



Chapter One

How Jesus Changes Everything

“Jesus is Lord” is a radical claim, one that is ultimately rooted in questions of allegiance, of ultimate authority, of the ultimate norm and standard for human life. Instead, Christianity has often sought to ally itself comfortably with allegiance to other authorities, be they political, economic, cultural, or ethnic.

—Lee Camp

In the same way the Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose. It says in the Bible that the whole universe was made for Christ and that everything is to be gathered together in Him.

—C. S. Lewis

Key to encountering the biblical Jesus is a step that many Christians seem to find painful, that is, our preparedness to read the Gospels in order to emulate Jesus. It appears that a good church upbringing will do many marvelous things for you, but one of the unfortunate things it also does is convince you that Jesus is to be worshipped but not followed. In his previous work, *Exiles*, Michael argued that the traditional Christian depiction of the porcelain-skinned Jesus has hindered our ability, indeed our desire, to actually be like him.¹ We readily acknowledge that none of us have within us the fortitude, the grace, the courage, and the imagination to actually be like Jesus. It is a lost

cause. But it's a lost cause made worth it by the forgiveness and grace shown us in Jesus' death on our behalf. By dying for us to set us free from the penalty for our sinfulness, he doesn't nullify the call to good works and godly living. Rather, he elevates from an endless and hopeless attempt to impress God to a joyful adventure of enjoying Christ's presence by imitating him. The quest to emulate Jesus isn't folly. When it's embraced by those who know they are forgiven for all the ways they will fall short, it is a daring exploit!

Making this very point, M. Scott Peck in *Further Along the Road Less Traveled* recounted the episode when Baptist theologian Harvey Cox was addressing a convention of Christian healers—pastors, therapists, nurses, doctors—that Peck was attending. During his presentation, Cox retold the story from Luke 8 of Jesus raising Jairus's daughter from the dead. In the well-known story, as Jesus and his companions are heading for the home of Jairus's dying girl, a woman who has been hemorrhaging for years breaks from the crowd and touches Jesus' robe in the hope that she too will be healed. Jesus reels around and demands to know who touched him. The cowering woman sheepishly owns up, and Jesus, feeling compassionate for her having endured years of unspeakable suffering, heals her and continues on his way to the house where the young girl has since died. Thereupon Jesus promptly brings the child back to life.

Having related the story (no doubt in greater detail than we just did), Cox asked his audience of six hundred Christian healers and therapists to indicate which of the characters in the story they most strongly identified with. The bleeding woman? The anxious father? The curious crowd? Or Jesus? What Cox found was that around a hundred felt they could relate to the desperate woman; several hundred identified with Jairus, whose daughter was dying; the majority identified with the perplexed group standing by. And six—yes, six—people felt they could identify with Jesus.

Peck's point in recounting this experience was to point out that there is something seriously wrong with Christianity when only one in every hundred Christians can identify with Jesus. Here was a story about Jesus the healer, told to healers, but none of them identified with Jesus. Have we made him so divine, so otherworldly, that we cannot connect with him anymore? Peck suggests that this leads to the excuse that we can't really be expected to follow Jesus because we perceive ourselves way down here and Jesus way up there, beyond identification. Says Peck, "That is exactly what we're supposed to do! We're supposed to identify with Jesus, act like Jesus, be like Jesus. That is what Christianity is supposed to be about: the imitation of Christ."²

By making Christ seem otherworldly, even ethereal, the church has inadvertently put him out of reach to us as an example or a guide. Even though Jesus routinely called people to follow him, the church has often represented this following in purely metaphysical or mystical terms. We can follow Jesus “in our heart” but not necessarily with our actions. Even after the phenomenally successful *What Would Jesus Do* campaign, in which Christians were encouraged to ask themselves this question before every action, it seemed that Christians were more interested in asking the question than in doing what Jesus would do. We have sanitized and tamed Jesus by encasing him in abstract theology, and in doing so we have removed our motivation for discipleship. When Jesus is just true light of true light, and not flesh and blood, we are only ever called to adore him, not follow him.

In Charles Sheldon’s popular novel *In His Steps*, one of the characters, Rev. Henry Maxwell, encounters a homeless man who challenges him to take seriously the imitation of Christ. The homeless man has difficulty understanding why, in his view, so many Christians ignore the poor:

I heard some people singing at a church prayer meeting the other night,

*All for Jesus, all for Jesus,
All my being's ransomed powers,
All my thoughts, and all my doings,
All my days, and all my hours.*

and I kept wondering as I sat on the steps outside just what they meant by it. It seems to me there’s an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn’t exist if all the people who sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don’t understand. But what would Jesus do? Is that what you mean by following his steps? It seems to me sometimes as if the people in the big churches had good clothes and nice houses to live in, and money to spend for luxuries, and could go away on summer vacations and all that, while the people outside the churches, thousands of them, I mean, die in tenements, and walk the streets for jobs, and never have a piano or a picture in the house, and grow up in misery and drunkenness and sin.³

This leads to many of the novel’s characters asking, “What would Jesus do?” when faced with decisions of some importance. This has the effect of making the characters embrace more seriously the fact that Jesus lies at Christianity’s core consciousness.

The difficulty for the church today is not in encouraging people to ask what Jesus would do, but in getting them to break out of their domesticated

and sanitized ideas about Jesus in order to answer that question. Jesus was a wild man. He was a threat to the security of the religious establishment. He was baptized by a wild man. He inaugurated his ministry by spending time

Practicing Dangerous Compassion



Sheila Cassidy

A single act of compassion altered the course of Sheila Cassidy's life. In 1975 while practicing medicine in Chile during the oppressive Pinochet regime, the young Australian provided medical care to one of the dictator's political opponents. Arrested and imprisoned by the Chilean secret police, Cassidy was tortured severely for information about anti-government forces. Her terrifying experience did not break the Roman Catholic, but instead proved to be the catalyst for a lifetime of human rights activism. Upon her release, Cassidy moved to the U.K., where she drew attention to human rights abuses in Chile by publicizing her story and writing a book, *Audacity to Believe*. She also spent a period of religious retreat in both a monastery and a convent before returning to her vocation as a doctor in 1980. Cassidy continued her human rights work to increase international opposition to the torture of political prisoners and also became active in the hospice movement, serving as the Medical Director of St. Luke's Hospice in Plymouth, England, for fifteen years. A true little Jesus, Sheila Cassidy emerged from her torture and imprisonment to a ministry deeply committed to life and peace.

with the wild beasts of the wilderness. He was unfazed by a wild storm that lashed his boat on an excursion across a lake and with the wildness of the demoniacs of the Gaderenes. And while he ultimately brought peace to both those situations, in neither instance did Jesus appear overwhelmed or frightened by the circumstances. There was an untamed power within him. Even his storytelling, so often characterized by the church today as warm morality tales, was dangerous and subversive and mysterious. If your answer to the question "What would Jesus do?" is that he would be conventional, safe, respectable and refined, then we suspect you didn't find that answer in the Gospels.

As Terry Eagleton says, "[Jesus] is presented [in the Gospels] as homeless, propertyless, peripatetic, socially marginal, disdainful of kinfolk, without a trade or occupation, a friend of outcasts and pariahs, averse to material possessions, without fear for his own safety, a thorn in the side of the Establishment and a scourge of the rich and powerful."⁴

The process of reJesusing the church will begin with a rediscovery of the fierce and outrageous life of Jesus. Too many people have become turned off to the church because the object of our faith seems bland and insipid. It reminds us of the quip made by the archbishop who is reported to have said, “Everywhere Jesus went there was a riot. Everywhere I go they make me cups of tea!”

This was the experience of punk rocker, screenwriter, and novelist Nick Cave. Writing in an introduction to Mark’s gospel, Cave talks about how as a younger man he found the Jesus presented to him in church as anemic and uninteresting. When he became interested in the Bible, he concentrated virtually all his attention on the Old Testament, drawn as he was to its violence and pervading sense of vengeance, perhaps not unsurprising for a punk. Later, an Anglican vicar in London suggested he read Mark instead, and Cave was astonished by the Jesus he discovered between its pages:

The Christ that the church offers us, the bloodless, placid “Savior”—the man smiling benignly at a group of children, or calmly, serenely hanging from the cross—denies Christ his potent, creative sorrow or his boiling anger that confronts us so forcefully in Mark. Thus the church denies Christ his humanity, offering up a figure that we can perhaps “praise,” but never relate to.⁵

Cave’s introduction to Mark is beautifully written and deeply heartfelt. He writes about “that part of me that railed and hissed and spat at the world” initially taking pleasure in the “wonderful, terrible book,” the Old Testament, before mellowing out in later life. “You no longer find comfort watching a whacked-out God tormenting a wretched humanity as you learn to forgive yourself and the world,” he says somewhat unfairly of the Old Testament. Nonetheless, after all those blood-curdling stories he was well and truly ready to meet Jesus. And meet him he did, seeing Jesus in Mark with a fresh perspective many seasoned Christians often miss:

The essential humanness of Mark’s Christ provides us with a blueprint for our own lives, so that we have something we can aspire to, rather than revere, that can lift us free of the mundanity of our existences, rather than affirming the notion that we are lowly and unworthy. Merely to praise Jesus in his Perfectness, keeps us on our knees, with our heads pitifully bent. Clearly, this is not what Christ had in mind. Christ came as liberator. Christ understood that we as humans were for ever held to the ground by the pull of gravity—our ordinariness, our mundanity—and it was through his example that he gave our imaginations the freedom to rise and to fly. In short, to be Christ-like.⁶

Cave is no theologian and doesn't pretend to be, but he's on to something. Look at what happens to those Jesus encounters in the Gospels—the hemorrhaging woman, Jairus, the woman at the well, Mary Magdalene, Peter, Thomas—they are lifted up by him, transformed, strengthened, renewed. Jesus teaches them how to live, not just how to worship. Today, we need to accept Jesus as our guide, as well as our Savior. And only a Savior as human as the one portrayed in the Gospels could ever be our guide.

Long before Cave was writing this, another novelist was exploring the essential *humanity* of Jesus. The prodigious talent of Dorothy L. Sayers found in the story of Christ more than enough material to occupy her attention. Sayers, originally an advertising executive, is probably best remembered for her detective novels, set between the wars and featuring English aristocrat and amateur sleuth, Lord Peter Wimsey. While she might have preferred to be known for her magisterial translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Christians seem to know her only for her 1941 radio play *The Man Born to Be King*, a dramatization of the life of Jesus. But the writing of that play was not the only time she turned her attention to Jesus. Her personal correspondence is littered with references to him, so much so, in fact, that it's not difficult to conclude that she was obsessed by Jesus. Her self-confessed quest was for a deep and proper understanding of his essence, his character and his mission, claiming as she did that such an understanding was "the difference between pseudo-Christianity and Christianity."⁷

For Sayers, an appreciation of the stained-glass Jesus was not enough to satisfy her. She needed to encounter the real Jesus. The "bloodless, placid Savior" that Nick Cave rebelled against repelled her every bit as much. In the introduction to the published version of *The Man Born to Be King* she discussed the importance of connecting with a flesh-and-blood Messiah:

The writer of realistic Gospel plays . . . is brought up face to face with the "scandal of particularity." *Ecco homo*—not only Man-in-general and God-in-His-thusness, but also God-in-His-thisness, and *this* Man, *this* person, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting, who walked and talked *then* and *there*, surrounded, not by human types, but by *those* individual people. The story of the life and murder and resurrection of God-in-Man is not only the symbol and epitome of the relations of God and man throughout time; it is also a series of events that took place at a particular point in time.⁸

While people like C. S. Lewis, who read *The Man Born to Be King* every Easter, appreciated Sayers's attempt to describe God in his *thisness*, not in his *thusness* (a great line), a good many churchgoers found her portrayal of

Jesus to be vulgar and unbecoming. Sayers's response to one caller, who telephoned to criticize her after the broadcast of her 1939 Advent play, *He That Should Come*, summed up her approach:

If you mixed as much as I do with people to whom the Gospel story seems to be nothing but a pretty fairytale, you would know how much of their contemptuous indifference is due to one fact: that never for one moment have they seen it as a real thing, happening to a living people. Nor, indeed, are they fully convinced that Christians believe in its reality.⁹

You didn't want to cross Sayers when she was in full flight! But her assumption holds water. Until Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Mel Gibson's gory *The Passion of the Christ*, all film versions of the life of Jesus portrayed him as unflappable and dignified. The crucified Christ was given a few spots of blood on his brow, his underarms were shaved, and his loincloth was fixed firmly in place. It seems that this was the church's favored version. Sayers's argument was that while the world saw a church that preferred a sanitized Savior, they had no choice but to conclude that the stories about him were myths and legends, not references to the historical incarnation of God in humankind. And while the central Christian story was merely a myth, it never laid any claim on the lives of believers or unbelievers alike. Like Robin Hood or the Knights of the Round Table, the Gospels might have taught a moral ethical code, but they didn't introduce us to *this* man, *this* person, who demanded to be the guide of *my* life. This Sayers called the "scandal of particularity," and it remains a scandal to this day.

But where is the scandalous Jesus in our churches today? Where is the Jesus who taunted the religious elite (Luke 20:32–36), who teased a Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21–28), who evaded arrest (John 7:32–36), who commended the faith of a pagan (Matt 8:5ff), who waited four days to resurrect Lazarus (John 9), who promised not peace but a sword (Matt 10:34ff)? To *reJesus* the church, we need to take Christians along on a journey of rediscovery, a pilgrimage toward Jesus, to see as Jesus saw. It will involve an embracing of this scandal of particularity.

↩ Taken Captive by Jesus

So what does it mean, then, to be taken captive by the agenda of the flesh-and-blood Jesus? We will argue that a rediscovery of the biblical Jesus will radically reshape our view of God, the church, and the world. And further,

we believe that by allowing Jesus to shape us in these three areas we are better equipped to reJesus the church communities of which we are part. Obviously, this will involve a preparedness on our parts to resist capturing Jesus for our ends or molding him to our theological or political agendas. And it will involve a thoroughgoing attempt to view reality as Jesus does; in effect, to see through his eyes.

Through the eyes of Jesus, we will see God differently, no longer as a distant father figure, but through the paradigm of the *missio Dei* to find the sent and sending God. Second, we will see the church differently, no longer as a religious institution but as a community of Jesus followers devoted to participating in his mission. We call this the *participatio Christi*. And third, through Jesus' eyes we will see the world afresh, not simply as fallen or depraved but as bearing the mark of the *imago Dei*—the image of God.

Those taken captive by the sight of Christ must be prepared for a reintegration of the theological concepts of *missio Dei*, *participatio Christi*, and *imago Dei*. These three concepts are foundational for a rediscovery of missional practice in our time. They are also foundational for us to reJesus the church in the West.

You Will See God Differently

When our imaginations are taken captive by Jesus, we will see God differently. Rather than seeing God as a loving but distant Father who calls us to himself and directs the affairs of history from on high, we will begin to see God as near, as integrally involved in our lives; in effect, as one who sends himself to us rather than waiting for us to come to him. The Latin phrase *missio Dei* is used to describe more the divine nature of God than simply the practical nature of Christian mission. In this respect the term is better translated as “the God of mission” rather than “the mission of God.” First coined by Karl Hartenstein in the 1950s, the term gained real currency because it located the idea of mission with the doctrine of God, not with the doctrine of the church. We often speak of mission being a function of the church's work in this world, but Hartenstein was anxious that the church understand that mission belongs to and describes God's work. We, the church, become partners in what God is doing, but it is never our initiative alone. Those who are taken captive by Jesus see mission not merely as a practice preferred by God but as an aspect of his very character. He is mission. Core to understanding God's nature is the realization that God cannot *not* be about the business of mis-

sion. He inhabits mission as part of the very stuff of his personality. In effect, he is both the sent and sending God.

In John 5, Jesus heals a lame man on the Sabbath and incurs the wrath of the Jewish leaders for, as they saw it, flouting the law of Moses. In his own defense, Jesus appeals to an even higher law than that of Moses. In effect, he appeals to the doctrine of *missio Dei*, even though he never uses such a term, when he says, “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (John 5:17). In other words, you Pharisees might refuse to work on the Sabbath, but God is unceasing in his redemptive activity, no matter the day or the date. Naturally, the Pharisees are outraged, not only because he is apparently disregarding the Sabbath but because he is equating himself with Yahweh’s missional work. But Jesus presses on, making an even more provocative claim: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (John 5:19).

Nothing could be more scandalous! Effectively, Jesus is claiming to be captive to the *missio Dei*, attending only to his Father’s missional activity, irrespective of narrow interpretations of Hebrew law. This stunning claim, that he is not operating under his own steam or on the basis of his own strategy but entirely at the impulse of the sent and sending Father, is a challenge to us. If we claim to be Jesus followers, we ought to be committed to being similarly (if imperfectly) in league with the *missio Dei*.

Later, in John 8, after a lengthy discussion about his oneness with the Father and the meaning of his death, Jesus concludes, “The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him” (John 8:29). Earlier he had referred to his being sent by the Father (John 8:16), but that could have been interpreted as him saying that he has the Father’s backing in his dealings with people. By verse 29 he reiterates that he is not alone, but here he makes it clear that he is talking about the Father’s personal presence with him at all times, including at that moment. Even though his followers might desert him, as many had done (John 6), he is claiming that he will never be deserted by his Father. Here we get a glimpse into the mystery of the relations between the Father and the Son, for the Father sends the Son and yet is present with the Son. The sending refers to the incarnation and the presence to the eternal relations. In other words, the Father is both sending and sent.¹⁰

But note how Jesus points out that the Father’s presence relies on the Son’s commitment to always do what is pleasing to the Father. In this way,

Jesus reveals the primacy of the *missio Dei*—the missionary Father. All that exists, even the Son and the Spirit in their eternal, uncreated being, are dependent upon the Father as the source of all life. All life is an expression of the

Imitatio Christi



Janani Luwum

Janani Luwum embraced his vocation as a little Jesus, imitating his Lord even to the point of death. The Anglican Church appointed him to be the archbishop of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Boga-Zaire in 1974, during the murderous regime of Idi Amin in Uganda. Seizing power in a 1971 coup, Amin and his squads were responsible for over 300,000 deaths. Amin destroyed the economy, while bestowing riches on himself and his friends. In 1976 Luwum convened a meeting with Catholic and Muslim leaders at which they passed a resolution deploring Amin's atrocities. In so doing, Luwum knew he had marked himself for death. He had consciously begun his *imitatio Christi*. Four days before his arrest, Luwum met with his bishops for the last time and shared with them the gospel passage in which Jesus calms the storm, comparing it with the political storm they were enduring and calling on them to rely on Jesus' calming presence. "They are going to kill me. I am not afraid," he confided. After an atrocious beating, including rape, the archbishop was shot dead. It was rumored that it was Amin himself who fired the fatal shots. His death was reported as a car accident. Luwum's humiliation and suffering embody the passion of Jesus. Like Martin Luther King Jr., Luwum is memorialized as a twentieth-century martyr at Westminster Abbey.

Father's life. To do what pleases God is not simply a matter of morality but of sharing in God's life and mission. It is another way of saying that Christ does what he sees the Father doing and speaks what he hears from the Father. He is devoted to the mission of God. As such he is the model of all discipleship. The life Jesus is offering involves being taken up into the mission of the Father.

No one has helped us understand this concept more than the missiologist David Bosch. This is the same David Bosch who celebrated the election of the architects of apartheid to the South African parliament in the late 1940s and went on to become one of the most celebrated missiologists in the world. During that time, he underwent a series of experiences that transformed him from a bigoted Afrikaner to a deeply compassionate missionary who worked in a poor black community in the Transkei region of South Africa.

Exhausted from the back-breaking labors of working with the poor, he eventually accepted a position in 1975 as the professor of missiology at UNISA (University of South Africa) Pretoria, where he served until his untimely death in a car accident in 1992. What he discovered about the mission of Jesus can be summed up in the following statement:

Mission [is] understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It [is] thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.¹¹

This triune element to the *missio Dei* is not unique to the thinking of Bosch. In the 1930s, thinkers like Karl Barth and Karl Hartenstein were advocating a trinitarian base for a missional doctrine of God. When we see God as Jesus understood him, we see a God so devoted to his broken planet that he issues himself forth to redeem it. In the incarnation of Jesus, we hear the *missio Dei* presented to us in his teaching and embodied in his flesh. But further than that, the ministry of the Spirit continues to testify to God’s character and his core missional orientation. Jacques Matthey writes in summary of those committed to the idea of *missio Dei*, “We have not separated the Father from the Son and the Spirit. This has consequences: we cannot limit the scope of Christ or the Spirit to inner-church circles.”¹² In effect, you can’t keep the Trinity locked up in church. God escapes the stained-glass crypt and sends himself out throughout the world: Father, Son, and Spirit.

But this doesn’t mean that the church is not involved. Far from it. As Bosch said earlier, the cycle continues with the triune God sending the church into the world. It is essential that we recapture the importance and role of the church within the overall frame of *missio Dei*, without reverting to an old ecclesiocentric approach. We will return to this discussion soon.

Nonetheless, part of the process to reJesus the church will involve a dismantling of its much-loved temple theology. While Jesus embodies the fact that the Trinity is both sent and sending, his followers very often seem to prefer a deity who reveals himself in sacred buildings, liturgies, and sacramental practices. So-called temple theology locates God as a withdrawn deity calling recalcitrants back to his temple/church/cathedral to be reunited with him. But an encounter with the Jesus of the Gospels flies in the face of this idea. While we do find Jesus revering the Jerusalem temple as “my

Father's house" (Luke 2:49), we don't think he is saying that his Father lives in that building. Rather, he is acknowledging that within the Jewish system of his time, the temple was seen as a physical embodiment of God's presence in Israel. What he then does is to equate his own person as such an embodiment by saying, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days" (Matt 26:61). We know he was speaking of his own body and its impending death and resurrection. But this is not only a comment on his certainty of being resurrected. It is a comment on where the physical presence of God is located. Rather than being seen in the temple, Jesus sees it in himself. He is the temple. He is the physical embodiment of God.

The instance of Jesus' physical death is depicted as a moment of great wildness. In contrast to being a solemn moment in which Jesus tenderly resigns himself to death, Matthew describes it as a time of great horror! An earthquake is unleashed beneath the city. The curtain of the temple is vandalized by God, torn in two from top to bottom. Graves burst open and the dead rise to wander through the city as a foretaste of the final resurrection yet to come. It's like a scene from *The Night of the Living Dead*! Everything about Jesus is wild, even his death. And the symbolism is unmistakable. Something has shifted in the spiritual realm. A cosmic tsunami has been unleashed. Through Jesus' death God has entered into our world for good. God will now no longer dwell in temples, but in the hearts of those who serve God.

This is picked up again by Paul, when he refers to the church as the body of Christ. The triune God doesn't reside in a temple or any other building. Rather, the physical embodiment of the Trinity is in the people of God, the followers of Christ. The *missio Dei* describes the impulse that saw the Father send his Son into the world to enflesh him. It is also the impulse that sees the Father, the Son, and Spirit send us into the world as his ambassadors, his representatives, enfleshing him here on earth. This leads us to our second aspect of being shaped by Jesus.

You Will See the Church Differently

Through Jesus' eyes, the church is the sent people of God. A church is not a building or an organization. It is an organic collective of believers, centered on Jesus and sent out into the world to serve others in his name. When we are taken captive by the Nazarene carpenter, we can no longer see ourselves as participants in a similar system to the one he came to subvert. Not only does Jesus undermine temple theology by becoming the temple himself,

but also he undermines the sacrificial system by dispensing with sin without reference to ceremonial washings, rituals, or liturgies (“Go in peace, your sins are forgiven”). As noted earlier, he also plays fast and loose with the legalism of Sabbath keeping. In fact, he subverts the whole religious system. So why would he do that simply to replace it with a Christian religious system? He doesn’t! He is antireligious, offering his followers direct access to the Father, forgiveness in his name, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, to be reJesused is to come to the recognition that the church as the New Testament defines it is not a religious institution but rather a dynamic community of believers who participate in the way of Jesus and his work in this world.

As we said earlier, God’s mission in this world is his and his alone. The glory of God, not the church, is the ultimate goal of mission. Our role as the church, however, is a humble participation in his grand scheme—the kingdom of God. We neither determine our own agenda nor merely imitate his but rather participate in the marvelous plan of God according to his call and guidance. Again, Bosch addresses this superbly:

Mission takes place where the church, in its total involvement with the world, bears its testimony in the form of a servant, with reference to unbelief, exploitation, discrimination and violence, but also with reference to salvation, healing, liberation, reconciliation and righteousness Looked at from this perspective mission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus, wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.¹³

The participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus is referred to by the Latin term *participati Christi*. As Bosch suggests, this can never be boiled down simply to evangelistic preaching or social justice. As soon as someone can tell you the one thing you need to be doing in order to participate in the mission of Jesus, you can be sure they’re not telling you the whole story. Mission involves everything Jesus is about in the world. And this cannot be limited to merely religious concerns. The liberating mission of Jesus is unfolding all around us. As Robert McAfee Brown once said about the meaning of life, it is “our task to create foretastes of [the Kingdom of God] on this planet—living glimpses of what life is meant to be, which include art and music and poetry and shared laughter and picnics and politics and moral outrage and special privileges for children only and wonder and humor and endless love.”¹⁴

In both Luke and Mark's gospels we find the report of an incident where the disciple John notifies Jesus of a stranger who is performing exorcisms in his name: "We saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us" (Luke 9:49). At that time there were many charlatans and magicians willing to perform various acts of sorcery for a fee. For example, when Philip, Peter, and John visit Samaria (Acts 8), they encounter one of Scripture's most beguiling characters, Simon the sorcerer, who had held all of Samaria in his sway with his magical powers. Even after his conversion and baptism, he still offers the disciples cash in return for the even greater magic they can perform. Back in Luke 9, John has discovered an unknown exorcist, using the name of Jesus to perform the miraculous, and he has asked him to cease and desist. But Jesus' response is staggering: "Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you" (Luke 9:50). Jesus is suggesting that rather than running around drawing lines of demarcation between those who are in the community of Christ and those who are not, we are simply to bless all those who participate with us in the work of Jesus. This is how robust Jesus' view of the kingdom was. It couldn't be contained within borders. It was a living thing, a wild thing, and it was bursting out everywhere. It is one of our greatest mistakes to equate the church with the kingdom of God. The kingdom is much broader than the church—it is cosmic in scope. The church is perhaps the primary agent of the kingdom but must not be equated fully with it. We need to be able to see the kingdom activity wherever it expresses itself and join with God in it. Jesus shows us how to see God working in the strangest of places.

In Matthew 13:24–30, Jesus offers us an illustration or metaphor to make better sense of this:

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did the weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?'

But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

It will be impossible to separate the wheat from the weeds, so allow them to grow up together and leave it to God to sort out in the end. In other words, John, if some guy you don't know is driving out demons in my name, don't stop him. My kingdom is no respecter of our arbitrary lines of distinction.

How much does the church today need to be reJesused in order to appreciate this! Conservative Christians won't even acknowledge that the rock star, Bono, is on the side of the angels in his fight against global poverty. Certain denominations have demonized others. Some churches won't work with certain other churches as a matter of principle. And yet whoever is not against you is for you, says Jesus. He is teaching John to appreciate all others who serve in Christ's name. In effect, he demands that we abandon our painstaking attempts to weed the field, pulling out each wild plant by hand. Instead, he says, tend to the wheat. Participate in the growth of the kingdom—the wheat—and leave the business of weeding the field to God and his angels.

This isn't to say that such participation is a solo venture for individual Christians. Rather, it ought to be seen as a communal commitment. In this respect, the doctrine of *corpus Christi* (the body of Christ) should be acknowledged. God calls together bodies of believers to participate in his mission. Or, as John Eldridge puts it,

God is calling together little communities of the heart, to fight for one another and for the hearts of those who have not yet been set free. The camaraderie, that intimacy, that incredible impact by a few stout-hearted souls—that is available. It is the Christian life as Jesus gave it to us. It is completely normal.¹⁵

Interestingly, the term Jesus, and more often Paul, employed to describe a gathering of Christians (since there was literally no such collective noun at the time) was the Greek term *ecclesia*. Today we translate it into the old Anglo-Saxon term “church.” But that term today has come to refer more to places of Christian worship or to the institutional aspect of the Christian community. It has strayed a long way from Paul's original usage. Remember, Paul didn't invent the term *ecclesia*. It was already part of the vernacular of his time. He takes this pre-existing term and invests it with a new, distinctly Christian meaning. But it would be helpful to recall in what ways the term *ecclesia* was employed by Paul's non-Christian contemporaries in order to get closer to the original raw material Paul uses in developing his unique ecclesiology.

Most dictionaries will tell you that *ecclesia* literally means “the gathering of the called-out ones.” It comes from two words, *ek*, meaning “out,” and *kaleo*,

meaning “to call.” But in its original usage an *ecclesia* was not just an assembly or a gathering, as many suppose. If that’s all Paul wanted to convey, he could have used *agora* and *panegyris* as well as *heorte*, *koinon*, *thiasos*, *synagoge*, and *synago*, all of which refer to an assembly. The word *ecclesia* had a political aspect to it. In fact, it wasn’t a religious term, and neither was its use limited to a religious gathering. In Paul’s time, an *ecclesia* was a gathering of the elders of a community. In smaller villages and towns across Judea, local elders would gather regularly to discuss and deliberate over a variety of social and political dilemmas facing the community. Neighborhood disputes, arguments over estates of deceased persons, communal responses to natural disasters—these were the kinds of things the council of elders would consider. Today, this might be similar to a meeting in the local town hall of a group of community leaders. In other words, an *ecclesia* was a gathering of wise community leaders, brought together by their common vision for the harmony and well-being of the wider community.

It was more than a body of unseen lawmakers who exercised authority and ran the offices of government through a vast bureaucratic system. It was a community within a community whose function was to add value to that community. It brought wisdom to the village. It helped the village be a better village. And of course, being the elders of that village meant that the leaders were required to live with the ramifications of their decisions. They were in the village, and their destiny was as connected to the prosperity and peace of that community as anyone. How interesting that Paul takes this term and Christianizes it for his fledgling communities. Of course, he adds to it the idea of the *ecclesia* being a body, striving for unity and diversity (1 Cor 12:12–31). He calls us a family, a household, with all the attendant expectations of an ancient Hebrew family—devotion, loyalty, affection (Gal 6:9–11). He refers to the *ecclesia* as a bride, emphasizing our duty to holiness and fidelity (Eph 5:22–32), and as an army, presupposing discipline and focus (Eph 6:10–13). There’s more to Paul’s idea of the church than just a gathering. But isn’t it interesting that the base, raw material he uses to develop his vision for us is that of a group of elders adding value to the village, bringing wisdom, and connecting our destiny with that of the community? We think that to be the sent people of God implies that we will have our neighborhood’s best interests at heart. We think Christians should see themselves as sent by Jesus into the villages of which they’re part, to add value, to bring wisdom, to foster a better village. In short, to participate with the work of Christ all around us.

When Michael was planting the faith community of which he is currently part, smallboatbigsea, he was given a prophetic word from a woman

at a meeting he was attending. She told him that a day would come when, if smallboatbigsea was taken away from its neighborhood, the whole community would grieve for its loss. For him, it's a cherished word. Those ancient villages in Judea would have grieved had all their wise, godly elders been suddenly taken away. They wouldn't have known how to be good, true, noble, and peaceful without their input. Is it not possible that Paul imagined a similar appreciation toward his churches? Did he choose *ecclesia*, of all the terms he might have used, because it contained this element of community service and value adding? If so then, to be sent to participate in the unfurling of the kingdom in our communities will necessarily mean the bringing of wisdom, peace, and grace to our villages.

You Will See the World Differently

We recognize that each person is created in the image of God and thus possesses the inherent dignity and value that accompanies it. We recognize also that God has been, and continues to be, at work within them, leading them on a unique and sacred journey. In our previous book together, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, we wrote about the importance of prevenient grace, the confidence that God goes before us, prevening (preparing) our participation in his work. More than that, though, God has already touched every person, leaving his unique fingerprints on that person's soul. The Latin term for this is *imago Dei*, the image of God.

To say that we are all made in the image of God is to acknowledge that there are certain, special qualities of human nature that allow God to be made manifest in us. It is a statement about God's love for humans but also a statement about the uniqueness and beauty of humans. A belief in the *imago Dei* is not a denial of the inherent sinfulness of all people. To deny such is not only heretical, it's just plain ignorant. The human race continues to give myriad examples of our depravity and potential for evil. Rather, it recognizes that God's image is so indelibly stamped on our nature that not even the fall can completely erase it. We, of all creation, are the creatures through whom God's plans and purposes can be made known. In other words, when Christians acknowledge the image of God in us, we can see ourselves as participants or partners with God.

But further, we can see even the unbeliever as bearing the mark of God, and such a mark in even the so-called lowest person must be respected and acknowledged. In other words, if humans are to love God, then humans must

love other humans, as each is an expression of God. Jesus pointed this out with his parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31–46). The regular refrain from the king in the story, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did/did not do for one of the least of these, you did/did not do for me” powerfully illustrates the doctrine of *imago Dei*. Why feed the hungry or clothe the naked or visit the imprisoned or tend to the sick? Because even these, the least of these in fact, bear the image of the king.

The Bible does not claim that animals, though created by God, bear his image in the same way humans do. Humans are self-conscious, with the capacity for spiritual and moral reflection and growth. We differ from all other creatures because of our rational structure—our capacity for deliberation and free decision making. This freedom gives the human a centeredness and completeness that allows the possibility for self-actualization and participation in a sacred reality. However, as previously noted, the freedom that marks the *imago Dei* in human nature is the same freedom that manifests itself in estrangement from God, as the story of the fall exemplifies. According to this story, humans can, in their freedom, choose to deny or repress their spiritual and moral likeness to God. The ability and desire to love one’s self and others, and therefore God, can be neglected, even resisted.

The vision Jesus brings is one where the believer learns to identify and tease out that image in others. When Jesus acknowledges the serene faith of a pagan centurion (Matt 8:10), the persistent faith of a Canaanite woman (Matt 15:28), and the desperate faith of the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43), he is finding the *imago Dei* in the least likely people—foreigners and criminals. Romans, Canaanites, thieves, adulteresses (John 8), and Samaritans (John 4) were seen by the Jewish establishment as being on a par with dogs. As we mentioned, animals are not seen in Scripture as bearing the image of God, so to disregard the *imago Dei* in certain peoples is to treat them like animals. You never see Jesus doing that. Lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, children, demoniacs—they were treated with great grace and respect by him. Even the hemorrhaging woman whose issue of blood made her perennially unclean is paraded by Jesus before the ogling crowd, her faith acknowledged by the Savior of the world for all to see. This was the scandalous Jesus at his most untamed.

If we reJesus the church, we will lead it toward a greater respect for the unbeliever, a greater grace for those who, though they don’t attend church services, are nonetheless marked by God’s image. It will lead to a greater respect for people in general. This is illustrated in Willa Cather’s marvelous

novel about Christian mission, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Set in the wild Arizona territories at the turn of the twentieth century, the book portrays the life stories of two Catholic missionaries, bringing the gospel to a melting pot of frontier families, Mexican settlers, and Native Americans. At one point, one of the priests, Father Vaillant, describes an experience that encapsulates his missionary call. It is one of the best descriptions of the missionary vocation:

Down near Tucson, a Pima Indian convert once asked me to go off into the desert with him, as he had something to show me. He took me into a place so wild that a man less accustomed to these things might have mistrusted and feared for his life. We descended into a terrifying canyon of black rock, and there in the depths of a cave, he showed me a golden chalice, vestments and cruets, all the paraphernalia for celebrating Mass. His ancestors had hidden these sacred objects there when the mission was sacked by Apaches, he did not know how many generations ago. The secret had been handed down in his family, and I was the first priest who had ever come to restore to God his own. To me, that is the situation in a parable. The Faith, in that wild frontier, is like a buried treasure; they guard it, but they do not know how to use it to their soul's salvation. A word, a prayer, a service, is all that is needed to free these souls in bondage. I confess I am covetous of that mission. I desire to be the man who restores these lost children to God. It will be the greatest happiness of my life.¹⁶

Father Vaillant's testimony is anchored in a belief in the *imago Dei*. The buried church supplies are symbolic of the image of God buried deep in the souls of all people. The missionary task is not to bring God to them but to uncover the *imago Dei* and assist people to use this knowledge for the salvation of their souls. Vaillant assumes that the gospel is buried deep in the soil of all people and it is his job, through "a word, a prayer, a service" to unearth this treasure and "restore to God his own."

↩ **Marked by Jesus**

Put simply, to undertake the reJesus project one must first be committed to being marked by Jesus, to submit oneself to being shaped and changed to reflect more and more the lifestyle and teaching of Jesus. This idea is wonderfully portrayed by the much-loved novelist and short-story writer Flannery O'Connor. This devout Christian saw her function as a writer in part to shake the spiritual cataracts from her secular readers' eyes and open their vision to an incarnational faith and an awareness of the operation of grace in

the everyday world. Within virtually every story she wrote was embedded the presence of grace, waiting to be accepted or rejected by her characters and her readers. She died before the age of forty, having spent the last decade of her short life suffering from the effects of lupus, the debilitating disease that was to claim her. One of the last stories she wrote was completed in a hospital bed in defiance of her doctor's orders not to push her failing body any further. "Parker's Back" is considered to be the crowning achievement of her Christian vision as a writer because it marvelously illustrates the fact that the complete, most fulfilled human being is the one who incarnates Jesus in his or her life. It seems somehow fitting that O'Connor died writing it.

Obadiah Elihue Parker (that name is foreboding in itself) is a tragicomic country hick, a good-for-nothing who drifts from job to job and place to place. His only overriding interest seems to be the collection of tattoos that adorn nearly every inch of his skin, with the exception of his back. Inspired by a tattooed man he saw at a county fair when he was fourteen, OE has spent more than a decade covering the front of his body with a variety of images, trying to emulate what he remembered as the symphony of colorful images on that tattooed man. And yet with each new tattoo, his dissatisfaction grows. Whereas his hero's pictures looked harmonized and integrated, OE saw his own designs as haphazard and messy. In OE Parker, O'Connor has created the typical human, striving for redemption and yearning to be something beautiful. And yet each new attempt to correct the overall effect of his tattoos leads to even greater disappointment.

When we meet Parker, he has married the daughter of a fundamentalist preacher, a dour young woman named Sarah Ruth who would only marry him in the county clerk's office because she believed church buildings to be idolatrous. Sarah Ruth, outwardly religious and deeply pious, becomes the ironic foil for her heathen husband's search for redemption. She represents that kind of Christian that Dorothy L. Sayers identified as preferring to take Jesus in fairytale form, not straight from the Gospels. She has rules for everything, having learned all her life how to judge and find wanting every experience and every person.

Sarah Ruth, as one might imagine, despises Parker's tattoos. But more than that, she seems displeased with everything he does. In voicing her dissatisfaction as clearly and as often as she does, she reinforces Parker's disappointment with himself. He desires more than anything to do just one thing that would please her. In a sense, his quest for redemption becomes located in his focus on pleasing the unpleasable Sarah Ruth. For a man who has only

ever performed menial jobs, who has no money and very few prospects, it's not surprising that in his simplistic way, he decides that the only thing he could do to please her is to get the right tattoo in the middle of his back.

He visualized having a tattoo put there that Sarah Ruth would not be able to resist—a religious subject. He thought of an open book with HOLY BIBLE tattooed under it and an actual verse printed on the page. This seemed just the thing for a while; then he began to hear her say, “Ain’t I got a real Bible? What you think I want to read the same verse over and over for when I can read all of it?” He needed something better.¹⁷

Brow-beaten and anxious about choosing wrongly, he ends up in a tattooist's parlor leafing through a catalogue of religious images before being stopped by the piercing gaze of a Byzantine icon of the face of Christ. O'Connor describes how Parker felt he “were being brought back to life by a subtle power” as the image of Jesus takes hold of him. He decides there and then that the most pleasing thing he could do was to have his whole back tattooed with this face of Christ. The symbolism of “Parker's Back” isn't restrained. O'Connor is obviously depicting a man being marked by Jesus, inscribed with the express image of God. Albeit in a secular way, she is nonetheless describing Parker's baptism, his initiation into the family of Jesus. As surely as any catechumen is being marked by Jesus at baptism, OE Parker is equally denoted as belonging to him. Where none of the other of his slapdash collection of tattoos can satisfy him, his whole back now bears the unified, single image of God.

But as you might expect, not even this painful act of sacrifice can win Sarah Ruth's approval. When he returns home and reveals the Byzantine Christ across his back, she is initially confused. “It ain't nobody I know,” she says tellingly. The irony is bitter. The devout Christian woman cannot recognize the face of Jesus, while the recalcitrant heathen is stained by it forever.

“It's him,” Parker said.

“Him who?”

“God!” Parker cried.

“God? God don't look like that!”

“What do you know how he looks?” Parker moaned. “You ain't seen him.”

“He don't *look*,” Sarah Ruth said. “He's spirit. No man shall see his face . . .

“Idolatry,” Sarah Ruth screamed. “Idolatry . . . I don't want no idolater in this house!” And she grabbed up the broom and began to thrash him across the

shoulders with it . . . and large welts . . . formed on the face of the tattooed Christ. Then he staggered and made for the door . . .¹⁸

Sarah Ruth can neither understand nor appreciate the incarnation. For her, God is a spirit, and no one can see his face. The idea that God has taken on human flesh and walked among us is beyond her comprehension and her spirituality. She prefers her Deity far beyond and distant. It is even less likely that she could comprehend the idea that her husband has chosen to incarnate God in his own body. The welts she leaves across the tattooed Jesus' face mirror the beatings that the real Jesus bore in his passion. The story ends most poignantly. Still gripping the broom and filled with rage, Sarah Ruth looks out toward a pecan tree in her yard: "her eyes hardened still more. There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby."¹⁹

In this, the closing line of the story, O'Connor reminds us of Parker's full name. Obadiah, "servant of the Lord," Elihue, "God is he." Hanging on a tree, beaten by one who doesn't recognize his identity, bearing the hatred and condemnation of the woman who watches him, Parker is an embodiment of the incarnation. He is the suffering servant, the crucified one, and perhaps O'Connor is hinting that he has finally stepped into his name, living up to his calling at birth to be marked by God.

We confess that this calling is ours as well. Like Father Vaillant in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and OE Parker, we too feel marked by Jesus and, as a result we see God, the church, and our world differently. We see God as the *missio Dei*, the church as the *participati Christi*, and the world as the *imago Dei*. And we echo Father Vaillant when he says, "I confess I am covetous of that mission. I desire to be the man who restores these lost children to God. It will be the greatest happiness of my life."

← Notes

1. Frost, *Exiles*, 28–49.
2. M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 210.
3. Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps* (1896; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), 9. Originally published in 1896, this book was translated into twenty-one languages by 1935. It was the basis of the global campaign to take Jesus as guide and model that became known as the WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) movement.

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5. Nick Cave, *The Gospel According to Mark with an Introduction by Nick Cave* (Melbourne: Text, 1998), xi.
6. Ibid.
7. Quoted in Laura Simmons, *Creed Without Chaos: Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy Sayers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), 78.
8. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1955), 21.
9. Simmons, *Creed Without Chaos*, 79.
10. See Augustine In *John* 35.5; 36.8; 40.6; Chrysostom In *John* 53.2.
11. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 390.
12. Jacques Matthey, "Congress 'Mission Dei' God's Mission Today: Summary and Conclusions (Reflector's Report)," (50th Anniversary of the World Mission Conference, August 16–21, 2002), 3.1. Cited 25 September 2008. Online: <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/mission/willingen.html>.
13. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 519.
14. Robert McAfee Brown, quoted in "The Meaning of Life," *Life*, December 1988. Cited 25 September 2008. Online: <http://www.maryellenmark.com/text/magazines/life/905W-000-037.html>.
15. John Eldridge, *Wild at Heart* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 34.
16. Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927; repr., New York: Vintage, 1990), 206–7.
17. Flannery O'Connor, "Parker's Back," *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Noonday, 1992), 519.
18. Ibid., 529.
19. Ibid., 530.



Chapter Two

ReJesus and Personal ReNewal

*My mission is to introduce Christianity into
Christendom.*

—Søren Kierkegaard

*We have to admit that there is an immeasurable
distance between all that we read in the Bible and the
practice of the church and of Christians. This is why
I can speak validly of perversion or subversion, for,
as I shall show, practice has been the total opposite of
what is required of us.*

—Jacques Ellul

We believe it is not possible to be following the biblical Jesus and not end up being molded by the *missio Dei*, *participati Christi*, and *imago Dei*. When taken captive by Jesus, we cannot help but see God, the church, and the world very differently. They are fundamental elements of a Jesus-shaped people. So, taking them as our starting point, let us now look more deeply into the nature and dynamic of the lifestyle and faith that Jesus taught and exemplified. We do this not so much to outline the contours of his teaching—so many books have done a better job of that than we can possibly accomplish—but rather to try and find its spiritual centers, to touch the wild and primal energy that radiates out of Jesus. In doing so, we believe we can begin to understand why it is that his people historically have obscured the dynamic of his message in various ways. And so from the broad framework we have explored so far, let us turn our attention to an exploration of connection between Jesus, the disciple, and the community of disciples, that is, the church. We use the term “disciple” deliberately because it emphasizes the kind of relationship that is decisive for the maintenance of a living connection with Jesus. For what is a

church if not a community of disciples, of people devoted to following Jesus? If the New Testament is our guide in these matters, then discipleship should be the defining quality of the Christian life. And if this is the case, then we can never move from the more primal commitment that is involved in becoming his follower in the first place.

And yet, the ethos of discipleship and the presence of the wild Messiah are not readily associated with church and Christianity of our day. Far from it, our expressions of church range generally from what we might call high church, where Jesus tends to be relegated to some place in the outer echelons of the cosmos, to the more prevalent contemporary seeker-sensitive model where the radical message of Jesus is easily trivialized into some form of spiritual accessory in a consumerist paradise. From the fundamentalist co-option of Jesus as a religious fanatic to the liberal reduction of him into a schmaltzy moralist, it is probably fair to say that we have largely lost touch with our loving, wildly passionate, dangerous, radically merciful, and always surprising Redeemer-Lord. This is the Jesus so powerfully portrayed in the Gospels. The loss of the presence and power of *this* radical Jesus must surely account for a significant part of the spiritual bankruptcy of the church in the West. And therefore the importance of reJesus for spirituality and mission cannot be underestimated.

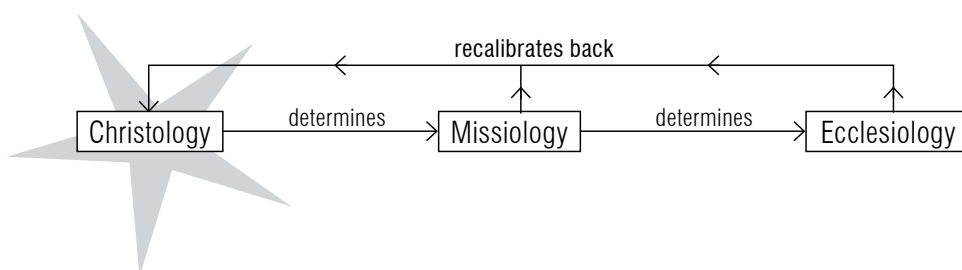
Rebooting to Jesus

If it is not already clear, let us state it emphatically: We believe that Christology is the key to the renewal of the church in every age and in every possible situation it might find itself. The church must always return to Jesus in order to renew itself. When, for whatever reason, the church gets stuck or loses its way in the world, it needs to recover its primal identity in its founder. It is not good enough to return to the founder of whatever denomination or organization we find ourselves in, although revitalization of that kind is not without merit. For Salvationists to rediscover the fire and fight within William Booth or for Methodists to have a re-encounter with John Wesley's passion and theology is valuable. But, when there is something fundamentally wrong in the basic equation of the faith, then it is time to recover a vital and active sense of Jesus: who he is, what he has done for us, the way of life he laid down for us to follow. His passions and concerns must become ours. In other words, as stated earlier, Christology must determine missiology (our purpose

and function in this world), which in turn must determine ecclesiology (the cultural forms and expressions of the church).

Putting aside the issue of how missiology must inform ecclesiology (as that is dealt with in our previous books, specifically *The Shaping of Things to Come* and *The Forgotten Ways*), we believe that Christology is the singularly most important factor in shaping our mission in the world and the forms of *ecclesia* and ministry that result from that engagement. There must be a constant return to Jesus in order to ascertain that we are in the Way. It is no good just revamping our missiology or inventing new cultural forms of *ecclesia* unless we have first and foremost related them to Christology. This has become the misguided task of many so-called church renewal projects currently underway. Some such projects maintain that we need to get our theology and preaching right and renewal will flow from there. Others insist on Spirit-filled worship or alternative worship or church planting or a postmodernized approach to the faith. We are skeptical. Whenever these strategies are not anchored directly in a biblical Christology, they are doomed to limited effectiveness.

So, allow us to portray it this way:



Before there is any consideration given to the particular aspects of ecclesiology, such as leadership, evangelism, or worship, there ought to be a thoroughgoing attempt to reconnect the church with Jesus; that is, to reJesus the church as the first order of business. So much is bound up with this recovery of a radical New Testament Christology. The church's mission as well as its experience of community can be revitalized only by a renewed encounter with Jesus the Lord. And this is not something that is casual and intermittent. It requires a constant attention to the Lord of the church. As Wilhelm Visser T'Hooft once put it, "It belongs to the very life of the people of God that it must accept again and again to have its life renewed by a new confrontation with its Lord and his holy will."¹

Think of it like a form of recalibration. When a machine gets jammed, the only way to kick-start it is to reset it to its original formulation. It's

like a computer. When things go haywire and all else fails, we reboot it. By rebooting a computer, we restore its original operational settings, thus allowing it to function properly again. The software is back in sync with the

Resisting Evil



Dietrich Bonhoeffer

As a little Jesus, Dietrich Bonhoeffer refused to bend his knee to the Nazis, the empire of his time. His public resistance in 1933 to Hitler's policy to merge all Protestant churches into a pro-Nazi Protestant Reich Church put him at risk from the beginning. Bonhoeffer claimed defiantly that the church is not an organ of the state, but is subject only to Jesus and his mission. In 1939, faced with being drafted into the German army, he accepted an offer to teach at Union Seminary in New York. He returned home barely a month later, however, convinced that he would never have a voice in Germany after the war if he didn't stand with his people during it. He found an opportunity to resist Hitler through his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, an officer in the military intelligence agency Abwehr and a key figure in the covert resistance movement. Von Dohnanyi arranged for Bonhoeffer to travel to the Vatican and to Switzerland, where he helped a group of Jews cross the border, as well as to Sweden, where he met with British bishop George Bell to try to secure Allied support for a planned coup against Hitler. When the money used to smuggle the Jews across the border into Switzerland was traced to Bonhoeffer, the Nazis arrested him in 1943. While he was in prison, a group of Abwehr officers, including von Dohnanyi, attempted to assassinate Hitler but failed. The Nazis tied Bonhoeffer to this plot as well, and in 1945, a month before the surrender of the Germans, he was executed by hanging. Bonhoeffer's writings have inspired millions, but his courage in resisting evil and in paying the ultimate cost for his fidelity to the gospel is his greatest and most enduring legacy.

hardware again. This is precisely the image that we wish to convey—that by rebooting the church to Jesus, it will recover itself and become fully operational again.

The Bible describes Jesus as Alpha and Omega (Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). It also describes him as Founder and Perfecter of faith (Heb 12:2). Surely these divine titles (functions?) must say something about the ongoing role of Jesus in the life of the disciple and in the life of the Christian community. If Jesus is as he claims, the Beginning and the End, then surely this must indicate that Christology claims central place in our self-understanding. If he is Founder

and Perfecter, then he not only sets the primary template for authentic faith but also works at helping us bring it into mature expression.

We want to address this in two primary dimensions. First, the reJesus project for individual followers of Jesus is the reJesusing of personal discipleship. Second, in the next chapter, we will explore the impact of reJesus for the renewal of the church as an organization. This chapter is individually oriented; the next chapter is communal in focus.

↩ The Capturing of Our Imaginations

Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits (one of the most significant Catholic missionary orders), developed a set of spiritual exercises for the initiation of new Jesuit candidates. The novel, and perhaps the most significant, aspect of the exercises was the requirement of the novitiate, as well as the established member, to activate their imaginations in order to encounter Jesus more directly. We will return to what this entailed in a later chapter, but for now it's enough to highlight why engaging Jesus through activating our imagination is an important thing to do.

Ask yourself what stimuli provoke your imagination on any given day. In other words, what stuff, coming at you from the world in which you live, most arouses or inspires you and your worldview? Television? Movies? Video games, sports, novels, business, the Internet? And yet these are not benign or valueless entertainments. They are owned or controlled by powerful forces in our society. They collectively contribute to a collective imagination that shapes us all: consumerist, materialist, individualist. In *Exiles*, Michael explored the way in which our post-Christian culture is not dissimilar to the empires into which the Old Testament exiles, Daniel, Esther, and Joseph, were repatriated. Our current empire is no more friendly to our faith than Babylon was to, say, Daniel's faith. Like all empires, our society seeks to maintain control over us in a variety of ways. These ways include

- ↩ the threat of violence (having a powerful army helps)
- ↩ the dominance of the economic system
- ↩ the capturing of the imagination of the people by various means (e.g., the ubiquitous use of Caesar's image throughout the empire on coins, artifacts, and statues)

On the last point, how is the ubiquity of Caesar's image any different from the intrusive and all-pervasive nature of the tools employed by our current empire for manipulating our imaginations? It, like all pervasive systems, seeks to claim our total allegiance by dominating our imaginations. Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat deal with this issue in their commentary of Paul's letter to the Colossians. They suggest that in order to overcome the ubiquitous and dominating claims of the Roman Empire, the Colossian Christians organized their lives and their thinking around a christological center. They cultivated an alternative imagination to the dominant imagination around about them and in so doing structured their lives around Jesus.² As we saw in chapter 1, this reorientation around Jesus changes everything.

One of the most urgent reasons why we need to re-envision ourselves around Jesus is that our imaginations so easily become captive to the dominant forces in our culture, whether those forces are economic, political, religious, or ideological. Furthermore, as we have already observed, our perceptions of Jesus readily become domesticated through familiarity, fear of change, spiritual indolence, or whatever keeps us from engaging Jesus as living Lord. Idolatry still has its lure, and in modern democratic societies and in the globalized, market-based economic system within which we all live it seems to have become almost totally pervasive and yet more subtle at the same time. There seems to be little ideological or religious alternative to the domination of the free-market-based consumption other than the reactionary responses of Islam. The Western church seems to have almost totally capitulated to the economic ideology of our day. Says Tom Sine,

This imagery of the good life and a better future, that pervades Western society, is born of the Enlightenment and the rise of modernity. Essentially, the storytellers of the Enlightenment took the vertical quest for God's kingdom, which had been a centerpiece of European culture, and turned it on its side. It became the horizontal pursuit of western progress, technological mastery and economic growth.

This vision of a better future is called the Western Dream or the American Dream, and now it is the driving myth behind the new imperial global economic order. In fact, as we will see, marketers of the new global order called McWorld, and the merchants of "cool" are seeking to influence people everywhere on this planet to live into this dream. And they are having stunning success.³

Furthermore, Walsh and Keesmaat state, "The messages are all telling the same story. . . . economic growth is the driving force of history, con-

sumer choice is what makes us human, and greed is normal. If we live in an empire, it is an empire of global consumerism."⁴ And the empire has a plan for our lives.

Into this profoundly religious empire, made up of the idolatrous lure of money, sexuality, competing ideologies and visions, comes an alternative vision of reality in the form of Jesus. The WWJD campaign invited us to imagine how Jesus would respond to the cultural and religious issues of our day. However, this question tended to become captive to a religious pietism that limited the issue to private morality and then further trivialized into an international campaign that focused almost entirely on the sexual ethics of young adult Christians. This is unfortunate, because WWJD has in it the capacity to become a global movement that takes the claims that Jesus makes over all of life seriously indeed. We would like to relaunch the campaign but this time keeping the broader issues in mind as well. What would Jesus do in the consumptive world in which we live? How would he respond to the environmental crisis? What would Jesus do with the banal depravities of reality television? What would Jesus do with our money and resources in a world of poverty and in need of grace and mercy? As we shall see in a later chapter, the lordship of Jesus cannot be limited to personal piety and must extend to all issues common to human experience. WWJD must extend to the issues of economics, environment, and politics if we are to truly unlock the world-renewing power inherent in the question.

Our imagination is such a powerful force. Jesus pointed out, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:21). In other words, the things that capture our imaginations (our treasures), whether they are wealth or sex or power, drag our hearts (our actions, our priorities) along with them. This is why he insisted that we store ourselves "treasures in heaven" (Matt 6:20). If we allow Jesus to capture our imaginations, our actions and priorities will mirror his lifestyle and teaching. The church needs an alternative imagination to that of the empire in which it finds itself.

In this respect, Walter Brueggemann comments on the role of the preacher as the source of an alternative, Christ-centered imagination. If the church needs to be continually reJesused, then those who give voice to the church's public speech ought to be committed to drenching the church's collective imaginations in the gospel. Says Brueggemann,

The event of preaching is an event of transformed imagination . . . Because finally church people are like other people; we are not changed by new rules. The

deep places in our lives—places of resistance and embrace are reached only by stories, by images, metaphors and phrases that line out the world differently apart from our fear and hurt.⁵

We've heard too many sermons about how to be better citizens. Too much preaching is concerned with the fostering of a capitulation to the mores and values of a post-Christian empire rather than a call to allow our imaginations to be overtaken by Jesus and focused on treasures in heaven.

← The Conspiracy of Little Jesuses

Often the wake-up call to embrace an alternate imagination has to be made in a stark and uncompromising fashion. The 2005 film *V for Vendetta* is set in a totalitarian Britain in the not-too-distant future. The English have handed their imaginations (so to speak) over to a dictator whose empire is every bit as controlling as Caesar's. In fact, it resembles the Orwellian Britain of the novel *1984*. A revolutionary in a mask, calling himself only V, embarks upon a program of civil unrest to shake people out of their stupor. In one scene, he takes over a British television studio and broadcasts an incendiary call to arms, concluding in the following manner:

... the truth is, there is something terribly wrong with this country, isn't there? Cruelty and injustice, intolerance and oppression. And where once you had the freedom to object, to think and speak as you saw fit, you now have censors and systems of surveillance coercing your conformity and soliciting your submission. How did this happen? Who's to blame? Well certainly there are those more responsible than others, and they will be held accountable, but again truth be told, if you're looking for the guilty, you need only look into a mirror. I know why you did it. I know you were afraid. Who wouldn't be? War, terror, disease. There were a myriad of problems which conspired to corrupt your reason and rob you of your common sense. Fear got the best of you, and in your panic you turned to the now high chancellor, Adam Sutler. He promised you order, he promised you peace, and all he demanded in return was your silent, obedient consent. Last night I sought to end that silence. Last night I destroyed the Old Bailey, to remind this country of what it has forgotten. More than four hundred years ago a great citizen wished to embed the fifth of November forever in our memory. His hope was to remind the world that fairness, justice, and freedom are more than words, they are perspectives. So if you've seen nothing, if the crimes of this government remain unknown to you then I would suggest you allow the fifth of November to pass unmarked. But if you see what I see, if you

feel as I feel, and if you would seek as I seek, then I ask you to stand beside me one year from tonight, outside the gates of Parliament, and together we shall give them a fifth of November that shall never, ever be forgot.⁶

The film climaxes after V's death, with thousands and thousands of Britons, all wearing Guy Fawkes masks, marching on the Houses of Parliament in an unstoppable wave of resistance. V has duplicated himself in the lives of others. He has catalyzed a movement for change, for revolution. In this respect, V epitomizes what we've been talking about. He captures the imaginations of those who were previously held captive to the empire. He fashions a grand conspiracy in which hundreds of thousands of little Vs stand irresistibly against the totalitarian regime.

As mentioned earlier, Alan coined the phrase "the conspiracy of little Jesuses" to describe this same idea as portrayed in *V for Vendetta*. Jesus takes captive the imaginations of his followers and then replicates himself in them. In fact, we can sum up the task of discipleship as the lifelong project of literally becoming like him, of becoming a little Jesus. But the whole process of becoming more like him moves quickly beyond the individual to the group and from there to a movement. Even a superficial reading of the New Testament indicates that it was Jesus' strategic intention to create a movement consisting of Christlike people inhabiting every possible nook and cranny of culture and society—hence the idea of a mass conspiracy.⁷

Whether one talks about becoming a little Jesus or uses that wonderful old phrase "imitation (or following) of Christ," the essential function is clear—the modeling ourselves upon his life lies at the center of our spirituality. Says Kierkegaard,

To be truly redeemed by Christ is, therefore, to impose on oneself the task of imitating him; As man Jesus is my model because as God he is my Redeemer; Christianity can be defined as a faith together with a corresponding way of life, *imitation of Christ*.⁸

The climactic scene in *V for Vendetta*, with countless Vs streaming out of side streets, leaping over barricades, and flowing like a torrent toward Parliament, represents the power that resides in such a conspiracy of imitation. Kierkegaard also said, "Unlike the admirer who stands simply aloof, the follower of Christ strives to be what he admires. Without this essential condition all attempts to be a Christian are fruitless."⁹ This is the conspiracy of little Jesuses.

David Bosch rightly noted, "Discipleship is determined by the relation to Christ himself not by mere conformity to impersonal commands."¹⁰ He

said this when commenting on how preachers have used the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20) to pressgang Christians into missionary service. Many well-intentioned church leaders have simplistically presented the words of Jesus, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,” as some remote order barked by a stern sergeant-major. If Jesus said it, we should do it! But Bosch points out that missionary service that is motivated by blind obedience to an impersonal order from Jesus is built on a flimsy foundation. If our commitment to mission is only based on Jesus’ “order” in Matthew 28, it makes mission an obligation for us rather than an act of love and grace. It’s not unlike a woman who complains that her husband never brings her flowers. When the guilty husband rushes out and buys her a bouquet and presents it to her, she is still dissatisfied, because it wasn’t that she wanted flowers in particular. What she wanted was for him to be motivated by his devotion for her so as to buy a gift. When we engage in mission only because we feel guilty that we haven’t pleased Jesus and his order in the so-called Great Commission, we satisfy neither Jesus nor our own sense of calling. Rather, says Bosch, mission emerges from a deep, rich relationship with Jesus. The woman whose husband never brings her flowers doesn’t want flowers. She wants him and his devotion. What Jesus is saying to his disciples in Matthew 28 is that little Jesuses will be naturally and normally about the business of making disciples, not to satisfy Jesus’ demands but out of complete devotion for him. To paraphrase Bosch, the Great Commission is not a commission in the ordinary sense of the word, but rather a creative statement about the new order of things. Or as Garrett Green was noted for saying, “God is the one who conquers not by force, but by capturing the imagination of his fallen creatures.”

However difficult it is to remain open to God, it is vital that this relationship must take the form of a direct and unmediated relationship with Jesus. It must involve a constantly renewed, up-to-date experience with our Lord. The loss of covenantal relationship results in a religion other than the one Jesus started. Even though it might take the forms of Christian faith, it will lack the reality of it.

That discipleship is foundational to Christianity and its mission therefore goes without saying. If we fail here, we will fail everywhere.¹¹ But the critical role of discipleship in the mission of the church once again highlights the role of the radical Jesus in the life of faith. And this bond cannot primarily merely involve a cerebral, objective, indirect understanding of Jesus and the Christian faith. This substitution of thinking about Jesus for existential encounter with Jesus is a constant temptation for the follower. This is partly

because a living relationship with the Lord of the universe is a risky, disturbing, and demanding experience. We never get the better of him, and it is a whole lot easier, and less costly, to think than to do. It is not good enough that we just follow his teachings or a religious code developed in his wake. Discipleship requires a direct and unmediated relationship with the Lord, and the loss of this immediacy is catastrophic to the movement that claims his name.

Dallas Willard rightly bemoans the fact that for quite a while now the churches in the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian.

One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship. Contemporary Western churches do not require following Christ in his example, spirit, and teachings as a condition of membership—either of entering into or continuing in fellowship of a denomination or a local church. . . . So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, discipleship clearly is optional. . . . Churches are therefore filled with “undisciplined disciples.” “Most problems in contemporary churches can be explained by the fact that members have not yet decided to follow Christ.”¹²

This living link between Jesus, discipleship, and authentic Christianity was highlighted by Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he says,

Discipleship means adherence to Christ and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. An abstract theology, a doctrinal system, a general religious knowledge of the subject of grace or the forgiveness of sins, render discipleship superfluous, and in fact exclude any idea of discipleship whatsoever, and are essentially inimical to the whole conception of following Christ. . . . *Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.* [italics added]¹³

The last sentence of this quote highlights the issue for us. At stake at the heart of discipleship is nothing less than the embodiment and transmission of the gospel. Who wants a Christianity without Christ? Well, if we are to avoid the ever-encroaching possibility of this form of spiritual deception, we had better be sure we keep our focus on disciple making as a key task. It is embodiment (our willingness to embody and live out Jesus' life and message) that creates spiritual authority. It also gives much needed credibility to our witness. And in the credibility of the message laid down through our lives lies

the foundation for its authentic transmission from generation to generation and from culture to culture. Embodiment and (trans)mission therefore go together and all are bound inextricably to our relationship with Jesus.

Critic of Religiosity



Søren Kierkegaard

Like Jesus attacking Pharisaism, Søren Kierkegaard came out swinging against every phoney form of institutionalized Christianity. “An apostle proclaims the truth, an auditor is responsible for discovering counterfeits,” wrote this nineteenth-century Danish philosopher and theologian. He saw it as his mission to be an auditor of Christendom, an institution he charged with sanitizing Jesus and making light of his message. Denmark’s state church, he wrote, was “just about as genuine as tea made from a bit of paper which once lay in a drawer beside another bit of paper which had once been used to wrap up a few dried tea leaves from which tea had already been made three times.” One of the fathers of existentialism, this remarkably complex and intelligent man underwent a profound spiritual transformation at the age of thirty-five and thereafter sought to apply some of his existentialist ideas to Christianity and thus reintroduce his nation to Jesus. Individuals, not the state, Kierkegaard argued, needed to make a “leap of faith” in order to enter into authentic Christianity. As a little Jesus, he hoped that his brutal attacks against the banality of institutional religion would anger Danish Christians enough to make them re-examine their relationship to Jesus.

The difficulty that we face in this issue of embodiment and transmission is that it is directly related to the credibility of the gospel. Our witness is a vital link in giving the claims of Jesus credibility in the eyes of non-Christian people. We are not allowed off the ethical hook by admitting that while our practice is poor, the beauty, purity, and truth of the Bible are nonetheless undiminished. The Bible, claims Jacques Ellul, insists on the unity of the two:

We have to understand this. No recognizable revelation exists apart from the life and witness of those who bear it. The life of Christians is what gives testimony to God and to the meaning of this revelation. “See how they love one another”—this is where the approach to the Revealed God begins. “If you devour one another, you do not have the love of God in you,” etc. There is no pure truth of God or Jesus Christ to which we can return, washing our hands of what we ourselves do. If Christians are not conformed in their lives to their

truth, there is [effectively] no truth. This is why the accusers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were right to infer the falsity of revelation itself from the practice of the church. This makes us see that in not being what Christ demands we render all revelation false, illusory, ideological, imaginary, and non-salvific. We are thus forced to *be* Christians or to recognize the falsity of what we believe. This is undeniable proof of the need for correct practice.¹⁴

Whether we like it or not, we carry the burden of having to live out the truth in such a way as to establish its viability among those who are watching. Shane Claiborne, author of *The Irresistible Revolution*, once surveyed a group of people who identified themselves as “strong followers of Jesus” and asked them, “Did Jesus spend time with the poor?” Around 80 percent replied in the affirmative, leaving a disturbing 20 percent of so-called strong followers of Jesus who think Jesus didn’t spend time with the poor. That this could be the case should remind us of the levels of Christian ignorance about our founder and Lord. But the more disturbing fact is that Claiborne asked the same group, “Do you spend time with the poor?” Only 2 percent replied that they did. There is for many an almost complete disconnect between our beliefs about Jesus and our actions. This disconnection lies at the nub of the problem facing the church. Søren Kierkegaard expressed it this way: “Christ is the Truth inasmuch as He is the way. He who does not follow in the way also abandons the truth. We possess Christ’s truth only by imitating him, not by speculating about him.”¹⁵

But beyond issues relating to the mission of Jesus’ people, the whole matter of the leadership and ministry of the church is also directly bound to discipleship. This is no small matter, and focused effort here must yield exponential results in terms of spirituality, ministry, and mission, because Jesus is thus made manifest in the life of his people.

↩ Face Time with Jesus

Why the church tends to so easily lose this central focus on discipleship is a bit of a historical puzzle because it forms such a strategically significant part of our task as his people in the world. Perhaps it is because it is an essentially simple act that we tend to lose focus. Modeling ourselves on a hero comes naturally to us. We do it unconsciously all the time. This task of integrating life with our message has a long history of reflection and practice, even though it has seldom, if ever, been widely accepted by the majority of believers

in the Western Christendom church. One of the particularly christocentric ways of seeing this process is called conformation (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18).

The Bible understands Christian formation in a way that is largely unfamiliar to us. In the New Testament, Jesus does not disciple people by generating information, developing programs, or implementing plans. Rather, Jesus' discipleship always involves a deeply personal process of being drawn into becoming more like the image, or form, of Jesus. The great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer latched onto this idea and made it central to his understanding of discipleship and ethics. He said, "It comes only as formation into his likeness, as conformation with the unique form of Him who was made man, was crucified, and rose again."¹⁶ For him, *conformation* was the way Jesus continues to incarnate himself in the world through his people: "The way in which the form of Jesus Christ takes form in our world is the concrete, obedient, con-formation of human beings to the form of the biblical Christ, the man whose existence for others is the world's true reality."¹⁷ But he too pointed out that this cannot be a matter of abstract theologizing or merely developing discipleship programs or the like, but rather by the way of obedience to Jesus and his commands.

The image of Jesus to which we are called to conform to is not some sort of religious nut concerned with other-worldly religious matters as if the human issues don't matter. No, if the pattern is Jesus as we encounter him in the Gospels, then it means being drawn into the pattern of true humanity because Jesus models for us what it means to be a human being in the fullest sense. In Jesus, God has given us the archetype of what it means to be truly human. Now we must become more authentically human in the way that Jesus has set out for us, using Jesus' life as a model. It was never meant to be a matter of becoming a religious person but rather the forming of Christ in every person and in the life of the community of disciples.¹⁸

This idea of conformation focuses attention on the direct link with Jesus and his people. The loss of this relationship and this consciousness must surely lead to the decline in the spiritual keenness of the Christian. Conversely, the rekindling of our relationship with Jesus must surely lead to a renewal of the spirit. Surely the true disciple is the person who acknowledges Christ as a present reality in his or her life. This is what trusting Jesus is all about. It requires that we draw near to Jesus, live under his lordship, trust his saving work on our behalf, and in a concentrated act of worshipful and responsive love, conform our lives to his. Participating in the life of God "does not take place through ecstasy or any religious *tour de force* (feat of strength)

but through Jesus Christ. The saints are those who penetrate into the existence of Christ, who lift themselves not by their 'bootstraps', but by Christ's humanity into Christ's divinity."¹⁹

In trying to convey this need for immediacy between believer and Jesus, Kierkegaard coined a rather strange term, *contemporaneousness*. Although a cumbersome term, it is a useful one because it highlights the need for unmediated closeness between Jesus and his followers. He notes that for the believer, Jesus must be a "living reality, seen through the eyes of faith, and contemporaneous with each generation. His reality must be such that it transcends both time and space."²⁰ In Kierkegaard's thinking, therefore, contemporaneousness is a conscious effort by the believer to reach beyond the church's entire two-thousand-year tradition and, free of inherited presuppositions, encounter Jesus, seeing him with the eyes not of the first Christians but of the first eyewitnesses (crucifiers as well as disciples), and there, "in the painful tension of that dilemma; make his own choice as to whether Jesus is the God-Man who has an absolute claim to his life or a madman who should be avoided at all costs."²¹ If Kierkegaard is right, then it is impossible to avoid this rather direct appointment with Jesus if we are to be saved and to truly follow him. A Christian must be a person who has engaged, and is engaging, Jesus directly. And it is only through the lifelong imitation of Christ, not just one encounter, that genuine contemporaneousness is fully achieved.

Without laboring the point, let us reinforce our conviction that such contemporaneousness is not simply a matter of getting one's theology right (whatever *right* might mean). Biblical faith cannot be reduced to believing in a set of doctrines, and neither can discipleship be seen in these terms. Faith, as Luther (re)discovered, is more like the supreme gamble in which we stake our lives upon a conviction. It can't be reduced to belief in a set of propositions. It is a profoundly existential act in which we are fully and personally involved. Contemporaneousness cannot be attained by speculation but only by the active presence of Christ in my own existence. There is much more to being a disciple than believing and trusting Jesus at the outset; Christianity also involves a well-defined way of existence, a way of life that can be summed up in the phrase "the imitation of Christ." When we choose this way, we take it upon ourselves to be his constant companion, his follower, his contemporary. All the aspects of our discipleship (worship, ritual, prayer, mission, theologizing) are in one sense or another directed toward the achievement of contemporaneousness. Christ's whole life in all its aspects must supply the norm for the life of the following Christian and thus for the life of the whole church.²²

← The Who? And the What?

So what can we use as our flashlight as we travel along this path towards Jesus? There are core truths about Jesus that provide the broad contours of the faith he set for us to journey toward. Understanding these enable us to repeatedly touch base with the elemental aspects that make Jesus and his way so special. They can provide the compass, if you will, that we can consult to see if we (individual followers and/or community of faith) are consistent with the wild and untamable Lord of the church.

Jesus' Life and Teaching	Implications for Disciple/Church	Examples of How These Could Be Lived Out
Ushers in the kingdom of God and focuses it around his own person (e.g., Mark 1:14–15; Luke 11:20)	Living under the King (see later chapter on existential monotheism, ch. 5). The kingdom of God is central and extends in and beyond the church to his entire cosmos. We are agents of the kingdom in all spheres of life common to human being. Jesus is Lord/King! We can live and work wherever we are, and we can expect the kingdom to already be there.	When we are at work, we invite Jesus to accompany us there. We look for opportunities to enact Jesus' qualities while we are working. We look for ways to mirror the work of God even through the most mundane and everyday activities.
Demands direct and active faith/trust in God (e.g., Mark 1:14–15, Matt 17:20)	Requires a radical openness to the sovereign and miraculous intervention of God in us. Faith as trust demands a distinct form of spiritual openness on our behalf. We should expect God to be involved in all aspects of our lives.	We refuse to give up when a situation seems hopeless; we have faith in God to work in the situation, somehow. We must not give in to our fears.
Mediates the grace and mercy of God (e.g., Matt 12:7)	Openness to receive as well as impart grace/mercy to others. The measure we give will be the measure we receive. We can be generous with both our resources and our time. God is merciful; we must try to find ways to be like God in daily life.	We refuse to rule out the unlikely agents of grace in our midst. Whether someone is uneducated, elderly, divorced, an ex-convict, disabled, or even just needy or annoying, we humbly accept their gifts to us as if they were from God.
Offers forgiveness of sins (e.g., Matt 9:2; Luke 7:47)	Repentance and forgiveness are a way of life (70x7). Radical openness to a holy God will require that we be constantly aware of our sinfulness and the possibility of radical evil that lurks in the human soul. Also, we must be a forgiving people (Matt 6:15).	We examine ourselves carefully for any bitterness or lack of forgiveness toward others. We place ourselves in relationships of accountability. We are open to the rebuke of the loving friend. We confess our limitations regularly.

Jesus' Life and Teaching	Implications for Disciple/Church	Examples of How These Could Be Lived Out
<p>Demonstrates the love of God for his world</p> <p>(e.g., John 3:16; 14:21)</p>	<p>Demands our primary love for God and a secondary love for others in his name. We need to know we are a loved people, and this should be expressed towards others. This love should include but extend beyond our family members to embrace even our enemies. We should be known as a people of love.</p>	<p>Our loves shows God's love. We show love to our family members and do so reflecting on the way it is an outpouring of the love we have received from God. We practice hospitality to the stranger. We create spaces in which others can grow and find grace.</p>
<p>Heals the sick and casts out demons</p> <p>(e.g., Mark 1:23ff.; Luke 11:20)</p>	<p>Healing ministry should be part of the church's service in the world. These are signs of the kingdom's presence (John 14:12). We live in a wounded world: we should actively look for opportunities to heal people in body, psyches, and relationships.</p>	<p>We look for opportunities to pray for people, comfort people, reconcile with people. We must not shrink back from prayer for the sick or to engage in spiritual warfare when necessary.</p>
<p>Calls all to follow and imitate him</p> <p>(e.g., Matt 4:19; 8:22)</p>	<p>He is the image of the human. Not only Savior but also God's pattern for authentic human life. This requires a following after, an imitation of Jesus . . . discipleship. It also involves a willingness to go against the flow and to stand with Jesus and his cause in the world. Even to the point of suffering and martyrdom. It will also mean we are more "attractive" to sinners and outcasts (as Jesus was).</p>	<p>We look for opportunities to disciple other Christians. We volunteer at a soup kitchen and sit down and talk with the clients, even if their appearance and actions make us uncomfortable.</p>
<p>Radicalizes the current standards of holiness (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount)</p> <p>(e.g., Matt 5–8)</p>	<p>Jesus sets a challenging ethical and moral code for the disciple/church to follow. The Sermon on the Mount is the most used discipleship text in the history of the church. This not only describes but prescribes the life of discipleship. We should make it a basic reference text and seek to live it out.</p>	<p>We practice hospitality, generosity, humility, and justice. We believe our faith brings not just personal salvation but a motivation for changing the world to reflect the justice and peace of God.</p>
<p>Introduces a distinctly non-religious (even anti-religious) way of loving and worshiping God (e.g., Matt 21; John 4:20ff)</p>	<p>Real countercultural forces are unleashed in the gospel. We therefore should be willing at times to go against the flow and status quo. People should be able to see that we follow Jesus and not that we are particularly "religious" people which can be so off-putting to many non-Christians.</p>	<p>We challenge our faith community to join a secular group doing work that Jesus would approve of, even if we disagree with some of the other views the group holds.</p>
<p>Shows love and compassion for the poor and oppressed</p> <p>(e.g., Luke 4:18–19; 7:22–23)</p>	<p>We must serve the marginalized and downtrodden in Jesus' name. And this will mean we sometimes stand in direct opposition to the systems and lifestyles that engender oppression—be they political, social, and religious system of the day.</p>	<p>We work with a group that helps HIV/AIDS victims, even though some of our Christian friends think this isn't a cause Christians should be involved with.</p>

Jesus' Life and Teaching	Implications for Disciple/Church	Examples of How These Could Be Lived Out
Befriends the outcast and misfit (e.g., Matt 9:9–12; Luke 19:10)	We should refuse to exclude people from fellowship based on cultural preferences. Also, we should be hanging around a lot more “freaks” than we ordinarily do. There is something we have to learn from the margins of society that we cannot learn from the center.	We make a point of welcoming visitors to our church who do not appear to fit in. We collect “freaks” and outcasts and look for what they can teach us about Jesus.
Proclaims (as well as lives) the good news of the kingdom (e.g., Matt 5:13–16)	We should proclaim (as well as live) good news of Jesus. In a sense we are (and must become) good news. (<i>We are salt/light.</i>) Love, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, righteous anger . . . these are the marks of a disciple.	We socialize with unbelievers. We pray with them. We model an alternate reality by our alternate lifestyle. We are always ready to give an answer for the hope within us. We acknowledge the ministry of the gifted evangelists among us.
Follows the pattern of God's redemption (e.g., Luke 15:4–32)	We must act redemptively because God is a redeemer. We restore what has been lost or broken. Mission involves the redemption of broken people and lost culture. We don't judge, we redeem.	We aim at restoration and beauty, creativity and grace, hospitality and generosity. We live, love, play, and suffer, better than anyone else, for God is our Redeemer.
Presents an existential call to the whole person (e.g., Matt 22:37–40)	We must respond with all that we are, not just believe with our heads or our bodies. The love of God engages heart, head, mind, will, body, etc. We cannot compartmentalize our lives in ways that divide our total devotion to God.	We see that pleasures are from God. But we direct them towards God, acknowledging that God gave them to us in the first place. We engage intellectually, emotionally, and bodily in the life God has given us.
Offers new beginnings (e.g., John 3:1–7; Luke 7:38–50)	We must be born again. We are the people of the new start! We must offer new starts to others. Give people a go. Learn to actively forgive.	We remember that we have received forgiveness and that others need it as well. We tell others of Jesus' gift of a new start and a life with God.
Hates hypocrisy (e.g., Matt 23:28ff.; Luke 12:1)	In Jesus' teaching, self-righteousness is abhorred! Mentioned far more than sexual sin, this is unacceptable sin of the spirit for disciples of Jesus. We have been forgiven much; we must be willing to offer the same grace to others.	We listen humbly when others point out our faults. We remember not to put sexual sins higher on the scale of sin than the more “spiritual” sins of hypocrisy and pride, since Jesus said more about these than about sexual sin.
Is coming again (e.g., Luke 11; Matt 25:1–13)	An adoring and expectant longing for his presence and return (like a betrothed virgin awaiting the bridegroom). He completes us. He also comes in judgment on unrighteousness. It's going to be a big day!	We hold on to a sense of Jesus' return and our need to live urgently. Seize the day! “Live as if Jesus died yesterday, was raised today, and is coming tomorrow” (Luther).
Lays down life for friends (e.g., John 15:13)	Calls us to self-sacrificial lifestyle. We are called to be servants to a lost and broken world (Matt 23:11–12).	We decide to give up a luxury—perhaps cable TV, dinners out, or cell phone games—and give the money to a good cause.

Jesus' Life and Teaching	Implications for Disciple/Church	Examples of How These Could Be Lived Out
Brings salvation (e.g., Luke 1:76–77; 19:9)	We need to be saved. This is not only a decision, it is a lifelong process (Phil 2:12). Also, we are the messengers of salvation. Salvation in the Hebrew mind has connotations of healing and wholeness. We need to apply salvation holistically.	We hold on to the idea of salvation as a process in which we are involved on a daily basis.

We don't believe this list is exhaustive, nor do we think that it is even an adequate summary of the faith that has captured the hearts and imaginations of hundreds of millions over two thousand years of history. In fact, we suggest that readers might wish to compile a list of the central ideas and implications of Jesus and his teaching for themselves. It's a great exercise to remind the disciple of the essentials of the faith.

Following Missional Jesus

Scot McKnight, biblical scholar and blogger, has done something similar with his blog series called "Missional Jesus." He draws no conclusions as to how we ought to live as followers, but we believe that it should be reasonably clear how Jesus acted and affected those around him—readers can draw their own conclusions. Here is our summary/excerpting of the series.²³

Bible Text Examined	Subject of Blog Entry
Luke 4:16–30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missional Jesus publicly announces the centrality of himself to the mission of God (4:21). • Missional Jesus sees his own mission in Isaiah 61:1–2, that means his mission involves justice for the poor, prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed. • The mission of Jesus is a Jubilee mission (4:19). • The mission of Jesus creates disturbances and rejection (4:24). • Homies reject Jesus (4:24–29). • The mission of Jesus will extend beyond the normal boundaries.
Luke 5:1–11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missional Jesus is a preacher of the word (5:1–3). • Encountering the missional Jesus brings bewilderment, wonder, and awe—leading to repentance (5:5, 8, 9–10). • Missional Jesus shares his mission with those who are attached to him (5:10). • Those who participate in the mission of Jesus are called to enlist others in the mission of Jesus (5:11).

Bible Text Examined	Subject of Blog Entry
Luke 9:57–62	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missional Jesus knows the cost to the body (9:58). • Missional Jesus knows the cost to the family life when it comes to sacred customs (9:59–60). • Missional Jesus knows the cost to the family life when it comes to simple social courtesies (9:61–62). • Missional Jesus wants all from his followers, he wants them to make that decision now, and he demands all because he knows the kingdom of God is worth it.
Matthew 4:23–25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall, missional Jesus did what was good for others. • Missional Jesus taught in typical centers of religious education. • Missional Jesus preached—which means declared good news—about the kingdom of God. What is the kingdom of God? Kingdom for Jesus is the “society in which God’s will is established and transforms all of life.” • Missional Jesus healed. • Missional Jesus was attractive.
Matthew 7:12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missional Jesus accepts anyone who comes to him for healing. • Missional Jesus breaks down boundaries between Gentiles and Jews. • Missional Jesus heals Gentiles, too. • Missional Jesus believes that what mattered was faith in God (through Jesus) and not ethnic heritage and religious association. • Missional Jesus lauds the perception of faith in him as faith in the One who is sent by God with authority.
Mark 12:29–31	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missional Jesus confronts the evil at home in persons ravaged by evil spirits. • The evil world recognizes missional Jesus as a threat of power. • Missional Jesus’ power is intimidating and awe-inspiring, but it doesn’t mean everyone who perceives turns into a follower of Jesus. • Missional Jesus summons those released from evil to witness to the mercy he [the Lord] has shown them. • Missional Jesus knows his mission is a spiritual battle.
Matthew 9:32–34	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missional Jesus attracts those who are possessed by evil—the way flames attract moths. • Missional Jesus, therefore, attracts folks who know that Jesus can heal them. • Missional Jesus can flat-out cure folks. • Missional Jesus is opposed by the religious authorities: to the degree that they call him demon-possessed.
Matthew 9:35–10:4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missional Jesus participates in the mission of God. • Missional Jesus therefore prays to God for “extenders” of his mission-working kingdom of God. • Missional Jesus prays because he is moved by oppression and the need for mercy on so many. • Missional Jesus specifically identifies 12 workers for the kingdom and appoints them as his personal representatives in the kingdom work. • Missional Jesus appoints his “extenders” to do what he has been doing in Matthew. They are therefore extenders of Jesus and not doers of their own mission. Missional work is Jesus work. • Not all of Jesus’ “extenders” follow Jesus faithfully.

Bible Text Examined	Subject of Blog Entry
Matthew 10:5–8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missional Jesus has a targeted audience. They are Jews. • Missioners of the missional Jesus have one message: God's kingdom. • Missioners do what Jesus did and extend what Jesus did and say what Jesus said. They are to "be" Jesus in a new place in order to extend Jesus and his kingdom into new places.

What we can say is that without qualification, the Gospels present us with the most compelling portrait of a person who was so wonderfully human, and yet one who lifted us up beyond the merely human and has shown us the life of God (John 14:9). He is the God whom we love and who is worthy of adoration. We will not let go! And we refuse to subvert this life in the petty concerns of church polity or middle-class mediocrity. We will strive to do anything in our strength to assure that in his church, he is named as Lord.

Another voice singing from this same song-sheet is Irish songwriter Sinéad O'Connor, who in 2007 released her album *Theology*, an anthology of reflections on various Old Testament passages that cry out in anguish for a faith not stained by the church that bears God's name. Raised Catholic, the brunt of her attacks has invariably been borne by the church of her childhood, but the sting in her beautiful songs can be felt by any church or denomination that shuts Jesus out of its religious system. In her searing lament, "Out of the Depths," she captures the psalmist's brokenhearted cry for mercy. It begins with a paraphrase of Psalm 130:1:²⁴

Out of the depths I cry to you
O LORD.

In her song she imagines this lament being sung for a God who is locked out of his own church. The song closes with the lines:

And it's sad but true how the old saying goes
If God lived on earth people would break his windows

What a line! To truly understand God we must see him as the humbled one, the attacked one. Jesus' windows were all broken by the time he ascended the gentle slope of Golgotha. Sinéad ends the song by breathlessly repeating several times the Old Testament line (Ps 130:6a):

I long for you as watchmen long for the end of night.

This is our longing, too.

Renewal will begin with each of us. But like the conspiracy of the little Jesuses, it will have consequences for the renewal of the church as a whole. And to that subject we now turn our attention.

← Notes

1. Wilhelm Visser T'Hooft, *The Renewal of the Church* (London: SCM, 1956), 1.
2. Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), ch. 2–3.
3. Tom Sine, *The New Conspirators* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, forthcoming).
4. Walsh and Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, 85.
5. Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 23.
6. *V for Vendetta*, Directed by James McTeigue (Burbank, Calif., Warner Bros., 2005).
7. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 113.
8. Louis K. Dupré, *Kierkegaard as Theologian: The Dialectic of Christian Existence* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 171.
9. Ronald Grimsely, *Kierkegaard: A Biographical Introduction* (London: Studio Vista, 1973), 103.
10. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 67.
11. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 102.
12. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, quoted in R. J. Foster and J. B. Smith, *Devotional Classics*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2005), 14.
13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted in John A. Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World: A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology* (London: Collins, 1967), 100.
14. Ellul, *Subversion of Christianity*, 6–7.
15. Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, quoted in Dupré, *Kierkegaard as Theologian*, 172.
16. J. A. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 254.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 255, 256.
19. Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (London: Longmans, 1954), 447.
20. Vernard Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship: A New Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968). Cited 25 September 2008. Online: <http://www.hccentral.com/eller2/part12a.html>.
21. *Ibid.*, e-text.
22. Søren Kierkegaard, journals, November 26, 1834, quoted in David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 173.
23. Scot McKnight's "Missional Jesus" series can be found online at <http://www.jesuscreed.org/?cat=39>.
24. Sinéad O'Connor, "Out of the Depths," *Theology* (Koch Records, 2007).



Chapter Three

ReJesus for the Church and the Organization

Christ's whole life in all its aspects must supply the norm for the life of the following Christian and thus for the life of the whole Church.

—Søren Kierkegaard

All religious institutional embeddedness—whether in the form of temple worship, unjust social systems, or repressive religious practices—is challenged by the revelation of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

—Gail O'Day

In Revelation 3:20, we hear these famous words of Jesus: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” We generally interpret this to say that Jesus is standing at the door of our hearts and asking us to allow him to come in. Even though we can appreciate the sentiment, the verse itself has nothing to do with personal evangelism. The specific church in question in Revelation 3 is that in Laodicea, the famously lukewarm church that Jesus wanted to vomit out of his mouth. The image here is of Jesus standing outside of the church asking to come in. The question that should spring to our minds is, “What is he doing on the outside of the church when he is meant to be the Lord of that very church?” But of course, John’s revelation of the seven messages to the seven churches is given to us as a warning that we not make the same errors. Jesus is outside the door of the church in Laodicea! How is this also true for many communities and organizations that claim the name Christian? The question we ask in introducing this chapter must be, is Jesus

similarly outside the door of your church? Have we shut him out of the fellowship of the insiders? And what has been the result?

← ReJesusing Our Organizations

As is now clear, our basic assumption is that Jesus provides the primary template for us as individual followers but also for the church as the community that is in Christ and that walks in his way. As stated earlier, we believe that the church must constantly return to Jesus to find itself again, to recalibrate, to test whether we are indeed in the faith. The inference is that by and large the church as we currently experience it in the West has to varying degrees lost touch with the wild and dangerous message that it carries and is duty bound to live out and to pass on. As Jesus' disciples we are called to a Christlike life, and no matter how we configure it, that must surely mean that somehow our lives and our communities must be in significant congruence with the life, teachings, and mission of Jesus. The degree that we are living the life laid out by our Master is directly proportional to the degree that we can call ourselves authentic disciples.

This might well sound like idealism to some more pragmatically inclined readers, and perhaps rightly. They may well point out the fact that as things now stand, we have built and established a massive global religion comprising thousands of organizations with massive capital and resources. And there is no denying that such organizations do manage to help many people and bring many to faith. Therefore, they might consider it an indulgence on our part to be prattling on about the radical life of Jesus when, whether we like it or not, we are now obligated to maintain those religious organizations with their associated programs, paid professionals, ideologies, capital, buildings, and so on. Theirs is a call to pragmatism over radicalism, although, we suspect, in more honest moments many of them would probably admit that much that we do seems to have only an indirect correlation to the uncluttered, nonreligious, life-oriented faith so compellingly portrayed in the Gospels. These objectors might, in spite of their deepest spiritual intuitions, simply say that we have no choice but to continue to operate the services and maintain the system or else the whole edifice might crumble.

And others still might add the fact that along with the institution of the church we have long and complex histories that have shaped us, carried us, and landed us where we are today. They would suggest that we are indeed

inheritors of a grand religious tradition with rich rituals that has evolved from the early Christian movement even though it is not really the same phenomenon now. For them, the church as we have it is their reality, and they can't, indeed they won't, go back to some simple, somewhat naïve, aesthetically bankrupt, primitive Jesus-like faith of biblical Christianity. Such people will no doubt believe that for good or ill, Christianity now exists, embedded, in its rituals, dogmas, priesthoods, cathedrals, and other religious accoutrements and that the idealism of a reJesus project has no place in the sensible Christian religion we now have.

And we must admit that there is substance to both these responses—the pragmatic and the traditionalist. The institution of the church (traditional and contemporary) is not without God, beauty, or blessing. And we recognize that deeply spiritual people have tirelessly worked for their advancement. We don't wish to suggest that it is worthless (and please forgive us if we have given this impression), but we cannot escape the question, "Is this really what Jesus intended for his movement?" And isn't all this paraphernalia the very thing that partly obscures our access to the vital faith that we all seek and long for? Does advancing in the kingdom of God boil down to this? Running programs and services and/or guiding the laity through liturgical complexities in order to help people get to the God they are all meant to access directly through Jesus anyhow? Was this what Jesus had in mind when he established the church (Matt 16:18–19)?¹ And, whatever happened to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers that many within the Protestant movements are meant to adhere to (1 Pet 2:9)?

We are not insensitive to the fact that a great many people feel connected to Jesus via the stained-glass imagination of grand ecclesiastical traditions. Nor do we dispute that contemporary-style seeker churches have given many people new hope and led them into a real experience of Christian faith. It would be ignorant of us to do so. God is everywhere, and his grace is manifest wherever he so chooses.

However, whatever case can be made for the status quo, none of us can, or should, avoid the spiritual test of evaluating the validity of our preferred expression of church by cues offered by Jesus the Messiah. Unless we can validate who we are and what we do by lining ourselves up with the measure that Jesus laid down in his life and work, then what in God's name are we doing? And how can we legitimately call ourselves Christian, unless what we are doing is built squarely on the rock of Jesus and takes its direct agenda (and direct cues for its organizations and lifestyle) from him? His *modus operandi*, his

teaching, his critique of religion, his commitment to the way of the kingdom, must become our primary source of guidance. We believe that in order to find

Evangelistic Activism



Alan Walker

Alan Walker was an Australian evangelist and theologian born in 1911 who devoted his life to both social activism and evangelism. In the 1950s Alan Walker launched a three-year-long evangelistic tour across Australia and New Zealand, in which he preached to more than half the total populations of each country. Evangelistic rallies like this were relatively common in Australia at the time; by the early twentieth-century fundamentalist preachers from the United States had begun regular visits to the country to conduct similar evangelism circuits. But the scale of Walker's itinerary was unique in that he heralded the integration of evangelism and social activism in a day when the Protestant church generally saw the two realms as incompatible. He also had the moral courage to be an outspoken critic of the racist "White Australia" policy as early as 1938, when the church had been largely silent on the issue. As a pacifist during World War II, and the Vietnam War, he attracted the ire of the media but remained true to his convictions. After his last evangelical tour in 1958, he took over the leadership of the Methodist Central Mission in Sydney, Australia and developed it into one of the country's largest social justice agencies. He was expelled twice from South Africa for his anti-apartheid stance and was knighted by the Queen of England, befriended by Martin Luther King Jr., and dubbed "the conscience of the nation" by the Governor-General of Australia. Alan Walker embodies Jesus because his social activism was never at the expense of his evangelistic passion; "Let it never be forgotten that it is Christ we offer."

renewal (organizational, communal, and personal) we need to rediscover Jesus afresh even though this be a dangerous course of action because it calls into question so much of what we might build our various religious houses on. At the beginning of this new century, we have never needed so desperately to rediscover the original genius of the Christian experience and to allow it to strip away all the unnecessary and cumbersome paraphernalia of Christendom.

It has surprised us that in recent years even our secular culture has been demanding this project of reJesusing the church. A number of filmmakers (secular prophets of our time?) have recently depicted Christlike characters in conflict with the institutionalized church. Those church leaders who have dismissed these films as savage attacks on Christ have missed the point. Films

such as *Jesus of Montreal*, *Chocolat*, and *As It Is in Heaven* are not attacks on Jesus. They are scathing critiques of institutional Christianity, but they all portray their messianic-like protagonists with great sympathy, even reverence.

The most allegorical of them, the Canadian film *Jesus of Montreal*, depicts an out-of-work actor, Daniel, who is commissioned to breathe new life into a church passion play but who enrages the religious authorities when he stages it in an all-too-real manner. As he researches and rehearses the story of Jesus (tellingly, under the gaze of a stone statue of Christ outside the church), Daniel's life begins to mirror that of Christ's. Like Jesus, he gathers around him a troupe of misfits and outcasts—a man who dubs porno films, an overlooked middle-aged actress, a model often reduced to exposing her breasts for casting agents. Like Jesus, Daniel molds this band into a proud, functional community of grace and forgiveness. Like Jesus, Daniel appeals to the common people. His play is soon the talk of Montreal, with hundreds of non-churchgoers lining up for tickets. And inevitably, like Jesus, he finds himself in serious conflict with religious leaders, who are so outraged by his earthy, passionate portrayal of Christ they decide to shut the play down, resulting in Daniel's tragic death.

Jesus of Montreal is more than a drama about an actor who becomes consumed by his role. It is an allegory in which Daniel is essentially a Christ figure right from the opening John-the-Baptist parallel scene. And while it offers us an agnostic retelling of Jesus' life, we wouldn't expect a secular filmmaker to do anything else. But if we're wise, we'll listen to the film's basic premise: if Jesus really did turn up in Montreal, the church would be his greatest enemy!

Likewise, in two other films, Christ figures turn up in small communities, offering hope to the marginalized but ending up in conflict with the church establishment. In *Chocolat*, a woman called Vianne transforms a dour French village with love and grace (and, of course, chocolate) and is nearly run out of town by the mayor, who is the overbearing power behind the meek priest. In *As It Is in Heaven*, an internationally famous symphony conductor retires to the small Swedish town of his childhood and is inveigled into directing the local Lutheran church choir. His methods are so radical that he transforms the rag-tag amateur singers into a world-standard choir, but in so doing he finds that the Lutheran minister has become his sworn enemy. Like Daniel, he too dies tragically but leaves behind a group of men and women who will never be the same.

We don't suggest that we should take our cue from filmmakers, but these movies have intuited something important and are popular precisely because they hit a nerve in their audiences. Even though they might prefer to depict decidedly nondivine Christ figures, they do speak to an audience that believes

the real Christ was more about transforming a small band of followers than running a wealthy religious institution. These films, and many more besides, insist that a faithful, determined, loving, honest community of friends, inspired by an extraordinary visionary, can change its worlds. Daniel's acting troupe resolve to carry on his work by establishing an avant-garde actors' studio. Vianne's friends from the chocolate shop initiate a revolution that eventually sees the dismal village change into a vibrant colorful community. And in *As It Is in Heaven*, the conductor, also called Daniel, dies of a heart attack listening to his choir win a prestigious choral contest in Austria, knowing they have achieved a sense of harmony rarely accomplished by even the best choirs.

The message these films seem to be making was also expressed by anthropologist Margaret Mead, when she wrote, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."² How different is this from the revolution forged by Jesus? We do well to remember Roland Allen's profound observation about missional movements and how they center on Jesus:

The spontaneous expansion of the Church reduced to its element is a very simple thing. It asks for no elaborate organization, no large finances, no great numbers of paid missionaries. In its beginning it may be the work of one man and that of a man neither learned in the things of this world, nor rich in the wealth of this world. What is necessary is faith. What is needed is the kind of faith which uniting a man to Christ, sets him on fire.³

We feel that at this critical juncture of history, when the church is forced to find itself again by the sheer circumstance of the adaptive challenge of the twenty-first century, we must return to being that simple, uncluttered, passionate community of Christ, filled with the love of God that so imbued our spiritual ancestors. We must reignite our passion directly from Jesus' flame. This process of going back to our generative center will mean a process of rediscovering Jesus afresh. We need to reJesus our organizations.

Christianity Minus Christ Equals Religion

In order to get to the nub of the problem, let's reverse the way of looking at the process of reJesus: let us think about what happens when you take Jesus out of the experience of Christianity. To see this consider the following equation:

Christianity - Christ = Religion

It makes sense, doesn't it? Some statements have an immediate ring of truth about them, and for many Christians this is one of them. Of course, Christianity without the lifeblood, the vision, the love of the real Jesus is a soulless religious institution. If you have not already noticed, we tend to use the word "religion" in rather negative sense—as a set of inherited rituals, rules, and structures devoid of a vital spirituality. Mostly religion in this sense tends to be quite oppressive and controlling. And this is how we mean it here. The removal of Jesus from the faith does result in the rise of religious consciousness and institutional expression. A study in European church history will more than adequately prove this point. The Inquisition was not a freak of history but rather was the logical result of a highly coercive and controlling religion that had lost sight of its reason for existence—had lost contact with its founder. But how does this happen? How does a movement as vital as that of early Christianity find itself having drifted so far from its foundation? This is not so mysterious a matter. In fact, it can be readily explained by the sociology of religion. Sociologists recognize that the fading of the initial founding impulse of a movement is not unique to Christianity but is true of all religious expressions. Sociologists call this the *routinization of charisma* and say it accounts for the decline of religious organizations and people movements. What happens in the beginning of a movement is that the people encounter the divine in a profound and revelatory way, but with successive generations this encounter tends to fade like a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy. What begins as a revolutionary, life-transforming, confrontation with Jesus eventually subsides into a codified religion and is subsequently incorporated into normal social life.

And herein lies an irresolvable dilemma for all people of faith: Although genuine faith is born out of direct encounters with God, it cannot survive and prosper without some form of stability and order. Viewed positively, rituals, creeds, and organizations can help people structure their relationship with God. In fact, we believe this is what they initially were designed for. But unless the worshipper is very wary, the glory of the God encounter will slowly fade and the ritual, creeds, and rules intended to preserve the encounter will take its place. The crisis dawns when the outward forms of worship no longer match the inward experience and spiritual condition of the participants. At that point, decline becomes inevitable, authentic Christianity is subverted, and constant renewals become necessary . . . hence the need to reJesus.

It is, as O'Dea says, a dilemma born of the tragedy inherent in the human condition in a fallen world. But for the disciple, the simple truth must

remain; one cannot bolt down, control, or even mediate the essential God encounter in rituals, priesthods, and theological formulas. We all need to constantly engage the God who unnerves, destabilizes, and yet entralls us. The same is true for our defining relationship with Jesus. It is like the story of the Israelites in the wilderness. They tried to store up the manna from heaven for another day. Religion can give into the same temptation to try to store up and rely on the souvenirs of a past spiritual experience. For how many years did the church rely on the system of holy Christian relics—a bone from Peter’s finger, a wooden shard from the cross of Christ, cathedrals and sacred buildings, inherited rituals, even creedal formulas, more than it relied on a fresh, daily encounter with Jesus? We, like Israel, are called to be willing to collect the fresh manna every day—and we are to do this without becoming spiritual thrill seekers but rather lifelong worshipers. To do otherwise is to “outsource your encounter with Jesus” to a religious system of souvenirs, ritual, and religious paraphernalia. Said Maurice Friedman:

Theophany *happens* to man, and he has his part in it as God has His. [Religious] forms and ideas result from it; but what is truly revealed in it is *not* a form or an idea but God. [Genuine] religious reality means this; it is the undiminished relation to God Himself. Man does not possess God; he meets Him.⁴

The more one replaces a fresh daily encounter with Jesus with religious forms, over time he is removed from his central place in the life of the church. The result of this removal (by whatever means) is the onset of dead religion in the place of a living faith.⁵ And to be honest, much of what has gone under the name Christendom can readily be called religion and not Christianity as defined by the Bible. Centuries ago, Blaise Pascal uttered these incisive words about the spiritual condition of the Christianity of his day: “Christendom is a union of people who, by means of the sacraments, excuse themselves from their duty to love God.”⁶ And while religious people tend to be sincere, they do use religion to qualify the God experience—to soften it and control it. One of the functions of religion, sociologically speaking, includes that of avoiding God. All attempts to reduce the faith to intellectualism, or to condition our understanding of God, or to domesticate Jesus, or to diminish the call to lifelong discipleship will result in the loss of the God experience and the encroachment of some form of religion. Anglican missiologist John V. Taylor says, “We need not go all the way with Karl Barth in defining all religion as unbelief. But . . . it is plain that man uses religion as a way of escaping from God. This is true of Christianity as of any other religious system.”⁷ And it was

yet another Anglican who rightly said, “Jesus was inaugurating a way of life which had no further need of the Temple.”⁸ Any attempt then to reconstruct a temple theology of church goes clean contrary to the work of Jesus. He is the new temple.

Martin Buber, the great articulator of dialogical Hebraic spirituality, says that what were originally the true forms of the God encounter soon deteriorate and then become obstacles or substitutes for God. We do very well to heed the warning he gives:

The ur-danger of man is “religion” and mystic ecstasy. It may be that the forms by which man originally hallowed the world for God have become independent . . . then they eventually cease to embody the consecration of the lived, everyday life, and become instead the means of its separation from God. Life in the world and religious service then begin to run on unapproachably parallel lines. But the “god of this divine service” is no longer God, it is the mask, the real partner in the communion is no longer there, the worshipper gesticulates into the empty air. Or, it may be that the state of soul underlying the divine service that becomes independent, the devotion, the reaching-out, the absorption-in, the rapture; which was meant to be and intended for a verification, flowing from the fullness of life, becomes instead detached from life. Now the soul only wants to deal with God; it is as if she [the soul] desired to exercise her love for Him and for Him alone, and not on His world. Now, the soul thinks, the world has disappeared, and only she alone, the soul is left. What she now calls “God” is only a figment in herself, the dialogue which she thinks she is carrying on is only a monologue with divided roles, for the real partner in the communion is no longer there.⁹

As harsh as this might seem, the Hebrew Bible sustains a constant critique of its own religious forms. Psalm 50 is a classic example of a prophetic railing against the formulization of faith. The prophets were the guardians of the covenantal relationship between God and his people. They were obsessed with the call to faithfulness to God. And they insisted that true faithfulness toward God could not be fulfilled through religious ritual, but only with a heart given over to him. This basic challenge is repeated throughout the prophetic wrings. For instance, Isaiah cries, “The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote . . .” (Isa 29:13, cf. Isa 58; Jer 7:3–16; Amos 5:21). It’s not about sacrifice in itself that the prophet rails against; it is the loss of covenantal worship. It is the intent one brings to religious forms that gives them their true meaning.

↩ Christianity as Antireligion

As we are thinking about the dangers of formulaic religion, it might be useful to take a look at the Pharisees. Most readers of the New Testament would agree that the Pharisees are often portrayed as the bad guys and not as a group of people we would want to join. Let's take a closer look at the Pharisees. What do we know about them?

Well, from the Bible and from historical research, we can say that

- ↩ They were very sincere in their belief system.
- ↩ They were an extremely zealous and passionate bunch—the commitment of a suicide bomber would probably be similar to the zeal of a good Pharisee.
- ↩ They were meticulous tithers and gave beyond what was required of them (mint, rue, and cumin were not listed in the things needed to be tithed).
- ↩ They upheld a strong moral code—they were very decent people.
- ↩ They believed in the authority of the full Hebrew Scriptures. And in this they opposed the Sadducees, the theological liberals of their day, who limited the canon to the first five books and then began diminishing their authority over matters of life and faith.
- ↩ They believed in miracles. They believed that God can and did break into the course of human affairs in the form of miraculous intervention. Against the theological liberalism of their day, they fiercely defended the doctrine of the resurrection (the primary miracle), which the Sadducees denied.
- ↩ They were the keepers of the tradition, and therefore the custodian of the identity of Israel. It is unlikely Israel would have survived the stormy intertestamental period without their presence and contribution.
- ↩ They were what we would call missional. Imbued with messianic causes, they went over land and sea to make just one convert.
- ↩ They prayed arduously and often with set prayers prescribed for all possible situations in life.

- ↩ They were strongly messianic. They longed for Israel's (and the world's) redemption.

We would be wrong to characterize Pharisees as mean-spirited people with nothing but evil on their minds. Generally they were sincere and well-intentioned in all they did. As degenerate and in need of renewal as the Judaism of Jesus' time was, they were nonetheless exemplary religious people as far as religions go.

We might want to ask ourselves the question, "Which brand of contemporary Christianity most closely adopts this form of spirituality?" To which we must surely answer, "It is the Bible-believing Christians . . . the evangelicals!" And the most frightening aspect of this realization, as just noted, is that these were the people who were most responsible for putting Jesus on the cross. So herein lies the rub. They are us, or at least what we can become if we are not attentive to the dynamics involved in the slow erosion of faithfulness into religion. They are living mirrors of what can happen to all well-meaning and sincere people when they lose focus on the central issues of faith—the "weightier matters of the law" (Matt 23:23). The horror of this realization is complete when we remember that these fine, upright, devoted religious people—people not unlike us—were hell-bent on murdering Jesus.

But let's press this exercise even further. Remember that, theologically speaking, Jesus was a true Pharisee. He affirmed all the things on that list regarding the authority of the Bible, the reality of miracles, the resurrection, the need for an ardent holiness, and so on. The world of difference exists in how we inhabit the theology we adhere to—how we believe it. Divorced from love, humility, and mercy, it readily becomes a dead and/or oppressive religion. And here again Jesus is the key. Without the active love for, and presence of, the radical Jesus, Christianity easily degenerates into an oppressive religion. Make no mistake, the Christendom project is full of atrocities perpetrated in the name of religion; the Inquisition and the Crusades stand out, but they were not isolated incidents. One can even argue that it is partly from the snares of religion that Jesus came to save us. We do well to remember the judgment that came upon the legalistic moralism that the Judaism at the time of Jesus had degenerated into. The parables of judgment have ongoing validity to all religious people, not just the scribes and the Pharisees.

While teaching at a seminary in the American Bible Belt, Alan once posed the question, "What would we do with Jesus if he turned up at our churches?" One brave soul answered with heart-stopping honesty, "We would

probably kill him!” And we all somehow knew that his answer was disturbingly true. But the disquieting question remains: what *would* your local church do if Jesus, the real, undiminished reforming revolutionary that we see portrayed in the Scriptures, came into the community? For most of our churches, we expect that sparks would fly! Why? Because Jesus and religion just don’t mix. Jacques Ellul is absolutely right when he says that

For the Romans nascent Christianity was not at all a new religion. It was ‘antireligion.’ . . . What the first Christian generations were putting on trial was not just the imperial religion, as is often said, but every religion in the known world.¹⁰

Christianity claims not to be a religion that is superior to others, but to be an antireligion that refutes all the religions that attempt to link us with a divine universe. No doubt Christianity constantly becomes a religion . . . [however] the Christian religion itself is constantly called into question by the absolute that is revealed in Jesus Christ.¹¹

In Jesus we have the undoing of all that we call religion. In the place of a mediating system with its temples, rituals, creeds, and priestly cultus, he opens up the God experience to all and shatters the oppressive religious system of the day (Matt 21:28–46; Luke 19:10–26; 23:45). That the advent of Jesus signaled the demise of the temple system is clear. Says N. T. Wright, “Jesus was inaugurating a way of life which had no further need of the Temple.”¹² Even a cursory reading of Mark reveals that immediately after his Spirit baptism and ordeal in the desert, Jesus immediately begins confronting the forces that oppress human life—the demonic forces and the religious system. His attack on religion is relentless and cuts deep. In the ministry of Jesus, the kingdom of God breaks out among those whom the religious system had marginalized—the poor, the oppressed, the prostitutes—and the religious people find themselves under the judgment of God (e.g., Matt 23:13–39). And in Jesus’ answer to the Samaritan woman we see Jesus delegitimizing all attempts to localize and thus mediate and control God through the operation of sacred spaces (John 4:20–24).¹³ Furthermore, Jesus’ parables of judgment all call into question any attempt to control God and people and are therefore undeviating condemnations of religion in all its forms. Taken as a whole, it is difficult to see Jesus fitting into any religious system. In him is the undoing of all religion.

And because of this, the religious people hated Jesus and constantly plotted to kill him . . . and eventually did, in cahoots with the politicians

and the mob. And we would suggest that all religious people will likewise hate Jesus and seek to remove him from the equation because what he does is effectively invalidate the system that they have so deeply invested in. To reJesus the church, we must first look in the mirror and ask ourselves whether the strange and wonderful God-Man has invaded our life with purpose and freshness. If Christianity minus Christ equals religion, then Christianity plus Christ is the antidote to religion.

↩ **The Founder and the Found**

Part of the basis to this claim comes from an understanding of the defining role that Jesus plays for the movement that sprang from his life and work. In all people-movements, including religious movements, there is a defining relationship between the originator and the subsequent movement that forms from the work and teachings of that person. In some rare cases, a movement might well evolve from the original template set by its founder, taking on a broader vision or a new philosophical base while still remaining essentially true to its original self (e.g., the women's movement as it has evolved from the original suffragettes to modern-day feminism). But we would suggest that this ought not to be the case for the church. The living link between the founder and the found is critical for the health of Christianity in particular, as we have already tried to articulate.

Max Weber, the famous sociologist, was one of the first to broker these insights when he described the role of the "charismatic leader" in the founding of a movement. The charismatic leader in his view is distinguished from other types of leaders by his or her capacity to inspire loyalty toward himself or herself. And the source of this authority exists apart from any status gained from membership in an established institution. He also noted that movements, particularly religious movements that survive beyond the first generation, are started by such an extraordinarily gifted (charismatic) person who in a crisis situation puts forward a radically alternative vision of the world and thus initiates an ensuing mission to change the world in order to fulfill that vision. This annunciation of a radical vision and mission subsequently attracts a set of followers who collectively experience various successes and encounters that further validate the charismatic's mission. And so we find that eventually a team of devoted followers emerges to further advance the radical message of the founder.¹⁴

The point we make in referring to Weber here is that he rightly understood the critical factors that made for significant people movements and transformational organizations. For one, he clearly understood the role of

Radical Hospitality



Jean Vanier

By his mid-thirties, Jean Vanier, a native of Geneva, Switzerland, had also lived in England, France, and Canada; served in the British Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy; completed his doctorate in philosophy; and become a dynamic young professor at the University of Toronto. But it wasn't until 1964, when Vanier was thirty-six, that Vanier discovered what would become his true life's work. After witnessing the desperate situations of thousands of intellectually disabled people in mental institutions, he bought an old house in Trosly-Breuil, France, invited two men from such institutions to live with him, and established a community with them. Naming the home L'Arche, which means "the ark" in French, Vanier and the two men opened their home to others, gradually building a mutual community in which people with mental disabilities and people without maintained a genuine community. Since then, 130 other community homes have been formed in places all over the world. Although he has become internationally regarded, Vanier still makes his home in the original community of Trosly-Breuil. Jean Vanier is a little Jesus because he embodies the Christlike motivation to live among, befriend, and serve those who are otherwise treated as social outcasts in our world.

the founder as decisive, not only for the initiation of the religious movement but also in defining the ongoing life of the organization that outlives him or her. He also noted that in order to survive the loss of the founder, the movement has to somehow build the charisma of the founder into the life of the organization.¹⁵ He said, "The genuine charismatic situation quickly gives rise to incipient institutions, which emerge from the cooling off of extraordinary states or devotion and fever."¹⁶ In fact, it was Weber who coined the phrase we have already introduced: the routinization of charisma.

Thomas O'Dea refers to these catalyzing encounters that kick-start movements and then fade with the passing of time. He points out how consecutive generations tend to construct religious systems to take the place of the original encounter. He says, "Worship is the fundamental religious response [to such encounters] but in order to survive its charismatic moment

worship must become stabilized in established forms and procedures.”¹⁷ In fact, he argues that this is an unavoidable paradox for religious movements.¹⁸ The ultimate and the sacred cannot be expressed in institutional structures without those structures taking on a life of their own and corrupting what they are meant to represent. Yet without some form of institutionalization, religious experiences of themselves will not sustain a religious movement.

And herein lies an irresolvable dilemma for religious organizations: although religious movements are born out of firsthand religious experiences, they cannot survive and prosper without some form of stability and order. The *charism* (the originating grace or gift) has to be diffused, ritualized, and mediated by the organization so that the initial gift of the founder can be made accessible through the organization itself. While O’Dea saw this process of institutionalization as inevitable and even necessary, he also saw that it was paradoxically the process that would dilute or possibly even obliterate the initial message and ethos of the founder. Yet this routinization of charisma has a tendency to snuff out the life it was meant to protect and enhance. The crisis inevitably dawns when the outward forms of worship no longer match the inward experience and spiritual condition of the participants. Decline becomes inevitable. Authentic Christianity is subverted and constant renewals become necessary . . . hence the need to reJesus.

Weber maintained that the process of institutionalization and renewal involved a constant return to the charismatic center in order to relegitimize, or in our language, refound, the subsequent movement. To remain true, all religious organizations require a form of renewal that requires a return to the original ethos and the power of the founder. And whether one applies this to a denomination or to Christianity as a whole, one can call this rediscovery of one’s original message radical traditionalism because it involves going back to the organization’s deepest tradition and reinterpreting it for a new context.

In fact, there is a certain way of thinking and acting within an organization that can be traced back to its founder. This is called the organization’s foundational culture, and it is formed through three sources:

- ↩ The beliefs, values, and assumptions of its founders
- ↩ The validation of these beliefs through the learning experiences of the group
- ↩ The enhancement of these beliefs by the new beliefs, values, and assumptions brought by new group members.

But we can say categorically that the impact of the founder is the most important factor in determining the resultant culture of an organization or religion.¹⁹ In relation to the church we can call this process refounding the church, or simply reJesus.

In the formation of Christianity we can clearly see all these forces at work. In the New Testament (even the word “new” implies a departure from, or at least a radical reinterpretation of, the “old”) Jesus redefines the way people had previously understood and experienced the kingdom of God. As the true prophet of God, he totally radicalizes the kingdom by negating and bypassing the religious institution that has inadvertently begun to block its operations and activity (Matt 23:13ff.), and in so doing he opens up direct access for the people, for all who would draw near (e.g., Matt 11:28–30; 21:43; John 4:20–24). In doing these things, Jesus explicitly becomes the founder and initiator of a new covenant with the people of God. He initiated a way of engaging the God of Israel that later came to be called Christianity, the religion that takes its cue from him. We also know from the Gospels that Jesus spent significant and strategic time devoted to initiating his followers into the ways of the kingdom and to discipling and teaching them to recognize the dynamics of what it meant to be one of his followers. The basics of what it means to be a disciple are thus built into the system at its inception.

It was Peter Berger who alerted us to the fact that reality is in fact socially constructed. The social process is exactly how leaders get their ideas implemented. Their ideas are taught to the group, even imposed at times in the form of commands, as we can see in some aspects of Jesus’ teaching. But they are generally passed on to the followers through a combination of socialization, through the charismatic power of the founder, and by acting, by doing, by living out confidence in the message.

They knew they were bound to his teaching and template. Any apostolic development of the teachings of Jesus are authentic only insofar that they refer directly to the person, and extend the work of, Jesus. They are all bound to the revelation of God given in and through Jesus. They have no authority to speculate beyond that. They can, however, interpret Jesus and his teachings and reapply them in fresh cultural ways. As such the whole movement grows and evolves, but the nascent ethos of the founder is maintained. This is exactly what Paul does. The most cogent example of apostolic imagination and practice was given to us by Paul who spent his best energies in establishing new ground for the gospel and in working out the redemptive significance of the Messiah, in terms of both his person (e.g., Ephesians and Colossians) and

his work (e.g., Romans and Galatians). But he too is self-consciously bound by the revelation given in and through Jesus (Gal 1:8; Col 1:15–20; 1 Cor 3:11; 9:16–23). In a real sense his work always harks back to the Christ event to be true and authentic.

Early on, the original church had cause to recalibrate to Jesus. The original believers were largely Jews, and The Way was considered a sect under the broader umbrella of Judaism. As such, many of their expectations were colored by their Jewish nationalism. For instance, expectations of a restored Jewish kingdom were not met within a generation. In fact, rather than being liberated from foreign control, Jerusalem and the temple were brutally destroyed by the Romans, and Jews were scattered throughout the empire. The Jewish believers had cause to seriously rethink the bases of the faith. Their assumptions had to be radically reconsidered. Note the way that within a generation the Christian movement was already forced back to its founder to rediscover its original charism. Was it a Jewish renewal movement or something more? The Christian movement would have ample reason to do this again and again throughout history. It is what renewal of the faith, ministry, and mission of the church is all about.

And remember, we are talking here about both the founder and the found. Whatever sociological process we might use to understand the role of the founder of a movement, in order to be valid, his or her followers must somehow strive to embody the life, ideals, and reality of that founder. Likewise for the Christian movement, the founder must be able to be seen in the lives of the found. This is the process of embodiment, which is so essential to movements.²⁰ This is what it means for the church to have Jesus in its midst. This must surely partly be what it means to live “in Christ” and he in us. Observers should be able to encounter Jesus in and through the life and community of his followers. People observing us ought to be able to discern the elements of Jesus’ way in our ways. If they cannot find authentic signals of the historical Jesus through the life of his people, then as far as we are concerned they have the full right to question our legitimacy.

Tony Campolo tells the story of a drunk who was miraculously converted at a Bowery mission in New York. Like all Campolo stories, it has a jokey punch line that betrays a far more serious and convicting point.

The drunk, Joe, was known throughout the Bowery as the worst kind of wino, a hopeless derelict of a man, living on borrowed time. But following his conversion, everything changed. Joe became the most caring person that anyone associated with the mission had ever known. He spent his days

and nights hanging out at the hall, not balking at even the lowliest job. He mopped up vomit and urine and cleaned up drunks whatever their condition. He considered nothing too demeaning for him.

One evening, when the director of the mission was delivering his evening evangelistic message to the usual crowd of still and sullen men, their heads hung in penitence and exhaustion, there was one man who looked up, came down the aisle to the altar, and knelt to pray, crying out for God to help him to change. The repentant drunk kept shouting, “Oh God, make me like Joe! Make me like Joe! Make me like Joe!” The director of the mission leaned over and said to the man, “Son, I think it would be better if you prayed, ‘Make me like Jesus!’” The man looked up at the director with a quizzical expression on his face and asked, “Is he like Joe?”²¹

The New Testament writers likewise call people to emulate their example, knowing that they had committed their lives to Jesus and that he indeed “lived in them.” It takes either self-delusion, a lot of chutzpah, or a real commitment to the embodiment of Jesus’ message to be able to say “follow me as I follow Christ.” But Paul was never coy about calling people to follow his example. This might seem like arrogance to us, but, like the ex-drunk in Campolo’s story, he was so given over to the example of Christ that he had become a living embodiment of Jesus. It was Jesus he was pointing to, but it is Jesus through the medium of his own life. He understood Jesus lived in him and he in Christ. It is out of this conviction that he could say,

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Cor 11:1)

Join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. (Phil 3:17)

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you . . . (2 Thess 3:7)

Note how in Philippians 3:17 he also directs his readers to observe others whose lives mirror that of Jesus. In effect, the found are to replicate the founder to outsiders and to each other.

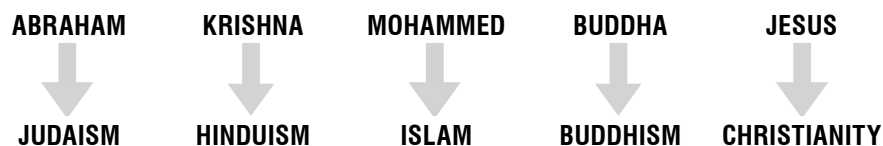
But to push the point a little further, consider the difference between Christianity and Islam. In both cases, the founder sets the primary pattern for others to follow—they provide the authenticating human image of the spiritual person for their followers to emulate. There is in all religions some real expectation of continuity between the founder and the follower. So, when we

see a person or organization claiming to be Christian but acting in a gratuitously violent and unloving way, we can say that that person or organization is clearly out of sync with the way of Jesus. We can say with some confidence that one cannot follow Jesus and at the same time act in ways deeply inconsistent with his teachings. That is why violent fundamentalisms are aberrations of Christianity as defined by Jesus. They distort the reality of love and forgiveness that are embodied in the Messiah.

But in the case of Islam, the founder set an entirely different model from that of Jesus. The Koran depicts Muhammed as a passionately spiritual man who called people into the worship of *Allah*. And there are some great spiritual insights in the Koran. However, the same Koran depicts Muhammad as a man with a rigid morality, an assertive sexuality, a bad temper, and distinctly warlike tendencies. So following the logic, we can say that when Islam acts similarly it is not entirely inconsistent with its founder at this point.

However, when Christianity is warlike and voracious, it betrays Jesus in a significant way. This is why racism, the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the Christian endorsement of unbridled capitalism of our day are such apostate distortions of the faith—apostate because they run contrary to the faith expression, the initial pattern, that Jesus set for us to follow. The founder’s influence must imbue the movement because we get our sense of place and our ongoing identity from him.

The following table will give the reader a feel of what we are saying here: we ought to get a feel of what a religion stands for by examining the lives and teachings of the founders (or key figures).²²



↩ Discerning the Inner Voice of the Organization

But beyond the role of the founder in the ongoing renewal of the church, we must briefly return to the idea of radical traditionalism. Another useful way of conceiving the renewal of organizations is to talk in terms of reforming, or even better, refounding the organization. Movement expert Steve Adison calls this discerning the inner voice of the organization.²³

Drawing on the insights of organizational theorist Robert Quinn,²⁴ Addison says that rather than us finding a purpose, a purpose finds us. Quinn argues that every organization has an inner voice that constitutes its moral core. Following this cue, then, we can say that in various forms of organizational renewal, the goal is not so much to impose a purpose on its members but to help them rediscover it, to train them to listen for the inner voice of the organization. Still, we can be sure that any attempt to realign the organization with its inner voice will threaten the existing culture, whose central impulse is self-preservation. Nonetheless, as Quinn says, this “articulation of the inner voice of an organization is often the first step toward revitalizing a company and uncovering a vision filled with resonance.”²⁵

Similarly, in his study of religious orders, Lawrence Cada refers to the “founding charism” of an order to describe its unique vision of the world transformed by the gospel.²⁶ The use of the term *charism* (grace) implies that the purpose of an organization is a gift that lies at the heart of the organization—a divine bequest, unique to that particular organization. And the recovery of that gift means a “return to the sources.”²⁷ Organizational renewal is about the discovery of an organization’s true identity and mission. The authority to bring transformation to the church does not rest in the person of the leader or group but in God’s calling. If this is so, then the key to the revitalization of religious organizations is to reappropriate, or recover, their founding charism.

But as mentioned earlier, this must not be the blind return to traditionalism but an innovative insight into how the founding charism is to be expressed in the contemporary world. This involves a rediscovery of the founder’s vision matched with spectacular innovations that are as yet unheard of.²⁸ Addison suggests then that revitalization requires an innovative return to tradition.

While many people use the term “radical” to mean a departure from the traditional, it refers to a return to the root cause of a thing. Webster defines “radical” as “of or pertaining to the root or origin; reaching to the center, to the foundation, to the ultimate sources, to the principles, or the like; original; fundamental; thorough-going; unsparing; extreme; as in, ‘radical evils’: ‘radical reform’; ‘a radical party.’”

We have been called radicals in our time, but using this definition, aren’t we all meant to be radicals in some form or another? We are hardly calling the church into new, uncharted territory. Rather, we advocate a return to our most fundamental cause. If that’s radical, then we are radicals indeed!

Central to the organizational renewal process is the rediscovery of the organization's identity and at the same time the innovative interpretation of that identity in a changed world. Thus, there is both a continuity and discontinuity in the revitalization process, involving both a conservative dimension as well as a radical one. Addison illustrates by referring to Volkswagen's innovative reinterpretation of the Beetle to illustrate this process. This iconic motorcar ceased production in the late 1970s before being resurrected for the new millennium. The new Beetle that emerged definitely has continuity with the original one but was in some sense radically new. It was a great success and a powerful illustration of radical traditionalism involved in refounding organizations.

But we can also learn from educational psychology in this matter. Jean Piaget, the great educational psychologist, conducted much of his early research on the streets of Geneva, interviewing children and observing how they played structured games together. He noted that very small children unquestioningly played games according to the inherited rules. They slavishly obeyed the traditional rules of, say marbles, because their older siblings or their parents had taught them how to play that way. Piaget then noted that at a certain stage in the development of the child he or she wanted to throw these rules away. A rule-less game of marbles on the streets of Geneva last century was exactly as you'd expect it to be—chaos! Later in childhood, these same children, fed up with chaotic games that were always won by bullies or the most crafty, rediscovered the original rules of the game. Piaget noted how much more powerfully these rules worked in the lives of the older children. They were the same rules they were taught as tiny children. But the difference now was that they had discovered these rules as an antidote to disorder. They felt these rules were *their* rules. In a sense, this process of childhood development mirrors what we've been discussing.

What we are advocating is a radical traditionalism. The church needs to follow the same path as the children did with their games of marbles. ReJesus, the refounding of the church, means departing from a blind, slavish allegiance to religious rules inherited from our parents and forebears. It means walking into the turmoil of chaos and daring to trust that the at the end of the path will be not bedlam but a rediscovery of the way of Jesus, a rediscovery of the original rules that we can own ourselves with greater conviction and authenticity. Jesus, as our founder, is our guide on this path. His words and his example are the constants as we leave our old traditions and look to bring the church and the gospel into new contexts of traditional radicalism.

← Notes

1. “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

2. This quote has appeared everywhere from fridge magnets to school blackboards. We found it online at <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/33522.html>.

3. Roland Allen, *The Compulsion of the Spirit* (ed. David Paton and Charles H. Long; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 47–48.

4. Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955; repr. New York: Harper’s N.Y., 1960), 32. Cited 25 September 2008. Online: <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=459&C=377>.

5. The word “religion” can be used in either a positive or a negative sense. We almost use it always in the negative.

6. From Abraham Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 169–70.

7. John V. Taylor, *The Go-between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: SCM, 1972), 190.

8. N. T. Wright, quoted in Bruxy Cavey, *The End of Religion: An Introduction to the Subversive Spirituality of Jesus* (Ottawa: Agora, 2005), 62.

9. Martin Buber, *Mamre* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1946), 103–4.

10. Ellul, *Subversion of Christianity*, 55.

11. *Ibid.*, 141.

12. Quoted in Cavey, *End of Religion*, 62.

13. He says to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. . . . But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.”

14. Weber’s ideas are widely discussed and freely available. See, for instance, H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 262ff.

15. See the work of Ichak Adizes, *Corporate Life Cycles* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1988).

16. Quoted in H. B. Jones, “Magic, Meaning, and Leadership: Weber’s Model and the Empirical Literature,” *Human Relations* 54/6 (2001): 753.

17. Thomas F. O’Dea, “Five Dilemmas of the Institutionalization of Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 1/1 (October 1961): 34.

18. *Ibid.*, 32.

19. Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 209–10.
20. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 114–16.
21. Michael heard Tony Campolo tell this story in a presentation many years ago.
22. Adopted from online podcast notes by Canadian writer and speaker, Bruxy Cavey, <http://www.themeetinghouse.ca/podcast/TMH.rss>.
23. From Addison's exceptional but unpublished work on Christian movements. Material used with permission. See also his blog on movements called *World Changers* at <http://www.steveaddison.net/>.
24. Robert E. Quinn, *Change the World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 61.
25. *Ibid.*, 138.
26. Lawrence Cada et al., *Shaping the Coming Age of Religious Life* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 92.
27. Raymond Hostie, *The Life and Death of Religious Orders* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 1983), 277.
28. *Ibid.*, 278.