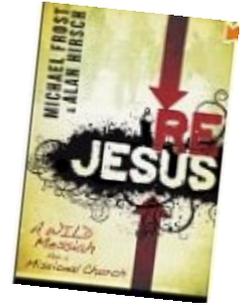


Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch : ReJesus – a Wild Messiah for a missional church

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Introduction

Our task is not reforming but refounding the Church, because we need to go back to the true founder. *Nothing is more important for the church in our day than the question of refounding Christianity... There is no doubt that we face a spiritual, theological, missional and existential crisis in the West.*

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.'*⁷

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, p 8. *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 –if it's about Jesus it's about our relationship with Jesus, and if it's about our relationship with Jesus it's about discipleship.*

So many so-called new movements have been presented as new ways of doing church; and this is putting the cart before the horse. We need to get our Christology right before we start thinking about how to do church. Jesus is not about religion but about anti-religion – he undermines any status quo which is not built on the demands of the kingdom, and this calls into question much of our religious codes, institutions and behaviour. *The heart of Christian spirituality is to increasingly become like our founder.* This book is not about renewal for its own sake, or about Christology as a debate; it's an attempt to recalibrate the mission of the church around the person and work of Jesus.

1. How Jesus changes everything

A good church upbringing will do many marvellous things for you, but one of the unfortunate things it also does is convince you that Jesus is to be worshipped but not followed. Tell the story of the raising of Jairus's daughter and ask people who they identify with – and it's everyone except Jesus. *We have sanitized and tamed Jesus by encasing him in abstract theology, and in doing so we have removed our motivation for discipleship.*¹⁹ One archbishop said, 'Everywhere Jesus went there was a riot. Everywhere I go they make me cups of tea'. Dorothy Sayers insists we know Jesus as individuals, as a particular man who demands to be the guide of my life – 'the scandal of particularity' she called it.

Part of the process to reJesus the church will involve a dismantling of its much-loved temple theology. Jesus embodies the fact that the Trinity is both sent and sending; his followers prefer a deity who reveals himself in sacred buildings, liturgies, and sacramental practices. God becomes a withdrawn deity calling recalcitrants back to his temple/church/cathedral to be reunited with him. Jesus had things to say about temple theology! Why would he dismantle one religious system to replace it with another? *Church as the NT 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 the world,* 29.

The meaning of life? Robert McAfee Brown: 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'.

We translate the Greek term *ecclesia* by the old Anglo-Saxon term 'church' – but we don't use it the way Paul did. It was a pre-existing term, from *ek* (out) and *kaleo* (to call). It didn't mean just assembly/gathering – it was a gathering of the elders of a community, eg in villages and towns, to sort local issues. It was a gathering of wise community leaders, brought together by their common vision for the harmony and wellbeing of the wider community. So for us it has to be about not just ourselves, but also our local community, our neighbours.

2. ReJesus and personal ReNewal

The church is *a community of disciples, people devoted to following Jesus. Discipleship should be the defining quality of the Christian life.* The church must always return to Jesus in order to renew itself. It gets stuck, or loses its way; it needs to recover its primal identity in its founder. It's no use revamping our missiology or inventing new cultural forms of *ecclesia* unless we have first and foremost related them to Christology. Wilhelm Visser T'Hooft: *it belongs to the very life of the people of God that it must accept again and again to have its life renewed by a new confrontation with its Lord and his holy will.*

Tom Sine:

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

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

Into this world of idolatry comes an alternative vision of reality in the form of Jesus.

David Bosch: *Discipleship is determined by the relation to Christ himself not by mere conformity to impersonal commands.* We have to open our imaginations to Jesus.

The problem is, the churches in the W world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. Dallas Willard:

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

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

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

This is the issue – discipleship is about the embodiment and transmission of the gospel. Kierkegaard said that Denmark's state church was 'just about as genuine as tea made from a bit of paper which once lay in a drawer

beside another bit of paper which had once been used to wrap up a few dried tea leaves from which tea had already been made three times.'

Discipleship is more than a decision; it involves a well-defined way of existence, that can be summed up in the phrase 'the imitation of Christ'.

3. ReJesus for the Church and Organization

As Jesus' disciples we are called to a Christ like life, and no matter how we configure it, that must surely mean that somehow our lives and our communities must be in significant congruence with the life, teachings and mission of Jesus. The degree that we are living the life laid out by our Master is directly proportional to the degree that we can call ourselves authentic disciples. 64. The institution of the church is not without God, beauty or blessing; and yet, is it really what Jesus intended for this movement? Isn't all this paraphernalia the very thing that partly obscures our access to the vital faith that we all seek and long for? Does advancing in the kingdom of God boil down to this - Running programs and services and/or guiding the laity through liturgical complexities in order to help people get to the God they are all meant to access directly through Jesus anyhow? Was this what Jesus had in mind when he established the church (Matt 16:18-19)? And, whatever happened to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers that many within the Protestant movements are meant to adhere to (1 Pet 2:9)? 65

*At the beginning of this new century, we have never needed so desperately to rediscover the original genius of the Christian experience and to allow it to strip always all the unnecessary and cumbersome paraphernalia of Christendom. 66. Many secular films look for this - Chocolat, As it is in Heaven, Jesus of Montreal. Hard on the institution but looking for something. Margaret Mead: *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. indeed, it is the only thing that ever has - 68.**

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

And herein lies an irresolvable dilemma for all people of faith: Although genuine faith is born out of direct encounters with God, it cannot survive and prosper without some form of stability and order. Viewed positively, rituals, creeds, and organizations can help people structure their relationship with God. In fact, we believe this is what they initially were designed for. But unless the worshipper is very wary, the glory of the God encounter will slowly fade and the ritual, creeds, and rules intended to preserve the encounter will take its place. The crisis dawns when the outward forms of worship no longer match the inward experience and spiritual condition of the participants. At that point, decline becomes inevitable, authentic Christianity is subverted, and constant renewals become necessary... hence the need to reJesus.' 69

We do not possess God – we meet him (Friedman). Pascal: 'Christendom is a union of people who, by means of the sacraments, excuse themselves from their duty to love God.' 70. NT Wright: 'Jesus was inaugurating a way of life which had no further need of the Temple' 71. Christianity is an anti-religion...

The solution – radical traditionalism. ReJesus means departing from inherited religious rules, *walking into the turmoil of chaos and daring the trust that at the end of the path will be not bedlam but a rediscovery of the way of Jesus.* Jesus himself is our guide. 83.

4. I've got a picture of Jesus

Many churches have constructed Jesuses who meet their needs. The middle-class Jesus. The meek and mild Jesus. The baby-in-a-manger Jesus. You know you've remade Jesus in your own image when he hates all the people you hate – gays, liberals, fundamentalists, muslims...

One of the best ways to expose our co-option of Jesus to our own agendas is to look at the images we have.

- The bearded-lady Jesus: Holman Hunt – Jesus as blond, bearded royal; King Arthur, perhaps.

Jesus was not the Jesus of our popular art. 'Jesus was a difficult and uncooperative revolutionary who so threatened the established order of the day that there seemed to be no option but to have him executed' – Alison Morgan WG.

- The spooky Jesus – glowing haloes and exposed hearts. An otherworldly, distant being.
- Ordinary Galilean Jesus – the BBC computer model, p 99. Offer a selection of images to a group of people and this one always comes last.
- The revolutionary Jesus – meek, mild, as if poster.
- Fully human fully divine Jesus – medieval artists, not quite human.
- The Jesus of the age – Jaroslav Pelikan surveys how each image of Jesus is a key to the values of its age (listed p 105-6).

5. The Shema Schema (one God, one love)

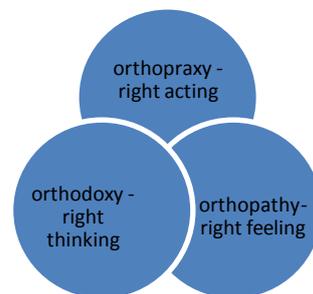
Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one, and you shall love him with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. Ever since the Fall we've been torn between the desire to hide from God in the garden and to reveal ourselves to him. In Jesus, God has come to us.

6. Three... two... one...engage

Much of what gets in the way of a true and life-altering encounter with Jesus can be traced to the problem of worldview. Jacques Ellul notes that our problems in perception can be traced back to a change in the basic understanding of revelation – from history to philosophy. Hebraic ways of knowing are not the same as ours. WE cannot be disinterested spectators when it comes to knowing Jesus – it's those who allow Jesus to get at them that end up entering the kingdom, not those who want to watch from outside (rich young ruler). The issue is the heart, which determines not just our feelings but also our actions. *Without the heart, we cannot comprehend God.* The Hebrew verb to know belongs not to the sphere of reflection but to that of personal contact – hence 'to know' also means sexual intercourse. In biblical Hebrew, you have to come into contact with something in order to know it – not just observe it. The first part of the journey is inwards. Calvin said that only when the scriptures are believed and obeyed do people even begin to have a foundation for true knowledge – knowledge of God is born in obedience.

Discipleship based in Hebraic ways of knowing looks like this:

It's what the Shema aims at – Det 6.4-9 and Mk 12.28-34: love God with all our heart, mind, will, strength.



7. The church that Jesus built

Dan Kemball – *They Like Jesus but not the Church* – interviews with unchurched young people. Not at all antagonistic about faith in Jesus, but convinced that the church, as organised religion, has little to teach them about it. The church needs to be recalibrated around Jesus. How? Paul's vision of the Jesus community – the body of Christ, through *communitas*. A community which follows Jesus, moves out in service to others, understands that worship is a whole life thing, practises his presence, insists that we need to be continually re-evangelized, learns and lives the values of Jesus, devotes itself to scripture and the exercise of spiritual gifts – and isn't a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy.

Conclusion