



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 with

Practicing Dangerous Mercy



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.

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 *re*Jesus 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 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

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.

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

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19. *Ibid.*, 530.