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On Following Jesus

BY PAUL ANDERSON

SOME CHRISTIAN groups ask, "How can we be certain of our salvation?" Others ask, "How can we be sure we are right?" Still others ask, "How can we do good in the world?" The Quaker question, however, is, "How can we be, most radically and effectively, true followers of Jesus?" Interestingly, when this question is lived faithfully, the others tend to take care of themselves.

Fortunately, Friends are not the only ones to ask what it means to follow Jesus centrally. Other than the Bible, the most popular book of the Middle Ages was *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. Charles Sheldon's book, *In His Steps*, became one of the most widely read Christian books of the twentieth century and asked the question, "What would Jesus do?" And I am told Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* has become Harper and Row's best-selling religious book of all time. Even the recent interest in Christian discipleship centers around the question, "How can Christians today follow Jesus?" Thankfully, Quakers are not alone, and we have a lot to learn from others who also share this common quest.

The truth is, though, we also have a lot to share, and the body of Christ (and the world beyond it) will be worse off if we neglect proper stewardship of the truth with which we have been entrusted. On this the church growth "experts" are wrong. Churches that grow are not necessarily those that de-emphasize a particular heritage. If this were true, cults would be extinct by now, instead of on the rise. Churches that grow (most healthily) are also those where the Spirit of the risen Lord reigns powerfully and transformingly. Where people *follow Jesus enthusiastically*. There's no substitute for that!

I often hear a comment suggesting that evangelical Friends should emphasize more pointedly the following of Jesus Christ instead of Quaker "distinctives." If what one means by this is that the external trappings of a movement (quaint expressions, symbolic dress, external trademarks,



etc.) should never be mistaken for the center, I agree wholeheartedly. But if one considers Quaker testimonies on peace, simplicity, spiritual worship and sacraments, inclusive and empowered ministry, integrity, and the dual emphasis upon spiritual revival *and* social reform as "optional distinctives," that person has understood neither Quakerism nor what it means to follow Jesus.

When you set out to follow Jesus completely, wholly, unreservedly, you will be confronted, in time, with *every one* of the issues Quakers have been addressing over the last three and a half centuries. And, these were issues faced squarely by early Christians too. Apostolic Christianity has less to do with calendars or institutions, and more to do with encountering Jesus Christ personally and

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being sent by Him as a partner in His saving, healing, and redeeming work. This makes one a "friend" of Jesus.

May a follower of Jesus *ever* lie, cheat, or kill for an earthly or a heavenly cause? Jesus says "No." In fact, such unfaithfulness actually sets back the active reign of God.

Does pleasing God, and developing a meaningful relationship with God, *ever* hinge upon performing an external act or saying the right words, separate from an inward response of genuine faith? To say so makes a mockery of the cross. Jesus came to show us the way to God and died to unite humanity with God. In doing so, He revealed finally the bankruptcy of all human approaches to God, not a new set of Christian forms to replace Jewish ones. If Christ is enough, nothing else is needed. Forms may assist us; they never determine God's saving, healing, empowering action toward us.

And, is Christ's present will for His disciples *ever* locked into a set of regulations or system of beliefs? We need belief systems, but they do not save us. The Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit of Christ will be present to guide His followers into all truth, convicting them of sin and of righteousness (John 16:5-15). Belief in the resurrection is one thing. Living in the power and presence of the resurrected Lord is another—and this is central to the good news of the Gospel.

SO HOW do we do it? Ironically, Friends have traditionally held that the risen Lord must always be attended and heeded above and beyond human traditions. So, an appeal to "traditional Quakerism" is a contradiction of terms. On the other hand, when we set out to follow Jesus we are not the first, nor are we alone. Others have found His teachings convincing and His leadings true. To discard the benefit of those learnings is foolish, although to become smug in them is to deny their central genius.

At different stages of my life, following Jesus has called for different challenges. As a child it meant seeking to be kind and patient—generally trying to beat up on my

younger brother less. Success was real, but too often only partial. As an adolescent it meant living by a Christian ethic instead of giving in to the pressures of the world. The Lord helped me a great deal then, and for this I am grateful. Now as an adult, I face not only questions about my personal lifestyle, attitudes, and behavior, but also questions about what kind of world this should be and how Christians ought to make a difference in it for Christ.

As the Lord speaks to me about following Him today, I find my Quaker heritage of more significance, not less. I suppose that not only are we a people who ask what it means to follow Jesus, but in a real sense, we *are* that question. But beware, the true answer may not come in the form of fine-sounding propositions or beliefs. The truest answer will be expressed in the changed and changing lives of those who encounter Jesus personally and who are sent by Him as His apostolic partners in the world. These people Jesus calls His "friends." **EF**

A note from the editor: I am deeply grateful for the privilege of serving as editor of the EVANGELICAL FRIEND over the past four years. As I draw together the final copy of the magazine that has nourished my connections with Friends and love for the Lord for nearly as long as I can remember, sadness gives way to trust. The Lord never allows a seed to die without bringing forth a new shoot. We look forward to the new EFI publication that will follow, and pray it will be used of God in ways beyond imagining.

*In Christ's service,
Paul Anderson*

To the Point

We're frequently asked if the emerging evangelical church in Bolivia and Peru is really *Friends*. And some are wondering if it matters . . .

Francisco Mamani is a second-generation Friend who has pastored the First Friends Church of La Paz. He is also the United Bible Society representative for most of Bolivia, making frequent visits to other countries as well.

"Why am I a Friend?" Francisco thought for a moment. I expected him to say what many do at home: "Because my parents are," or "The Friends brought my people the Gospel." Instead he gave this incisive reply: "There are various reasons. One, our church is free of class distinction. Friends missionaries regard me as an equal; most other missionaries do not. Secondly, our Friends churches are bound together by love and trust in each other, not by rules, rituals, or church government.

"Also," he added, "Friends teach a simple Gospel of holiness that is for every Christian."

He told of being invited, sometimes urged, by others to change denominations or churches because of one doctrine or another. But he said he had settled it in his own mind. He was more comfortable as a Quaker Christian. (April 1981)

—Jack Willcuts