

“Putting a Hand to the Plow”

Luke 9:51-62 ⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³ but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"¹ ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then¹ they went on to another village. ⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." ⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ⁵⁹ To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." ⁶⁰ But Jesus¹ said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." ⁶¹ Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." ⁶² Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

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I remember listening to a Christian radio station back in West Virginia just before I moved up here and just before the invasion of Iraq. I normally don't listen to Christian radio. It's not the music that I don't like. It's the agendas of the radio stations that get me. If proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of God is their mission then stick to it rather than mixing it with political and social agendas. Sooner than later the agendas are what begin to be proclaimed and not just instead of the Gospel but rather as the Gospel. Anyway, on this particular day in a ten-minute segment of DJ commentary the DJ's blasted abortion as murder of the innocents and then began to sing their praise for the technological wonder that the American military had at their disposal. There's just something a bit off when Christian commentators see no problem with condemning abortion as murder while condoning America's ability to rain fire down upon a people in the name of Freedom. The DJ's were equating Pro-life and the cause of Freedom with the Gospel and saying that those who did not espouse these values the believed to be inherent in their Gospel deserved to be punished.

On a related subject, a year or so back John Mason and I were having one of our usual debates about things American. This particular time it was about an American soldier who had deserted the military and fled to Canada seeking refugee status. He disagreed with the moral premise of the war in Iraq and refused to go. Instead of serving time in a military prison, he decided to take his chances on being able to live a comfortable life in Canada.

Mr. Mason, being more than somewhat of a leftover Peacenik from the 60's thought the soldier had done the right thing and should be allowed to stay in Canada because war is never right. Moreover, there would be no war in Iraq if the soldiers just decided to stop fighting. I didn't argue with that or with his premise that war is never right. Yet, I just said the man had no honour and his word was good for nothing. He had signed a contract with the people of his nation to protect them even if it meant going to war. Though he enlisted in a time of relative peace under a different administration under the promise that the

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military would help him with university, he still signed on knowing the risks. The contract he signed allowed him to conscientiously object but with a penalty, prison and/or a dishonourable discharge. Admittedly, refusing to go to war would destroy his chance of having a fair chance at life in the U.S. I would have taken the man's side if there were a draft imposed and he was going to be conscripted against his will. But, he signed up willingly and therefore he really had no right to a cushy life in Canada when others in his same situation were laying down their lives. He should have stayed in the U.S. and hoped the courts would be lenient which they probably would have been. This soldier had put his hand to the plow and looked back. He had enlisted his life to a cause for certain benefits, but was reneging on paying the cost.

I bring these incidents up in hopes that they will serve as illustrations for Luke's passage here that deals with discipleship. Discipleship is simply to enlist one's life to become a student of another's way of life, to live under the authority of the one you've enlisted yourself to, and to promote that way of life to others. It is to be a follower. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to enlist oneself under his authority as a student of his life as it is manifest in a community of believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit living under the authority of Scripture and promoting this way of life to others. It is to live and to proclaim the Kingdom of God. It is to participate in Jesus' mission of striving for things to be here on earth as they are in heaven. Jesus calls his own disciples and he receives those who wish to be his disciples by sending the Holy Spirit to open the ears of people to hear the proclamation and to experience the Kingdom of our Lord in their hearts and in the community faith. The Spirit calls us to obedience, wholehearted obedience. To be made or to become a disciple of Jesus is to be born anew, made alive by God himself to live under his authority alone. Disciples of Jesus take the Scriptures and the community of faith seriously and live accordingly. It is not enough to be a good person who comes to church. A disciple of Jesus studies and does what it says in the Bible with the companionship of a congregation whom we strive to love as Jesus commanded us and who also hold us accountable to live according to Scriptures.

One of the greatest challenges in the church today and I would even say in this congregation is that we claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ yet we resist to enlist ourselves under the authority of Scripture and rather embrace the values of the culture around us. This works two ways. Either we equate Conservative values with obedience to Scripture or grace with licentiousness and non-judgmentalism. The one side is overly concerned about everybody's sins while the other won't deal with sin at all. Disciples of Jesus Christ are made alive by the Holy Spirit, live according to the authority of Scripture, are committed to a community of faith, and proclaim the Kingdom of God in word and in deed. We do not use conservatism to judge others nor use grace to excuse ourselves.

This passage from Luke highlights first that the Jesus' disciples do not try to find ways to punish those who do not accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Jesus would much rather have us deal with the logs in our own eyes before we try to remove the specks in the eyes of people outside the church. There are too many hungry, thirsty, and dying people in the world for Christians to be running around

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on the moral hobbyhorse. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are not to use our Holy Spirit given authority to condemn the world. Rather, we've been given the Spirit to work now to make earth as it is in heaven until Jesus returns and makes it so. Kingdom works now will somehow endure into the future Kingdom of God.

Secondly, Jesus reminds his disciples that there is a cost to being his disciples. Jesus' own lifestyle was one step below foxes and birds. Therefore, as Christians we must realize that there is a material cost to following Jesus. A major killer of the church in the West is the materialism and consumerism that we Jesus' disciples have bought into to the extent that the dollar is the God in which we trust. Indeed, we do sacrifice our integrity before God if for a higher lifestyle.

Another cost is family loyalty. The church suffers today because Christian parents would rather have their children learn how to kick a ball or flick a puck with a stick into a net in order to be liked and a winner than to be involved in a Christian community and learn what it is to love and serve. Jesus would say to that “let the dead bury the dead. You go proclaim the Kingdom of God”.

Thirdly, there is no half-hearted giving of one's life to Christ. To say that Jesus is our Lord and Savior and then put other commitments before it is like trying to plow a field while looking behind you. In Jesus day they usually hooked a plow behind an ox and walked behind it steering the ox so that the rows would be straight. If you look behind, the ox goes where it will and the rows aren't straight and you waste a days work trying to fix it. Not having straight rows may not seem like a big deal, but the straighter the row the more evenly the water disperses itself particularly in an irrigated field or a field that's on a hillside. If the rows aren't straight, some plants will get more water while others get less because the crooked row diverted it elsewhere. The same thing is true in a congregation. If there are people in a congregation who are looking behind to life outside the Kingdom, it affects the growth of the whole congregation by stemming the flow of the Spirit who is at work in us all **together** leading us **together** to build one another up in Christ. If we are just good people who come to church because it is what good people do, we cause the whole congregation to suffer. If we call ourselves Christian yet commit ourselves to and conduct our lives according the world around us, the whole congregation suffers.

The way the Gospel plows the field for the Kingdom is to plow it straight so that the water of the Holy Spirit, the new life of Christ flows evenly through the church. The Gospel plows us by calling us to be wholehearted disciples of Jesus Christ letting his authority have sway over us and the field grows into a richly loving community. And so we are left with the question, are we plowing straight or are we looking behind and letting our crooked rows deprive this communion?