

# Myth No. 4: Jesus Didn't Found the Church

## A Theologian Answers the Atheists

by Fr. Thomas Williams, LC

Though the neo-atheist authors such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins take issue with God himself and religion in general, they devote dozens of pages to criticizing Christianity in particular. They attack the foundations of Christianity as well as its doctrines, in an attempt to undermine both its historical roots and its internal consistency.

To begin with, the atheists question the historical existence of Jesus Christ himself. Next they cast doubt on the reliability of the New Testament texts as a historical document. The issue that concerns us here, however, is the atheists' claim regarding the founding of the Christian Church. They claim that even if Jesus did exist, he certainly never intended to found a church. This latter innovation — they assert — would be the work of the generations that came after him and twisted his original intention.

Here one must inquire after the historical record. Do we have any reason to believe that the founding of a visible community of believers played a part in Jesus' mission on earth? Did Jesus intend to establish a church or didn't he? Curiously, though our atheist authors may question whether Jesus ever existed and argue that the Gospels tell us nothing about him, they are more than ready to assert categorically that he never intended to found a church.

How they could know this without the help of the Gospel record is a true miracle of atheist logic. Hitchens, for example, states that Jesus' disciples "had no idea that anyone would ever found a church on their master's announcements" and that Jesus himself evidenced "complete indifference to the founding of any temporal church" (*God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*).

This is a tough claim to process. The idea of the Church was a familiar concept to early Christians, who universally understood it to be founded by Jesus Christ. The New Testament is replete with references to the Church. Writing in the first century, St. Paul refers to the ekklesia (Church) some five dozen times in his letters, and there is no record of anyone standing up and accusing him of innovating something that Jesus never intended.

He speaks variously of the visible Church as Christ's body, as Christ's spotless bride, as the community of Christian believers, as the household of God, as the pillar and bulwark of the truth. He moreover writes of "deacons," "presbyters" and "bishops" — giving good evidence that a differentiated Christian clergy was in existence as of the first century.

The Apostle John uses the term "church" several times in his third epistle, and another 20-odd times in Revelation, whose authorship is generally attributed to him. The Apostle Peter uses the term "church" in his first letter, and it can be found in the Letter of James as well. All three of these men formed part of the original band of 12 apostles who, according to Hitchens, "had no idea that anyone would ever found a church on their master's announcements." Either they quickly gathered in a conspiracy to undermine their Lord's wishes (for which there is zero historical evidence) or Hitchens has got the story terribly wrong. But let us turn to the witness of Jesus himself.

Hitchens doesn't bother to even acknowledge the text that most clearly contradicts his claim. St. Matthew's Gospel records Jesus saying to Peter, in front of the other disciples, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Unlike other thinkers and founders, Jesus left nothing in writing; what we do find is a stated intention to establish a church.

What other evidence can be found of Jesus' project? He carefully selected out 12 "apostles" from among his many followers, and gave them special training as well as explaining many things to them in private that he didn't announce to more general gatherings. This number 12 mirrored the 12 tribes of Israel, the "people of God," and expresses an intention to establish a new Israel.

Early Christians attributed significance to this special "college" of apostles surrounding Jesus. When Judas, one of the twelve, betrays Jesus and later commits suicide, the Christian community hastens to appoint someone else to take his place (Acts 1:15-26). The appointment of successors to the apostles underscores the Christians' sense that the apostles represented an institutional structure that was meant to continue through time, rather than a mere

group of individuals. The apostles left behind them a structured community, under the guidance of acknowledged pastors, who built and sustained it. This was understood by all to be a fulfillment of the express wishes of Jesus.

In their attempts to discredit Christianity, our atheists seem blithely uninterested in the historical facts at our disposal. A dispassionate look at the historical record reveals something quite different from what the atheists propose. Jesus not only intended to found a church — he really did so.

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