

“Follow Me”

by the Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.

And He said to them, “Follow Me...” (Matthew 4:19).

“If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31).

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15).

“Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations...” (Matthew 28:19).

The twelve disciples are some of the most central people in the Word, unique in their opportunity to live with and learn from our Lord Jesus Christ. For that reason, in some circles they have been raised to the level of sainthood. In reality, however, they were just twelve men—ordinary in many ways—each with his own personality. Foremost among them, because we know the most about him, is Peter. He is the one who asked about how many times he had to forgive his brother (Matthew 18:21-22), who walked on the water to Jesus until he lost faith (Matthew 14:28-31), who refused at first to have his feet washed by Jesus (John 13:8-9), who saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain (Mark 9:2-8), who claimed with certainty that he would never deny the Lord, only to be proven wrong (Matthew 26:35), and who went on to become a great teacher and leader in the early Christian Church. Some of the disciples showed self-centeredness, as when James and John asked to sit at Jesus’ left hand and right hand in the kingdom of heaven (Mark 10:35-40). Judas Iscariot has become a symbol of betrayal (Matthew 26:14-16). Thomas reminds us of the doubter in us, because he refused to believe in the resurrection of Jesus until he had seen Him with his own eyes (John 20:24-29). John is called “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” and he seems to have had a particularly close relationship with Jesus (John 13:23-25).

A disciple is a follower, a believer in a particular faith or faith leader, and a student. In the gospels, we get to know twelve people who lived out this definition. We know that the Lord chose to include specific parts of the lives of certain people in His Divine revelation to us because of what these people and their actions represent. Within the details of what He chose to tell us about them, there are powerful messages for our own spiritual lives. What messages do we learn by means of the disciples?

Consider some of the disciples’ experiences. A Man with magnetism asked them to leave their jobs and follow Him, and they did. In the three years that followed, they watched Jesus heal countless people, and cast out demons (cf. Mark 1:32-34). After a while, they themselves were able to perform some of these miracles (see Mark 3:15; Acts 3:6-9). They witnessed Jesus challenging the leaders of the Jewish Church, by healing on the Sabbath, for example (Mark 3:1-6). They heard Him teach time and time again (cf. Matthew 5-7), and often talked with Him about the meaning of His parables (see Matthew 13:18-23). They saw Him interacting with Samaritans, welcoming little children, healing blind beggars—people many of them had learned to look down upon (see John 4:27, 9:2ff; Matthew 19:13-15). They saw Lazarus raised from the dead (John 11), and participated in the miracle of the feeding of five thousand people (Matthew 14:15-21). Once, while they were at sea, Jesus calmed a fierce storm when they thought they would sink (Mark 4:39). They felt the Lord’s reprimand when they argued about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God (Mark 9:33-35). They prayed with Jesus (Mark 14:32-42), ate with Him (Mark 14:12ff), journeyed with Him. They saw the Lord ride into Jerusalem as a king, hailed by multitudes (Mark 11), and then later they saw Him captured

and crucified (Mark 14:43-50, 15:16-32). They saw the Lord after they thought Him dead, and He told them their mission—to baptize and preach the gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:19).

If we could draw all the experiences of the disciples together, we could extrapolate a general theme for our spiritual lives. These men placed themselves in the presence of the Lord, and their lives were defined by His leadership. We too are called to place ourselves in the presence of the Lord, and to work hard to submit to His guidance. To be followers, believers, and students of our Lord Jesus Christ is one way of defining spiritual life itself.

Nevertheless, this general message, no matter how powerful it is, is not the only thing that can be seen in the lives of these men. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church teaches us that all the stories of the Word contain deeper, symbolic lessons for our spiritual lives. Seen in this way, the pageant of the disciples, and the specifics we are told about them, are like a gateway or entrance point into the internal sense of the Word, where deeper and richer messages await.

“Follow”

The first way we can see this deeper message is to consider the concept of *following*. The disciples followed the Lord, literally walking around with Him on His journeys. Again, however, this contains a deeper message for our spiritual lives. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church says that to “follow the Lord” means “to acknowledge, to obey, and to act and live from Him and with Him” (*Apocalypse Explained* 864). The main point here is to equate walking with living—in this case, living the life the Lord wants us to live. It has to do with “the path of truth” or the direction truth points, namely to a good life (*Arcana Coelestia* 519). Another teaching equates walking with “leading a life of love” (*ibid.*). This is also seen in the Scriptures, where we encounter such phrases as, “You shall keep all these commandments and do them, and walk always in His ways” (Deuteronomy 19:9; cf. *Apocalypse Explained* 97).

Think of the stories about the Lord calling the disciples. Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, as they were fishing, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (*Matthew* 4:19). He said similar things to James and John, and later to Matthew, the tax-collector. The Word uses the word “immediately” in several of these stories to describe how the men did follow Him. There was a magnetism about the Lord, that caused these men to leave their old life and devote the rest of their lives to Him. In this regard, the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church teaches, “the Lord draws after Him the person who from freedom wills to follow” (*Apocalypse Explained* 864). Are we willing to keep the commandments of the Lord, to allow Him to direct our day-to-day lives, to be drawn after Him with the same level of devotion?

True Discipleship

One of the things the Lord did for His followers was define what it meant to be a true disciple. At one point, Jesus said, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32). Later He added, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Truth and love: these are the two fundamental entities of spiritual life. It makes sense that the Lord would highlight them as the fundamental signs of discipleship.

Turning again to the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, we learn that “nothing is of greater importance to [us] than knowing what the truth is” (*Arcana Coelestia* 794; cf. *New Jerusalem and Its*

Heavenly Doctrine 11). This is because truth, and the goodness it describes, are the “essential ingredients in all components of a person’s life; all his or her civil life, moral life, and spiritual life hang on these two” (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 28). This is why part of the Heavenly Doctrine is a book called *Divine Love and Wisdom*, for these two qualities are what define the Lord. It is why our minds are created with two basic components, an understanding and a will, which give us the ability to perceive truth, and the freedom to will what is good (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 28, 29).

In fact, when we look at the disciples themselves, we see these teachings come to life for us in the different personalities. “Peter [represents] the truth of the church, James its good, and John, good in act, that is, works; the rest of the disciples represented the truths and goods that are derived from these” (*Apocalypse Explained* 411:12, cf. 100:2). How often did Jesus teach in great detail about what is true and good? “Abide in My Word” the Lord said, “and you will be My disciples indeed.” So for us, the more we know about the Lord’s kingdom, the more we will be able to live the life that leads there.

“Who do you say that I am?”

One area that is particularly worthy of our attention is the teachings about the Lord Himself. Once, while Jesus was traveling with His disciples, He asked them, “Who do people say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (Matthew 16:13). Their answers were John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, etc. The Lord’s follow-up question was, “But who do you say that I am?” to which Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15,16). Many of us are also familiar with the story of the transfiguration, where Jesus took Peter, James, and John up onto a mountain and showed forth His inner glory, so that He looked like the sun itself (Matthew 17:1-8). We may also recall Thomas’s words to Jesus after he had seen Him in the resurrection: “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). In all these places, and in so many others, we see the effort of the Lord to get these men to understand who He truly was.

In the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, we read that “the first principle of the Church is to acknowledge God, to believe in Him and to love Him” (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 281). Further, we learn that “there is only one fountain of life, which is the Lord, from whom we live and act and have our being” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10774; cf. Acts 17:28). Finally we hear that,

A correct idea of God is to the congregation like the sanctuary and altar in a church, or like a crown on the head and a scepter in the hand of a king, as he sits upon his throne. From this hangs the whole body of theology, like a chain from its anchor-point. If you are prepared to believe me, the idea everyone has of God determines his place in the heavens (True Christian Religion 163).

With these teachings in mind, we can see, again through the relationship of the Lord with His disciples, a deep and powerful message for our spiritual lives. We, too, must come to understand our God—to know that He is a God of love, to learn the laws of His Divine Providence, to really “get” that He uses every ounce of His Divine power to help each individual have the best eternal life possible, and many other things besides. As we learn, our willingness to devote ourselves to Him, and follow Him where He leads, will grow.

The Church

Finally, let us look at the central mission which the disciples were given after the Lord had been crucified then had risen from the dead. They were commissioned to “make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all things [He had] commanded [them]” (Matthew 28:19,20). Another place describes the mission as, “preach the kingdom of God and heal the sick” (Luke 9:2). He explained to them, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8).

The efforts of the disciples to spread the gospel led to the development and establishment of the Christian Church (see *Apocalypse Explained* 411:12). Groups of people gathered together to worship the Lord, to learn from His Word, to support each other in living the life He had prescribed. Today, we too benefit greatly from a church. This is also part of the message for our spiritual lives which is given by means of the disciples.

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church contains a clear definition of a church. It says, “The Church is said to be where the Lord is acknowledged, and where the Word exists; for the essentials of the Church are love to the Lord and faith in Him, and the Word teaches how a person ought to live in order that he or she may receive love and faith from the Lord” (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine* 243). And there is a grouping of teachings on what truly defines a church in spiritual terms: “A church is a church from doctrine (or teachings) there, and from life according to it” (*Apocalypse Explained* 384, cf. 799; *Apocalypse Revealed* 17). “The church is a church from the good of love to the Lord, and from the good of love towards the neighbor” (*Apocalypse Explained* 938; cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 388). “A church is a church by virtue of its affection for truth” (*Arcana Coelestia* 4449; cf. *Apocalypse Explained* 675). “The church is a church from this that the Lord is adored and that the Word is read” (*Apocalypse Explained* 1069). All of us, as disciples of the Lord, are called to gather with others to focus on the Lord, to have our affection for truth continually inspired, to adore the Lord in worship, and to live according to the teachings of the Word.

The disciples were real human beings; we see some of their struggles as well as their triumphs. In this way, we are very much like them. We too are on a journey through life, with the Lord as our Guide. We will have periods of doubt, which will hopefully be replaced with a growing faith. We will be weak, hopefully with increasing spiritual strength. We will be self-centered at times, hopefully with escalating and expanding good qualities of charity and usefulness.

Through the stories about the Lord’s disciples, we can learn what it truly means to follow the Lord. We can see how central love and wisdom, goodness and truth, are to our lives, for abiding in the Lord’s Word and loving one another are the true signs of discipleship. We can come to understand in growing measure who our God is, namely the Lord Jesus Christ, the one God of heaven and earth. And we can see that we need the Lord’s church for support in all facets of our spiritual lives. Jesus said to His disciples, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God” (Luke 8:10). May we strive to be worthy of that gift.

Amen.

Readings: Matthew 4:18-25, 28:18-20; John 8:31-32, 13:34-35; *Apocalypse Explained* 100:2, 411:12, 864.