

***SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE***  
***Until Jesus Shows up***



***Steve Highlander***

# Some Things Never Change Until Jesus Shows Up

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[Steve@SteveHighlander.com](mailto:Steve@SteveHighlander.com)

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# Some Things Never Change Until Jesus Shows Up

For hundreds of years before Jesus was born, the Israeli prophets told of a coming Messiah that would save the nation. The problem was that they offered two conflicting visions of the Messiah.

One was a conquering king—a descendant of David—who would reign in righteousness and propel the nation to worldwide status. Israel would be powerful and prosperous once again. This version of the Messiah was especially popular with the Jews under Roman occupation in the first century.

The prophets also told of a suffering servant. A man of sorrows. A person who didn't look like much on the outside—least of all a regal king. This ubiquitous person would suffer and die for the nation—but no one understood how or why. This version of the Messiah wasn't as popular as you can imagine.

The Israelites could not reconcile the contradicting pictures provided by their prophets. They did not see what we could see—from a two-thousand-year-old rearview mirror perspective. They could not know the Messiah would come in two stages. Jesus 1.0: The suffering servant who would die on the cross and bring true salvation to the nation; and Jesus 2.0: The Son of David returning to put down all satanic rebellion and establish the promised kingdom for eternity.

To their credit, I do not think we would have been able to see that either, so let's not be too harsh on them. Remember, none of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. Theirs was works-based religion; there was no direct access to the Father like we enjoy today. The gifts of the Holy Spirit to bring light and revelation were not available to them until Jesus rose from the dead and poured out the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The hallmark of Jesus's ministry was revealing the truth and power of God's kingdom on earth. That is what He came to do at His first advent.

The other purpose in His first advent was to reunite the divided Kingdom of Israel. We'll look at this in more detail later,

The world Jesus invaded (and I use "invaded" specifically) was very different from today's world. Yet, at the same time, so much of the religious and political attitudes are the same. Hence the title of this booklet: Some Things Never Change Until Jesus Shows Up.

In this message, I intend to show how the same religious and political attitudes that hindered the people of Israel in Jesus' day also hinder the Christian Church today. Could it be that religious people are not all that different at heart—despite the centuries and various outward distinctions? I think I prove the point adequately.

Having proved the point is only half of the challenge. What to do with what we discover is the other half of the issue. And it will be the more challenging half to navigate. How will we respond to what is revealed herein? That is the question. So, let me ask you in advance, "Are you willing to be challenged? Are you willing to adjust according to what—if anything—the Holy Spirit might speak to you?" Saying "yes" in advance to these two questions will position you for transformation. Why not stop for a minute and God to speak to you

## Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven Is at Hand

When John the Baptist showed up in Israel six months before Jesus, he had a particular message: "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:1). When Jesus took center stage a few months later, His message was the same (Matthew 4:17).

It is essential to understand what John and Jesus were really saying and how the Jewish people of Jesus's day understood it. I was always taught that repentance meant "turning 180 degrees." To "quit sinning." And other similar ideas. It wasn't until much later in my Christian life I discovered the real meaning of the word repent (*metanoia in Greek*) and how the people who heard John and Jesus understood the instructions.

*Metanoia* means to “think again” or to “think twice.” It had to do more with changing the way we think than with quitting sin. For the skeptics, I offer the following advice from John himself.

*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance. **Matthew 3:7***

It is clear John separated the act of repentance from the fruit of repentance. Let’s reread the message with a new understanding of *repent*.

[Think twice about this, change your mind], because the kingdom of God is at hand. And—as a result of rethinking this thing called the Kingdom of God—start acting differently (unauthorized Highlander version).

The Israelites of Jesus’s day had it all wrong, even though they were serious about the scriptures and performing the Mosaic Law. Centuries of interpretation (without the input of the Holy Spirit) had clouded the message—as we will see as we progress in this message. Their God-given religion had devolved into a legalistic and fleshly approach to God that had corrupted the leadership. That trickled down to the people. Jesus saw them as “sheep without shepherds.” Israel was lost and wandering with none to help. Jesus came to “seek and save the lost.” At one point, He claimed, “I am not sent, but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 15:24).” In Matthew 10:6, He sent His disciples out with the same instructions.

The first advent of Jesus was to confirm and fulfill God’s Covenant with the nation of Israel. He said, “I did not come to destroy the Law and the prophets but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). By living sinlessly, fulfilling the prophecies of His first advent, and correcting their misunderstanding of the Kingdom of God, he fulfilled the Old Covenant. That paved the way for His death and resurrection to enact and empower the New Covenant.

John and Jesus challenged their followers to think differently about the Kingdom of God. It might be wise to get a good understanding of where they were wrong. I believe the same problems and attitudes that hindered them hinder the Church today. We can learn from their mistakes as the Church prepares for the second coming of Jesus.

Let's examine the various religious and political groups that John and Jesus confronted and see if we find someone we know—perhaps ourselves—in the mix.

### **Some things never change.**

There will constantly be varying opinions on subjects — especially religion and politics. These are two of the most hotly debated topics in society—and when they are combined, they become exponentially more so.

"Make America Great Again." "Black Lives Matter." "My Body, My Choice." "One nation under God" and other catchy slogans litter the religious, political, and social landscape. Did Jesus have to thread His way through a myriad of various opinions? Are we so different from the people He came to redeem two thousand years ago? I think not.

I find it interesting that the religious/political climate in Jesus's day was so very similar to the climate in America today. Our Sunday School version of the four Gospels presents a very flat view of the Jewish people of the day. There were the "Jews" and the "Gentiles." However, lumping all Jews into one category is categorically wrong (excuse the pun).

Let's look at the diversity of groups and the religious/political views that existed in ancient Israel at the time of Christ. Not only will it help us to understand the context of the New Testament better, I think we will find it surprisingly similar to our own. James relates the Bible to a mirror, into which we look and see ourselves—for better or worse. I present this teaching with that specific thought in mind. It is my purpose that we look into the

“perfect law of liberty,” see our reflection and make any adjustments necessary.

## Not Every Israelite was a Jew

The Jewish People of Jesus's day were a diverse lot. First, we must understand that the term "Jew" did not include all Israelites. After King Solomon died, the Israelites split into two kingdoms—the northern kingdom that included ten tribes and the southern kingdom that included the tribe of Judah, Benjamin, and some Levites. (Read the story in 2 Chronicles 9-12 to understand the significance of this event.)

The southern kingdom included Jerusalem and the temple. This group remained somewhat faithful to the worship of Jehovah—at least in terms of maintaining temple worship. The people of the northern kingdom went into idolatry immediately and were eventually scattered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. These are commonly referred to as the "lost tribes of Israel." Later, around 587 BC, the Israelites in the southern kingdom were taken into captivity by the Babylonians for seventy years, returning around 517 BC to rebuild Jerusalem and the second temple.

The term "Jew" did not come into existence until after the return from Babylonian captivity. It is a derivative of the word Judah and only represented the southern kingdom of Israel which included Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Especially in the book of John, the term "Jews" means Judeans. We see this clearly in Hebrews 8:8 (quoting from Jeremiah 31:31): "...Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...." The term Jew never referred to the ten tribes of the northern kingdom.

That is significant because the Samaritans were from the northern tribes. They were Israelites—but not Jews—in the technical sense of the word. From the story of the woman at the well in Samaria, we learn of the religious division here. She asked Jesus if He was greater than their father, Jacob, who had dug the very well where they were sitting. Later she stated, "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem



is the place where one ought to worship." Notice the distinction—*you Jews*. This division of Israelites into two distinct groups is essential to understand.

The Samaritans worshipped the God of Israel (somewhat); however, they did not do so at the temple in Jerusalem. They followed the more pagan tradition of worshipping in the high places. They also rejected the Davidic lineage as the true kings of Israel. Moreover, they only accepted the first five books of Moses as true scripture, rejecting the prophets and other books. This they had in common with the sect of the Sadducees, who also only accepted the books of Moses. These distinctions resulted from Jeroboam, the first King of the northern kingdom (as opposed to Rehoboam, Solomon's son, the king of Judah), deciding to create a counterfeit religion like the one in Jerusalem. The idea was that if people worshipped in Jerusalem, their hearts would return to one king and one nation. Two passages of scripture are significant here.

*There were wars between Rehoboam of Judah and Jeroboam of Israel continually. 2 Chronicles 10:19*

*And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom may return to the house of David: If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah." Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Now this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one as far as Dan. He made shrines on the high places, and made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi. Jeroboam ordained a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did at Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that*

*he had made. And at Bethel he installed the priests of the high places which he had made. So he made offerings on the altar which he had made at Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in the month which he had devised in his own heart. And he ordained a feast for the children of Israel, and offered sacrifices on the altar and burned incense.* 1 Kings 12:26-33

Here is the essence of religion. A system of worship devised from a person's own heart. It is essential to note the things Jeroboam did to preserve his position and his life.

1. He sought ungodly counsel from people who had a stake in the outcome.
2. He created idols and referred the people back to their history—reinterpreting it to suit his agenda.
3. He placed the idols in two cities to make it more convenient to worship. “Don’t go out of your way to worship; make it as convenient as possible.” We see this tendency in churches today that cater to a distracted and comfort-centered clientele.
4. Interestingly enough, the meaning of the two cities was “the House of God (Bethel)” and “Judgment” (Dan). In a perfect double entendre word picture, we see how Jeroboam corrupted these two things.
5. He made shrines on the high places. This is what the Samaritan woman was referring to.
6. He ordained people who were not God-called to be priests. The King James version says he made priests “from the lowest of the people.”
7. He devised a feast from his own heart that mimicked the God-ordained feast of tabernacles in the seventh month.
8. He offered sacrifices to the idols he set up.

These same things are happening in the church today. I could elaborate on each of these items, but I think you can figure it out on your own.

The truth was they were Israelites and under covenant with God as a people, but their worship and view of the scriptures were

totally wrong. Jesus came to correct those things and reunite this group with the "Jews" under His Messiahship.

The Samaritan woman's issue was two-fold. First, we don't associate with Jews, and second, where is the proper place to worship. Jesus told the Samaritan woman, neither you nor the Jews are understanding this thing correctly. It is not *where* you worship but *how* you worship that matters. Both sides had missed the critical heart issue, preferring to focus on worship techniques rather than the spirit of worship.

*Jesus came to reunite the nation of Israel before He would add the Gentiles. In John 10:16, He said, "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd."*

Today, we look back at this passage through an 1800-year-old lens of Catholic and Protestant interpretation and apply Jesus's word to the Gentiles. Or, as the Mormons do, to the supposed descendants of the ten lost tribes scattered around North America.

The first-century Jews would not have understood His words that way. While there is an application of Jew and Gentile becoming one new man (Ephesians 2:11-22), it is also true that Jesus came to reunite the two divided houses of Israel. That is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Ezekiel 37:16-23. God told the prophet to take two rods and write on one the house of Judah and the other the house of Israel. God told him He would reunite the two major divisions in Israel into one rod again.

Again, we see this when the High Priest Caiaphas unknowingly prophesies about Jesus dying for the unity of the nation. We find the story in John 11:49-52:

*And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish." Now*

*this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, **but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.*** (Emphasis mine.)

The term “scattered” always referred to the nation of Israel in the diaspora. It means the people of Israel scattered through the nations, not a bunch of Gentiles scattered around the world. That the Bible tells us this was a prophecy is clear. What is unclear is if Caiaphas knew he was prophesying about the coming salvation (which is highly unlikely). It is more likely he determined from scripture that the Messiah would die for the nation. The Hebrew scripture presented two opposite views of the Messiah. The conquering King would restore the nation to political independence and the former glory known by King David and his son, Solomon. The other was that of a suffering servant who would die for the nation. Given the unreconcilable choices, the Israelites looked for a Messiah that would lead them to victory over the Romans.

Caiaphas points out the obvious. This man would fulfill the suffering servant prophecies that required that one man dies for the nation's sake. Given his doctrinal point of view, it was highly unlikely that he had the resurrection and eternal salvation in mind. What is ironic is they chose the safety provided by subservience to Rome over their own Messiah. Even though they claimed to be watching for the conquering King Messiah, when Pilate confronted them with His Kingship, they cried out that they had no king but Caesar. To paraphrase the Bible, *bad religion corrupts good doctrine.*

The commentary on the prophecy is also vitally important. John points out what Caiaphas meant—whether he understood it or not. “...*But also, that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.*”

There is the implication here that God would unite Israel (in New Testament salvation) and include the Gentiles in the same body.

Today we find similar strains in the Church. Division among the people of God is rampant. Each group (read that Protestant, Catholic, Fundamental, Charismatic, Pentecostal, Liturgical, etc.) separate from one another, promoting their worship style and their interpretation of the scriptures as the only valid one. Could it be—like the ancient Israelites—we all have some things messed up and need the Messiah to get us back on track and reunite the people?

Does the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to hear the fundamental message of John and Jesus again? Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand? Do we need to rethink our approach to the kingdom of God? Do we need to change our minds and bring forth fruit fitting our new mindset? I think so.

The division is a significant reason we do not see the power of God working in our churches. I am not suggesting an ecumenical compromise, but rather an understanding that there are Christians in all denominations and that the Kingdom of God should not be divided over where or how we worship. I believe—in a general sense—that each expression of the Church has something to offer that the others miss.

I find an exciting concept in the Book of Ephesians that I rarely hear ministered on. It seems the idea is a bit too far out there for most Christians.

*"...for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ..."* Ephesians 4:12-13

Paul declares that Jesus divided and imparted His ministry gifts to the Church for some particular reasons. He gave the gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers with the following purposes:

1. For the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry
2. The edifying of the Body of Christ

3. "Until" (a definitive time frame)
4. We come to the unity of the faith
5. The knowledge of the Son of God
6. To a "perfect man" (not men)
7. To the full measure of the stature of Christ

Much of the Church miss these essential concepts. A smaller group gets them, though they rarely practice them as intended. It is the last four points that we tend to avoid because of the implications. The connector is "til," Or "until," which is a time word. Something will happen until something else happens. The first two will continue at least until the Spirit of God accomplishes the last four purposes.

Paul says the church will come to the unity of the faith. It appears impossible with thousands of denominations. Division in the Church is rife. Humanly speaking, it would be impossible to unite the Church—the Body of Christ—in its current state. But what is impossible for man is possible for God. And Paul said it was possible.

Likewise, Jesus came to unite the tribes of Israel after hundreds of years of bitter separation, doctrinal differences, and varying ideas about worship. He did it with a change of covenant.

*Because finding fault with them, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord. Hebrews 8:8-9*

The modern Church acts as if the New Covenant was given to the Gentiles, and the Jews were still under the Old Covenant. Nothing could be further from the truth. The New Covenant was given to the "Jew first and then the Greek" (Romans 2:10). Jesus came to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel." It would be some years later before the first Gentiles were brought into the Church. Paul,

writing to the Church in Rome, reminded them that God *broke off the natural branches (Israelites and Jews) and grafted the wild branches (Gentiles) into the tree*. The root was always of Jewish perspective. Some Christians make a sharp distinction between the nation of Israel and the Church. That is only true with respect to the political nation, not the root of God's Kingdom. There is and only has been one Kingdom of God.

An illustration might be appropriate here. Consider a butterfly. It starts as a larva and becomes a worm. Later it builds a cocoon and—in the dark (representing death and the grave)—a metamorphosis takes place. The worm becomes a butterfly.

You cannot say they are two different creatures. They are one and the same. However, through the miracle of metamorphosis, a transformation takes place. The ugly earthbound worm enters the cocoon, and a beautiful, winged creature emerges, no longer earthbound. They are not two different creatures. It is the same one, but there has been a transformation of form and function.

***So is the Kingdom of God! Morphing from Old Testament Expression to New Testament expression through the cocoon of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.***

Significant changes are necessary for the modern Church. I don't mean we should change the New Covenant, but we change the way we view—and do—Church.

First, there are several fundamental doctrines that true Christianity hangs on. All true Christians believe these fundamentals. Things like the virgin birth and the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Those things without which Biblical Christianity falls apart. Styles of worship and preaching, models of church government, and other institutional things are personal preferences. Perhaps they are informed preferences with Biblical merit—but they are not fundamentals—they are preferences.

We see this very human trend in the Bible in several places. None more evident than the Corinthian church.

*“For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.” **Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?**” 1 Corinthians 1:11-13 Emphasis mine.*

Two chapters later, he is still addressing their carnality.

*“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.... for you are still carnal. **For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal?**” 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 emphasis mine.*

Each group (sect) had their favorite teacher and emphasized one doctrine or style over another. Paul told the Corinthians they “were carnal and not spiritual” and that they were “babes in Christ.” Paul was not impressed with their lack of unity and corrected them in no uncertain terms. You and I must come to grips with the fact that dividing the Body of Christ over non-essentials is not maturity but immaturity. It is religious tribalism at its worst.

## The Nature of Tribalism

Tribalism is an inherent human characteristic. That is why Paul told the Corinthians they walked as “mere men.” Meaning they were just doing what humans do—following the old flesh nature and the world's methods. We do not understand tribalism in the west very well—especially in America—because our societies are based more on individualism than collectivism. Fewer families live near extended family members. That said, tribalism is very much alive and well in America. I'll expound on this more once we define tribalism.



We tend to think of tribalism as a primitive expression of humanity—visualizing half-dressed natives, sitting around a fire making guttural sounds, and eating roasted lizards on a stick. That is a poor understanding of tribalism. Tribalism can be pretty sophisticated, understood within the context of specific cultures.

As a missionary working in third-world countries, I encounter tribalism regularly. The simplest way to describe tribalism is an

"us-and-them" mentality. If you are not part of "us," you are part of "them." Even if the "thems" are not enemies, there is a sharp distinction and a strong bias towards the "us."



In Papua New Guinea where I serve as a missionary, there is a recognized *Wantok*

system. A *Wantok* (one talk) is someone who speaks the same language as you. The implication is that they are a relative or tribe member—an "us." Socially, favor is given to your wantok over those that are not wantoks. This impacts jobs, politics, and even family issues.

On the one hand, tribalism emphasizes what's different—not what is the same. In tribal cultures, face painting, clothing, adornments, dancing, singing, and other things provide the distinctions. (Photos Upper Left: An Engan warrior from the Papua New Guinea Highlands. Lower Right: Another Highlands warrior from a different tribe.)

Two inherent needs of humankind are the need to belong and the need to be self-expressing. These seem to be opposite needs—and they are if taken as stand-alone needs. However, when



you factor in tribalism, you see how both needs are met in significant ways.

One of my favorite cartoons shows a teenager with spiked, purple hair, tattoos, piercings, and black clothes. The teen says to the parent, "Why can't you just let me be unique?" The next frame shows the teenager meeting her friends outside, and they all have the same hair, clothing, and body art.

You see, we all want to be unique—IF we can identify with others like us. Few people want to be alone in their uniqueness. That is the essence of tribalism. We want an "us" group, separate from the other "them" groups. We need the identity and belonging that is provided for in the "us" group, yet we want individuality distinct from the "them" groups.

Ethnic clans and families who live close to each other generally constitute third-world tribalism. Since we have already seen that families in western societies are not geographically centered, our inherent need for tribalism manifests differently. This human bent toward tribalism explains the need of the westerners to belong to gangs, social and service clubs, and other groups. It fulfills the human requirement to be accepted within a distinct group—but easily identifiable from other groups.

With this definition, it is easy to recognize tribalism in western culture—especially in United States' recent social and political upheaval before, during, and after the 2020 election. Tribalism became acutely recognizable. We observed the sharp “us-and-them” distinctions in politics with the republicans and democrats, liberals and conservatives, religious and non-religious factions sharply dividing and retreating into the relative safety of their own tribe.

Remember, tribalism does not make distinctions within the group. To attack one tribe member is to attack all tribe members. Likewise, if one tribe member offends, the entire tribe is to blame.

We saw this when the Democrats went tribal on President Trump and his supporters. They tried to lump every Republican into a

narrowly defined tribe and sought to persecute the entire tribe even though most were not supportive of the minority responsible for the problems. On the other side, the conservatives lumped every Democrat in with the fringe minority politics of the far left.

Third-world tribalism manifests in unique dress and culture. Consider the groups you encounter today. When you see someone who is particularly tribal, you can discern their tribe right away. A guy has long hair, a headband, a leather vest with patches, and rides a motorcycle. Another wears black clothes, dark makeup and listens to death metal music. Yet another has a cowboy hat, snap-front shirt with two pockets, a big belt buckle, and boots. A woman may wear a jogging suit with matching sneakers and headband and carry color-coordinated accessories. Am I stereotyping, or are we observing the tribalism of the west? You don't generally see these groups mixing.

Having established that tribalism is alive and well in the United States, we need to turn our attention to tribalism in the Church. We have the Catholic tribe and the Protestant tribe. Within Protestantism, we have tribes like the Baptists, the Methodists, and the Lutherans (plus around 1300 more). We also have the Pentecostal tribe, the non-denominational tribe, and the fundamentalist tribe. You get the picture.

Religiously, we tend to lump everyone into "us-and-them" categories. It is this religious tribalism that Jesus came to set us free from. First, He came to reunite the tribes of Israel under His Messiahship, as we discussed before. Then He intended to unite the vast ethnic and religious gulf between the Israelites and the Gentiles.

*"Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, **who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision** in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being **aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise**, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are*

*made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;" (Ephesians 2:11-19 emphasis mine)*

When it comes to His body—the Church—Jesus is an uniter, not a divider. Some might argue that Jesus said He did not come to bring peace but a sword; even households would divide because of Him. While this is correct, He referred to those who would and would not believe in Him, not a division between believers. Those who like the divisions often do so because they feel superior and must generate division, thinking it makes them more spiritual. After all, they are taking a “Biblical stand.” The problem is, religious tribalism is not a sign of maturity but rather immaturity.

Let us not forget Psalm 133, which starts with: “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” The Psalm describes the unity of the Body of Christ as anointing oil and everlasting life. Where there is unity in churches and between churches, you will find the power of the Holy Spirit at work to change lives.

Unity and agreement are not the same things. We can have unity without necessarily agreeing on every point. Unity is a virtue—agreement is not. In the Psalm above, God did not bless agreement; He blessed unity. The problem with most Christians is they place a higher priority on agreement than they do unity. It sounds like this, “If you do not agree with me on every little point, I will not be in unity with you.” That is tribalism, pure and simple.

Unity looks at the higher goal of Kingdom work and minimizes the differences that are not germane to the larger purposes of Christ.

The unity of God's people was a mandate of Christ. Should it not also be the mandate of everyone who names the name of Christ?

# Religious and political Diversity in Jesus's Day

Just as we make a mistake when we call all Israelites “Jews,” we likewise do so when we lump all the Israelites into one religious or political expression. In this section, we will look at the various groups who interacted with Jesus. These groups include:

- The Sadducees: the wealthy, religious, ruling elite connected to Rome.
- The Pharisees: the legalistic religionists who had a rule for everything.
- The Judeans: explicitly referred to those who lived in Judea and had control of the temple. These included the Sadducees and Pharisees.
- The Essenes: probably the group that was closest to practicing the truth.
- The Zealots: political Jews who wanted to overthrow Roman rule and become a sovereign nation. Their slogan might have been, “Make Israel Great Again.”
- The People of the Land: the laity (for lack of a better word) who were not as religiously or politically motivated as the religious leaders.
- The Samaritans: Israelites who did not worship at the temple in Jerusalem.

We typically hear about the Sadducees and Pharisees because they are mentioned explicitly in the Bible multiple times. The other groups were alluded to if you know what to watch for. Israel did not have an uncontested religious or political landscape. It is simply wrong to lump every Jew of Jesus's day into the same category—politically or spiritually. Let's look at these groups and their unique take on the religion of their day. Then we will see if there are any parallels to what is happening in the Church today.

## The Sadducees

This group was unique for several reasons. As mentioned above, they were the Aristocrats—the wealthier class in Jewish society—and had connections with Rome. A hundred years before Christ, the position of High Priest was being bought and sold. By the time of Jesus, the Roman government was appointing the High Priest for terms, even though, according to Mosaic Law, the High Priest was supposed to be a direct descendant of Aaron and served for life. The High Priest (usually a Sadducee) controlled the Temple and the Sanhedrin (Jewish religious and legal court).

The Sadducees were more concerned with maintaining wealth, social status, and political power than they were about being particularly godly. Corruption was common among them. It was probably their religious beliefs that allowed for this dichotomy. The Sadducees did not believe in anything spiritual. They did not believe in angels and demons. Heaven and hell were also not in the belief system. They did not believe in resurrection or the afterlife, as did the Pharisees.

As temple administrators, they were extremely particular about the religious rites and sacrifices involved in Israel's temple worship. Their lives revolved around religious expression and ceremonial cleanliness but were devoid of any authentic spirituality. The Sadducee movement saw their ritual cleanliness, mostly in their ability to serve in the temple and separate themselves from the Gentiles. It was a self-righteous religious expression.

Theirs was a 'doable' religion. They only accepted the Torah—the first five books of Moses—as authoritative, rejecting the other writings and prophets. They also believed in an extreme version of free will. That is, they did not think God was all that interested in the lives of men and pretty much left them to whatever they wanted if they stayed ceremonially clean, according to the Law of

Moses. They might be called the “deists” of their day. They believed in God but didn’t think He was all that concerned with human affairs. Paul may have had these people in mind when he warned young pastor Timothy to watch out for certain types of people. He said they “Have a form of godliness but denying the power thereof: from such turn away” (2 timothy 3:5).

We see some of these same tendencies in the Church today.

Some deny the power of the Holy Spirit. They believe in a “doable” religion. That is that a person needs to apply religious self-will in following the commands of God. They are legalists. For them, the Holy Spirit is a doctrinal issue, not a living reality working in the life of the Church.

For these “Christians,” political power overshadows the proper government of the church. Where church politics prevail, you will discover the quenching of the Holy Spirit. Paul said that God “sets *the members in the body as it pleases Him*” (1 Corinthians 12:18). There must be God-called, God-ordained, and God-empowered leadership in the Church of the Living God. God’s right to appoint His leadership in the Church is often usurped with man-called, man-ordained, and man-empowered leaders. Anytime there is a fight for control of the church—be it a local church or a denomination—you can be sure spiritual things are not happening.

In 2001 I was living in Ghana, West Africa. I saw this clearly with some of the denominational churches I was working with—one large old-line denomination split. The new group formed the “evangelical” version of the denomination. That was a good start, but they kept the old denominational hierarchical structure and set about placing people in positions.

I was grieved in my spirit and prayed about it. God spoke to my heart. I distinctly heard the Holy Spirit say, “The Church has been put together wrong. I’m going to have to pull it apart and put it back together again. It will look like the devil is tearing up the Church, but it will be necessary.”



As I thought on this, the Holy Spirit revealed that men had put people in place in the Church. Maybe a person was a true pastor but was he in the right church? If pastor “A” is not in his proper place, then two other things were true also. Pastor “B” who should be where pastor “A” is, is also out of position. Pastor “C” who is pastoring where Pastor “A” should be is out of position. Repeat this with pastor “B” AND “C” and all those affected by them, and you can easily see there is a significant problem.

As I prayed about this, the Holy Spirit said the Body of Christ was out of order and that He would have to tear it apart and put it back together rights. In the beginning, it would seem as if the devil was tearing the church up, but that it really would be God reorganizing and repositioning the Church leadership—and in some cases, the members—correctly.

To summarize the Sadducees, we find that they were religious legalists who did not believe in the power of the Holy Spirit, or spiritual things at all, for that matter. They were professional religionists—nothing more. They were more concerned with power, wealth, and status. Jesus’s preaching and teaching were a slap in the face to the Sadducees. They hated Jesus because He threatened all the things that their religion had afforded them.

Jesus warned His disciples about the doctrine of the Sadducees and their corruption. So should we be warned that politically oriented churches, devoid of the Spirit of God, should be avoided?

# The Pharisees

The Pharisees were the other main religious body impacting temple worship in Judea. There were sharp distinctions and some bitter rivalries between them and the Sadducees. Doctrinally they were miles apart. To their credit, the Pharisees believed in all things spiritual; the Sadducees did not (Acts 23:8). The Pharisees accepted all the Old Testament as authoritative. They believed in the resurrection on the last day and the afterlife. Not so the Sadducees.

We see how Paul used this division to his advantage in Acts 23:6-7.

*But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees: touching the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question. And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees; and the assembly was divided.*

It's easy to see why there was much division in the religious expression of Jesus's day—much like our own day. Too much alike, I think.

If the Sadducees were the liberal elite, the Pharisees were their legalistic opposites. The Pharisees held to the Torah Law, as did the Sadducees. However, they also held the “traditions of the elders” as authoritative. These traditions were the sayings and interpretations of later generations of priests and Rabbis that were layered on top of the Law of Moses.

The Pharisees also sought wealth, power, and social status. Jesus accused them of practicing a hypocritical religion. He challenged them for making a show of fasting and long prayers in front of people for pretense. They loved their titles: Rabbi, Teacher, Priest, etc. Like the Sadducees, their positions gave them all of these perks—and Jesus threatened them.

Jesus confronted the Pharisees on many occasions, calling them painted tombs and snakes and vipers. He called them out for adding “doctrines of men” to the Law and then exalting their traditions above the Law. At one point, He told them they had robbed God’s Word of its power because their traditions superseded it. He said to them:

*All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition...making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do.” Mark 7:9-13*

It was the addition and emphasis of these traditions that Jesus came against so vehemently. In effect, they changed the Word of God—not by rewriting the scriptures but by layering their interpretations and traditions on top of it. The Jewish Rabbis practiced “building a fence around the Torah (Mosaic Law).” To their credit, they were attempting to keep people from sinning, but it backfired on them. What does *building a fence around the Torah* mean? Consider a cliff edge at a tourist site overlooking a vast canyon. A barrier is built six feet from the edge to keep people from accidentally falling off the edge. That is precisely what the Pharisees did.

There are many examples, but one should suffice. The law said you could do no servile labor on the Sabbath Day. They didn’t cook, clean, go to work, etc. However, it did not give specifics about what was “work.” So, the question arose. How far could one walk on the Sabbath Day and not break the Law? Scriptures didn’t address this issue, so they added their tradition. In the beginning, they could only walk 2000 cubits total there and back to a place. If they went 2001 cubits, they had broken the Law. The rationale was based on an entirely ridiculous interpretation of the Scripture in Joshua chapter three when Israel was preparing to enter the Promised Land across the Jordan River.

*When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. Yet there shall be a*

*space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed this way before. Joshua 3:3-4*

This passage has nothing to do with the Sabbath Day—after all, they are packing their belongings and walking across a river. However, the Rabbis had to have some basis for making a new tradition, so they made one up. Later that tradition was changed to 4000 cubits and still later to 8000 cubits. So which distance was a sin? Did God have to apologize to the first Israelites who could only walk 2000 cubits? Was their “sin” of walking too far on the Sabbath deleted from their records? Ditto on the next group who could only walk 4000 cubits. Was there a “creep” in what was considered a sin? Did God change His mind? Of course not. That was the practice of building fences around the Torah.” After a while, the *rules* become more important than the Law itself. There are numerous examples in the Bible. The Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath tradition on several occasions. Of course, He did not because He was sinless. What He did was break their traditional add-ons.

The Rabbis created a false sense of sin and used it to condemn people.

Pharisees were a legalistic and judgmental group. They did not see their own sin, though—as is common with legalistic and judgmental people. They had their list of outward rules they insisted on but never understood the heart issues. Their religious self-righteousness was used to elevate themselves and put down others. They were concerned about helping the poor, sick, or burdened only so long as it made them look good in front of people. In addressing this hypocrisy, Jesus said they did all these things “to be seen of men”—and that they had their reward (Matthew 6:5). God was not impressed and was not going to give them anything.

The hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the discord between them and the Sadducees is seen in Acts chapter twenty-three, which is mentioned above. The story goes on. Paul, seeing the mix of

religious groups, knows how to manipulate the crowd. He cries out that he is a Pharisee from a family of Pharisees. He states that the real reason he is being prosecuted is the hope of the resurrection—which the Pharisees believed in and the Sadducees did not.

Suddenly, the Pharisees see an opportunity to strengthen their position against the Sadducees and become Paul's friend. Here, my friend is tribalism at its finest. It recalls the old saying, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Listen to them change their tune from judgmentalism to acceptance.

*Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God." Acts23:9*

Notice how they got their jab in at the Sadducees, "If a spirit or an angel has spoken to him...." Political and religious expediency was their *modus operandi*. Their concern over Paul's teaching about grace was suddenly not so important when it gave them an advantage over the "thems." The Pharisees were only concerned with true religion when it worked for them. They really didn't care about the people.

Jesus relentlessly rebuked this hypocrisy.

*Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them .... But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men .... They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. .... "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go*

*in. [Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.] "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. "Woe to you, blind guides, .... "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! .... "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! .... You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? Matthew 23*

Not much more needs to be said about the Pharisees of Jesus' day. However, we want to see if modern-day Pharisees—not Jewish ones, but "Christian" ones—exist.

Are there those leaders in the church who have never been born again? Yes. I have heard many testimonies from preachers who have said, "I went through Bible College and even my denomination's seminary. I was pastoring a church, and I was not saved. I got saved long after I went into the ministry."

Are there church leaders and parishioners who think that political power in controlling the church is more important than spirituality? Yes. Anytime there is hidden activity behind the scenes to control the church, there is sin.

Do some Christians seek to use political power to get their way in society? Yes.

Are their churches more concerned about how they look to the public than minister to the poor and lost? Yes.

For several years I led a team into a state prison to do ministry. We held around 500 services behind prison walls. One man (I'll call him Bill) who had gotten saved and was walking with the Lord was going to be paroled after 20 years behind bars (he didn't do what they convicted him of). "Bill" was working inside the prison as a volunteer with the "Scared Straight" prison program to keep young offenders out of prison. A woman in a local church also worked with the "Scared Straight" program in the community. She developed a relationship with "Bill" and wanted to get married when he was released. The church board had a congregational hearing to discuss this "convict" becoming a congregation member. The wife-to-be invited me to attend in support of "Bill" to be a character reference.

It was a heated debate. Many in the church didn't want "this type of person" in their congregation. What would the public say? Theirs was a respectable—and wealthy—church. One man—used to getting his way because he was a significant financial supporter—said, "if you let him come to this church, I will stop tithing." I couldn't believe it. I rebuked them publicly in the meeting, all to no avail. They voted not to allow the couple to get married or attend their church. PHARISEES!!!!!! It still makes me mad to think about their hypocrisy.

Are there Churches and Christians today who are more interested in manmade rules and doctrines than they are in the righteousness of Christ? Yes.

Are there hypocrites that say one thing and do another? Yes! Are there those that hold double standards? Yes!

Are there those who would oppose the moving of the Holy Spirit if it would jeopardize their positions and power? Yes.

Pharisaical "Christians" abound in the church today. Oh, that the people of God would return to a non-political understanding of the Body of Christ. I long for the day that the flesh is not the dominating factor in Church structure. A day when personalities,

policies, and public opinion no longer guide the church in her ministry to this world.

Everyone likes to be the “First” church of this or that. I would love to see “The Last Church of the Pharisees.”



## The Judeans (Ioudaioi)

This sub-group of the Israelites might be appropriately called “The Jews.” They were of Judean descent and were called “Jews” after returning from Babylonian captivity some 550 years earlier. They were also Judeans because they lived in Judea, the southern kingdom of the divided nation.

Other Jews and Israelites lived in Samaria, Galilee, and the surrounding nations. The book of Acts mentions sixteen different nations from which the Jews had come to be a part of the Festival of Pentecost in Jerusalem—each speaking the language of their district or country.

The specific Judean population was proud of their pure Judean heritage and that they lived on “ground zero” of God’s kingdom. As far as holiness went, the Temple Mount was the holiest place for the Jews. The City of Jerusalem was next in order; Judea was third, and then the rest of the geographical boundaries of Israel proper.

It is interesting to note that only agricultural products—produced within the national boundaries of Israel—were acceptable for the tithe. A Jew living in Arabia did not “tithe” according to the Law of Moses. The famous passage in Malachi, “bring all the tithes into the storehouse that there may be food in my house,” specifically referred to this concept. The only thing that was ever considered a tithe was agricultural produce from within the national boundaries of Israel proper. God specifically ordained the tithe to provide food for the priests who served by course in the temple each month and at all feasts.

The Judeans, “Ioudaioi” in Greek and translated “Jews” in English, were the keepers of Jerusalem and the temple. They included the Sadducees, Pharisees, Levites, and part of the population of Judea. There is good reason to believe that simply designating “Ioudaioi” as Jews is technically wrong, just as calling all Israelites “Jews” is wrong. That seems especially clear in the Gospel of John, where Jesus refuted the IOUDAIOS leaders

regularly. To simply say “the Jews” were against Jesus was not true. The “People of the Land,” the next sub-group we want to consider, were for Jesus. They believed in Him and followed Him. The term “Ioudaioi”—the Jews—seems mainly related to the Judean leadership in Jerusalem and their respective followers rather than a national identity. It should be noted that this is not necessarily a mistranslation because that sub-group was the real “Jews,” strictly speaking, being both the tribe of Judah and living in Judea proper. It is a simple matter of bad exegesis, or *Sunday School theology*, as I like to say. A shallow understanding of the nuances of the Bible.

The Judean leaders (Sadducees and Pharisees) were the ones who fought against Jesus. They controlled the temple and the Sanhedrin—the national, legal court of Israel. They thought they spoke for the entire nation. This is seen in Caiaphas’ statement when there was a heated debate on what to do about Jesus. It is evident that not all the Jews opposed Jesus because Caiaphas says that if left to continue, everyone would be following Jesus, and they would lose their positions and eventually their national identity.

*If we let Him alone like this, **everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.**” And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.” Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad. Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death. John 11:48-53*

There is good reason to believe the term Jews should not be understood generically, but rather specifically as the Judean authorities.

The IOUDAIOI thought they were the religious elite and had it all figured out. They thought they spoke for everyone representing and preserving the true worship of the God of Israel. They were not. As with the Sadducees and Pharisees, they had been undermined by corruption, legalism, and manmade tradition. They claimed to be the authoritative leaders, but Jesus continually confronted their false authority with His own. We see this especially in the gospel of John. John seems to go out of his way to point out how many times Jesus refuted the authority of the IOUDAIOI over Him. Jesus declared His authority came from the Father.

“The Jews” (IOUDAIOI) stopped Jesus and questioned His authority to do what He was doing. They had not given Him their blessing or authority to minister the way He was. Since they believed they had the ultimate authority, they wanted to know where He got His approval to minister. He was not a Levitical priest. He was not a trained scribe or lawyer. He was not a recognized Rabbi. He had not gone to their schools and did not have a piece of paper authorizing His ministry. Jesus would not have been allowed to preach in many of our churches today based on these criteria. This story would be quite humorous if it wasn't so tragic.

*They came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him. And they said to Him, “By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?” But Jesus answered and said to them, “I also will ask you one question; then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John—was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me.” And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men’ ”—they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed. So they answered and said to Jesus, “We do not know.” And Jesus answered and said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” Mark 11:27-33*

Not only did the IOUDAIOI question His authority, but they also sought to protect theirs. Jesus, knowing all things, knew where to poke the hardest. He questioned them regarding John's ministry, knowing it would put them in a difficult spot. I'm sure there was a knowing smile on His face as they discussed among themselves how to answer. The conclusion. "Damned if we do and damned if we don't. We can't answer that question with incriminating ourselves." "We can't tell you, they said." Actually, they didn't want to tell Him because it was going to cost them something. Why not just own up to their false views? Why not admit that they had no valid answer? The reason was that they would lose their positions of power and influence over the people. They were more concerned with their positions and all that they provided than being right with God. Their religious pride, born of the flesh, held them in bondage to the lies. Remember folks; these were the covenant people of God and the religious rulers of Israel.

Jesus seemed to relish pushing the point that the IOUDAIOI had no authority over Him and that His was a greater authority. Multiple times in the gospel of John and elsewhere, Jesus used the term I AM in referring to Himself. The I AM was the ultimate authority in Israel. We see this theme carried over to His discussion with Pilate during His "trial." Pilate questions Jesus and gets no response. He marvels that Jesus isn't defending Himself and says, don't you know I have the authority to let you go or to crucify you? Jesus said you have no power over me whatsoever, only what my Father gives you.

To maintain our theme, we need to ask the question, "can we find evidence of IOUDAIOI practices in the church today?" Yes. Wherever political power and dictatorial leadership abounds, you find the IOUDAIOI spirit. It manifests itself as spiritual elitism.

I knew of a "pastor" who embodied this principle. He was the supreme leader in his church. He told people where to sit during church in relationship to himself—designating their ranking. Much like sitting on the right hand and left hand of God. He did not want people to build relationships with each other, preferring

everyone to connect through himself. That kept people from talking and discussing the problems in the church. If people did question him and leave the church, he publicly prayed curses on them for refusing the authority of the man of God. The congregation was told to stop being their friends because they were demon-possessed and deceived. He told his congregation that he would always be spiritually superior to them as their leader; otherwise, he could not lead them. He ruled by favoritism and intimidation. I confronted him on some of these things. His response: "I've made a lot of mistakes." But it didn't change anything. You see, he said what he needed to get me off his back but then continued to act as the IOUDAIOI.

I have known other pastors and leaders who admitted knowing the truth about something but refused to preach it because it would cost them their position. They didn't want to go against established—albeit wrong—doctrine. Or perhaps it was the person or family that ran the church they didn't want to run afoul of. I have felt the pressure to bow to the religious/political hierarchy that I have served under at one time or another. You get the feeling that if you ever want to advance in the group, you can't say or do certain things.

One doctrine that causes a lot of problems is the baptism with the Holy Spirit. I've known of several denominational pastors who received the baptism with the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. However, they would not preach it because of the fear of losing members, finances, or even their positions (including salary, parsonage, insurance, and two weeks paid vacation).

I knew a pastor that had gotten saved in prison and took correspondence courses to get his Biblical degree. When he got out of prison, he became a pastor assigned to a church in a small Midwestern town. His denomination was mainline Pentecostal and believed in the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues.

He took the church with a handful of people in membership. He had a genuine evangelistic ministry and an incredible testimony. After a few years, they had grown to around 200. I asked him how

he handled the Baptism with the Holy Spirit, tongues, and the gifts of the Spirit. He said there were other things more important, so he didn't teach on it. After a few more years he did feel convicted by the Spirit to teach on these things. The congregation, saved and brought into the church without being taught about these things, balked. They ended up kicking him out of the church because the Holy Spirit and tongues were just not respectable enough for them now that they had a reputation in the town to lose. He stood for the gospel truth and left to his credit, starting another church in another town some distance away.

The spirit of the Judeans is still alive and well in the church today.

# The People of the Land

The “*People of the Land*” were the citizens of Israel. They were God’s “flock.” God considered the national political and religious leaders as “shepherds” of His flock. Several times in the Old Testament, God made a distinction between the people and the leaders. Usually, because the leaders were not “good shepherds.”

*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!” says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel against the shepherds who feed My people: “You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings,” says the Lord. “But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking,” says the Lord. Jeremiah 23:1-4*

*And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, “Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: ‘Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them. Ezekiel 34:1-6*

It is clear from passages that God held the leaders of Israel responsible for the state of the nation. They were the reason the sheep were scattered—spiritually, politically, and even geographically when they were dispersed by the Assyrians and later the Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans. We have already seen the political division in the kingdom. They had not been “one flock” for centuries. Yet, God promised to return them to one flock and one shepherd, as we saw earlier.

The *People of the Land* were the rank-and-file Israelites. They were the hardworking farmers, fishermen, and merchants trying to eke out a living for their families. They were not as concerned with all temple regulations and rules. They were not looking for applause, power, or wealth.

Sometimes they followed Jehovah. They often wandered away from true worship and slipped into pagan idol worship until the God of Israel brought correction through harsh conditions (drought or war). The people would cry out to Him to restore their covenant relationship and blessings. Jehovah would respond with mercy and restoration.

God was faithful to maintain His covenant with the *People of the Land*. God fulfilled many of His promises to the nation through the first coming of Jesus. He will be faithful to fulfill the remaining promises before, during, and after His second coming.

The *People of the Land* were, at the mercy of their leaders, who grew more and more self-centered and corrupt. It was the *People of the Land* that Jesus came to—“the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” A careful reading of the Gospels shows a vast gulf between the “shepherds” and the “sheep.” The sheep mostly responded positively to Jesus—the *Good Shepherd*. The reason was that Jesus had compassion on them, unlike the bad-shepherd leadership they were used to. Consider these two verses side by side.

*Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the*



*people. But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Matthew 9:35-36*

*For [the leaders of Israel] bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. Matthew 23:4*

From these two verses, it is easy to see why the *People of the Land* loved Him, and the religious and political leadership hated Him.

We see this difference again in the story of the triumphal entry on what we now call Palm Sunday.

*Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, saying: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples." Luke 19:39*

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the *People of the Land* cried out "Hosannah (meaning "save us now"), son of David. They laid their garments and palm branches in the street for the donkey to walk on. In stark contrast the "shepherds of Israel" were angered.

The religious leaders were more concerned with power and position and the privileges they afforded. Their strenuous religious efforts were not born of a pure heart or the Holy Spirit—but the flesh.

The *People of the Land* just wanted to love and worship God. Even though they had been deceived and controlled by their leaders, they responded almost immediately to Jesus and the Gospel message. Jesus' message them was:

*Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*  
Matthew 11:28-30

This is a sharp contrast between the religious and political leaders to which He said, you are a bunch of snakes and painted tombs.

Today we can see some of the same sharp lines of demarcation between the professional clergy system and “regular” Christians. There are some significant problems with this scenario.

The first problem is that the Church today is still trying to operate—at least to some degree—by the Old Testament priesthood system. Our current system of leadership was designed and perpetuated by the Roman Catholic Church. It was a melding of Old Testament temple patterns and the Roman court system. Catholic church buildings, robes, ceremonial processions, and other things came—not from the Bible—but pagan Rome.

The clergy-laity system has hindered the Church of Jesus Christ in many ways. By designating a special priesthood, they robbed Christians of the “priesthood of all believers” revealed in the New Testament, under the New Covenant,

Few Christians understand that God never intended for Israel to have priests. He originally called them to be a “*kingdom of priests*”—*not a kingdom with priests*. In plain terms, every Israelite was to be a priest to God, acting as a mediator between God and the Gentile nations.

*Now therefore, if you (Israel) will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And **you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**’ These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.*  
Exodus 19:5-6 Emphasis mine.

This national priesthood was part of the covenant God offered to Israel. They rejected it.

*Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die. Exodus 20:19*

By doing this, they rejected direct communication with God in favor of a mediating priesthood. Moses pointed out that it was not God’s intent to kill them but to demonstrate his holiness, which needed respect. In like manner, the same group refused to go into the promised land a few months later. They let their unbelief stand in the way. Even though they tried to repent and said they would follow God into the Promised Land, it was too late. They missed out on the promise because of unbelief (Hebrews 3:15-19).

Although the Israelites rejected the offer of being a *kingdom OF priests*, God’s intent did not change. He still wanted a people who would serve as a *kingdom of priests*. The New Covenant was enacted upon the death and resurrection of Jesus. With the New Covenant, God achieved His purpose of a *kingdom of priests* through the Church, the Body of Christ.

*And formed us into a kingdom (a royal race), priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the power and the majesty and the dominion throughout the ages and forever and ever. Amen (so be it). The Book of the Revelation 1:5-6 AMP*

*And formed us into a kingdom (a royal race), priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the power and the majesty and the dominion throughout the ages and forever and ever. Amen (so be it). The Book of the Revelation 5:9-10 AMP*

The Amplified Bible—and most other versions—translate this most accurately as “kingdom” rather than “kings.” The King

James Version is one of few translations that render it “kings and priests.” However, the song of worship refers to God’s original offer of a “royal priesthood” to the nation of Israel—which they rejected—and now fulfilled through the Kingdom of God operating through the Church of Jesus Christ. We can see this clearly in 1 Peter 2:5-10

*You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, “Behold, I lay in Zion A chief cornerstone, elect, precious, And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.” Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone,” and “A stone of stumbling And a rock of offense.” They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.*

It should be clear, Peter is speaking to a Church (comprised of Gentile and Jewish Christians) rather than the nation of Israel because he said they were *not a people but now are the people of God*. He also addresses this passage to those who had *not previously obtained mercy but now had obtained mercy*. That could not have referred to Jews since they were the people of God and experienced the mercy of God through their history. This designation of Gentile Christians under the New Covenant can easily be associated with Israeli identification, *People of the Land* under the Old Covenant. The congregation of God. I.E., the ordinary people, as opposed to the religious elite.

Peter points out that the Israelites—except for a remnant—rejected the cornerstone (Jesus) and ended up tripping over him in disobedience. Remember, the original promise to Israel

included two conditions. 1. Obey my voice; and 2. Keep my commandments. They did neither and resulting in their exclusion from the blessing of the covenant.

In Matthew chapter twenty-one, Jesus tells the parable of the wicked vinedressers who had been given charge of a leased vineyard. As sharecroppers, they were supposed to share the fruits with the landowner annually. Jesus relates that the landowner sent servants (the prophets) to collect the rent, and the wicked vinedressers beat and killed them and sent them away empty-handed. Finally, the landowner says, I will send my son whom they will respect as my representative. The wicked men said, let's kill the heir and keep the vineyard for ourselves.

Little interpretation is needed here. The owner was God. The wicked vinedressers were the IOUDAI—the wicked leaders of Jews. The servants were the prophets, and the Son was Jesus.

Jesus neatly trapped them into pronouncing judgment on themselves. He asks, “What will the owner of the vineyard do to the wicked men?”

Not yet realizing that Jesus was directly relating this parable to them, they must have been outraged at the injustice of this story. *“They said to Him, “He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons.”*

Jesus then connects the parable to the scripture quoted in 1 Peter.

*Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord’s doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes”?*

He then declares God’s own decision based upon the Jewish leader’s sense of justice.

*“Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.*

Listen to that closely. The **kingdom would be taken** from the wicked and unbelieving Jewish leaders and **given to another NATION**. The word nation is “ethnos” in Greek, meaning a different ethnic group. Strong’s dictionary says it usually relates to Gentile nations.

In the last week of His life, after three years of loving the people and ministering to their needs, teaching about the kingdom of God, and confronting and rebuking the hard-hearted leadership, Jesus announced the final decision of God.

*“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, **but you were not willing!** See! **Your house is left to you desolate;** and assuredly, I say to you, you shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” Luke 13:34-35 Emphasis mine.*

You might notice that Israel’s house was going to be left “desolate” because they rejected their Messiah. Could it be the ultimate “abomination of desolation” is not a pagan antichrist setting up an idol, but rather the people of God rejecting the Son of God? We must compare the first desolation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

*Moreover all the leaders of the priests and the people transgressed more and more, according to all the **abominations of the nations**, and defiled the house of the Lord which He had consecrated in Jerusalem. And the Lord God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy....Then they (the Babylonians) burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its*

*palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions. And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as **she lay desolate** she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years. 2 Chronicles 36:14-21 Emphasis mine.*

All of these passages are connected to make the point. Israel rejected the offer to be a royal priesthood, a peculiar people, and a holy nation, first by refusing to hear God directly and then through the abomination of idol worship and wickedness.

The kingdom of God and the promise of a kingdom of priests passed to the Church of Jesus Christ, who would bring forth the fruits required by God.

That was a long explanation to get to the point I wanted to make. The protestant reformation had a few foundation stones. One was known as *“the priesthood of all believers.”* It recognized the intent of God that you just read. Every born-again Christian was—and was intended to function as—a New Testament priest with the power, authority, rights, and privileges that attended the position.

I do not mind repeating what I said earlier. Strict adherence to the clergy/laity system of ministry is wrong. I do not deny there are God-ordained leaders for the Church. The Church needs leadership. However, when the appointed leaders look upon the “People of the Land” (congregation) as unqualified to do the work of the ministry, we have a serious problem.

Paul addressed this issue in his letter to the church at Ephesus. He taught them that Jesus had ascended and left gifts to govern and equip the church. The apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers were anointed to do a specific thing—equip the church (People of the Land, spiritually speaking) *“for the work of the ministry and the edifying of the body of Christ”* (Ephesians 4:12).

That is rarely done in our churches because much of the leadership holds a strict clergy/laity philosophy.

The Church, living in these last days, MUST start recognizing the genuine, God-ordained priesthood of every believer and begin an effective strategy to equip them and release them into the ministries God has called them. It is not enough to send a few top people off to Bible college on occasion. Every Church is called to disciple servants and mentor leaders all the time.

In Romans chapter twelve, 1 Corinthians chapter twelve, and Ephesians chapter four, Paul shares his revelation of the Body of Christ. In these three chapters (and elsewhere), he discusses the Body of Christ in terms of ministry gifts and function. In each of these passages, he says every believer has gifts and callings—not a relatively small, select group of leaders.

1 Corinthians chapters twelve through fourteen especially explain how the Body of Christ is supposed to operate, yet I rarely see a church today modeling those principles. Has God used the clergy/laity model inherited from the Roman Catholic Church? Yes, He has! He always uses imperfect and flawed people and programs to get His will done. However, we need to consider the question, “is there a better, more Biblical way?” I believe the answer to that question is “YES!”

I send forth a call to the Church to arise and develop an ongoing plan to develop the gifts and callings of each member of your congregation. I send for a call to each member of the Body of Christ. To find and fulfill your role as a Kingdom of Priests and the People of the Land.



# The Essenes

A highly distinct group of Israelites lived in communal groups around Israel—the most famous one just northwest of the Dead Sea in Galilee called Qumran. Today, they are famous for producing or protecting the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in the 1940s by a Bedouin shepherd looking for lost sheep. (Side note: I find that scenario extremely interesting given our discussion that Jesus, the “Word made flesh,” and the “Good Shepherd” came looking for the lost sheep of the house of Israel during the same time the scrolls were being produced and used.)

The Dead Sea Scrolls contained many copies (or pieces) of the Hebrew Scriptures, other Jewish writings from the second temple era (the Apocrypha included in the Catholic Bible), and other texts detailing the cultural and religious life of the Essenes. I could say much about these scrolls and the insight they offer into the life of the Essenes. However, it is outside the scope of this message.

The Essenes are not mentioned by name in the New Testament. We can see their reflection in the gospel stories. I’ll point out a couple below.

From a religious standpoint, the Essenes didn’t quite fit in with anyone else. Like the Sadducees and the Samaritans, they only accepted the Torah—the first five books of Moses—as binding. They rejected the oral traditions emphasized by the Pharisees. Like the Pharisees, they believed in the prophets and the bodily resurrection—contrary to the Sadducees. A central tenant of their religious life was maintaining ritual purity as they waited expectantly for the Messiah to come.

They did not worship in the temple and were forbidden to offer animal sacrifices. This strange mix of beliefs set them apart from—and at odds with—the other major divisions of first-century Judaism.

A priest started the Essenes—some say he was a descendant of Zadok, the High Priest who served King David and his son Solomon. Because of this, they were strict about ritual purity and

keeping the Sabbath. So much so it is said they would not defecate on the Sabbath. They practiced ritual cleansing (baptism) regularly. Given the fact that this particular group lived in Galilee, came—in part—from a priestly line, and practiced baptism for the remission of sin, it is most likely that John the Baptist was an Essene.

Remember, John was a priest's son (Zechariah was lighting the incense in the temple when the angel announced his coming birth). He directly confronted the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Yet as far as we know, John never served in the temple. He came from the wilderness and performed his ministry outside of Jerusalem. Like the Essenes, he practiced a strict lifestyle (eating locusts and honey and wearing a camel-hair garment), unlike the loudaiioi in Jerusalem. That said, it is also likely that Jesus (from a human standpoint—being John's younger cousin) also had Essene sympathies. He, too, confronted the other religious groups, rejecting the Pharisees' oral traditions and the Sadducees' hypocrisy and corruption.

Moreover, the Essenes practiced communal living, shared property, and did not believe in any form of slavery—preferring to serve one another. They were known for celibacy and great hospitality. They separated themselves from contact with society—insomuch as they could—to remain ritually pure.

Some theologians believe that Jesus moved in and out of the Essene communities taking advantage of their hospitality. One interesting observation is the story of the last supper. Jesus told his disciples to look for a man carrying a jar of water and ask if they could have their Passover meal there. Typically drawing and carrying water was a woman's duty, not a man's, so he would *stand out like a sore thumb* in the crowded streets of Jerusalem during the feast. Likewise, the hospitality afforded Jesus and the disciples was customary of the Essene community. Likely the man Jesus told them to look for was an Essene.

You will also note that the early church in Jerusalem sold some of their possessions and “had all things in common.” That was also an Essene lifestyle.

Because of these things, it seems to me that the Essenes were the closest to being right of all the diverse groups in Jesus's day. Of course, anytime men become religious without the Spirit of God, they tend to go to extremes, as did the Essenes. We must remember that they were without the Spirit at this point, as were the Sadducees, Pharisees, and others. My point is simply that the Essenes were probably the best expression of Jews waiting for the Messiah you could find in the first century.

Can we find any parallels in the modern religious landscape? I think so. A strict legalism—so rigid they couldn't poop on the Sabbath—dominated the community. They felt that they were the one accurate representation of authentic worship and practice. According to them, their interpretation of the Bible was the only correct one. Do we observe some of these traits in some denominations and groups today? Yes.

There is no perfect church (except mine and possibly yours—but that is doubtful). Respected American Evangelist Billy Graham said, "If you find the perfect church, don't join, you will spoil it." My intent is not to *throw the baby out with the bathwater* but rather to point out the excesses in the Church of Jesus Christ that are not of the Spirit of God. By its makeup of imperfect people, the Church at best—at least at this point in history—will be flawed. Our goal is to purify the Church by allowing the Spirit of God to point out and remove any artificial religious garbage. Remember, Jesus, cleansed the temple—twice. He didn't shut it down; he fixed some of the corruption.

In 1980 I was born again through the ministry of a *Fundamental, Independent Baptist Church*. To their credit, they believed in salvation by faith and evangelism. Those people led me to the Lord, for which I am eternally grateful. However, they were highly legalistic. They adopted strict standards of holiness and rigid interpretations of the Bible. They were dead-set against the Baptism with the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. We were told in no uncertain terms speaking in tongues was devil worship. They also believed that they were the only true Christians and the only ones going to heaven. We (I include myself in that group at

this point) had our reasoned explanations as to why the Methodists, Catholics, Lutherans, and every group could not possibly be Christian. According to us, the possible exception was Southern Baptists because they did have Baptist in their name, even if they were liberals from our viewpoint.

Other groups are mutually exclusive, restricting communion—a necessary element of fellowship, and in some cases, salvation—to confirmed members. I saw this in Africa, where having multiple wives was neither illegal nor immoral. While the churches there acknowledged the second (third or fourth) wife, they would not give her communion. These same churches taught that one had to take communion to be saved. I confronted them in no uncertain terms. Did they have the right to withhold communion and thus salvation? Did God exclude the additional wives from eternal life for that reason? Most of these women had no choice in being the second or third wife.

Paul warned against those groups who insisted on *abstaining from certain foods and forbidding people to marry* (1 Timothy 4:1-3). Many of the Essenes were vegetarians. It sounds to me like he was addressing Essene excesses, yet he tells Timothy it will be “in the latter days.” Can you think of any religious denominations that have these rules today?

The Essenes restricted involvement in the day-to-day society preferring to live in a closed community with like-minded people. It has been pointed out that this is very similar to the monastic movements that gained popularity a few centuries later in the Christian Church. Due to the worldliness and compromise of the church leaders and their impact on the Church, many people moved out of populated areas and formed communes called monasteries. They could separate themselves from the contamination of the world and be free to focus on God. While the fleshy churches of the day were “so earthly minded they were no heavenly good,” the monastic group became so “heavenly minded they were no earthly good.” Separating themselves from society separated those needing salvation from the people who

had the gospel message. No one was getting saved because the church refused to interact with the world.

Both outcomes are wrong. Becoming like the world and extreme separation from the world failed to produce spiritual results. Jesus and the apostles never advocated avoiding society so you could be holy. We were to be bright and shining lights in the world.

*Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault **in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation**, among whom you shine as lights in the world,* Philippians 2:14-15 Emphasis mine.

Jesus said the same thing, calling us *the salt of the earth* and the *light of the world*. He instructed us to “*let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven*” (Matthew 5:13-16).

Contrary to much popular doctrine, Jesus did not pray that God would take us out of the world but that he would keep us from the evil one (John 17:15). The whole point of Jesus’s prayer was that we are in the world, but we are not of the world. His prayer was for us to impact the world through the Holy Spirit, not be impacted by the world. His prayer was that God would “keep us.”

It was not God’s intent that the Church withdraw from the world to avoid temptation, suffering, or persecution. Religious conservatives tend to think that protecting their children from worldly influences will keep them safe. It will not. I knew a Christian woman who went to a Christian school from kindergarten through twelfth grade and was sheltered from worldly influences. She even became a teacher at the same school where she graduated. I was talking to her one day when she shared how angry she was that she was unprepared for life in the world after she became an adult. She had not been taught how to confront the world and win; she had been taught how the world was so bad she must hide from it. That mindset is inconsistent with Jesus’s prayer for His disciples.

Please understand, I am not against Christian schools. I am against the concept that we must hide from the world rather than teach Christians how to stand for the Lord they say they follow. Our cookies-and-Kool-Aid youth programs simply are not doing the job. A good friend of mine was a co-pastor of a church and in charge of the teen ministry. He had worked in that area of ministry for years and had seen a generation of kids grow up in church and move into adulthood. They did teach the word. They had skits and pizza parties and ski trips—all the right programs—according to the experts. I asked him one day if he saw that the youth ministry was producing solid disciples. His response? No, not really!

Before you think I am overly harsh, I have to admit that my efforts at youth ministry were not all that successful either. That realization prompted the question I had asked my friend. We did the stuff and gave them Biblical information, but that was not enough to produce strong disciples. Many of them fell away in their high school years or soon after that. We had not taught them about commitment to Christ or how to stand against the pressure brought on by the world. We were more concerned about them thinking that Christianity was fun and cool. Most of us older Christians have figured out it is neither. I like the old saying, “It has been real, and it has been fun—but it has not been real fun.” That is Christianity. The absolute joy of knowing the Lord and having supernatural experiences are tempered with the times we must take up our cross and follow Jesus. Feeling His presence and hearing from the Holy Spirit is balanced with suffering persecution for His name’s sake.

I saw a statistic a few years back that opened my eyes to this problem. Most Christians that have been saved for five years or more don’t lead people to the Lord. The reason? They don’t know any lost people well enough to witness to them. Strong Christians tend to get involved in church activities and withdraw from secular social activities, clubs, and events if they are not strong Christians; they usually do not want to “upset the applecart” by being a Christian witness at work or in their social activities. (This is a generalization, of course, some older Christians do lead

people to the Lord, but they have been taught differently than the group we are discussing.)

The Essenes withdrew from the world to worship the Lord without being contaminated and distracted by the world; however, they never impacted the world either.

Jesus waded into the mess we call the world and confronted it. He got persecuted, rejected, misunderstood, and lied about. The sin, rebellion, and unbelief of His own people grieved His soul to the point He wept uncontrollably over the City of Jerusalem, lamenting that they would not respond to His love.

Jesus commissioned His church to do what He did. The very night He rose from the dead. The very first day that anyone could ever be born again, Jesus commissioned us. With the breath of God and a new commandment, the church was born.

*So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. John 20:21-22*

The Church of Jesus Christ needs to rethink the way we operate. Jesus said he was sending His disciples out as sheep among wolves, but they were to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves (Matthew 10:16).

We only have three choices. The first is to be like the world. The second is to avoid the world, and the third is to confront the world with the truth in power and love.

The Essenes had a lot going for them. However, like anyone trying to be religious without the Spirit of God, they ended up with a self-focused, religious experience flavored by extreme legalism and ineffective witness to the world.

We must root out strict legalism, exclusiveness, self-righteousness, and other flesh-appealing things from our churches.

# The Zealots

The next to last group we want to consider is the Zealots. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, called them the “fourth sect of Judaism.” They were Israelites and followed the Law of Moses to some degree like others of their day; however, they were the political branch of the nation. Their slogan might have been, “Take Israel Back for God. Or “Make Israel Great Again.” They were the group that combined religion and politics to the point they could no longer distinguish one from another. To be a patriotic Jew was to be a righteous Jew.

They were driven by hatred of the Roman occupation of Israel. They wanted to drive the Romans out with force. Their concept of a Messiah was a military leader who would restore the nation to sovereignty. *God, Guns, and Glory might have been their battle cry.* A branch of the Zealots was called the Sicarii—assassins in the Greek language or “dagger-men.” They carried small daggers (sicæ) in their clothing. Their goal was to kill any Roman or Greek or any Jew who was a Roman sympathizer. They often did this by catching them in a busy marketplace, stabbing them stealthily, then slipping away in the crowd.

Barabbas, the criminal, released by Pilate during the trial of Jesus, was a Zealot. We are told he had committed “murder during the recent insurrection” (Mark 15:7). Knowing this fact makes the entire story more incredulous.

We should note at this point that Simon—one of Jesus’s handpicked disciples—was a Zealot (Luke 6:15). If he was a Sicarii or not, we do not know. We do know where his religious and political views were anchored.

The Zealots lined up on the side of the Pharisees concerning the Law, the prophets, and the oral traditions. They believed the prophecies of a coming Messiah—more in terms of liberating the nation politically than saving the soul of the nation. Josephus said of the Zealots, “They agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions, but they have an inviolable attachment to



liberty, and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord."  
(18.1.6)

Their idea was that submitting to the Romans was sacrilegious. The Zealots did not mind murdering to achieve their political goals—even though the Ten Commandments said, “do not murder.” They wanted war with the Romans. Their religion was so tied to their nationalism that they compromised scripture to achieve their political purposes. To them, the end justified the means.

They played a vital role in the ultimate destruction of the temple in AD 70. The Zealots become increasingly “zealous” (for lack of a better term) between AD 40 and AD 70. They murdered more and more Jews and Greeks, prompting Josephus to describe their activities as “a reign of terror.” They instigated several insurrections, like the one in which Barabbas took part. They finally succeeded in taking control of Jerusalem. They stirred up the Jewish people to a fanatical revolt against Rome, which disastrously ended with the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70.

We can learn several lessons from the Zealots. Mostly what not to do. A fanatical mixture of religion, politics, and nationalism is fatal. It tends to create terrorists. We see the same thing happening in the Muslim world today. While “zealous” Christians are not likely to assassinate people or carry out suicide bombings, there are still dangers associated with this mindset.

We have seen people blow up abortion clinics and kill doctors performing abortions. One national Anti-abortion leader lead rallies whipping the crowd up by encouraging them to “feel the hatred.”

Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, gained notoriety for its hateful words and actions against the gay community. They were also known for protesting at the funeral services of soldiers killed in action, carrying signs that said, “Thank God for dead soldiers.”

While these are extreme examples, there are many Christians that have very ungodly attitudes toward their political and philosophical opponents. That in contrast to the Christ who said,

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; Matthew 5:43-45a*

Wow! How completely counterintuitive to the flesh—which is exactly why Jesus instructed us to do it. Why not read that verse again?

The website *Torah Portions* has this to say about this passage.

*While it certainly is true that the Torah says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18), it contains no commandment to hate your enemy. Instead, Yeshua contradicted what must have been a popular adage among the Zealots: “Love your neighbor, but hate your enemy.” That is to say, “Love your fellow-Jew (i.e., your neighbor), but hate the Romans.” The Dead Sea community in Qumran went even further. They taught their followers to “love all the sons of light ... and hate all the sons of darkness,” understanding the sons of light as members of their own sect and sons of darkness to be other Jews outside of their sect (Dead Sea Scrolls).<sup>1</sup>*

The hatred and anger I see coming from the religious-political right are not demonstrating the nature of the Christ we claim we are representing with our “stand for righteousness.” Like the Sicarii, some modern Christians are willing to compromise the scriptures for their political and philosophical views.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://torahportions.ffoz.org/disciples/matthew/love-your-neighbor-but-hate-yo.html>

Likewise, nationalism is not equal to spirituality. America is not the new Israel (speaking as an American). Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” That contrasts with the Old Testament Kingdom of Israel. The Kingdom of God transcends geopolitical boundaries today. It is not citizens of a particular nation—no matter how much they proclaim they are a “Christian nation”—that makes them Christian. The truth is, according to Jesus, one must be born again to enter the Kingdom of God.

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are guaranteed to Americans in our constitution—not the Bible. The Bible’s version of this might be “life, liberty, and the pursuit of holiness.” The Bible directs us to “pursue holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). The pursuit of happiness is something entirely different. Not to say God wants us to be miserable, but chasing happiness usually leads to sin, where God’s blessing on us does not.

Like the Zealots, some Christians have mixed politics, nationalism, and religion to the point they can no longer separate them. That is a huge mistake. With this mindset, doing ungodly things to achieve political or nationalistic goals is quite okay because they all accomplish the same thing, or so goes the thinking.

In January 2021, a group of Zealots stormed the Whitehouse. Theirs was a mix of religious, political, and nationalist philosophies. I would not say they were all of the same minds, but they certainly had these concepts in common to some degree. It is clear they were unorganized. I don’t see what they hoped to accomplish. Did they think they would change America with a small ragtag group without weapons? It was a wrong-headed approach, to say the least, and I don’t know many Americans who agree with their insurrection. Nevertheless, the spirit of the Israeli Zealots is alive and well in twenty-first-century America.

The Church of Jesus Christ must put politics, nationalism, and religion into proper perspective. All have value but not the same significance. I’m not saying Christians should not be involved in

politics or the social debate. It is that they should ACT like Christians when doing so. Jesus said that everyone would know we are His disciples by the love we have—not by our hatred and anger, driven by righteous indignation.

Bill Johnson, Pastor of Bethel Church in Redding, California recently said,

*“If what is happening in our country doesn’t make you angry, you may be part of the problem. Either through apathy or agreement with the wickedness going on. However, if that anger drives you to criticism, judgment, and complaint, you are playing on the devil’s field, and you will never win. Righteous anger should drive us to intercession, where we include ourselves in the intercession. Oh Lord, WE have sinned against you....”*  
*(Slightly paraphrased by me.)*

I believe Bill is correct. Jesus demonstrated a different kingdom where he chose to die for his enemies rather than kill them. As counterintuitive and as hard on our flesh as it is, this is what Jesus called us—as His Body—to do also.

# The Roman Sympathizers

There is no official name for this group. They were the Jews that supported the Roman occupation in Judea. Their motto might have been, “If you can’t beat them, join them.”

These Jews were okay with the Roman overlords if they could live a relatively peaceful life. Some of them—like Jesus’s disciple Levi and convert Zacchaeus—worked for the Roman government. In their particular cases, they were tax collectors—probably one of the most hated of all the sympathizers. The Jews hated paying taxes to Rome in their own country. The tax collectors were also notorious for cheating people, hence Zacchaeus’ decision to pay back sevenfold to all he had cheated. That Zacchaeus was an observant Jew is discovered in the fact that he offered to pay sevenfold. Mosaic Law said that if you caught a thief, he was required to return what he had stolen sevenfold (Proverbs 6:31).

They were detested by other Jews and especially the Zealots, who often targeted them for assassination.

There is not much to say about the sympathizers except that they were unwilling to buck the system but go along with whatever the government said. Some of them might also have been opportunists, seeing a chance to gain personally from the situation.

We can see some Christians today who are reluctant to *rock the boat*. They don’t want to draw criticism or persecution by taking a stand for Christ on the job or in society. They are content if their comfortable lives are not disrupted too much. Again, we should be reminded that Jesus called Christians to be salt and light amid a crooked and perverse generation. Hiding behind self-protective compliance is not an option.

That does not mean Christians should rebel against all governmental issues. Like the Zealots, some Christians just have a rebellious nature that has not been brought under the control of the Spirit of God. The flesh and a religious spirit empower their

spirit. We need to pick our battles and remain Christ-like during spiritual warfare carefully.

Paul instructed Christians to generally obey the laws of the land where they do not contradict the clear direction of God. I believe some Christians need to read this next passage. That is the reason I am including the quote rather than simply providing the scripture reference.

*Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.*

That said, civil disobedience is an option for Christians—when used correctly. When the Jewish authorities commanded the apostles to stop preaching in Jesus's name, they challenged the leaders with the question, “*Do you think we should obey God or man?*” The issue here, though, is twofold. First, the command was in direct opposition to God's command to the apostles. Second, it was not a legal statute; it was a religious injunction to curtail a religious movement. Laws in direct opposition to religious freedoms should be protested. For instance, I would have no problem smuggling Bibles into a closed country. I would also take a stand against laws in the USA that hinder freedom of speech and religion.

The key—as in all things Christian—is to maintain a godly balance regarding these issues. There is no one-size-fits-all principle. Above all, we must be cautious about sympathizing with an ungodly worldview that is hostile to Christianity.

# Two Conclusions

## Conclusion #1

Jesus came to unite the various factions of Israel back into a single people. He did this by first confirming and fulfilling the Old Covenant and then instituting the New Covenant. We see this clearly at the Last Supper. The Last Supper took place on Passover. God instituted the Passover meal ('sedar' in Hebrew) the evening before they left Egypt. After that, God told them to eat a ceremonial meal annually on the Passover to commemorate the event. The Passover meal reminded them of their God's great deliverance for the nation, the exodus from Egypt, and the beginning of the journey to the Promised Land.

It is no coincidence Jesus chose this night and this meal to institute the communion meal. He told the disciples that he had longed to eat this meal with them. Everything was going to change in the next three days. We usually quote Luke 22:19-20 concerning eating the bread and drinking the wine during our communion services. When was the last time you heard the pastor speak on verses 15 and 16?

*Then He said to them, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."*

The Passover meal, commemorating the exodus from Egypt and the Old Covenant, was replaced by New Testament communion, memorializing the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the New Covenant. It was most appropriate to switch the memorial meals on the night of the Passover. Just as there was to be a change of covenant, there would be a change of ritual meals.

There is so much that needs to be said about the way the modern church does communion. However, it is outside the scope of this present tome and would require a book of its own to do the subject justice. Suffice it to say that our modern services with a



few drops of juice and a tiny cracker were not what Jesus—or Paul for that matter—had in mind when they told us to take communion. The early church shared meals called love feasts; they genuinely communed with each other and the Holy Spirit, unlike our modern ritualized version.

Jesus hand-picked twelve men to be his primary disciples. Others, including women, joined the group. Some traveled with Him at times, and others provided hospitality when He ministered in their towns.

While it is speculation, I think it might be safe to conclude that Jesus included disciples from each of these subgroups in His chosen twelve. We know most were Galileans, giving them Essene influences, Simon was a Zealot, Levi, a Roman sympathizer/tax collector, and John, who personally knew the Sadducean High Priest's family, may have held those beliefs. The only group we do not see specifically represented was the Samaritans. That would make for an interesting group. Simon the Zealot would have hated Levi the tax collector—at least in the beginning. Do you suppose Jesus, the wise guy that He was (take that however you want) paired Simon and Levi when sending them out two by two?

No doubt the religious and philosophical differences made for interesting discussions and arguments around the campfire. Several times we see the disciples disputing with each other as they walk along the road.

Jesus was an uniter, not a divider. So must the Church of Jesus Christ make every effort to unite believers, not divide them. Jesus was not afraid to take people with radically different points of view and build them into a force that would change the world within 40 years. Is it possible for you and me to have that same courage, conviction, and faith? In Jesus, the various sects that divided Israel were brought together. He spent purposed and dedicated time with each group ministering to them in the ways they could respond to. Some believed and repented, and some rebelled in unbelief. Either way, you could not remain neutral with

Jesus. He had a way of getting to the root matter of a person's heart. He ignored tribal identities to bring the Israelites together.

What was the result of His inclusive ministry?

*And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all that I ever did." So when the Samaritans had come to Him, they urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. And many more believed because of His own word. Then they said to the woman, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world." John 4:39-42*

*And many of the people believed in Him. John 7:31*

*Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; John 12:42*

*[Because Lazarus was raised from the dead...] many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus. John 12:11*

Jesus crossed the dividing lines by speaking the truth—even when it hurt the intended audience. Many hated Him, but many turned to Him.

## **Conclusion #2**

I had several purposes in presenting this message. The main one was to open the Bible to provide a much clearer picture of the social, religious, and political environment that Jesus ministered in. The second goal was to show the modern church that those same tendencies are alive and well in the twenty-first century. As I mentioned earlier, the Bible is a mirror that reflects our image. Perhaps we all might see at least a little of ourselves in the ancient Israelites and make some adjustments where needed.

Jesus was not afraid of factions. He went head-to-head with all of them, calling each group to a better understanding and a closer

walk with Him. He came to correct our skewed opinions, manufactured traditions, and fleshly ways of worship. Jesus insisted on change. He still does.

The third purpose of this message was to provide a much better understanding of the Gospels and the epistles, connecting ideas and verses that are generally not considered together. I wanted to bring the people of the Gospels and their various worldviews into sharp view. I think many people get a *flat view* of the Bible in our Sunday School classes. I hope to have presented a 3D picture of them instead.

The final purpose of this message is to call every Christian to submit to the extraordinary work the Holy Spirit in these days.

The year 2020 was a landmark year from a worldwide point of view. God did a reset in the Church. It does not matter if you think God sent Coronavirus if it was a naturally occurring thing, or the devil sent it. God used it—as He does all things—for His plans and purposes. God did a hard reset on many Christians and churches.

I heard many Christians say they could not wait to get “back to normal” regarding church. That is the last thing we want. We do not want what was “normal” in 2019. We want and need a powerful awakening from the Holy Spirit to shake our churches and us. So much so it spills out of the building and into the streets in a powerful evangelistic movement. As powerful as the three and one-half years Jesus walked on earth and the next forty years when Spirit-filled disciples “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

Jesus is coming back. It seems like it is getting closer. Things are happening that we would not have thought possible a few years ago. In His first advent, Jesus came to get the people ready for salvation. To confront their false religious practices and cause them to repent (rethink) their lives and relationship with God.

Today the Holy Spirit is preparing the Church for the second advent of Christ. He is coming for a Church without a spot or wrinkle.

*Just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. Ephesians 5:25-27*

*Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. The Revelation 19:7-8*

The Spirit of God is doing a deep cleansing work in the Church in preparation for Christ's return. Spots are removed by scrubbing with soap and hot water. Wrinkles are extracted with heat and pressure. Have you been in hot water lately? How about the ironing? Felt a little heat and pressure? It is part of a plan to prepare you. Do not run from it. Yield to it.

*And I am convinced and sure of this very thing, that He Who began a good work in you will continue until the day of Jesus Christ [right up to the time of His return], developing [that good work] and perfecting and bringing it to full completion in you. Philippians 1:6 AMP*

**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.**

**2 Corinthians 13:14**

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