

Following Jesus – ?

In 1967, I met a young man called Henry. We were both attending a training or 'orientation' conference for young people who were thinking of joining a programme of practical 'on the job' training in Christian evangelism and discipleship, lasting for one year or more.

I don't remember how long we talked, or how often, in those few days of the conference. We went our separate ways after that. I went to India on a 2-year commitment (and stayed for nearly 5) and I only heard later that, in the end, Henry had not joined the programme. I never had any more contact with him.

But something he said stayed with me. "I don't call myself a Christian any more; I am a follower of Jesus." He had seen how the label of 'Christian' had been so misused and mis-applied; how many people who took that label had dishonoured it so that the watching world held Christians in contempt. Henry did not want to be associated with what had become an empty and abused label, but he **did** want to be known to be closely linked with the Lord Jesus. That idea was new to me, but I remembered it.

As it turned out, his comments were very appropriate for Christian witness in India. I soon discovered that, in India, being a 'Christian' could mean many different things, quite distinct from having a real personal trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. It could mean belonging to a specific social group; not being either Hindu or Moslem; sometimes even having an implication of a low standard of sexual morality – by association with lax 'western culture' which was assumed to be 'Christian'. I rapidly adopted Henry's description of myself as 'a follower of Jesus'. It seemed to communicate to people that I was not part of that western culture and that I at least intended to live as a disciple of Jesus. A sensible and practical move which seemed to communicate effectively and gained some respect, even from those who disagreed.

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Several decades have passed since then and, back in the UK, I have not been so sensitive about how to describe myself, so usually I have called myself 'a Christian' but sometimes again 'a follower of Jesus'. However, recently I have begun to question the accuracy of that second description: does it really adequately describe my relationship with the Lord?

Along the way, and especially starting on a specific day during my time in India, I became very aware that I was **in Christ**, and that it was God who had joined me to his Son. I suppose that up until then I had thought that it had been my decision to become a Christian, and that I had 'joined up' on my own initiative. There were several Bible passages that helped me to see the real position, especially perhaps "*By his doing you are in Christ Jesus*" (**1 Corinthians 1:30**).

Looking back over the intervening years, there are many amazing results of that simple but profound revelation, so many that I sometimes get a little surprise when I am reminded of them, but one of the most significant is that it isn't 'down to me' any more. I am joined to Jesus because my Father has done it. The fact of my being a Christian is no longer dependent on my performance. In reality, of course, it never was; it just felt like it!

A more unexpected result was in my 'prayer life'. I began to know more clearly who I was talking to when I prayed, as it became increasingly obvious to me that because my life was joined to Jesus I had freedom of access to God as my Father. Up until then, I had usually addressed my prayers to God as 'Lord', and I don't think I was 100% sure whether I was speaking to the Father or to Jesus. Without making any conscious decision to change my vocabulary, I found that I was talking to God and calling him 'Father', knowing that he had placed me in his Son and that I could pray in his name.

A few years before that, I had begun to be strongly challenged by the claims on my life of being a disciple of Jesus. Perhaps the most radical of these had been summed up in **Luke 9:23**: "*He was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me'*", with the most demanding practical outcome being stated in **Luke 14:33**: "*So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.*" I had wanted to be a true follower of Jesus, so I had started to take these commands seriously, with practical, down-to-earth results in my lifestyle.

One of the results of my focus on discipleship was that I had joined that training programme and I was there in India! But it was not discipleship which made the difference. Something else happened. As a

direct result of knowing that it was God who had joined me to his Son, I found that the Holy Spirit was more active in my life. For some years previously, I had been aware that he was at work in all believers' lives and was therefore at work in mine. Lines from hymns like 'Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way; thou art the Potter, I am the clay' had definitely been a significant part of what I wanted. But now something was different.

It's difficult to express it clearly, but I had wanted to follow Jesus and he had been 'over there'. Not far away, sometimes even feeling close to me, but somehow separate and still 'distant' in some way. Now that I began to know that my life had been joined to his, that apparent distance disappeared and I began to actively take hold of what I could see was mine in him. I went through my New Testament and marked all the places where it said that I was **in Christ** and what was mine as a result.

Looking back on that time now, from the perspective of several decades later, it seems that my experience then was similar to what Jesus had said would happen to his disciples when the Holy Spirit came: *"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him; you know Him because **He abides with you and will be in you.**"*¹ I had known Jesus in some ways 'with' me but now he was **in** me and I was in him, by the working of the Holy Spirit.

When that had happened for the disciples at Pentecost, they finally stopped 'following Jesus' in the way they always had done: with him somehow 'over there' as the Master directing operations, and with them trying to follow his instructions. They were still definitely disciples, but learners now from the Holy Spirit at work within them and poured out upon them, not from Jesus in his visible human body. What started happening to me seems very similar. Not changing direction, but it still seemed like turning a corner! Perhaps 'changing gear' would be a better description.

Previously, I had tried to live by following Biblical principles, especially the teachings of Jesus about discipleship, but now the emphasis had shifted. The principles were still there and Jesus' teaching had not changed, but now he wasn't 'over there' any more. He had said that the Holy Spirit would lead and guide us into all truth,² and that he (the Spirit) would 'take of mine and will disclose it to you'. It was definitely not down to me any more!

A couple of articles ago, I mentioned the fairly recent emphasis by some on 'spiritual disciplines' as a supposed 'means of grace', in the mistaken and misleading idea that we can somehow **do** things that will facilitate the grace of God in our lives. Just to say again, we need to avoid these twisted ideas like the plague, as they will all too easily pull us into a legalistic, rules-following approach to the Christian life. But alongside this idea of 'spiritual disciplines' comes the apparently enticing prospect of becoming 'apprentices of Jesus' and copying his lifestyle by entering into 'deeper discipleship'.

That sort of approach MAY possibly have characterised some of the way that the Twelve related to Jesus during their 3½ years travelling around with him, even extending into the time between his resurrection and Pentecost. After all, he had given them some very demanding criteria for those who wanted to be his disciples – those same commands which had so motivated me towards discipleship, joining the training programme and travelling to India. Jesus' disciples, especially the Twelve, seem to have been eager to follow him and learn from him – and inevitably their day-to-day lifestyle needed to fit very closely with his as they travelled around together! Perhaps **they** would have considered themselves to be his 'apprentices' – ?

But that all changed – totally – after the Holy Spirit arrived on the day of Pentecost. From that day on, we hear nothing about 'discipleship' and (amazingly) almost nothing about the actual teachings of Jesus. Not in the book of Acts, nor in any of the letters! New believers were not faced with the same intensive demands for those who wanted to follow Jesus. In fact, I can find absolutely no reference to 'following Jesus' from Pentecost onwards. Yes, the believers were often referred to as 'disciples' which, after all, simply means 'learners', but there was no hint of becoming 'apprentices of Jesus' or anything like that.

It may just possibly have been appropriate for the Twelve and other 'followers' of Jesus to try to emulate his approach and lifestyle while he was physically there with them but, even so, they never seem to have really grasped what his mission and message were. They certainly took hold of the idea of the Kingdom

¹ **John 14:16-17**

² **John 16:12-15**

of God, but they thought it would mean the re-assertion of the sovereignty of the Jewish nation and seeing the Romans removed, perhaps something like the treasured folk memories of the reigns of David and Solomon. They gradually took hold of the understanding that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but any idea that the Messiah would give up his life was totally unthinkable.

Look at Peter in **Matthew 16**. In **v.16** he makes the dramatic assertion that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But then in **v.22** he actually rebukes Jesus for talking about his impending arrest, suffering, death and resurrection! Peter has a **very** different idea of the role of the Messiah!

In **Luke 9:53-54**, James and John seem to think that Jesus' authority would be shown by bringing judgment on those who reject him, and in **Matthew 20:20-24** their mother tries to secure the places of honour for her two boys in the coming kingdom! In the following verses, Jesus then has to explain in some detail that his kingdom doesn't work that way!

When the two disciples meet Jesus on the way to Emmaus (**Luke 24:13 onwards**), Cleopas expresses disappointment because *"we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel"* and it hadn't happened as far as they could see.

Even in the moments just before he is taken up into the sky before their eyes, they ask a question which clearly shows that they have understood hardly anything of what he has told them: *"Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"* (**Acts 1:6**). Jesus rebukes them gently, but he knows that everything is about to change in a few days' time, when the Holy Spirit will come upon them and they will receive power . . .

. . . and not only power! In the days after Pentecost, they may have remembered what Jesus had told them about the Holy Spirit when he was talking with them after the last Passover meal together (**John 14** and **16**). John certainly remembered his words well enough, when he wrote his account more than 50 years later:

"the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you" (**14:17**);

"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" (**14:26**);

"when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you." (**16:13-15**)

It is easy to think that Pentecost was all about miraculous power: the sound of a great wind; the appearance of 'tongues of fire' on their heads; speaking in other languages; the dramatic effectiveness of Peter's public speaking. Yes, all of those were certainly there, demonstrating the power of the Holy Spirit, but something else had also happened: at last, the disciples were beginning to really know and understand – and they stopped 'following Jesus' !

What do I mean? Jesus had said *"He abides **with** you and will be **in** you"*. When he had said that, there he had been, physically standing next to them, staying – 'abiding' – **with** them, as he had been for the previous 3½ years. He was separate from them – 'over there' – and they were still trying to follow what he said. But when the Holy Spirit arrived, Jesus wasn't 'over there' any more, nor even standing next to them. He was, in a very real way, **in** them, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

They were no longer following from a distance, nor even as closely as they could. In a very real way, their lives were now joined with his in a way that had been simply impossible before. He had said *"I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you"* (**John 16:7**). When he had said that, they had not been able to understand how it could possibly be to their advantage that he should go away and send the Holy Spirit. Now it all began to fit together.

Look beyond the spectacular and **obviously** supernatural appearance of Pentecost, and we no longer see people who are hesitant about their trust in Jesus or sheepish about speaking up in his name. We see Peter, who had once tried to dissuade Jesus from going ahead with his planned death and

resurrection, now proclaiming that forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit is available to anyone who will repent and put their trust in that same crucified (and risen!) Messiah.

When had Jesus ever taught that forgiveness would be through his death? Just a few hints at the Last Supper and in **John 6**, and at that time they had been completely mystified by what he had said. Now Peter declares it openly and confidently, quoting Old Testament scripture to confirm it. The disciples who had met behind locked doors 'for fear of the Jews', now openly attracting the attention of the whole city, packed with visitors from overseas. The list goes on and, as we read on into **Acts**, it is plain to see that these disciples are not living by rules, nor even trying to apply the teachings of their risen and ascended Lord, but living from the new source of life within them.

They speak about who Jesus **is** and what he has **done**, not about what he taught. They don't teach codes of practice, but personal response in repentance and faith, both in an initial response and in an ongoing 'walk'. They seem to be very different people from those slightly bewildered 'followers' of Jesus who never really seemed to grasp what his purpose was. Now they were living from the inside, not by any external form or formula. Their lives really had been joined to Jesus; they had his life inside them! "*He abides with you and will be in you*" is what he had said. Now it was happening.

It would be many years before John would write his first-hand account of Jesus' life and teaching, but perhaps they remembered that the Master had spoken about this new sort of life long before they began to experience it. John recalled it clearly:

"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full." (**John 15:4-11**)

The choice for us is clear – or is it really a choice? Do we want to follow all the teachings of the one we call our Lord? Yes, of course we do. What about "*if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love*"? Should we be meticulously trying to follow every detailed instruction of his that we can find, in order to maintain our relationship with him? "... *just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love*", he said. Was that sort of slavish following of instructions characteristic of Jesus' relationship with his Father? No, of course not! The relationship of love came first; the following of instructions was a **result**. In **John 14:15**, he said it the other way round: "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*" Keeping his commandments is not the way into his love but rather a demonstration of the reality of it in our lives. The 'fruit of the Spirit' in **Galatians 5:22-25** is precisely that: **fruit**, the result of life within, not a set of standards that we somehow strive to achieve.

Which way do we want to live? Have we realised that trying to 'follow Jesus' can so easily be just thinly disguised legalism? Just another way that 'law' exercises leverage on our lives?¹ Or will we embrace the new life in the Holy Spirit that is ours as part of our inheritance, part of being 'in Christ' – ?

As Paul puts it: "*But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.*" (**Romans 7:6**)

Dave Taylor September 2026

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¹ See [Law:– Leverage and Liberty](http://www.justonecandle.uk) from www.justonecandle.uk or <https://justonecandle.substack.com/p/law-leverage-and-liberty>