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Author(s): Hiebert, D. Edmond.

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Following Jesus

D. Edmond Hiebert

Jesus enlisted His disciples with the invitation, “Come, follow Me.” His call made a powerful impact on them. The response of Matthew to that challenging call, for example, was that “he left everything behind, and rose up and *began* to follow Him” (Luke 5:28, NASB). The Johannine account of the calling of the first disciples (John 1:29-51) makes it clear that in responding to His call the disciples were keenly conscious of the unique nature of the One enlisting them as His followers.

The Position of Christ as Leader and Model

Jesus assumed the position of Leader and Teacher of those who responded to his call. His central position as their instructor and guide was never questioned — his grip upon their hearts and lives left them no other alternative. At the very close of His earthly ministry Jesus gratefully acknowledged their committed relationship to Him: “You call me Teacher, and Lord; and you are right; for so I am” (John 13:13).

Jesus also became their model even though he did not parade Himself before them as the pattern for their lives. As far as the Gospel records go, this aspect of their relation to Him was seldom touched on by Jesus. This aspect of modelling may be implied in the words: “Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29). Their growing recognition of his gentle and humble nature, inciting them to learn from Him, would naturally lead to the desire to live as he lived.

That the disciples are to follow the example of their Teacher and Lord is clearly expressed by Jesus at the very close of His earthly ministry. In the Upper Room, after washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus explained, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you” (John 13:14-15). Having provided an example of humility and service, Jesus urged them to follow that example in their own lives, since “the servant is not greater than his master” (13:16).

The Book of Acts does not expressly state that the disciples of Jesus must follow the example of their Lord, but that truth is confirmed by the story of the disciples whose lives and teaching proclaimed the fact that “they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:3).

D. Edmond Hiebert is professor emeritus of New Testament at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California.

The New Testament epistles clearly indicate that Christ Himself is the example for His followers. Following Pentecost Jesus' followers gladly accepted the implied demand that they must follow their Lord's example in act and attitude. Yet even in the epistles Jesus Christ as the example of believers is not as frequently stressed as we might expect. That truth, however, is latent in much of the teaching of the epistles. Thus, for example, when, in Romans, Paul deals with the problem of differences in viewpoint concerning matters of opinion and conduct, he appeals to the example of Christ who did not please himself but graciously accepted others (Rom. 15:1-7). Paul urges believers to walk in love because of the loving self-sacrifice of Christ Himself (cf. Eph. 5:1-2). The example of Christ Himself must motivate Christian conduct.

Paul also appeals to the problem-plagued Corinthian church to "be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (I Cor. 11:1). Christ is the model of his life and conduct and this fact qualified him to be a model for the Corinthian believers. And, in writing to the Philippians, Paul urges that they mould their relations to one another by the very attitude "which was also in Christ Jesus."

In I John 2:6 the Apostle John explicitly holds up the example of Christ as the pattern for Christian conduct: "the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." John insists that the validity of Christian profession must be tested by its conformity to the life of Christ. The claim to have fellowship with God is verified by a life of holiness in daily conduct.

One of the most complete New Testament statements concerning Christ's example and the Christian life is found in I Peter 2:21-23. The passage calls for study in our effort to understand the biblical teaching concerning the believer and the example of Jesus.

The Christian and the Example of Christ

Peter elaborates on the example of Christ in connection with the problem of Christian suffering. He undergirds his appeal to the household servants patiently to endure unjust treatment by holding up the parallel experiences of Christ: "since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps."

It is one thing faithfully to follow in the direction that a series of footprints leads; it is another matter to be able to place one's feet in those very tracks. To illustrate this difference, let us think of a tall young farmer on a snowy winter morning hurrying toward the barn. With long strides he moves through six inches of newly fallen snow. He has almost reached the barn when he hears his three year old son shouting, "Daddy, I is comin' right in your tracks." Was the eager youngster walking "in the steps" of his father or faithfully following where they lead? When we remember Peter's bold confession of the uniqueness of the One who left those footprints (John 6:68-69;

Matt. 16:16), in which sense would Peter think of following the steps of Jesus?

Peter's remark, "since Christ also suffered for you," constitutes a compelling motivation for his readers to accept suffering while doing good. The fact that Christ had suffered "for you" makes his example personal and compelling. "Leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps" points to the abiding import of His example. The word "leaving" indicates that the earthly example terminated with Christ's ascension, but the present tense of the verb marks its continuing significance for His followers.

Christ left His followers "an example." The Greek word appears only here in the Greek Scriptures and denotes a model to be copied by the novice. The term literally means an "underwriting" and the reference apparently is to the copy-head which the teacher placed at the top of the page, to be reproduced by the pupil. The learner was not merely to admire the beautiful example of the teacher but must attempt to reproduce it stroke by stroke, feature by feature.

"For you to follow in His steps" states the purpose of the example, but the explanation changes the metaphor. Christ becomes the guide along a difficult way. Christ's steps mark the course for the lives of his followers, challenging them to walk the way he did. The Greek construction does not strictly denote stepping in the same steps but rather following upon or along the line that the footprints mark out. Mortals cannot always place their feet fully in our Lord's footprints; but, they can follow where his tracks lead.

In verses 22-23 Peter expands the example of the Model Sufferer both negatively and positively. Four statements indicate what he did not do (v. 22-23a), while one pictures what he did do (v. 23b). In both respects Christ is our perfect example.

Two relative clauses explain what Christ did *not* do. The first declares the unmerited nature of His sufferings: "who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth" (v. 22). That is, he did not succumb to a single sinful act. He demonstrated his unique sinlessness (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; I John 3:5; John 8:46; 14:30) under the most intense provocation and undeserved suffering.

Neither were His sufferings due to sinful speech: "nor was any deceit found in His mouth." His speech was subjected to the most rigorous scrutiny by His enemies, but no evidence of deception or lack of integrity could be detected in His words.

The second relative clause depicts Christ's patient endurance: "and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats" (v. 23a). The picture is vivid: Christ resolutely refused to respond in kind. The Gospels record various occasions when Jesus had bitter and vicious words hurled against him. But Jesus never yielded to an outburst of personal hatred against His detractors.

“While suffering, He uttered no threats” heightens the picture in the realm of deed. During the passion scene He was subjected to severe physical sufferings, yet he never threatened His tormentors with revenge. Some of the early Christian martyrs could not resist the natural urge to threaten their executioners with divine punishment. Even the Apostle Paul on one occasion, when abused in court, did not resist the temptation (Acts 23:3).

In view of such a unique example of what Jesus did not do, can Peter be understood to demand that we must walk “in His steps?” Not even the most godly believer among us can maintain that he is fully living up to these aspects of the example of Christ. But surely every one of his followers can conscientiously direct his course of life along the line that He marked out for us!

No one need imagine that he can earn his salvation, by walking “in His steps”! D.M. Stearns, after a forceful sermon on “Christ Our Saviour,” was approached by a man who said, “Why don’t you preachers preach about Jesus as our Example?” Stearns replied, “And if I preach Him as example, will you follow Him?” “Yes!” said the man confidently, “That’s what I believe, following Jesus as our example.” “Fine,” nodded the preacher, “let’s see what the Bible says.” Turning to I Peter 2:21-23 he read about Christ “leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps.” “That’s it,” said the man, “that’s what I believe.” “But,” insisted the preacher, “will you walk in His steps as the Bible enumerates them?” The man declared that that was what he was trying to do. “Who did no sin,” the preacher read; “can you take that step?” The man’s response was surprised silence. “Neither was guile found in his mouth; can you take that step?” Bewildered silence! “Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again. Can you take that step?” Met by total silence, Stearns emphatically declared, “Man, what you first of all need is a Saviour.” Clearly Christ the Example is only for those who have first accepted Him as Saviour.

The contrasting “but” serves to indicate that the example of Jesus is also positive: He “kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously.” The verb here rendered “kept entrusting” basically means “to hand over.” In the New Testament it is commonly used for delivering up a criminal to police or court for punishment (cf. Matt. 26:14-16; Mark 14:41-42; John 19:11, 16). Here it states Christ’s own action of “handing over” or “committing himself (supplied in context) to Him who judges righteously.” Then the point of the example is that believers must avoid all retaliation because of unjust treatment and leave matters in the hands of our just God.

The active voice of the verb “kept entrusting” indicates that this was Jesus’ deliberate, volitional response. He consciously chose to do so. And it is precisely here that suffering believers can truly walk “in His steps.” As failing mortals we cannot fully place our feet “in” the prior footprints Peter has enumerated. But by His grace we can resolutely commit ourselves to follow His example of unreservedly entrusting ourselves to God in all circumstances.

No hesitant, faltering attitude on our part can be permitted. Only a whole-hearted, unswerving allegiance to Him will enable a vital experience of following our Lord.