

“In *ReJesus*, Alan and Michael successfully reinstate Jesus at the center of the spiritual life and mission of God’s people. In an era overly focused on how to ‘do church,’ their message is clear; we must take a closer look at the life of Jesus. If you want to jump back into authentic, New Testament discipleship, then take their challenge to recalibrate the mission and work of the church around the story of Jesus. As only true practitioners can, they provide an abundance of practical insights and inspiration.”

—Matt Smay, Missio Director of the Missional Church Apprenticeship Practicum, co-author, *The Tangible Kingdom*

“Frost and Hirsch excavate the ruins of Western Christianity, digging through the accumulation of 2,000 years of dust in order to return the church to the sure foundation of Jesus Christ. This book is a challenging and helpful addition to the task of re-centering, re-founding, or, in their words, ‘re-Jesusing’ Christianity. The Jesus-shaped church will look quite different from many of the modern variety, and Frost and Hirsch skillfully articulate both the need and the means to align the way of Jesus with the religion that bears his name.”

—Mike Erre, Teaching Pastor at Rock Harbor Church in Costa Mesa, California, author, *The Jesus of Suburbia*

“THIS is THE conversation to be had! While everyone is obsessed with reinventing the church—this puts not just the conversation, but the focus squarely back on where it belongs: Jesus! It’s not the forms, the structures, the styles, the venues—it’s the person of Jesus. I devoured every page of this book; I was completely engrossed in it. All true missional living starts and finishes with Jesus. When Jesus is at the core, not just of telling others about him but of creating a new life within us, we will be transformed and the church will be redefined. It will come not from ideas from without but from a person from within—Jesus! When Jesus is at the core, our faith and the church will always be alive to anyone, any time, any culture, and any place in the world. What Alan and Mike have done is write a book that answers the ‘so what’ of Jesus to his followers. The book is profound.”

—Bob Roberts Jr., Senior Pastor of NorthWood Church in Keller, Texas, author, *The Multiplying Church*

“‘The times, they are a-changing,’ observed and sung by Dylan decades ago, continues to be the reality facing the church at the beginning of the 21st century. In response to our present challenges, Frost and Hirsch offer a fresh and provocative reading of the person of Jesus as the key for Christians to draw upon in living as contemporary disciples. They dig deep into the Jesus narrative for clues in understanding a wild Messiah—a ReJesus—and they discover key resources that are used to reclaim a radical call to discipleship. The reader will find their proposal to be openly invitational but should be prepared to be quite challenged.”

—Craig Van Gelder, Professor of Congregational Mission, Luther Seminary, author, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*

“Is the religion of Christianity the religion of Jesus? Is Jesus to be a model for our lives, or is he just a God-shaped security deposit? Frost and Hirsch recover God’s call to become more like His Son and dare to place an earthy, narrative Christology at the center of all things missional.”

—Sally Morgenthaler, author, *Worship Evangelism*, contributor, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*

“As Christendom dies a slow death, people scour the landscape of literature to find answers for how to redo church, re-engage faith, or reposition so that we can maintain our present status quo of reputation, resources, and rest. In *ReJesus*, Hirsch and Frost call us past these pathetic pursuits to a new world, or old world, in which leaders follow Jesus and let Jesus reform the church. Read, only if you’re willing to rethink everything.”

—Hugh Halter, Missio Director, Pastor of Adullam in Denver, Colorado, co-author of *The Tangible Kingdom*

“The themes of mission and personal and corporate renewal can be approached from a variety of perspectives. Many books on mission take a pragmatic approach, focusing on strategies; while those addressing renewal tend towards a nostalgic spiritualizing, drawing inspiration from previous revivalism the church. *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* represents a different approach. It draws together three key themes that are all too often compartmentalized: Christology, Missiology, and Ecclesiology. So many churches in the West are suffering from amnesia with regard to the Biblical narrative, or at best are guilty of a selective reading, resulting in a misrepresentation of Jesus to conform to our cultural assumptions and boundaries. Frost and Hirsch present us with a faithful portrayal of Jesus as fully human, as God intended us to be, by showing us what the God who dared to make us in his own image is really like. The authors present an untamed Jesus who makes scary, radical demands, while at the same time giving of himself to empower his followers with the courage and resources necessary to follow his leading. *ReJesus* reveals abundant evidence of extensive research, and dropped into the text are brief descriptions of individuals who embodied the challenges Frost and Hirsch present to the reader. In confronting such a gospel every seeker will find more than they bargained for! But the gospel was never a bargain, it is always a gracious gift—far too great and glorious for us to ever fully comprehend or exhaust its potential. In reading this book be prepared for a wild ride!”

—Eddie Gibbs, Senior Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, author, *LeadershipNext*

“Frost and Hirsch have done it again. Reading *ReJesus* provoked, frustrated, and ultimately convicted me of my need to live more deeply in the way of Jesus. If you are looking for another book on simply bolstering church *as-we-know-it*, this is not for you. If you and your church want to be challenged to walk in the Way of Jesus, this book delivers.”

—Ed Stetzer, blogger (www.edstetzer.com), author, *Planting Missional Churches*

“Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost continue to push the church into the future with their latest project, *ReJesus*. Herein they focus on what every Christian church must focus on—Jesus Christ—and they develop a Christ-centered strategy for missional ecclesiology. This is a timely and relevant book and deserves a wide readership.”

—Tony Jones, national coordinator of Emergent Village, doctoral fellow in practical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, author, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*

“*ReJesus* calls to mind Jaroslav Pelikan’s *Jesus Through the Centuries* and the stubborn fact we can never get outside our own culture(s) to a pure Jesus. That way is not open to those who confess the Incarnate One. In every age Christians are compelled to wrestle with the meaning of Jesus again. Colin Greene’s *Christology in Cultural Perspective* reminds us of how we must continually wrestle with how to be faithful to Jesus in our day. Neibuhr’s *Christ and Culture* shows how we continually shape Jesus out of our cultural imaginations. Yet, in all its eradicable shortcomings, the church is still the location where we’re shaped by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. We always wrestle with how to re-Jesus because we have no choice. May we do it with humility and a deep love for these clay vessels of history we call the church, for there is no other place in which Jesus is made present. This book is a contribution to that wrestling; like all such wrestling it is itself enmeshed in culture. I trust it encourages others to wrestle that we might all be more faithful followers of Jesus.”

—Al Roxburgh, Vice President, Allelon Canada, co-author, *The Missional Leader*

“It is with such ease that the church veers off course. *ReJesus* draws us back to Jesus in all of his radical, passionate, and transformative beauty. Frost and Hirsch demonstrate by word and example that to be the church demands a fearless, intimate, and constant encounter with Christ. As individuals and as a community, we have no option but to heed their wisdom.”

—Daniel M. Harrell, Associate Minister at Park Street Church in Boston, author, *Nature’s Witness: How Evolution Can Inspire Faith*

“At this moment in history we are in the middle of an ecclesial and theological reformation that is at least as radical as, and likely more significant than, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries. In this bold, compelling, and prophetic masterpiece, Hirsch and Frost articulate the beautiful vision of the Jesus-centered Kingdom that is driving this new Reformation. Hirsch and Frost brilliantly weave together insightful biblical exegesis, critical historical reflection, transforming spiritual discipleship, probing cultural analysis, and even a good bit of humor in ways that help readers get free from the deadening yoke of the Christian religion and rediscover the wild, untamed, life-giving Jesus of the Gospels. I hope everyone who professes faith in Christ will dare to read this book. They will not put it down unchanged.”

—Greg Boyd, Senior Pastor of Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, co-author, *The Jesus Legend*

“Calls for a fresh, radical following of Jesus Christ are not new. Reformers from Francis of Assisi to Mother Teresa have sounded the call; already in the New Testament the Apostle John says true Christians must ‘walk as [Jesus] walked,’ and Peter insists we must follow in Jesus’ steps. What is new about the message of *ReJesus* is the creative interweaving of the themes of Jesus’ example, God’s mission, and the kingdom mission of the church—the ‘reintegration,’ as the authors put it, ‘of the theological concepts of *missio Dei*, *participatio Christi*, and *imago Dei*.’

“The book is filled with images—visual, imaginative, conceptual, biographical—that evoke Jesus Christ and Jesus-like discipleship. The authors’ eclectic mining of secondary sources also helps free Jesus from well-rooted stereotypes. I view this book as an enlargement of the foundation of the authors’ provocative and prophetic earlier works, rather than a sequel to or restatement of them. I think the authors are correct: ‘Christianity minus Christ equals Religion’—not authentic discipleship.”

—Howard A. Snyder, Professor of Wesley Studies,
Tyndale Seminary, Toronto, author, *Radical Renewal*

“How horrific it is to think that we could be so passionately missional, but subtly drift from being entirely Jesus-centric in the process. Anyone in the missional conversation must never, ever forget about this subtle drift. *ReJesus* challenges us all in very theological, hopeful, and practical ways to never let that happen.”

—Dan Kimball, Pastor of Vintage Faith Church in Santa
Cruz, California, author, *They Like Jesus But Not The Church*

“This books reads you; you don’t read it. Over and over you will find yourself wrestling with yourself and with God. In the end you have more than a decision to make; you have a quest to pursue. What you do about that will define your life.”

—Reggie McNeal, Leadership Network,
author, *Missional Renaissance*



Introduction: Read This Bit First

Jesus is the center of all, the object of all, whoever does not know him, knows nothing aright, either of the world or of himself.

—Blaise Pascal

The means to know God is Christ, whom no one may know unless they follow after him with their life.

—Hans Denck

On the morning of June 7, 1964, the recently consecrated wing of the Ku Klux Klan known as the White Knights gathered solemnly in the Boykin Methodist Church in the pine woods near Raleigh, Mississippi. Concerned about what they saw as a wave of blacks and communists hitting the streets of Mississippi, the Klan had marshaled their forces to plan a so-called counter-attack against the civil rights movement. Armed with rifles, pistols, and shot-guns and protected by men riding on horseback through the woods and by two Piper Cubs circling the property overhead, they bowed their heads as their Grand Chaplain ascended to the pulpit to read the following prayer:

Oh God, our Heavenly Guide, as finite creatures of time and as dependent creatures of Thine, we acknowledge Thee as our sovereign Lord. Permit freedom and the joys thereof to forever reign throughout our land. May we as klansmen forever have the courage of our convictions that we may always stand for Thee and our great nation. May the sweet cup of brotherly fraternity ever be ours to enjoy and build within us that kindred spirit which will keep us unified and strong. Engender within us that wisdom kindred to honorable decisions and the Godly work. By the power of Thy infinite spirit and the energizing virtue therein, ever keep before us our oaths of secrecy and pledges of righteousness. Bless us now in this assembly that we may honor Thee in all things, we pray in the name of Christ, our blessed Savior. Amen.¹

The congregation said their amens softly under their breaths. Later, Sam Bowers, the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi, took to the pulpit and in overtly religious language declared what amounted to a holy war against the civil rights leadership, detailing a formal protocol for all Klan attacks on the “nigger-communist invasion of Mississippi.”² Within the month, three civil rights workers were murdered execution-style in nearby Neshoba County.

The overtly Christian character of the Ku Klux Klan, its symbolism, and its language, will not be news to anyone—who can forget those burning crosses? But it’s the specifically Christ-focused aspect of the Klan philosophy that continues to shock nearly half a century later. Praying in the name of Christ at the inauguration of what was effectively a racist death squad still jars, but there can be no denying that the KKK routinely called on Jesus to strengthen them in their quest. The devotion to Jesus of the Imperial Wizard, Sam Bowers, is well known. Ken Dean, the director of the Council of Human Relations in Mississippi in 1964, said of him, “The Imperial Wizard, in the most radical sense possible, is a believer in the sovereignty of God.”³ Indeed, more than that, Bowers believed that God’s sovereignty is most supremely demonstrated in his raising of Jesus from the dead:

There is one simple, and central, Empirical Fact, of manifested human history. That Empirical Fact, of course, is the Physical Resurrection of The Galilean . . . The genuineness of Faith is in the Omnipotent Power of God to perform the Miracle: The certainty of rational human knowledge is that the Resurrection did occur: As an Empirically manifested Fact.⁴

Charles Marsh, who in researching the civil rights movement in Mississippi began a correspondence with Bowers later in life, says of him: “Bowers as theologian is, in a most radical, perplexing, and bizarre sense, a believer in the Christ-centered shape of all reality.”⁵

How distressing, then, to those of us who likewise seek to trust in the “Christ-centered shape of all reality,” that we share such a faith with so reprehensible a set of characters as Sam Bowers and the KKK. How did followers of Jesus end up so far from the teaching and example of Jesus? How did Jesus followers like members of the Lutheran Church in Nazi Germany quote Jesus in one breath and incite racial vilification in the next? The same could be asked of the Crusaders or the Conquistadors or even the Rwandan death squads.

The KKK is, of course, an extreme example of a group adopting the image of Jesus in a way that seems foreign to us. But there are milder ex-

amples of this even within our own broad community of people who identify themselves as Christians. In 2005, while en route to a speaking tour of the United Kingdom, we decided to treat ourselves to a stopover in Rome. As one does when in the eternal city, we visited the Vatican and St. Peter's Basilica. It was every bit as beautiful as we had imagined. Everyone who sees St. Peter's agrees that it is a truly remarkable feat of human ingenuity, with perfectly designed shafts of natural light highlighting its artistic treasures, built on a scale designed to foster a feeling of spiritual awe. Like all tourists we wandered, mesmerized, our necks craned upwards to take in the sheer grandeur of the cathedral. Not looking where we were going, we accidentally bumped into each other, and there in the middle of the room that represented the heart of global Christianity for centuries, we reflected on what we were seeing and asked each other where Jesus was to be found in this place. Certainly, we agreed, the architecture of the basilica was stunning, and the sculpture, windows, and ceiling were beautiful. But both of us had the same nagging question bubbling around in our minds: Where is the poor, itinerant rabbi from Nazareth?

Similarly, on a recent speaking assignment in Moscow, Michael had the opportunity to wander through the Orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Constructed as recently as the 1990s, it is an astonishing feat of religious architecture. Situated on the banks of the Moskva River, a few blocks from the Kremlin, it replaced the original cathedral that had been destroyed by Stalin in 1931. It is constructed almost entirely of marble, and its gleaming golden domes or cupolas make it the tallest Orthodox church in the world. The white marble exterior is completely ringed by astonishing bronze relief statues of various saints and Christian heroes. Inside, the chapels are configured as an equal-sided cross measuring 85 meters wide, each replete with hundreds of gilt icons and frescoes. Wandering around the cavernous main chapel, which can hold up to ten thousand people, it is hard not to be amazed by the beauty of this house of worship. But if you look more closely, some disquieting features begin to emerge.

The original cathedral commemorated the so-called divine intercession that led to the Russian victory over Napoleon in 1812. In fact, Tchaikovsky's 1812 *Overture* debuted in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in 1882. When Boris Yeltsin approved the rebuilding of the cathedral, it was designed to be as close a replica of the original as possible, including its deeply patriotic Russian themes. So, this great building manages to be both a religious space and a historical monument to the militaristic might of Russia. There

are frescoes that deify historical figures and events. The two-story galleries surrounding the main church are devoted to the history of Russia and the war of 1812 specifically. In fact, the marble boards on the first floor commemorate the participants of that bloody war. The frescoes in the second-story gallery depict various historical events and personages that played a decisive role in the Orthodox church or in Russian history. Below the new church is a large hall for church assemblies, where the last Russian tsar and his family were glorified as saints in 2000. The face of Jesus therefore sits alongside an image of the incompetent Tsar Nicholas II, who oversaw the vicious Bloody Sunday massacre of unarmed, peaceful demonstrators in 1905.

As Michael left the cathedral and headed through the snow to the nearby Metro station he encountered an elderly woman kneeling on the frozen pavement, begging for loose change from disinterested passersby. While it was difficult to see the real Jesus in the cathedral frescoes, it wasn't hard to recall Jesus' words about what we do for the "least of these" being done as if for him. According to Jesus' own words, he should be identifiable in the ragged image of the suppliant pauper outside the cathedral far more than in the astonishing gilt iconography inside.

We open this book with these three vastly different stories—the 1964 massacre in Neshoba County, and our visits to the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox cathedral—to illustrate our concern with what has been promulgated in Jesus' name throughout history. In Mississippi, Rome, and Moscow, the name of Jesus has been invoked as central to movements that do not seem to be in accord with the Jesus we find in the pages of the Gospels. In the descriptions of the KKK's Bible-thumping reign of terror in Mississippi we are aghast that men could attempt to sanctify their actions with prayers to Jesus. In the Vatican, one of the archetypal buildings dedicated to the religion that was founded on Jesus Christ, we cannot locate the simple, hardy, revolutionary carpenter who is compellingly portrayed in the Gospels. At the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the Jesus of the Gospels competes with tsars and generals for the affections of the devoted. All of these are unsettling insights that speak directly to the purpose of this book because they raise disturbing questions about the continuity between Jesus and the subsequent religion established in his name.

In saying this, we don't mean to equate the Catholic or Orthodox churches with the Ku Klux Klan. We simply mean to identify instances in which a group's depiction of the person of Jesus is incongruous to us. Indeed,

the discontinuity between Jesus and the religion that bears his name that we found in Rome and Moscow is by no means limited to those churches or denominations. Both Catholic and Protestant groups, right up to our present time and including even the newer Christian church movements, have traded in the radical way of Jesus for the seemingly greater grandeur of such religious expressions.

These examples suggest questions that can be, indeed, should be, asked of all believers, churches, and denominations in any time and place:

- ↩ What ongoing role does Jesus the Messiah play in shaping the ethos and self-understanding of the movement that originated in him?
- ↩ How is the Christian religion, if we could legitimately call it that, informed and shaped by the Jesus that we meet in the Gospels?
- ↩ How do we assess the continuity required between the life and example of Jesus and the subsequent religion called Christianity?
- ↩ In how many ways do we domesticate the radical Revolutionary in order to sustain our religion and religiosity?
- ↩ And perhaps most important of all, how can a rediscovery of Jesus renew our discipleship, the Christian community, and the ongoing mission of the church?

These are not insignificant questions because they take us to the core of what the church is all about. They take us to the defining center of the movement that takes its cue from Jesus. Rather than call this reformation, we will call this task refounding the church because it raises the issue of the church's true founder or foundation. And in our opinion, nothing is more important for the church in our day than the question of refounding Christianity. It has a distinct poignancy at the dawn of the twenty-first century as we collectively attempt to address Christianity's endemic and long-trended decline in the West. We seem a little lost, if truth be told, and no quick-fix church-growth solution can be found that can stop the hemorrhage. There is no doubt that we face a spiritual, theological, missional, and existential crisis in the West.

We must admit that both of us are somewhat obsessed with mission and what it means to be a missional people. But we both remain convinced that it is Christology that remains even more foundational and therefore the primary issue. We have elsewhere asserted that it is Christology (the exploration

of the person, teachings, and impact of Jesus Christ) that determines misology (our purpose and function in the world), which in turn determines our ecclesiology (the forms and functions of the church).⁶ We have found

Follow Me—Becoming a Little Jesus

Following Jesus involves more than simply accepting him as your Savior via some prayer of commitment, no matter how sincere that prayer might be. In order to follow Jesus you must also emulate him, using his life as a pattern for your own. We call this emulation becoming a “little Jesus.”

When we call ourselves little Jesuses, we aren't claiming to be able to walk on water or die for the sins of the world. No, being a little Jesus means that we adopt the values embodied in Jesus' life and teaching. Only Jesus was able to feed thousands with small amounts of bread and fish, but as little Jesuses we can embrace the values of hospitality and generosity. We might not be able to preach to the multitudes, but we can commit to speaking truth to lies. We can't die for anyone's sins, but we can embrace selflessness, sacrifice, and suffering.

We hope to see a conspiracy of little Jesuses unleashed all over the world, transforming their communities the way Jesus transformed his. To give concrete examples of what it means to emulate Jesus, throughout this book we will be giving thumbnail portraits of the little Jesuses who have inspired us.

no reason to revise our opinion on this, but over time we have only become even more convinced of the primacy of this formula. Both of us (together and apart) have written books about a distinctly missional form of discipleship and ecclesiology.⁷ In writing this book, we feel we are now getting to the nub of the matter. We are going back to the founder and recalibrating the entire enterprise along christological lines.

The core task of this book therefore will be to explore the connection between the way of Jesus and the religion of Christianity. We will attempt to assess the Christian movement in the light of the biblical revelation of Jesus and to propose ways in which the church might reconfigure itself, indeed, recalibrate its mission, around the example and teaching of the radical rabbi from Nazareth. Where is the continuity? Why is what we experience as Christianity discontinuous with the way of Jesus? How consistent is our witness with his life and teachings? And can we move away from his prototypal spirituality without doing irreparable damage to the integrity of the faith? How far is too far?

Similarly, Jacques Ellul, the French theologian and philosopher, raises a disturbing historical problem for us to solve, a problem that he calls “the subversion of Christianity.”

The question that I want to sketch in this work is one that troubles me most deeply. As I now see it, it seems to be insoluble and assumes a serious character of historical oddness. It may be put very simply: How has it come about that the development of Christianity and the church has given birth to a society, a civilization, a culture that are completely opposite to what we read in the Bible, to what is indisputably the text of the law, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul? I say advisedly “completely opposite.” There is not just contradiction on one point but on all points. On the one hand, Christianity has been accused of a whole list of faults, crimes, and deceptions that are nowhere to be found in the original text and inspiration. On the other hand, revelation has been progressively modeled and reinterpreted according to the practice of Christianity and the church. . . . This is not just deviation but radical and essential contradiction, or real subversion.⁸

And while this might seem to be an overstatement, Ellul proceeds to back up his conclusions with some unnerving scholarship. To our thinking, no one has yet answered his questions in a satisfactory way. Yet they cannot be avoided if we are to re-establish ourselves as an authentic church in the twenty-first century. Therefore, among other things, we have taken it upon ourselves to further develop his concerns and to continue to raise the questions first posed by Ellul.

But this quest is not limited to the realm of scholarship and philosophy. For example, at a more popular level, Erwin McManus takes up a similar theme in *The Barbarian Way*, in which he rails against the transformation of Christianity from a dangerous and revolutionary spiritual force into a “religious civilization.” And rightly so. Is such a civilization, with its associated civil religion, what Jesus intended for the movement he started? Was it his intention to produce a domesticated religion with a fully fledged mediating priesthood, cumbersome rituals, and dense theologies, along with all the other trappings of religions with ambiguous connections to the surrounding society and culture? Is this what Jesus meant when he came pronouncing the arrival of the kingdom of God or the tearing of the veil in the temple at his death?⁹

So what’s this book all about? It’s all about Jesus, with direct implications for our discipleship, some radical challenges for our churches, and some suggested reformulations for our spirituality. In short, it’s about re-Jesusing the church.¹⁰

It's All About Jesus

From the beginning, let us say that we believe that the only way we can truly authenticate ourselves as an expression of Christianity is to somehow measure ourselves against the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, our Lord. And it is to him that we must now return if we are going to faithfully negotiate the profound challenges of the twenty-first century. But surely this is what the church tries to do in every age and context? Surely all expressions of Christianity seek to call Jesus Lord and have a special place reserved for him in their life and theology. We would argue that while confessionally this might be true, the church throughout history struggles to concretely conform its life to the radical life and teachings of Jesus. We don't say this judgmentally, as we are well aware how difficult it is to live a life based fully on Jesus. It is no easy thing, because the way that Jesus sets for us to follow is inherently subversive against all attempts to control, and thus institutionalize, the revelation that he so powerfully ushers in. In other words, it's just plain hard to create a religion out of the way of Jesus.

So this book is dedicated to the recovery of the absolute centrality of the person of Jesus in defining who we are as well as what we do. As hard as it is to truly follow him, we assert that we must constantly return to Jesus to authenticate as well as legitimize ourselves as his people. We have no other Archimedean point by which to set our coordinates or any other touchstone by which we can assess the abiding validity of our faith and to see if we are authentically Christian. The love of Jesus, and our commitment to live in conformity to him, is in effect an inbuilt spiritual mechanism at the heart of the church's theology and experience that provides an instrument for our ongoing renewal. It seems to us that a constant, and continual, return to Jesus is absolutely essential for any movement that wishes to call itself by his name.

But it is hard to keep a clear vision of the true way of Jesus, particularly when you live within a culture that is far askew from that way. Missiologist David Bosch grew up as a proud racist Afrikaner near Kuruman in South Africa. Looking back with shame, he recounts how in 1948, the same year he entered teacher's college, the pro-apartheid National Party was swept into power. For Afrikaners like Bosch, "it was to us like a dream come true when the Nationalist Party won that victory. We had no reservations whatsoever."¹¹ It was during this very time that young David Bosch was sensing a strong call into the Christian ministry, seeing no conflict between his support for apartheid and his belief in the teaching of Jesus.

But Bosch is not the only well-meaning theologian to have been guilty of such dissonance. Early last century, the well-known historian Adolf von Harnack remarked, “There is something touching in the striving of every individual to approach this Jesus Christ from the perspective of his personality and individual interests and to find in Him none other than himself, or to receive at the very least a small part of Him.”¹² By “something touching” Harnack means something sad or pathetic or pitiful. As a historian of dogma, he had seen too many agendas take Jesus captive, quoting him to justify all manner of beliefs and practices. He became convinced that the kernel of the gospel had been overlaid by the husks of metaphysical concepts alien to the teachings of Jesus. The primitive stories of Jesus had been corrupted by official church dogma, claimed Harnack.

Indeed, it’s not hard to find examples to support his view. Those who want to find in Jesus merely a reformer of Judaism, or the last of the prophets, have managed to do so quite readily. Supporters of violence have characterized him as a revolutionary, while Tolstoy and his disciples saw him as a teacher of nonresistance. To New Age scholars, Jesus is the holy one of an esoteric order. To the enemies of the traditional social order, he was a warrior against the routine. And to racists, Jesus was an Aryan Galilean. In fact, after ten years in prison for his involvement in the deaths of the three civil rights workers, Sam Bowers returned to Mississippi to devote himself to a study of the life of Christ and was never, in forty years of research, convinced that Jesus was anything other than Bowers believed him to be when he ascended that pulpit in 1964.

Harnack believed that the only answer to the problem of losing the kernel of the gospel under the husks of foreign ideas was to emancipate the gospel by returning to its primitive form, freeing it from centuries of superstitious Catholicism. And in this he was right. Setting Jesus free from Nazis, racist Afrikaners, Klansmen, and the dogma of the church is essential, but even Harnack wasn’t able to let Jesus be Jesus. As a leading Protestant liberal, he launched what would famously be called the “quest for the historical Jesus,” believing sincerely that if only the real Jesus could be recovered, he would be the inspiration for a renewed Christianity. Today, twentieth-century German liberals like Harnack are often seen as falling into the very trap in which they accused others of being snared. Besotted by the liberal humanism of their time and unable to escape the rigors of the new science, history, they limited their rediscovery of Jesus to that of a purely human figure. Harnack’s quest for an emancipated Jesus led him to one without such concepts as revelation, incarnation, miracle,

and resurrection, which he considered unscientific. In the much-quoted judgment of the Catholic George Tyrrell, “The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nine centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.”¹³

Suffering Prophet



Martin Luther King Jr.

Like Jesus announcing the kingdom of God, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. prophetically spoke to the possibility of a new American society—a society without racism, oppression, and violence. His iconic “I Have a Dream” speech, singing out his hope for America’s future, echoes Isaiah 40, “I have a dream that every valley will be exalted . . .” and Amos 5:24, “No, no we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. . . .” His uncompromising stance on non-violence even in the face of extreme provocation was influenced by the non-violent activism of Mahatma Gandhi in India, and deliberately embodied the explicit teachings of Jesus to turn the other cheek and to love one’s enemies. King’s message of hope and justice inspired African-Americans to claim their place at America’s table, rather like Jesus’ message gave hope to the poor of his day. As a little Jesus, King transformed society, and his assassination in 1968 mirrors the sacrificial death of Jesus. King is one of the ten twentieth-century martyrs from around the world who are depicted in statues above the Great West Door in London’s Westminster Abbey.

Surely the challenge for the church today is to be taken captive by the agenda of Jesus, rather than seeking to mold him to fit our agendas, no matter how noble they might be. We acknowledge that we can never truly claim to know him completely. We all bring our biases to the task. But we believe it is inherent in the faith to keep trying and to never give up on this holy quest. The challenge before us is to let Jesus be Jesus and to allow ourselves to be caught up in his extraordinary mission for the world.

Whether it is the grand ecclesiastical project of the institutional churches, epitomized by the ostentatious excess of the Vatican, or the tawdry grab for the hearts and minds of the aspirational middle class by prosperity-style Pentecostalism, the Christian movement has been subverted. Like a forgotten nativity scene in a shopping mall dominated by Santa Claus, reindeer, elves, Disney characters, tinsel, baubles, and fake snow, the biblical Jesus is

hard to find. But Jesus is still calling us to come and join him in a far more reckless and exciting adventure than that of mere church attendance. When allowed to be as he appears in the pages of Scripture, Jesus will not lead us to hatred, violence, greed, excess, earthly power, or material wealth. Instead, he will call us to a genuinely biblical and existential faith that believes in him, not simply believing in belief, as in many expressions of evangelicalism. It requires an ongoing encounter with Jesus. This will raise issues in the *ways of knowing* that bring about true spiritual transformation, which we will explore later in this book.

And so it is all about Jesus for us, with some direct implications for our lives as followers of Jesus.

Direct Implications for Our Discipleship

Because this is a book about Jesus, it must also be a book that explores our living relationship with him. Therefore it should also be about discipleship—our experiencing the redemption he brings, being incorporated into his body, following in his way, becoming like him, and taking up his cause. And so any attempt to reJesus the church must also recover a real sense of the radical and revolutionary nature of what it means to follow Jesus in the current Western context. To be free in Jesus must somehow mean that the idols of our time come under some serious questioning. For instance, to be free in Jesus surely will mean liberation from the shackles of a predominant and omnipresent middle-class consumerism that weighs heavily on us. To be free in Jesus means allowing Jesus to be Jesus, and in doing so, allowing Jesus to challenge our religiosity or our self-righteousness or our greed or worse.

Radical Challenges for Our Churches

Following Jesus will also have implications for a religion constrained by degenerating institutional forms and expressions. And so this is also a book that will have direct implications for missional ecclesiology (our understanding and practice of church). We will explore the implications of the love and following of Jesus for the missional church at the dawn of what might prove to be the most missionally challenging century ever. And given that we are mainly concerned with how Jesus shapes our mission and our experience of church, we believe that if we don't deal with Christology, how can we ever get

mission, or even, and perhaps especially, a right view of ecclesiology? How many so-called new movements has the Protestant church seen in recent memory? Whether it is Pentecostalism, church growth theory, the third-wave charismatic movement, the parachurch movement, rapid church multiplication, emerging church, simple church, or the passion movement, so many of them have been presented as new ways of doing church. From our perspective, this is putting the cart before the horse. Let's get our Christology right and then dare to place all our deeply held desires for how to do church at its service. Not vice versa.

Are we fundamentally aligned with Jesus' purposes and will for his community on earth? It's a good question, and one we must ask at this critical time in history. When we direct that question to our founder, we find the answer somewhat disturbing. The only means we have of proposing a viable answer is to compare the 'religion' of Jesus with the religion of Christianity to see if these coincide. How else are we to assess our authenticity? If we are to take him as the prototypal Christian, and if, apart from the uniquely messianic aspects of his work, we are to take his words and actions as exemplary and authoritative for all of his followers everywhere, then we are left no option but to make this dangerous comparison. In fact, it's dangerous because we believe such a comparison will reveal the church to be on the wrong side of Jesus' type of barbarian spirituality and religion, precisely because his form of spirituality can hardly be considered to be civil. It must be called subversive by all that is called civilized. It is what Ellul called "antireligion." Jesus undermines any status quo that is not built on the all-encompassing demands of the kingdom, and this must call into question much of our religious codes, institutions, and behavior.

Some Suggested Reformulations of Our Spirituality

And because this is a book about Jesus, it is also therefore a book exploring the nature of Christian spirituality and worship in our context. If Jesus is our center point, our guide, and the mediator between humanity and God, then we cannot bypass the implications that this will have for our spirituality.

It is true that Jesus is like God, but the greater truth, one closer to the revelation of God that Jesus ushers in, is that God is like Christ. As A. Michael Ramsey, the former Anglican archbishop, noted, "God is Christlike and in him

is no unChristlikeness at all.”¹⁴ Or in the words of Jesus, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father, I and the Father are one” (John 14:9, 1:14, 18). This has massive implications for us, especially for our understanding of God, but it does not exhaust the extent of the revelation we find in Jesus, because not only does Jesus redefine our concept of God but also he shows us the perfect expression of humanity as God intended it. In other words, he models for us what a true human being should be like. Therefore, focusing our discipleship on Jesus forces us to take seriously the implications of following him, of becoming like him. It sets the agenda for our spirituality. It acknowledges that Jesus as our model, our teacher, and our guide is normative for the Christian life. He is the standard by which we measure ourselves, the quality of our discipleship, and therefore our spirituality.

If the heart of Christian spirituality is to increasingly become like our founder, then an authentic comprehension of Jesus becomes critical. All too often the focal point of our corporate and individual life shifts from its true center in Jesus, resulting in various anomalies in our spirituality. A true Christian expression models itself on Jesus, and it is God’s unambiguous aim to make us to be more like his Son. In fact, this is our eternal destiny: “to be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Rom 8:29). In *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan calls this the “conspiracy of little Jesuses,” and we believe it is fundamental to God’s plan and purposes for his world.

If this worries us, if we think this would somehow upset the finely balanced ecology of our spirituality, then we can perhaps reframe the issue by posing it as a question: If Jesus is perfected humanity—the human image of God—how bad can we become if we became more like him? Would the world not be a better place if there were more little Jesuses around? It strikes us therefore as a matter of fundamental importance to our humanity, our spirituality, and our witness that we regularly get a truer perspective on the focal point and the defining center of our faith.

Finally, in doing this we hope that we can in some way restore Christology to the church at large, to make it applicable to the whole people of God. For far too long Christology has been the province of academic and professional Christians, who seem far more concerned with an examination of how the divine and human are related in Jesus’ person than they are in the details of his life or the content of his teaching and vision. As theologians attempted to use speculative philosophy and ontology to explore the two natures of Christ, Christology became something of a complex science that in effect excludes the theologically uninitiated person. When the study of the remarkable

life and teachings of Jesus becomes the sole province of theologians and religious professionals, when it is done in abstract and divorced from our daily concerns and from the missional context of the church, it will tend to degrade the vitality of our Christianity. The system we have historically constructed to try to probe the nature of Christ reaches Gnostic proportions and takes years to comprehend in a meaningful way. Only few very smart people can do that,

Righteous Forgiveness



Fannie Lou Hamer

Born to sharecroppers in rural Mississippi, Fannie Lou Hamer rose to prominence as an African-American woman in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Like others in the movement, Hamer was deeply spiritual, and as a little Jesus, she stood up for the disenfranchised and forgave those who persecuted her. In 1962, the forty-four-year-old Hamer attended a rally sponsored by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, an organization dedicated to fighting for civil rights through civil disobedience) and, inspired, she and her husband went to register to vote. Along the way, Hamer sang hymns, including “Go Tell It on the Mountain” and “This Little Light of Mine.”

For this, she and her husband were kicked out of their home, and Hamer lost her job. However, her tenacity also attracted the attention of SNCC, and the organization recruited her to be a field secretary. The following year, she was arrested with three other activists on trumped-up charges, and she sustained a near fatal beating at the hands of the police. Hamer, however, sang spirituals and refused to hate her tormenters. “It wouldn’t solve any problem for me to hate whites just because they hate me,” she explained. For the next fifteen years until her death, Hamer continued her work in the Civil Rights movement, including an organizational role in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer and as a seated delegate at the 1964 and 1968 Democratic National Conventions, always applying her belief in the biblical righteousness of the cause. She was known for saying “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.” She maintained that it wasn’t enough just to claim to be a Christian. “If you are not putting that claim to the test, where the rubber meets the road, then it’s high time to stop talking about being a Christian.”

and the net effect is devastating for the church as an agency of Christ’s kingdom. This is our concern, because the living link between Jesus and his people must never be dissolved or placed beyond the reach of the average Christian. To do this is to sever the church from its true source of life (John 7:38). Surely

any loss of a direct, grassroots comprehension of Jesus must be a major cause in the degeneration of Christianity in any time and any place?

Therefore, we propose a rediscovery of Christology that includes a pre-occupation with the example and teaching of Jesus for the purposes of emulation by his followers. Some will say that such emulation is arduous to achieve in general and impossible when it comes to the specifics of his redeeming death and resurrection, the miracles, and his judgment of the unrighteous. Surely, they argue, we cannot die for the sins of others or judge their deeds. And here's where we need a far richer Christology than we've been offered in the past. For us, Christology is the study and examination of the entire phenomenon of Jesus, including his person and work and teachings, for the purpose of determining in what ways the various elements of his life and activity can be emulated by sinful human beings. For example, we can't die for others, as Jesus did, but we can offer ourselves sacrificially in service of others. Paul compares husbands loving their wives with Jesus dying for our sins. A working Christology would help us understand Jesus better and provide the tools for appropriating his example into our lives.

So this is not primarily a book about renewal for its own sake, nor is it a book about Christology as a strictly theological discipline. Rather, it is an attempt to reinstate the central role of Jesus in the ongoing spiritual life of the faith and in the life and mission of God's people. More specifically, it is an attempt to recalibrate the mission of the church around the person and work of Jesus. This book then is a work of missional Christology, if there is such a thing. It is an attempt to revision and revitalize our vision of Jesus as master of history and Lord of the church against which, we are reminded, the gates of hell will not prevail (Matt 16:18). In short, it is about nothing less than reJesusing the church.

Notes

1. Don Whitehead, *Attack on Terror: The FBI against the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970), 4, cited in Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 64.

2. Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 65.

3. *Ibid.*, 62.

4. Letters to Charles Marsh, cited in *ibid.*, 62–63. Note Bowers's reference to Jesus as "The Galilean." Bowers used this term to distinguish Jesus as a non-Jewish descendent of Aryan colonists in ancient Galilee.

5. *Ibid.*, 63.

6. Most recently, Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2006), 143ff.; Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 16ff.

7. Michael Frost, *Exiles* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006). See also Alan Hirsch, Neil Cole, and Wolfgang Simson, *Igniting Primal Fires*, which explores Ephesians 4:11 ministry (forthcoming).

8. Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 3.

9. We think not. The idea of “one nation under God” is the calling of Israel, not that of the church. One church under God is more like it. And the church is called to live among the nations, bearing witness, influencing, but never dominating.

10. The Christian organization in England called rejesus has a wonderful interactive website (ReJesus.co.uk) exploring Jesus’ “life, character, teachings, and followers.” We recommend it as a great place to spend some time.

11. J. Kevin Livingston, “David Jacobus Bosch,” *The International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23/1 (January 1999): 26–32.

12. Adolf von Harnack, *The Essence of Christianity*, quoted in Alexander Mens, *Son of Man* (Torrance, Calif.: Oakwood, 1992), 5.

13. George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), 49.

14. A. Michael Ramsey, *God, Christ and the World: A Study in Contemporary Theology* (London: SCM, 1969), 99.