

## INTRODUCTION

### “Follow Me”

Two fishermen are at work beside a lake, preparing their nets to fish. They are brothers, working alongside their father in the family business. It is a successful one; the family owns its own boat and employs other fishermen.

There was nothing unique about this day. As they did every day the fishermen planned to rest when they finished mending the nets, and then sail into the lake at night when the fishing is best, hoping to bring back food for their families and the other people in their village. This is the way fishermen on the Lake of Galilee had always lived. It was the way their fathers and grandfathers had lived, and their great-grandfathers, and it was the way their children would live.

These were ordinary people, living as ordinary people everywhere live—then and now. But this particular day something happened that would completely transform their lives, and which would eventually transform the world. A rabbi from a neighboring village walked up to the two brothers and said to them, “Follow me.” He did not explain why the fishermen should follow him, or even what it meant to follow him. He simply said “Follow me.” And they said “Yes.”

The suddenness of their “Yes” is remarkable. They must have known the rabbi, but had he ever before asked them to forsake everything and follow him—to share his life, to live as he did? And what was so attractive about his invitation that it caused two sensible and prudent fishermen, men whose survival depended on making good decisions, to suddenly drop everything and embark on an entirely new life?

But this is what happened. And it happened not only to these two brothers but to many others as well. Immediately after the first fishermen began following Jesus he went up to two other brothers who were also preparing to go fishing and said to them, “Follow me.” They also said “Yes.”

Throughout Jesus’ subsequent public career the words “Follow me” would recur like the refrain in a hymn. He would walk up to a man named Matthew who worked for the Roman occupation army as a tax collector and say to him, “Follow me,” and he too would immediately follow. When a wealthy young man came to Jesus asking what he could do to be saved Jesus answered, in effect, “You must live as I do.”

To be a Christian during Jesus’ lifetime meant literally following him as he traveled about in the places where the ordinary people of his time lived. Some people accepted his invitation, but most did not—and for good reason. It was a costly decision; it meant keeping nothing for oneself. And it was a risky one. What if Jesus was not the person they believed him to be, the Messiah promised long ago by the prophets? Jesus constantly warned his followers that following him would involve immense sacrifice.

But despite the cost many of those who knew Jesus face to face would choose to follow him and their choices would ultimately affect all humanity. Along with the four fishermen who were called first, and the eight disciples who Jesus later chose to continue his ministry after his death, all those who followed him received an education unlike any which previous humans had ever received. It involved not only their minds, but their very being; not only what they did, but why they did it; not only what they felt obligated to do, but what they wanted to do.

These original followers of Christ were taught to see the world in a fundamentally new way. It was, they learned, a friendly place that did not need to be conquered by violence in order for humans to survive. They learned to view God as a benevolent and loving parent, not an angry and vengeful judge. They were taught to address God as “Abba,” their word for “Daddy”.

They learned how to heal, how to feed the hungry, how to serve others. Most important they learned the power of love at Golgotha and Gethsemane, and they saw this new way’s power confirmed by the Resurrection. And finally they received this power themselves at Pentecost—and again at the lake in Galilee where it had all begun. And

with that power they were transformed from fishermen and other ordinary people into missionaries and preachers and administrators, the founders of the great global religion we now call Christianity.

What caused this almost incredible change? What transformed these fishermen into world-changing religious leaders, and their followers into people able to create a new religion?

They have left us their answers to these questions in the accounts they left behind, the books we now call the Gospels. They tell us their abilities came from their decision to follow Christ, and from the power they were given when they acted on that decision, even before they knew what it meant. This new way was costly, not only for themselves but also for their families, but it brought them such joy, such deeply meaningful lives, they risked everything to tell their story to the world.

Their "Yes" has rippled through human history for twenty centuries now, affecting a constantly growing number of people everywhere. There is no one living today who has not been affected by it in some way.

One such person was the twentieth-century Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld who led the United Nations in its formative years. At his death this great leader left behind a spiritual testament which includes this passage:

I don't know Who—or what—put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal. From that moment I have known what it means 'not to look back,' and 'to take no thought for the morrow.'

This call comes to each of us in different ways, but it always comes. And when it comes we must answer. And how we answer changes history.

## INTENTIONALITY IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

In Jesus' lifetime people followed him in varying ways, and to varying degrees. At the core were the Twelve, men who had given up everything—their businesses, their family's security, their personal freedom—to follow

Jesus. These are the people who traveled with Jesus, who shared his daily life, and who continued his mission after his death and resurrection.

There were also the Seventy, about which we know much less—but obviously persons willing to devote a period of time to proclaiming Jesus’ message full time, but who returned to their usual lives once that time had ended.

There were also the women from Galilee who traveled with Jesus and the Twelve. They could not be part of the Seventy because they were women, but they provided the financial means for their male colleagues to teach, preach and heal. These women made substantial contributions to Jesus’ ministry, likely at considerable personal sacrifice, but at some point they also appear to have returned to their homes, judging from the silence about them which we find in the subsequent tradition.

In addition to these two groups other disciples are mentioned in the Gospels and in Acts. These were the people who listened to Jesus, who took his words seriously and who tried to put them into practice, but who maintained the daily existence they had inherited from their ancestors and which everyone in their culture maintained.

Beyond these circles of committed followers was another larger group. These were those who had heard Jesus speak and had been moved by his teachings but who only observed him. Some had seen the miraculous healings Jesus performed and others had heard about them, in some cases from the healed persons themselves. Still others had heard about the miraculous feedings, and some had even participated in them.

This larger group had a commitment to Jesus, but it was a conditional one. Jesus had attracted their attention, but he would retain it only so long as it benefited them. There was as yet no irreversible commitment—no commitment to follow Jesus whatever the cost.

Still further from Jesus were persons in the leadership elite. People in this group followed Jesus only in the sense that they were attempting to determine whether he was a threat to their privileged positions. In the end they would decide that he was and they would decide to kill him, but even in viewing Jesus as a threat their lives became centered on him.

Jesus himself appears to have accepted all these varying degrees of commitment, even to the point of regarding those in leadership who were opposing him as playing an essential role in the new religious tradition he was forming. When Jesus appears in human history everyone is measured by their reaction to him.

## *Early Christianity*

In the first decades of Christianity we find a pattern that is quite similar to the one that existed during Jesus' life.

At the highest level of intentionality were the Twelve—now called Apostles, and now joined by Paul—men whose lives were devoted entirely to disseminating the amazing story of Jesus' life as widely as possible. As this preaching mission succeeded they were increasingly required to devote their attention to leading and administering the communities of believers which had formed as the result of their preaching and teaching. Consequently they soon realized they needed to ordain other believers to take responsibility for the Church's charitable activities. These new ministers were called deacons, after the Greek word for service.

Surrounding the apostles and the deacons in Jerusalem was a third small group whose level of commitment was very close to theirs. These were lay people, men and women, who had made an unqualified commitment to the Christian community, selling their personal property and living in economic community with the Apostles and with each other.

This early example of intentional Christian community seems not to have survived the persecution which dispersed the Jerusalem Church a few decades after it was founded, but this early post-Resurrection community would be the first in a long line of evangelical lay communities which would spring up in the Christian Churches, continuing to the present.

Clearly the vast majority of first-century Christians did not live at the same level of commitment as the Jerusalem community, nor were they expected to. When one couple in the Jerusalem Church announced they wanted to join the community, and so had sold their property and were donating the proceeds to the Apostles—when in fact they had secretly kept a portion for themselves—Peter condemned them for lying to the community, not for having kept some property for themselves.

In the early centuries of Christianity communal property did not become the norm, but persecution, and even more the constant threat of persecution, did become the norm. This situation of sustained adversity, which lasted for nearly three centuries, virtually required all Christians to live at very high levels of commitment and intentionality.

During these centuries when their survival, both individually and as a group, was constantly under threat the early Christians adopted quite

high standards of membership. In at least some places only fully committed Christians, i.e., those willing to die under persecution, were allowed to attend Sunday worship.

When some Christians failed the test of persecution, as inevitably happened, it produced a major controversy within the Church. A fierce division arose between those who believed anyone who had lapsed under persecution should never be allowed back into Church membership, and a more forgiving group who were willing to allow them back after a period of penance. Eventually the non-rigorists prevailed, but the tensions which produced these early schisms would recur in Church history, up to the present.

Persecution ended rather suddenly early in the 300s, and in the decades and centuries which followed Christians would gradually divide into two major groups. The first group slowly but surely became the civil religion of the former Roman Empire. The second formed small lay-initiated communities that sought to live out the Gospel without compromise, whatever the cost.

The clearest example of this second development is St. Anthony, the founder of Christian monasticism. As a young Christian in Egypt in the mid-200s he heard the story of the rich young ruler being read one Sunday in his local church and immediately determined to follow Jesus' advice to that earlier young man who had lived only 200 years earlier, and in a place nearby. He proceeded to sell the estate he had inherited from his parents, distributing the proceeds to charity, and devoting the rest of his life to prayer and spiritual development.

There were also small communities of married Christians throughout the Mediterranean area in the early centuries of the Church who had been inspired by the example of the Jerusalem community.

The faith and daily life of these groups, both monastic and lay, contrasted sharply with the large numbers of people who had only recently converted to Christianity, and who tended to regard their new faith as merely another religion, rather than a new way of life.

In many cases these recent converts had entered the Church under political or social pressure, and even when their conversion was voluntary it was often shallow. The Christian Church grew quite rapidly in the 300s, and there were simply not enough pastors and teachers to instruct and form the new Christians.

## INSTITUTIONAL CHRISTIANITY AND INTENTIONAL CHRISTIANS

In the centuries following persecution Christianity continued to evolve in two quite different ways. One produced a highly institutionalized civil religion. The other produced loose networks of intentional Christians, usually but not always living in self-governing voluntary communities.

The growth of institutional Christianity is easy for us to see and study because it played a prominent role in the historical events of its time, and because it developed the rituals and doctrines which have come to define Christianity for most people. The numerous buildings which institutional Christians have erected throughout the world are vivid evidence of its importance. Since the 300s the vast majority of those who consider themselves Christian, probably in the range of 85 to 90%, have been institutional Christians.

Intentional Christianity on the other hand is much harder for us to recognize and to study. That is because it is fundamentally personal and non-institutional, and because it has involved fewer people. But despite its smaller numbers and its institutional weakness this portion of Christianity has had a profound impact on both the Church and on western civilization, an impact completely out of proportion to its size. Because intentional Christians have, until recently, been forced to exist at the margins of society where they were heavily persecuted and regarded as heretics their influence has often been overlooked.

The differences between these two groups are substantial. For the majority of institutional Christians their religion is largely synonymous with affiliating with a particular religious organization. For such people this membership is a part of their life—very often an important part—but it is only a part of their life. Intentional Christians by contrast view their Christian faith as much more than a religion. For them it is a way of life, something that defines their entire existence. Everything they do—mentally or physically, politically or personally—is done because they believe being a Christian requires that action. Their religion is not a part of their life, it is their life.

Intentional Christians are the people who throughout history have read or heard the stories of Jesus from the Gospels, and have found themselves wanting, often passionately, to follow the example of the first generation Christians. These original Christians, the ones who had first said "Yes" to Jesus, had held nothing back, as Jesus had held nothing back for

himself, and if they were to follow him these persons could hold nothing back for themselves.

Whereas institutional Christians struggle to reconcile the demands of living in their particular culture and society with the ideals presented by their religion, intentional Christians struggle to differentiate themselves from the societies they live in because they believe many practices of their society are incompatible with following Christ.

Always for these intentional Christians following Jesus means taking action, not at some distant time in the future, but *now*, in the time that actually exists. Many of the first Christians emphasized that this is how they came to follow Christ, dropping what they were doing on a particular day and from that moment beginning to live life in a new way. That is what those who have intentionally followed Jesus in subsequent centuries have sought to do.

Of course not everyone who heard Jesus say, “Follow me,” during his lifetime had answered, “Yes”. Some had said “I’ll think about it.” Others had said, “I’ll do it when it’s convenient.” Still others had simply declined, saying “It’s too hard.” It has been the same every year since. But those who did say “Yes” to Jesus came to live their lives in fundamentally different ways, ways that were quite different than the way they would have chosen for themselves.

Their “Yes” necessarily occurred before they knew what it meant to accept Jesus’ invitation, but that did not deter them. They learned to follow by following—often learning the most from the mistakes they made, as the stories they tell about themselves make quite clear.

Those who have answered Jesus’ invitation with an intentional “Yes” in the centuries since have had a deep and long-lasting impact on our entire civilization. They are the people who have given their lives as martyrs. They are the people who have devoted their lives to spiritual development, often at the cost of great poverty and distress. They are the ones who have left the security and comfort of the communities and families they had grown up in to go into the wilderness and create new communities of the spirit.

They are the people who throughout the medieval period endured social ostracism and intense persecution in their struggle for social justice, eventually laying the foundations for democracy. They are the ones who in the 1500s died as martyrs for religious liberty, for separation of church and state, and for the right of voluntary assembly. They are the



people who in the 1600s left their homes in England to establish a new nation in North America, a nation that would provide the seedbed for the global democracy that would transform the entire world in the twentieth century.

They are the people who in the 1700s devoted themselves to evangelizing the ordinary people of Europe and America, and who created local congregations where poor and working class people could be comfortable. They are the people who in the 1800s volunteered their best leaders and who contributed vast sums to send missionaries to Asia and Africa. They are the people who in the same period forced society to confront the shameful institution of slavery and to abolish it.

They are the people who in the twentieth century forced their fellow Christians to confront the legacy of religiously legitimated warfare and to enact laws recognizing the right of conscientious objection to military service. These are the people who are forcing us today to confront the massive number of abortions taking place throughout the world.

Without these people and their courageous actions throughout the centuries the world would be a very different place. They are the intentional Christians. They are the ones who have asked not "What *must* I do to be a Christian?" but "How can I be *more* Christian?"

### *The River of Grace*

There is a river of grace flowing through human history, a river which like all rivers has two banks. On one bank the Church's institutions have thrived and developed, and Christians devoted to these institutions have built homes there.

On the other bank live those Christians called to uncompromised intentionality. There they have built their homes, and have created a different set of institutions.

Both banks are part of Christianity, but the people who live there have developed two quite different ways of being Christians. These two lists suggest the contrast between these two ways—and the importance of both.

## The River of Grace

INTENTIONAL	INSTITUTIONAL
Creating the new which the river makes possible	Preserving the old which the river has produced
Prophetic	Priestly
City of God	City of Man
Monasticism	Diocesan Church
Radical innovation	Evolutionary change
Perfectionist ideals	Acceptance of evil as inevitable
Tightly bounded voluntary communities	Inclusive biological-based communities
Emphasis on the spiritual	Emphasis on the historical
Individuals are primary	Institutions are primary
Bible as authority	Tradition as authority
Evangelical	Catholic
Believer	Church
Freedom	Continuity

## MONASTIC INTENTIONALITY AND EVANGELICAL INTENTIONALITY

Just as Christianity has developed in two distinct ways, one institutional and the other intentional, intentional Christianity has developed in two distinct ways, one monastic and the other evangelical.

Of these two forms the evangelical form is the oldest, appearing in Christianity's first decade in the Jerusalem Church. Monasticism by contrast would not appear in Christianity until some two hundred years later, and would not become a major force in the Church until several centuries later.

But the evangelical lay movements, even though part of Christianity in its earliest years, never found a secure place in the Church's institutions until after the Reformation. In the 1,500 years before the Reformation an antagonistic relationship between the institutional Church and the lay movements developed, in contrast to monastic intentionality which developed in a positive relationship to the institutional Churches.

The primary distinction between these two forms of Christian intentionality is the monastic requirement of celibacy. Evangelical intentionality by contrast has always assumed its members would be married and have families.

Both the evangelical and monastic strands of intentional Christianity have generated numerous movements and institutions over the centuries. This book's purpose is to provide an overview of both monastic intentionality and lay evangelical intentionality over the entire two-thousand-year history of Christianity. It will note both their similarities and their differences, and analyze the ways both have influenced the development of western civilization.