

# Sharing Our Faith



## Jesus Was Not a Christian

The Rev. Alan Boyd

Jesus was not a Christian.

In fact, Jesus was a practicing Jew.

Before 1973 Jesus' Jewishness was not a given in Christian thought. Jesus wandered lost in the overextended fantasy of Christian imagining.

But the real Jesus is no longer lost.

In 1973 Jesus became Jewish again. Why? Geza Vermes, Oxford University's first professor of Jewish Studies, published *Jesus the Jew*.

Amazing how a well-researched book can shift our thinking.

But some will say, "What about the Good Book? Doesn't it tell us who Jesus was?"

No, it tells us what Christians thought about Jesus, not who Jesus really was.

If we want to find the real Jesus, we have to drill through the encrusted layers of Christian tradition to find him. Or, to use another metaphor, we have to peel back the successive layers of the Christian onion to approach the Jewish male who lived in the first third of the tumultuous First Century CE.

One layer we have to peel back is the deliberate changes made in the New Testament manuscripts to bolster the deity of Jesus. For example, the earliest and best authenticated reading at Luke 3:22 is *My son you are; I today have birthed you* (quoting Psalm 2:7). You won't find this reading in your English translations. Why? This reading was rejected by many early Christian scribes because it seems to say that Jesus became "God's son" at his baptism. Not a popular position with the orthodox.

Another layer we have to peel back is to honestly acknowledge that every English translation is hypothetical. No one, but no one, can say that they possess the New Testament documents as originally written. Why? First, the originals are lost to the mists of time. Second, the copies we do have reflect a "living" text, not a "settled" text. The manuscripts reflect the distinctive beliefs of the individual Christian communities which read them. Third, the Greek text, upon which every English translation is based, never existed. It's a hypothetical construct. Fourth, we need to honestly acknowledge that there are errors, some of them major, in the hypothetical Greek text which translators use. For example, there are 250 errors in the critical apparatus of the Nestle-Aland 27th edition of *I Corinthians* alone (Reuben Swanson, *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: I Corinthians* [2003] xxv-xxvi). Some are errors where the editors guess about blank spaces in the text. Swanson muses, "It is difficult to understand how so many errors in the reporting of the data can have occurred."

What does all this mean? Christians don't own Jesus; they never have. In fact, we don't even own the text which tells Jesus' story. Jesus the Jew refuses to stay entombed in Christian imagining.

The next time someone says to you, "But, the Bible says . . .," reply, "Really!!?"