

Most experts agree that between thirty and forty thousand different Christian denominations exist today. Denominations normally have multiple physical locations where their franchises (popularly called “churches”) do business in a building on a piece of real estate. Is your Christianity accurately and completely defined and determined by any one of them? *What kind of Christian are you—and why?*

Once upon a time, long before the institutions we know as churches and their buildings, creeds, traditions and artifacts existed, Christ-followers were known as *people of the Way* (see Acts 18:26; 19:9,

(Philippians 3:13). Christ-followers are “on” *the Way*, moving with a purpose, rather than stationary alongside *the Way*. For Christ-followers, faith is not confined to an ecclesiastical organization. Faith is far more than mental assent to dogmas and creeds—far more than particular rituals or ceremonies.

The Way brings to mind a journey with Jesus Christ, rather than a destination already achieved. As Christ-followers, we are not stagnant; we are growing. We are on the move—“pilgrims” to use a biblical metaphor. We are ambassadors here on earth. While we live within earthly

set of dogmas or doctrines other than Jesus, who is our *Living Stone* (1 Peter 2:4). Jesus Christ is who and what we believe. He is our foundation, he is our center and our core—he is our all in all.

Jesus is not only our guide on our journey, but he is *the Way*—he is the path, he is the road. We are Christ-followers and we are *people of the Way* because he walked this way before us—he blazed the trail before us—and we follow in his footsteps.

As Christ-following *people of the Way*, we are going somewhere. We haven’t fully arrived. In one sense, we are spiritual aliens in the land, the state, the province and the

Greg Albrecht



People of the Way

23; 24:14). The word “way” in the New Testament is translated from the dynamic Greek word *hodos*. It means a road or a *journey*—*hodos* implies travel or movement.

The word “way” implies that Christ-followers are not sitting still. Like Paul, Christ-followers do not believe they have arrived or that they have already been “made perfect”

nations, speak different languages and have distinct customs, we represent the kingdom of God in this world.

People of the Way are not simply those who mindlessly believe and follow religious practices just because their parents and grandparents did. Their faith is their own.

People of the Way are not tied down or tethered to any

country in which we reside. Christ-followers are not the property of any religious entity—we are bought and paid for by Jesus Christ.

What About Church Membership?

Though some people profess membership in an incorporated institution, if they are truly *in*

Christ, they are first and foremost members of the universal body of Christ, which has no denominational boundaries.

People of the Way might be found within the walls of a building or institution that calls itself a church or they may never venture inside such a building or institution. **People of the Way**, the universal body of Christ, may at times be obvious and visible, but they can also be obscure and invisible.

As **people of the Way**, we follow Jesus and as we journey with our risen Lord; we mature in him. He builds us into his temple—a spiritual house where he dwells. *When it comes to church membership, Christ-followers must ask if they first and foremost belong to*

Jesus or if they think Jesus belongs exclusively to their religious tribe. Whose name most defines your faith—your denominational label or our Lord Jesus Christ?

Following Jesus was considered to be a **way of life** long before Christianity morphed into tens of thousands of denominations, each with their own unique, differing, competing and even contradictory sets of priorities, practices, beliefs and doctrines.

But the priority of defining Jesus as a **way of life** only lasted a few centuries after his birth, life, death and resurrection. Then came the desire to organize into human power structures. The 11th chapter of Genesis tells us that people came together to build a city with “a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves”

(Genesis 11:4). As it turned out, their attempts to organize resulted in the construction of a Tower of Confusion.

Several thousand years later, and a few hundred years following the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, people again attempted to make a name for themselves. They began construction on another Tower of Babel. In an attempt to utilize **the Way** to unify the Roman Empire, the Emperor Constantine made Christianity his state religion.

In many respects, efforts to organize and institutionalize were about making a name for Constantine and his political

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legacy, rather than faithfulness to following **the Way** of Christ.

So, in Constantine’s time, it was once again said, “Let’s make a name—let’s build towers—mighty churches and cathedrals—to the glory of God or rather, to the emperor!”

Up until Constantine, **people of the Way** generally knew that God is Christlike—but after Constantine’s “conversion,” many began to see him as Caesar-like.

Up until Constantine, Christ-following **people of the Way** had been a persecuted minority movement. They were non-violent peacemakers who cared for each other and reached out with the love of Jesus to those outside their faith and beliefs.

For **people of the Way**, faith was not a matter of buying into acceptable doctrines and dogmas or performing correct ceremonies and rituals.

Christ-following **people of the Way** represented a different way—they did not conform to the religious status quo any more than Jesus conformed to the establishment of the Sanhedrin when he lived and ministered on this earth.

One Way, Two or Many?

The institutional church of the Empire—with all of its bureaucracy, conformity and uniformity—grew and grew for about 700 years. Then the inevitable confusion happened.

Around 1054, through a series of conflicts that featured a backstory of the worst kind of “church politics,” the eastern

Greek church and the western Latin church suffered the “Great Schism.” Now when people thought of Christianity, they thought of separate, competing entities.

Those two streams of institutional Christianity dominated for 500 more years until what is commonly known as the Protestant Reformation. Before the Reformation, there were two institutions, popularly accepted as valid Christian churches. In the immediate wake of the Reformation, a multiplicity of fragmenting movements fought for power and adherents.

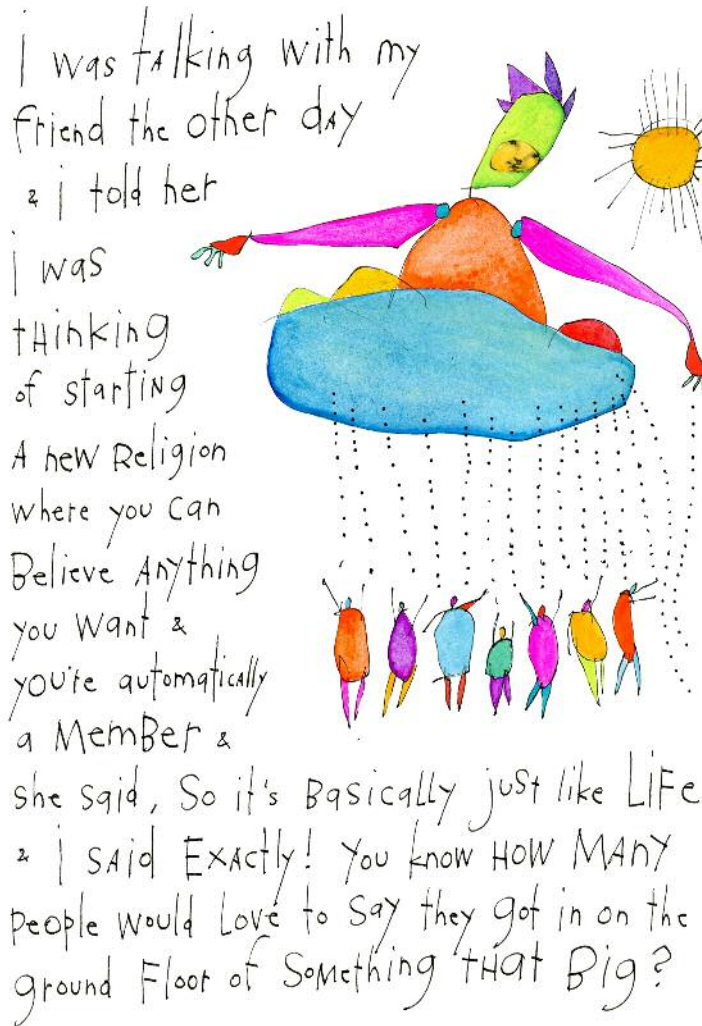
After the Reformation and after a violent revolution, democracy was introduced in North America. Democracy dramatically impacted how faith was practiced: well-established European religious hierarchies scrambled to establish footholds in the New World as democracy added dimensions of competition and market

share to the established institutions of Christendom.

In North America, the ideas and interpretations of what it meant to be a Christ-follower exploded and multiplied into a wide variety of denominations. *Within the freedom offered by democracy, capitalism and religious liberty, hundreds of new small business startups offered themselves as Christian options.*

And, given these New World freedoms, many movements (including those known as “cultic groups”) found fertile ground in which to flourish. Democracy guaranteed them freedom from the fear that powerful religious institutions could condemn them, subject them to inquisitions or eradicate them by burning them at the stake.

Thus it is that Christianity finds itself in a confusing place in these early years of the 21st century—with 30,000 to 40,000 options. It’s confusing because most of these religious entities, competing for a greater market share, claim to be spiritually superior, more faithful and “more true” than their competitors.



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I AM The Way, The Truth & The Life

Jesus does not claim to be merely one of these thousands of alternatives. John 14:6 uses the definite article for “**The Way**.” “The” defines, identifies and limits a particular person or object. “The” house is not just any house. “The” president is one specific individual. “The” way and “the” truth and “the” life is distinct, singular and unique. Jesus is making a bold and audacious claim, is he not?

Further, John 14:6 mentions “truth” and “life” as descriptors, which serve to further explain **the Way**. And who is **the Way**? Jesus says “**I AM the Way**.”

As we follow Jesus on **the Way**, we hear the many voices of spiritual propaganda—lies and distortions—calling to us from the ditches, swamps and dark forests of religious deceit. They attempt to seduce us, inviting us onto dangerous detours away from **the Way of Jesus**.

They make every effort to persuade you and me to leave **the Way** with Jesus, urging us either to sit down and stagnate or lose ourselves on some other path.

As **people of the Way**, we are on the road—we are on a journey. We are ever-growing, ever-maturing in Christ. Life in Christ is dynamic and ever-changing. He is constantly transforming us as he lives within us. Paul explains that Christ is renewing us “day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Jesus is **the Way** and the truth and the life (John 14:6). As we follow him, we grow in him and he grows in us. Metaphorically, we might say that Jesus “grows on us.” Christ-followers must remain Christ-centered and Christ-focused.

For **people of the Way**, Jesus is our core, our center, our goal, our journey, our path and our road. He is our everything, for “*in him we live and move and have our being*” (Acts 17:28). □

Greg Albrecht is President of Plain Truth Ministries.