

## Chapter 1



# Welcome to the Jesus Movement

So when [the disciples] had come together, they asked [Jesus], “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

(Acts 1:6–8)

Ultimately, the Jesus Movement is a metaphor. Images, metaphors, and forms of symbolic speech are a way of helping you to get at more deep and complex things in accessible and memorable ways. This Jesus Movement isn’t a twenty-first-century invention or a throwback to 1960s “Jesus Freaks” or a rhetorical concoction of my making. We’re talking about going forward as a church by going back to our deepest roots as disciples of Jesus Christ.

New Testament scholars and others who look at early Christian origins often refer to the Christian movement in its beginnings

**The Jesus Movement:**

We're following Jesus into loving, liberating, life-giving relationship with God, with each other, and with creation.

as the “Jesus Movement.” Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion who has studied early Christian origins and the expansion and growth of Christianity, has written the suggestively titled book *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion*. It's not an adapta-

tion of Christian triumphalism but a description of the evolution of the movement Jesus inaugurated into the Church.

Stark is specific and prolific on this topic. He explains the way Christianity grew as a movement to bring new life to Judaism and to broken people:

Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world. . . . To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

So when we use the phrase the “Jesus Movement,” we're actually pointing back to the earliest days of Jesus's teaching and his followers moving in his revolutionary footsteps in the power of the Spirit. Together with them, we're following Jesus and growing loving, liberating, life-giving relationship with God, with each other, and with creation.

The late Verna Dozier shares this understanding. A brilliant black lay theologian and educator, her last published book was

---

1. Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 161.

titled, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return*<sup>2</sup>. She would have recognized the Jesus Movement as a call to return to our deepest origins as Christians, to return to the roots of our very life, as people of the Way, as disciples of the Lord Jesus. It's a call to return so that we can truly march forward, following the way of Jesus.

## God on the Move

There's no denying it: Jesus began a movement. That's why his invitations to folk who joined him are filled with so many active verbs. In John 1:39 Jesus calls disciples with the words, "Come and see." In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he asks others to "Follow me." And at the end of the Gospels, he sent his first disciples out with the word, "Go . . ." As in, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). As in, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15).

In Acts 1 he uses even more movement language: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (v. 8). If you look at the Bible, listen to it, and watch how the Spirit of God unfolds in the sacred story, I think you'll notice a pattern. You cannot help but notice that there really is a movement of God in the world.

If you don't believe me, ask Abraham and Sarah. They were ready to enjoy their pension and their senior years. Then God called and said: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation" (Gen. 12:1–2).

Beyond their own desires Abraham and Sarah found themselves a part of the movement of God. On their journey they joined up with a woman named Hagar, and Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar

---

2. Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006).

were a family. (It was a dysfunctional family, but a family nonetheless.) Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar are the ancestors of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They're proof that God has a movement.

If you still don't believe me, ask Moses. According to the biblical book of Exodus, Moses was born of Hebrew slaves in Egypt. But due to mysterious circumstances, Moses was adopted by a loving Egyptian princess and nursed by his Hebrew mother. In his adulthood this dual nature caused him quite an identity crisis. He had to wonder: "Am I a slave or a slave master?"

In the midst of this crisis he was forced to flee Egypt. He eventually married a woman named Zipporah whose father Jethro was a well-off businessman. Moses ran the business and everything was cozy, until he ran into a burning bush. Of course it was God. Instead of asking Moses to enjoy the comfortable life, God challenged him to join the movement, to leave the comfort of Jethro's business and go back to Egypt, back to the land of his people, back to the Hebrew slaves and Egyptian slave owners. But now he would return as liberator to set the captives free, just like the old spiritual says . . .

When Israel was in Egypt's land (Let my people go)  
Oppressed so hard they could not stand (Let my people go)

Go down, Moses  
Way down in Egypt land  
And tell old Pharaoh  
Let my people go.

And Moses went, because he was part of God's movement.

You could ask Isaiah, who was in the temple when he heard the call from God. Isaiah was comfortable—he rather liked living in the capital city of Jerusalem, and residing in the temple, where there was always good, well-executed "high church" liturgy. But God called, "Who will go for us?" and Isaiah said, "Here I am; send me" (Isa. 6:8).

You could ask Queen Esther, challenged by Mordecai to risk her regal privileges and go to the king to save her people. “Who knows?” Mordecai asked her. “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Her response: “I will go to the king . . . and if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:14–16).

Ask any of the disciples who left their nets to follow Jesus. They heard the Jesus who said, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). They heard his call to “[g]o therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” And they heard his reassurance that “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). And so they went. And so do we.

## The Shape of the Jesus Movement

In the mid-1990s biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza studied the earliest days of Christianity, a period she called the “Jesus Movement.” In her study of the New Testament, she noticed several things that matter as we consider the topic of ministry for the movement.

First, the movement was Christ-centered—completely focused on Jesus and his way. In fact, if you look at the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, long before Christianity was ever called the Church, or even Christianity, it was called “the Way.” The way of Jesus was the way. The Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of God, that sweet, sweet Spirit, infused their spirits and took over.

William Temple, one of the great archbishops of Canterbury from the last century, once said that there is no use just telling him to be like Jesus. He couldn’t do it . . . except with the Spirit of Christ.

According to biblical scholar Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the Jesus Movement 1) centered on Jesus, 2) eliminated poverty and hunger, and 3) integrated people at all levels of society.

It's no good giving me a play like Hamlet or King Lear and telling me to write a play like that. Shakespeare could do it. I can't. And it is no good showing me a life like the life of Jesus and telling me to live a life like that. Jesus could do it; I can't. But if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me, then I could write plays like his. And if the Spirit of Jesus could come and live in me, then I could live a life like his.<sup>3</sup>

When the Spirit that lived so fully in Jesus inhabits us, then we have a chance to live like him. That's precisely what happened to the early followers of his way. They began to look like Jesus. Folk in Antioch saw them and nicknamed them "little Christs."

The second mark of the movement is this: following the way of Jesus, they abolished poverty and hunger in their community. Some might say they made poverty history. The Acts of the Apostles calls this abolition of poverty one of the "signs and wonders" which became an invitation to others to follow Jesus too, and change the world.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. (Acts 4:32–34)

It didn't take a miracle. The Bible says they simply shared everything they had. The movement moved them in that peculiar way.

Third, they learned how to become more than a collection of individual self-interests. They found themselves becoming a countercultural community, one where Jews and Gentiles, circumcised

---

3. William Temple, quoted in John Stott's *Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 37.

and uncircumcised, had equal standing, and even slave girls could speak and prophesy, full of the Spirit (Acts 15:1–21; 16:16).

I was a child and I remember my father taking me to meetings of the Union of Black Episcopalians, which was organized to eradicate racism from the Episcopal Church. At that time, it was known as the Union of Black Clergy and Laity.

I remember some of those giants, now of blessed memory: Mattie Hopkins, Austin Cooper, Quinton Primo, John Burgess, Fred Williams, Jimmy Woodruff. The Union was founded to eradicate racism, but we understood that was not the ultimate goal. That was one step toward the goal. The ultimate goal has always been bigger than that.

At the end of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, someone asked Martin Luther King Jr. what the end or goal of the boycott really was. And he answered—you can almost hear him thinking out loud—“The end is the end of segregation.” But wait—it’s more than that: “The end is reconciliation.” No, he finally concluded, the real end “is the creation of the beloved community.”<sup>4</sup>

That’s when they were clearly part of the Jesus Movement, because they were turning the world upside down, just like he did, just like his followers have from the start. And they weren’t doing it for their own gain, but to join Jesus in creating a community where everybody is beloved, no one is hungry, no one is left out, all are equally children of God.

## Partners in the God Movement

We need baptized people who are committed to living and witnessing to the way of Jesus. I still remember the day that became crystal clear for me.

---

4. Martin Luther King Jr., “Speech at Conclusion of Montgomery Bus Boycott,” 1956, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>.

It was morning. I was in court with someone from my congregation when everything stopped. The judge stopped the proceedings and announced that two planes had just crashed into the World Trade Center.

Everything really did just stop. I was scheduled for a Eucharist with baptism and confirmations that night. Suddenly we were faced with a very real question: Should we go on with the service? Or maybe have a memorial service instead and do baptisms and confirmations later?

We talked, we prayed, and we realized—no, this is precisely when the church must be the church. So we included prayers for those who died, for those who suffered, for our enemies, for ourselves, and for the world. And we did baptize new followers of Jesus. We confirmed disciples of Jesus who were reaffirming and reorienting themselves to follow the way of Jesus.

In one of those moments when all of the distractions and props were stripped away, we were called back to the essence of who we are and what we are here for as the church, the body of Christ, the Jesus Movement in the world. I am more convinced of that necessity every day. We need people who will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, who will love justice, live mercy, and walk humbly with God, just like Jesus.

Pastor and biblical scholar Clarence Jordan was one of those people. In 1942, he worked with a team to found Koinonia Farm in Georgia, welcoming people of different races to live and work together, caring for each other and for the land. They called it a “demonstration plot” for the God Movement.

His word choice wasn’t accidental. In the 1960s, he wrote a Southern-folk, liberation-minded version of the New Testament called the Cotton Patch Gospel. When he translated the Greek New Testament and came to the word *basileia*, usually read as “kingdom,” he decided it was more like a movement or “some-



thing that gets underway spontaneously.”<sup>5</sup> He spoke of it as the God Movement.

Jordan was one the earliest white leaders to take up the civil rights cause, but even then his ultimate goal was clear. “There must be a greater and deeper movement than the Civil Rights Movement.” Jordan kept his eye on “the God Movement, the stirring of His mighty Spirit of love, peace, humility, forgiveness, joy and reconciliation in the hearts of all of us.”<sup>6</sup>

Jordan once offered wise counsel to a young peace worker named Craig Peters. It is worth repeating today:

I am increasingly convinced that Jesus thought of his messages as not dead-ending in a static institution but as a mighty flow of spirit which would penetrate every nook and cranny of man’s personal and social life. . . . I really don’t think we can ever renew the church until we stop thinking of it as an institution and start thinking of it as a movement.<sup>7</sup>

He was right. Ministry in this moment—Episcopal ministry or ministry in any denomination or tradition—has to serve more than an institution. It has to serve the movement.

---

5. Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 81.

6. Marsh, 81.

7. Marsh, 81.

### **QUESTIONS FOR THE ROAD . . .**

- 1.** The Jesus Movement is defined this way: “We’re following Jesus into loving, liberating, life-giving relationship with God, with each other, and with creation.” What do you think and feel about this definition? What parts resonate and what parts make you curious?
- 2.** Curry and others see Christianity as primarily a movement, one that expresses itself in an institution but should always be on the move. What are the benefits of this way of understanding the church? What are the limitations?
- 3.** Have you ever seen a Christian who was clearly participating in the Jesus Movement? What was this person doing and saying? How did others respond?