

WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW JESUS

By Paul Penno Jr.

December 3, 2011

Ann Hill Carter was only 20 years old in 1793 when she married the celebrated Henry Lee III, then Governor of Virginia. With her marriage, Ann became mistress of Stratford Hall and during the first decade of her marriage to Henry, she bore him four children.

Ann was plagued with poor health, and in 1804 she was taken with a severe fever. One day, while in the grip of her illness, the family became alarmed that Ann was not responding to external stimuli. They hastily summoned physicians who conducted lengthy examinations of Ann's inert body. Finally, the grim-faced physicians were forced to advise her husband that they could not detect a heartbeat. The grief-stricken husband reluctantly accepted the verdict of death and Ann's body was placed in a coffin. Three days later, the coffin was put to rest in the family vault.

Some time later a sexton, bringing flowers for the deceased wife, thought he heard a noise emanating from the casket. As he listened intently, he was sure that he heard a faint voice calling for help. The sexton quickly unfastened and removed the lid from the coffin and Ann Carter Lee looked up at him with wide eyes as she tried to raise herself into a sitting position.

Over the next several months Ann Carter Lee slowly regained her health. Eventually she was able to become a fully functioning wife and mother. On

January 19, 1807, fifteen months after her narrow escape from premature burial, she gave birth to a son who would be her last child to survive into maturity. The infant was named Robert Edward after Ann's two brothers. Robert Edward was to become another illustrious member of the famous Lee family.

This is a genuine historical incident, because that young woman later gave birth to Robert E. Lee, famed Confederate general in the Civil War.

How many other people have been buried alive and whose screams never brought them deliverance nobody knows. You've heard of the famous Dr. Leakey, anthropologist of Kenya who has said he discovered the oldest bones of prehistoric man in a gorge in Tanganyika. His brother was buried alive by the Mau Mau in Kenya while we were living there. It was a terrible thing.

It's a terrible thing too when souls are baptized who have never died to sin. It's a terrible thing that people haven't died when they've been buried in baptism with Christ. But the mistake comes in not dying first.

What It Means to Follow Jesus Christ

Should fear be the motivation in leading someone (a youth, for example) to be baptized? Whether the right answer is yes or no, let's not forget what Jesus said about letting the youth come to Him and don't hinder them, don't get in their way, don't stop them (Mt. 19:14). Even if a person demonstrates a lack of mature sanctification, let's think of those arms of Jesus opened wide to welcome him. And if we have

mistakenly “hindered” one, let Jesus give us the gift of repentance.

And let’s express on Jesus behalf a glad welcome into the kingdom of God and trust Him to “receive” them. Let the youth snuggle into His arms. When He warned us not to “hinder” them, He knew that as sincere parents or teachers we could be inclined to misunderstand His drawing of the children and sincerely but inadvertently “hinder” them.

The story of one famous baptism inspires us. The Ethiopian eunuch riding in his chariot “down from Jerusalem unto Gaza” was reading the Bible while jolting along. What had caught his attention was Isaiah 53, about the “Suffering Servant,” wondering what the heart-arresting story meant. “Then the Spirit of the Lord said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot.” Philip’s response is inspiring: “And Philip ran thither to him.” Oh that the Lord may give us grace to be so instantly responsive! (See Acts 8:26-38).

He began his soul-winning ministry by asking a question, usually a good way to break any ice: “Understandest thou what thou readest?” The man needed a human being to illuminate his reading of the text! “How can I except some man should guide me?” Thank the Lord, he welcomed Philip who eventually told him that “if thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest” be baptized. What is required for baptism? That “believing with all the heart.” What it means to “believe” is therefore important. In the Ethiopian’s case, it was a heart appreciation of Isaiah 53. Excellent! A verse-by-verse reading of that chapter with a voice subdued

by humility, letting the Spirit melt the heart. Let the children come to Jesus.

Some struggle to put bread on the table and pay the rent, and put shoes on the children’s feet. I would not lay another straw on the burden they carry. Others lay awake at night wondering what to do with the money the Lord has entrusted to them. I would like to encourage them to believe that the dear Lord will hear their prayer for wisdom to know what to do with it. Surprisingly, of the \$144 billion Americans give to charity annually, they donate more than half of it during the last 45 days of the year. From Christmas to New Year’s Eve, they give an average of \$1.6 billion a day. Motivated by different concerns, they want to end the year having done what is right.

Justification by faith is not a cerebral, theological exercise; it’s the joy of living. And part of the joy of living is the joy of giving. Yes, actually learning to enjoy giving more than getting. Why and how? Because in true justification by faith you come to realize that you own nothing that can rightfully be called yours. You don’t need a preacher to pound it into your ears that you are a steward, an estate-manager. You see that on His cross Christ took what was yours (your grave) and gave you what was His (eternal life). Yes, He redeemed you from hell itself! Simply believe this truth of justification, and you are set free from those terrible tentacles of “covetousness,” which is selfishness, the desire to acquire and to keep. Get on your knees, and ask the Lord where and how to give, rather, to pass on,

what He has permitted to pass through your unworthy hands.

Give, not because you hope it's an investment that will pay off in "treasure in heaven" for you or because you want to receive (Mt. 6:20); give because you want to help lift the burden that Jesus carries on His heart by lifting someone else's burden that He feels. Just for the joy of helping. Yes, He will guide you to give wisely, not unwisely.

Tell people that the Gospel is *very* Good News. Tell them that Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). Some don't like to hear those words; they want to emphasize how hard it is to follow Jesus, how much you must give up, how much *you* must *do*, your salvation depends on your knowing how difficult it is to be saved.

And I will agree—there is one *very* difficult thing about being saved: that is, learning how to believe. Jesus says in John 3:17-19 that *not* believing will keep us out of heaven. Indeed! Serious!

And the truth is that all of us were born in an unbelieving state; believing is never transmitted genetically; unbelief is natural to us; unbelieving is far and above the most difficult thing humans have to learn to overcome. It is the addiction of all addictions, the most insidious, the most pervasive. "He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18).

The distraught father in Mark 9:17-24 shows us how deep the problem is rooted in our human nature. Jesus said to him, almost like tantalizing him, "All things are possible to him who believes."

Then the poor man realized how awful his problem was, how every cell of his being was saturated with unbelief: he burst into tears and cried out in anguish, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."

Now, there is Good News in that story. The moment you realize that unbelief is your real problem, help is on the way. A wise writer said, "you can never perish" if from your heart you pray that man's prayer.¹ The people above all people whom Heaven rushes to help are those who realize the depths of their sin.

Unbelief is the most serious problem in the world church, the source of our lukewarmness, the reason for the delay in the coming of Jesus. We *must* learn to believe how good the Good News is; and the moment we say that, we remember that Christ will have a people who will overcome even as He overcame. He did not die in vain! He will see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied (Isa. 53:11).

A sincere question has come: "If you follow Jesus truly, should not your old sinful nature you received from Adam be annihilated? If you are faithful, shouldn't God now give you a sinless nature so you won't be tempted any more?"

To be truly converted does not mean that God puts new flesh upon the old spirit; He gives you a new Spirit within the old flesh. He does not propose to bring new flesh to the old mind, but a new mind to the old flesh. Victory over sin is not gained by having the human nature taken away. but by receiving the divine nature to subdue and have

¹ *Desire of Ages*, p. 429.

dominion over the sinful nature. It's not by taking away the sinful flesh, but by His sending in the sinless Spirit to conquer and condemn sin IN the flesh. It's the grace of God teaching us to say "No!" to the flesh, just as Jesus did in His life on earth (Tit. 2:11).

The Bible doesn't say, Let this flesh be upon you which was also upon Christ, but it does say, "Let this MIND be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). It does not say, Be ye transformed by the renewing of your FLESH, but it does say, "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your MIND" (Rom. 12:2). God's people will at last be transLATED by the renewing of the flesh when Jesus comes in the clouds of heaven; but for now they are transFORMED by the renewing of their minds.

The Lord Jesus took the same flesh and blood, the same human nature, that we all have, flesh just like our sinful flesh; He was *sent* "in the likeness of sinful flesh, and because of sin"; and by the power of the Spirit of God through the divine mind that was in Him, He "condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3). And therein is our deliverance, our victory "in Christ." Good News: the closer you come to Jesus, the more you will be tempted by the flesh BUT the more the "grace of God" will teach you to say "No!" to the flesh, and so you will "overcome even as [Christ] overcame" (Rev. 3:20).

Is there a better word than "stewardship" in describing our relationship to Jesus in His work of proclaiming the gospel "to every creature"?

Jesus said, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). That command of Jesus requires that we support those who "go." That means, first of all, the giving of tithe—one tenth of our "increase" that the Lord gives us. It's not a legalistic assessment upon us; it's fellowship with Jesus in His work. It's working together with the Lord Jesus in His work of proclaiming the gospel "to every creature" "in all the world."

That's the work that the Lord Jesus loves. A "steward" is someone who cares for property; the word "stewardship" can be understood to imply a legalistic connection with the Lord Jesus in His work of proclaiming the gospel to "every creature."

But it's almost infinitely beyond that; you never get to really know someone until you get down working with him in digging the ditch; "stewardship" rightly understood is getting down in the ditch digging with the Lord Jesus; sharing His heart burden for the world.

Jesus said "Go ye . . ." and that requires that we support those who give their lives to "go." This one obeyed the call "Go ye" in 1972, to proclaim the third angel's message in verity to the people.

Your "going" may not be overseas, but it may mean next door; or it may mean, teaching "the everlasting gospel" instead of legalism to children or youth in your local Sabbath School.

If our hearts can be "enlarged" to comprehend the "breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of the love [*agape*] of Christ in the true gospel (cf. Ephesians 3:14-21; Psalm 119:32), the Holy Spirit

will take over our ministry and our teaching; and everything we do for the Lord Jesus will bear eternal fruit. That will be a happy “stewardship,” both for now and for eternity.

There is a beautiful illustration of genuine faith in the story of the three Hebrews of Daniel 3 who were thrown into the fiery furnace. They told the insanely angry king that (1) the living God whom they served was “able” to deliver them from his power, but (2) it might possibly be that He would be unwilling to do so—they didn’t know for sure—but if He were unwilling to deliver them they would serve Him nonetheless, and they would not cast contempt on His holy law by bowing down to his golden image.

In this way these three men demonstrated that their faith in God was the New Covenant kind, not the Old Covenant kind. (They probably had been studying the writings of Jeremiah!) The Old Covenant kind of “faith” is a counterfeit of the genuine: it’s making a “bargain” with God. Old Covenant faith says, “Lord, if You will deliver us, then we’ll keep Your commandments.”

Sometimes preachers lead their people into Old Covenant faith when they tell them that if they take the initiative to “pay tithe,” then God will bless them financially. New Covenant faith is a choice to pay tithe whether or not the Lord rewards us.

The New Covenant is God’s out-and-out promises to His people, and their heart response is to believe and appreciate what He promises. His love, not fear, “constrains” them to loyalty and service (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). The Old Covenant is “bargaining” with God. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego rebuke

us for that. Jeremiah promises (31:31-34) that the time will come when God’s people graduate completely out of the Old into the living faith that is in the New. As God’s people face the trials of the last days, their faith will mature into that of “the Lamb’s wife”—a church that has grown up into that “measure of the stature, of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). It’s time for the New Covenant, now.

What does it mean in these last days to become a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ? You believe God is, and that He rewards your devotion and hears your prayers; that He is your heavenly Father, that He loves you so much He gave His dearest treasure to become your Savior—His only Son; and that He stays with you forever through the on-going gift of the Holy Spirit.

You have begun an eternity-filled and growing heart appreciation of the love that led Jesus Christ to die your second death on His cross; that love has begun to “constrain” you to live “henceforth” unto Him and not for “self.”

Your baptism is a sign to the world that you turn away from its ways and sinful pleasures; you have now taken up your cross to follow Jesus. You believe that the One who died for you was resurrected and now lives forever as your personal High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary, your Attorney on your side, defending you from the attacks of Satan.

You have begun to love the Bible as God’s personal word to you; and you ask Him to deepen that love and confidence from now on forever. You have begun to love God’s law, His ten

commandments as ten promises of victory over temptation Satan may bring against you; you love obedience to the fourth, keeping holy His blessed seventh-day Sabbath as a precious gift from Him.

The “blessed hope” you cherish is the imminent personal, literal, visible second coming of Jesus and you want to help others also to get ready. You thank the Lord for the “gifts” He has given to His “body” on earth, the church—one of which is the living gift of prophecy, evidence of His on-going love.

Since His church is His “body” on earth, you want to remain forever one of its loyal members, supporting it with tithes and offerings returned to the Lord. You believe that your physical body is the “temple” the Holy Spirit dwells in; you choose to keep it in health and purity, for it was purchased by the sacrifice of Christ.

You ask to be baptized by being buried in the water as a declaration to the world that you are now “crucified with Christ” and you are risen with Him to a new life. You seek fellowship in that “church” that Revelation singles out as “the remnant” which “keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.” You are happy forever “in Christ” living under His new covenant of grace.

We all know that a “disciple” is someone who follows a teacher.

Therefore the ultimate lesson in “discipleship” is the one that the “144,000” teach us: these are they who “stand on the mount Zion, ... having the Father’s name written on their foreheads, ... and who follow the Lamb wherever He goes” (Rev. 14:1,

4). “Mt. Zion” is the church, the same as the “remnant church” of 12:17. For “the Lamb “ to “stand on Mt. Zion” therefore is Christ and His people to be fully reconciled; the sacrifice of Christ will at last be fully vindicated in these people.

Through Christ’s ministry in the Most Holy Apartment of the heavenly sanctuary, He ministers to His last-days people the “atonement” in this final time of the High Priestly ministry; every buried root of enmity against God or alienation from Him (see Rom. 8:7) will have been cleansed from their hearts; His people are at last “at one” with Him. This is the meaning of the prophecy of Daniel 8:14, “Then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.”

The sanctuary in heaven cannot be “cleansed” until first of all the hearts of His people on earth are “cleansed.” Thus the story of the 144,000 is the story of final victory over sin—a victory accomplished only by faith, not by works.

And here is where the message of Christ’s righteousness comes into sharp focus: sanctification is accomplished in the hearts of believers by the ministry of truth. “Sanctify them [Thy people] through Thy Word; Thy word is truth,” Jesus Himself prayed (John 17:17, KJV). This is what the 144,000 have heartily submitted to. The slightest hint from the Holy Spirit that something in the life is in opposition to that “truth of God,” and the believer gladly gives it up. Like a healthy heart beating and pumping blood throughout the healthy body, so the Holy Spirit is working throughout the remnant church; God’s people waste no time or energy fighting the leading of the Holy Spirit. There

is none of that “1888 spirit” that constantly opposes the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The 144,000 come to the place where it can be honestly said of them, “These are they who follow the crucified Christ [the Lamb] wherever He goes.”

Will it be this generation who open their hearts to this leading of the Holy Spirit?

One brief example must be mentioned: health reform is part of the message that the Lord sends in this great antitypical Day of Atonement. Slavery to appetite is part of an addiction that the 144,000 overcome as they follow the Lamb wherever He leads. Now in this “time of the end” (Dan. 12:4; 11:35) all such slaveries to worldly custom and to self are overcome. But it’s not you that do the “work”! The Lord leads you, and you follow Him; you have no righteousness of your own. You “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5-8). There is no fanaticism; there is simple surrender of self to the Lord, “constrained” by His love (*agape*).

We say, “He died instead of us,” and that’s true; He did. If you had been drafted in the American Civil War of 1861-65, you could hire a substitute to take your place and die instead of you; now you can enjoy life while he suffers and his loved ones mourn. “My substitute has taken my place!” It’s a vicarious substitution. And you can think of the sacrifice of Christ in that same way. He died instead of you. But is it a childish way of thinking of His cross? Is it basically egocentric?

The Bible goes far deeper: Christ’s sacrifice is also a shared substitution. “I am crucified with

Christ,” says Galatians 2:20. “We were baptized into Jesus Christ, . . . baptized into His death, . . . buried with Him by baptism into death, . . . planted together with Him in the likeness of His death, . . . our old man [the love of self] crucified with Him, . . . dead with Christ.” If all this is true, then “we shall also live with Him” (Rom. 6:3-8). But only IF.

One is the kindergarten, flower-girl-at-the-wedding idea of substitution—very, very true; but the other is the bride “growing up unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13), prepared to stand with Him side by side in the “marriage of the Lamb.” It’s a time for divine-human intimacy never before realized by the body of His church.

Apparently the Bridegroom believes the time has come for His people to “grow up.” The long delay must weary Him. Does it weary you?