

The Way of Jesus

reviewed by [James C. Howell](#) in the [January 24, 2006](#) issue

In Review



The Way of Jesus: A Journey of Freedom for Pilgrims and Wanderers

Jonathan S. Campbell, with Jennifer Campbell
Jossey-Bass

As a clergyman in a mainline denomination, I find myself either bored or annoyed when I even glance over a book like *The Way of Jesus*, but in the end I wind up thanking God. Such an easy target, so easy to dismiss prematurely: Jonathan Campbell tells the story of how he and his wife, Jennifer, have exited organized religion “not because we have lost our faith, but to save it.” The Campbells and others are bolting from the institutional church and running giddily into the arms of Jesus, who “is powerfully real,” they say. “To know Jesus is not an event, a ritual, creed, or a religion.”

A fast-track evangelistic career smothered Campbell's—Jonathan's, that is—spirituality. Despite enormous success, "I no longer felt the freedom or had the time to pursue certain relationships that I was drawn to. Instead, I felt led to maintaining and propping up 'key' relationships within the Church. Regardless of how I was feeling, I was still expected to fulfill my duties." So now, gathering informally here and there with other "religious refugees" who say "the Church gets in the way of me experiencing Jesus," the Campbells do only what they sense the Spirit is leading them to do, unencumbered by the trappings of the Christian religion.

The vapidness of all this is obvious. The notion of a pristine Jesus straight up, not on the rocks, with no ginger ale, is not even plausible: we meet Jesus, if at all, across a 2,000-year divide, via Gospels that were nascent institutions themselves, their transmitters trying to pass along a story they treasured via copyists, theologians and bishops. Campbell himself was reared in a devout, Bible-reading home. You have to wonder how people who weren't would ever join a refugee movement to stick to the Jesus who has long been housed in the church they are fleeing.

The word *feel* occurs multiple times on every page, and this simple fact fully explains Campbell's epistemology and ethics. God placed our desires within us, he contends. "They define us, and shape us." But isn't the tyranny of feeling the flimsiest conceivable mooring for the self? The Jesus of scripture wasn't "drawn" to people; and even if being drawn is a good thing, why shouldn't a pastor be drawn to key people, to leaders, in the church? Is true theology what I "feel" inside? Is the movement of the Holy Spirit no more than what I as a spiritual person "feel led" to do?

Campbell writes as if the foibles of the church are something newfangled. But hasn't the church in every epoch acknowledged its own foolishness? Don't we have a historic impatience with religion, epitomized in modern times by Barth and Bonhoeffer, whom Campbell quotes often? Yet Campbell writes as if he has unearthed something hitherto untold—that the body of Christ is "more than, and much different from, what we see on a typical Sunday in church." The body of Christ is mystical, a vision, a prayer, the preamble to a confession of sin.

To say so is a clue to why this book may be a badly needed addition to the reading list of clergy and lay leaders. How many pew warmers, Sunday school teachers and even pastors speak much of the body of Christ? And do they agonize over the dissonance between that vision, that prayer, and the admittedly embarrassing reality of congregational life? Have we grasped the depth of what is wrong with the church and why its demolition is its hope?

The Campbells are pushing away from a church that most of us understand died a long time ago. The Constantinian ecclesia, demanding obedience, teaching authoritatively, slinked away decades back. No one cowers before the church. People use the church for precisely the ends Campbell feels can be pursued only outside the church: dabbling, sampling, taking a little of this or that, exploring "my" spirituality.

The Way of Jesus is an engaging story, giving evidence of surprisingly sound theology, including a nuanced doctrine of sin and repentance that we may not expect from the kinds of writers who would dispense with organized religion. The Campbells are neither hostile nor belligerent, as if nursing anger against the church; the attitude is more like that of middle-aged adults looking back on high school days with some nostalgia but glad to be free of requirements, tests and rules.

Some of what Campbell says is a bit strange. Jonathan and Jennifer are a highly unusual couple in that while they were dating they "stayed up late many nights, wrestling with how to surrender our lives to Jesus." They exhibit a confident spirituality that might be difficult for their intended audience to identify with: "Our family is into a deep spirituality centered in Jesus that permeates all we are and do." My family couldn't honestly make such a claim. We want Jesus to permeate all we are and do, but our intentions are clouded by sin, not by an institution, and frankly I would be utterly unaware of the sin were it not for the institution that requires me to

confess week in and week out.

I do not think I would argue too strenuously with Campbell when he comments: “For a while, I thought of reforming the institution. I thought wrong.” We clergy who have not exited the church labor zealously at reform yet are humbly cognizant that the church will never be reformed, at least not on this side of eternity. It is the clumsiness of the church that is its charm. In *The Epistle to the Romans*, Barth spoke of the church as “a canal through which flows living water. Wherever graves are, there is resurrection. Where the church ends, there is its beginning. Where its unrighteousness is exposed, there its righteousness dawns. The divine demolition of any Church means that every Church arises as a signpost, threshold, and door of hope. . . . Broken, the Church can bear its message with its head erect, for the Gospel belongs to the Church that is lost.”

Yes, the church is lost, and we are unrighteous, as good as dead. But what if it were otherwise? What would God do with a church that never lost its way, was fully righteous, was vibrantly alive (as so many congregations now boast), pulsating with “a deep spirituality centered in Jesus that permeates all we are and do”? We will never know. But we do know that God is glorified (although the world may not notice, and many spiritual people may not either) in a church that is an embarrassment to itself and to God.