



March 23, 2008

Followers Of

“Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.” (1 Cor 11.1). Paul’s statement to the Corinthians was one of encouragement to follow the examples in their teaching, worship and daily life that had been set before them. This statement, and others in the New Testament however get taken out of context and applied in very literal ways that do not reflect the true intent. This past week I read a news article about how crucifixion is not good for your health. Imagine that. The article addressed the practice around the world of the crucifixion of religiously zealous individuals as an attempt to share in the sufferings of Christ. In most places this is a symbolic action in which someone volunteers to be affixed to a cross, usually with a convenient footrest. Indeed the arms are bound and a garment similar to that in classic paintings of the crucifixion is worn while at other times any manner of dress is acceptable. Some religious groups have a number of volunteers who share and take turns on the cross. The article however addressed a practice in the another part of the world in which a single individual is accepted as the symbolic victim and are actually nailed to a cross for a period of time. The article addressed how this is not a good thing to do as the injuries sustained may lead to permanent problems. The idea of wanting to be like Christ and follow his example is admirable in the lives of these individuals but a serious flaw in their understanding of the scriptures is at work here. God never intended for his followers to have lives that are filled with extreme sacrifices of this type, nor to deny any semblance of enjoyment in life. The history of “Christianity” however is marked by those who have taught this manner of living as a means of spiritual purification. Paul, writing to the Colossians, addresses this aspect of extreme self-denial. Paul noted certain doctrines that were being taught “...*have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.*” (Col 2.23). Christ indeed taught that one should deny the self and the fulfillment of our personal desires that con-

flict with what God would have us do (Matt 16.24). The sufferings that Christians endured in the early years of the church were not self inflicted. They were persecuted for what they believed and practiced. As Paul points out above, there is no intrinsic value in physical suffering. Over the centuries however practices such as flagellation, crucifixion and other extremes have dominated the minds of many in an attempt to get closer to God. The true denial of oneself manifests itself in the act of repentance, when we turn from the attitudes and lifestyles not in harmony with God. Christ has died for us and when one is baptized into Christ we are immersed in his death to rise in a newness of life (Rom 6.3-4). Our spiritual growth then comes not from making ourselves experience the physical sufferings of Christ (we could never imagine or go through what Christ did for us) but is to desire the “sincere milk of the word” (1 Pet 2.2), to deny fleshly lusts that war against the soul (1 John 2.15-16) and to remain faithful unto death (Rev 2.10). In the early centuries of the church, Christians were persecuted and killed for what they believed. They did not desire this, nor did they deliberately bring it upon themselves, but, when faced with the hatred of the world, they remained faithful and suffered the consequences knowing that they had a better life for them with God and Christ. There is a much simpler way to be closer to God. We need to come to an understanding of his word, believe and obey it. This is the good conscience that Peter speaks of in the heart of true believers (1 Pet 3.21). Being nailed to a cross will not do anything for a person if they have not learned or followed the doctrine and commands of God as revealed in the scriptures. God’s wish for his children is summed up by Paul as he exhorts Christians to pray for rulers and others “...*that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.*” (1 Tim 2.2). Christ has paid the price, all he asks is that we obey his will (John 14.15)

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