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FOLLOW ME

THE GOSPEL OF SIMPLE LIVING

IN THE GOSPELS, JESUS' INVITATION TO "FOLLOW ME" IS THE central focus of the primitive Christian message. The kingdom of heaven is not just something piously to be hoped for or believed in; it is something that has *arrived*: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). One's response to the call, therefore, has to be correspondingly concrete; one must put the kingdom first—before property, before family, before everything else in this system of things.

In the gospels, Jesus advises us not merely to donate ten percent of our after-tax earnings to a good cause, but to give up *everything* (Luke 14:33). On the other hand, Jesus also counsels against anxiety concerning material things like food and clothing. "Be not anxious," Jesus says repeatedly, God knows that you need food and clothing; put God's domain first, and these things will be yours as well (Matthew 6:32–33). To respond to the call to "follow me" meant abandoning one's possessions in the hope of a simple but secure lifestyle in which one's basic needs are provided for.

The gospels and the Jewish Christian position on this matter are practically identical. The main Jewish Christian group was called the "Ebionites"—a name derived, as we have already seen, from the Hebrew *ebionim* meaning "the poor." The Jewish Christians who thought of themselves as followers of the true prophet (Jesus), therefore, did not

conceive of themselves as merely giving to the poor, being nice to the poor, or defending the poor: they *were* the poor.

The Poor

The Hebrew *ebionim* refers to those who are very poor, in a wretched state, or who are begging. Epiphanius, that bitter critic of Ebionism, relates how these Jewish Christians explained their poverty: they traced it back to the time when the primitive Christian community, just after Jesus' departure, lived communally (*Panarion* 30.17.1–2). Epiphanius' sneering denunciation of the Ebionites points out several pertinent facts about the Ebionites: they were called “the poor,” and they actually were poor as well—it was not an empty title, even in the fourth century. It also shows that the Ebionites claimed their spiritual descent from the time when the primitive church really *was* sharing everything in common, from that pivotal event when the followers of Jesus “were of one heart and soul.” The followers of Jesus laid everything they owned at the feet of the apostles, and everyone received according to their need (Acts 2:44–45, 4:32–35).

It is precisely this event—the sharing of all their possessions in the primitive church—that in the minds of the Ebionites gave them the name of “the poor.” This was simple living, but it was not destitution, as they were supported in a simple and secure spiritual household: “There was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). The simplicity of their lifestyle was evidently one of the defining ideals of the Ebionites. In the *Recognitions* Peter is depicted as living an extraordinarily simple lifestyle, living on a strict vegetarian diet and wearing simple clothes (*Recognitions* 7.6).

Jesus in the gospels never gives a specific command that *all* Christians should live communally and share all their worldly goods, but we do see strong suggestions to this effect. Jesus does give *some* people the advice to join such a Christian community; his most celebrated advice to his immediate disciples is to “follow me.” When he is approached by a rich young man who says he is already keeping the commandments and asks him what more he should do, Jesus advises

him to sell everything he has, give it to the poor, and “follow me” (Luke 18:22, Matthew 19:21, Mark 10:21).

What does Jesus mean when he asks his disciples and others to “follow me”? On the face of it, it would seem to mean literally abandoning everything else and joining the community of which Jesus was the leader. It seems to have involved at least an abandonment of home and family (Luke 18:28–29), and most likely all possessions as well (Luke 14:33, 18:22).

Modern Christians become somewhat uncomfortable and start to rationalize when they read these verses. For those wishing to evade this radical rejection of materialism, some counter-arguments are possible. First, Jesus addresses his advice to a specific people (the disciples, the rich young man); perhaps he did not intend this advice for everyone. Secondly, in the passage about the rich young man in Matthew, Jesus presents this advice with the preface that giving everything away is not necessary in order to enter eternal life (simply obeying the commandments would suffice for that) but is only necessary if the young man would be perfect. However, at best this only slightly ameliorates the message. We are still left with the original, radical advice to “follow me”; and evidently Jesus’ invitation to his disciples to “follow me” involved precisely such a commitment to abandon one’s possessions.

The *Gospel According to the Hebrews* (a Jewish Christian gospel) repeats the story about the rich man invited to follow Jesus, but has Jesus draw the important conclusion that sharing all one’s worldly goods really follows from the law of Moses! When the rich young man hesitates to follow Jesus, Jesus responds:

Is it not written in the Law: Love your neighbor as yourself? And see, many of your brothers, sons of Abraham, are covered with dung, dying from hunger, and your house is filled with many good things, and absolutely nothing goes out of it to them.¹

This version has the ring of authenticity; it establishes a Jewish underpinning for a Christian ideal. Jesus plainly states that the “golden rule” is part of the law (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself,”

Leviticus 19:18). If we take this concept seriously, Jesus is saying, love of neighbor implies sharing *everything* with them. We want these good things; therefore we share them *all* with others. We do not even need to expand the concept of “neighbor” to include those outside our community (as Jesus does elsewhere in the case of the parable of the Good Samaritan) to see that the rich man has an obligation to share, because even those of his own faith and nation are hungry and covered with excrement.

“You cannot serve two masters,” Jesus insists: we must choose between God and money (Matthew 6:24). The obvious question is, if we surrender everything, how are we going to stay alive? This is a question that Jesus spent some time explaining in one of the most celebrated sections of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:24–33). “Do not be anxious,” Jesus advises us; God feeds and clothes the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, so he will do the same for you.

This is an appeal to nature: the care of God for those who put the kingdom first is something that is *natural*. Moreover, this is not an ascetic renunciation of the world in the expectation of future rewards in heaven. The kingdom is on earth as well as in heaven; that is why “seeking first the kingdom” is tied to the question “what shall we eat?” and not merely to the question of finding eternal life.

A similar appeal to nature is found several times in the Jewish Christian *Homilies*. The eternal law of God is nowhere concealed, and can be “read” by all (*Homilies* 8.10). This “reading” of the law cannot be the literal reading of a written text—since most people in ancient times were illiterate—but is rather the contemplation of the world created by God. Even more striking, when Simon Magus (Peter’s antagonist) asks Peter how we can tell the true scriptures from the false texts, Peter responds—

Whatever sayings of the Scriptures are in harmony with the creation that was made by Him [God] are true, but whatever are contrary to it are false. (*Homilies* 3.42)

Nature, as part of God's creation, actually has a *priority* over any written texts—one might say that *nature* is the word of God. The practical answer to the question “what shall we eat?” provided by Jesus and the first Christians described in Acts is to seek the kingdom of heaven *first*, giving up all our possessions, and to be confident that we will receive from God's kingdom what we truly need, something as natural as the birds of the air or the lilies of the field. Other Christian writers such as Arnobius (c. 300 CE) echoed this sentiment, saying that if animals, trees, or even stones could speak, they would follow nature and declare that God is Lord of all (*Against the Heathen* 1.33).

“Voluntary poverty” is often associated with asceticism. Later Christian monks and nuns often took vows of poverty to deny themselves the pleasures of the world, in order to draw themselves closer to God—turning inward, removing the seeker from the temptations of the world. The motivation behind this primitive Christian poverty, however, is *not* ascetic. It is outward-looking, emphasizing the rewards and satisfactions of righteousness and positive involvement with the world. Jesus advised his followers not to be anxious about food or clothing, because these would be provided. The early community presented itself as one big happy family (Acts 4:32, Matthew 12:46–50), so one was actually gaining a new spiritual family by following Jesus. Jesus stated that we would gain eternal life through our allegiance to righteousness, but would receive manifold blessings in this life as well (Luke 18:29–30). God's kingdom was to come on *earth* as well as in heaven (Matthew 6:10). Everywhere we see evidence both in the synoptic gospels and in the Jewish Christian texts that the motivation behind this voluntary simplicity is not a renunciation of the world, but a positive involvement in the world.

The value of non-attachment to material possessions is one of the clearest of Jesus' teachings in the gospels. Jesus declares that the Spirit has “anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18) and that the poor are blessed and that they possess the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20). He says that those who give a banquet should invite the poor, rather than their friends, to obtain eternal life (Luke 14:12–14). And

finally, there is the celebrated Last Judgement passage, in which the Son of Man judges both the righteous and the wicked by the same standard—when the Son of Man was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison, did they give him food, drink, clothing, and companionship? To both he says the same thing:

As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. (Matthew 25:40)

Call No Man Master

Did Jesus' teachings about the obliteration of economic distinctions also mean an obliteration of social distinctions?

Christianity has been invoked on all sides of issues relating to women and slaves, the two most prominent social issues present in Jesus' time. Slavery continued to exist throughout much of the Christian-dominated world until just the last few hundred years; the oppression of women remains commonplace today. However, the synoptic gospels present a very different story, and suggest strong egalitarian preferences at several points. First of all, there are the sayings, "the last shall be first," "call no man master," and the beatitudes, which seem to bless precisely those at the lower end of the social order. Secondly, there is the rejection of family relationships as less important than one's relationship to the word of God. Third, there is the relatively high position Jesus accords women.

Jewish Christian texts do not say much on this subject, but are broadly in accordance with the synoptic gospels. The *Recognitions* and *Homilies*—like many other ancient texts—are largely about males debating other males, with some female characters emerging from time to time; so Jewish Christianity hardly completely liberated itself from patriarchy. However, Jewish Christianity does accept the concept of the divine feminine; Jesus refers to the holy spirit as his *mother* in the *Gospel According to the Hebrews*, a gospel used by both the Ebionites and by the Nazoraeans.² The *Homilies* speak of the "Wisdom" or "Sophia" of God as if it were part of God's feminine aspect (16.12). The Elchasaites, another

Jewish Christian group, believed that the Holy Spirit was female and was either the equal of Christ or his sister (*Panarion* 30.17.6, 53.1.9). All of this makes sense because it is in accordance with Hebrew, which spoke of the holy spirit or divine presence, the *shekinah*, as feminine. It is significant that the Elchasaites also had two women leaders in the fourth century who according to Epiphanius were “worshiped as goddesses” (*Panarion* 53.1.2). Not only does the divine presence incorporate feminine aspects, but women in at least one Jewish Christian sect were able to take leadership roles as late as the fourth century.

The canonical gospel of Matthew—of which the *Gospel According to the Hebrews* was a version (*Panarion* 30.3.7)—provides some additional indirect evidence about Jewish Christianity. Matthew is often thought of as the most “Jewish” of the gospels, albeit with some strident anti-Jewish material thrown in as well. Interestingly, however, in Matthew women tend to be depicted more positively than in the other gospels. Kathleen Corley points out that only in Matthew are women allowed an equal place at the meal table; only in Matthew do women join the miraculous feedings of the multitude; and in Matthew the women who follow Jesus are held up as examples of true faith.³

In the synoptic gospels, the most direct reference to the obliteration of social distinctions is in Matthew:

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:9–12)

This does not merely downplay any hierarchical arrangement: it calls for the complete obliteration of hierarchical arrangements. The saying “the last shall be first, and the first last” appears at several other places in the synoptic gospels, sometimes in the form of promising rewards to those who have left their families (Matthew 19:30, 20:16; Mark 10:29–

–31; Luke 13:30). Jesus is not an advocate of traditional family values; he goes out of his way to reward those who have put service to God ahead of service to family.

The position of women in Jesus' ministry appears to be significant. Women, as well as men, are healed by Jesus (e. g., Matthew 8:14–15, 9:18–26). Women are among Jesus' first followers (Luke 8:1–3). Women are present at the crucifixion, after some of the prominent male disciples (such as Peter) have run away (Matthew 27:55–56). In Matthew, Mark, and John, Jesus appears after his resurrection first to a woman—Mary Magdalene (Matthew 28:1–10, Mark 16:9–11, John 20:1–18). Many in the early church accorded Mary Magdalene the role of an apostle; Hippolytus of Rome was only the first to refer to her as “the apostle to the apostles.”⁴

The one depiction of women that is *not* prominent in the gospels, interestingly enough, is that of women as submissive wives and mothers. In fact, at three points such roles for women are specifically rejected. In one case, as Jesus is preaching, Jesus brushes aside a tribute to his own mother, implying that it is not in bearing children but by bearing the word of God that women are blessed (Luke 11:27–28).

The unimportance of biological relationships is stressed again when news is sent to Jesus that his mother and brothers want to speak to him. Jesus stretches out his hands toward the disciples, saying: “Here are my mother and my brothers!” (Matthew 12:49). Not only does this episode denigrate the importance of family relationships, but it also makes clear that among Jesus' disciples at this public or semi-public gathering were both men and women followers, or he would have referred to them only as “brothers,” rather than “brother, and sister, and mother” (Matthew 12:50).

The Mary and Martha story gently but favorably contrasts a woman who talks with Jesus to a woman who does housework. Martha is distracted by “much serving,” and asks Jesus to tell Mary (who is listening at Jesus' feet) to help her. Instead of sending Mary into the kitchen to help out, Jesus replies that Mary has chosen the better path

(Luke 10:38–42). True, this is a choice between one submissive role (helping in the kitchen) and another (listening at Jesus' feet). However, it certainly does not affirm the traditional role of women as taking care of the household first; sitting at the feet of the master was generally the prerogative of *male* disciples, a prerogative here conspicuously extended by Jesus to include women. What is striking in all of this is precisely the lack of wife-and-mother role models in the gospels. With the possible exception of the accounts of Jesus' birth and the incidental passing remark about Peter's mother-in-law, *at no time is the "traditional role" of woman affirmed; at several times it is explicitly rejected.*

While there is no clear, unequivocal declaration that women are equal to men, or that slaves should be freed, the whole thrust of the injunction that the last shall be first and the first last strongly suggests that we not lay a heavy emphasis on displays of authority over other human beings, regardless of whether that authority is based on money, gender, or social position. Both Jewish Christianity and the synoptic gospels welcome the elimination of family and social distinctions as well as economic distinctions. This view contrasts sharply with the ambivalence of Paul, who wanted both to recognize equality (Galatians 3:28) and still preserve the traditional, subservient role of women and slaves (I Corinthians 11:3–16, 14:34–35, Ephesians 5:22, 6:5, Colossians 3:18–22).

Communalism, Sharing, Voluntary Simplicity

The emphasis on simple living is one aspect of primitive Christianity that not only occurs in the New Testament, but continued to be an ideal throughout early Christianity, whether Jewish or gentile, and is acknowledged at least as an ideal by most modern-day Christians. The Ebionite identification with the poor is well grounded in the synoptic gospels, where those who wish to follow Jesus are urged to give up possessions, status, and family. What is less clear, however, is how the possessions that one gives up should be given out, and we get different answers at different points. Are they simply to be given to the poor or to those in need, as Jesus advises the rich young man and as the Good Samaritan does in Jesus' parable? Or are we supposed to surrender them

to the Christian community, as the first Christians do in Acts? Or can we actually retain a few of our possessions, providing that we live very simple lives, as Peter does in the *Recognitions*?

Communalism is the most “practical” advice given. In the first chapters of Acts (4:32–35) the followers of Jesus share everything and hold everything in common. God both demands everything and at the same time gives us everything we truly need. Part of God’s work is to support us, because when we give everything to God we are absolutely destitute—thus the words of Acts, “there was not a needy person among them” (4:34), despite the fact they had abandoned their possessions. Jesus expected his followers to adopt a simple lifestyle and encouraged them to trust that God would provide enough to eat, drink, and wear.

Communal living has an undeniable romance and attraction to it; but communal living also presents problems, even for modern groups of people who are well-educated and relatively well-off. It is hard to imagine that illiterate first-century peasants would not have encountered some of the same problems. The discipline might be excessively strict, and one might fear expulsion from the community for perceived or actual wrongdoing after having given away all one’s possessions. At the other extreme, discipline might be too slack and lazy people might join the community to get free meals and a “free ride.” In addition, the community might be prone to factionalism, or collapse just through inefficient management.

This sort of anxiety is found in the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–12) who hold back part of their possessions when joining the community and then lie about what they have done. Other Christian texts show concern about others taking advantage of one’s Christian hospitality. One text recommends that an “apostle” that comes to you should be sheltered for one or two days, but “if he remain for three days, he is a false prophet” (*The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles* 11). The pastoral epistles recommend that younger widows not be supported by the community, because they become idlers and gossipers (I Timothy 5:11–13). The letters of Paul are full of information on factionalism in the early church, as we shall see in later chapters.

Questions about how to run a sharing community are not rhetorical. Outside of the New Testament itself, there is no mention of early Christians living communally. The monastic orders are the first real communities after Acts of which we have definite knowledge, but they only developed hundreds of years later. No one in the early church deals with the practicalities of communalism—e. g. receiving property from converts, penalties for false accounting, or the method of allotment of necessities, indicating that communalism must have collapsed as a practical alternative for most Christians at a fairly early stage.⁵

Other early Christians struggled with this problem and came up with different solutions. Clement of Alexandria wrote a lengthy essay in which he tried to answer the question, “How can the rich man be saved?” Clement suggests that it is not necessary to give away all one’s possessions, but that one should abandon one’s *attachment* to possessions (see *Who is the Rich Man Who Shall Be Saved*, sections 11, 13, and 26). A simple moderate life is required, with any surplus wealth above one’s simple needs given to the poor, the disciples, and those in need. The rich man who is saved remains the *custodian* of his wealth without actually consuming more than he needs for a very simple lifestyle. Indeed, the rich man should be prudent with his possessions; if he dissipates them indiscriminately, the poor would not benefit from receiving them.

Not everyone availed themselves of this solution; others literally *did* give everything they had to the poor. Antony, the hermit-saint who was one of the original Desert Fathers, was one of these. Six months after the death of his parents, when Antony had inherited a considerable amount of land, he was walking to church and thinking about Jesus’ advice to sell everything and the communalism of the first Christian community described in Acts. As it turned out, the text that day was precisely the text in the gospel where Jesus advises the rich man to sell everything he possesses and give it to the poor. When Antony left the church, he immediately went out and gave to the townspeople all his possessions, after seeing to it that his sister was provided for (Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 2). St. Basil the Great was another early church leader who took

Jesus' instructions more or less literally. However, though he did give away all his wealth, Basil did follow Clement's advice in distributing it over a number of years.

Given this strong anti-materialistic bias, it is *very* surprising to find out that Christianity in the Roman Empire had most of its initial support from the upper classes. This is a paradox that, as the sociologist Rodney Stark explains in his book *The Rise of Christianity*,⁶ is due to the fact that new religions typically do spread in the upper classes before they take root in the rest of society. A "sect" (i. e., a branch of an *existing* religion), on the other hand, typically appeals to the lower classes. It is this fact that, more than any other, explains why Christianity largely abandoned a principle that is so firmly embedded not only in its sacred texts but also in the other writings of the early church. However, this only applies to the gentile Christianity that took over the Roman Empire; it does not apply at all to the Jewish Christianity that rejected Paul. The Jewish Christians really *did* consider themselves Jews, and therefore were in sociological terms a "sect"—a splinter group of an existing religion—rather than a new religion. The picture that then emerges is a movement that when it was predominantly a Jewish sect *did* indeed appeal to the lower classes, but lost its "sect" character in the missionary efforts of Paul and others to the Gentiles.

The fact that all these texts favoring the poor survived even in a church spreading among the upper classes is further proof of their authenticity. One has only to read Clement of Alexandria's essay in the context of Stark's argument to see that there were a number of "rich" who were attracted to Christianity and were disturbed by Christian texts that were much too obvious to be denied. These texts, which were quite "inconvenient" from the point of view of a gentile Christianity spreading among the upper classes, would not have been invented along the way; they must come from the very earliest traditions.

Conclusions

The evidence from Jewish Christianity, the gospels, and the history of early Christianity all points in the same direction. For a follower of Jesus,

it would appear that the kingdom of God demands everything: the only lack of clarity is in the disposition of our possessions. There are countless Christian denominations, although today there are only a few practicing communalism in any form; the Hutterites, the Shakers, and the monastic orders are the most prominent modern exceptions to this rule. For the time being, anyone taking Jesus' anti-materialistic message seriously is forced back to Clement of Alexandria's solution: we are custodians of our possessions, which we should use as sparingly as possible, giving the balance to the service of those in need. The kingdom of God must have priority over everything—over family, possessions, and concerns about safety and well-being: we must seek *first* the kingdom of God. It is a natural thing to live a simple life, and not be anxious about food, drink, and clothing, but to rely on God.

The Jewish Christian followers of the true prophet emphasized voluntary simplicity to the maximum extent possible, and taught that this was the true law. On this point the teaching of the Ebionite Jesus and the Jesus of the synoptics is practically identical. The goal is not to dominate, but to serve. When we have put this principle first, ahead of everything else—only then are we ready to follow Jesus:

So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33)

