

CHRIST FOLLOWERS

Ask What It Means to Truly Follow Jesus

Text: John 17:1-11; Acts 1:6-14

The Enduring Picture

As I've shared once before, one of my favorite movie scenes comes from Pierce Brosnan's remake of the classic film, *The Thomas Crown Affair*. As the story goes, a priceless painting by the French master, Monet, has gone missing from the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art and the police are closing in to catch the thief. Weeks later, the thief has returned to the museum and set a fire to cover his next act. Alarms are going off, steel barriers are closing, museum-goers are panicking, as scores of police officers run about, pointing fingers at everybody. The scene is one of such utter confusion that only the camera catches the climactic event.

In the place where the Monet had once provided inspiration to thousands, there now hangs a much lesser painting. It depicts in pastel colors a quaint but ramshackle cottage surrounded by flowers, the gift of a sympathetic donor a day or two after the Monet went missing. As the museum sprinkler system rains water down upon the face of the substitute painting, however, a strange transformation begins to take place.

The quaint cottage and flowers begin to wash away, revealing colors far bolder and brighter behind them. There are splashes of orange brilliance, arcs of passionate red, strokes of a genuine genius. Slowly there reappears the dome and spire of a magnificent church set against a blazing sunrise. And you realize, it had been there all along beneath the surface image. The masterpiece was not lost after all. It had merely been painted over.

If you read the Book of Acts for yourself this week, you will have an epiphany something like the one that took place in that cinematic art gallery. You may find yourself shocked by what is actually there on that Scripture canvas. You will realize how much extraneous "stuff" has gotten putty-knifed and hardened onto our concept of Christianity through the years. As the original masterpiece starts to rise up from the canvas, you will be stunned by the simple shape and the brilliant color and the clear evidence of the Master's hand in the lives of those first "Christ Followers."

That's all they were, really. Before the Emperor Constantine harnessed the church for political purposes or the Crusades were launched... Before the institutional Church developed with all of its real estate and organizational apparatus, its denominations and schisms, its arguments over music, technology or marketing strategies... When you wash away the tragic distortions

and stupid trivializations, the wonderful traditions and celebrations that later developed... Before all the paraphernalia of "Christianity" as we know it confused things, there were simply "Christ Followers."

Three Ideas That Need Transformation

But these Christ Followers were not simple. They were as diverse, complex and flawed as we are today. Before He could use them to change the world, God had to change their minds about three important ideas. First, that the days of Jesus were over. Secondly, that Jesus might still prove useful if he can tell me how my kingdom gets restored. And thirdly, that this is important because, in the end, I'm on my own.

It's painful to feel like your best days are past. No matter what age we are, we all know that, right? My kids mourn the fact that they're now past the point where mom and dad pay for everything. I feel sad sometimes that my carefree school days are over. I have friends and family members who are facing far more serious losses. It's really hard when you've been to the mountaintop and feel, "I shall never be there again." You know that, right?

This is something of what the disciples are feeling when we meet them in Acts chapter 1. They had been lifted out of a routine working life and allowed to spend three years as the personal companions of the most fearful and fascinating man on the planet. They'd watched it all dry up once when Jesus was hauled away to be executed. Then they'd wondrously gotten it back when Jesus returned from the grave. But now it appeared that Jesus was really and finally going. There'd be no more campfire talks with him. No more watching him make evil and illness run. No more marveling at the way he changed lives with love and his wisdom. The rest of their lives would be an anti-climax, a downhill journey, a very poor sequel. The days of Jesus are past, they thought. Luke, the writer of Acts, seems to take that retrospective orientation himself as he starts the Book of Acts by saying: **"In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus..."** (Acts 1:1).

Given this view, it's not surprising that those disciples went on to ask the question they did. **"So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'"** (Acts 1:6) In other words, if we can't really continue the glory days with you, can you at least improve our lives from here? Before you go, can you please sort out our country's political future? Can you get rid of our oppressors or give us some insider information on what will happen because we want to make sure that we invest ourselves properly? If you have to retire to heaven, Jesus, can you please secure me an earthly kingdom?

"Because, it's obvious we're on our own from here on out." That was the subtext, of course. We started out on our own. We had this great communal

religious experience, but now that's over. We've got to attend to our own needs now. Because this thing's breaking up and we'll all be flying solo again shortly. And they must have felt that deeply, as Luke makes the point of saying for, then, "[Jesus] was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight" (Acts 1:9).

Changing Our Minds

How like us, I think. I find that somewhat comforting or encouraging, actually. How like us these people whom God went on to employ so dramatically. Honestly, how many of us here secretly tend to think, "The days of Jesus are past"? Oh, we still talk about him, we still celebrate him, but how many of us think that was then and this is now. Jesus is history.

So how can I distill out the wisdom of what he did and taught when he used to actually be active on earth? How can I apply it being more successful in the interests of my kingdoms here? Or how can I use my mobile prayer phone to get him consulting on my life and challenges, to get God blessing my career or country? Pay attention to the focus of many popular spiritual leaders today and notice how often the focus is on how much God wants to restore our kingdoms.

And how like those disciples we often are in the third dimension too. We are so vulnerable to feeling alone. We have these moments when we're together with other disciples. We experience a sense of Christ's presence. And then Jesus disappears from our sight and seems so hidden. We go back to life as everyone else lives it. We occasionally get back together again to revive our remembrance of Jesus. But in between so many of us live our lives with this cosmic spiritual loneliness.

This is not how God intends for it to be. He changed the thinking of the first disciples on all three of these common ideas, and he seeks to change our minds too. FIRST of all: The days of Jesus are not past. Jesus is present and active in the lives of his people right now. Pay special attention to how Luke finishes the first sentence of Acts 1:1 – **"In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus BEGAN to do and to teach."** Jesus himself goes on to say: **"Wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."**

The first major transformation that took place in the minds of the first Christ followers was a breakthrough realization that while he was walking around in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God could only be in one place at one time. But now through the person of the Holy Spirit, Jesus could be present and active in and through each of them. If you read your way through the Book of Acts, you'll be amazed at how the Christ Followers lived and acted

and influenced others just like Jesus did in the flesh. They do so precisely because Jesus IS still at work, now through their bodies, their voices, their wills – just as He intends to be at work through yours and mine.

SECONDLY, if you and I would be Christ Followers like the original ones there is something very hard we must do. We have to repent of the notion that Jesus cares in any way about our little kingdoms, except to the extent that they are submitted in service to His. Now don't get me wrong here: Jesus makes it clear that he cares for his people's welfare with the heart of a Good Shepherd. He lays down his own life for his sheep. He promises riches in heaven and tremendous grace, peace, and joy to all who follow Him here. But when the first disciples asked him about when he planned to restore their kingdom, the answer Jesus gives is very telling. He immediately refocuses them on his Kingdom.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus says, in effect: "If I give you power, it will not be to advance your interests, where you want. **"You will be given power to become my witnesses"** where I want, **"in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."** No reading of the Acts of the Apostles could possibly support the commonly trumpeted notion that Jesus gives a whit about the health, wealth, and prosperity of his disciples. On the contrary, they endure suffering, poverty, and the loss of much of what the world deems dear, and count it worth the price for the glory set before them and the privilege of serving Christ's cause. One observer at the time made it clear just how counter-cultural the first Christ Followers were as Acts 17:7 records: **"These [people] are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king--Jesus... [And they] are turning the world upside down."**

FINALLY, please note there, the word "ALL." **"They are all acting..."** The life of the Christ Followers is not an individual affair, but a communal one – and part of God's antidote to the cosmic loneliness that afflicts so many in our time. It is fascinating to me that when the disciples leave the place where Jesus ascended into heaven, they do not go their own separate ways, as we so often do from places like this. Acts 1:12 says: **"Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives... Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They ALL joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."**

My point here is that there was a time when people heard the word "Church" and the first thought that came to their minds was not a big fixed building but a beautiful moving people – a people who believed that the days of Jesus were not past, but that Christ was alive and moving through them now; who sought no kingdom of their own but that share they had in Christ's; a people who gathered regularly together in prayer so as to be better equipped to go out

regularly together as witnesses. And in this gathering and going, Jesus moved through them to change hearts, households, villages, cities, regions, the empire itself and then the world.

How do we think of ourselves today and what do we have the will to be? Are we that pastel place in the picture that hung in the museum, pleasant to look at or all too common? Or are we that brilliant creation of the Master's hand even now emerging as the Holy Spirit rains down on us? Only time will tell and God will fully see.

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