



The Call to Follow Christ

by John Stott

This article originally appeared in the Summer 2011 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

At its simplest Christ's call was "Follow me." He asked men and women for their personal allegiance. He invited them to learn from him, to obey his words and to identify themselves with his cause.

Now there can be no following without a previous forsaking. To follow Christ is to renounce all lesser loyalties. In the days when he lived among men on earth, this meant a literal abandonment of home and work. Simon and Andrew "left their nets and followed him." James and John "left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him." Matthew, who heard Christ's call while he was "sitting at the tax office... left everything, and rose and followed him."

Today, in principle, the call of the Lord Jesus has not changed. He still says "Follow me," and adds, "whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." In practice, however, this does not mean for the majority of Christians a physical departure from their home or their job. It implies rather an inner surrender of both, and a refusal to allow either family or ambition to occupy the first place in our lives.

Let me be more explicit about the forsaking which cannot be separated from the following of Jesus Christ.

First, there must be a renunciation of sin. This, in a word, is repentance. It is the first part of Christian conversion. It can in no circumstances be bypassed. Repentance and faith belong together. We cannot follow Christ without forsaking sin.

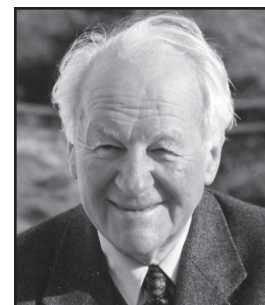
Repentance is a definite turn from every thought, word, deed and habit which is known to be wrong. It is not sufficient to feel pangs of remorse or to make some kind of apology to God. Fundamentally, re-

pentance is a matter neither of emotion nor of speech. It is an inward change of mind and attitude towards sin which leads to a change of behaviour.

There can be no compromise here. There may be sins in our lives which we do not think we ever could renounce; but we must be willing to let them go as we cry to God for deliverance from them. If you are in doubt regarding what is right and what [is] wrong, what must go and what may be retained, do not be too greatly influenced by the customs and conventions of Christians you may know. Go by the clear teaching of the Bible and by the prompting of your conscience, and Christ will gradually lead you further along the path of righteousness. When he puts his finger on anything, give it up. It may be some association or recreation, some literature we read, or some attitude of pride, jealousy or resentment, or an unforgiving spirit.

Jesus told his followers to pluck out their eye and cut off their hand or foot if these caused them to sin. We are not to obey this with dead literalism, of course, and mutilate our bodies. It is a vivid figure of speech for dealing ruthlessly with the avenues along which temptation comes to us.

Sometimes, true repentance has to include "restitution." This means putting things right with other people, whom we may have injured. All our sins wound God, and nothing we do can heal the wound. Only the atoning death of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, can do this. But when our sins have damaged other people, we can sometimes help to repair the damage, and where we can, we must. Zacchaeus, the dishonest tax-collector,



John Stott

more than repaid the money he had stolen from his clients and promised to give away half his capital to the poor to compensate (no doubt) for thefts he could not make good. We must follow his example. There may be money or time for us to pay back, rumours to be contradicted, property to return, apologies to be made, or broken relationships to be mended.

We must not be excessively over-scrupulous in this matter, however. It would be foolish to rummage through past years and make an issue of insignificant words or deeds long ago forgotten by the offended person. Nevertheless, we must be realistic about this duty. I have known a student rightly confess to the university authorities that she had cheated in an exam, and another return textbooks which he had lifted from a shop. An army officer sent to the War Department a list of items he had "scrounged." If we really repent, we shall want to do everything in our power to redress the past. We cannot continue to enjoy the fruits of the sins we want to be forgiven.

Second, there must be a renunciation of self. In order to follow Christ we must not only forsake isolated sins, but renounce the very principle of self-will which lies at the root of every act of sin. To follow Christ is to surrender to him the rights over our own lives. It is to abdicate the throne of our heart and do homage to him as our King. This renunciation of self is vividly described by Jesus in three phrases.

It is to deny ourselves: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself." The same verb is used of Peter's denial of the Lord in the courtyard of the high priest's palace. We are to disown ourselves as completely as Peter disowned Christ when he said "I do not know the man." Self-denial is not just giving up sweets and cigarettes, either for good or for a period of voluntary abstinence. For it is not to deny things to myself, but to deny myself to myself. It is to say no to self, and yes to Christ; to repudiate self and acknowledge Christ.

The next phrase Jesus used is to take up the cross: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." If we had lived in Palestine and seen a man carrying his cross, we should at once have recognized him as a convicted prisoner being led out to pay the supreme penalty. For Palestine was an occupied country, and this is what the Romans compelled their convicted criminals to do. So, writes Professor H.B. Swete in his commentary on Mark's Gospel, to take up the cross is "to put oneself into the position of a condemned man on his way to execution." In other words, the attitude to self

which we are to adopt is that of crucifixion. Paul uses the same metaphor when he declares that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh (i.e. their fallen nature) with its passions and desires."

In Luke's version of this saying of Christ the adverb daily is added. Every day the Christian is to die. Every day he renounces the sovereignty of his own will. Every day he renews his unconditional surrender to Jesus Christ.

The third expression which Jesus used to describe the renunciation of self is to lose our life: "Whoever loses his life... will save it." The word for "life" here denotes neither our physical existence nor our soul, but our self. The psyche is the ego, the human personality which thinks, feels, plans and chooses. According to a similar saying preserved by Luke Jesus simply used the reflexive pronoun and talked about a man forfeiting "himself." The man who commits himself to Christ, therefore, loses himself. This does not mean that he loses his individuality, however. His will is indeed submitted to Christ's will, but his personality is not absorbed into Christ's personality. On the contrary, as we shall see later, when the Christian loses himself, he finds himself, he discovers his true identity.

So in order to follow Christ we have to deny ourselves, to crucify ourselves, to lose ourselves. The full, inexorable demand of Jesus Christ is now laid bare. He does not call us to a sloppy half-heartedness, but to a vigorous, absolute commitment. He calls us to make him our Lord.

The astonishing idea is current in some circles today that we can enjoy the benefits of Christ's salvation without accepting the challenge of his sovereign lordship. Such an unbalanced notion is not to be found in the New Testament. "Jesus is Lord" is the earliest known formulation of the creed of Christians. In days when imperial Rome was pressing its citizens to say "Caesar is Lord," these words had a dangerous flavour. But Christians did not flinch. They could not give Caesar their first allegiance, because they had already given it to the Emperor Jesus. God had exalted his Son Jesus far above all principality and power and invested him with a rank superior to every rank, that before him "every knee should bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

To make Christ Lord is to bring every department of our public and private lives under his control. This includes our career. God has a purpose for every life. Our business is to discover it and do it. God's plan may be different from our parents' or our own. If he

is wise, the Christian will do nothing rash or reckless. He may already be engaged in, or preparing for, the work God has for him to do. But he may not. If Christ is our Lord, we must open our minds to the possibility of a change.

from *Basic Christianity*, by John Stott, pp. 109-113

John R. W. Stott is known worldwide as a preacher, evangelist and communicator of Scripture. For many years he served as Rector of All Souls Church in London, where he carried out an effective urban pastoral ministry. A leader among evangelicals in Britain, the United States and around the world, Stott was a principal framer of the landmark Lausanne Covenant (1974). His many books, including *Why I Am a Christian* and *The Cross of Christ*, have sold millions of copies around the world and in dozens of languages.

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