Anyone who is listening to what many professing Christians are saying about their faith these days knows that we have a bit of a “discipleship crisis” on our hands. Though there are many dimensions to this crisis, it stems in large part from the frequent adoption of increasingly truncated versions of biblical discipleship.

As recent studies have shown, a large percentage of American young people who claim to be Christians have embraced a form of Christian belief that falls far short of a vigorous expression of biblical discipleship. Dubbed “moralistic therapeutic Deism” (MTD), its contours reduce God to something of a “divine Butler” who remains aloof from his people until they summon him to address some felt need and who asks only that his people be “nice” to others.

Even a superficial examination of Jesus’ actual teachings reveals how unbiblical this form of discipleship really is.

But it is also clear that this state of affairs does not plague merely the younger generation of American Christians. Rather, the researchers who conducted this study have concluded that Christian young people have adopted this version of Christianity because their parents and churches have mentored them toward this perspective. Researcher Kenda Dean opines:

The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching their young people badly, but that they are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people focused primarily on “folks like us”...

What if the blasé religiosity of most American teenagers is not the result of poor communication but the result of excellent communication of a watered-down gospel so devoid of God’s self-giving love in Jesus Christ, so immune to the sending love of the Holy Spirit that it might not be Christianity at all?... If this is the case... then perhaps most young people practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism not because they reject Christianity, but because this is the only “Christianity” they know.
It appears that we struck a nerve with our Special Discipleship Issue last quarter. We’ve received more positive comments on that issue by far than any issue in the past. All I can say is, if you liked that one, it’s possible you’ll like this one even more.

The positive response just confirms our belief that God’s people are looking for solid, biblically-grounded material to help them live as authentic disciples of Christ. Given the times we live in, more and more we need strong believers who can model the true Christian life and set an example for non-believers and new believers alike. We need people to be filled with and to live daily in the amazing power that comes from the Holy Spirit and to walk in joyful obedience to Christ.

In this issue, Jonathan Lunde’s article on covenantal discipleship explores the critical distinction between legalism and joyful obedience, and he gives practical advice on living the life of a fruitful disciple.

Tom Tarrants follows up his powerful article from the last issue with an equally powerful discussion on true conversion and total commitment to Christ. Tom examines the nature of repentance and faith as well as Jesus’ call to every believer to make a wholehearted, lifelong commitment to him.

You’ll also find an article from Oswald Sanders on what it means to have Christ as Savior and Lord. John Stott provides his always wonderful teaching on our call to follow Christ as Lord. You’ll notice that each of these articles delves into critical and often misunderstood aspects of discipleship.

In our Profiles in Faith, I believe you will be encouraged by the story of David Brainerd, who in just a short span of time made a lasting impact in the mission field, and tremendously influenced great evangelistic leaders over the centuries.

Let us hear what you think of this issue. We’re trying to “ramp up” everything we’re doing to encourage and promote authentic discipleship. We’re praying that you, and others like you, will join the effort to help us start a real discipleship movement across America and beyond.

Sincerely,

Kerry A. Knott
K.Knott@cslewisinstitute.org

P.S. Please check out our new website at www.cslewisinstitute.org. Completely rebuilt, this site is a treasure trove of great teaching, discipleship programs, events, and more.
The Call to Follow Christ

by John Stott

At its simplest Christ’s call was “Follow me.” He asked men and women for their personal allegiance. He invited them to learn from him, to obey his words and to identify themselves with his cause.

Now there can be no following without a previous forsaking. To follow Christ is to renounce all lesser loyalties. In the days when he lived among men on earth, this meant a literal abandonment of home and work. Simon and Andrew “left their nets and followed him.” James and John “left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.” Matthew, who heard Christ’s call while he was “sitting at the tax office... left everything, and rose and followed him.”

Today, in principle, the call of the Lord Jesus has not changed. He still says “Follow me,” and adds, “whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.” In practice, however, this does not mean for the majority of Christians a physical departure from their home or their job. It implies rather an inner surrender of both, and a refusal to allow either family or ambition to occupy the first place in our lives.

Let me be more explicit about the forsaking which cannot be separated from the following of Jesus Christ.

First, there must be a renunciation of sin. This, in a word, is repentance. It is the first part of Christian conversion. It can in no circumstances be bypassed. Repentance and faith belong together. We cannot follow Christ without forsaking sin.

Repentance is a definite turn from every thought, word, deed and habit which is known to be wrong. It is not sufficient to feel pangs of remorse or to make some kind of apology to God. Fundamentally, repentance is a matter neither of emotion nor of speech. It is an inward change of mind and attitude towards sin which leads to a change of behaviour.

There can be no compromise here. There may be sins in our lives which we do not think we ever could renounce; but we must be willing to let them go as we cry to God for deliverance from them. If you are in doubt regarding what is right and what is wrong, what must go and what may be retained, do not be too greatly influenced by the customs and conventions of Christians you may know. Go by the clear teaching of the Bible and by the prompting of your conscience, and Christ will gradually lead you further along the path of righteousness. When he puts his finger on anything, give it up. It may be some association or recreation, some literature we read, or some attitude of pride, jealousy or resentment, or an unforgiving spirit.

Jesus told his followers to pluck out their eye and cut off their hand or foot if these caused them to sin. We are not to obey this with dead literalism, of course, and mutilate our bodies. It is a vivid figure of speech for dealing ruthlessly with the avenues along which temptation comes to us.

Sometimes, true repentance has to include “restitution.” This means putting things right with other people, whom we may have injured. All our sins wound God, and nothing we do can heal the wound. Only the atoning death of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, can do this. But when our sins have damaged other people, we can sometimes help to repair the damage, and where we can, we must. Zacchaeus, the dishonest tax-collector, more than repaid the money he had stolen from his clients and promised to give away half his capital to the poor to compensate (no doubt) for thefts he could not make good. We must...
Ye call me Master and Lord: and you say well; for so I am. —John 13:13 KJV

Jesus Christ . . . is Lord of all. —Acts 10:36

The question of authority is one of the burning issues of our times. It is challenged in every sphere—in family, church, school, and community. This revolt against constituted authority has been responsible for the disastrous breakdown in law enforcement, with a consequent upsurge in crime and violence.

Without some central authority, society will disintegrate into chaos and anarchy. Every ship must have a captain, every kingdom a king, and every home a head if they are to function aright.

If this is true of society in general, it is no less true in the kingdom of Mansoul, as Bunyan termed it—in the lives of individual men and women. The crucial question to answer is, “In whose hands does the final authority rest?” For the Christian there are only two alternatives. The authority rests in the Master’s hands or in mine. Scripture leaves us in no doubt as to who should hold it—“[He] is Lord of all.”

Lordship Salvation

In recent times in evangelical circles there has developed strident debate around what has been termed “lordship salvation,” a name that has been applied to the view that, for salvation, a person must believe in Christ as Savior and submit to His authority. Some, at the other end of the spectrum, go so far as to say that to invite an unsaved person to receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is a perversion of the gospel, and is adding to the scriptural teaching about salvation. “All that is required for salvation is believing the gospel message,” says Thomas L. Constable.

On either side are godly men whose love for the Lord is beyond question, and each view aims to preserve the purity of the gospel presentation in our day. There must, therefore, be mutual respect, but both positions cannot be right.

In my view, it is defective teaching to divorce the Saviorhood of Christ from His lordship. Salvation is not merely believing certain doctrinal facts; it is trusting in and embracing the divine Person who is Lord of the universe and who atoned for our sins.

To suggest that a person can exercise saving faith in Christ while knowingly rejecting His right to lordship over His life, seems a monstrous suggestion. In salvation we are not accepting Christ in His separate offices. To deliberately say, “I will receive Him as Savior, but I will leave the matter of lordship until later, and then decide whether or not I will bow to His will,” seems an impossible position, and cannot be sustained by Scripture.

Having said that, I would concede that many have genuinely believed in Christ who, through inadequate teaching, were never confronted with Christ’s claim to lordship, and therefore they have not knowingly rejected it. The proof of the reality of their regeneration would be that as soon as they learn of Christ’s claim, they submit to His mastery.
Christ’s call was not merely to believe in Him but to be His disciple, and that involves more than “making a decision” or believing certain doctrinal facts. A disciple is one who learns of Christ with the purpose of obeying what he or she learns. Jesus did not commission His disciples to go and make believers of all nations, but disciples; the terms are not synonymous, although there can be no salvation without believing (Matt. 28:20).

When Peter preached the first sermon to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius, he said, “He is Lord of all.” But Peter had not always recognized and bowed to His lordship. When, prior to that visit he saw a vision of a sheet being let down from heaven, containing all kinds of animals, reptiles, and birds, he heard a voice say, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean” (Acts 10:13–14). He set his opinion against the Lord and received a well-deserved rebuke. If Christ were lord of his life, he could not have said, “Surely not,” to Him. If he said, “Surely not,” that was a negation of His lordship.

Have we not sometimes done what Peter did? When the Holy Spirit has prompted us to pray, to witness, to give, to break with some sin, to respond to a call to missionary or other service, have we said, in effect, if not in words, “Surely not, Lord”?

When speaking to a large crowd, Jesus concluded His message with these challenging words: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not what I say?” (Luke 6:46). Acknowledging Christ’s lordship is more than repeating the chorus “He is Lord, He is Lord.”

Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi was a patriot and mystic. He sincerely admired Jesus as a man, but on one occasion he said, “I cannot accord to Christ a solitary throne, for I believe God has been incarnated again and again.” He was willing to concede to Him equality with Buddha, Muhammad, Confucius, Zoroaster, and the rest, but not a unique and solitary throne. Yet that is exactly what He demands and deserves.

“O Lord, our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us,” said Isaiah (26:13). Note that he did not say “instead of you,” but “besides you.” Israel did not want to entirely reject Jehovah, but they invited other gods to share their allegiance. But God will tolerate no rivals, no divided loyalty. No normal wife would be willing to share her husband’s love with another woman, but that was what Israel had done.

The “other lords” take various forms. With some it may be business, with others sports, or money, or some avocation that takes the place that is due Christ. The danger is that these “other lords,” though legitimate in themselves, may take an inordinate place in our time and affection and may eventually oust the real Lord.

Ideally the coronation of Christ as lord of the life should take place at conversion. When we present the gospel to a seeking soul, we should follow the example of the Lord and not conceal the cost of discipleship. Christ was scrupulously open and honest on this point. Unfortunately, that is not always done.

It is noteworthy that immediately on his conversion Paul realized what his only possible attitude should be toward Jesus. As soon as he got the answer to his question, “Who are you, Lord?” (continued on page 22)
Let us be clear on this. Christianity is not in essence a moral code or an ascetic routine, as so many down the centuries have mistakenly supposed. Rather, it is a supernaturalizing personal relationship with a supernatural personal Savior. Christianity centers upon Jesus Christ the Lord who, today and every day through the Holy Spirit, confronts everyone to whom the Gospel comes, summoning us to recognize and respond to him. He calls on us, not just to acknowledge his reality and the salient facts about him, but to exercise faith in him—that is, on the basis of the facts, to trust him—for the forgiveness of our sins; to repent—that is, to leave behind our present natural life of sin-driven bondage, and enter a new life of Christ-led freedom; and to become disciples—persons, that is, as our life project, walk with him, learn from him, worship him and the Father through him, and maintain obedience to him, conforming ourselves to his recorded attitudes and example up to the limit of the Holy Spirit’s enabling.

It is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead residing in each believer’s inner being, who, having invisibly but effectually united believers to Christ, now sustains them in that union, working in them the motivation and compassion of Christ, and mediating to and through them the power of his risen life. He illuminates their minds to understand Christ’s teaching, and biblical teaching generally, to see how it applies to them personally, and to envisage and pray for Christian advance. He reshapes their outlook, habits, and character by energizing their efforts at faithful obedience across the board. Every Christian thus becomes a work in progress, a lifelong reconstruction site, with the Holy Spirit as architect and craftsman at every point, first to last.

Following the Bible, we call the Spirit’s engendering of faith, repentance, and the commitment to discipleship regeneration or new birth (John 3:1–8; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:22–23; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 5:1, 18), and we speak of the consequent whole-souled pursuit of holiness and righteousness as sanctification, growth in grace, and glorification begun (Rom. 8:30; 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Peter 3:18).¹

As we contemplate today’s complex concerns, hopes, dreams, and ventures of Christian renewal, discipleship impresses us as the key present-day issue, and catechesis as the key present-day element of discipleship, all the world over. The Christian faith must be both well and wisely taught and well and truly learned.²

Notes

2. Ibid., 16.
True Conversion and Wholehearted Commitment: *Foundations of Discipleship*

by Thomas A. Tarrants, III, D. Min.

Director of Ministry, C.S. Lewis Institute

George Orwell famously said, “Sometimes the first duty of intelligent men is the restatement of the obvious.” We live in such a time today.

In America there is widespread fogginess and confusion about what it means to be a Christian. This can be seen in much preaching, and it is painfully obvious in the lives of vast numbers of people who profess salvation through Christ but seem to have no clue of what this actually means in terms of beliefs and behavior. In such a time, it is the duty of every serious follower of Jesus Christ to go back to the basics. In this article, we will seek to do so by reexamining what Jesus taught about true conversion and total commitment. Our goal is to understand rightly the call of Jesus so as to please and honor him in daily life. And we do this not for our sake alone, but also for those we seek to reach and teach, for the church to which we belong, and for the watching world, which desperately needs to see authentic followers of Christ.

As we begin, we remind ourselves that Christ’s call to true conversion and wholehearted commitment is rooted before all else in the grace of a merciful God, who loves us and calls us to life in his Son. This life cannot be earned by repentance, faith, total commitment or anything else we do. Our part is simply to receive it as offered.

Context

Before looking at the teachings of Jesus on these key themes, we note the broader context of his life and work, found in Genesis and the Fall.

In Genesis we see God creating a beautiful world and two people, whom he made in his own image and placed in a garden-like paradise. Filled with all they needed or could desire, the garden was a special gift from God, a place for them to care for and enjoy. And it was a place for them to experience personal fellowship with God. God’s only restriction was that they not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

How long this happy state continued we do not know, but at some point things went horribly wrong. Adam and Eve eventually disobeyed God’s command and ate from the forbidden tree. Their disobedience was not an innocent mistake but a willful rebellion against God’s lordship and loving care over their lives. It came about through the deceit and seduction of that “proud spirit,” the devil, who had himself earlier rebelled against God. Taking the form of a talking serpent, the devil sought to inculcate unbelief in Adam and Eve by suggesting that God was withholding something good from them by forbidding the fruit of that one tree. Simultaneously he enticed them to pride by assuring them that through eating the forbidden fruit they would become “like God.” Thus, by succumbing to pride and unbelief, they fell from their original innocence. The consequences of their willful rebellion were bitter: moral guilt, the corruption of their human (continued on page 25)
David Brainerd died on October 9, 1747, in Jonathan Edwards’s home in Northampton, Massachusetts. In what Edwards saw as a singular act of God’s providence, Brainerd had been persuaded by friends not to destroy his diary. Instead, he had put it in Edwards’s hands to dispose of as “would be most for God’s glory and the interest of religion.”

Jonathan Edwards edited the diary, added his own comments, and published it in 1749. Later editions also contained Brainerd’s missionary journal. According to Marcus Loane:

“The diary is a remarkable record of the interior life of the soul, and its entries still throb with the tremendous earnestness of a man whose heart was aflame for God. The journal is an objective history of the missionary work of twelve months, and its details are an astonishing testimony to the grace of God . . . Each needs to be studied as the revelation of a Christian character as rare as it was real.”

David Brainerd was born on April 20, 1718, at Haddam, Connecticut. As a young man, he had, as he says, “a very good outside.” After a time of “distressed, bewildered, and tumultuous state of mind” and rebellion against God’s law and sovereignty, the twenty-year-old Brainerd was radically transformed by a new vision of God’s glory: “My soul was so captivated and delighted with the excellence, loveliness, greatness . . . of God that I had no thought . . . at first, about my own salvation, and scarce reflected that there was such a creature as myself.”

In September 1739, Brainerd entered Yale College to prepare for the ministry. During Brainerd’s second year at Yale, George Whitefield visited the college, and a few months later so did Gilbert Tennent. Because of the strong revival preaching of these ministers, Brainerd, writes Jonathan Edwards, experienced “much of God’s gracious presence, and of the lively actings of true grace” but also was influenced by that “intemperate, indiscreet zeal, which was at that time too prevalent.” When Brainerd criticized one of the college tutors and the rector for their opposition to the revival, he was expelled. Neither his own apology nor Jonathan Edwards’s appeal moved the college authorities to allow Brainerd to complete his studies and graduate.

In the spring of 1742, Brainerd was overwhelmed by a strong desire that God use him in the work of missions “to the heathen.” His missionary commitment is expressed in his words: “Here I am, Lord, send me; send me to the ends of the earth; send me to the rough, the savage pagans of the wilderness; send me from all that is called comfort on earth; send me even to death itself, if it be but in thy service, and to promote thy kingdom.”

David Brainerd was licensed as a preacher of the gospel on July 29, 1742, and called by a Scottish missionary society to become their missionary to the Mahican Indians at Kaunaumeek in western Massachusetts. After twelve grueling months of minis-
try in this “farther-most edge of civilized America,” Brainerd, at the instruction of the mission board, changed his field to serve the Indians at the Forks of the Delaware in Pennsylvania. There he struggled with the intricate dialects of the Indian language, physical weariness and illness, and deep distrust on the part of the Indians, who had so often suffered at the hands of white men. Few of the Indians responded to his Christian message. He wrote: “To an eye of reason everything respecting the conversion of the heathen is as dark as midnight; yet I cannot but hope in God for the accomplishment of something glorious among them.”

In the summer of 1745, Brainerd moved to New Jersey to preach to the Delaware Indians at Crossweeksung near Freehold. A sudden and sovereign outpouring of God’s Spirit brought surprising success to Brainerd’s mission, leading to seventy-seven baptisms in less than a year.

Brainerd’s sick body, weakened by inadequate food and stricken with tuberculosis, began to fight its last battle. In May 1746 the Delaware Indians moved to Cranberry, New Jersey, where Brainerd hoped God would settle them “as a Christian congregation.” A final missionary trip to the Susquehanna in August 1746 was interrupted by illness, and Brainerd returned home to Cranberry, doubting that he would recover but “little exercised with melancholy, as in former seasons of weakness.” He continued to work and preach, sometimes from his bed, rejoicing that life and death did not depend upon his choice.

In November 1746 Brainerd left for New England but was forced by sickness to remain for the winter in Elizabethtown, in the home of Jonathan Dickinson, the first president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton). It is claimed by some that the college was founded by the Presbyterians because Brainerd was expelled from Yale for his support of the revival! In March 1747 Brainerd returned to Cranberry, where he visited his congregation of Indians for the last time. On March 18 he wrote: “About ten o’clock, I called my people together; and after having explained and sung a psalm, I prayed with them. There was a considerable degree of affection among them; I doubt not, in some instances, that which was more than merely natural.”

Too ill to resume his missionary work, David Brainerd set out again for New England and reached Jonathan Edwards’s home in Northampton, Massachusetts, on May 28, 1747. Edwards carefully records the final days of Brainerd’s life, noting such things as the last time he attended public worship and the last time he offered the family prayer. According to George Marsden, Edwards found “Brainerd’s prayers in the family stunning. Even his prayers returning thanks for food were awe inspiring.”

Edwards’s daughter Jerusha gave herself to the task of caring for the dying young missionary. There is no real evidence that they were engaged, but the story of David Brainerd and Jerusha Edwards, writes Marsden, is “one of the history’s fabled spiritual love tales.”

Brainerd corrected some of his private writings, wrote letters, and gave spiritual counsel to those about him. “He spoke to some of my younger children,” writes Edwards, “one by one.” When someone came into his room with a Bible, Brainerd said, “Oh that dear book: that lovely book! I shall soon see it opened: the mysteries that are in it, and the mysteries of God’s providence, will all be unfolded.” (continued on page 32)
A Summons to Covenantal Discipleship

Obviously, this narcissistic version of “Christian” discipleship requires very little from its adherents, resulting in lifestyles that are hardly “salty” enough to compel others to turn from their own narcissism so as to follow the Jesus of the Scriptures. In fact, this insipid religiosity has resulted in a pervasive disillusionment by the watching world regarding Christians and their claims. Rather than standing as beacons of integrity, justice, compassion, and purity, Christians are increasingly viewed by non-Christians with skepticism, indifference, and even cynicism. Since Christianity is always but one generation from extinction, this dilution of Christian discipleship and its impotent evangelistic influence should cause great concern for every thoughtful believer.

What might be said in response to this state of affairs?

Certainly, since MTD is patently unbiblical, if there is to be any resurgence in Christian vitality, the church must recover a profoundly biblical understanding of discipleship. That is to say, if these popular perversions of Christianity are to be corrected, it will only come through hearing Jesus’ own voice as it is mediated to us through the Scriptures. But in order to hear him faithfully, we must also recover a big-picture understanding of God’s purposes as they come to their fullest expression in Jesus. For our discipleship will reflect what Jesus had in mind only if we hear his voice and experience the power of his ministry in the robust richness of first-century Judaism. Only then should we feel any confidence that we have gotten things right as his disciples in the twenty-first century. In other words, if Christians are to expect people to take Christianity seriously in our context, then Christians must begin taking Jesus seriously in his context.

This is what I have attempted to do in my recent publication, Following Jesus, the Servant King. To address the contemporary aberrations of Christian discipleship, I set out to answer three questions from the Scriptures. These are the “why,” the “what,” and the “how” questions:

- Why should we be concerned to follow all of Jesus’ commands when we have been saved by grace?
- What is it that Jesus commands us to do as his disciples?
- How can we live out Jesus’ high demand of righteousness?

It didn’t take me very long to realize that the answers to these questions must be pursued in the context of the covenantal framework of the Scriptures. In fact, the loss of the biblical category of “covenant” in the church is likely one of the main reasons for the present impoverishment of Christian discipleship. My book is therefore a summons to return to “covenantal discipleship.”

First, the “why” question.

The “Why” Question

Why should we be concerned to follow all of Jesus’ commands when we have been saved by grace?

The “why” question emerges from the difficulty of sorting out the reason for an all-
consuming concern for righteousness, while at the same time affirming the New Testament’s declaration that we are saved entirely by the grace of God in Jesus. It is Christ alone who fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law on our behalf (Rom. 8:3), and it is he alone who bore the curse of the law in our stead (Gal. 3:13). Being counted righteous before God, therefore, turns not on our own concerted attempts to live righteous lives, but rather on receiving this verdict through faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:28; Eph. 2:8–9).

This is where the “why” question enters, encrusted with all sorts of related theological issues pertaining to grace and demand. Might we fall into a form of legalism if we actually strive to obey all of Jesus’ demands? Wouldn’t this transfer our confidence before God to ourselves and deny the sufficiency of Jesus’ finished work in the process? In fact, shouldn’t we rather view the extravagant demands of Jesus as persistent reminders of our inability to meet God’s standards, thereby nudging us back to his grace? Reducing the demands of Jesus to some realistic form of moralism might actually appear to be appropriate when viewed in this light.

To answer the “why” question and its corollaries, we must realize that the interplay between grace and demand permeates the covenantal framework of the Old Testament. In fact, every biblical covenant is grounded in grace—whether that be creation grace, sustaining grace, redeeming grace, or the grace that comes through divine promises about the future. This means that those who enter into covenant with God do so in a gracious reality. In other words, legalism—the attempt to earn God’s favor through meritorious acts—is never in view in the biblical covenants, properly understood.

And yet this gracious foundation never diminishes the divine demand of righteousness. Noah’s deliverance from the flood and the divine promise to maintain the seasonal cycles (Gen. 9:9–16) ground God’s requirement to steward the earth and respect its life (Gen. 9:4–7). Abraham’s reception of the divine promises of incomprehensible blessings (Gen. 12:1–3, 7; 15:5–21) results in God’s command that the patriarch walk faithfully before him (Gen. 17:1–14). Israel’s deliverance from their Egyptian enslavement (Exod. 12:31–42) leads directly to Sinai and the righteous demands of the law (Exod. 20:1–17). We should therefore not be surprised when the same pattern confronts us in the New Covenant—a covenant instituted in the graciousness of Jesus’ atoning death and vicarious life of righteousness, but which leads to his self-denying, cross-bearing summons (e.g., Matt. 10:37–39; 16:24–26).

Yet the answer to our “why” question is not simply found in observing the repetition of this covenantal pattern. The connections to our discipleship go far deeper than this. This is because both sides of the covenantal relationship find their fulfillments in Jesus.

On the one hand, all of the gracious elements of the covenants lead directly to Jesus. For instance, Jesus is the true Seed of Abraham through whom the patriarch’s promises are mediated (Gal. 3:15–29). He himself is the Lamb who provides the climactic fulfillment of the Passover deliverance through his crucifixion and resurrection (Luke 22:19–20). And he is the greater Son of David who fulfills the expectation of an heir reigning on an eternal throne (Luke 1:30–35). In each case, Jesus brings God’s covenantal grace to its zenith. In these and other ways, Jesus mediates...
A Summons to Covenantal Discipleship

God’s covenantal grace, epitomized by his role as the great Servant of the Lord, who does for Israel (and the rest of us) what the people could not do for themselves.

On the other hand, Jesus fulfills the law by articulating the end-time expression of God’s demand of righteousness. This is why he repeatedly places his commands in the neighborhood of discussions about the law (e.g., Matt. 5:17–48). Since he is the great Son of David, he fulfills the expectation of the righteous King, reigning over a transformed people and demanding from them the righteousness befitting members of the kingdom of God.

In the end, we find our answer to the “why” question in the framework of the New Covenant. Those who have experienced through Christ the internalization of the law (Jer. 31:33), the indwelling of the transforming Spirit of God (Ezek. 36:26–27), and the once-for-all atonement in Jesus’ death (Jer. 31:34), will inevitably respond in obedience and fidelity to his righteous commands. Put otherwise, (1) having been graced by Jesus in his Servant work, (2) genuine disciples will respond faithfully to Jesus’ royal summons to righteousness. And since Jesus lived out the life of the Servant, (3) followers of the King will ultimately emulate the Servant. We might depict this conception of discipleship accordingly:

The direction of the arrows is crucially important. The nature of the Servant’s work means that it cannot be emulated—at least initially. There is only one thing that can be done with grace. It must be received (Mark 10:45; 14:22–24). Thus discipleship appropriately begins in the reception of the Servant’s grace.

But those who receive this grace are also covenantally compelled to respond to Jesus’ all-encompassing summons to righteousness and fidelity (Matt. 5:20; 16:24). Grace that is thoughtfully received never leaves the individual unchanged. The one who has been graced by the Servant will therefore be moved and empowered to follow the King in all of his discipleship demands.

Only then will it be appropriate to speak about the imitation of Christ in his Servant ministry. In other words, disciples of Jesus ought to look like him, replicating his ministry of grace, compassion, justice, and truth, so that others might see Jesus.

To return to where we started, MTD’s reduction of the demand of discipleship simply to being “nice” to people fails miserably to preserve Jesus’ depiction of what it means to follow him. First, this meager demand actually functions as a weak form of legalism. There is no grace here that precedes the demand. Rather, the demand of “niceness” itself encompasses what discipleship entails. Accordingly, it fails to preserve the gracious foundation of a biblical covenant. Second, its requirement falls woefully short of the all-encompassing demand of righteousness articulated by Jesus. Rather than merely being “nice” to people, Jesus calls on his followers to love God with all their “heart, soul, and mind,” and their neighbor as themselves (Matt. 22:34–40).

To unpack this further, however, we must turn to our second question: the “what” question.
The “What” Question

What is it that Jesus commands us to do as his disciples?

As we know, people answer this question in a variety of ways. Some reduce it to “being nice” to others. Some view Jesus through Paul’s “gospel lens” and perceive only the necessity of faith in him as their gracious savior. Some engage in various social justice causes, seeking to obey Jesus’ great command to love their neighbors as themselves. Others translate Jesus’ commands into guidelines involving such things as not swearing, smoking, drinking, or having sex outside of marriage. Still others sell most everything and go to the ends of the earth with the gospel.

But what does Jesus mean when he calls people to a life of discipleship? Once again, our answer comes in the covenantal framework that he fulfills.

Since Jesus is the great King, who reigns over the New Covenant era, it is not surprising that he articulates the covenantal demand of righteousness, summoning people to follow him as one would follow God (Luke 18:18–23). For this reason, Jesus claims in Matthew 5:17 to be bringing the fulfillment of the law (and the prophets). Our knee-jerk reaction to this claim might be to interpret it as implying he would be the one to live out the law’s commands himself or to provide the final atoning sacrifice required by the law. But the nature of his fulfillment in this context turns out to be neither of these. Rather, as the succeeding verses make clear (vv. 21–48), his fulfillment consists in articulating the end-time expression of the law for his new covenant disciples.

This finds agreement with Jeremiah’s great description of the “new” covenant that God will one day make with his people (Jer. 31:31). Rather than dispensing with the law (as many Christians think), the new covenant involves the internalization of the law in his covenant people (v. 33). Jesus’ end-time articulation of the law is therefore what is to be internalized in the hearts and minds of his followers.

And yet, even though Jesus affirms the eternality of each of the law’s provisions (Matt. 5:18), it is clear that some aspects of the law are covenantally altered as they pass through Jesus’ fulfillment. In reality, Jesus’ fulfillment does not always affect the law in the same way. Rather, each instance of Jesus’ interaction with the law must be studied in its own context.

To capture the essence of the kinds of things that Jesus does with the law, we might use three metaphors, each of which pertains to light. Yet we will notice that even though each of these is distinct in itself, they all lead to the same general result—the high demand of righteousness in the new-covenant era.

Jesus the “Filter”

As the “filter,” Jesus’ fulfillment renders certain aspects of the law obsolete, as each of them is superseded by the realities to which they were pointing all along. Temple sacrifices are fulfilled, of course, in Jesus’ cross-work (Matt. 26:17–20; Hebrews 7–10). Circumcision in the flesh is eclipsed by the circumcision of the heart, performed by the Spirit (Rom. 2:25–28; Col. 2:11–12). The external function of the food laws is replaced by the internal witness of the Spirit regarding those things that defile the person (Mark 7:1–23; Gal. 5:19–24). And Moses’ temporary concession to allow frequent divorces is largely rescinded by Jesus’ summons to lifelong marriages characteristic of the “one flesh” union (Mark 10:2–12). Although each of these results in the obsolescence of an aspect of the law, thereby changing its ongoing function, profound righteousness of word and deed is the consistent outcome.
A Summons to Covenantal Discipleship

Jesus the “Lens”

As the “lens,” Jesus brings back into focus an element of the law that had become obscured by the traditions of the elders and teachers of the law. In this role, Jesus does not do anything to the law itself. But he does invalidate contemporary interpretations that have gone awry, inhibiting the living out of true righteousness. Here Jesus recovers the demand to show mercy toward sinners by pursuing them into their contexts (Matt. 9:9–13) and commanding that his followers sacrificially care for the needy they encounter (Luke 10:25–37). Jesus also recovers the demand that God’s people serve as the conduit of Sabbath blessings to those otherwise destitute and in need of rest (Luke 13:10–17). In each case, Jesus restores the original intention of the law, rebuking and discarding those interpretations that paradoxically were giving rise to less than what the law was intending.

Jesus the “Prism”

As the “prism,” Jesus raises the demand of the law to a new level of righteousness. This heightened demand should not surprise us, since with Jesus the kingdom of God has come, replete with its empowering new-covenant blessings. Accordingly, Jesus raises the murder prohibition to the prescription of misplaced and unrepented anger (Matt. 5:21–26). He elevates the adultery prohibition to condemn even the lingering after another in one’s heart (Matt. 5:27–30). He also adjusts his followers’ use of the law, exhorting them to forgo personal rights instead of defending them (Matt. 5:38–42). And he stretches the love command to extend far beyond one’s neighbor to include within its purview everyone, even one’s enemies (Matt. 5:43–47). Each of these examples demonstrates that Jesus not only preserves the Old Testament concern for righteousness—he extends and even elevates it!

Jesus’ Missional Summons

Finally, since Jesus brings the Old Testament covenants to their end-time fulfillments, his discipleship summons necessarily includes the call to mission. All the way back in the call of Abram, God announced his intention to bless all nations through him and his seed (Gen. 12:3). God also declared to the generation who received the Mosaic Covenant that they were “a kingdom of priests” (Exod. 19:6), suggesting their role of mediating the knowledge of Israel’s God to the nations of the world. Similarly, the Davidic Covenant envisions a day when the Davidic heir will inherit “the ends of the earth” (Ps. 2:8–12) and mediate the Abrahamic blessings to all nations (Ps. 72:1, 8, 17). It is for this reason that Jesus declares his followers to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matt. 5:13–16), for they are the means through whom this covenantal expectation would find its fulfillment. Jesus’ sending out of his disciples on their missionary journeys (Matthew 10; Luke 10) and his so-called “Great Commission” (Matt. 28:19–20) express this covenantal purpose. Consequently, as his disciples proclaim and demonstrate the presence of the kingdom of God (Matt. 10:1, 5–42), often exposing themselves to persecution and impoverishment in the process (Matt. 25:31–46), these great covenantal hopes will be realized. That is to say, as men and women from every nation bow their knees to Jesus in response to the kingdom mission...
of his disciples, the reign of the Davidic Son of Man is extended graciously among the nations until the day he returns in glory and great power (Matt. 28:18; Dan. 7:14; Ps. 2:8–9).

When we compare the nature and scope of these discipleship commands with the popular revisions of Christianity in our day, it becomes quite obvious whose voice people are actually now hearing. And it certainly is not the voice of Jesus! But if we listen carefully to the Gospel writers, Jesus’ clarion summons can still be heard, beckoning us to a discipleship that permits us no wiggle room for compromise.

It is at this point, then, that our third question raises its hoary head. Knowing our own inconsistency and fickleness of heart, how are we to do this?

The “How” Question

How can we live out Jesus’ high demand of righteousness?

In many ways, this brings us to the crux of the matter. As we have seen, anyone who is serious about studying Jesus’ commands realizes rather quickly that he calls us to a more bracing form of righteousness than merely being nice to others or avoiding various lifestyle vices.

How, then, are we to follow him faithfully? Those who are honest with themselves while reading the Sermon on the Mount will readily admit their consistent failure to live up to Jesus’ standards. This is actually prophetically unexpected, given the prophets’ wildly optimistic descriptions of the righteousness lived out by the returned-from-exile, new-covenant people (e.g., Isa. 60:3; 62:1–12; Jer. 50:4–5; Ezek. 36:26–27).

However, the reason for the dissonance between these expectations of a radically transformed remnant and the persistent failure of Jesus’ followers is to be found in Jesus’ surprising teaching regarding the inaugurated coming of the kingdom. That is to say, rather than the much-anticipated, cataclysmic in-breaking of God’s reign, by which he would climactically heal and transform his people, Jesus affirms that the kingdom has come only in part. It is here, “advancing forcefully” (Matt. 11:12), yet susceptible of being missed (Matt. 13:31–33). It is only inaugurated.

The payoff of this for our understanding of discipleship is rather significant. Rather than being completely transformed in the consummated kingdom, disciples of Jesus today have merely experienced the inauguration of the kingdom’s transforming power. Though the Spirit has been poured forth in our hearts, we continue to be divided in our affections and struggle to keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:17, 25). How then are disciples in this inaugurated state of transformation to live faithfully in relation to the King’s summons?

The answer once again comes to us from the covenantal framework of the Old Testament. It is obvious that within the economy of the Mosaic Covenant, the Jews were to live in a recurring pattern of remembrance, reception, and response. Throughout their calendar year, regular festivals, celebrations, and Sabbaths jogged their collective and individual memory to reflect on and receive afresh the grace of God to them as a people. Only then were they to respond to God’s call to righteousness. For example:

“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15; cf. Deut. 15:11–15; 16:2–3; 16:12; 24:17–22; Josh. 1:13; 23:3–11; and many others).

Ideally, they lived within the covenantal dynamic of the reception of prior grace that empowered them to respond to God’s demand of righteousness.

This, then, supplies us with the answer to our third question. Since we who inhabit this era of the inaugurated kingdom are not yet fully transformed, we continue to need
the same sort of grace that initially ushered us into our covenant relationship with God. And we need this daily.

In other words, we need to learn how to allow God’s pursuing and sustaining power to renew us every day so as to incline our hearts to follow Jesus. We therefore must return repeatedly to the Servant to receive ongoing empowerment to follow the King.

And it is in this context that we will experience the ministry of the Spirit, the vivifying presence of the kingdom era. Even while he waited in Babylon for God’s vindication after the exile, Ezekiel describes God’s empowering work in the people who live in the postexilic era—the era in which we live:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezek. 36:26–27; cf. Joel 2:28–29).

It is this expectation that has found fulfillment in the new-covenant era, as Paul repeatedly affirms:

“He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6; see all of vv. 1–18; cf. also Rom. 7:6; 8:1–17, 26–27; Gal. 5:16–18, 22–25; and many others).

Life in this covenant is one that is to be lived in the power of the Spirit. That much is clear. But what exactly does this mean? It is here that I frequently find myself a bit flummoxed. How is it that the Spirit’s work is received, accommodated, or otherwise actualized? And how is the Spirit’s work connected to Jesus?

Though Paul seems often to assume that his readers know the answers to these questions, Jesus gives us a bit more clarity in his upper-room comments about the Spirit. Significantly he affirms that the Spirit’s ministry will be all about Jesus! He will remind the disciples of what Jesus taught (John 14:26), he will testify to them about Jesus (15:26), and he will make the riches of Jesus known to his followers (16:15). Though the focus of the Spirit’s work in this context may be on the communication of propositional truth, Jesus’ riches are much more dynamic than merely his teachings, for Jesus not only taught—he acted! And it is in these actions that we find most clearly the grace of the new covenant.

Inserting these insights into our discipleship diagram, it is clear that a new arrow must be added—one that captures the frequent return to the Servant Jesus for the grace needed to continue following him as King. And all through this, the Spirit makes present the empowering riches of Jesus!

A Summons to Covenantal Discipleship

So what is it that disciples need to remember and receive from Jesus so as to enable them to respond more faithfully each day to Jesus’ discipleship summons? Certainly the multifaceted ways in which Jesus fulfills the grace of the Old Testament covenants would be the general context in which to answer this question. But we can sharpen this even further by pondering the grace that comes to us through Jesus’ specific ministry actions, and then intentionally receiving that grace daily through the Spirit’s work in our hearts and minds. In this regard, we can speak of Jesus in his roles of Representative, Redeemer, Restorer, and reigning King.

**Jesus the Representative**

As the Representative, Jesus takes up the role of Israel (and even Adam) and, on their
behalf, brings their failed history to its successful fulfillment. Set within the context of John the Baptist’s efforts to bring about the righteous remnant that was prepared for the separating judgment and transforming blessing of the one “coming after” him, John is understandably puzzled when Jesus comes to him for baptism. But Jesus’ reply (Matt. 3:15) implies that he viewed himself as the one who would bring about the very fulfillment of John’s ministry. That is, in his baptism, Jesus was identifying himself with the need of Israel and serving notice that he would bring about the long-awaited righteous remnant in himself—he was to be the remnant of one—for it would be in his own life that the expectation of the righteous people of God would finally be realized.

His successful reenactment of Israel’s testings in the wilderness then demonstrates the truth of the divine identification of Jesus at his baptism—he truly is God’s Son and his Servant in whom the Lord takes great pleasure (Matt. 3:17; cf. Ps. 2:7; Isa. 42:1).

This remarkable representative grace is now available to his followers, for in his righteousness we are now invited to stand (Rom. 5:2).

Jesus the Redeemer

Set within the historical context of Judah’s exile and return, Jesus the Redeemer brings to culminating fulfillment the role and experience of Isaiah’s Servant of the Lord (cf. Isa. 42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12). Accordingly, Jesus’ crucifixion brings to consummation the role of the righteous remnant by absorbing in himself the covenantal curse (cf. Deut. 28:32, 36–37, 41, 64–68), accomplishing the final atoning sacrifice for God’s covenant people. Jesus’ cross is therefore appropriately to be understood as the culmination of the exile of God’s people. God’s acceptance of Jesus’ suffering is then climactically affirmed in Jesus’ resurrection, which itself should be perceived as the climax of the return of God’s people from exile.

This is the grace of Jesus, the Redeemer. Not only has he successfully fulfilled the law’s demands for us, he has also borne the law’s curse on our behalf. As Paul exults, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1!)

Jesus the Restorer

As the Restorer, Jesus brings to fulfillment multiple covenantal hopes pertaining to the restoration of the nation from their brokenness and unfaithfulness. Several ministry actions are in view here. For instance, when he calls twelve men to be his disciples, Jesus is serving notice that he is beginning the fulfillment of the long-anticipated return from exile by all of God’s people (e.g., Isa. 11:11–12). Our own call to discipleship participates in this same restoring grace, now broadening out to include all people.

When Jesus sits down at the table with the wrong sort of people, he is acting out a living parable of God’s pursuing grace toward those who cannot purify themselves. Rather than contracting the defilement of those around him, Jesus inserts himself into their midst as the embodiment of God’s mercy that cleanses the impure. Jesus’ table invitation remains open also to us every day, even in our recurring defilement.

When Jesus heals the sick and handicapped, he is demonstrating his role of bringing to an end the covenantal unfaithfulness of God’s people. That is to say, when Jesus heals the sick and restores wholeness to the handicapped, he is inviting others to perceive in his gracious actions much more than simply miraculous power! Rather, he is demonstrating that it is he who will bring about a healed and transformed people, faithful to the God of the covenant. Once again, prior grace elicits and empowers covenantal faithfulness. This healing grace,
which encompasses both physical and spiritual elements, is perpetually on offer to Jesus’ disciples today.

Finally, when Jesus exorcises demons from people, he is signaling the arrival of the era when Satan’s damnable work accomplished in Eden is coming to an end. Jesus’ exorcisms therefore should be interpreted within this framework, serving notice that God is already now attacking the dominion of darkness (Matt. 12:28–29), and foreshadowing the day when Satan and his forces will finally be condemned (Matt. 25:41; 13:39–43). The authority that Eve and Adam surrendered to Satan is therefore being reclaimed in Jesus’ powerful ministry, offering gracious refuge and hope to us, who continue to live in the age where Beelzebub’s destructive influence is still afoot. Graciously, Jesus has bequeathed to us this authority to continue this ministry of setting people free from spiritual bondage.

Jesus the Reigning King

As the reigning King, Jesus fulfills the pattern of the suffering and vindicated Davidic king. Arising from the agony inflicted upon him, the crucified Jesus voices his cry of despair in the words of the psalmist, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46; cf. Ps. 22:1). In so doing, Jesus invites those watching to locate his fate within the framework of David’s own experience of divine abandonment, in spite of the covenantal promises to the contrary (2 Sam. 7:8–16; cf. Psalm 89). The covenantal dissonance that David experienced therefore finds tragic repetition in Jesus’ life. Will God prove faithful to his covenant promises in spite of cruciform evidence to the contrary?

It is in this context that the resurrection of Jesus represents more than merely Jesus’ conquest over death. Rather, Jesus’ resurrection brings to culmination this unexpected kingly pattern, as he is vindicated from the ignominy of the cross and exalted to the highest throne (Ps. 110:1; Acts 2:34). Accordingly, David’s expectations of universal ramifications stemming from his vindication (Ps. 22:27–31) are climactically fulfilled in Jesus, confirming that Jesus is the one who will indeed reign forever (Luke 1:32–33; 2 Sam. 7:13, 16), wielding all authority in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18; Dan. 7:14; Ps. 2:8).

Once again, God’s covenant grace comes to us through Jesus, as we perceive Yahweh’s faithful fulfillment of the promises he made to David. Our King has been vindicated and now sits enthroned forever! As we who are his disciples respond to this grace by proclaiming and demonstrating its reality around the world, his reign is extended further and further, anticipating its great consummation in the kingdom to come.

In each of these ways, God’s covenant grace comes to us through Jesus, as we perceive Yahweh’s faithful fulfillment of the promises he made to David. Our King has been vindicated and now sits enthroned forever! As we who are his disciples respond to this grace by proclaiming and demonstrating its reality around the world, his reign is extended further and further, anticipating its great consummation in the kingdom to come.

Concluding Thoughts

In the end, the answers to our three discipleship questions have obliterated the graceless and costless nature of so many contemporary depictions of Christian discipleship. On both sides of the covenantal framework, these modern mutations of Christianity dramatically fail to capture and preserve what Jesus has in mind when he calls people to follow him.

What does this suggest to us?
Among the many things that could be said, it certainly should imply to us the necessity of rethinking our evangelistic methods. Could it be that we have so overemphasized salvation by grace alone through faith that we have failed to communicate the demand side of the covenant? Jesus is not only the Servant, who lavishes his grace on us—he is also the reigning King, who demands wholehearted loyalty and devotion. If we continue in failing to communicate what it means to enter into covenant with God at the front end of people’s Christian experience, they likely will adopt a faulty expression of discipleship that may be worse than having no Christian commitment at all. Along with helping people to fall in love with their Savior, we must teach them to fall at the feet of their King. This must also be true of us who seek to lead others into this understanding of discipleship.

Second, our discussion should reveal to us the need for moving people into a deeper understanding of discipleship that includes a fuller grasp of the broader biblical narrative. Until the youth and adults in our churches are able to articulate their faith, rooting it in what God has been doing throughout history, we are in danger of leaving them to define their discipleship on their own terms, for their own purposes. We must, therefore, recover what it means not only to be a “Christian,” but also what it means to be a new-covenant follower of Jesus. What does it mean that Christians are those in whose hearts and minds the law has been internalized? What are the implications of Jesus’ reign over them as the righteous Davideic King? How is life to be lived so as to participate in the mediation of the Abrahamic blessings to the nations? In other words, modern-day Christians need to learn to live their lives within the ongoing narrative of God’s covenantal purposes. Otherwise we will almost certainly define our discipleship in ways that fall woefully short of the biblical vision.

Finally, we must come to grips with the inaugurated nature of the kingdom in the present era, inferring from this our recurring need for God’s vivifying and renewing grace. Learning to live life within the covenantal dynamic of grace and demand is the key to enduring faithfulness to Jesus. That is to say, we must learn not only to be saved by grace, but also how to live in grace. In so doing, we will discover the enablement that grace offers us, inclining our hearts and galvanizing our wills to respond to Jesus’ call on our lives. And the result of this will be increasingly consistent lives of discipleship, through which God will mediate his great covenantal blessings to others, compelling them also to follow Jesus, the Servant King.

May God grant us grace to this covenantal end.

Notes


2. Smith and Denton, Soul Searching, 162–65.


6. In this regard, see the comments by Smith and Denton in Soul Searching, 133, 267–68.
follow his example. There may be money or time for us to pay back, rumours to be contradicted, property to return, apologies to be made, or broken relationships to be mended.

We must not be excessively over-scrupulous in this matter, however. It would be foolish to rummage through past years and make an issue of insignificant words or deeds long ago forgotten by the offended person. Nevertheless, we must be realistic about this duty. I have known a student rightly confess to the university authorities that she had cheated in an exam, and another return textbooks which he had lifted from a shop. An army officer sent to the War Department a list of items he had “scrounged.” If we really repent, we shall want to do everything in our power to re-dress the past. We cannot continue to enjoy the fruits of the sins we want to be forgiven.

Second, there must be a renunciation of self. In order to follow Christ we must not only forsake isolated sins, but renounce the very principle of self-will which lies at the root of every act of sin. To follow Christ is to surrender to him the rights over our own lives. It is to abdicate the throne of our heart and do homage to him as our King. This renunciation of self is vividly described by Jesus in three phrases.

It is to deny ourselves: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself.” The same verb is used of Peter’s denial of the Lord in the courtyard of the high priest’s palace. We are to disown ourselves as completely as Peter disowned Christ when he said “I do not know the man.” Self-denial is not just giving up sweets and cigarettes, either for good or for a period of voluntary abstinence. For it is not to deny things to myself, but to deny myself to myself. It is to say no to self, and yes to Christ; to repudiate self and acknowledge Christ.

The next phrase Jesus used is to take up the cross: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” If we had lived in Palestine and seen a man carrying his cross, we should at once have recognized him as a convicted prisoner being led out to pay the supreme penalty. For Palestine was an occupied country, and this is what the Romans compelled their convicted criminals to do. So, writes Professor H.B. Swete in his commentary on Mark’s Gospel, to take up the cross is “to put oneself into the position of a condemned man on his way to execution.” In other words, the attitude to self which we are to adopt is that of crucifixion. Paul uses the same metaphor when he declares that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh (i.e. their fallen nature) with its passions and desires.”

In Luke’s version of this saying of Christ the adverb daily is added. Every day the Christian is to die. Every day he renounces the sovereignty of his own will. Every day he renews his unconditional surrender to Jesus Christ.
the sovereignty of his own will. Every day he renews his unconditional surrender to Jesus Christ.

The third expression which Jesus used to describe the renunciation of self is to lose our life: “Whoever loses his life . . . will save it.” The word for “life” here denotes neither our physical existence nor our soul, but our self. The psyche is the ego, the human personality which thinks, feels, plans and chooses. According to a similar saying preserved by Luke Jesus simply used the reflexive pronoun and talked about a man forfeiting “himself.” The man who commits himself to Christ, therefore, loses himself. This does not mean that he loses his individuality, however. His will is indeed submitted to Christ’s will, but his personality is not absorbed into Christ’s personality. On the contrary, as we shall see later, when the Christian loses himself, he finds himself, he discovers his true identity.

So in order to follow Christ we have to deny ourselves, to crucify ourselves, to lose ourselves. The full, inexorable demand of Jesus Christ is now laid bare. He does not call us to a sloppy half-heartedness, but to a vigorous, absolute commitment. He calls us to make him our Lord.

The astonishing idea is current in some circles today that we can enjoy the benefits of Christ’s salvation without accepting the challenge of his sovereign lordship. Such an unbalanced notion is not to be found in the New Testament. “Jesus is Lord” is the earliest known formulation of the creed of Christians. In days when imperial Rome was pressing its citizens to say “Caesar is Lord,” these words had a dangerous flavour. But Christians did not flinch. They could not give Caesar their first allegiance, because they had already given it to the Emperor Jesus. God had exalted his Son Jesus far above all principality and power and invested him with a rank superior to every rank, that before him “every knee should bow… and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

To make Christ Lord is to bring every department of our public and private lives under his control. This includes our career. God has a purpose for every life. Our business is to discover it and do it. God’s plan may be different from our parents’ or our own. If he is wise, the Christian will do nothing rash or reckless. He may already be engaged in, or preparing for, the work God has for him to do. But he may not. If Christ is our Lord, we must open our minds to the possibility of a change.

He does not call us to a sloppy half-heartedness, but to a vigorous, absolute commitment. He calls us to make him our Lord.

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Here is the truly Christian life, here is faith really working by love: when a man applies himself with joy and love to the works of that freest servitude, in which he serves others voluntarily and for naught; himself abundantly satisfied in the fullness and richness of his own faith.

Martin Luther
and realized that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, he asked a second question, “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:10). That was a clear, unequivocal submission to His lordship. His subsequent life proved that he never withdrew that allegiance. It should be remembered that in New Testament times a confession of Christ as Lord meant an irreversible change in public life. It needs to be clearly stated and strongly emphasized in our day that the Lord Jesus Christ has absolute and final authority over the whole church and every member of it in all details of daily life.

Seeing that our adversary the devil is always trying to seduce the disciple from following Christ, it is not surprising that some disciples do withdraw their allegiance. When Christ’s teaching runs counter to their worldly and carnal desires, they take the reins of life back into their own hands.

But Christ will not reign over a divided kingdom. If there was a time when Christ was really crowned as king in your life, it is salutary to ask the question, “Is Christ still king of my life in daily practice?” Thank God that even if allegiance has been withdrawn, on confession of that sin we can renew that coronation, and He will graciously reassume the throne.

What Is Involved in Christ’s Lordship?

Let us examine what submitting to Christ’s lordship really means.

**Full Submission to His Authority**

“In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord” (1 Peter 3:15).

The verb is in the imperative, so it calls for a definite act of the will, by which we take our place at the feet of Christ in absolute surrender. Paul states that this was the objective of His death and resurrection: “For this very reason Christ died and returned to life, so that He might be the Lord, of both the dead and the living” (Rom. 14:9; italics added).

In one of the Napoleonic wars, Lord Nelson defeated the French navy. The defeated admiral brought his flagship alongside Nelson’s vessel and went aboard to make his surrender. He approached Nelson smilingly, with his sword swinging at his side. He held out his hand to the victor.

Nelson made no response to this gesture but said quietly, “Your sword first, sir.” Laying down the sword was a visible token of surrender.

So, like Paul, we must lay down the sword of our rebellion and self-will. Henceforth His will becomes the law of our lives. Our consistent attitude will be: “Thy will be done [in me] as it is done in heaven.” Submission means the complete surrender of our rights. That sounds a frightening prospect, but the experience of missions has proved that it is the path of unimagined blessing.

*Make me a captive, Lord,*
*And then I shall be free,*
*Force me to render up my sword*
*And I shall conqueror be.* (George Matheson)

**Recognition of His Ownership**

“He is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36).

The word Lord here carries the idea of an owner who has control of all his possessions. Unless we recognize that fact in
practice, Christ’s reign over us is purely nominal. We are His by creation, and we are His by self-surrender. All that we have we hold as trustees, not as owners. But His gifts are to be enjoyed. God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim. 6:17).

The story of Sir John Ramsden of Huddersfield, England, provides an interesting sidelight on this aspect of truth. I have checked the accuracy of the story with an old man from Huddersfield, who, when a boy, used to run messages for a Quaker and was rewarded with an orange and a penny.

When quite a young man Sir John saw that Huddersfield was destined from its location in Yorkshire to become a great industrial center. Property was certain to acquire a largely increased value in the near future. He therefore began quietly to purchase houses and lands, and in a few years he was possessor of the whole of the town, with the exception of a cottage and garden that belonged to a Quaker gentleman.

All the overtures of the real estate men having proved futile, Sir John Ramsden himself called upon the Quaker to see what he could accomplish by personal influence. The usual courtesies having passed between the knight and the Quaker, Sir John Ramsden said, “I presume you know the object of my visit.”

“No,” said the Quaker with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Not unless thou’lt put them on edge.” That was altogether out of the question and somewhat chagrined the knight rose to leave. As he was going the Quaker said, “Remember, Sir John, that Huddersfield belongs to thee and to me.”

Although the Quaker owned a very small part of the town, he could walk over all the rest of Sir John’s town to reach the part that belonged to him.

In every life in which Christ’s claims are recognized only in part, a similar situation arises. Satan can say to Him, “That disciple belongs to You and to me! He is a Christian worker, but I control part of his life.” Where Christ is not lord in practice, life becomes a battleground of conflicting interests.

Unquestioning Obedience


Obedience from the heart is the true and unmistakable evidence of the reality of Christ’s lordship in our lives. Disobedience vitiates all our professions of loyalty. Our performance speaks more loudly than our professions. The test is not what I say but what I do.

Were it not for Calvary’s revelation of the heart of God, we might well fear God’s sovereignty and think His demands tyrannical. Calvary has set that fear to rest once for all.

There was a man in Germany, a village organist, who one day was practicing on the church organ, playing a piece by that master of music Mendelssohn.

He was not playing it very well, and a stranger stole into the church and sat in the dimness of a back pew. He noted the imperfections of the organist’s performance, and when the latter had ceased playing and was preparing to depart, the stranger made bold to go to him and say, “Sir, would you allow me to play for a little?”

The man said gruffly, “Certainly not! I never allow anybody to touch the organ but myself.”
Spiritual Discipleship

“I should be so glad if you would allow me the privilege!”

Again the man made a gruff refusal. The third time the appeal was allowed, but most ungraciously.

The stranger sat down, pulled out the stops, and on that same instrument began to play. And, oh, what a difference! He played the same piece, but with wonderful change. It was as if the whole church was filled with heavenly music.

The organist asked, “Who are you?”

In modesty the stranger replied, “My name is Mendelssohn.”

“What!” said the man, now covered with mortification. “Did I refuse you permission to play on my organ?”

Let us not withhold any part of our lives from the mastery of Christ.

It may be that you are thinking, I recognize Christ’s claim to lordship of my life, and I want to live under His lordship, but my will is so weak. It lets me down at the crucial moment. How can I maintain recognition of His lordship? How can I keep Him on the throne of my life?

Paul anticipated this dilemma when he wrote, “No one can say [“keep on saying” gives the tense of the verb] ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3; italics added).

The Holy Spirit is sent to enable the disciple to keep Christ on the throne of the believer’s life, and He delights to do it. He will detach our hearts from the world and attach our affections to Christ. He will empower our weak wills and make them strong to do the will of God.

Other lords have long held sway,
Now Thy name alone to hear,
Thy dear voice alone obey,
Is my daily, hourly prayer
Let my heart be all Thine own,
Let me live to Thee alone.
(F.R. Havergal)

Give up your self, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.

C.S. Lewis
True Conversion and Wholehearted Commitment

(continued from page 7)
	nature, a shattering of God’s image within, immediate spiritual death, eventual physical death, alienation from God, the incurring of his judgment, and expulsion from the garden.

From then on, human nature ceased to be centered on loving God and neighbor and became curved in on itself. Since that time, men and women have been born into the world alienated from God, and they find themselves spiritually dead, centered on themselves, and wanting to go their own way. Because of their darkened hearts, they willfully sin and ensnare themselves in patterns of behavior that further corrupt the already shattered image of God in their lives. Idolatries develop, leading to compulsive behaviors that become deeply ingrained and difficult to change. The world system, that is, human life organized without reference to God, expresses the values of fallen humanity and reinforces and gives them social sanction. Thus people are blinded to their plight and trapped in their sins. This tragic result of original sin has been at the root of all human misery from that day to this.

Yet all along God has been at work, reaching out to lost people with his grace. Through Abraham, he established a chosen people. And through Moses he delivered them from bondage and gave them “a land flowing with milk and honey.” Through priests and prophets he called Israel to trust him (faith) and when they strayed to turn back to him (repent), receive his forgiveness, love him wholeheartedly and obey his good commands (commitment), and enjoy his blessings. With steadfast love and faithfulness, he blessed them with his grace. Some responded in faith and loving obedience. But the majority either succumbed to the idolatrous, immoral pagan culture around them (as many nominal “Christians” are doing today) or reacted to it with a form of holiness that degenerated into moralistic self-righteousness (as others are doing).

**True Conversion**

Into such a world, filled with sin, suffering, sorrow and death, came Jesus of Nazareth. He came not to make bad people good but to make dead people alive! He came to “deliver his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). He was “Immanuel, God with us” (Matt. 1:23), who came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). His mission was reflected in his message. John the Baptist announced it by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). After John was arrested, Jesus began to preach “the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). In him, the reign of God was breaking into the world in a new way with a fresh offer of grace, calling for a radical decision. Obedience to the command to repent and believe was the only acceptable response, for these were the essential requirements for true conversion to Christ and submission to God’s reign.

Today when we hear the words *repent* and *believe*, our tendency is to think we know what they mean. But do we really? In spite of being widely used in the Amer-
True Conversion and Wholehearted Commitment

can church, few people undertake a careful word study. As a result, many in the church are confused or misinformed. But help is at hand if we will examine the true biblical meaning of the words and refresh or revise our understanding as needed.

What, then, did Jesus mean by the word repent? And how does it apply to us today? The main Greek word translated repent in our New Testament means a “change of mind.” That is part of what Jesus meant by this word. However, Jesus was not a Greek but a Jew. And his understanding of repentance grew out of the key Hebrew word for repentance in the Old Testament, which means “to turn.” Through the prophets, God repeatedly spoke to the backslidden Israelites, urging them to repent, that is, to wake up to their sin, humble themselves, and turn back to him and his righteous ways. This call is prominent in the Old Testament and means not only a change of mind, but a turning of the heart back to God, manifested in forsaking sin and embracing obedience.¹ In the New Testament, John the Baptist used the word this same way. Matthew’s Gospel records that John charged the Pharisees to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (3:8). In other words, they were to demonstrate inner change through outward behavior. In Luke, when the crowd asked for specifics about the shape of repentance, John said, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” To tax collectors, he said, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” And to soldiers, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be content with your wages” (3:10–14).

A vivid and touching depiction of repentance is found in Luke’s account of the prodigal son, who willfully left his father, gave himself to a life of sin and experienced the hard consequences of his choices. When at last “he came to himself,” he recognized how far he had fallen and purposed in his heart to return to his father, confess his sin, and ask for mercy (15:17–20). This is a beautiful picture of repentance and (along with the two parables on repentance that precede it) shows the joy—yes, joy—that repentance brings in heaven and in us.

Summarizing, one noted scholar describes repentance in this way:

_The New Testament word for repentance means changing one’s mind so that one’s views, values, goals, and ways are changed and one’s whole life is lived differently. The change is radical, both inwardly and outwardly; mind and judgment, will and affections, behavior and life-style, motives and purposes, are all involved. Repenting means starting to live a new life._²

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¹ Matthew 3:8

² The author provides a detailed explanation of the concept of repentance based on biblical texts, emphasizing the profound change it entails in an individual's life.
There are very few who in their hearts do not believe in God, but what they will not do is give Him exclusive right of way. They are not ready to promise full allegiance to God alone.

D.L. Moody
True Conversion and Wholehearted Commitment

A significant point to note about the words repent and believe in Mark 1:15 is that in the Greek text both are present imperative verbs, signifying continuing action. So while there is certainly the initial exercise of both at conversion, when we are saved, in the process of ongoing sanctification there will be a deepening of repentance and faith as we discover the depths of remaining sin and encounter the many challenges of life.

In other words, they continue to play a role in the lifelong process of being conformed into the likeness of Christ, restored to the image of God.

This description of repentance and faith is nothing new; it is rooted in the Scriptures and was the message of Jesus, Peter, Paul, the apostles, and saints and scholars throughout the history of the church.

Wholehearted Commitment

Jesus called everyone who would follow him, that is, everyone who would be a true Christian, to a wholehearted commitment to himself. This alone can free us from our enslavement to self and liberate us for joyful obedience to him. We see this in Mark 8:34–38, where he issued a profound challenge to both the crowd gathered around him and to his disciples. Jesus said:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever will save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels (emphasis added).

A brief overview of the context will help us better understand this much neglected but vitally important passage. Jesus is here addressing two very different audiences. He and his disciples were on a retreat in Caesarea Philippi, a pagan area and center for the worship of the god Pan. The crowds in that region would have been nonbelievers and his words to them pointed out the way of salvation and eternal destiny, as verses 35—38 make clear. This, what Jesus says here applies to all people, not just his disciples.

For his disciples, however, these words were a reminder and further explication of the way of salvation, which they had embarked on when they accepted the invitation to follow him, that is, to become his disciples. This was vital preparation for what they would soon encounter when he would be arrested, falsely charged, and killed. During their retreat they had come to a clearer grasp of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, with Peter boldly declaring, “You are the Christ!” However, there was a problem. Like many others of the day, the disciples’ idea of the Messiah was one of a God-empowered leader who would deliver Israel from Roman control and usher in an era of unparalleled blessing. In stark contrast, Jesus told them that he would soon “suffer many things, be rejected by the chief priests and scribes, and be killed” (Mark 8:31). These two ideas were totally incompatible in their minds. They expected a conquering Messiah; a suffering, dying Messiah was unthinkable. They had not understood that the Messiah would come first as a Suffering Servant. If their faith were to withstand the events just ahead, they would have to recognize that they were disciples of a Messiah whose devotion to God meant...
denying himself and embracing death for a lost and dying world, with all that that implied for their own lives. Ironically, many true Christians are in that same situation today; we find it hard to grasp that we are disciples of the Suffering Servant, whom to follow requires a costly obedience.

What, then, did Jesus mean when he said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me”? The phrase “come after me” was commonly used to refer to following someone as a disciple. But what about “denying” oneself? Today we often use this expression to mean refusing oneself a legitimate pleasure of some sort, for example, giving up sweets during Lent. However, this is not what Jesus meant.

Professor F.F. Bruce, one of the greatest evangelical New Testament scholars of the twentieth century, explains, “Denying oneself is not a matter of giving up something, whether for Lent or the whole of life; it is a decisive saying ‘No’ to oneself, to one’s hopes and plans and ambitions, to one’s likes and dislikes, to one’s nearest and dearest, for the sake of Christ.”

Another noted New Testament scholar, Professor C.E.B. Cranfield, says it this way, “to deny oneself is to disown, not just one’s sins but one’s self, to turn away from the idolatry of self-centeredness.” Denying self, then, is not giving up something, it is giving up someone. It is renouncing and turning from one’s old self as the center of life and embracing Christ as the new center of one’s life. It describes the fundamental shift of allegiance and reorientation of life that occurs at conversion. “This is not self-denial in the current sense of the word, but true conversion, the very first essential of the Christian life,” says R.C.H. Lenski. Likewise, William Hendrickson says, we “must once for all say farewell to the old self, the self as it is apart from regenerating grace.”

One must say a decisive “no” to everything that stands in the way of saying a radical “yes” to Christ. In the Greek text, the aorist imperative verb here speaks of this action as a definitive event in one’s life. Yet how many people in today’s church are even aware that a whole-hearted renouncing of self and commitment to Christ lies at the heart of true conversion and daily discipleship? How may have made such a decisive renunciation? Is this perhaps one of the reasons why we see so much self-indulgent, worldly living among believers today and so little authentic Christianity? Only those who have crossed this Rubicon will be able to proceed to the next requirement for following Jesus.

“Taking up one’s cross” is another expression we use today to mean something very different from what Jesus intended his hearers to understand. When we speak of having to “bear a cross,” we are usually referring to some unpleasant or difficult circumstance with which we have to live. But what Jesus meant was far more demanding. Again, Professor Bruce:

The sight of a man being taken to the place of public execution was not unfamiliar in the Roman world of that day. Such a man was commonly made to carry the crossbeam, the patibulum, of his cross as he went to his death. That is the picture which Jesus’s words would conjure up in the minds of his hearers. If they were not prepared for that outcome to their discipleship, let them change their minds while there was time—but let them first weigh the options in the balances of the kingdom of God: “for whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”
True Conversion and Wholehearted Commitment

Jesus was clearly asking those who would follow him to count the cost and commit themselves in advance to give up their very lives if faithfulness to him should require it. Once again, the text has an aorist imperative, speaking of this as a definite event. But how many of us have done this? Only those who deny themselves and take up their crosses will be able to do the last thing Jesus said: “Follow me.” The reason is simple. When we answer the call of Christ, life becomes both easier and harder. It is easier because of the blessings of grace, but harder because we enter an unrelenting combat against our old selves, the fallen world around us, and the schemes of the devil. Faithfully following Christ in this battle is possible only if we wholeheartedly put his will and interests ahead of our own, regardless of the cost. For as long as we retain our personal autonomy and seek to preserve our self-centered interests, we won’t be able to submit ourselves to his will when it conflicts with ours. And as long as we value our physical survival more than his glory, we will not be able to stand firm in the face of death. Once we make these decisive commitments, we will encounter challenges that require us to reaffirm them again and again. And we will discover that as we do, they grow deeper and stronger.

What, then, did Jesus mean when he said, “Follow me”? He meant we should obey his commands and seek to walk as he walked, live as he lived. The essence of Jesus’ commands and life was loving obedience to God and sacrificial service to one’s neighbor, regardless of the personal cost. Thus we are called to follow Jesus’ precepts and example by living a life of holy love, striving for that perfection in love that begins in this world and comes to fullness in the world to come where at last the image of God will be fully restored in us.

Such a life seems impossible when we consider our self-centeredness, sins, and weaknesses. And indeed it is impossible apart from grace. But Jesus knows how weak we are, and he has made the impossible possible for us through the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit creates the community of faith to nurture us. The Spirit makes the Word become alive and powerful in us. The Spirit pours out God’s love into our hearts. The Spirit enables us joyfully to abandon ourselves to God, to daily put to death the works of our fallen nature, and to be progressively transformed into the likeness of Jesus himself. The Spirit calls us to mission, gifts us for ministry, and enables us to fulfill the works God has prepared us to do for his glory. All these things and more he will do as we earnestly seek to be filled with the Spirit and walk in the Spirit. It is significant that the Greek verb we render “follow” is not an aorist but a present imperative, indicating continuing action. That is, Jesus asks us to follow him faithfully day by day to our life’s end.

He knows, of course, that we will not do it perfectly. Throughout our lives we will encounter temptations, trials, resistance, and persecution. And there will be times when we stumble and fall, sometimes tragically. When we do, it drives us back to the cross in repentance for our sin and in faith that the blood he shed for us saves to the uttermost. He who could forgive Peter, who denied him, will surely do no less for us. Then, like Peter, forgiven, restored and humbled, we march on with fresh hope and renewed commitment.

What Jesus teaches about true conversion and wholehearted commitment is not some-
thing most American church-goers will want to hear. As James Houston once observed, “Most church members don’t want growth, they want to remain comfortably asleep.” As a result, this is not something most preachers will want to address, since it will definitely “rock the boat” and might lead to reduce attendance and giving. But it is something we desperately need to hear again from the pulpits of our land.

Whenever individuals and churches have lost sight of these realities, the effects have been devastating on personal life, congregational life and the reputation of the church before the watching world. And that is where we are today. The greatest problem in the church at this time is that so many Christians have such a shallow grasp and experience of these transforming truths. But when these blessed truths have been recovered, it has led to personal revival, church renewal, and evangelistic fruitfulness. Such a recovery is what we desperately need today.

Conclusion

In this article, we have simply tried to restate the obvious: in laying down his life for us, and calling us to true conversion and wholehearted commitment, Jesus Christ is urging us to turn from a self-centered life that is the fruit of the Fall and to turn to himself and the God-centered life of the world to come. It is a call to a life of grace in all its fullness, freedom, and joy, a call to the only kind of life that will matter in the end. And the response he desires comes not from guilt, fear, idealism, or heroism, but from humble, grateful obedience, freely given out of love for him who loved us and gave himself up for us, and who said, “If you love me, you will obey me” (John 14:15).

Notes


In the same way the church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became man for no other purpose.

C.S. Lewis
Bidding his friends good-bye, especially his beloved Jerusha, and assuring her that “we shall spend a happy eternity together,” David Brainerd died on October 9, 1747, at the age of twenty-nine. His soul, writes Jonathan Edwards, “as we may well conclude, was received by his dear Lord and Master, as an eminently faithful servant, into that state of perfection and fruition of God, which he had so often and so ardently longed for; and was welcomed by the glori-ous assembly in the upper world, as one peculiarly fitted to join them in their blessed employments and enjoyments.”

A few months later, on Sunday, February 14, Jerusha died. The grief-stricken father, who said that Jerusha was “generally esteemed the flower of the family,” preached her funeral sermon on the poignant words from Job—“Youth is like a flower that is cut down.” She was seventeen years old. Her body was buried next to Brainerd’s in the Northampton Cemetery.

David Brainerd’s brief life was consumed by two great passions. On February 4, 1744, he wrote in his diary: “Sanctification in myself, and the ingathering of God’s elect, was all my desire; and the hope of its accomplishment, all my joy.”

Edwards’s *Life of David Brainerd* begins with a classic sentence: “There are two ways of representing and recommending true religion and virtue to the world… the one is by doctrine and precept, the other is by instance and example.” Edwards had already dealt with the matter of true and false religion theologically in *The Distinguishing Marks of the Work of the Spirit of God* (1741) and *The Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746). In 1749 he published Brainerd’s *Life* as “a remarkable instance of true and eminent piety, in heart and practice.”

Every page of Brainerd’s diary is filled with expressions of longing for holiness. On January 1, 1746, he wrote: “O that I might live nearer to God this year than I did the last… May I for the future be enabled more sensibly to make the glory of God my all.”

Brainerd attempted to “live to God in every capacity of life.” He prayed: “May I never loiter in my heavenly journey.”

One can find shortcomings in Brainerd’s life. Edwards notes a tendency to melancholy, which Brainerd himself found to be “a great hindrance to spiritual fervency.” Edwards also faults Brainerd for “being excessive in his labours, not taking due care of his strength.” Understandably, Brainerd struggled with loneliness. He knew that solitude aggravated his trials but it was better, he thought, than to be “incumbered with noise and tumult.” There is little or no appreciation for the beauties of God’s creation in Brainerd’s diary, unlike Edwards, who saw images of God’s glory and excellence everywhere. Edwards, however, found the
young man who was dying in his home “remarkably sociable, pleasant and entertaining in his conversation; yet solid, savoury, spiritual and very profitable; appearing meek, modest and humble, far from any stiffness, moroseness, superstitious demureness, or affected singularity in speech or behaviour.”

Jonathan Edwards believed that Brainerd’s life “shows the right way to success in the work of the ministry,” and “his example of labouring, praying, denying himself, and enduring hardness, with unfainting resolution and patience, and his faithful, vigilant, and prudent conduct in many other respects… may afford instruction to missionaries in particular.” The last words of Brainerd’s diary sum up his missionary passion: “May this blessed work… prevail among the poor Indians here as well as spread elsewhere till their remotest tribes shall see the salvation of God! Amen.”

David Brainerd’s faith was steady rather than flashy. It was not, writes Edwards, “like a land-flood, which flows far and wide and with a rapid stream bearing down all before it, and then dried up; but more like a stream fed by living springs; which though sometimes increased by showers, and at other times diminished by drought, yet is a constant stream.”

Brainerd’s influence grew remarkably within the transatlantic evangelical community through The Life of David Brainerd, Edwards’s most frequently reprinted and widely read book. It was the first American biography to reach a large European audience. It became the best-selling religious book in nineteenth-century America (with more than thirty different editions) and remains in print to the present day.

John Wesley prepared an abridged version of Edwards’s book and recommended it with the words: “Let every preacher read carefully over The Life of David Brainerd. Let us be followers of him, as he was of Christ, in absolute self-devotion, in total deadness to the world, and in fervent love to God and man.”

In 1769 John Newton wrote: “Next to the Word of God, I like those books best which give an account of the lives and experiences of His people… No book of this kind has been more welcome to me than the life of Mr. Brainerd of New England.”

Brainerd’s missionary career spanned less than five years, but Edwards’s Life of David Brainerd revealed a missionary hero whose impact was astounding. The little book made a significant contribution to the new era of missions that sent British and American Christians to many parts of the world.

Archibald Alexander said that a missionary spirit was enkindled in the New Side Presbyterian Church as a result of the publication of Brainerd’s diary.

As William Carey prepared to go to India, Brainerd’s Life was “almost a second Bible.” When Carey, Ward, and Marshman signed the historic agreement that laid down the principles of their missionary work at Serampore, they agreed to “often look at Brainerd in the woods of America, pouring out his very soul before God for the perishing heathen without whose salvation nothing could make him happy.”

Robert Murray McCheyne was deeply moved when he first read Brainerd’s Life in 1832. He remarked that as a result of Brainerd’s example he was “more set upon missionary enterprise than ever.” A few years later McCheyne wrote in a letter: “O to have Brainerd’s heart for perfect holiness.”

In the preface to an 1851 reprint of The Life of David Brainerd, Horatius Bonar warned against taking Brainerd’s life as a perfect life and points out some few defects,
but goes on to hold up his life as a protest “against the easy-minded religion of our day.” If Brainerd’s life, Bonar stated, is used to quicken our consciences and urge us forward in the “same path of high attainment,” we will find it “an unspeakable blessing.” The example of Brainerd’s “life of marvelous nearness to... God, which he lived during his brief day on earth,” continues to inspire Christians, Bonar wrote. “His life was not a great life, as men use the word,” Bonar concluded, but it was “a life of one plan, expending itself in the fulfillment of one great aim, and in the doing of one great deed—serving God.”

Two hundred and fifty years after Brainerd’s death, The Life of David Brainerd still challenges and inspires readers.

Oswald J. Smith, founding pastor of the People’s Church in Toronto, paid tribute to Brainerd with these words:

So greatly was I influenced by the life of David Brainerd in the early years of my ministry that I named my youngest son after him. When I was but eighteen years of age, I found myself 3,000 miles from home, a missionary to the Indians. No wonder I love Brainerd! Brainerd it was who taught me to fast and pray. I learned that greater things could be wrought by daily contact with God than by preaching. When I feel myself growing cold I turn to Brainerd and he always warms my heart. No man ever had a greater passion for souls. To live wholly for God was his one great aim and ambition.

A few years ago, John Piper wrote:

I thank God for the ministry of David Brainerd in my own life—the passion for prayer, the spiritual feast of fasting, the sweetness of the Word of God, the unremitting perseverance through hardship, the relentless focus on the glory of God, the utter dependence on grace, the final resting in the righteousness of Christ, the pursuit of perishing sinners, the holiness while suffering, the fixing the mind on what is eternal, and finishing well without cursing the disease that cut him down at twenty-nine.

The “constant stream” still flows.

There have been many editions of Brainerd’s diary. The Life of David Brainerd, edited by Norman Pettit, appeared in 1985, as volume 7 in The Works of Jonathan Edwards, (Yale University Press). Books by Marcus Loane, Oswald J. Smith, and John Piper cited in the following notes contain helpful short chapters on David Brainerd.

Notes


I feel that, if I could live a thousand lives, I would like to live them all for Christ, and even then, I would feel that they were all too little a return for His great love to me.

C.H. Spurgeon
Called & Committed:  
World Changing Discipleship

David Watson

Christians in the West have largely neglected what it means to be disciples of Christ. The vast majority of Western Christians – church-members, pew-fillers, hymn-singers, sermon-tasters, Bible-readers, even born-again-believers or Spirit-filled-charismatics – are not true disciples of Jesus. If we were willing to become disciples, the church in the West would be transformed, and the impact on society would be staggering. And this is no idle claim. In the first century, a tiny handful of inexperienced, timid disciples initiated, in the power of the Spirit, the greatest spiritual revolution the world has ever known. Within three centuries, even the mighty Roman Empire yielded to the power of the gospel of Christ.

Collect for Pentecost

Almighty God,

whose most dear Son went not up to joy
but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified:
Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross,
may find it none other than the way of life and peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.
When C.S. Lewis became a Christian as an adult convert, he came as a surrendered man, but still needed to learn what being a Christian entailed. This study program presents Lewis's understanding of prayer and thoughts about other aspects of Christian life.

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