



# Possible Pitfalls

## of Jesus Movements:

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## Lessons from History

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**T**he Jesus movements that are springing up these days in non-Christian religious contexts seem radically different from anything we have seen before. The questions many are asking are, *Will these movements result in syncretistic or heretical faiths? Will they connect people to God through Christ, or will they keep people from eternal life?*

One way to foresee possible pitfalls in these movements is to look at similar movements in history. The first movements to Christ began inside well-developed religious contexts before the emergence of Christianity as a distinct religious system. The Jewish Jesus movement, called “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22), grew inside the Jewish religious structure, and these believers continued to follow the extensive religious behavioral and dietary laws of their religious culture. The Greco-Roman Jesus movement, whose followers were called “Christians” (from the Greek word for the Messiah: “Christ”), spread within a religious context with a highly defined pantheon of gods (not unlike Hinduism) and respected tradition of philosophical literature. Some believe the Apostle Thomas started a Jesus movement in India, where the believers were called Nazraani Margam (Nazraani meant Nazarenes in Syriac, and Margam means “the Way” in Malayalam), which developed into what is called the Mar Thoma church today.

In the 4th century, the Emperor Constantine’s sponsorship accelerated the development of the Greco-Roman Jesus movement into a religious institution, complete with Greek and Roman cultural, religious,

and political forms, such as icons, solar/lunar holy days, and the diocese structure. Other contemporary Jesus movements were either isolated from this process or chose to reject the political, ecclesiastical, theological and creedal control of the developing Papal Christianity.

These, and many later movements, show us the potential pitfalls associated with movements to Jesus that either are isolated from, or refuse to be associated with, the main forms of Christianity during their times.

### **Potential Pitfall #1: Inadequate discipleship or insufficient access to Scripture can lead to syncretism.**

Examples from history: The Greek movement to Jesus had the Old Testament in Greek, the Septuagint, and many believers were literate in the Greek language, a huge advantage when discipling with written text. However, the Greek believers, for many reasons, did not enter into the Jewish believers’ religious stream or take advantage of well-developed Jewish training and synagogue structures. Paul’s letters reveal the problems that faced the Greek believers as they tried to live out their faith in an entrenched pagan religious context. The New Testament books became the foundational discipling documents of the rapidly multiplying fellowships of the 2nd century, and itinerant multi-ethnic apostolic teams helped to spread the message while empowering local elders and local believers that the Lord was gifting as pastors, teachers, administrators, and so on.

Did this model prevent syncretism and heresy from happening? No. Some groups in the Greek Jesus movement were syncretistic, combining their faith with Greek philosophies which elevated asceticism and

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celibacy on the one hand, or hedonism and promiscuity on the other. Other groups rejected all things Jewish, even the Old Testament. Yet other groups combined their faith with occult or mystery religions or Gnosticism. Even those groups which became the orthodox mainstream adopted Greek religious practices such as the use of icons and philosophical disputation, elements that were not present in the simultaneous Jewish Jesus movement. As heresies arose in this movement, they were fought off by well-disciplined Greek believers from inside the Jesus movement, not by Jewish believers, who were busy with other problems in their own movement. In this way, they maintained the integrity of the central message for three centuries in an environment with entrenched religious beliefs and hostile political forces.

*What lessons can we learn from this? It is highly unlikely that movements can completely avoid syncretism, but correction can come when local apostles, leaders and apologists extensively study the Word in their heart language.*

But what about movements to Jesus in non-Christian religious contexts—those that have no effective and accurate Bible translation into their language, those that are illiterate, or those making their own translations without adequate linguistic, theological and exegetical understanding? Such movements often come up with new or variant understandings, in some cases touching on important theological issues.

Examples from history: As the Gospel expanded beyond the Greek-speaking world, having the Bible only in Greek became inadequate. Early translations in other languages were the Syriac/Aramaic translation of the Bible (old Syriac and the Peshitta), Latin (Old Latin and the Vulgate), Armenian, Georgian, Nubian, Ethiopian and Egyptian Coptic translations. These early translations were done by people fluent in the local language and culture, as well as Greek language and culture.

Because these cultures were significantly different from the contexts that the Greek New Testament was revealed in, theological differences arose almost immediately. Most problematic was different understandings from the Greek view concerning the nature of Christ, with the Armenian, Ethiopian Coptic believers concluding Jesus had only a divine nature (the Monophysite position) and the Syrian-Nestorian believers concluding He had two natures, one human/non-eternal and one divine/eternal. This latter perspective led the Nestorians to conclude that Mary could not be the “mother of God” as the Greek councils insisted, but only the “mother of Christ,” a position that led to them being dubbed heretics by the Roman church.

History shows that translating the Scripture into

various languages inevitably ignites theological debates, no matter how carefully it is done. Even when a word or phrase, such as “Son of God,” is translated in a word-for-word fashion, it can have significantly different connotations or meanings in different languages. Some translators try to add footnotes to words or phrases that help maintain the original meaning.

Some may conclude that it is safer not to translate Scripture, and simply rely on the Greek, or on existing translations. This choice can be even more problematic. When Islam arose, the communities that had the Bible in their own languages proved largely immune to its advance, and many of them continue to exist to this day. When the Nestorians evangelized distant lands, they took the Syriac Bible with them; however, only bits and pieces, plus some liturgy and hymns, were translated into local languages. By the time Islamic, Turkic and Mongol invasions cut off communications with Western missionaries, believers in these Persian, Turkish, or Mongol people groups were still worshipping in Syriac, which most did not understand. Likewise, those communities that only had the Bible in Greek or Latin, but no local translations, had a faith that was not deeply rooted and indigenous. During the Islamic conquest of North Africa, it seems that the Latin and Greek believers fled to other regions, and the local people groups with no scriptures of their own abandoned their faith.

*What lessons can we learn from this? It is crucial that all Jesus movements have an effective and accurate translation in their local language, which is ideally done by bi-lingual, bi-cultural people.*

### **Potential Pitfall #2: Attachment to community customs and identity can lead to syncretism and/or conflict with community leaders.**

Believers in Jesus movements maintain their community identity and often continue to follow the same customs as their family. They are not like “secret believers,” who have told neither friends nor family of their faith. Such secrecy does not lead to movements. Nevertheless, by continuing local customs, many of which are religious to some extent, these Jesus movement believers might revert to relying on legalistic or occult religious practices or local gods to help them, rather than maintaining trust in Jesus alone. In addition, it is possible that leaders in the community could object to these believers reinterpreting or partially fulfilling local customs, and eventually initiate persecution of them.

Examples from history: In any culture, believers are subject to syncretism to the extent that they continue

to live by the worldview, not merely the religious practices, of those around them. However, throughout history, believers have managed to continue to participate in the celebrations or even religious practices of their culture while transforming their meanings.

For example, the Council of Nicea determined that the resurrection of Jesus Christ should be celebrated at the time of the spring equinox, which fell at the same time as the pagan fertility feasts of the goddess Eostre (Easter). Even today we still have vestiges of these pagan religious rites in the form of painted eggs and Easter bunnies, which were associated with fertility. However, most believers do not misunderstand the meaning of the resurrection because of these pagan religious accretions, nor is the goddess of fertility still worshipped by nominal Christians and secularists. But it is likely that confusion existed for some time between the pagan religious meaning of the festival and the newly instituted celebration of the resurrection, because initially the majority of the population was still pagan. There are many other historical examples of the Church continuing local religious and other practices while infusing new meaning into them, with the old meanings eventually disappearing.

Nonetheless, early Jesus movements did suffer persecution from their own communities in spite of their adherence to most local customs. Many Jewish believers, like Stephen and James, were martyred by fellow Jews in spite of keeping the Law and other Jewish customs. Non-Jewish followers of Jesus also faced persecution for refusing to worship the Emperor. Jewish believers in Jesus, like other Jews, were exempt from this requirement. The Romans accepted Judaism as the religion of a distinct ethnic group, encompassing all Jewish sects. But followers of Jesus who were not ethnically Jewish or official converts did not enjoy the Jewish exemption. So Paul notes in Galatians 6:12 that some Greek believers were being persuaded to convert to being Jewish believers-in-Christ to avoid persecution. Today, Jesus movements that stay inside their socio-religious contexts similarly experience waves of persecution. So believers may be tempted to leave their communities, and even move to other countries, to avoid persecution.

*What lessons can we learn from this? When believers use local cultural practices and even religious rites, but infuse them with new meanings, they are largely successful in bringing godly transformation to their communities. However, these believers may be persecuted by others from their local communities for the changes they are introducing.*

### **Potential Pitfall #3: Believers can be pressured to act against their conscience.**

When believers from different areas end up with different practices, they can find it difficult to accept each other. Furthermore, in today's world with significant diasporas and easy travel, people from the same people group can come to Christ in different ways and develop a variety of expressions of their faith. John Travis tried to express some of this complexity in his C1-C6 scale describing varieties of practice and identity of Christ-centered Communities from Muslim contexts.

The biggest problems arise when those expressing their faith in one form try to force or pressure other believers from similar backgrounds to conform to their own version of the faith. This pressure goes both ways. Sometimes those who have rejected all religious forms of their birth culture insist that all believers must do the same. On the other hand, we sometimes find that believers who express their faith through many of their birth religious forms, and maintain their birth identity, try to force all believers to do the same.

Examples from history: When Jesus movements in different areas maintain local practices, and these movements come into contact with believers from other backgrounds, their practices (such as forms of prayer and special holidays and feasts) can be unacceptable to each other. The historical record shows that each group tends to condemn the other group or try to get them to conform to their own practices. For example, in the third century, after the Greek movement to Christ had gained a large following, it began to condemn those who were in the Jewish movement to Christ, even though the original disciples had like them remained fully practicing Jews. In the 7th century, after 200 years of isolation, the spreading independent Celtic movement to Christ started by St. Patrick was forced by the Roman church to change the way they did their Masses, celebrated Easter, and cut their hair in order to be acceptable. Likewise, the Mar Thoma believers in India survived many centuries using the Aramaic/Syriac hand-copied scriptures, only to be condemned by the Portuguese Catholics arriving in 1500 because they refused to accept Romanization, which included switching to Latin, celibacy of priests, transubstantiation, prayer to Mary and to saints, use of icons, and other practices the Mar Thoma church had never embraced. Thankfully, the idea that all believers must agree on external rites and holidays has been put to rest; however, believers still have the tendency to judge which religious forms are acceptable based on their own cultural expectations rather than the Bible.



Paul faced a situation where some Jewish followers of Jesus were putting intense pressure on Greek believers to leave their pagan socio-religious communities, and join the kosher, circumcised, Law-keeping community of Jewish believers. Paul strongly condemned this practice.

But Paul also dealt with Greek believers who were continuing to eat meat in idol temples (1 Cor 7:10), who were in conflict with other Greek believers who refused to eat meat that might even possibly have been sacrificed to an idol. This situation was a conflict between believers coming from the same religious and ethnic background. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul defends both positions as valid, but makes clear that each believer should be careful to follow their own conscience, while taking into consideration the consciences of other believers. Paul says a believer should not force other believers to act against their consciences nor behave in their presence in ways that wounds their consciences.

*What lessons can we learn from this? Believers should not force other believers to act contrary to the dictates of conscience, whether those believers are from other socio-religious contexts or whether they are from the same context. The New Testament makes clear what kind of moral and theological issues are not merely matters of conscience and individual conviction.*

### **Potential Pitfall #4: Christian leaders can undermine a movement, even unintentionally.**

There are two main ways that leaders of institutional Christianity have historically undermined Jesus movements happening in other socio-religious contexts. The most common way is that they have become alarmed by what is happening, causing such an uproar that the governments in those areas ban the movements and any Scriptures they may have translated. The second way happens unintentionally when movements to Jesus spring up in countries with significant antipathy toward self-identified “Christian” nations. If leaders in these Christian nations put pressure on rival governments to treat followers of Jesus in their territories kindly, implying “they belong to us” even when the Jesus movements are insisting they are not, persecution or massacres may follow.

Examples from history: There were mass movements to Jesus in northern Europe during the time of Constantine. However, their Arian theology was deficient. Unfortunately, Christian leaders did not respond to these movements with concern, praying for northern Europeans and working to see that they had scriptures they could read. Instead, they

convened church councils that condemned them and backed harsh measures, even military violence, against them. This was the pattern for hundreds of years in Europe, where those coming to Christ in mass movements (including many we would not consider heretical, such as Protestant groups) were lined up against certain church criteria and blacklisted or killed if they fell short.

This happened outside of Europe as well. Unfortunately, Christian leaders persuaded even non-believing rulers to stamp out Jesus movements. In Japan in the 16th century, hundreds of thousands of Japanese came to faith through the ministry of Francis Xavier and the Jesuits, who used the Japanese name for the Most High God in their outreach. When Dutch Protestants arrived, they protested so vehemently against such practices that the Japanese emperor banned all Jesus movements, and thousands were killed, dispossessed or subjected to government torture until they recanted. The survivors of the movement, who became known as Kirishitan (“hidden Christians”), chose to practice their faith secretly, using only Buddhist forms and having only oral Latin scriptures. Over time they added their martyred saints to their objects of worship. In China a similar Chinese movement to Christ emerged, which the Pope opposed after a “Chinese Rites” controversy in the early 18th century, in which critics labeled their use of Chinese religious rites as syncretistic. After the Papal Bull was issued, the Chinese Emperor in turn sent out edicts banning the Christian faith in China. The Catholic Church reversed their decision on this in 1939 after a full investigation!

The second way of undermining movements was modeled by the Emperor Constantine, infamous for getting a Jesus movement massacred because he approved of it. Though Rome and Persia had been enemies for centuries, when Constantine decided to favor the followers of Christ that had been formerly persecuted by his government, he sent a polite letter to the rulers of Persia encouraging them to do the same. The Persian authorities feared that believers in Jesus would now become a fifth column favorable to Rome, especially if they came under the developing papal structure. So they began a massacre of Jesus followers in which over 50,000 believers ultimately perished.

*What is the lesson to be learned from this? Attempts to judge and control Jesus movements by Christian leaders residing in other cultures have almost without exception been ill-informed and have had disastrous consequences. This has been the case whether leaders decided to condemn the movements or decided to express approval in a way that implied ownership of or authority over them.†*