

“A Compelling Christ”

Scanning the pages of history I was struck by the incredible realization that millions of people have seemingly been willing to blindly follow. Review with me a brief inventory of those people who have chosen to follow in the hope of finding liberation, meaning, fulfillment, or a better life. I am talking about world leaders like Hitler, Mussolini, Ayatollah Khomeini, Mu’ammar Khaddafi, and Saddam Hussein.

See, history documents we are not the first to set out in pursuit of finding and following a compelling leader. Many, throughout time, upon realizing that a self-led life driven by instincts does not satisfy, have restlessly searched for someone or something to follow. All around us, people are frantically looking for someone to give life a sense of safety and order; they are looking for a cause for which they can believe to be worth living. This, I think, is a clear commentary on our intrinsic need for finding meaning and direction outside ourselves.

In our culture today there is a growing segment of our population for whom everything in their world is broken. Every institution, every organization has either disappointed or betrayed them. As a result, it has become almost impossible for them to trust anything or anyone. This becomes critical in understanding our quest to become a fully-devoted follower of Christ.

The fear of following has much less to do with rebellion and much more to do with trust!

See, how is someone whose haunted memory of being bruised and battered by a parent going to be able to unconditionally trust anyone? Or, how is someone emerging from a home ravaged by distrust and blatant independence going to know how to cultivate a trusting, dependant relationship? How can we expect a person to develop a genuine concern for the direction of their lives when they do not really believe there is a future worth caring about?

These are the questions being asked by an entire generation that has inherited a world shrunken to conform to the significance of the immediate. In this kind of world, there is no need to hope, no need to trust, no need to dream again.

One evening on my way home from a busy day of trying to effectively respond to the needs of people, I was deeply impressed by the shallow response of a highly visible sign posted in front of one of our community establishments. The sign simply read: “Whatever”. As I drove on, I could not escape the feeling that this word, “whatever”, has come to embody the feelings of an enormous number of people. Pulling into the parking lot of a nearby business, I wrote myself this reminder:

Life is more than “whatever” when it is fully-devoted to the dynamic direction Jesus gives!

I will be honest with you; my heart literally breaks when I look out the congregation I pastor and consider the many that have been betrayed by relationships in which they have put their trust or have been hurt by people whom they have been willing to follow and then disappointed. The entire arena of life is impacted: politics, education, and even the church. All have fostered this sense of cynicism that has left us with little to trust in except ourselves.

Most people like the sound of trusting Jesus as the leader of their lives. The problem is, we are too often stuck in a place where we cannot see Him clearly; someone has stepped between us and blocked Him from view. That someone may have been a parent who neglected or abused us, yet was regarded by everyone else as a respectable Christian. That someone may have been a trusted spiritual leader who took advantage of us. That someone may have been a “Christian” colleague who mistreated us. That someone may have been a friend who claims to be a follower but bitterly refuses to forgive another.

Like a bad seat at a baseball game where your view is obstructed- you can hear the sounds, you can feel some of the excitement, you can watch others who are able to be absorbed in the game, but for you there is a helpless sense of detachment.

It is hard to trust Jesus when you are in the shadows!

Yet, listen friends, He is One who has never betrayed, used, or disappointed anyone fully-devoted to following Him. At the end of life lived on our own, He remains as the only viable option for a meaningful, purposeful life.

The words of John Mandeville's song have frequently run through my mind: "Things change, plans fail- Jesus will still be there."

It is remarkable to see how in just three short years of 24/7, people of power, vision, and great influence turned their lives over to Jesus. He was so compelling that, even after He left, these people continued to follow Him for the rest of their lives. Some were willing to die in order to be a fully-devoted follower. They had known Him, seen Him, heard Him, verified His authenticity, and unflinchingly turned their lives over to His control. Think of it: businessmen, bureaucrats, social revolutionaries, academics, financiers- these were not weak people.

MATTHEW 4:18-20

In Matthew, Jesus is walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee when He saw two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, casting their nets into the lake. They were not on vacation; fishing is what they did for a living. They were professionals. Jesus says to them, "*Come, follow Me... and I will make you fishers of men.*" And, what I want you to see is their response: "*At once they left their nets and followed Him.*"

Can you imagine? In the face of such obvious uncertainty, giving up your career, your job, your home, and your family in order to follow someone you hardly knew? It is unthinkable! He did not spread out a map on the ground and show them where He would lead them; they didn't cut a deal. They just followed! What could possibly explain this radical response?

For centuries, these men and others like them, had become very familiar with the oral tradition and literature archives talking about the long-hoped for promise of One who would come to restore their once proud nation to all of it's former glory. The growing sense of meaninglessness to the despair of an unraveling world peaked their anticipation of the One who would once again give life meaning and purpose. Endowed with authority, Jesus came into a world with broken expectations and rises out of the ashes of a despairing people to offer a fresh view of life and new hope to all who would follow Him. It was a compelling call!

Our struggle to become a fully-devoted follower of Christ has something to do with the nature and wide-spread popularity of "grandstand Christianity". The simple truth of the matter is, Christianity has become a spectator sport for many. To respond by dropping everything to follow Him will involve more than simply adding Him to our lives like another piece of furniture designed to make us comfortable.

I frequently find myself pondering what might have been. Where might I be today if He had not reached down to that little boy in Silvis, Illinois and touched him with His marvelous grace? Where might my greed, lust, self-centeredness, and anger have taken me in my life were it not checked by the persistent presence of the indwelling Spirit? What might have come of my life, my relationships, if my life had been permitted to freelance without restraint? I am eternally grateful my life has been blessed by a personal encounter with the compelling Christ. I know, beyond any doubt, my life is radically changed as the result of deciding to follow Him. I have lost nothing. Why wouldn't I follow Him?

Yet, there is more. It is not enough to think about all the benefits of our own personal encounter with the compelling Christ. It is certainly fine to revel in the goodness of God, but let's not get entangled by the blessings. It is not about us. It is rather, about the compelling cause of the compelling Christ!

Following, from start to finish, is a matter of unqualified obedience.

If the whole motivation of following Him were about the benefits and the blessings of those who choose to follow, then the followers of the first century would have likely bailed out! But, they didn't? Do you know why? The cause was so compelling they followed regardless of the cost!

Judas stands as a mirror reflection of those who follow for what they can get out of it. As soon as his financial aspirations were not realized and the prospect of suffering became evident, he checked out.

The rest, however, would have died for Jesus. Some of them did. Every hope, every dream, every aspiration was willingly placed in His hand without reservation or negotiation. They were fully-devoted followers. Although they were sometimes imperfect followers, they remained undaunted in their commitment to follow Him.

Jesus is still calling followers today. He is the compelling Christ with a compelling cause. When we see Him clearly, there is only one acceptable response: *“At once they left their nets and followed Him.”*