



*The*  
**Inconvenient  
Gospel**

*A Southern Prophet Tackles  
War, Wealth, Race, and Religion*

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**CLARENCE JORDAN**

*Edited by Frederick L. Downing  
Introduction by Starlette Thomas*

## **PRAISE FOR *THE INCONVENIENT GOSPEL***

“I can critique some of the things Clarence Jordan believed about the Bible, but I cannot critique the way he lived it. This collection of writings from a too-often-forgotten sage is a gift to all of us at a time when we need models of costly courage and conviction.”

**Russell Moore**, *Christianity Today*

“Clarence Jordan has you saying ‘Amen’ one minute and thinking ‘I’m not sure about that’ the next. Regardless, he guarantees thoughtful interaction with his practical application of the Bible, which clearly comes from tending a farm. If Christians embraced at least some of his ideas, we’d have a different effect on our world: less hypocrisy and more action.”

**Joel Salatin**, Polyface Farm

“Flannery O’Conner famously said that her native South was ‘Christ-haunted.’ But for Clarence Jordan, Jesus was more than a ghost. He was a living presence in the poor and rejected, inviting us into beloved community as a real and practical alternative to the plantation economy. Jordan’s words are as relevant today as when he delivered them.”

**Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove**, author, *Revolution of Values*

“Few have lived, spoken, and written with such power, depth, and simplicity about Christian discipleship as Clarence Jordan did. His life is a testimony and a provocation to what God’s love for the whole world demands of us today. *The Inconvenient Gospel* is an essential book. It will inspire and challenge those willing to take its message to heart.”

**Norman Wirzba**, Duke Divinity School

**This is a preview. Get the entire book here.**

“Dallas Lee said of Clarence Jordan, ‘The promise of something wise or something funny or just something good to know danced in this man’s eyes.’ That wisdom, that fun, that good dances in his words too. As a member of the *koinonia* Clarence cofounded, I’ll use these pages as a guide, but anyone reading them can expect to be challenged and perhaps even changed.”

**Bren Dubay**, director, Koinonia Farm

“Clarence Jordan once wrote, ‘What the poor need is not charity but capital, not caseworkers but coworkers.’ That insight gave birth to the affordable housing movement, surely the most far reaching of Clarence’s many gifts to the world. His clear insights in this book make the gospel come to life.”

**David Snell**, president, The Fuller Center for Housing

“Clarence Jordan cultivated a ‘demonstration plot’ of God’s kingdom at Koinonia Farm. Now, with *The Inconvenient Gospel*, we have field notes from that experiment. Wise and often witty, Jordan’s words are a call to join God’s mission, even on our home soil where loving our enemies and our neighbors may be the same thing.”

**Ragan Sutterfield**, author, *Wendell Berry and the Given Life*

“In living a life of radical discipleship informed by the Sermon on the Mount, Clarence Jordan may be closest thing we have to an American Bonhoeffer. I’m heartened by the publication of *The Inconvenient Gospel*, to introduce a new generation of readers to Jordan’s unique and prophetic voice.”

**Brian Zahnd**, author, *When Everything’s on Fire*

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# The Inconvenient Gospel

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Clarence Jordan

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Plough

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# Who Was Clarence Jordan?

*Frederick L. Downing*

IN 1942, at the height of World War II and more than a decade before the civil rights movement, a young pastor and farmer named Clarence Jordan founded Koinonia Farm, an interracial, pacifist communal experiment on depleted farmland in the Deep South, as a “demonstration plot for the kingdom of God.” People needed to see the good news lived out in a practical life of justice where black and white Christians ate and worked together in harmony with one another and the earth.

BORN ON July 29, 1912, in Talbotton, Georgia, Clarence Leonard Jordan grew up in a conservative, privileged home. His father, Jim Jordan, had developed several businesses and owned farmland; he was mayor of Talbotton and head of its bank. Clarence’s mother, Maude Jossey Jordan, had a great impact on his personal

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development. Her father had died in a gun accident, so she hated firearms and any form of fighting. People who knew her described her as particularly tenderhearted and sensitive. Like other white families in town, the couple raised their family in the Southern Baptist tradition.

On visits to the Jordans' landholdings, Clarence and his brothers would play with the fieldworkers' children. Clarence soon realized his playmates lived in dire poverty and had only a few months' schooling per year because their parents depended on their help with fieldwork. When they did attend school, they had to walk several miles to a one-room schoolhouse staffed by a teacher with minimal education. Clarence wondered why they couldn't come to the big school in Talbotton. He also wondered about a Sunday school song that said, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight." If that was true, why were black children treated so differently?

Soon after his twelfth birthday, Clarence made his profession of faith during the yearly August revival. A family acquaintance, Mr. MacDonald, attended the same church and sang in the choir. He was also warden

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of the Talbot County Jail. The jail was a couple hundred yards behind the Jordans' home. At four o'clock every morning, a gong sounded to rouse the chain gang. The jail had five or six metal-barred wagons for transporting these prisoners to various worksites under the surveillance of armed guards.

A friend of Clarence's father's was imprisoned there – for killing a man over a love affair – and Clarence would join his father on visits. The boy became acquainted with others incarcerated there and often stopped to chat on his way home from school. Ed Russell was one who befriended him. Most of the inmates were black. In the course of conversation, they told him about the jail's "stretcher," in which a man being punished had his feet clamped to the floor while his arms were stretched upward with block and tackle.

Late one night, Clarence was wakened by terrible cries and groans from the direction of the jail – his friend Ed Russell's voice. The stretcher was in use, and Clarence could picture the man operating it – Mr. MacDonald, whose rich bass voice had proclaimed during Sunday evening service, "Love so mighty and so true merits my soul's best songs. / Faithful, loving service, too, to Him belongs. / Love lifted me . . ."

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“That nearly tore me to pieces,” Clarence would recall later. “I identified totally with that man in the stretcher. His agony was my agony.” The appalling breach between what his religion professed and the brutality and violence he witnessed would churn in Clarence throughout his life.

During his teen years Clarence said little about this inner turmoil. With two mules, Jib and Jody, he plowed his father’s fields. He learned to ride a motorbike and won a daredevil’s reputation among his friends and brothers, with whom he explored the woods and creeks outside town. But his mind was active, too, and during high school he considered pursuing law in order to fight for justice for people like the men he knew in jail.

As head of the bank, Jim Jordan oversaw tenants on bank-owned land. Accompanying his father on his rounds brought Clarence face to face with the sharecropping system. The more he saw of rural Talbot County, the more he realized that “most of the blacks did not end up on the chain gang” – instead, they were held down by economic oppression. They needed justice in every area of life. So Clarence began to think that studying agriculture might better empower him to “help the poor lift the awful

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burden off their backs.” He would share scientific knowledge with tenant farmers and help improve their lot.

In 1929, at seventeen, Clarence started classes in agriculture at the University of Georgia. But by the time he earned his degree, he no longer believed that better farming techniques alone could cure society’s ills. He decided to pursue the ministry.

ALL MALE STUDENTS at the University of Georgia were expected to join the Reserve Officers Training Corps, and Clarence had signed on at the outset of his college career. After completing the compulsory two years, he volunteered for two additional years of advanced training. In June 1933 – after graduating from university and before starting seminary – he was set to receive his commission after a final ROTC camp in Gainesville, Georgia. This turned out to be a second turning point. Clarence was twenty-one.

He had been reading the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel. One morning, when his officer commanded him to shoot at cardboard figures and impale straw dummies from horseback, he remembered Jesus’ words, “Love your enemies.” Canterng through the designated woodland, Clarence suddenly saw these targets as

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the enemies Jesus had told his followers to love. In that moment, he grasped that Jesus and the US Army taught opposite values. He reined in his horse and dismounted. Walking out of the woods, he handed his pistol, spurs, and saber to the officer in charge.

From the moment that he got down off of his horse in Gainesville to turn in his weapons, Clarence Jordan began a journey toward radical discipleship – living out the commands of Jesus unconditionally. Clarence trained for the ministry at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Here he learned to read the Bible in Greek and Hebrew. More importantly, he came to see that “the Word must come alive in currents of history and social change.” Learning to read the Bible in this way led him to see that the earliest Christian church was a *koinonia*, a communal fellowship of economic sharing. In time, he became convinced that Christians needed a new theory of economics – one of sharing based on need.

When Clarence joined other seminarians at a mission in Louisville’s ghetto, he was surprised to learn how many of the inner-city destitute were from rural Alabama and Georgia. This experience “drove me to get back to the area that was vomiting these people up,

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to see if we couldn't reverse the trend from the farms to the city." He felt that if the problems of race and poverty were to be solved, it must be "in the regions where tensions are the greatest, and rooted in the poor economy of the South."

In seminary, Clarence met Florence Kroeger, a young woman who worked in the library. More than her blue eyes, her sense of adventure and willingness to take risks drew him to her. As their friendship grew, he confided in her his dream of returning to the Deep South to help the poor. And when their relationship became serious, he told her, "If you want to be the wife of a pastor of the First Baptist church someplace, you don't want to marry me." Florence was undeterred, and they were married on July 21, 1936.

WHILE IN LOUISVILLE, Clarence Jordan came to see the American church as under the powerful sway of a plantation mentality, with controlling cultural myths about race, nation, and wealth that created a rift between the life of the spirit and the daily life of the believer. Clarence developed a two-pronged strategy to counteract this bifurcation of life. First, he would make a Bible version with the stories set in the American South

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and told in the language of the cotton patch so common people could see the Bible as good news for the poor and become participants instead of spectators. Second, society needed a demonstration plot – a concrete example and daily reminder of an authentic Christian life.

So, at age thirty, in 1942, Clarence moved onto a 440-acre farm he had located near Americus, in southwest Georgia. He named it Koinonia. Another couple, Martin and Mabel England, joined the Jordans' venture. Clarence and Florence had two children, Eleanor and James, by this time; the Englands had children as well. Koinonia became the lived example Clarence had envisioned, interracial and communal. "It scared the devil out of us to think of going against Southern traditions," Clarence later confessed.

It would also take a lot of work. The red clay soil was badly eroded, and the buildings so rundown that the two men moved in first to make the homes habitable for their families. Clarence chose a one-room shack in a lonesome spot for his office. Here he could read, think, pray, and start drafting his Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament.

The two families joined the local church, Rehoboth Baptist. So did other Koinonia members, as the

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community grew. For a time, there was relative calm surrounding Koinonia's endeavors. Clarence sought to be a good neighbor and to go slow with his revolutionary ideas. But Koinonia Farm was established in the middle of World War II, and Clarence's antiwar sentiments offended his neighbors. In 1949, accusations reached the FBI that he "counseled young men against entering military service." Had this charge been proven, he would have been guilty of sedition, in violation of the Selective Service Act of 1948. The FBI gathered evidence and interviewed Clarence, but the US Attorney in Macon declined to prosecute him.

Another time, a group of men arrived at the farm, asking for Clarence Jordan and identifying themselves as Ku Klux Klan. When Clarence introduced himself, one of them glared into his face. "We're here to tell you that we don't allow the sun to set on anybody who eats with n----s." Without missing a beat, Clarence grabbed the man's right hand and began pumping. "I'm a Baptist preacher and I just graduated from the Southern Baptist seminary," he grinned. "I've heard about people who had power over the sun, but I never hoped to meet one."

In August 1950, the Rehoboth Baptist Church voted to expel Clarence and the other Koinonians from the

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church because they had “brought people of other races into the services.” After this event, Clarence would never join another denomination or local church. Instead, he viewed himself as a member of the church universal and expanded his conversation with churches outside the Southern Baptist orbit. He also depended more on the brothers and sisters of the community for spiritual fellowship. “Something has been set in motion here, something that is eternal,” Clarence declared. “I’m beginning to see that I’m in this thing called Koinonia for life.”

Half a week after the eviction, elderly Baptist deacon Bowen arrived at Koinonia to ask forgiveness. “Well, you have it,” Clarence replied. Bowen asked if they could pray, and the two knelt on the bare clay beneath a tree in the yard.

As the old man stood to go he said, “I can’t go into a church that won’t have you in it.”

“You don’t get out of the church,” Clarence countered. “You live so that they kick you out.”

THE DECADE of the 1950s would be increasingly violent for Clarence Jordan and Koinonia. The Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, with its

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mandate to desegregate public schools, was a watershed event in American culture and a direct challenge to the status quo in American race relations. In 1956, two young black men contacted Clarence Jordan. They wanted to enroll at the Georgia State College of Business, but every applicant had to produce signatures from two alumni of Georgia's university system – a gambit that had always prevented any black student from entering. Clarence drove to Atlanta to meet the prospective students and offer his support.

By the time he got back to his community three hours later, the state governor had called the Sumter County sheriff with instructions to “check out this Jordan fellow.” That night, the anonymous threatening phone calls began. Some nights they came every ten minutes, from sunset till morning.

In the months that followed there were twenty-eight separate attacks against Koinonia, including the use of dynamite, firebombs, and high-powered rifles. Koinonia had grown to about sixty people, black and white, and they were all in danger. One night, when Eleanor Jordan, home from college, turned on her bedroom light, a bullet ripped through her bedroom wall, missing her by inches. Luckily, the attacks killed no one.

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Senator Joe McCarthy had whipped up anti-communist sentiment, adding grist to the rumor mill of Americus, Georgia. Clarence Jordan must be communist, locals reckoned, for he had refused to support the war effort, his race-mixing was well known, and out-of-state cars had been observed at Koinonia. A local grand jury investigated Jordan and Koinonia. Its report, which it sent to the Department of Justice, concluded that Koinonia profited from the violence, that Clarence Jordan committed perjury, and that he was lacking in “honesty, integrity, and good faith.” Koinonia was accused of spreading false propaganda and keeping blacks in “a state of brainwashed peonage.”

In 1957 the Ku Klux Klan again trained its sights on Koinonia. On Sunday, February 27, they gathered from across the state at the Americus fairgrounds, 150 strong, in robes and hoods. Their rally began with a prayer and ended with a motorcade that drove slowly past the farm. One of the Koinonia children said, years later, that this was the first time he saw fear in the faces of community adults.

BY THE END of the 1950s, many people had left Koinonia – some driven away by fear, others just ready to

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move on. The community was a shadow of its former self, and Clarence Jordan had to find new ways of envisioning his mission. As he read the Bible in economic terms, he sought a way to redistribute land and wealth to the poor and dispossessed. He created Koinonia Partners, a revision of his original idea of Koinonia, to build houses for the poor at cost and at no interest (it was the forerunner of Habitat for Humanity). And he established a Fund for Humanity to restore land to the poor.

He also began speaking widely at churches and colleges. His early writings had struck an optimistic tone. Now his sermons, like those given at Goshen College in 1965, tended to focus on the hard teachings of Jesus, such as renouncing wealth and learning to love one's enemies. In his writing and preaching, he grew more daring in calling for change in the church and in the lives of Christians. He now addressed Christian institutions and individuals bluntly: "You ought to spend at least as much trying to help house your poor brothers whom you have seen as trying to house God whom you have never seen." He was angered when a Georgia church spent twenty-five thousand dollars installing a decorative fountain while there were people in town with no running water. And

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when a minister bragged that his congregation had just erected a ten-thousand-dollar cross, Clarence retorted, “Time was when Christians could get those for free.”

After the death of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Clarence Jordan became even more resolute. In a sermon titled “Things Needed for Our Peace,” given less than a month after King’s assassination, Clarence boldly condemned American racism in a way that remains contemporary more than fifty years later. He called on the privileged students of Furman University to go out from that place with a new spirit of servanthood. And at the American Baptist Convention meeting in Seattle in the summer of 1969, he urged pastors to focus their ministry in the here and now rather than pointing believers away from this world.

Clarence would still disappear into his shack in the pecan orchard to reflect, pray, and write. His belief that Jesus invited his followers to a revolutionary way of life – its marching orders contained in the Sermon on the Mount – never wavered. During the 1960s, he labored over his Cotton Patch version of the Gospels.

After King’s death, with racial tensions still strong, the FBI continued to follow Clarence Jordan closely. On August 24, 1969, he accompanied two black Christians

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to the First Methodist Church of Americus. They were refused entry. Clarence and the other two remained outside and attempted to talk to worshippers when they came out. A report on this event was sent to the FBI and other intelligence units.

Two months later, on October 29, 1969, Clarence was working on his Cotton Patch Version of the Gospel of John in his writing shack when he suffered a massive heart attack and died. He was fifty-seven.

Clarence Jordan's prophetic voice was a corrective to an overly spiritualized Christianity, bringing into sharp focus the radical nature of the Christian gospel as it relates to materialism, militarism, and racism. He was a hero to some and a thorn to many. He delivered his Master's message in the vernacular of his own people and place, but, more importantly, he showed all of us that it can and must come to expression in our daily lives.

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Frederick L. Downing, professor of philosophy and religious studies at Valdosta State University, also selected the readings in this volume. He is the author of *Clarence Jordan: A Radical Pilgrimage in Scorn of the Consequences*; *Elie Wiesel: A Religious Biography*; and *To See the Promised Land: The Faith Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King, Jr.*

# Reading Clarence Jordan Today

*Starlette Thomas*

BEFORE YOU TURN THE PAGE and enter the life of Clarence Jordan through his own words, it's worth taking stock of where Christianity in North America finds itself these days, more than half a century after his death.

You might be as puzzled as I am. Didn't Jesus call himself "the way"? How hard could it be for his disciples to keep their eyes on him, to keep walking straight in the way he showed us? Turns out his way is also pretty narrow, and few find it (Matt. 7:14).

Hyperpoliticized and evenly divided on who's wrong and who's right, the North American church continues to toe "the color line." Not much has changed in five decades: we're still segregated at 11 a.m. on Sunday. The sociopolitical construct of race still holds the reins, controlling the ways in which Christian communities of faith are formed in most places. We still avoid talking

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about race, but we'll sing in a well-meaning way: "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight."

But that's not how Jesus loves the little children. It is well past time that we deracialize his gospel, as his love is not color-coded. God's love is unconditional, which means it is uncategorical.

Besides, we're not supposed to see our bodies that way. Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth: "Even though we once knew Jesus from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:16-17). Or as Clarence Jordan put it in *The Second Letter to the Atlanta Christians*: "That's why, from here on out, we pay absolutely no attention to a person's outward appearance. It is true that we once knew Christ physically, but now we do so no longer. Therefore, if a man is a Christian he is a brand-new creation. The old guy is gone: look, a new man has appeared."

To be clear, this call for a raceless gospel is not a suggestion that we be colorblind, and it is not a vision

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of what some have described as a post-racial society. Instead, it is an invitation to see race as it really is: a caste system with a good paint job. This raceless gospel is also a proclamation of an undivided “kin-dom” to come. Until then, we should see race as the good news of socially colored white skin and therefore “another gospel” (Gal. 6–9). In *Cotton Patch Parables for Liberation*, Clarence Jordan writes, “The church of God does not respect color lines.” But Jordan didn’t just write it down; he lived it out, “precept upon precept, line upon line” (Isa. 28:13).

Clarence and Florence Jordan, with Millard and Linda Fuller and a few others, drew a line in the sand at Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, in 1942. Right then, not waiting for a more appropriate time, they bore witness to the hospitality, kinship, and fellowship of Christ’s body. Jordan said, “Faith is not belief in spite of the evidence, but a life in scorn of the consequences.” Academically trained and ordained, he knew what he was talking about. But his farmer’s hands called him to do some deep digging in American soil foreign to this kind of Christian witnessing. As he worked the land, he toiled with the issues of race and its progeny as a spiritual discipline. It was important for Jordan that

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he lived it, that he brought it home, even though it was inconvenient.

Jordan called Koinonia Farm his “demonstration plot,” where he dared to erase “the color line” by integrating his faith and his life, practicing it in community with African Americans, those socially colored black. It was forbidden, this so-called race-mixing, and he no doubt crossed the line. He got the Ku Klux Klan’s attention and the group paid him several visits, leaving bullets as they drove by. But Jordan kept his head down, and his head was on straight; he was a pacifist who founded a desegregated community because he was grounded in his faith. He saw that the American church was following in the footsteps of the American empire, and he went another way.

Perhaps Jordan had a vision like that of Peter, who reported back to the New Members Committee of the church at Jerusalem: “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us” (Acts 11:12). Despite the disapproval of his neighbors, who cut ties and boycotted the farm, Jordan kept on digging and planting seeds in hopes that the church would change. He showed that you don’t need much to make a difference.

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We are all God's children. What a shame it is that much of the North American church has chosen an Enlightenment idea about identity over the truth that we are all created in the image of God. Coloring in the face of God in peach tones, we have framed the divine in 11 x 17 and hung up an idolized version of ourselves in our homes and sanctuaries.

Careful not to change a thing, it seems that the North American church is, by and large, stuck in a time past, or perhaps walking back on its calling to be the reconciling body of Christ. Christianity is not following its leader. This is not a new insight but a necessary confession. From Jesus' first handpicked disciples until now, Christian believers have been a walking contradiction, with Jesus saying one thing and his followers doing another. These discrepancies have caused many Christians and onlookers to question whether the church is the right body for the job. Because it needs bodywork.

I found Clarence Jordan's words when I was looking at Christianity, realizing that in remaining segregated on Sunday mornings it wasn't just missing something but missing the point. In Jordan, I stumbled upon a guide who knew exactly where I expected my faith to take me, who shared my convictions, and whose faith had led him

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to defy the status quo. A Greek-reading green thumb, Clarence Jordan stuck out to me. I couldn't unsee the cotton patch evidence.

Jordan didn't wait on the world to change. Instead, he changed the world around him. He didn't wait on the laws to change; instead, he followed the laws of Christ. He lived in his own world, which proved to me that there is life outside of and apart from this racialized reality. It could be done, and I didn't have to wait on the North American church to do it. No, I could put my hands to the plow and turn my corner of the world upside down.

YOU MAY BE WONDERING how my connection to Clarence Jordan came about, how a twenty-first-century African American pastor finds herself enthusing about a Jim Crow-era Southern Baptist minister. You could say we were brought together by the Holy Spirit and a shared commitment to building community. A few years ago, I received a pastoral study grant from the Louisville Institute in Kentucky, supported by the Lilly Endowment, to take a sabbatical and undertake a deep dive into Clarence Jordan's life and writings.

At the time, I was questioning my faith in race and in the North American expression of Christianity, which

supports it, evidenced by the fact that its churches come in black and white. Today, I have no doubt that American Christianity is complicit in oppression due to its silent, even unwitting, trading in the perks and privileges of white supremacy. I am not alone; there have always been Christians who sensed that the church was not living up to its confessions, that it had somehow lost its way, that it would need witnesses who could shine a light when the church hid its own light for power, position, or material gain.

Christians in America must answer for the many ways that they do not identify with the way of Jesus or answer his call for justice. Far too many are wishy-washy, fifty-fifty, feigning laryngitis and pretending they cannot find their voice to answer the blood calling from the ground. Still, I must ask: Were you there for sweet Elijah McClain, who went to the store for snacks but never made it back home? Were you there for Ahmaud Arbery, stopped in his tracks while jogging? Were you there when they shot Breonna Taylor while she lay in bed sleeping? Were you there when they choked the life out of George Floyd? When bowed heads at Mother Emanuel AME Church were filled with bullets? When supermarket shoppers in Buffalo, New York, were murdered in the

aisles? Because if we aren't there for them, then why are we here? If these deaths don't affect you personally, how can we talk about being one nation, let alone the one body of Christ?

Word made flesh, Jesus is God on the ground, on the move, where the injustice is. Jesus is in the thick of it. Jesus is God face to face, in places we think he wouldn't be caught dead and with the last people we would picture him with. As his disciples, we should be close on his heels and always be found in his company – no matter who he is keeping company with.

Unfortunately, instead of being known for “sharing all things in common” as the first Christians were, American Christians are known for shoving select scriptures down people's throats. Nauseated by this and no longer wanting to be associated with the likes of such Christians, many followers of Jesus have left the church building and are looking for him elsewhere. They know that he is found in community: at shared tables, at sickbeds, and at gravesides; with tortured souls; with those who secretly are interested yet don't want to be seen with him; with women and children.

For years, I had searched for a conversation partner who could double as a witness to this gnawing, nagging

*Reading Clarence Jordan Today*

yearning for authentic being and belonging in Christian community – without the surveillance of race. I wanted to be seen fully, freely, and authentically, apart from “the white gaze.” I needed to prove that it could be done, not just personally but in community. For me, that witness was Clarence Jordan. He made me believe again that there could be more to human being and belonging.

So, as part of my project, which looked at the malformation of Christian community due to the sociopolitical construct of race, I studied Clarence Jordan’s writings and his witness at Koinonia Farm. I wanted to know more about the man who broke the laws of segregation to keep the law of love, which Jesus distilled for us in the Greatest Commandment, to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:35–40).

On Koinonia Farm’s seventy-fifth anniversary, I walked the grounds and stood just outside Clarence Jordan’s writing shack. I pictured him writing there. I wanted to be close to him, close to someone who kept their convictions even closer. My feet were dug in by then. I looked around and took in his handiwork, pecans on the ground ready to be harvested. His Christian identity was not a card he carried but a role he carried

out and acted out in the world, and quite literally planted in the ground.

These observations led me to believe that the churches in North America will either be communal or coffins. There is no life in spaces cut off from entire communities. Churches will either be inclusive or invisible to generations who have no interest in hand-me-down hatreds, exclusionary prejudices, and sacred stereotypes. Going to these churches will make no difference if they offer the same selections and preferences as American society at large.

There is a generation that wants to see something different. And we are willing to go to the ends of the earth, and back in time, to find those who know the way – a way out of racialized identities and hierarchical forms of belonging in a capitalist society. For me and for many others, Clarence Jordan is one of those. A patron saint of community-builders, he still speaks to those who feel called to defy race and its categorized way of living. He inspires us to lay to rest this segregated expression of church and demonstrate a better way.

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# I

## *Impractical Christianity*

*The following article appeared in Young People's Quarterly in 1948, "written from personal experience as director of Koinonia Farm, a Christian agricultural missionary project in Georgia."*

YOU CAN'T PUT Christianity into practice. You can't *make* it work. As desperately as it is needed in this poor, broken world, it is *not* a philosophy of life to be "tried." Nor is it a social or ethical ideal which has tantalized humankind with the possibility of attainment.

For Christianity is not a system you work – it is a Person who works you. You don't get *it*; he gets *you*. Jesus said, "I am . . . the life" (John 14:6). Now life isn't something you try out for a while and then exchange for something else if it doesn't prove practical. You either have it or you don't. And if your Christianity is the kind that has to be "worked," you don't have the real thing. For when you look long and deeply into the face of

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Jesus, that compulsion of love falls on you, and you find yourself vowing that you would follow him and serve him – practical or impractical, wise or foolish, for better or worse – unto the death.

Somehow or other we simply must realize this. Already too many people are thinking of Christianity as a glorified scheme which will gather up all the frayed ends of our social, industrial, economic, and political reforms into a golden fabric of peace and plenty. “Everything else has failed,” people say, “let’s try Christianity” – as though it were a jigsaw puzzle awaiting human ingenuity to put it together! We talk of reconstruction; Jesus talks about rebirth. The city of God is not built up from below; it comes down from the Father.

Christianity is more than a scheme to be tried – it is a guiding star. Christians are those who locate and direct themselves by Christ, just as a navigator takes bearings from a fixed star. What Jesus taught and accomplished among us has given us our knowledge of God. His word and way are more dependable than the North Star, and whenever we navigate by him, we can be sure of arriving. By getting our sight on Jesus, we get our bearings; we are no longer “lost,” for we know where we are and where we are going. And it isn’t the star that is practical or

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impractical, but the navigator who accepts or rejects its guiding light.

But at the time Jesus spoke these words, I suppose the world considered those who followed him as foolish, impractical, idealistic, fanatic. He made them forsake jobs and homes; he led them across racial boundaries when the time was anything but ripe; he turned them into peacemakers when the popular thing to do was to hate. And in return, he rewarded them with a cross!

Would any but fools follow such a one? Yet they couldn't help it. Never once did they ask: "Aren't we going a bit too fast? Won't we do more harm than good by stirring up the people?" Perhaps as Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and certain death, Thomas spoke for them all when he said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). The statement of a fool – a fool for Christ!

Such compulsion is not the product of reason but of love. And love has its roots in fellowship. They were with him, they followed him, they knew him, they loved him. This fellowship with him changed them, empowered them. And herein is the clue to our weakness and the key to our possibilities.

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For what we need more than goods is God; more than a living is life. Even though we build with our own hands a new world, if we find not God, our lives still are voids darkened by the lurking shadows of our own selfishness and echoing to the whimperings of children who won't admit they are lost.

Have you ever imagined what you would do if you could be alone with Christ for a few hours? You think you would ask him all kinds of questions and discuss with him the many perplexing problems which plague our fear-haunted world. But you wouldn't. For a while you would just sit and look at him. Then, as though drawn by a magnet, you would come near him and kneel. And while you knelt, he would put his hands upon you in loving forgiveness, and you would feel indescribable peace and power surging through you. You would lift up your eyes and look into his. But you wouldn't, you couldn't, ask him anything.

You would be in that silent, wordless fellowship which love alone interprets. Fellowship with him is all the heaven one seeks, the answer to all problems, the goal of all yearnings, the fulfilment of all desire.

