

Chapter 1

Jesus: The Perfect Follower

When I first began the process of writing this book I had several friends read the first few chapters just to give me some feedback regarding the material and if what I was writing made sense. The book chapters were arranged in a different order than they are today. As I heard back from these friends one responded bluntly, “I personally don’t care what you think about following, and I don’t really care what other writers or theories have to say about following. These will not convince me. But if you can show me that the followerfirst perspective was consistent with the life and teaching of Jesus, THEN I’ll be sold.” I immediately moved this material to the first chapter.

My friend was right. What others propose regarding leading and/or following fades into insignificance when compared to what Jesus lives and teaches regarding leading and following. What makes the followerfirst perspective a powerful force for change is its consistency with the life and commands and teachings of Jesus Christ and other teachings of Scripture.

In most Christian leadership literature, the Lord Jesus Christ is often presented as the perfect leader. I certainly do not disagree with such an assertion. Jesus was, indeed, perfect in everything He did and said. I accept without question that when Jesus led others, He did so perfectly. However, from all that has been written regarding Jesus as a leader, one might begin to think that Jesus’ purpose on the planet was to lead others. I would argue that the biblical evidence does not support such a claim. In fact, a close inspection of the biblical text, without the prevailing leader bias,

reveals that Jesus' purpose, commands, and teachings were all centered on being a follower.

Jesus' Purpose

Jesus was the greatest follower who ever lived. When we inspect the life and teachings of Jesus it was His acting as a follower that influenced more people than His actual leading a small band of disciples. Consider Jesus' stated purpose for being on the planet. While proclaiming Himself to be the "bread of life" and that those who believe in Him will not be cast out, Jesus said,

...For I have come down from heaven *not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me*. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing but should raise it up at the last day (John 6:38, 39) [emphasis mine].

What is striking about this verse is Jesus' admission that His purpose was to *follow* the will, of His heavenly Father. From childhood, Jesus knew He "must be about [His] Father's business" (Luke 2:49). That business is beautifully portrayed in Philippians 2:5-11:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Although equal with God, Jesus "made Himself of no reputation." This translation does not give the full sense of Jesus emptying

Himself as a direct translation of the Greek word *ekenosen* requires.¹ The Amplified Bible translates the phrase “but stripped Himself [of all privileges and rightful dignity].” The NIV translates the verse, “but made himself nothing.” All of these different translations seek to do justice to the concept that Jesus, although equal with God the Father, willingly humbled Himself and took the role of an obedient follower.

Jesus spoke of His follower status throughout His earthly ministry:

John 5:30

I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.

John 7:17-18

If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.

John 12:49-50

For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak.

John 14:10-11

Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works.

The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), was simply and faithfully following what He had been directed by the Father to say and do. Jesus did **nothing** on his own authority. He was a follower. He is equal with the Father in His deity, yet, for the purpose of the Godhead, Jesus became the follower. The Father is not **better** than Jesus because Jesus is the follower. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as three distinct and coexisting Persons, do not

operate based upon a concept of which Person is better than the other, because each is perfect deity. Rather, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit operate based upon an accepted role and responsibility.

An oversimplification of this role and responsibility may be stated thus:

- **The Father's role is to be the authority and to bring about His will for His good pleasure.**

“...for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). (See Ephesians 1:5, 9.)

- **The Son's responsibility is to follow the will of the Father.**

“I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me” (John 6:38). (See Luke 22:42.)

- **The Holy Spirit's responsibility is to follow the will of the Son.**

“However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13-15).

In Colossians 1:18 the Apostle Paul said of Christ, “He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.” Paul understood Christ's position as the head of the church and reiterates this point in Ephesians 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Colossians 2:10 and 2:19.² Paul continues the thought of Christ's place within the Church by adding that Christ is to have “first place in everything.” The King James Version translates ‘first place’ by

using the word, “preeminence.” This word carries the idea of being “foremost in time, place, order or importance.”³ Because Christ is the head of the church, all who make up the Church fall under His authority.

The Bible makes it clear that in the Church there is no difference in the worth of persons regarding their ethnicity, gender, or background (Galatians 3:28). The Bible does speak to the matter of certain roles within the Body of Christ holding higher degrees of importance because of their responsibility to teach the Word of God (See 1 Corinthians 12.). I will elaborate on this differentiation in more detail in Chapter 7. Yet, we need to always keep in mind that these presumably more important roles are held by those who follow Christ.

Spiritually, we are all equal in that we are all sinners forgiven by the grace of God. Organizationally in the church we are all equal in that we are all followers. Even though we may be gifted differently, no one has personal meritorious rank or worth over any other person within the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). The only ranking member of the Body of Christ is Christ Jesus. Any differentiation among members within the body comes at the level of the responsibilities to which we are called, gifted, and willing to assume.

We all have roles and responsibilities within the Body of Christ. Some church organizations and denominations may vest organizational authority in a particular person or persons in the church. However, this authority does not supersede that of Christ or the Bible and only extends to the individual(s) as the Scriptures allow. Thus, the beginning point of the effective functioning of the Body is an understanding that, under the leading of the Lord and consistent with His purpose, **we are all followers.**

Jesus thought of Himself as a follower of the will of the Father. Contrary to much of the current biblical leadership literature, Jesus’ primary role was not to be the leader of a group of men and train them to become leaders of a future group of believers who would establish His church.⁴ Instead, Jesus understood His role to be a follower of the will of God, period (See John 6:38-40). A close inspection of the Scriptures reveals that His followerfirst perspective can explain every activity of Jesus recorded in the Bible. Even when Jesus acted as a leader, His actions were predicated upon a

followerfirst perspective. Jesus followed the will of the Father until the day He died. Yet, through His death and subsequent resurrection, Jesus became the Savior of the world, a fact that has influenced countless millions of people. The gospel message proclaims that God had a plan to redeem the world to Himself, and this plan was followed perfectly by His only begotten Son. This followerfirst perspective is also evident in the commands Jesus issued to those who would follow Him.

Jesus' Commands

Jesus as Rabbi

Assuming the role of a rabbi, Jesus chose not to gather His disciples as other rabbis had done up until that time. Historically, rabbis would teach, and those who longed to follow would simply inform the rabbi that they were willing to sit under his teaching. Jesus, however, went a step further. There were those who followed Jesus and sat under His teaching according to the common practice of the time. However, for those whom Jesus wanted closest to Him, these individuals would have to respond to His command, "Follow Me."

Vander Laan suggests that Jesus' use of these commands and His personal choosing of His disciples indicate Jesus' embracing the model of the advanced rabbi.

A few (very few) of the most outstanding *Beth Midrash* students sought permission to study with a famous rabbi often leaving home to travel with him for a lengthy period of time. These students were called *talmidim* (*talmids*) in Hebrew, which is translated *disciple*...As the rabbi lived and taught his understanding of the Scripture his students (*talmidim*) listened and watched and imitated so as to become like him.

Eventually they would become teachers passing on a lifestyle to their *talmidim*.⁷

Vander Laan continued by stating that in Jesus' time many students would seek out the rabbi they wished to follow (see Mark 5:19; Luke