enshrined him as "the only Son of God." But he wasn't.

And it's not his fault that Christianity has made him out that way. Jesus had nothing to do with the development of Christianity — nor has he had anything to do with the many stances and moral positions the Church has taken over the ages. Regrettably, in its divergence from Jesus' original message, Christianity has done a great disservice both to the man and his mission.

The gospels do not record any words of Jesus concerning some of the most divisive and controversial issues in Christianity today — issues like birth control, abortion, homosexuality and gender equality. And yet the Christian

Church maintains that it faithfully represents the will of Christ in upholding doctrines concerning these issues — doctrines that have frequently been used to alienate and exclude individuals from the "Christian community."

Moreover, mainstream Christianity has become increasingly intolerant of other faith traditions. Although the majority of people who believe in God express their belief through other religious traditions, fundamentalist Christians assert that their perspective is the only valid one. This exclusionary, inflexible stance has resulted in much alienation — which is, of course, completely opposed to the radical inclusivity Jesus advocated.

Jesus reached out across different religious traditions to recognize and value each human being. His focus was not on promoting one religious perspective; rather, he emphasized our shared humanity and the interrelatedness of all people.

Difficult and challenging as it may be, the conversation about Christianity's faithfulness to Jesus' message and mission must take place. Meaningful change will only come about when we're brave enough to talk candidly with one another and reconcile our different viewpoints.

Ironically, one thing that atheists and true "fans" of Jesus can agree on is that, in his extraordinary compassion and acceptance of others, Jesus is indeed worthy of imitation. He frequently reached out to help those in need — those who were physically impaired, outcast or otherwise marginalized.

Jesus never intended to be the "founder" of a religion that would be oppressive and exclusionary. He did feel a innate connection with a particular power within, however, and his mission was to make what he called "the kingdom [or 'reign'] of God" more present in the world. Jesus saw liberation and happiness as potentialities that all people can achieve.

Christianity isn't Jesus' fault. It's ours. And, in the end, we're the only ones who can fix it.