

CHAPTER 16

THE CROSS AND “FOLLOWING” JESUS

THE CROSS AS A PARADIGM IN GREEK WORDS FOR “FOLLOW”

In response to a draft copy of this chapter, a reader sent me this comment: “We are to follow the Lord, not be the Lord.” The word “follow” struck me as a word that I definitely must check out. I am sure you will find the following studies of the Greek words translated “follow” or “follower” extremely interesting and challenging.

Before I plunge into summarizing my study of these Greek words, I want to comment briefly on the second part of the reader’s statement: “We are . . . not to be the Lord.” I heartily agree. The worst sin of all is an ambition to be God, a blasphemous tendency common in our humanistic culture, found much in New Age teaching, and encouraged in some Christian groups—where it is disguised as “deep” spiritual teaching. As we seek earnestly to follow the example of Jesus, we need to recognize that we are all a long way from being totally conformed to His likeness and will not be totally like Him until “he appears”.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, I know of no scriptural limitation on the amount of changing that can happen in this life, at least no limitation that should lessen our passion to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus (Paul was still “pressing on” close to his execution). Another chapter is being planned to deal further with the issue of man’s ambition to be God as a perversion of a healthy passion to be conformed to the Cross.

Throughout my life, many hymns about “following Jesus” have prompted me to reflect on images these words bring to mind: I pictured us being like sheep following the leading of the Good Shepherd or being like the disciples following Jesus around Galilee and Judea. These mental pictures can help us trust and enjoy the presence, guidance, and protection of the Lord; however, I now realize that I was not following *Jesus* very much; I seemed mainly concerned about following the rules and principles that were taught by my family and church and ensured me acceptance by them. I had no idea that “following Jesus” meant following His example.

From reading previous chapters, you have learned much about my interest in the emphasis in Scripture of our being conformed to the likeness of Jesus in His suffering and death; however, until I studied the following Greek words recently, I had not realized that many of the references in the New Testament about “following” Jesus were actually about the same thing—about our applying the paradigm of the Cross to our attitudes and actions—and thus, we see more clearly that the paradigm of the Cross is certainly a major theme of the New Testament, but a theme that is not given much emphasis in many church groups.

**1. *akoloutheo*** Of the several Greek words that are translated as “follow” in the New Testament, *akoloutheo* is the most common, occurring about 90 times. It means “to

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<sup>1</sup>According to 1 John 3:2b: “But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

*follow*; *follow* as a disciple; *imitate*.”<sup>2</sup> Note Spiros Zodhiates’ explanation of its meaning and implications:

. . . The first thing in following Jesus is a cleaving to Him in believing trust and obedience. Those cleaving to Him must also follow His leading and act ***according to His example*** . . . Hence constant stress is laid by the Lord Jesus upon the need of ***self-denial and fellowship of the Cross***. . . , ***sharing in His sufferings*** not only inwardly, but outwardly if necessary . . . ***a life resembling His and a self denying sharing of His cross***. . . <sup>3</sup> [emphases mine]

Similarly, the *Amplified Bible* translation of Matthew 16:24 shows that following Jesus means being conformed to the paradigm of the Cross:

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone desires to be My disciple, let him deny himself—that is disregard, lose sight of and forget his own interests and take up his cross and follow me [cleave steadily to Me, ***conform wholly to my example in living and if need be in dying also***] . . .” (Matt. 16:24) [emphases mine]

As has been discussed before, praying through Bible verses can be an extremely rewarding activity and can be done by turning each scripture into a personal request or commitment, something like the following paraphrase of the verse above:

Lord, I desire to be truly Your disciple. Help me to lose sight of and forget my own interests and take up my cross—be like You in my attitudes and motivation as You went to the Cross. I want to cleave steadily to You and be conformed wholly to Your example a little more today. Help me live each moment with a growing understanding of what it means to take up my cross and follow Your example of suffering and laying down my life for You and others.

**2. epakoloutheo** This Greek word, used by Peter, is an intensive form of *akoloutheo* and means “. . . ***follow diligently, . . . pursue . . .***”<sup>4</sup>

. . . Christ suffered for you, leaving you ***an example***, that you should ***follow [follow diligently, pursue]***\* in his steps. . . . When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:21b-23)

\*My addition from Zodhiates.

Notice that the passage above clearly states that one ***purpose of Christ’s suffering was to leave us an example to follow in our daily lives***. May it not be that He suffered in vain! Our appreciation for His suffering can be measured by how ***diligent*** we are in the ***pursuit*** of fulfilling His purpose—that we be conformed to His example in His suffering

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<sup>2</sup>Zondervan, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1972), 12.

<sup>3</sup>Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 112.

<sup>4</sup>Zodhiates, 612.

(the paradigm of the Cross). Following is my account of a recent situation in which I have been convicted by these verses:

Over the last year or so, I have been offended by a certain person's lack of response to letters and phone calls. I have suffered in that I have felt insulted because his neglect seemed to proclaim that he rejects me as unworthy of his attention to my communications. Further, his withholding information and remuneration from me has seemed very unreasonable and inconsiderate. Some comments he has made to others about me have also not been complimentary.

As I have prayed about following the example of Jesus in His response to insults and rejection, I have realized that I have had an unconscious need to be recognized as being significant; when ignored I have been angry. After some healing for a sense of unworthiness and after repentance of related un-Christ-like attitudes and responses, I can now be thankful that God is exposing this problem and enabling me to follow Christ's example more fully in my response to such situations. Further, I am realizing that He *never* ignores me and that I am significant enough for Him to shed His blood for me and plan every detail in my life that I might follow His example in everything I do.

Dealing with *my* problem does not mean I believe the other person's behaviour is totally Christ-like, nor do I minimize the negative effect his disregard has on others (including the example he sets for his staff); it means that I am being changed into Christ's nature in the way I respond to this kind of behaviour.

Now, I can look at the problem more objectively, appreciating the fact that this person does not intentionally try to offend people. In his frantically busy life, he does not seem to realize how valuable his responses would be to others nor how much his lack of attention to such communication offends some people. I hope to be able soon to express some of these things to him in the Spirit of Christ.

Although my suffering seems so insignificant as compared to that of Jesus and New Testament Christians, I believe that the Lord wants us to follow His example in every situation of our lives, by seeking a revelation from the Holy Spirit as to how we can apply this paradigm to each specific situation.

**3. *mimeomai*** From the root from which we get "mimic", this verb means "to imitate, follow as an example."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the related noun *mimetes* means "follower, imitator". The English translations of these Greek words are emphasized below:

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<sup>5</sup>Zodhiates, 986.

For you yourselves know how you ought *to follow our example* . . . .  
We did this . . . in order to make ourselves a model for you *to follow*.  
(2 Thess. 3: 7, 9)

Remember your leaders . . . . Consider the outcome of their way of  
life and *imitate (follow—KJV)* their faith. (Heb. 13:7)

Be *imitators (followers — KJV)* of God, therefore, as dearly loved  
children. (Eph. 5:1)

. . . in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.  
Therefore I urge you *to imitate* me. (*be ye followers* of—KJV)  
(1 Cor. 4:15b, 16)

*Follow my example*, as I *follow the example* of Christ. (*Be ye  
followers* of me, even as I also am of Christ.—KJV) (1 Cor.11:1)

You became *imitators (followers — KJV)* of us and of the Lord; in spite of  
severe suffering, . . . (1 Thess. 1:6)

May we all continue to mature in being conformed to Christ's likeness until we  
reach the stage that others will be able to look to us as an example, especially in our living  
out the paradigm of the Cross. The only way we can reach that goal is that we pray the  
following types of prayer frequently and sincerely:

(a) *Worship* Jesus in His suffering and death, adoring His loving  
selfless response to the ones inflicting suffering on Him.

(b) *Commit* ourselves to be changed into His likeness as we focus on  
His nature revealed in the paradigm of the Cross.

(c) *Repent* of any way we have fallen short of following His example  
in loving and forgiving everyone with whom we have interacted (or even  
thought about!)—even those who cause us some kind of suffering.

(d) *Depend* on His Spirit, trusting Him to make the changes  
necessary in us, knowing that it is impossible to follow the example of  
Christ by our own effort.

**4. *dioko*** “To follow or press hard after, to pursue with earnestness and diligence in order  
to obtain, . . .”<sup>6</sup> The aggressive—sometimes violent—actions implied by the use of this  
verb are revealed by its use to express Paul's relentless pursuit and arresting of Christians;  
in these cases, it is translated by the verb “persecute”. Picture yourself as a football  
(rugby) player pursuing an opponent who is frantically carrying the ball towards your goal  
line—you pursue him until you tackle him violently. Now keep that picture in your mind  
as you consider Paul's command to pursue God's love:

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<sup>6</sup>Zodhiates, 474

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**Follow** [*dioko*—*pursue earnestly and lay hold of*] the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts . . . (1Cor 14:1a)

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I **press on** [*dioko*—*follow after (KJV)*] to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me . . . I **press on** [*dioko*] toward the goal **to win** the prize (Phil. 3:12, 14)

As previously stated, the context of these last two verses in Philippians includes Paul’s declaration of his passion to be “conformed to His death” (v. 10). Paul later commands us to follow his example in this earnest pursuit (v. 17—quoted earlier in this chapter). **Thus, we are to pursue the aspects of the paradigm of the Cross with a relentless determination to lay hold and live them out in our daily lives.**

**Being a Disciple** “A ‘disciple’ was not only a pupil, but . . . they [disciples] are spoken of as **imitators of their teacher**”<sup>7</sup> [emphasis mine]. Accordingly, the following verses show that Jesus commanded and exhorted His disciples to follow Him by being trained to become like Him.

A student (*mathetes*—*disciple*) is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be **like his teacher**. (Luke 6:40)

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, **showing yourselves to be my disciples** . . . . love one another as I have loved you. (John 15:8,12)

Accordingly, by recognizing the true meaning of “disciple”, Jesus commands us in the “Great Commission”, to make **imitators of Jesus** of all nations (Matt. 28:19). Of course, we have to first become disciples ourselves in the full meaning of that word by submitting to His training to live out the paradigm of the Cross in all we do.

Some Evangelicals seem very reluctant to emphasize following Christ as an example, apparently fearful that this teaching might replace the “true” Gospel with a message that asks us merely to be good people by our own efforts. Admittedly, this is a very valid concern; there may well be churches that teach this kind of message to some extent and we need to hold firmly to the foundational truth of the redemptive work of Jesus on the Cross as our only hope for salvation in this life and the next. However, if we judge such churches with a superior attitude and do not emphasize sufficiently our need to follow the example of Jesus in His suffering, we might be focusing on a “speck of sawdust” in their eyes and not be aware of and not be dealing with the “plank” in our own eyes (See Luke 6:41,42). Note that the purpose of dealing with “our plank” is to enable us to remove the “speck” in the other person’s eye so that they might then see more clearly.

In all that we do, moreover, we must realize that we are always following something—either the example of Jesus or some other ideal or pattern. Each denomination emphasizes its own concept of Jesus and of what it means to be a good Christian; thus, many Christians end up following an image that only partially reflects the true nature of Christ and that could even include aspects completely opposite to His likeness. In addition, some Christian groups tend to follow some sort of legal system, rather than proclaiming the example of Jesus as our only standard to follow.

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<sup>7</sup>Vine, 171

None of us completely follow the Lord all the time and are prone to follow other patterns. Therefore, all of us need continually to be open to the Holy Spirit to show us who or what we are truly following as we consider (a) our choices of what we do, (b) our motives for doing these things, and (c) the way we do them.

I can hear my Savior calling ***“Take thy cross and follow, follow me”***  
**[follow My example, be conformed to My death].**

***I have decided to follow [the example of] Jesus — The world behind me, the cross before me — no turning back!***

For the ***message of the cross*** is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who ***are being saved*** it is the power of God.  
(1 Cor. 1:18)

***“O Lord set me free that I might pursue radically an intimate relationship with you and a life filled with your likeness.”***

Crucified with Christ my Saviour,  
To the world and self and sin;  
To the death-born life of Jesus  
I am sweetly ent’ring in;  
In His fellowship of suff’ring,  
To His death conformed to be,  
I am going with my Savior  
All the way to Calvary.

A. B. Simpson

**Once more, let me emphasize the importance of the adoration of Jesus. As we meditate on the various aspects of His nature expressed so eloquently through His suffering and death, we are changed into His glorious likeness. Such worship facilitates conviction by the Holy Spirit of ways that we do not truly follow Jesus and will encourage us to commit ourselves fully to be conformed to His death.**

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