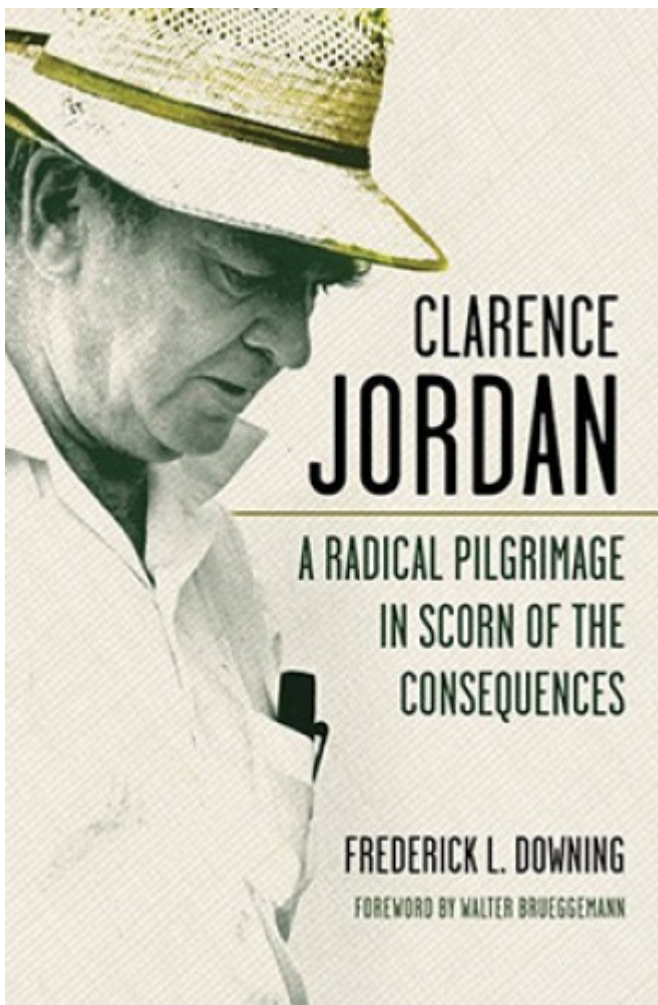


Clarence Jordan's radical experiment in following Jesus

What makes a person able to see evil and stand against it without fear?

by [Scot McKnight](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Clarence Jordan

A Radical Pilgrimage in Scorn of the Consequences

By Frederick L. Downing
Mercer University Press,

VOLUME ONE

ROOTS IN THE COTTON PATCH

The Clarence Jordan Symposium 2012



EDITED BY
Kirk Lyman-Barner AND Cori Lyman-Barner

Roots in the Cotton Patch

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Cascade

As parishioners gathered outside Rehoboth Baptist Church in Americus, Georgia, on a Sunday in August 1950, there was tension in the air. Someone from Clarence Jordan's Koinonia Farm, just down the road, had brought a visitor to church—an Indian Hindu named R. C. Sharma. The problem was not that Sharma was a Hindu but that he had dark skin.

That night the congregation voted to expel Clarence and his wife, Florence, and all other members of Koinonia. The congregation's official complaint, reports Frederick L. Downing, was that Jordan and friends had "brought people of other races into the services of Rehoboth Baptist Church, and . . . done this with the knowledge that such practices were not in accord with the practices of other members."

Former president Jimmy Carter tells a related story about Jordan in *Roots in the Cotton Patch*, a collection of talks given at the 2012 Clarence Jordan Symposium:

We were having a revival at the Plains Baptist Church and just before the sermon began, Clarence Jordan came in because he was a friend of our revival speaker. I would guess that about a third of the people there got up and walked out, because those were times when it was not a common or acceptable thing for anyone to maintain that African American citizens were equal to white citizens in the eyes of our government or in the eyes of God.

What makes a person able to see systemic evils and stand against them "in scorn of the consequences" (as Jordan puts it in *The Substance of Faith and Other Cotton Patch Sermons*)? Or as Downing asks: "What was it that propelled this young man rooted in the red clay dirt of Georgia to go so far beyond his family and his region that this favored son became the 'black sheep' of the family, and a threat to the good folk of a town with the name of Americus?" Downing's splendid biographical study offers the beginning of an answer.

Jordan grew up in the town of Talbotton in west central Georgia, the son of parents who believed that children should show respect for all persons. Jordan later said that he knew his parents would punish him as much for mistreating African Americans (Jordan often used the word *Negro*) as for mistreating whites. They pressed on him their conviction that color did not change a person's value in God's eyes or theirs. It was said that Jordan's father never missed a service at Talbotton Baptist Church. The whole family participated in the regular revival meetings.

Jordan was especially close to his mother, forming what Downing—who dabbles in social-psychological explanations—calls a mutual admiration society. Jordan's father was often absent, and his mother was especially devoted to Clarence after he had a serious childhood illness. Interpreting Jordan's lifelong focus on community as compensation for his father's absence, Downing weaves into the biography a

“complex theme of abandonment and a resulting quest for community.” As Jordan sought approval from his grandfather, he became, in the famous terms of Erik Erikson, a *homo religiosus* who was also judge and parent of his own father. Perhaps so.

The Jordan family home was about 200 yards from an “old-time Georgian chain gang” camp and jail of “terrible brutality.” Young Clarence walked near the camp on his way to school. He once said that the camp gave him his “first awareness of the injustices to people because of race.”

At church, he met the warden of the chain gang, a Mr. MacDonald. One Sunday evening, 12-year-old Jordan observed MacDonald exulting in singing the hymn “Love Lifted Me.” In bed later that night, Jordan was awakened by the sounds of a prisoner being beaten at the camp. He later called it a “devastating experience.” The sounds “nearly tore me to pieces.” How, he wondered, could a man sing about God’s love and then become a monster toward a man because he was black?

Jordan attended the University of Georgia. His time there was particularly influential. Not only did he experience a call to ministry during this period, but it was there that his Christian devotion and giftedness for ministry were recognized by others.

He joined the ROTC on campus but became a pacifist after studying—and memorizing—the Sermon on the Mount. (He called it the Lesson on the Mount and believed every Christian should be required to memorize it.) In his final exercise in the ROTC, he told his commanding officer, “You and Jesus are teaching me opposite things. I have to relinquish either one or the other.” He turned his back on militarism and headed for Southern Theological Seminary in Louisville.

In seminary Jordan met his life’s partner, Florence, and plunged into his studies, devoting eight to ten hours a day to schoolwork. Jordan lived out his faith through a ministry at Haymarket, an outdoor farmer’s market in Louisville which was surrounded by bars and brothels. According to one story, after a white man had raped a black woman, a black man announced at Haymarket that he was going to kill a white man to exact justice. Clarence walked forward, put his head on a table, and told the man that if someone had to die for the act, he’d be the one to die. That vulnerable act of surrender calmed the situation and started a conversation about what could be done without resorting to violence.

Jordan completed a Ph.D. in New Testament Greek at Southern Seminary in 1938. In 1942, Clarence and Florence, along with Martin and Mabel England, bought a farm south of Americus, naming it Koinonia Farm. They called it a “demonstration plot for the kingdom of God.” It was designed to be an experiment in following Jesus, an interracial community where people lived, worked, and ate together, living out an alternative to racism, militarism, and consumerism.

Koinonia Farm was to be a demonstration of the kingdom.

Jordan’s competency in Greek became the foundation for his “Cotton Patch” translations of the New Testament which he produced in the 1960s. In these texts, Jordan translated the Bible into the idiom of the South and the context of racial tensions. The letter to the Romans was now addressed to the Christians in Washington, 1 Corinthians to those in Atlanta, Galatians to the “churches of the Georgia Convention,” and Ephesians to the Christians in Birmingham. For the “kingdom of God” he used the term “God movement.”

Not all readers have been impressed by his effort to communicate the gospel in everyday language. Downing offers this estimation of Jordan’s project:

In a time of the emergence of immense cultural change, including a new emphasis on honesty in theological conversation and the radical dialogue about the death of God and liberation theology, Jordan sought to rewrite the gospel in an idiom of the common folk, which would penetrate human illusion, rewrite cultural myths, and present a new portrayal of the humanity of God.

As a New Testament professor, I have often made use of Jordan’s Cotton Patch translations, not least his hilarious version of the angel’s speech to Joseph and Mary: “Get moving, and take your wife and baby and highball it to Mexico” (Matthew 2:13).

Writing the Cotton Patch Bible influenced Jordan himself, Downing suggests:

The writing project promoted a new consciousness in him, and helped to rewrite the author. During the writing project, Jordan wrote himself toward a deeper sense of prophetic awareness. Jordan responded to the death of Martin Luther King Jr. with renewed and deeper commitment. His prophetic vision began to find focus in a critique of American Evangelical

Christianity. The journey to radical faith culminated for Jordan in . . . a more economic reading of the Bible which called for a redistribution of wealth and the building of partnership houses for the poor. This was essentially Jordan's new covenant idea, no longer simply with the South but with humanity.

Downing's view is confirmed by homiletician Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, whose teaching at Yale Divinity School has focused on contextual and prophetic preaching. In an essay in *Roots*, she writes, "Frankly, I can think of no one who embodies *both* of those aspects of preaching better than Clarence Jordan."

Jordan believed in what Charles Marsh calls "lived theology." Theology that is not lived is just an abstraction; lived theology makes theology what it is designed to be. In his essay in *Roots*, Marsh comprehends Jordan's vision as well as its limitations. Because Jordan was focused on the concrete reality of a reconciled fellowship of believers, he was not trying to offer a political solution. Jordan wondered if the civil rights movement wasn't selling itself short on the deeper, God-shaped transformation that was the kingdom vision of Jesus.

The main issue for Jordan was discipleship, the costly following of Jesus. Marsh sees Jordan and Martin Luther King Jr. working on parallel but not identical paths:

In the end, the civil rights movement and the God movement illuminate two trajectories of building beloved community which diverge and sometimes turn against the other: the church as the agent of social empowerment and the Christian community as a distinctive social reality that repudiates secular power.

While the civil rights movement saw the church as an agent of social transformation in the world, Koinonia was constructed as an alternative society. Writes Marsh: "Jordan believed that the only way authentic change could transpire in southern race relations was as a result of 'incarnational evangelism,' and that meant making Christian truth concrete in community lived and shared with the excluded and the oppressed."

Like King, Jordan paid a high price. He endured the scorn of neighbors, pressure from the Klan, visits and interrogations from the FBI, the shooting and beating of members of Koinonia, orchard trees chopped down, and roadside markets blown up.

When asked why members of Koinonia didn't just pack up and relocate, Downing relates, Jordan answered: "We have too many enemies to leave them. The redemptive love of God must break through. If we must be hung on a cross to redeem our brothers and sisters in the flesh, so let it be." In another context, he called this stance "divine redemptive subversiveness."

He put it still differently in a sermon later published in *The Substance of Faith*:

My good friend Patty Boyle . . . [has] a little motto hanging in her hall right over an old oil-soaked cross that was burned on her lawn, and which she doused and brought into her hallway. She's got a little sign hanging over it with a quotation from Vinegar Joe Stilwell. It says, "Carborundum non illegitimus," which freely translated means, "Don't let the s.o.b.'s get you down."

Downing recounts Jordan's words to a group of American Baptists in May 1969, the year he died: "I hope and pray before I pass on to glory that little church which expelled me from its fellowship will realize that I am really its son, that I do love it, and that it will gather with me at God's table." He never joined another church and died still waiting to achieve with Rehoboth Baptist Church that to which his life was devoted: reconciliation.

Jordan, like all prophets, summoned people to turn and find the way of God. A prophet deserves to have the last word. This passage from *The Substance of Faith* captures Jordan's way of shocking us to attention:

The biggest lie being told in America is, "Jesus Christ is Lord." It's the biggest lie that's being perpetrated. What I'm saying is, now, these people have made a public profession. They have publicly stated that Jesus Christ is Lord and have gone through baptism to say so, haven't they? But if what you've said reflects the situation all over, it means 98 per cent of the people who publicly state that Jesus Christ is Lord are lying. . . . Now, Jesus said there's only two responses, that of the wise man and that of the idiot. Let us now go forth to classify ourselves.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The making of a redemptive subversive."