Are We Today Supposed to "Follow" Jesus?

INTRODUCTION – Children used to play (maybe some still do) "Follow the Leader." People today are still following leaders (e.g., politicians, pastors, professors) – some, sadly, to their own detriment.

A. Books

Millions are following one another on Facebook. Some daily add more comments and/or photos about themselves or current events. The person with the most followers is Portuguese footballer Cristiano Ronaldo (with about174 million followers). How many follow you, and how many do you follow – and whom do you follow the most?

In 1897 Charles M. Sheldon published a well-known social action novel entitled ***In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*** as a call for radical Christian discipleship to follow Jesus' example in serving the world's needy. Many people and preachers thinks that is what believers today should be doing – doing now what they think Jesus would be doing.

B. Bumper sticker – Some years ago, many professing Christians latched onto the acronym WWJD ("What Would Jesus Do?") as a slogan for life. It's still seen on some cars and trucks.

C. Bible – What does the Bible say about following Jesus as our example? Let's see.

I. Jesus and following – The idea of following Jesus occurs a number of times in the Gospels.

A. The statements on following – Fourteen times Jesus called people to follow Him.

1. Specifically – Jesus told some individuals to follow Him; they became His disciples – Matthew (Mt 9:9; Mk 2:14; Lk 5:27), Philip (Jn 1:43), and Peter and Andrew (Mt 4:19).

2. Generally – At times Jesus invited crowds to deny themselves, take up their (or the) cross, and follow Him. (Mt 16:24; 19:21; Mk 8:34;10:21; Lk 9:23) One man said he'd kept all the commandments and then he asked Jesus what to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus' answer was this: "Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, **follow Me**." (Lk 18:22)

B. The substance of following – Jesus enlisted and encouraged following Him literally – in His travels and in His teaching. The essence of following was discipleship – being an adherent and an associate – and this resulted in twelve disciples Jesus chose to be apostles.

Making disciples was common in the Greco-Roman world (including Judaism), resulting in many schools of thought. "The disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto Him, 'Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Thy disciples fast not?'" (**Mk 2:18**)

C. One specific of following – The only specific action that Jesus mentioned (and that only once) related to following His example was that of washing one another's feet, as He did the night before He died – "For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you." (**Jn 13:15**)

1. Demonstration of humility – Jesus gave this command only to the Apostles. The truth being taught was clearly that of humility.

2. Denominations and ceremony – Some Christian groups (incl. Anglican, Church of God, Episcopalian, Free Will Baptist, Grace Brethren, Lutheran, Mennonite, Orthodox, Primitive Baptist, Roman Catholic, 7th-Day Adventist, and United Pentecostal) observe foot-washing (most annually – others quarterly, monthly, or weekly) as an ordinance (on a par with water baptism and Communion).

3. Distribution to widows – The only other time this idea of foot-washing is found in the New Testament is in the qualifications Paul gave for a widow to be included in the distribution of charity – namely "if she have washed the saints' feet." (1Ti 5:10)

4. Division among believers – Christian groups that reject idea of foot-washing as a practice today (either annually on Maunday Thursday – or more frequently) do so for two reasons:

a. Silence – The Epistles and Acts contain no admonition, approval, or even account of the practice of foot-washing at all – by believers in general, by men, or even by the Apostles.

b. Sandals – Foot-washing was common in Bible times, because people wore open sandals and walked on dusty roads. Such is not the case today in most parts of the world.

II. Peter and following – We turn now to Peter's connection to the idea of following Jesus.

A. Peter's dying – Conversations between Jesus and Peter that show that there was a singularity or uniqueness in following Jesus as far as each individual was concerned; following Jesus meant doing or experiencing different things for different people.

1. Before the crucifixion, Jesus told Peter "'Whither I go, **thou canst not follow Me now**; but thou shalt follow Me afterwards.' Peter said unto Him, 'Lord, why cannot I follow Thee now? I will lay down my life for Thy sake.'" (emphasis added – **Jn 13:36-37**)

2. After the resurrection, things were different. In John 21:18 Jesus told Peter that in his old age he would be forced to go where he didn't want to go. John explained it this way: "This spake He, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He saith unto him, 'Follow me.'" (Jn 21:19) Then when Peter asked Jesus what would happen to John, Jesus said "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou Me." (Jn 21:22) According to tradition, John truly did not have to suffer execution (as did Peter) – but, rather, was exiled to the island of Patmos. Thus, following Jesus had different outcomes for different individuals.

B. Peter's writing – The one time in Peter's writings that he mentioned following Jesus was in connection with believing slaves suffering mistreatment. After noting that suffering when one is innocent pleases God, he wrote that "For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps." (**1Pt 2:21**) Peter said nothing about following Jesus' life (and nothing for all believers in general to do) – but simply about behaving under suffering the way Jesus did (namely, suffering innocently, patiently, and maybe even silently).

III. Paul and following – We get a rather different picture of following from Paul's writings. This is seen in three major ways.

A. The requests /exhortations – Instead of mentioning Jesus' disciples as followers or exhorting believers to follow Jesus, Paul turns the attention more to himself.

1. Following God – Paul does say "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children." (Eph 5:1) However, it is said as a conclusion to what he had written in the previous chapter; thus, this may be another unfortunate chapter break in our Bibles. The previous verse was "Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." (Eph 4:32) So, the context seems to limit this exhortation to follow God to the area of gracious, kind treatment of fellow believers – especially, to forgive them – clearly not a general admonition to follow Jesus' life.

2. Following Paul – Four times Paul very specifically exhorts believers (in three different cities) to follow him.

a. "Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me." (1Co 4:16)

b. "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ." (1Co 11:1) Since Paul got direct revelation of truth from Christ, believers should believe what Paul has taught and follow it.

c. "Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an example." (Php 3:17) Paul again encourages following (believing) him and his apostolic team and evaluating others by that standard of truth.

d. "Yourselves know how ye ought to follow us." (2Th 3:7; cf v. 9) – Here Paul includes his associates with him as those who should be followed.

B. The records / experiences – In the following two passages Paul records the fact that believers in Thessalonica had become followers of both Paul and the churches in Judea.

1. "Ye became followers of us, and of the Lord." (1Th 1:6)

2. "Ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews." (1Th 2:14) As in other passages, it clear that following consisted of trusting the teaching (doctrine) that Paul had given them – and that the churches in Judea had already trusted.

C. The reasons / explanations – What did Paul write to get his readers to follow him?

1. Their position – He told them they were part of a new, special group of believers (the Church, the Body of Christ) that God had begun (1Co 12:13,27; Eph 4:12) and had been revealed to Paul.

2. Paul's commission – He shared how God chose Paul and gave him a special, individual commission to be a witness, minister, preacher, teacher, and apostle (Ac 9:15-16; 22:15; 26:15-18; Rom 15:16; Eph 3:7; Col 1:25; 2Ti 1:11) – despite the fact that Paul had persecuted Christ ("I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest." – Ac 22:8; 26:15) by persecuting the Church ("the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church" – Col 1:24).

3. Paul's specialization – Although Paul sought to evangelize Jews as well, he was sent especially to the Gentiles (Ac 22:1; 26:17; Rom 15:16,18; Col 1:27; 2Ti 1:11) as "apostle of Gentiles" (**Rom 11:13** – " I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am apostle of Gentiles; I magnify mine office.").

4. Paul's revelations – In addition, Paul could make such bold exhortations about following him because God personally appeared to him, and, thus, his teaching was what he received by direct revelation from God for believers (Ac 22:14; 26:16; 2Co 12:1,7; Col 1:Eph 3:3). Perhaps very significant is the fact that **Paul never said to follow Jesus – even in part, much less totally.**

IV. Believers and following – So are believers today to follow or emulate Jesus' life? Are believers today supposed to go to Israel and traverse the roads He trod? Are we supposed to follow His preaching style and content? Are we supposed to publically rebuke Pharisees and expect to end up crucified?

A. In His steps (major life events) – Several events in Jesus' life stand out as ones that we **cannot** (and must not try to) emulate – namely, His birth, baptism ("follow the Lord in baptism"), temptation, transfiguration, death, resurrection, and ascension.

B. In His status – Likewise, Jesus' circumstances were quite different from our lives today.

1. His life generally – Jesus lived as do only a minority of human beings – in ways the Bible never indicates we should emulate. Four things stand out that greatly limit those who could emulate Him: He was a (a) homeless (b) Jewish (c) carpenter (d) who never married or had children (probably never dated, lived in an apartment, condo, or mobile home, or went to "college").

2. His life historically – Jesus lived in the Roman Empire. Life was radically different from life in the 21st century – e.g., before the printing press, the Industrial Revolution, guns, electricity (incl. indoor lighting, appliances), telephones (now photo-taking cell phones), railroads, cars, buses, trains, planes, radios, TVs, computers, and space and deep-sea exploration.

C. In His service (ministry) – Jesus' incarnation involved things that only He was supposed to do – and some that only He could do.

1. Preaching the gospel of the kingdom only to Jews and mainly in Galilee and around Jerusalem. 2. Teaching (often in parables)

3. Performing miracles (healing blind, lame, and sick, walking on water, providing food for 4,000 and 5,000 people from minimal substance, casting out demons, raising the dead)

4. Choosing & training apostles

5. Dying as the Atonement for sin

D. In our singing – As is true in other areas of Christian doctrine and practice, the lyrics of a number of well-known hymns and songs can be very misleading.

1. "Jesus Calls Us" – One of my favorites years ago says this: "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult / Of our life's wild, restless sea; / Day by day His sweet voice soundeth, / Saying, 'Christian, follow me.'" The problem is that when Jesus in the Gospels said "Follow Me" He was addressing unsaved people – not Christians – so this song regrettably misrepresents Bible facts.

2. "Follow, I Will Follow Thee" – Another moving song says "Jesus calls me, I must follow / follow Him today. / When His tender voice is pleading / How can I delay?" Refrain: "Follow, I will follow Thee, my Lord / Follow every passing day. / My tomorrows are all known to Thee; Thou wilt lead me all the way." This song takes the sometimes forceful Gospel words of Jesus about hypocrisy and hell and labels them "His tender voice." It also takes Jesus' "Follow Me" in the Gospels to mean we have a conscious awareness of His leading us to do various things and go various places – whereas, according to the Bible, it meant He was calling people to trust Him as far as truth is concerned (i.e., as a student trusts what a teacher is teaching).

CONCLUSIONS

A. Following Jesus – Only one time is this idea found outside the Gospels. Peter refers to following Jesus steps – but it is only directing slaves to submit properly to mistreatment by masters.

B. Footwashing – This is the only specific action that Jesus (just once) encouraged the apostles (His followers) to take. Most believers see it as a cultural practice that is no longer apropos and take it as only one historical example of a way in which to show humility.

C. Differing from Jesus' day – Many things in Jesus' life are not present or practical in most of the world today, and likewise much done nowadays has no precedent from Jesus' day.

D. Following under the Law or under grace – Trying to follow what Jesus said or did, or how He did things, or what He looked like would mean returning to the period of time that Jesus' death ended. It would mean doing things that were right and proper under the Law – but contrary to what we are to do now under the gospel of grace for the Body of Christ.

E. Paul and truth – What seems most prominent and important for believers today is Paul's frequent exhortation to follow him – to trust what he taught – since God chose him to be the major communicator of truth for the Body of Christ. So the question is not "What would Jesus do if He ***were*** alive now" but "What does God want us to do (as revealed in His Word) since we ***are*** alive now?"

F. Guarding what we say and sing – Too many modern "worship songs" (and also some older hymns) have actually changed truth – poetical imagery begetting and perpetuating heretical theology. We need to carefully choose and then heartily sing only those songs that fit this wonderful age of grace.