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FOLLOWING JESUS THE FAITH-ROOTED ORGANIZER: A REVIEW OF PAUL ANDERSON'S *FOLLOWING JESUS*

PETER HELTZEL

When Jesus called the disciples, he called them to “Follow Me!” Following in the footsteps of Jesus is the heart of the walk of discipleship. Yet, we know not what we must leave behind and where we will go. When Simon Peter was called by Jesus he was asked to lay down his fishing nets and Jesus would make him a “Fisher of Folks.” This sacrifice took great courage because Peter was giving up his livelihood. From then on he would have to depend on the grace of God to supply all his needs. God transformed his passion for fishing into passion for lovingly reaching out to others through discipleship and evangelism.

What is God calling us to lay down and do to bear witness to Christ and his Kingdom? This is the question that drives Paul Anderson’s new book *Following Jesus*. Anderson argues that to be a disciple of Jesus means to *practice the presence of God* the way that Jesus did. However, we are not merely supposed to emulate Jesus, rather we are to seek to listen to and follow the risen and living Christ in the present. Anderson writes, “Belief in the resurrection is one thing; living in the power and presence of the resurrected Lord is another. Such is central to the good news of the gospel” (8).

That Jesus is present today challenges the more static evangelical view of Jesus I grew up with where Jesus was a historic man who died on the cross for our sins. While the historic Jesus did die on a Roman cross for our sins, he also was resurrected on the third day. Since Jesus was raised from the dead, he is alive and leading the body of Christ as its head; Jesus may be invisible (as not the visible historic human Jesus of Nazareth), but he is just as real as he was during his earthly life through the power of the resurrection. We are called to open our ears to voice of our Living Lord.

Anderson’s vision of discipleship is deeply rooted in his Quaker heritage. Encountering and responding to the Living Lord is the still

point of his theology. This mystical Christology carries on the spirit of the apostolic era. Anderson writes, “As we encounter the risen Lord and are commissioned by him to continue his saving/revealing work in the world, the incarnation happens anew” (50). The logic of Anderson’s “dynamic Christocentricity” (182) is that incarnation “happens anew” in the collective life of the body of Christ. Jesus is continually present as the church gathers to discern Jesus’ words and way.

These practices are the primary means to enter into this abundant and transforming life with the Living God. Practicing the spiritual disciplines is a time-tested path to becoming God’s dwelling place. Being a disciple of Jesus is learning how to better practice the presence of God. Spiritual disciplines should be practiced in the body of Christ who seeks to be obedient to Jesus Christ the head of the church. Anderson writes, “If Christ is alive, he seeks to lead us, and if he seeks to lead us, we can discern and obey his will” (21). Holy Scripture interpreted through the power of the Holy Spirit helps us discern the Jesus way. The Lord’s Prayer “involves attending, discerning, and minding the present leadership of the resurrected Lord” (27).

John’s vision of Jesus as a mediator of love and life is the heart and soul of Anderson’s theology of discipleship. Jesus wrote, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). We have been called not just to live, but to live abundantly. Abundant life is a life of unhurried peace. It is simple. It is radiant. It is irresistible. But such an abundant life does not just fall into our laps. We have to do something. We have to follow a path of action that is open to the promptings of the Spirit and the prophetic vision.

THE ROLE OF THE SPIRIT IN THE LIFE OF DISCIPLESHIP

Quakers are committed to a deep integration of head and heart, contemplation and action. While Anderson’s book is about “Following Jesus,” it pulsates to the rhythm of the Spirit. Quakers affirm a robust pneumatology that is expressed in the communal practices of spirituality. Anderson reads Quakerism as the spiritual epicenter of modern renewal movements, writing “many other spiritual movements have their own roots in the Quaker awakening. The Wesleyan Methodist movement, the Pentecostal movement, the Salvation Army, the Vineyard Fellowship—the Quaker desire to follow Jesus radically and to restore Christianity to its pristine and

apostolic character directly influenced these movements” (12-13). Anderson argues that apostolic pneumatology continues today in the life of contemporary renewal movements.

Quakerism offers spiritual disciplines that open us up to deeper experiences of the Spirit. Through practicing the presence of God we become aware of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads us to God-directed action. As we become more attuned to the Spirit we become more aware of the disillusionment and loneliness that surrounds us in society. As disciples of Jesus, we are challenged to practice the indwelling of the Spirit of God because this is the only thing that can bring us true and lasting peace.

Anderson challenges us to consider “What *is* Jesus doing—in the church and in the world?” and how can “the work of the apostles... continue in this and every generation?” (13). Central to discerning what Jesus is doing in the world is having the courage to enter the places of the deepest pain in the world. Anderson writes, “Ministry involves identifying human needs and meeting them, energized and empowered by the transforming love of Jesus Christ” (96). The power of the perspective of the poor guides our prophetic ministry. The church is waking up to its call to love the neighbor and serve the city, until justice rolls like a mighty river (Amos 5:24).

FOLLOWING JESUS THE FAITH-ROOTED ORGANIZER

Given the growing progressive movement around the United States, any discussion of discipleship needs to include an account of how Christians are organizing people to build a justice movement that is inspired by Jesus’ teaching of the Kingdom of God. God’s Spirit is moving today in creative and collaborative ways throughout the world. For example, New York City is experiencing the dawn of a new day under Mayor Bill de Blasio, who was inaugurated January 1, 2014. After twelve years of corporate governance, a new paradigm of activist government is breaking forth in New York City. Through Mayor De Blasio’s leadership, the City Council is working to pass a Paid Sick Leave Bill, an expanded Living Wage Bill, and a Universal Pre-K educational policy. These policies that help poor New Yorkers are political causes that followers of Jesus should be engaged in supporting.

With new progressive leadership in City Hall, it is time for the faith community to get its act together, working to establish and implement

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a justice agenda through mobilizing prophetic congregational networks. It is not enough for individual churches to have social justice ministries, but congregations must work together in a multi-faith, multi-racial, multi-sectoral movement for justice.

Since the 1930s, organizing movements for social justice in the U.S., like those of Saul Alinsky, have largely been built on assumptions that are secular origin—such as reliance on self-interest and having a common enemy as a motivator for change. But what if Christians were to shape their organizing around the implications of the truth that God is real and Jesus is risen? In what ways is the risen and living Lord calling the church to social action today?

Alexia Salvatierra and I have developed a model of social action called faith-rooted organizing that gathers people for social change drawing from the deepest wells of our faith.¹ Faith-rooted organizing offers a path to meaningful social change that takes seriously the command to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. It was faith-rooted organizing that helped undergird our work in the Living Wage Campaigns of LA and NYC, and faith-rooted organizing that can mobilize the work of justice in the years ahead.

In the spirit of the Life and Works Movement within the ecumenical movement, I would like to push Anderson to think more carefully about the role that faith-rooted organizing plays in following Jesus today. While Jesus was a mystic, he was also, as Obery Hendricks, Jr. argues in *The Politics of Jesus*, a poor Jewish prophet who engaged the Roman Empire and Jewish Temple cult through faith-rooted organizing.² Jesus was more than a wise teacher, he was an activist who was reforming Judaism and challenging the Roman Empire. We need to re-ignite the prophetic fires of Jesus again, inspiring the church to fight poverty and injustice in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Here are some questions we need to consider as we deepen a theology of prophetic discipleship in the years ahead: How did Jesus organize and build leaders in his ministry? How does thinking about Jesus as a faith-rooted organizer deepen our Christological ethics today? What is the biblical and theological basis of our justice ministries today? How can Quaker spiritual disciplines helped a centered community sustain the struggle for the long haul?

Quakers have been good at gathering folks for spiritual fellowship as the basis for ethical action in the world. Quakers like John Woolman fought hard against slavery, and now it is time for a new

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generation of Quakers to join the multi-faith movement of justice and peace as politically engaged faith leaders. Anderson's *Following Jesus* is inspiring Quakers, and even fellow restorationists like me, a minister and theologian in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), to step up and claim the power that God has given us to love our neighbor through concrete social action. May we be as vigilant in our multi-faith organizing for justice as we are in our spiritual practice of a centered community!

ENDNOTES

1. See Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel, *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).
2. Obery Hendricks, Jr., *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Teachings of Jesus and How They Have Been Corrupted* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).