

# Follow Me Now

by Alan Hartung

Over the course of my life as a Christian, I have spent a great deal of energy trying to understand the ways of Jesus. I want to know how to rightly follow him, in ways that are not merely permissible but are also beneficial. When I began pastoral work, I was obsessed with finding the right ways of doing ministry. In all of this, I was convinced there was a pattern - available to me in the Bible - that could be discovered by the Spirit's revelation of Scripture and my reasoning capacity. I just knew I could discover the right path, then be able to walk in it, and finally lead others down that same path.

As with many people, the real experience of life has changed many of my perspectives. The past couple of years have been a time of transformation so profound it can only be described as a total shifting of paradigms. The story I had previously been living in broke down too often and too completely for me to merely amend it, I had to find a different story.

With my life in pieces after a difficult divorce, reconstruction brought surprising new revelations. I discovered I knew very little about practically following Jesus. At the same time, I was not completely oblivious; Jesus had reached out to me at the time of my conversion in such a powerful way I knew him to be real, and I knew his desire was for a relationship with me. Realizing my lack of practical ability to follow Jesus has produced a driving force in my life. Learning to follow him - quickly learning - was a necessity.

Before my world had been drastically altered, I lived as though comprehension of the rules of life in God was necessary in order to follow Jesus. Living out of a clearly defined religious system was the only acceptable way for the spirituality I began my Christian life in. In fact, even now, I am often tempted back into that old way of thinking.

Now, I sound a lot more like Soren Kierkegaard and his leap of faith. My life crumbling around me opened my eyes to see the reversal needed in my life. Following Jesus means a life of practical experience. You learn to follow Jesus not by dissecting the Scriptures, you learn to follow by following. My quest to follow Jesus had a surprisingly simple answer. In the words of the sage Nike, "Just do it."

The simplicity of following Christ gets muddled by our insistence on exalting knowledge over experience. The fallacy of objectivity runs rampant in the church today, though I hear its cries as it is being stabbed with wounds that will prove fatal soon, very soon. We have lived in the church as though we can read the Scriptures in a vacuum, unprejudiced by our experiences and perspectives. *Sola Scriptura* we cry, and what we mean is our interpretation alone.

Before my latest "conversion," the Scriptures to me were blueprints to how life is to be led. Anyone with common sense would dig into the Bible and gain a proper understanding of what it says before even admitting to having an idea as to what the Christian life is about. Now, however, I see the Scriptures speak most often to my condition as the result of a life being lived. The Scriptures hold an even higher place of reverence for me now as I esteem the mysteries therein - many of which can only be even faintly understood while one is in the process of following Jesus. The truth is revealed to me in deeper ways only as I am immersed in a life under Christ's direction. I understand because I am following him, I do not seek to understand so that I can follow him.

The Gospel of Mark records the calling of the first disciples: "As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.' Immediately they left their nets and followed Him" (1:16-18). The word "immediately" does not allow for a lot of time for Simon and Andrew to gain head knowledge before embarking on their quest. Granted, they had a physically present Jesus to follow, but does that mean following Jesus has become relegated to the world of the mental?

Following an intangible Jesus is by no means a simple thing, and certainly we need help in doing so. For years, the primary means of help has been the Scriptures, with all other means given much less credit. Scripture still holds for me a primary tool in following Jesus, but the Holy Spirit and the Holy Church provide a much more important role than in times past.

"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). This verse has typically been understood as the Holy Spirit enabling the believer to understand Scripture. I wonder, though, about the two simple words, "all things." The Holy Spirit was not sent to us to give us an intellectual framework by which we are to live out our lives, but the Spirit was sent to assist us on the journey giving us guidance, support, and illumination. The first days of a Christian should not be spent being indoctrinated with 'salvation by faith alone' and what actions are acceptable for believers in today's church. The first days should contain much time of prayer, gaining more and more practical experience of the new relationship with God.

One can hardly follow Jesus, without living a life of intimate relationship with the other parts of his body. The Father has chosen to turn his mission over to the church, and his plans for every individual reside within their place in the body of Christ. Learning to follow Jesus means learning to follow Jesus with others. Entering into disciplines that other members of the body are engaged in, and participating in corporate worship, confession, and service are entirely necessary for following Christ. It is only in this context the light of Scripture most brightly shines. To go to the Scriptures as a lone individual seeking enlightenment inevitably leads to an individualistic faith that guides the follower on a more difficult, distorted path—a path that places much emphasis on self and little on relationship.

The original audiences of our Scriptures were almost always groups and seldom individuals. The few writings to individuals in our canon of Scriptures point to the corporate nature of their messages. The living community of believers, the body of Christ, is the context for proper understanding of God's revelation in Scriptures and the ways of life in Him. Try to get these understandings on your own, and you will be sorely disappointed at best or disillusioned by following a wrong path at worst.

"Follow me" is the cry Christ still utters today. When he utters it, he is not calling you to an intellectual pursuit of an intangible entity; he is calling you to a life of rich experience with him and his entire body of followers.

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