

Chapter 4.05 The Early Church 2: Groups and Directions

This chapter goes into some details of the story of the early Church and the shift from Jesus the prophet to the God Christ. Followers of Jesus were not originally called “Christians” but were called followers of the “way” of Jesus. They were “wayists” like Taoists or like followers of the Way in the sci-fi TV shows “Andromeda” and “Star Trek”. Non-Christians first called them “Christians” in Antioch in Syria when non-Christians heard them using the term “Christ”, probably in the 50s CE. Let us call all the people that followed Jesus the “movement”.

Early and Continuing Deification; Jesus as Divine Hero.

Within a few years after Jesus died, some followers already began to speak of him as semi-divine and as like a Mediterranean hero such as Herakles (Hercules) or the Twins Kastor (Castor) and Polydeukes (Pollux). Jesus did miracles, was wise, fought terrible villains, died young to save us, had one divine parent, and was divine himself. His power, heroism, divinity, the size of his sacrifice, and efficacy of his sacrifice, all grew with the telling. His real humanity faded and he became primarily a divine hero, most important son of the highest God. Unlike other Mediterranean heroes, Jesus’ Father had no rival gods, and Jesus had no rival gods, although Jesus did have rivals of nearly divine ability such as Satan (Lucifer) the Devil.

Within two hundred years, Jesus became more than a Classical semi-divine hero; he became like a Hindu avatar or like the Mahayana Buddhist Bodhisattva for his era of the world. These figures might have begun as human but they became fully God, they created the world, sustain the world, guide the world, save the world, lead all sentient beings to salvation, sacrifice themselves to do this, dualistically fight against evil, and monastically rise above evil and duality. Jesus’ early character as superhero and his early semi-deification paved the way for his later change into full Godhead Bodhisattva.

The problem is how much of Jesus’ character as superhero and deity might really be part of his original personality and his real identity, and how much has been added later. Liberals think almost all the divine attributes were added later while conservatives see almost all the divine attributes as factual. The problem is worsened according to what subgroup of Jesus’ early followers might have done the embellishing, and what we get when we strip away the gloss. At least some of Jesus’ Jewish followers began to see Jesus as more-than-human right after his death although they likely did not see him as fully God equal to God the Father. When non-Jews took over, they continued the development of Jesus as more-than-human.

(A) Orthodox standard Christians take the early Jewish ideas about Jesus as evidence that Jesus really was more-than-human, and take later non-Jewish embellishment as further evidence. Orthodox standard Christians tend to see these ideas as not coming from mere humans but as coming through divine inspiration from God the Holy Ghost.

(B) Assume that early Jewish followers of Jesus already had ideas of him as semi-divine or divine. Assume that later non-Jewish ideas are unjustified elaborations. It still seems reasonable to give the

early Jewish ideas of Jesus as more-than-human a lot of weight. Just because non-Jews later might have fantastically turned Jesus into divine superhero does not mean he was only human. He might really have been divine. Even if we remove later non-Jewish embellishments, we have to be careful not to remove a true divine core that lies underneath, for which the early Jewish ideas might be evidence.

(C) On the other hand, even if a residue of Jewish ideas remains after we remove later non-Jewish embellishment of Jesus as divine superhero, that remainder does not necessarily mean the early Jewish ideas of him as semi-divine are correct. Likely the early Jews who thought of Jesus as somewhat divine were a non-typical minority. Early Jewish ideas of Jesus as semi-divine might be wrong, and later non-Jewish elaboration might be wrong too, so Jesus might really be only human. This is the liberal position. I am close to this position.

(D) Suppose we accept that later non-Jewish embellishment of Jesus as divine is distinct from earlier Jewish ideas of Jesus as divine. This understanding does not mean that early Jewish ideas are right or wrong or that later non-Jewish ideas are right or wrong. The early Jewish followers might have gotten it half-right, and then the later non-Jewish followers built on the basic early Jewish insight to get it all right. Both groups were right about Jesus' divinity, each in their own ways. The two sets of ideas complement each other to make a correct fully rounded picture of Jesus including his full divinity. Of course, the later non-Jewish ideas about Jesus' divinity had to avoid going too far such as by seeing Jesus as only-divine-and-not-human-at-all; but they did manage this feat. This is roughly the position among standard Christian scholars and might have been the position of the early Church.

(E) The early Jewish followers, or the later non-Jewish followers, might both be right or wrong; but that does not matter. Jesus loves us whether we think he was God or not; God loves us whether we think Jesus was God or not. What matters is not Jesus' status as any kind of god but his message. This is my position. I think all ideas of Jesus as divine are very likely wrong, Jewish or non-Jewish, and are due more to human mythic imagination than to revelation or facts. Even if Jesus is divine, we do not understand his divinity well enough to make a big deal out of it. We do understand his message well enough to act on it. I trust Jesus and God to be kind on this matter.

“Lord”.

Within a few years after Jesus died, even before Paul began to write his letters about 45-50 CE, at least one large group of Jesus' followers already began to see Jesus as more-than-human, and began to institute practices accordingly. We can look at some practices of the early Church to see the transformation.

Even before Jesus died, likely some followers already called him “lord”. For Jesus, the term “lord” probably started out meaning (1) “respected human”. It soon moved through (2) “mixed divine and human” to (3) “A god” to (4) “THE God, the same as the one and only God Yahweh-EI”. The shift in meanings was allowed because of overlap between the Greek term “kyrios” and the Hebrew term “adonai”, both of which are translated as “lord” but do not mean fully the same thing.

The Hebrew term can apply to both people and God but not at the same time. When it applies to people, it can only mean “aristocratic superior lord” and cannot mean “God”. It is often used as a euphemism for

God. It cannot apply to any mixed being because Jews do not allow mixed beings. When it is used as a euphemism for God, Hebrews always keep in mind that it is only a euphemism and that using the same term for people and God does not mix people and God. The Greek term can have all four meanings, and Greek thought does allow mixed beings. The New Testament is in Greek. Where the Hebrew term “adonai” occurs, it is translated by the Greek term “kyrios”. What is not permitted in Hebrew happened in Greek. Jesus started out as a respected human but ended up as co-equal to the one and only God Yahweh. The same thing probably happened in the spoken languages before the New Testament was written, at least among followers who spoke mixtures of Greek and Hebrew.

Even though fuzziness of language helped the shift in meaning for the term “lord” (adonai) as applied to Jesus, the shift likely did not depend primarily on fuzziness of language. The shift indicated something going on in how people thought. Unfortunately, this long after the original events, it is hard to be clear about what people thought and how they expressed it. People can subdue linguistic fuzziness when they want; and they accept changes allowed by fuzziness only when they want the changes independently of the fuzziness. “Dude” did not originally mean all of what it does now, and “dude” did not have to shift in meaning if people did not want it. People can use the fuzziness of “dude” to mean either a man or woman – I find “dude” applied to a girl funny - or can clarify with the term “dudette” if needed. Likely some early Jewish followers did call Jesus “adonai” and meant some kind of divine lord. Fuzziness between Greek and Hebrew helped allow a shift in meaning that some speakers already intended. Fuzziness in language did not alone cause the shift. Why some Jewish followers did mean “divine” when they used “adonai” is not clear. Other Jewish followers who did not think of Jesus as divine did not necessarily go along with them; this group used “adonai” to mean only “respected human”. The way of speaking of the group who thought of Jesus as divine did win out finally: “Lord (Adonai) Jesus” now means much more than “Lord Byron” or even “Lord Buddha”.

Messiah.

Followers of Jesus probably speculated on him as a messiah or as the Davidic messiah even while he was still alive but I see no evidence that he embraced that role or that term. He certainly did not make a point of it. Probably within a few months after he died, people did call him the messiah, meaning the Davidic messiah, meaning a unique human-divine person with a unique relation to God. Although an idea of a messiah was available in Jewish culture of the time it was not this idea. I think early followers of Jesus who stressed this kind of messiah did not use the idea as it was found in Jewish culture then but instead shaped what was available into the new idea that we see in the New Testament. I cannot prove my interpretation. Giving evidence would take us too far out of the way. The New Testament idea of Jesus as this new messiah went along with the idea of him as Lord. It is possible that non-Jews would have reshaped Jewish ideas in this way but it is more likely that early Jewish followers of Jesus began the reshaping of available Jewish ideas.

Eucharist; the Last Supper; the Lord’s Supper.

“Eucharist” means “good gift” or “good grace”. “The Last Supper” refers to the supper that Jesus had with his disciples just before he was arrested. “The Lord’s Supper” refers to the sacramental practice that developed out of the Last Supper. “Eucharist” was the original Greek name for the sacrament. See below for passages about the body and blood. See Chapter 06.02 for further comments on the Lord’s

Supper.

The "Lord's Supper" played a role in early Church organization. The Lord's Supper symbolized Jesus' divinity, and the relation of believers to Jesus as God. Jews consider consuming blood a sin. Jews identify blood with the life force. The life force of any being belongs to God, so the blood belongs to God, and so humans may not drink liquid blood or eat congealed blood. In the Temple in Jerusalem, the blood from animal sacrifices was poured out to God. Jews do not sacrifice people. Jews accused their neighbors of human sacrifice, with some reason; they looked down on their neighbors for it; and they used the contrast to support ethnic distinctions. Recall from the Tanakh that God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac but later relented. Perhaps the major point of the story is not that God ordered the sacrifice of human Isaac but that he relented and then stopped the sacrifice. In relenting, God abolished human sacrifice. To Jews, eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood, even as bread and wine, was doubly blasphemous as both human sacrifice and drinking of forbidden blood. Yet the practice was in fact set in among some early Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus, they interpreted it as participating in the divinity of Jesus, and they interpreted it as necessary if they were to be resurrected and have eternal life. This view was revolting to Jews that were not in the movement, to many Jews that were in the movement, and to many non-Jews as well who thought that Christians were drinking real blood rather than symbolic blood. Among non-Jews, there is precedence for drinking the blood of a god, usually in symbolic form such as wine. Still, I do not see how Jews could come to this practice, not even if they considered Jesus God, and especially if they considered Jesus God.

I think Jesus wished people to eat bread and drink wine in memory of him and in celebration of the Kingdom of God. I do not think Jesus interpreted eating bread and drinking wine as eating of his body and drinking his blood.

The standard interpretation of the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches is: the bread is the literal body of Jesus, the wine is his literal blood, and we have to literally chew and gulp if we want eternal life. We really eat a real body and we really drink real blood. We cannot get eternal life if we do not chew and gulp. If we believe, and do not commit heinous sins, then the act of chewing and drinking almost guarantees eternal life. It is Christian magic. It seems like black magic. The Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches use passages from the New Testament to support their interpretation. I disagree with their position but I do not strongly disagree with their interpretations of the relevant passages. Instead, I reject the passages.

Not all early followers of Jesus interpreted the practice as standard Christianity does now. Something like the standard Roman Catholic and Orthodox interpretation only won out after several decades. The victory was part of one group taking control of the Church. That group edited his words after Jesus died so as to support their position. I do not believe the passages accurately reflect the words or intent of Jesus. Passages in the New Testament that describe the activity of ritual eating and drinking accurately report some of Jesus' words as support for the position of the winning faction; but the passages also attribute ideas of the winning faction to Jesus as a way for that one group of early followers to justify itself. The act of eating bread and drinking wine, and the now-standard literal interpretation as chewing and swallowing, became part of a secret magic ritual for advanced followers that brought them to innermost membership in one faction of the early Church. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches are the heirs of the winning faction and its practices, as is standard Orthodox Christianity.

Some other people of the time who wished to follow Jesus could not accept this magical meaning of the practice. Some followers of Jesus left the early Church when they reached the stage where they learned of this idea and of the secret ritual. I do not know of clear alternative non-standard interpretations of eating and drinking from the early Church. I think alternatives were suppressed by the winning faction. There is not much point in guessing. I do not want to seek validation for my point of view by projecting it backwards. The winning faction distorted Jesus' words so as to create a magical ceremony that would separate them from other kinds of believers and would thus make their faction a strong in-group. They succeeded.

Some Protestants disagree with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and give interpretations of the passages to support their own ideas. In effect, Protestants say the practice is not a literal eating of meat and blood but uses meat and blood as a metaphor. It is not always clear what the meat and blood symbolize. I agree with Protestants somewhat in their ideas about the practice but not with their use of the passages. They are reverse-editing passages to support their position while I simply discard the bad passages.

Lord's Supper (Eucharist) Passages.

In Mark, the passage is simple, and suggests Jesus had symbolism in mind, although Mark does not explain the symbolism. The words are not entirely from Jesus but are Mark's reworking to bolster the magic of Jesus' death. "The covenant" means the new Christian covenant to replace the old Jewish covenant. Jesus very likely would not have used "covenant" in that way. The new Christian covenant is instituted when Jesus dies, so the passage refers to his sacrifice. As far as I can tell, the passage does not intend literal body or blood. This passage also shows that Jesus expected the big change to happen quickly. Eating bread and drinking wine meant more than it does now, especially eating the first piece or "breaking bread" (literally tearing a piece off a loaf). Breaking bread and drinking the first wine was a minor ritual that said "now this meal is underway, now this meal is will successfully complete, and with it so our lives with our family and friends". When Southeast Asians open the rice pot and spoon out the first rice of the evening meal, the feeling is much the same.

Mark 14:22 – 14:25. * During supper he broke bread, said the blessing, and gave some bread to the assembled disciples. He added these words, "As you take this bread, you also take my body." He took the first cup of wine, offered thanks to God, and then gave some wine to the disciples. They all drank from the cup. As they did, he said, "As you drink, you also drink my blood, the blood of the covenant. It is spilled for the sake of many people. I tell you I will not drink the fruit of the vine again until the day when I drink it in the Kingdom of God." *

About thirty years later, John offers a more elaborate scenario. Jesus is describing himself to some Jews and to his disciples. In doing so, Jesus creates a rift within his disciples. The scene does not take place at the dinner just before Jesus died but long before. It is a turning point in the movement. At first in this scene, John suggests that Jesus means not his actual body but his words, his ideas, and his message; probably as was originally intended in Mark. Then John changes to mean Jesus' actual body. In Greek, the word for "eat" is more like "chew" and the word for body ("sarx") is literally "flesh", so the shift is clearer in Greek. John purposely mixes up symbolism with literality, so eventually we have to take the

symbolic as literal. At first we think that, “the bread which I give is my own flesh” refers to the fact that Jesus will sacrifice himself to save others but then we see it means Jesus literally gives his own flesh for eating. As usual, John embeds all this in a philosophical discourse in which he makes Jesus divine even if not yet quite fully equal to God the Father. The actual dispute among followers that John reports came decades after Jesus died, not at an altercation with the Jews while Jesus lived. John took the terms of a later dispute and rewrote it to get sanction from Jesus for John’s group. Jesus is the first speaker.

John 6:46 – 6:66. * “No, nobody has seen the Father directly except the one who came from God the Father, and only him. In deepest truth I tell you, [you do not have to see directly, you only have to believe because] believers already have eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert but they died anyway. When I talk about the bread of life, I mean the bread that comes directly from God. If a man eats that bread, he will never die. I am that living bread from God. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. In addition, the bread from me, which I give, is my own flesh. I give my flesh for the life of the world.”

This explanation led the Jews to argue. “How can a man give us his own flesh to eat?” When Jesus was teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum, he explained further. “I also give you my blood to drink. In deepest truth I tell you, unless you eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man [me], you will have no real life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will live eternally and I will resurrect him on the last day. My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives always in me and I live always in him. As the living God [of life] sent me, and as I live because of the Father, so whoever eats my flesh will live through me. My flesh is the living bread from God. It is not like the bread that your ancestors ate and yet died eventually anyway. Whoever eats this bread [of my flesh] will live forever.”

When they heard this further explanation, many of the disciples objected. “This is more than we can stomach. We won’t listen to this stupid talk”. Jesus knew some of his disciples were disgruntled, and so continued. “Does this [modest knowledge of the divine] amaze you? What if the Son of Man levitates back to the place where he came from? The spirit alone gives life. The flesh alone cannot do it. My words have both spirit and life. Yet still [despite the blessing of hearing my words] some of you have no faith. That is why I told you before that nobody can join me unless the Father has given that to him as a gift.” Jesus knew the whole time who would find faith, [who would drop out of the movement], and who would even betray him. From then on, many disciples left the movement and no longer followed him. *

I doubt Jesus said any of this in these words. The phrase “more than we can stomach” is John’s little joke. The phrases “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will live eternally” and “you can have no real life in you” remind me of vampire movies such as “Bram Stoker’s Dracula”. John has Jesus institute the practice while Jesus still had much work to do yet the other gospels have Jesus institute the practice at the Last Supper before Jesus’ death. John emphasizes the divisive character of the idea of the literal body and blood while the other gospels emphasize its holiness, probably as symbolic body and blood. It cannot be both times and both ways. The different times show their different concerns and show how gospels writers felt free to retell a story to suit their needs. I think John was more correct than the other gospels about the timing. I think Jesus used bread and wine symbolism long before the Last Supper to mean the meat and blood of his message, and I doubt his poetry caused this much controversy. The gospel writers other than John impose the idea of literal body and blood into the Last Supper, and make a big deal of it there, to gain extra ratification for a new tradition that arose after Jesus died. Some

groups within the movement had accepted the new tradition while other groups had not. John's group had already accepted the idea of literal body and blood to such an extent that John did not have to re-write the timeline to gain extra support for the idea among his group. Although Jesus did not speak these words, John has Jesus as the speaker because John emphasized the importance of "the Word", John needed Jesus' words to explain a rift within the movement, and John needed Jesus to back up John's group in the rift. John needed to reinterpret Jesus' words and he needed to institute the practice of the Eucharist before the time of the Last Supper. In the end, the Church rejected John's timing while it did accept the timing found in other gospels and John's dramatic use of Jesus' speech. I do not know what the Church makes of John's timing.

Resurrection Stories.

Ideas of Jesus' resurrection likely began right after he died. Resurrection itself need not make Jesus divine because many Jews expected a general resurrection. As the first person in the general resurrection, Jesus would be special but not necessarily divine. As the resurrection of other people did not come, followers had to explain why Jesus was resurrected but other people were not. That delay makes sense if Jesus was not just anybody but was a special divine person who prepared the way for a later resurrection. Probably various ideas and terms (lord, messiah, body and blood) of Jesus' divinity and stories of Jesus' resurrection came shortly after he died, arose roughly at the same time, and fueled each other. Probably visions of him resurrected occurred for several years after he died but not for decades.

"Them" below refers to disciples. A disciple is not necessarily an apostle. There were many disciples but only a few apostles. The time is three days after the crucifixion. Then there were only eleven apostles because Judas left the group after betraying Jesus. "Simon" refers to Peter.

Luke 24:13 – 24:35. * On the third day itself, two men who had been interested in Jesus were walking on the road to Emmaus a few miles outside of Jerusalem. Jesus himself started walking alongside the men but something prevented them from recognizing who it was. Jesus-in-disguise asked, "What are you talking about with such intensity?" Both looked really down. One man, Cleopas, said, "You must be the only man in Jerusalem not to know what happened the last few days." Jesus-in-disguise said, "About what?" The men said, "About Jesus from Nazareth. He was a powerful prophet both in what he said and in what he did. We were hoping he was our Liberator. But instead our head priests and rulers contrived a death sentence for him and then crucified him. Curiously, though, this is the third day since he died, and some women in our group told a story that shocked everybody. They went early in the morning to his tomb but didn't find his body. They said they saw some angels who told them Jesus was alive. So some of our group went to the tomb and found it disturbed as the women said but they did not see his body."

Jesus-in-disguise said, "You are really not bright. You refuse to believe all the prophets said. They told you that the Messiah had to suffer like this before he could return in full glory." Then Jesus-in-disguise began with Moses and explained to them all the texts from the Tanakh that referred to him as the Messiah. By that time they were at Emmaus, and Jesus-in-disguise started to go his own way. The two implored him to stay with them. "Stay here [for the night] with us because it is almost day's end." So Jesus-in-disguise went in with them. He sat down at evening table, took bread, said blessing, broke bread, and offered it to them. As he did that, suddenly the eyes of the two men were really open and they

recognized him. As soon as they recognized him, he disappeared in front of them. Both exclaimed, "Whoa! That is why our hearts burned as we walked along the road and he explained scripture to us." Instantly they jumped up and ran all the way back to Jerusalem where they found the Eleven and the rest of Jesus' group, and they told their story. The group also said that Jesus still lived. They told their own story of how Jesus had appeared to Simon, and told how they too had recognized Jesus when he broke bread." *

Originally this story did not include the elaborations such as the theological explanations, the jibe at the Jews and authorities, and the reference to the foretelling of Jesus in the Tanakh. In this version of the resurrection, unlike other accounts in the New Testament, only women see Jesus at the tomb, and an angel has to explain to them what it is all about. If Jesus had just arisen, some women had only just seen him that morning, the women did not tell many disciples, and the disciples they did tell did not believe them, then it is very unlikely that the event is already the talk of the town, everybody already believes in the resurrection, and two travelers from Jerusalem already are obsessed with the events and their meaning. Those elaborations became typical of stories about Jesus as the Church went along. Notice how Jesus is changing from a prophet that wanted to restore Israel into a Messiah (Christ) with a bigger agenda. The center of the story is: two men meet another man along the road; they begin to talk about important matters, including Jesus; they share a meal, as Jesus once did with people; as they share a meal and talk about Jesus, they realize they have understood each other and "bonded" as they could not have done otherwise; even though Jesus is dead, it is as if he were still alive with the people that "get" him, and he is still changing their hearts; especially when people share meals as he used to do, it is as if he were still alive and helping them. In this sense, it is true that Jesus is still alive and still with the people that will listen. The message of the story is to trust other people and share with them, especially food. When you do, you will be in the Kingdom of God as if you were still with Jesus when he was alive.

As more people told this story, they changed "it was as if he was really there with us" to "he was really there with us and was really alive". It is like the game "telephone" or like a chain of gossip in which imagined details become real and then take over the story. Jesus' imaginary presence overcame the message. Eventually the metaphysical glamorized version displaced the real version; the magic displaced the message. The message was lost. This happens with seeing Elvis Presley too.

John Shelby Spong argues that many stories of Jesus' resurrection are like this, and that other stories about Jesus might be like this too. People tell stories to explain what it means to understand Jesus and to follow him. They tell stories to explain his life and message. The stories feature Jesus as if he were still alive. Jew has used this kind of story before with other characters in the Tanakh, such as Moses, and would continue to use this kind of storytelling throughout their history. This kind of story was so common among Jews that it has a name, "midrash". Jews understand clearly the difference between "as if" and "really was". Yet during the telling from one Christian to another, the stories featuring Jesus changed so that they became not "as if" but "really was". Fun words spoken to stimulate the imagination became the literal Word of God. Later on, the Church inherited the stories. It had to defend its position and its sacred texts, especially the gospels. To defend itself, it asserted that the stories are literally true, not just "as if". The stories were never meant literally but they were taken literally and defended literally, and that can cause a lot of trouble.

Superman.

Probably because of when I was born (1949) and how I misspent my youth, the early deification of Jesus reminds me of the transformation of Superman. His true Kryptonite name, "Kal-el", is a mix of Greek and Hebrew, and, I think, means "good" ("kallos") from Greek and "God" ("El") from Hebrew. When Superman first arrived on the literary stage in the 1930s, he was not who we know now. He "was able to leap tall buildings in a single bound", "faster than a locomotive", and could not be pierced by a needle to receive a vaccination (the movie "Superman Returns" makes a visual joke out of this early comic book problem). He could run fast and jump far but he could not fly, and he was not able to fly faster than the speed of light so as to reverse time. I think he did not have heat vision or x-ray vision although he did develop them quickly. He could not withstand nuclear bombs because there were no nuclear bombs in the 1930s. He was not smarter than all the scientists put together. He was not especially brainy. He fought bank robbers rather than Lex Luthor or other super villains. Kryptonite did not exist. He aged normally. There was no super dog or super girl. There was no city in a bottle. All the extra powers came to him as the writers allowed their imaginations to roam to provide what people wanted. Once he gained a power, he never lost it. Once a power stepped up in scale, such as flying speed, it never reverted. Once his story gained a situation, such as Bizarro World, the situation returned again and again. Originally he did not think of sacrificing himself for the greater good. He wanted a girlfriend. Now Superman can never live a normal life but always has to be available to make our lives better. Superman started out as "super jock", an extension of teen fantasies, and ended up as something qualitatively different. At first, he was more like the Hulk than the Superman we have now. Eventually he became like a Mahayana Bodhisattva. In whatever religion it appears, the god-hero who sacrifices himself to save other people, to give us life at the cost of his own, fills a deep need. To quote the movie Spiderman (not Superman, but it fits): "With great power comes great responsibility" – if you are a good guy. As Jesus was deified, he began to fill the need. To better fill the need, he was deified, purified, and expanded more and more. Eventually the character and the need matched well enough to endure. Similar transformations happen to other heroes even if they do not go as far, even to heroes that expressly do not have any super powers, and, these days, especially to heroes that have a dark side. Batman and Conan clearly became the instruments of light and good for their time and place.

Church Organization.

Within a decade of Jesus' death, his followers divided into two levels. Not all subgroups had both levels, but both levels were in the subgroup that eventually dominated the movement. The first level included regular followers who met together, sang songs, and helped each other. The second, deeper level included initiates who knew secret ideas and had secret practices such as baptism and the Lord's Supper. Eventually the secret practices became open, so the distinction between the two levels blurred, but in the early years it was important.

Regular followers of both levels met together and sang together. The songs were like hymns, and the songs taught about the movement or taught doctrine about the movement such as the lordship of Jesus. Singing was not a Christian innovation; Jews had done it for a long time, as with the Psalms. Christians adapted the Jewish practice. From what I have seen, singing is a great recruiting tool. Already while Jesus was alive he ate regular meals with his followers. Probably the meals were not like the Last Supper or like the Lord's Supper of modern churches. The meals had bread and wine, but that was true of all meals if participants could afford it. Soon after Jesus died, followers began to have regular

meals together, and the meals were remembrances of him. Those meals became ritualized.

Probably as soon as Jesus died, followers ritualized the communal meal. The meals might have included disreputable characters such as tax-collectors, prostitutes, and the poor. People probably pooled resources for the meals. The meal might have been a big source of support for poor followers. I think this is like large church suppers even now in American churches, often held after services or in the evening on Sunday. In addition, some followers modified the general meal to make a second kind of meal that was a secret meal for the in-group. The in-group meal included a re-enactment of the idealized Last Supper in which the in-group followers ate bread-as-body and drank wine-as-blood. They discussed doctrines they did not want other followers and the public to know, such as about Jesus' body and blood. When pagans later criticized Christians as cannibals, they had these secret meals in mind.

Baptism was an important initiation rite into the deep level. At first, not all followers necessarily were baptized although I think most persistent followers were baptized. Baptism indicated a commitment to the movement where people went from being casual followers to being real followers, maybe as it does today. Members of the in-group had to be baptized but just being baptized might not necessarily have made a follower a member of the in-group. I do not know what it took besides baptism to be a member of the in-group. I think Jesus did not baptize his followers but some of Jesus' disciples did baptize the followers they recruited. Baptized followers considered themselves to be in a direct line from the baptizing disciples of Jesus. I think baptized members of the in-group felt they then had a right to baptize others and to continue the line. People got the idea that you had to be baptized to be resurrected, and, later, to go to heaven. What I just described seems to preclude infant baptism but the practice of infant baptism arose in the decades after 70 CE, so I do not take a stand either way.

Churches kept doctrinal disputes internal and tried to keep all other disputes internal as well such as over inheritances or marriages. Christians did not like to go to court. Influential members of a church tried to get the parties to agree privately. If that did not work, a group of church members met with the rivals. Among Western Americans and among many Christians I have known, this attitude persists now. Westerners used to consider court shameful.

Partly to keep the peace, and partly to keep purity of conscience, members went through public confession of sins and faults. After confession, other members decided what to do with the sinner. I do not know how lenient or harsh Christians were. I have seen films of this practice among modern people but I have never seen it in real life. It looks unpleasant. Sociological works on modern cults refer to it as a form of mind control. This practice kept people out of the movement, maybe especially rich and powerful people. Eventually the Church replaced this technique with private confession to a priest or bishop. Later on, Protestant churches dropped it altogether.

These relations and practices imply at least some officers and hierarchy. They do not necessarily imply the full spectrum of offices and hierarchy of elaborate churches such as the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Episcopalian.

The Game: Jesus Slowly Reveals Secrets to His Idiot Disciples.

Jesus did not take on the role of messiah, and Jesus did not expect to die and be resurrected. If he had,

he would have made it openly clear, his disciples would have known, and it would have been a big part of the movement even before he died. Yet it was not. Beginning with Mark, the earliest gospel, the writers made up a story to explain why it was not. As in the resurrection story above, the gospel writers have Jesus play an odd unrealistic game with his disciples, who look stupid. The reason nobody knew about Jesus identity as Messiah and the need for his death was not because Jesus did not try to tell people but because his disciples were too stupid to get it. At first, Jesus keeps his identity and the future secret. He lets the secret out bit-by-bit, and he makes the disciples guess at his identity and at his upcoming death and resurrection. Demons know Jesus' secret identity, and what will happen, because Jesus has been around since before time and demons have been around since at least the dawn of time. Jesus commands demons not to reveal his identity, not even to his disciples, but sometimes demons let it slip anyway. People in general, not his disciples, cannot know who Jesus is until his death and resurrection, but must know after. Jesus wants his disciples to know even before but he does not want to tell them directly. He wants them to guess. So Jesus asks questions, performs miracles, and drops hints; but no disciples get it. Finally Peter does get it, but not quickly and not well (see below). It is not clear how well the other disciples get it even when Jesus explains, although they seem to pick up on the idea that Jesus is divine. Not until after Jesus is killed and resurrected do they seem to fully get it, and even then only slowly.

If Jesus did play this game, that might explain why nobody knew in advance who he was and what was going to happen, but using this game to explain general ignorance is a stretch. This game is out of character for Jesus. Jesus would not talk like this or act like this. It is not clear why Jesus would hide his identity or the upcoming events of his death and resurrection from anybody. If he did hide them from his followers in general, it is not clear why he revealed them to the disciples, or why he revealed them through this game rather than directly. If he did reveal the truth to his disciples, it is not clear how they could be so stupid. I do not see how keeping everything a secret from everybody but his disciples would have made his death and resurrection more effective. If Jesus had revealed the future to a general audience, the revelation would have helped the movement. The gospel writers are skillful at dramatizing the game but it is not clear why readers-listeners would go along with it.

Not all the original followers of Jesus' Way had in-groups. One subgroup that did have an in-group invented this game. This game explains the death of Jesus in a way that gives power to in-groups. This game explains why they know of Jesus' divinity but other followers do not. This game might be one reason why the particular subgroups within the Jesus Way that had in-groups, secret baptism, wine-as-blood, and bread-as-body eventually prevailed over followers of the Way that did not. Followers that did not believe in magic, did not believe in this game, and did not have magical in-groups, could not compete, and so died out.

Early Church Groups.

The Jesus movement split into at least three distinct major subgroups. These are not the same subgroups that I mentioned before, that split along the lines of Jesus' divinity; but there is considerable overlap between the two groups of three. As with the other group of three, the lines between these three groups were not sharp.

(1) Jerusalem Church.

James the Just led the first group. James was “the Just” because he strictly adhered to Jewish Law and apparently he had a noble personality. He lived in Jerusalem. He interacted often with Pharisees and Jewish authorities, and they got along well. James was very likely close kin to Jesus, likely Jesus’ half-brother through Mary. According to standard Church doctrine from about 200 CE onwards, James might have been Jesus’ cousin but could not have been his brother because Mary did not have children after Jesus, and Joseph was not Jesus’ father. In contrast, the early Church right after Jesus did seem to recognize James as Jesus’ half brother. James was the accepted leader of the entire Jesus movement with all subgroups while he lived, held in regard even above Peter and Paul. Meetings of the movement were held in Jerusalem under his auspices. He claimed the right to set doctrine and judge disputes. He would have been like a first Pope or Patriarch if those offices existed then. In 62 CE, a Jewish official, acting on his own, killed James. Other Jews were shocked and they had that Jewish official deposed.

The church in Jerusalem under James is called the “Jerusalem Church” and sometimes “the Nazarenes”. The Nazarenes and the Jerusalem Church might not always have been the same group, so the reader should be careful in attributing facts about the Nazarenes to the Jerusalem Church under James.

James insisted that all followers had to adhere to the Mosaic Law including the dietary laws, and men had to be circumcised. In effect, he required followers of Jesus to be Jewish or to convert to Judaism, and to maintain Jewish identity. James saw the Jesus Way as the new direction of Judaism and not as anything apart from Judaism. James did not allow followers of Jesus to be only God Fearers following a Law less strict than Mosaic Law.

Further beliefs of the group in Jerusalem have to be inferred from a group that might have descended from the group in Jerusalem, “the Ebionites”. After James died in 62 CE and the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, the Jerusalem Church did not continue long. It might have contributed to another group called “the Ebionites”, which means “the Poor” in Aramaic, and who lived in Syria or Jordan. Their poverty was voluntary. They endured for a few hundred years, and then died out. The later Church that became the standard Church considered the Ebionites heretics, what we know of them is only from reports of the standard Church, and so the information probably is biased, but the information is probably reliable enough. The Ebionites believed that Jesus was a normal human being born naturally of a man and woman; was not divine; observed the Law assiduously; that God made him a prophet, maybe when John baptized him; and that Paul had distorted Jesus’ teaching. The Ebionites did not like the Hellenists (see below) and Paul was a clear Hellenist. Some Ebionites might have believed that Jesus started out as a normal man but was adopted by God and made semi-divine; probably when he was baptized. When the Jerusalem Church and the Ebionites disappeared, this line of thinking about Jesus nearly disappeared as well.

The Jerusalem Church left no particular documents. The Ebionites wrote at least one gospel, but it has survived only in fragments or in quotes from other sources, and cannot be considered in this book. The letter of James in the New Testaments might or might not be by James the Just although it is attributed to him. For current thinking on the status of that letter, go online. Even if the letter was not entirely by James it likely represents his thinking.

(2) Hellenists.

The second group is called “Hellenists”. It is better to think of them as moderate Hellenists. Some writers call them “hellenizers” because this group wanted other people to adopt their ideas. To many Jews of Jesus’ time, “Hellenists” was originally a derisive term, like “Yankees”, a term that stuck and got less derisive over time. “Hellenes” was the Greek term for themselves. A “Hellene” was a Greek or, more often, any person of any ethnicity who had accepted basic Greek ideas even if he-she also observed the customs of the society-culture of birth. To accept the Greek way of life was to “Hellenize”. Romans were Hellenized. Many residents of Syria were Hellenized. Paul was a prominent Hellenist. Christian Hellenists directed much of their missionary activity to God Fearers, Diaspora Jews, or even to ordinary residents of the Empire that were neither Jews nor God Fearers. They probably did not try to convert Jews in Judea. Christian Hellenists were called that because of their personal roots in Greek culture and because of who they focused missionary activity on, not necessarily because their beliefs about Jesus came out of Greek culture or reflected Greek beliefs.

(Many ideas that are called “Hellenistic” did not derive from Classical Greek culture or philosophy. True, the ideas are Indo-European as opposed to Semitic but the ideas are more akin to ideas from Iran and India that had spread throughout the Middle East, and had been taken up by some philosophers and religious leaders. These ideas are part of later middle Platonism and Neo-Platonism that in turn became the basis for ideas of the Church. There is no equivalent to the Indian Bodhisattva or Iranian devil in Greek culture.)

In general, the Hellenists stressed the divinity of Jesus and the magical efficacy of the birth, death, and resurrection. At least at first, the majority likely did not think that Jesus was divine in the full sense of God the Father. They thought Jesus was divine but at a subordinate level or in some other way. Only gradually did the faction that believed in the full divinity of Jesus, and that the divinity of Jesus is identical to the divinity of God the Father, win out. Hellenists did not think followers needed to convert to Judaism, be circumcised, or follow the full dietary laws.

Necessary fussiness: Some Jewish followers of Jesus did not believe in his divinity. Some Jewish followers of Jesus who were not Hellenized might have believed in his divinity. Some Jewish followers that were Hellenized did believe in his divinity while some did not. Some Hellenized followers of Jesus, Jew or non-Jew, did not believe in Jesus’ divinity while others did. I do not know: what ratio of Jesus’ followers were Jews or non-Jews at particular times; what ratio of Jews (followers of Jesus or not) were largely Hellenized; what ratio of non-Hellenized Jewish followers of Jesus believed in his divinity; what ratio of Hellenized Jewish followers of Jesus believed in his divinity; and what ratio of non-Jewish followers of Jesus (mostly Hellenized) believed in his divinity. I do not know the ratio of various beliefs among Jews in Jesus time, such as for example the ratio of Jews that believed in Heaven or did not.

The Jerusalem Church and the Hellenists argued strenuously over what was required of followers of Jesus. James the Just and Paul did not get along. Paul called himself an apostle yet James did not accept Paul as an Apostle. James did not accept claims that non-Jewish followers of Jesus did not have to follow Jewish Law. James and Paul argued openly over dietary rules and over the requirements on non-Jews. For the most part, the Church as a whole accepted the right of James to decide, at least until the Jerusalem Church was destroyed after the fall of Jerusalem.

The Hellenists were not uniform in belief and they formed subgroups that argued among each other. They ranged from modest Hellenists such as Luke, to fervent but orthodox Hellenists such Paul, to orthodox but metaphysical Hellenists such as the author of the gospel of John, to extreme believers in the divinity of Jesus such as the Gnostics. If you do not know much about Paul, see the chapter on him later in this part of the book. Some Hellenists felt that Christians were completely free of the Jewish Law and should deliberately not follow it so as to make a point of not being under it; Paul argued against them, saying that Christians should follow the Law when they could even though they knew they did not have to. When I grew up, Greek parents even in the United States did not circumcise their sons so as to make a point of contrast with Jews. Even now, Americans eat pork on religious holidays such as Christmas so as to continue to emphasize differences with Jews – some Americans do not know that is why they eat pork then. Some Hellenists followed the lesser law of the God Fearers and would not eat food that had ever been offered to any other gods, even the household gods. Some respected the Jewish Law almost fully.

The letters of Paul (45 – 60 CE), the gospel of Luke, the Acts written by Luke (both after 70 CE), and the gospel of John (around 100 CE), are classics of Hellenistic Christianity. From them we can see the variation in Hellenistic ideas. Other documents show forms of Hellenism that more strongly stress the role of Jesus as philosopher or as spirit, such as the gospel of Thomas, but they were not accepted in the New Testament. Hellenist documents that were taken into the New Testament tend to show elements of compromise (see below) and so the Hellenistic elements do not always stand out. Even though John argues strongly for the divinity of Jesus (see later chapters), passages from John can be seen as arguments against even more metaphysical, spiritualized, and non-corporal explanations of Jesus by more extreme Hellenistic groups with whom John's group competed.

(2B) Radical Hellenists or “Heretics”.

Aside from the moderate Hellenists was an assortment of other groups that were more radical, especially radically non-Jewish in that they stressed the divinity of Jesus without much consideration for his humanity, for example some Gnostics. I do not consider these groups much here because there are too many, they are too diverse, and the early Church gradually purged their ideas. They contributed some ideas to Christianity but the ideas were filtered through more moderate Hellenists, and this book cannot consider that topic. Today we know some as early “heretics”. The next chapter briefly describes two, Marcion and Mani. The chief rivals of these radical Hellenists were probably other moderate Hellenists. The moderate Hellenists argued with these groups and tried to contain them. In the Gospel of John, John argues with at least one group that saw Jesus as only divine and as not human at all. That is why John stresses the incarnation of the Word. Radical Hellenists were important for keeping the moderate Hellenists moderate, for clarifying why the Church needed to compromise for unity, and for clarifying by contrast the lines along which the Church needed to come together.

(3) Compromisers.

The third group was a de facto compromise group, originally led by Peter. Peter was active in Jerusalem, Galilee, and neighboring areas, maybe especially Syria. Peter represented the apostles and apostolic authority, at least after the fall of the Jerusalem Church after 70 CE. One incident shows the character of Peter and the compromisers, even though the incident is reported by Luke, a sympathizer of Paul. Paul

and the Hellenists allowed non-Jewish Christians to eat what they wished. James insisted that all Christians “eat kosher”, especially no pork and no food that had been offered to any idol, even a household god. While James the Just was still alive, before 62 CE, Peter dreamed that God showed him a big sheet on which were many animals, and told him that he could eat of any animal without being unclean. Peter and many members of the Church interpreted the dream to mean that the dietary laws no longer applied to non-Jewish (at least) Christians. Due to this dream, Christians adopted a compromise in which Jewish Christians continued to follow the full Mosaic Law while non-Jewish Christians could follow the less strict version of the Law (from Noah) typical of the God Fearers. Non-Jewish Christians still could not eat food that had been offered to an idol but they could eat pork if it had not been offered to any idol. Really the Jerusalem Church and the Hellenists agreed to leave each other alone, with Peter brokering the deal.

The first gospel, of Mark, around 60-70 CE, is an example of a compromise text, especially if Mark was the secretary of Peter. It is a somewhat angry book, written as an argument against fellow Jews, but still with the hope of coming to an accord with Jews and bringing them into the fold. Mark was probably a Hellenized Jew but might have been a learned God Fearer Christian. Mark is angry because he seems to believe that Jews would come to Jesus if only they would relax and open up. Mark accepts some divinity for Jesus but does not stress his divinity. In its original version, Mark did not even report the resurrection or appearances of the risen Jesus. That might not have been important in the Jesus mythology at the time, or many followers still did not accept the resurrection. The gospel of Matthew, from shortly after 70 CE, does accept the magic of the birth, death, and resurrection even though Matthew is steeped in Judaism. Matthew was deeply familiar with the Torah. He used proof texts, fairly and unfairly, to argue strongly against Jews. He might also have been arguing with the strict group of James the Just. Matthew might have been a learned Diaspora Hellenized Jew. Matthew seems to have given up on bringing in any more Jews to the movement, and now wants primarily to justify his wing of the Jesus movement, and to bring in any God Fearers that might be open to his arguments. He seems to refer to the burning of Jerusalem and seems to say that it was the fault of the Jews for not accepting Jesus. That might be the first serious instance of blaming the Jews.

Blending. When the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 70 CE, Christians outside the Jerusalem Church took that as a judgment by God against Jews for not accepting Jesus. I do not know if Christians outside the Jerusalem Church also took those events as a judgment against the Jerusalem Church for not accepting the ideas of the Hellenizers and Compromisers. What happened between Hellenizers and Compromisers after 70 CE is not clear. It seems the Hellenists absorbed the Compromisers so that a moderate Hellenist position eventually dominated, approximately the position of Paul, augmented by the high Christology of John (almost full divinity of Jesus). “Apostolic authority” is the special authority of the closest followers of Jesus who knew Jesus personally, originally “The Twelve” and probably including James and his group. They were all Jews; none were Hellenists. The Hellenists wanted both to keep their position of not being Jews and not being subject to Jewish Law while also taking the apostolic authority of the Jewish Christians.

They accomplished this in three ways. First, Paul insisted he had met Jesus in a vision, and so he really was an apostle and really had apostolic authority even though he had never met Jesus while Jesus was alive. Second, other Hellenists insisted that apostles had baptized them and that the apostles had laid hands on them. These acts gave the second generation, the Hellenizers, the direct authority of the

apostles. It also meant only they could continue the chain of charismatic power; only chosen successors of the Hellenizers could continue the authority of the apostles. Third, they could both be Hellenistic and appear Jewish at the same time by “co-opting” Peter, the chief of the apostles. The gospels start with Peter as an idiot yet have him first to understand that Jesus is God and that Jesus must die and be resurrected to fulfill his mission. Even while the gospels paint Peter as a stooge unable to get the hints of Jesus, they also paint him as the leader of the apostles, brave, true, and astute – a contradiction that can lead to unintended humor. In painting him both ways, they can use a well-known and respected figure as a dominating authority for their own ideas about the divinity of Jesus and the mission of Jesus.

In his association with Paul, Luke was a Hellenist, but his gospel seems more like a compromise attempt to bring together Diaspora Jews, Hellenized Jews, and general members of the Empire. It has anti-Jewish rhetoric but not as much and not as strong as Matthew or John. It does not constantly refer to the Tanakh and it does not subvert traditional Jewish understanding, as did Matthew. It broadens the roots of Jesus to make him appear part of the “family of people” rather than as just a Jew (see next chapter). For example, the Three Kings (Three Wise Men or Three Magi) that come to visit Jesus represent the whole world, not just Jews.

By the time of the gospels of Luke, Matthew, and John, the Church had bishops, had developed the idea of apostolic succession, and developed the idea that apostolic succession might come in distinct lines from particular apostles. The bishops that could clearly link their office to particular apostles, and especially to Peter, carried great weight in discussions of policy and practice. For example, the Bishop of Rome claimed that his office descended directly from Peter and so carried the greatest weight; eventually the Bishop of Rome became the Pope.

Galilee disappeared as a center for the followers of Jesus. The Way of Jesus, and later Christianity, moved almost immediately from the country and from peasants to the cities and to small business people and working people. It altered the message to appeal to these new people, such as by stressing the need to bypass courts.

Modern Takes.

Conservative Christian writers such as Larry Hurtado and N.T. Wright see at the heart of Christianity the early subgroups that stressed the divinity of Jesus (the Christ) and that had a separate in-group. I am not sure, but I think they argue: (a) some of Jesus’ earliest followers thought he was strongly divine; (b) some of the earliest followers were Jewish; (c) so some of the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus saw him as strongly divine; (d) Jews would not think a human being was strongly divine unless he really was strongly divine; (e) and so Jesus really must have been strongly divine. They turn the aversion of traditional Jews for mixing the human and divine into an argument for the strong divinity of Jesus. Their view is not necessarily wrong but it requires clear evidence that some early traditional Jewish followers did think Jesus was strongly divine. Their view supports the idea that the standard Christian package comes as an indivisible whole.

In contrast, liberal Christian writers such as Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and John Shelby Spong think the original Jesus Way was made up mostly of common people with no hidden programs or in-groups. They see as deviations the subgroups that stressed the divinity of Jesus and that used in-groups

and mystery rites. The divinity of Jesus was not an important idea in the early Way. We do not have to take the standard Christian package as a whole. Elaine Pagels points out the role of Gnostic alternatives to the standard orthodox position in the early Church. Gnostics believed in the divinity of Jesus but not in the standard divinity. The prominence of Gnosticism in the early Church shows that even people who believed in the divinity of Jesus did not all agree on the nature of the divinity and its significance, and thus the standard orthodox Christian position does not have to be the only position. We can believe in a divine Jesus without necessarily taking the entire standard package as a whole; or we can believe in a Jesus that was not divine. Indirectly she supports the idea that the Jesus movement did not at first consist mostly of people that insisted on the divinity of Jesus. I agree with liberal writers in most respects, so here I go into the liberal position a bit.

The problem with the liberal Christian view is how it sees the original Jesus Way. Suppose the original Jesus Way did not have a standard divine Jesus and did not believe in the standard magic of the birth, death, and resurrection. Liberals prefer idealized populism to the kind of Big Change that Jesus preached. The original Jesus Way comes across as the first arrival of 1960s peace-and-love, of modern 1970s-1990s New Age, or of academic intellectual post-modernism. The followers of Jesus come across as intoxicated proto-hippies sharing a whole-grain organic dinner, wine, and their gently used clothing with the good-hearted misunderstood poor. I think the real mass followers were more like the crowds at a modern mega-church or at the traveling show of a televangelist. They wanted to know what Jesus and the disciples could do for them. They were hungry, sick, and needed clothes. They were not in the mood for rationality or too much mush. In the movie "Phenomenon" with John Travolta, the lead character gets mild super powers. At first the public fears him. But when they think he can heal, they jam sick children in his face. They get angry when he cannot cure everybody for free. In theory, liberal thinkers do not overlook what Jesus said about the end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it and the restoration of Israel. In practice, they do. Without change-of-the-world ideas, the Way can appear like a klatch of Socratic philosophers or a group of drunken Taoists. To Jesus, the point was the Big Change, the restoration of Israel and everything that went along with it. To his mass followers, eschatology mattered because it meant they would be healed, fed, healthy, and have an eternal abundant life including food, clothes, spouses, children, and status; they wanted to know how to get that for themselves for sure now.

Liberals still want to see Jesus as secretly divine and therefore consistent in all his aspects. As long as liberals insist on seeing the Jesus Way in their terms, and insist on an absolutely consistent Jesus that reflects the idealized divine Jesus, they will focus on some idealized mostly-was of Jesus while neglecting his all about in the real world. They will not be able to address his all-about properly.

The closest analog to a good version of the Jesus Way that I have seen with my own eyes is the non-militant wing of the Black Panthers in Oakland, California in the late 1960s and early 1970s, before the police destroyed the movement. The Panthers fed, housed, and clothed people, helped people get medical care and jobs, fixed buildings, cared for oldsters, and educated children; all without state help. They did not see an end of the world or a complete transformation but they did see a big real change. They knew any change depended on them. They did not let populism get out of hand. They were not the blood-drinking anti-capitalist revolutionaries of conservative nightmares; the Black angels of contemporary Black revisionist history fantasy pep rallies; the goo-goo dolls of liberal longings; or even the Black knights of their own self-image; but they worked. They did not deify (divinize) their leaders, even when their leaders were killed or imprisoned. I doubt most of their followers understood the rhetoric,

cared, or followed because they did understand. That didn't matter either. The Jesus Way was much less fierce but might have been similar. With less strident tones, the Salvation Army and the Volunteers of America also are similar.

Peter.

Peter was probably about the same age as Jesus. He was a fisherman. His original name was "Simon". Jesus renamed him "Cephas" in Aramaic, which means "rock". During their lifetimes, Jesus called him either "Cephas" or "Simon". In Greek, "rock" is "petros", which in English becomes "Peter". "Rock" in Latin is "lapis". Jesus did not call him "Peter". Peter likely moved to Rome when he was old to live among Diaspora Jews there. He might have been killed there in one of the persecutions. He was a charismatic person, brave, true, astute, and bold when needed. He helped hold the early Church together. It is not clear what relation he had with James except that, while James lived, Peter was under the authority of James. It is a shame the gospels painted him as a stooge in the game of guessing Jesus' secret plan so that the gospels could use him to validate Jesus' divinity.

A famous passage in Matthew shows how both Peter's astuteness and dullness were invented to bolster claims of Jesus' divinity and Church authority. This passage is typical of invented passages where Jesus plays the game of slowly revealing the secrets to his idiot disciples, and typical of added passages that ratify Church authority. Roman Catholics cite this passage as evidence the Bishop of Rome comes directly from Peter, the Roman Catholic Church has authority even over heaven or hell, and so the Roman Catholic Church has very great authority. Protestants deny that this passage validates the authority of the Bishop of Rome; but their denial rests on twisting the meaning of the passage from its face value. I consider the passage as added later and not the words of Jesus. I think it has little to do with the real Peter. So I do not accept Church claims to authority based on this passage, or the claims of any particular church. It is hard to have it both ways: Peter as idiot stooge and Peter as the judge of creation. If Peter (the Church) did not understand then what it takes to achieve what God wants, I wonder if the Church understands now.

Matthew 16:13 – 16:23. *When the band got to the area around Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his followers, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They responded, "Some people say you are [the Son of Man is] John the Baptist [returned], some say Elijah, some say Jeremiah, and some say one of the prophets." Jesus asked, "What about my followers? Who do you think I am?" Simon Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus declared, "Simon son of Jonah, you are a lucky man. You did not learn this from any ordinary mortal. My Father God told you that. I add this: You are Peter [Cephas the Rock], and upon this rock [Peter, Cephas] I will build my church. The power of death will never defeat my church. I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of God. What you deny [forbid] on earth will be denied in heaven, and what you permit in earth will be permitted in heaven." He then strictly ordered his disciples not to tell anybody he was the Messiah. From that time on, Jesus started to explain to his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem; suffer much from the elders, chief priests, and lawyers; be put to death; and rise up again on the third day. When Peter first heard what would happen to Jesus, Peter grabbed Jesus' arm and began to plead, "God [the Father], please, no. No, Lord [Jesus], this can never happen to you." Jesus turned directly to Peter and said, "Get out of here, Satan. You are now an obstacle in my way. You think as men think, not as God thinks. [You do not understand what it will take to achieve what God wants.]" *

