

Jesus Christ Superstar

"Every time I look at you I don't understand..."

By Dan Ofstedal – November 7, 2025 ¹

"You've got to live right
To be the light of the world"—From the musical "Godspell"

This is an essay about Jesus of Nazareth, not about the rock opera itself. I chose Jesus Christ Superstar lyrics as epigraphs for two reasons. First, the musical itself is an inquiry into the true nature of Jesus. Second, both the music and lyrics are fantastic. I've embedded corresponding video clips from the 1973 film throughout—they're worth watching as you read. I strongly recommend a complete listen to the full album. Very groovy.¹ Watch this space for a future post focusing solely on its music and theology.

"One thing I'll say for him: Jesus is cool."

YouTube video clip from Jesus Christ Superstar (1973): <https://youtu.be/f-3RQeYDVgw>

Jesus' essential message is about transcending the self, finding oneness with God, with creation, and with others. "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). "Love one another" (John 13:34). He also spoke repeatedly of forgiveness, humility, love and compassion—but these naturally flow from the primary message of transcendence and oneness—knowing your authentic self.

Following him meant more than belief; it meant transformation and participation in the kingdom of heaven which—as he told us—is present *here and now*.

How did a message of unity, humility, and self-transcendence become a religion of division, hierarchy, and rigid rules? One word: ego.

As Christianity became institutionalized—first in local communities, then as the official faith of the Roman Empire—it was inevitably shaped by human ambition and the demands of empire, which always needs to define "who belongs" and "who is saved." This distortion represents a graft onto Jesus' original teachings.

Mystical and experiential Christianity, by contrast, preserves the authentic through-line: ego-transcendence, oneness, and the lived wisdom of Jesus' example. Like the lyric says, "Jesus is cool."

Christianity has always contained multiple strands: mystical/experiential, moral/wisdom-teacher, and doctrinal. Each interprets Jesus differently, emphasizes different aspects, and carries its own strengths and vulnerabilities.

"Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication."

YouTube video clip from Jesus Christ Superstar (1973): <https://youtu.be/NGcIvK7f77o>

What we know about Jesus comes from followers writing decades later. Paul's letters (~50 CE) emphasize his cosmic role; the Gospels (~70 CE and later) blend memory, theology, and interpretation. Each author was writing for a different audience, addressing different questions, shaping different communities.²

¹ Used with permission by Dan Ofstedal, check out this and other of Dan's writings at: <https://danofstedal.substack.com/>

Even in these earliest decades, there was no single Christianity. Some saw Jesus as a mystic and wisdom teacher; others as the Messiah or Son of God. “Messiah” in Jewish thought meant an anointed liberator, not necessarily a divine figure. Jesus redefined that expectation spiritually: his kingdom was inner, not political; his authority came from God, not Rome.

The words of Paul and the Gospels were later canonized and weaponized in doctrinal battles, although their original purpose was to guide inner transformation and communal life. The diversity of early Christianity—Gnostic communities, Jewish-Christian sects, mystical movements—was vast. But empire has no patience for diversity of thought—it’s too hard to control.

“For the sake of the nation, this Jesus must die.”

In the first two centuries following Jesus’ death, his followers were often persecuted by Rome. Then came the great reversal: in 313 CE, Constantine legalized Christianity. By the late 4th century, it had become the official religion of the Roman Empire.

A faith that had begun with a man executed by empire was now enthroned atop it.

“Empire consciousness”³ brought what empire always brings: hierarchies, exclusion, codified creeds, and the use of fear to enforce conformity. Imperial Christianity needed clear boundaries: who was orthodox and who was heretic, who would be saved and who would be damned. The experiential became dangerous—if anyone could know God directly, what need had they of bishops and emperors? So mystery was replaced with certainty, inner transformation with outer compliance, the living way with the correct creed. The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) defined Jesus alone as “of one substance with the Father” and drew sharp boundaries around who was in and who was out.

Here is history’s deep irony: a mystic who preached oneness, humility, and trust—“do not be afraid,” “peace I leave with you”—became the figurehead of power, control, and exclusion.

“We turn to Rome, to sentence Nazareth.”

YouTube video clip from Jesus Christ Superstar (1973): <https://youtu.be/rGZgG8Ub8k4>

Empire consciousness operates through fear and division. It needs enemies, hierarchies, and the threat of punishment to maintain control. Jesus embodied oneness consciousness, which operates through love and inclusion. It dissolves boundaries, elevates the marginalized, and trusts in the goodness at the heart of existence. “The last shall be first.” “Love your enemies.” “That they may all be one.”

These two levels of consciousness are not merely incompatible—they are opposites. Yet for seventeen centuries, Christianity has struggled under the weight of this contradiction, trying to serve both Jesus and Caesar. Jesus explicitly warned against this.

To understand how we got here—and how we might return to the authentic core—we need to distinguish between the different streams that have flowed through Christianity’s history. Not all expressions of Christian faith are equally aligned with Jesus’ original message.

“What’s the buzz, tell me what’s happenin’?”

YouTube video clip from Jesus Christ Superstar (1973): <https://youtu.be/zbGEuNi2SKs>

For clarity's sake, I have separated Christianity into three strands:

1. Mystical/Experiential Christianity

This is the authentic core. It emphasizes direct experience of God, oneness, and ego-transcendence. Jesus becomes the living model of union with the divine—not a distant savior to be believed in, but an experience to be had, and a path to be walked.

This mystical strand originates in Jesus' own teachings: "The Kingdom of God is within you" and "Whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these" (John 14:12). These words point to divine potential within each person, not dependence on external authority. Early communities carried this forward: Gnostics of the 2nd and 3rd centuries emphasized direct knowledge (*gnosis*) and the inner divine spark. The Desert Fathers and Mothers, retreating to the Egyptian wilderness, pursued union with God through contemplative silence. The Gospel of John itself testifies to this mystical current throughout: "I and the Father are one."

One of the keys is staying centered in the present, rather than regretting yesterday or worrying about what will come. As Jesus in the rock opera implores, "*Save tomorrow for tomorrow. Think about today instead.*"

Mysticism appears throughout history in voices the institutional church often tried to silence: Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, the Quakers, contemplative orders, and modern movements like the 19th century New Thought Movement, which reclaimed the mystical heart of Christianity without the doctrinal baggage—emphasizing oneness and the divine presence within each person. It's Christianity as Jesus might have taught it today: transformative, inclusive, focused on experience rather than creed.

Following the mystical path naturally leads to the moral path. Compassion, forgiveness, and humility flow spontaneously from direct realization of oneness. You don't love your neighbor as yourself because a rule demands it—you do so because you recognize yourself *in* your neighbor. You *are* your neighbor.

2. Moral/Wisdom-Teacher Christianity

This strand focuses on how Jesus lived and taught: humility, compassion, forgiveness, care for the marginalized. "Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). It's reflected in the Sermon on the Mount, from which comes liberation theology, and the Social Gospel movement.

This ethical path is beautiful and necessary. But without the mystical foundation, it can become mere moralism—striving to be good without the transformative experience that makes goodness natural. The mystic doesn't strain to forgive; forgiveness arises from seeing reality as it is.

3. Doctrinal Christianity

This strand emphasizes correct belief, creeds, and orthodoxy. Salvation depends on *who Jesus is understood to be*, rather than how we follow his example or experience God. Belief becomes the litmus test. Get the doctrine right, and you're saved; get it wrong, and you're not.

If religion is the metaphorical finger pointing to the indescribable moon, this kind of Christianity is focused entirely on the finger.

Reflected in the church's creeds, confessions, and the institutional enforcement of orthodoxy, this strand has provided structure, community, and continuity across centuries. These can be real gifts. And they can be a gateway to a higher understanding.

But doctrine also carries profound dangers. It can overshadow mystical and moral truths, foster division, and reinforce ego-driven "insider/outsider" thinking. It epitomizes empire consciousness. It builds walls where Jesus tore them down. It creates hierarchies where Jesus said, "whoever would be first must be last."

Jesus never said "worship me." He said "follow me." The distinction matters profoundly.

Doctrine also tends toward an anthropomorphized view of God—man projecting his own image onto the divine. God becomes a cosmic judge, a stern father, a bookkeeper tallying sins and merits. This is ego writ large: we remake God in our image rather than recognizing the divine mystery that transcends all human categories. The mystics knew better. They spoke of God as ground of being, as love itself, as the silence beyond words, as ineffable. Doctrine, for all its usefulness, risks reducing the infinite to something manageable, containable, controllable.

To be fair, all three strands can coexist within the same traditions. The Catholic Church places heavy emphasis on doctrine and also runs vast social justice programs. It has also—often grudgingly—tolerated its mystical strand: Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, Thomas Merton, Anthony de Mello, just to name a few.

"Jesus Christ, Superstar—do you think you're what they say you are?"

Jesus' identity has always been contested. Was he Messiah, divine Son, teacher, mystic, revolutionary, or something else entirely? To call him Messiah once meant hope for liberation from Roman occupation; now it triggers doctrinal debates about the Trinity, atonement theory, and exclusivity.

Yet the mystical thread remains, and reveals his true path: living in union with God, transcending self, and embodying oneness with all. "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Not doctrine—*experience*.

Reading the Bible as mystical poetry is the key to reconciling passages that otherwise seem contradictory. Parables, symbolic language, repeated imagery—all of it invites reflection and inner experience rather than rigid doctrinal interpretation that doesn't really make sense. Jesus didn't speak in systematic theology. He spoke in stories, paradoxes, and provocations designed to see past the ego's certainties.

"Everything's alright, yes, everything's fine."

YouTube video clip from Jesus Christ Superstar (1973): <https://youtu.be/qV9C6Am8xzk>

It is tempting to reject Christianity outright when its institutional face looks like empire—hierarchical, controlling, punitive, wrapped in the language of damnation and fear. Many have done so, and I understand why.

Yet to abandon the mystical heart of Jesus would be to discard the very message that transcends ego. I refuse to throw out the baby (Jesus) with the bathwater.

Mystical Christianity is the root; doctrinal overlays are grafts—some helpful, some diseased. The mystic Jesus calls us beyond self, to oneness, to freedom, and to the Kingdom of Heaven within. Doctrinal Christianity can guide us for a while, but only when it serves that deeper reality.

Following the mystical path naturally leads to the moral path. Once you realize and experience your oneness with the divine and with all creation, compassion, forgiveness, humility, and love flow from that experience. You don't manufacture these virtues through willpower—they arise naturally. There is no need to use guilt and fear to coerce behavior.

Jesus said: 'Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another' (John 13:34). To 'love your enemies' (Matthew 5:44) can only mean to have no enemies.⁴ That is not doctrine. That is the way.

The invitation remains what it always was: not to believe the right things about Jesus, but to walk the path he walked. To discover the Kingdom of Heaven within. To know—not as intellectual concept but as lived reality—that at the heart of existence is love, and at the heart of each of us is the divine spark Jesus recognized and called us to realize.

Everything, ultimately, is alright. Just like Jesus, we are all—Superstars.

YouTube video clip from Jesus Christ Superstar (1973): <https://youtu.be/URWa0rbB1Kw>

Further Reading:

- **Bart Ehrman** - *Lost Christianities* and *Misquoting Jesus* (early Christian diversity and textual criticism)
- **Elaine Pagels** - *The Gnostic Gospels* and *Beyond Belief* (Gnosticism and early diversity)
- **Marcus Borg** - *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* and *The Heart of Christianity* (historical Jesus and progressive faith)
- **John Shelby Spong** - *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* and *The Sins of Scripture* (progressive Christianity and biblical reinterpretation)
- **John Dominic Crossan** - *The Historical Jesus* and *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (historical Jesus scholarship)
- **Matthew Fox** - *Original Blessing* and *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (creation spirituality)
- **Thomas Merton** - *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *Contemplative Prayer* (contemplative practice)
- **Richard Rohr** - *The Universal Christ* and *The Naked Now* (contemplative/mystical Christianity and nondual consciousness)
- **The Jesus Seminar** - Collaborative scholarly project on the historical Jesus

Fun fact: Deep Purple singer Ian Gillan sang the part of Jesus in the 1970 album, but not in the later stage production or the 1973 film.

There are numerous inconsistencies among the gospels, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.

My friend and Macalester College professor emeritus Dr. Michael Obsatz coined this term, which aptly describes the unbridled ego. His works and information can be found at www.lifesjourney.us

This doesn't mean we condone bad behavior or don't take strong action. It means we think and act from the clarity that comes from an understanding higher than ego-reactivity.