

## Copying Jesus

“Christians today should do what we see Jesus doing in the gospels. For example, it was his custom to go to the synagogue, so we should attend church.”

It sounds so reasonable, doesn't it. I would like to examine the thinking process behind this sentence.

When it comes to copying Jesus, there are many things that he did. Jesus spent a lot of time by the Sea of Galilee. As early as Mark chapter two we read that he went to the lake *once again* (v. 13). Before long he was criss-crossing it, even walking over it at night. So are we called to do the same? Make a point of spending time by and on lakes, and attempting to walk on water?

“Ah, no,” you say. “Jesus did all that to get away from the crowds, or rather to keep the crowd size manageable. It should not be seen as an emphasis on being by or on water.”

I agree. Notice that we are now qualifying our copying of Jesus by discerning his motives. Perhaps those are what we should copy. So let's ask about the attending synagogue – why did he go? Each time he went, it was to teach the people. This was where the god-fearing people were, the ones who would accept his teaching. In so doing, he stirred things up: one congregation was so angry at his message that they attempted to kill him; Pharisees at another place were so angry at him healing on the Sabbath that they plotted his death. The emphasis was on spreading the word, not on attendance for attendance's sake.

Another habit of Jesus' was attending festivals in Jerusalem. Once again, it was not the act of attending that is focused on; each time he went he spoke to the people. In fact, when it comes to religious observance, it was remarkably lacking in Jesus' life. He showed no desire to worship (he sang just one hymn that we know of) but he had a strong private prayer life, and was keen to give good news to the poor, healing many from disease and from affliction by demons.

What other actions of his might we be called to copy? He once explained that while foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, he had nowhere to lay his head. Perhaps we need to become rough sleepers in sympathy. This would tie in with his lifestyle of poverty: at his death, his only possessions seem to have been the clothes he was wearing. Didn't he say something about us having no possessions?

Then again, he spoke out fearlessly against the religious leaders of the day who had distorted God's word, calling them white-washed sepulchres. This so enraged them that they brought about his death. Isn't it good to stand up for justice and truth? Do we sense a call to copy him here?

“One moment,” you say. “Peter wrote, ‘It is for you to follow in his steps.’ That seals it. Copying Jesus is for Christians today.”

Hmm. I am not so sure. Let's look at the passage in One Peter chapter two. The issue is about suffering without complaint. 'To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps (v. 21).' This attitude is what Peter encourages us to copy. We are to accept suffering and persecution for his sake. The rest of Jesus' habits and customs we are not called to copy, because Jesus never laid that on his followers. Paul wrote, 'Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ', true, but again this was for a specific case, namely the limited sphere of not causing offence by what you eat or drink (1 Cor 11:1). It was not given as a general principle.

I believe we are called to do what Jesus laid on his followers, no more no less. He gave the disciples a lot of teaching, and when he was returning to heaven, he summed it up very forcefully. "All authority has been given to me... go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them... and teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:20)." Obedience to his spoken instructions is the key to Christian living, paying special attention to his mission. "As the father sent me, so I send you... receive the Holy Spirit... announce the forgiveness of sins (John 20:21-23)."

What concerns me is that it is all too easy for churches today to create hoops for believers to jump through that don't come from Jesus. I am not happy about the church I heard of where you could only join if you gave ten percent of your income to the church. Generosity is good, but Jesus never laid a demand like that on people. Or another church where you were only acceptable if you had been baptised in a certain way. This is to go beyond what Jesus said. Or the church which said that because Jesus fasted for forty days in the desert we are to fast too. He did not lay the practice of fasting on his followers. Fast if you want to, but don't make it an expectation for others.

Personally, I am looking for the church where there is enthusiasm for obeying the commands Jesus gave the twelve to the letter. Seek first the kingdom of God... Love your enemies... Take the gospel to every creature, and many others. I don't want the waters muddied by introducing other practices that Jesus did not give instructions about and justifying them by saying it copies Jesus when there are some aspects of Jesus' life that we have no intention of copying. There is far too much emphasis today on gathering for worship, for example, a subject which Jesus never raised with his disciples. Our teaching programme is at fault: talks on commands or a command of Jesus are incredibly rare in our meetings; we seem to teach on almost anything else. The practice of holding prayer meetings does not come from Jesus. We have turned the Christian way into a religion, to everyone's loss. The gospel is about spreading the message, bringing good news to the poor, not about holding meetings.

In a law court, witnesses are to speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Couldn't we focus on Jesus' commands, all of Jesus' commands and nothing but Jesus' commands in our churches? We seem to be distracted from his teaching so easily. If we want to be followers of Jesus, we need to put aside all our traditions and practices no matter how holy they may sound and re-examine the gospels carefully to my mind, and then act on what we discover.

I hope that gives you something to ponder. Thanks for reading.

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