



Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today

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“Will the church embody and articulate its only legitimate identity? Will God’s people live as followers of Jesus?”

A Wake Up Call for Today’s Disciples

As if from out of nowhere arrives Pope Francis. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the man who most represents the institutional church and its global identity arrives on the scene. In the first days of his papacy, the world watches as he washes feet, cares for the poor, reaffirms the basic vocation of the church as the presence of Christ in the world, and everyone is shocked. Out of the layered intrigue of ecclesial power and defensiveness, of wordcraft and posture, suddenly we see what we did not expect: a genuine disciple of Jesus.

The cynical media that so readily and understandably hovers, exposes, and scoffs at the church has been stunned and then charmed. Many of us inside the church—Roman Catholic and Protestant—have been as well. Around the world and across denominations people are taking note that here is a person who doesn’t just represent churchly power, but someone who lives what the church professes to be its call. It was enough of a shock that *Time* magazine made Pope Francis their Person of the Year for 2013. Why? Pope Francis simply lives as a follower of Jesus. And that, it turns out, matters.

As Pope Francis vividly and simply portrays: the most urgent call upon the church is simply to live as followers of Jesus. Christendom no longer masks the church’s failure to live this primary call.

It’s true that many important, complex factors need to be considered at a time like this. In a postmodern, post-Christian, multireligious landscape, intellectual questions need to continue to receive vigorous intellectual investigation and reflection. Christian orthodoxy cannot and must not bury its head and keep saying the Apostle’s Creed without asking ourselves what is meant and what is heard when we make such fundamental affirmations of faith.

How the church communicates its message—how it tells and lives “the old, old story,” why and how that story matters today—is all part of the work the church needs to do. How churches organize themselves and whether they snap, crackle, and pop in the way some think they should is not primarily about money, size, or technology. The issues are more basic: Will the church embody and articulate its only legitimate identity? Will God’s people live as followers of Jesus?

No one calls for the church to be less like Jesus. It’s quite the opposite. What Pope Francis is doing that has drawn such dramatic attention is its own irony, for he is simply doing what is meant to be the daily, pervasive action of the most ordinary Christian disciples. What is shocking is that this seems so unusual!

This fundamental disconnect should trouble the church more than theological or

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BOOK EXCERPT

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metaphysical issues, more than its political or ethical debates, and even more than its ecclesiastical and institutional crises. What should trouble the church is its vocational crisis: Is the church remembering and practicing its call to follow Jesus?

The passionate and enthusiastic response across the religious and political spectrum to the simple witness of Pope Francis seems to expose something much more fundamental about the state of the church. Who would have thought that someone representing the church actually lived like its namesake and Lord? This is a wake-up call for any who claim to be disciples.

Everyone is given the gift of living in light of God’s call. The church is meant to be the community who chooses to do so and speaks and acts in ways that call others to do so too. This is the vocation of God being lived through the vocation of the church for the sake of the vocation of the world.

Sometimes the church is just odd: habits, speech, attitudes, potlucks, etc. Every church is something particular, and you smell it the moment you are on the premises. The point is not whether a church is odd, but whether it is odd because it imitates Jesus Christ. Does the church live that vocation? Surely this plain and unadorned question is the one that people inside, and certainly outside, the church want to have answered. If the response is anything but yes, we have to ask ourselves what we are doing and why.

Many outside the church do not measure the church by a standard of perfection. What they seek is far, far more achievable: authentic people whose verbal trust in Jesus also leads them to live in ways that show up in ordinary but self-giving acts of grace, justice, and compassion.

– Taken from chapter four, “The Primary Call”



Mark Labberton, author of
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"Mark Labberton makes me uncomfortable in the best possible way: uncomfortable with my small life, my small dreams and my small God. And yet in the midst of that holy discomfort he awakens hope that it is possible to wake up to the real life . . . that we were created for."

— Andy Crouch, executive editor, *Christianity Today*, on *The Dangerous Act of Worship*

Scholar, Pastor, Leader

Mark Labberton was named president of Fuller Theological Seminary as of July 1, 2013, after serving as Lloyd John Ogilvie Associate Professor of Preaching and director of the Lloyd John Ogilvie Institute of Preaching since 2009. He previously spent sixteen years as senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, California. Labberton has been involved in ministry for over thirty years and has spoken before a broad range of audiences, including numerous conferences and events for the Presbyterian Church (USA), InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the National Pastors Convention, and International Justice Mission. He has also taught courses at New College Berkeley for Advanced Christian Studies.

In 1982 Labberton co-founded the Christian International Scholarship Foundation (CISF)—an organization funding the advanced theological education of Christian leaders from the Majority World, including executives of relief organizations, college and seminary faculty, and denominational presidents—and served on the board of CISF for seventeen years. He has also worked closely with John Stott Ministries, the United States member of Langham Partners International, which provides books, scholarships, and seminars for Majority World pastors. Labberton served as chair of John Stott Ministries from 2001 to 2004 and co-chair of the John Stott Ministries Global Initiative Fund from 2004 to 2007. Today he continues to contribute to the mission of the global church as a senior fellow of International Justice Mission.

Labberton has authored the books *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus* (2010) and *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God's Call to Justice* (2007). He has published articles in periodicals such as *Christianity Today* and *Radix*, as well as *Leadership Journal* for which he also serves as contributing editor.