

Are We to Follow Men or Follow Christ?

By Michael Clark

Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved...*be followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.* Now I praise you, brethren, because you remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances [teachings] as I delivered them to you. But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. (1 Corinthians 10:31 to 11:4 KJ2000- emphasis added)

Paul admonishes us to follow him, but how are we to do it? Are we to follow him and those in church leadership like so many blind sheep? Are we to follow a man just because he claims a church title or has an "office"? Did Jesus set up a "divine right of kings" among men and give the church's leaders a blank check to write whatever they will? Contrary to what we see around us, Jesus did not give His authority over to a dynasty of successors and then die as some men teach, but rather He remains the Head of the church (Greek *ekklesia*- called-out assembly), and abides in all those He has called out of the world system unto Himself. Before going to the cross He assured the disciples:

I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world [kosmos - world system] sees me no more; but you see me: because I live, you shall live also. At that day you shall know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. (John 14:18-20 KJ2000)

Jesus still lives in us who are His! Earthly kings delegate authority and determine who takes their place when they die, but Jesus is still the Head of the church and has never given that place to anyone. He is still the Chief Shepherd over His flock and all members of His body still answer first to Him and His Spirit (See Act 5:29-32; also 1 Corinthians 3). When men like Diotrephes try for church preeminence--that place which belongs to Jesus alone--they are antichrist in their very natures. They are trying to displace Christ of His rightful place among the saints of God. John wrote to the assembly:

Beloved, you do faithfully whatsoever you do for the brethren, and for strangers; Who have borne witness of your love before the church: whom if you send forward on their journey in a godly manner, you shall do well: Because for his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellow helpers to the truth. I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, receives us not. Therefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he does,

speaking against us with malicious words: and not content with that, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and forbids them that would, and casts them out of the church. Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that does good is of God: but he that does evil has not seen God. (3 John 1:5-11 KJ2000)

Notice how John believes this over-lording man did evil because he resisted those who were sent out by John to this body of believers he had established. Also notice that these same sent-out ones took nothing from the Gentiles, but were truly walking by faith in Christ. It is these men that John holds up as godly examples of Jesus, not the ones who has preeminence among the saints.

True spiritual leadership never gets between Christ and His sheep, but rather shows them what being a true follower of Jesus looks like. The lead by their example as lowly servants. So in 1 Corinthians chapters 10 and 11 quoted above (notice that the chapter break improperly disrupts the flow of what Paul is teaching), we see Paul asserting that he does not seek his own advantage, nor exercise his will over others, nor does he live a life that may offend others¹. Instead, he follows Jesus Christ alone. Then and only then was anyone to follow his godly example. Of this passage Albert Barnes comments, "It is well when a minister can without ostentation appeal to his own example, and urge others to a life of self-denial and holiness, by his own manner of living, and by what he is [doing] himself in his daily walk and conversation."

Part of the example that Paul gave the church and its leadership was that a man should work with his hands and support himself and not be a burden on the church. Paul did not just preach a sermon on Sunday and kick back and live off the offerings that came in. In fact the only offering he commanded to be taken was for the poor widows in Jerusalem (see Romans 15:25-28), never for himself or those who ministered with him. He wrote this to the Thessalonians:

One further order we must give you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: don't associate with the brother whose life is undisciplined, and who despises the teaching we gave him. You know well that we ourselves are your examples here, and that our lives among you were never undisciplined. We did not eat anyone's food without paying for it. In fact we toiled and laboured night and day to avoid being the slightest expense to any of you. This was not because we had no right to ask our necessities of you, but because we wanted to set you an example. When we were actually with you we gave you this principle to work on: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." Now we hear that you have some among you living quite undisciplined lives, never doing a stroke of work, and busy only in other people's affairs. Our order to such men, indeed our appeal by the Lord Jesus Christ, is to settle down to work and eat the food they have earned themselves. (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 ~ Phillips NT)

Many men go into ministry today so they can make a living from it. They see it as a good profession with unlimited possibilities to become famous and rich. That was never in the heart of Paul or the other apostles; in fact, he suffered the loss of all things as He followed Jesus² and counted it all as rubbish anyway. We need pastors and church leaders that have that attitude today-seeking the welfare of others, tending to the poor and needy first, and working with their own hands to support themselves and others. What an example that would be to a skeptical world that only sees high profile ministries begging constantly for more money, living off the fat of what comes in, and only making a token donation to the poor to be seen of men³.

Paul led by example. But where did he get the idea that he was to not be a burden to the church, but rather a servant to all men and even meet their needs when it was necessary? He got it from Jesus. When a multitude of thousands had followed Jesus out into the wilderness and had no provisions to sustain them, what did He do? Did He have them all sit in groups of fifties and send out the disciples with twelve baskets to take up a great offering, as is the practice today? Not hardly! He fed them all until they were so satisfied that twelve baskets of food were left over! He told the disciples that they should feed the hungry following His own example⁴.

Jesus later told the disciples what godly leaders do for the household of God when there is need and what will happen to those who don't tend to the needs of the saints.

Who then is the faithful, thoughtful, and wise servant, whom his master has put in charge of his household to give to the others the food and supplies at the proper time? Blessed (happy, fortunate, and to be envied) is that servant whom, when his master comes, he will find so doing. I solemnly declare to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant is wicked and says to himself, My master is delayed and is going to be gone a long time, And begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with the drunken, The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour of which he is not aware, And will punish him [cut him up by scourging] and put him with the pretenders (hypocrites); there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.(Matthew 24:45-51 AMP)

About this Doctrine of Covering

It is interesting that the whole teaching of human submission and covering is brought up by the apostle Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth. Here in chapter eleven, Paul explains that"every man praying or prophesying with his head covered, dishonors his head." He goes on to say, "For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God." However, the boldest statement against this false doctrine is in verse three, where Paul says, "But I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ...and the head of Christ is God." When we obey men rather than God in our

assemblies and submit any word spoken in our gatherings first to the leader, we are prophesying with our heads covered. Christ is our covering we should speak what He puts in our hearts, because the *One* Mediator between God and mankind is Jesus Christ⁵.

Religion makes it "rebellion" to relate directly to Christ. In man's opinion, you simply cannot do without a church leader covering you. If you have not yet joined the illustrious fraternity of "heretics" who dare to relate to Christ directly, you are living far below your rightful place as joint heir in Christ.

Neither Jesus nor the apostles taught that any man should be our covering. In fact, Paul and his fellow workers were not demanding at all, but instead appealed to "every man's conscience in the sight of God."⁶ In this he shows that he is not usurping that unity and bond between the believer and His Lord. Regarding matters of conscience, Paul also wrote that every man should be "fully persuaded in his own mind."⁷ The essence of faith is every man's connection to God himself without any human interference. Jesus warned, "I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown."⁸

How About Teachers in the Church?

Many today want to be teachers of Jesus' flock. The early church was inundated with false teachers. First the Judaizers went out among the Gentile church, trying to bring them under the Old Testament law. Then the Gnostics of Alexandria, Egypt, went out among the infant church claiming to be possessors of all truth. These men all had a common goal and that was to draw away saints from Jesus and make them disciples unto themselves and their cult. Paul warned the elders of the Ephesian church about this very thing. "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears" (Acts 20:29-31 RSV).

John, speaking about the antichrist spirit as well as the Gnostic heresy among them, also warned about human teachers rising up from among the believers.

Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and know that no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. He who confesses the Son has the Father also. Let what

you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life. I write this to you about those who would deceive you; but the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him. And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. (1 John 2:18-28 RSVA)

These false teachers went out from the common fellowship they had in Christ and set themselves apart over the congregation of the saints, drawing away as many of them as possible under their own influence and over-lording leadership. As we see from Paul's warning in Acts, these antichrist teachers come out from the flock of God and then they rise up over it. Peter admonished the elders of the churches this way:

Now I have something to say to the elders in your group. I also am an elder. I have seen Christ's sufferings, and I will share in the glory that will be shown to us. I beg you to shepherd God's flock, for whom you are responsible. Watch over them because you want to, not because you are forced. That is how God wants it. Do it because you are happy to serve, not because you want money. Do not be like a ruler over people you are responsible for, but be good examples to them. Then when Christ, the Chief Shepherd, comes, you will get a glorious crown that will never lose its beauty. (1 Peter 5:1-4 NCV)

We who are elders, the older ones in the church, are not to lord over Jesus' flock. We are to lead by a godly example and to do so without any thought of getting paid for our servanthood. Notice also that Peter identifies himself as an elder who has shared in Christ's suffering, not even as an apostle, much less as their pope! He makes it clear that we are never to be ones who rule over the people of God. Jesus also made this very clear to the disciples when He walked among them.

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. (Mark 10:42-44 RSVA)

Notice this part of 1 John, chapter 2 and understand it well: "But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and know that no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son." The Liar is the devil himself, the father of lies. How does he deny the Father and the Son? Surely he knows that they exist! Jesus overcame the wicked one, breaking all his power except the power of his lies in the gullible. So, with that in mind, who does the devil use to deny the

preeminence of Jesus in and over the church? He uses false teachers who live and move in the antichrist spirit. These teachers deny Jesus His rightful place as the Head of every believer and the church. Through this spirit, human leaders and teachers come out from the body of believers, rise up and try to draw devotion away from Jesus to themselves.

What was John's solution to this problem? What did he tell the church to do to keep from being seduced by the many antichrist spirits in this world? He told them to learn to listen to the Unction, the Holy Spirit within them, which God had given them when they came to Christ. The Greek word antichristo not only means "against Christ," but also "in place of Christ," which is the more common form we see today. Men try to displace Jesus and drown out the voice of His Spirit with their own voice, teachings and preeminence.

"My Sheep Hear My Voice"

What is a sign that we are among Jesus' sheep? He said that we would know them in this manner: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (John 10:27-30 RSVA). His sheep hear His voice, the voice of His Spirit! Without knowing and hearing that Voice, we cannot follow Him and do His will.

How about all the other voices that try to distract and attract His sheep? Of these Jesus said:

"When he [Jesus] has brought out all his own [sheep], he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." This figure Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. (John 10:4-6 RSVA).

After centuries of assault on the flock of Christ by "strangers," deceivers, false christs, false teachers, false apostles and false prophets, the church has a real problem-His sheep, for the most part, don't know His voice and have come to trust in the voices of strangers who have risen over the flock of God. Our one defense against the antichrist spirit-- hearing Jesus' voice, the voice of the Spirit-- has almost vanished from those who call themselves "Christians."

Is it any wonder that in John's Revelation, the Spirit constantly repeats Himself with this one phrase, "Let he who has ears hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches"?

Jesus taught the disciples this way: "Call no man Rabbi, for only one is your Teacher, even Christ and you are all brethren." How far we, as the body of Christ, have fallen from our common unity in His Spirit! We are no longer the flock of His pasture who live as members

one of another in Him, having a common Teacher. Instead we have men lusting for preeminence and lording over one another with honorific titles that belong only to Jesus. Even David had the one unifying principle which God desires figured out when he wrote, "The Lord is my Shepherd..." We need to know Jesus alone as our total sufficiency in all things.

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:10-11 NRS)

¹ See the rest of chapter ten

² Philippians 3:8

³ See Matthew 6:1-4

⁴ See Matthew 14:14-21 and 15: 29-39

⁵ 1 Timothy 2:5

⁶ Corinthians 4:2

⁷ Romans 14:5

⁸ Revelation 3:11 RSVA