

# Should Jews take offense at the exclusivity claim of Christ?

**Introduction.** Should Jews take offense at the exclusivity claim of Christ? This presentation is in the form of an apologetic letter, aimed at educated people who are Jewish by heritage, regardless of their level of faith. The presentation explains Christ's gospel in the context of discussing the exclusivity claim of Christ. The purpose is not so much to convince about the correctness of the gospel as it is to provide the following: an accurate presentation of the gospel; an explanation of the basis for evangelical Christian beliefs [to facilitate understanding and provide a foundation for future discussion]; an assurance that belief in Christ's exclusivity should not lead to anti-Semitism [to alleviate Jewish concerns about this issue]; and an apologetic regarding Christ's exclusivity claim [to provide context for the gospel presentation and mitigate Jewish anger over this claim].

I began working on this because I have a friend who is intellectual by nature, Jewish by heritage, atheist by faith, and angered by these issues. Much of his anger had a foundation in misunderstanding, based on horrible experiences with Christians: reading about the political religious right; absorbing the biased media portrayal of evangelical Christians; personal exposure to untransformed, worldly, people who called themselves Christians but did not exemplify Christ's nature, seek to follow Christ, or believe in most of the Bible; and personal experience of prejudice and anti-Semitism at the hands of the same sort of people, even getting called a "dirty Jew" and hit over the head with a purse by a little, old, Roman Catholic, lady, on her way home from church.

I believe my letter to my friend accomplished my purposes. I hope in the future that this letter will facilitate future discussions about the gospel, having provided my friend with a written copy of that important truth, explanations of my faith and Christ's claim to exclusivity, and assurance that true evangelical Christians do not judge or hate Jews.

**Should Jews take offense at the exclusivity claim of Christ?** Christians and Jews are always at risk of upsetting each other when discussing faith, because they believe in mutually exclusive things. However, that does not mean they need to avoid the subject. Christians should respect a person's Jewish heritage, whether that person is strong in faith or less certain. Likewise, Jewish people should respect that most Christians are sincerely seeking truth. One would hope that we can continue to talk about all sorts of things – including faith – in a way that is, not only mutually respectful in the sense that we are courteous to each other, but actually mutually respectful in the sense that we continue to respect each other even when we hold opposing views. Jews think Christians are wrong about faith issues and Christians think Jews are wrong on the same issues, but hopefully it is evident to both groups that both are intelligently seeking answers and that both can care about the other as well as the issues. One hopes we all can benefit by the exchange of ideas without getting angry at each other.

**Considering Christianity's claim of exclusivity.** Some people of Jewish heritage get angry when they hear certain New Testament passages. When one teaches, he presents facts, explains why they are important, and then explains the implications. When a Christian pastor teaches biblical concepts, the facts he presents are what the scriptures say. Even if a Jewish person

disagrees with the meaning of what the New Testament scriptures say, he can acknowledge the content of what they say; where he would differ with the Christian is on whether that should be important to him and whether that would carry any implications for him. A good Christian pastor thus is not creating his own rhetoric, but merely reading and explaining scriptures. The scriptures of both the Old Testament and New Testament are the foundation of the Christian faith and understanding, so when a good Christian pastor says something that is disagreeable to someone who is Jewish, it is not that he has chosen to conjure up this philosophy, but rather that this is what he has discerned after research and thought about the scriptures. A good Christian pastor is not going to engage in anti-Jewish rhetoric; herein, we are discussing theological issues that Jewish people have with sound Christian teaching, not those they have with the anti-Semitic teachings of speakers who do not represent Christ well.

Jewish people often find the exclusivity claim of Christianity abhorrent, but they should hesitate to be angry about this issue for several reasons. First, every person in an argument with mutually exclusive opinions believes he is correct and the others are wrong; some believe a form of Christianity is the truth of God, some believe a form of Judaism is the truth of God, some think both those groups are wrong. One's view of being right cannot be more morally repugnant than another's view of being right.

Second, our culture's call for inclusiveness is not to be mistaken for a call for religious tolerance. Tolerance in a legal sense would mean we could each practice our faith in safety; tolerance at a personal level would mean Jews could respect a Christian's belief that his faith is exclusively correct without thinking this was a judgment against modern day Jews or their ancestors. In contrast, our culture's demand for inclusiveness is secular humanism's great attack on all faiths: by calling for us to weaken each faith's right to view itself as correct, they draw us all closer to their "faith" in the philosophy and psychology of unfaithful man.

Third, all religions – not just Christianity – believe they are exclusively correct. The only qualifier is that the polytheistic religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, allow for adding more gods, so if one wanted to add the Jewish YHWH to one of these religious-cultural systems, that would be fine; but they are not open to the idea of worshiping YHWH at the expense of their other gods any more than faithful Jewish people are open to changing to accommodate Hindu gods. However distorted both Jews and Christians might think Mohammad got things, Islam was founded on the concept of the one true God which Mohammad knew about from mixing with local Jews and Christians, the Jewish YHWH, called "Allah" in Arabic. Though these groups differ on the description of God's nature and specifics of his way to righteousness and salvation, faithful Jews and the faithful practitioners of the religions that spun off of Judaism – Christianity and Islam – all believe that there is only one true God and that he provides only one true way to righteousness and salvation.

This brings us to the fourth reason that Jews should not judge Christians for believing in the exclusivity of their faith: it is founded on the Hebrew scriptures. [So we are clear on this, the "Old Testament" to evangelical Christianity is the entirety of the Hebrew scriptures, and only the Hebrew scriptures; these were the sacred scriptures to Jewish Jesus in his day, and the only modification since that time has been to add the New Testament – about Jesus – to them.] The

first two of the ten commandments in Exodus 20 make clear that God's primary concern was the exclusivity of the people's relationship with him. Throughout the books of the Torah [or Pentateuch], especially in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, God was presented as emphasizing again and again that he was the only true God, that the people were to worship and depend only on him. This theme also pervades the writing of the prophets and the wisdom literature [or Hagiographa]. Thus, throughout the Hebrew scriptures, which along with witness accounts of Christ's life were the foundation for the Christian faith, this exclusivity was not only presented as mandatory on the part of the believer, it also was presented as an integral part of God's nature and relationship with mankind.

Christ said he had come to fulfill the scriptures of the Old Testament, not replace them [Matthew 5:17]. He kept to this theme of exclusivity, and this brings up a fifth reason: Christians are not proposing that Christianity is the only way to God; Christ did [John 14:6]; Christians just believe him. Christ made this statement in John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; *no one* comes to the Father but through Me." Christ said it, not Christians. Christians believe Christ was correct, and thus they hold to the exclusivity of Christianity for pointing to righteousness and salvation. This view is not a judgment of others, only a declaration of following Christ. As we shall see, if one does not believe Christ is the *only* way then there is no reason to believe in Christ at *all*.

There is one last reason. As mentioned earlier, the Hebrew scriptures stated that God expected both devotion and dependence from his people. There was a pervasive theme of deliverance. In the beginning, this deliverance was primarily represented as physical in nature, such as the Exodus from Egypt. However, there were hints in Genesis that were further explored later in these Hebrew scriptures, that deliverance was not only physical in nature, but spiritual too, and that there would come a day – especially important to the prophets, but mentioned as far back as Moses – when physical and spiritual deliverance would be one and the same, a "Day of the Lord," when the world as we know it would end and God's anointed "Messiah" would rule the Earth as God's representative. To the Jews, this Messiah was the promised Davidic King who would also be high priest, ruling forever in peace and justice. Just as important as their own deliverance was the correlated concept of divine judgment on the non-believing Gentile nations. Psalm 2 says the Messiah will "break them with a rod of iron" and "shatter them like earthenware." Psalm 110 says of the Messiah, "He will shatter kings in the day of His wrath, He will judge among the nations, He will fill them with corpses." In a lament during the exile, the writer of Psalm 137 looked forward to this day, saying, "How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock"!

Perhaps this violent *Jewish* exclusivity should not be so shocking, since way back in Moses' day, in Deuteronomy 20, the same God told his people before they entered the promised land of Canaan, "in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive *anything* that breathes." Mind, this is the *Jewish* God and *Jewish* Messiah, as portrayed in the *Hebrew* scriptures, we are talking about. But these Psalms were the basis for the New Testament development of these concepts, and a Jewish reader should know before we go on that the word "*Christ*" is simply derived from the Greek word for "*Messiah*."

**Considering Christ: the exclusive way to God or crazy?** Many Jewish people are surprised to learn what evangelical Christians actually believe. Their surprise is reasonable, for the characterization of the evangelical Christian faith by the media is grossly inaccurate, the religious political action groups often represent Jesus poorly, and most Jews have not had extensive personal exposure to evangelical Christians. Exacerbating the image problem, most people who identify themselves as Christians actually know very little about what the Bible says and live out even less.

Thus it is worthwhile to share the core of what evangelical Christians believe. Christians would like for Jews to understand the Christian faith even though they do not share it. At the least, this understanding would strengthen our friendships, provide Jews with ammunition against the Christian political extremists they detest, and enlighten them about evangelical Christian efforts to reform the mass of people who blindly go about calling themselves Christians yet are filled with hate, selfishness, and pride, even anti-Semitism.

Evangelical Christians believe there is one true God, YHWH [often translated “the Lord,” but literally “I am”] from the Hebrew scriptures, who made everything that is [Genesis 1]. He is the God who made covenants with Abraham [Genesis 15; 17], Moses [Exodus 19-24], and King David [2 Samuel 7]. The covenant with Moses was conditional, ending with the exile and to be replaced by the “New” covenant, but the covenants with Abraham and David were unconditional and remain to be completely fulfilled. Part of these covenants was the promise of the “Messiah” [Psalm 2; Daniel 9] to deliver God’s people and judge those who were not of God. All of this is laid forth in the Hebrew scriptures. The basis for the New Testament is the Old Testament [quoted about 300 times in about 200 pages] and the eye witness accounts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, which included fulfillment of scores of prophecies about the Messiah in the Hebrew scriptures.

The gospel [“good news”] of Christ is about deliverance. Every person is tainted with sin [Psalm 14:3; 53:3; Romans 3:23], defined as a condition which is less than pure or an action which is against God’s will. Because of this sin, God judges us to be unworthy and deserving of death [Isaiah 64:6; Romans 6:23]. There is nothing a person can do to become pure again, there is no way to earn righteousness or earn salvation from death [Romans 3:27-28; Ephesians 2:8-9]. However, God’s mercy is as great as his justice, so he has made provision for doing what we could not do for ourselves [many promises in the scriptures, starting with Genesis 3:15]. Toward that end, God came here in the form of a man, Jesus, the promised Messiah [John 1:1, 14]. Jesus lived a holy life, making him a worthy sacrifice. He was man so that he could be the sacrifice on man’s behalf, and he was God so that he would be capable of making the sacrifice and bearing the penalty of our sin. The Messiah’s death was sacrificial: it paid the price for sin for all time [Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24]. God offers us forgiveness based on this sacrifice; if we accept this gift in faith, we are saved from eternal death, and God attributes to us the righteousness of the Messiah with whom we identify [Joel 2:32; Romans 10:9-10].

We need to define a few terms here, so the Jewish reader will understand what we are discussing. Evangelical Christians believe in the one God, but the Bible – Old Testament and New – indicates that God is not just the Father, but also the Son [the Messiah] and the Holy Spirit; thus

evangelical Christians are called “Trinitarian.” Evangelical Christians believe the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct from each other in personality, yet of the same essence and so in unity that each and together are wholly the one God.

There are many different beliefs which people call Christianity; many of these beliefs are so different from those of evangelical Christians – particularly as to whether the Messiah was God or just man, and whether his death was sacrificial or just an example – that, if evangelicals are Christians, it would be possible to say the others were not. Even “evangelical” is defined loosely. Technically, the only beliefs you must ascribe to as a member of the Evangelical Theological Society are that the Bible is the Word of God and that God is triune. More broadly, evangelical Christians believe also in the uniqueness of deliverance through Christ’s death on the cross. Even so, there is ample room for doctrinal differences, but the main issue to all Christians should be understanding this gospel message.

Righteousness is purity, and since we all sin, we are all impure, and thus we are none of us righteous on our own merits. That is why evangelical Christians say Jesus was the only righteous person who ever lived: he was the only one who did not sin, because he was God as well as man. Most people see a greater amount of goodness in a man like Gandhi than in a man like Ted Bundy, but neither was absolutely pure, or free from sin, so while one had more social value, both were condemned to eternal death for their sins. Only Christ was absolutely righteous. And because of our impurity, we cannot think we can earn this righteousness by our deeds: there is no way to earn our way to God’s favor; even Abraham was attributed righteousness because of his faith [Genesis 15:6]! What God demands is faith in his provision for deliverance. In Abraham’s day, that did not include an understanding of the Messiah, but it did include the promise of provision for deliverance, and Abraham believed, and God therefore credited him as righteous.

Since the time of Christ on Earth, God’s revelation has included a greater understanding of his provision, so now we have faith in what has been done, instead of what would be done. Thus, evangelical Christians believe that people are made right with God by believing what he has done for us: that Christ was who he said he was and that he did what he said he would do. Evangelical Christians put their faith in God’s forgiveness of their sins, in God’s salvation from eternal death, and in God attributing to them Christ’s righteousness. Obviously, if one believes that, then one has to believe in its *exclusivity*: one can only come to God on God’s terms, and if this is the provision God made, then it is futile to look for another way [see Proverbs 14:12]. When one believes this, the Bible says he comes spiritually alive, or is “born again.” John 1:12-13 says, “But to all who believed him [Christ] and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn! This is not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan—this rebirth comes from God.”

**Considering Christian evidence of Christ’s reality.** To be a faithful Christian, you have to ascribe to this much of the Bible’s teaching, whatever church you might attend. Hopefully, the Jewish reader can see there is nothing judgmental in these beliefs; in fact, the Bible says we are not to judge [Matthew 7:1-6], for that is the right of the Messiah alone [Psalm 110]. Especially there should be nothing against Jews in this, for Jesus himself was a Jew and he offered his message to Jews first. Christianity began as Judaism, and the early followers of Christ

considered themselves faithful Jews who were following the Jewish Messiah, not a new religion at all.

The great evidence of Christ's reality that even secular historians cite is that something dynamic happened to the hundred or so followers of Jesus after he left. They lived transformed lives, willing to risk their lives for what they believed, and it is hard to think this would have come about if they had not actually seen the resurrected Jesus. Regardless of whether the Jewish reader believes that, he probably would think that such faith that leads one to be "born again" would lead to a transformed life. Indeed, the Bible lays out this expectation of being transformed [2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 8:29; 12:2], in part because the Holy Spirit abides in the believer [John 14:17]. Many passages explain how a believer should be changed over time, in contrast to how a non-believer lives [Galatians 5:16-25; Ephesians 5:1-10]. The reality of these verses which many evangelical Christians have experienced themselves and observed in others is one reason they put such faith in the Bible.

However, the Bible says this transformation only happens if the believer walks in faith, in communion with God, so many self-proclaimed Christians look no different from non-believers, worldly and sinful. What should develop in a believer who walks in faith is selflessness, a willingness to sacrifice and serve, humility, truthfulness, faithfulness, a willingness to do what is right regardless of cost. Many evangelical Christians can attest that when one chooses to submit to God and follow Christ, these changes do occur, though one is always vulnerable to human weakness.

**Does the exclusivity claim of Christ lead to hatred of Jews?** Sometimes the perceived hatred is a misunderstanding of what evangelical Christians teach from scripture. It is understandable that Jewish people take offense when a Christian pastor quotes portions of the New Testament that say if one is not following Christ then he is following Satan. The biblical reasoning is twofold: first, [based on the belief that Jesus was who he said he was] the non-believer is following Satan in the sense that he is doing just as Satan did, acting independently of God; second, the non-believer is following Satan in the sense that without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the enlightenment of the Word of God, he is so vulnerable to his human nature, which is sinful, that he will inevitably walk in sin.

The big question is whether one will base his life on God's revelation. Atheists have rejected that revelation and chosen to be independent of God, just as the Bible says Satan did. Faithful Jews have made a different choice, to follow God's revelation, but [by Christian beliefs] they have chosen to believe only the first half of the story, not recognizing the provision God has made for them. This is not to say that Jews are evil people or Satan worshippers; just that they have not embraced the full revelation of God as the Christian knows it. Doubtless Jews view Christians in a similar way, as deceived into believing something extra that is false.

Misunderstandings aside, it is true that some Christians hate those of other religions, but this is not based on biblical revelation. Rather, this is evidence of their own sinfulness, their lack of understanding of Jesus' message, and the work of our adversary in their hearts. Jesus called on his followers to love everyone, even their enemies, to put others before themselves, and to be

humble. Believing a devout Jew [or anyone else] is deceived does not give any Christian the right to judge the other person or hate him, but rather should inspire the Christian to demonstrate God's love to him so that he will believe in the reality of Christ. With regard to history, Christians can agree with Jews, and be sorry, that so many people who have called themselves Christians have manifested Satan's work in their own lives much better than Christ's.

### **Do the grace from God and temptation from Satan excuse poor human behavior?**

Evangelical Christians believe that none of us is capable of being righteous [pure] on our own, because we have sin in our hearts and sin in our lives. The only way we can have righteousness [purity] is by accepting the righteousness of the Messiah [Jesus, who lived a pure life], which God attributes to us when we identify ourselves with the Messiah. Satan acted independently of God, choosing not to depend on or be devout toward God, and this is exactly what he is trying to entice us to do as well. The deception we fall for is that we can earn our own righteousness, that we have value because of what we do. The Bible [Old Testament and New] says we have value because God made us and because God loves us, and that we can be righteous only in dependence on his provision.

Evangelical Christians believe that this dependence on God for righteousness – on God's "grace" – does not provide license for sin. The Hebrew prophets dealt extensively with this topic, as they argued against the common assumption that God would not allow destruction of Israel and Judah merely because of their heritage, despite the people's disobedience, the covenant curses promised for it, and God's warnings through history and through leaders as far back as Moses. Christians should consider also Romans 6:15: "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!" Yes, Christians believe that they are forgiven and declared righteous by grace – as taught in both the Old and New Testaments [Romans 4:2-3: "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'" (quoting Genesis 15:6).] But this does not give permission to sin, including judging or hating others.

In fact, the commanded response to this grace is gratitude that leads to obedience [Romans 12:1-2]. Realizing that God has provided this miraculous gift of unmerited grace and offered forgiveness that people could never earn – and prompted by the Holy Spirit in his heart – the true believer in Christ feels overwhelming praise and thanksgiving toward his loving God, and thus desires to know and obey God better. This desire does not always lead to better behavior immediately, but it does open the door to the Holy Spirit's work on his character, which progressively leads to greater obedience over time.

Theologically, identifying oneself with the Messiah entails following the Messiah. A systematic reading of the Hebrew scriptures provides the theological basis for things that are more overtly stated or exemplified in Jesus in the New Testament: we are to be God's light in the world [Matthew 5:14-16], we are to live a life of serving others [Philippians 2:3-5; John 13:5-14], forgiving [Matthew 18:21-22] and accepting [Romans 15:7] others. Jesus raised the bar: it was not enough to avoid committing adultery [Exodus 20:14], we should even eradicate our lust [Matthew 5:27-28]; it was not enough to avoid murder [Exodus 20:13], we should even eradicate

our anger [Matthew 5:21-22]; it was not enough to love your neighbor [Leviticus 19:18] we should love even our enemies who persecute us [Matthew 5:43-47]. Jesus taught that, while we should be discerning about people's behavior, we have no right to judge others [Matthew 7:1-2]. There is no provision for the believer to hate anyone, even those who hate him.

While it is true that Christians believe they cannot lose their salvation even by sinning grievously, that should not induce them to sinfulness. They cannot lose their salvation because they didn't earn it in the first place: it was a free gift of God, offered to them because of Christ's death, accepted by them when they trusted in God's provision through the Messiah [as explained earlier]. As mentioned above, this does not provide license to sin, and it should result in an attitude that desires sin less. Also, there are repercussions for sins, even if one cannot lose his salvation. Sin is destructive, prompts God to induce conviction to change [which can include suffering], leads to earthly repercussions like prison, prevents the believer's spiritual growth and the Holy Spirit's work through the believer, leads to a loss of treasure in heaven and to answering to God when the believer gets there. We do pay for our sins, just not with a loss of salvation. Evangelical Christians believe there is a real Satan, and that there are demons, all of them once holy angels who rebelled [Job 1:6-7; Ezekiel 28:12b-17a; Isaiah 14:12-14; John 12:31]. However, we are responsible for our own behavior and control of our own thoughts [2 Corinthians 10:5]. There is an adversary trying to deceive and tempt us [1 Chronicles 21:1], but we are commanded to resist in faith [James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8-9]. Our acknowledgement of evil does not mean we excuse sinful behavior.

**Was Jesus' claim of exclusivity arrogant?** If Jesus was who he said he was – not only “God's son” but “God the Son,” i.e. the Messiah, God himself come to earth – then his claims were not arrogant. The religious leaders of the day, corrupt in their hearts, had Jesus put to death for his perceived blasphemy, but if he was telling the truth, then he did not blaspheme. That is why it is pointless to say that Jesus was a good man with good things to say, but he wasn't the Messiah: if he was not the Messiah, then he was a crazy, lying, blasphemer, who deserved his death. But if he was the Messiah, then we best believe all that he had to say, including that faith in his provision is the only way of salvation and reconciliation with God.