Come, Follow Me  
“Come, Follow: The Great Invitation”

October 25/26, 2014  
Digging Deeper  
Come, Follow Me “Come, Follow: The Great Invitation”  
Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@c1naz.org)

Background Notes  

John 1:35-51  
35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"  
36 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.  
37 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?"  
38 He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.  
40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.  
41 He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed).  
42 He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).  
43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."  
44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.  
45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."  
46 Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."  
47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"  
48 Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."  
49 Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"  
50 Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these."  
51 And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Luke 5:27-32  
27 After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me."  
28 And he got up, left everything, and followed him.  
29 Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them.  
30 The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"  
31 Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."

Matthew 8:18-22  
18 Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side.  
19 A scribe then approached and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."  
20 And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."  
21 Another of his disciples said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."  
22 But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

Introduction to this Series  
“Walk this way.” Those words introduce a really bad joke that invites imitating the gait of the inviter, rather than the simple act of following him. When Jesus used the words “Come, follow me,” he had no such double intentions, though his listeners usually failed to understand the full implication of his invitation. Did any of his first disciples really understand what Jesus meant when they decided to follow him without knowing where following him would lead? Do any of us comprehend decisions like this when we make them? For example, did any of us having any idea what it would mean when we swore ourselves through sacred vows to a life-long experience of monogamy? Probably not. “What did I get myself into?” might be a fitting aftershock. At my own wedding, a neighbor lady greeted me in the reception line with “Now you’ve done it!” Her cynicism was lost on me for the moment when nuptial celebration and good food at the reception seemed the more appropriate pleasant thoughts. But in her case, she had recently suffered the loss of her husband through sudden heart ache and death, and little about marriage felt especially good to her then.
What feels good to us when we say the words “I have decided to follow Jesus,” taken from a hymn written within the Indian culture and commonly used in the English speaking world at baptisms or altar calls? Is following Jesus, rightly understand within the gospel accounts noted above, a matter of what we decide or does this call transcend our whimsy when invitations at church meetings tug at our heartstrings? Do I decide to follow Jesus in the same way I decide to take a new job or marry a spouse or have children or change my clothes? Or, how do I square up my decision to follow Jesus with the simple fact that I never decided to be an American? Is it possible that parental guidance, church influence, and place of birth conspired to make me a follower of Jesus quite apart from my decision, so that what I actually decided was to accept the decision others made on my behalf before I was ever conscious of making any decision at all?

Few Christians in the west (including the U.S.) are innocent in their religious choices, even if they check “No” on the recent census when asked about affiliation. For them, doing so implies that they have long decided that not following Jesus has become their most recent decision even if others once chose for them. And even then, they may have decided not to follow Jesus by allowing their regular participation in church life to merely lapse, probably when they passed their teenage years and had half a brain to start thinking on their own. College has a way of waking children from their dogmatic slumbers and shocking parents into recognizing that, like it or not, the young person they claim as their offspring no longer decides what their parents once decided for them. Welcome to adulthood! I realize the cynicism in what I’ve written here, and cynics are, by and large, cowards at heart, not wanting to believe anything is quite so certain as to decide about it. After all deciding to follow Jesus sounds like a choice we should probably stick with through “hell and high water.” Who among us honestly faces that choice with enthusiasm?

And yet, scattered throughout the story of Jesus told us in the four Gospels, are incidents where Jesus issues the Great Invitation to make a radical break with the tried and true habits of the past, and venture forth into unknown waters, through treacherous wilderness, toward uncertain futures, and for risky rewards. He does all of this because he believes in a Big Idea expressed in his words and deeds, that depends on his own person to bring it about. He called that idea, “the kingdom of God.” By doing so, he put himself at immediate odds with other kingdoms that exhibited their great power all around Israel in the first century of our common era (CE). I am referring, of course, to Roman rule from Caesar on down and to Jewish rule largely found in the High Priest and also the family of Herod, Rome’s proxy. Only rebels and madmen talk freely about the coming of another kingdom, one that promises to challenge in some way the present kingdoms of the world.

Jesus was not the first to speak of coming kingdoms and regime changes. Jews had grown weary of the contrived system of justice rigged by Rome and Jerusalem to govern Israel. Jews hated the sight of Roman crosses that ringed the hilltops around Jerusalem — reminders that Rome ruled here and not them. Roman troops, even in small numbers, that made predictable appearances during major feast days, angered the sensibilities of observant Jews who considered Roman military might an insult to the promise of Torah that Israel’s God offered peace (shalom) to the world, not to mention the violation of sacred space where only observant followers of Torah ought to be found. So, to counter these pagan intrusions, small bands of insurgents frequented the dark valleys while waiting for soldiers to pass on the highways leading into and out of Jerusalem, and then attack them with daggers, picking them off one by one. More aggressive lestes, as they were called in the Greek language, brigands against Rome, called for followers to accompany them on a grand crusade to rid Palestine of the unclean occupiers. Such men were Judas the Galilean whose tax protest led the Romans to crucify 2,000 of his followers shortly after the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE.

To follow Judas the Galilean meant casting one’s lot with a movement, a cause, and a promise of a different kind of rule — a new kingdom — to replace the old one. It also meant “come and die.” Whether these rebel leaders saw themselves as would-be Messiahs or something quite less, yet the outcomes of their movements unsettled the landscape on the eastern edge of the Empire which Herod the Great had once promised to defend as a favor to Rome. As time passed, the momentum of such insurgency grew exponentially. Nearly forty years after Jesus’ time, in the year 66 CE, the momentum became a movement that swept throughout Galilee and
Judea, joining together unlikely coalition partners from Zealots to Essenes to right-wing Pharisees. By the time the seven year war against Rome ended, the bleeding ruins of Masada testified to the utter loss of Jewish influence with Rome and the end of city and temple with it. Even a much later attempt under Bar Kochba (“son of the star”), sanctioned by Rabbi Akiba, in 135 CE failed. Jerusalem became a Roman city dedicated to Jupiter in contradiction to its sacred status as “Zion the City of God.”

Right in the middle of these movements Jesus arrives. He, too, asks people, “Follow me.” The statistics speak for themselves as we examine the word usage in the Gospels:
1. Matthew: 6x
2. Mark: 4x
3. Luke 5x
4. John 6x

“Do what I do,” he is saying to his audiences. “Throw in your lot with me. Stake your life on what I am teaching and how I am living. Trust yourself to the way I am following. Trust me.” In a world of mistrust and suspicion, where seasoned institutions fail to inspire confidence and the least among us fall victim to predators in places of trust, the call of Jesus is even more pertinent. Reading the stories of Jesus in the Gospels builds our faith, our trust, our confidence that this man has no designs to rob us or deceive us. When Jesus addressed the blind man in the 9th chapter of John’s Gospel, he asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” In effect he was inviting the man to follow him implicitly, and to this the blind man responded, “Who is he Lord, that I might believe in him.” A simple “I am he” from Jesus was sufficient to elicit the words of commitment: “I believe.” He decided to follow Jesus by taking refuge in him.

What this series ultimately asks is “Will you follow Jesus?” What you won’t hear is “Will you accept this list of basic beliefs?” or “Try out Jesus” or “Come and have all of your needs met.” None of those invitations ever left the lips of Jesus when he spoke plainly the words, “Come, follow me.” Instead, he challenged everyone who would join him in his call for the coming kingdom of God, “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). In other words, choose the life you are willing to live and die for; choose that life that only makes sense because Jesus lived, died, and rose again to make it possible. The truth of following Jesus lies precisely in this: The way we live our lives would make no sense unless God raised this Jesus from the dead.

Introduction to this Week’s Study
A number of important texts from the Gospels help us understand what it means to follow Jesus. We will begin with the most recent Gospel account, that of John, and then examine Luke and Matthew. To a certain extent, Mark stands behind the main theme for the other writers, from the rough and tumble fishermen to the wealthy scholar (Mark 1:17 and 10:21). Each Gospel carries the same message without hesitation.

Perhaps besides the word “follow,” the term “disciple” holds equal importance for the witnesses of the earliest Christian evangelists. We often toss around in the church the idea of “making disciples” or having a discipleship ministry” or “establishing discipling relationships” with new coverts. And yet, with the exception of the gang named “The Disciples,” the language has little traction in the wider culture. Had we talked with people in Jesus’ time, however, the recognition value for the Hebrew equivalent, talmidim, would have been high. Skilled rabbis regularly called young men to join them for extended periods of training that included not only learning the great biblical texts but also observing the lives of their teachers. They learned what it meant to be an observant Jew who was capable of emulating and exceeding their Master. They aspired to preserving Jewish identity in a world that constantly pressured them to trade it for something else. Among the Pharisees, having such disciples was the lifeblood of a continuing Judaism.

What we learn from the example of Jesus is a fresh, new way of calling disciples. He knew how others practiced their craft and consciously did his work differently. At one point, according to Matthew, Jesus chided his contemporaries by saying: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (Matthew
23:15). Following another human being is risky business, since to do so involves becoming like them. Jesus offered his followers the kind of life worth dying for.

**A Collection of Characters Who Follow Jesus (John 1:35-51)**

Consider it a potpourri of future followers in just a few verses of John’s Gospel. Our first introduction is to a man named John (not the writer) aka “John the Baptist” or “John the Baptizer” whom we’ll refer to as Jقب! His name appears in 1:35-36 as the fellow who pointed Jesus out to others, and, in effect, worked himself out of job. He would later comment about his relationship to Jesus: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (3:30), likening himself to the “friend of the bridegroom” in his role as the one “sent ahead of him” (3:28) and as the one whose “joy has been fulfilled” by Jesus’ arrival (3:29). Jقب was the pointer of the way to Jesus. He gave witness to Jesus so that others might follow him, and the essence of his message climaxes in the testimony of 1:36, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The prequel to this defining moment of witness is the following text:

> The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ 31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." 32 And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ 34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God" (John 1:29-34).

Of note in this quotation are the words “that he might be revealed to Israel,” an event made possible by the descend of the Spirit on Jesus when John baptized him. Jقب was a bridge between Israel before Jesus and Israel after Jesus’ coming. Historically, the church has embraced Jقب as a true follower of Jesus in its canon of saints, even though he is likely considered the last prophet of the Old Testament period (see Luke 7:26ff and Matthew 11:9ff for more details). During his public ministry, Jقب gave witness to the identity of Jesus, and this is especially true in the texts from John 1. We might say that after Jesus arrived, Jقب gave the “hand-off” of his own disciples, releasing them to follow Jesus.

That is, of course, what happens in 1:37 as two of Jقب’s disciples hear his testimony, “… and they followed Jesus.” In theological terms, we might suggest that Israel’s agenda after the coming of Jesus is one of moving toward him and away from the officialdom of Second Temple Judaism. Jقب was himself the son of a priest (see Luke 1), and the kind of things he did down by the Jordan River imitated ceremonial washings practiced at more formal locations near synagogues or near the Temple. Like the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Qumran sectaries, Jقب saw his role as preparing the way for the Lord in much the same sense as Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 40 and in the last of the writing prophets, Malachi (3:1). Once Jesus’ ministry ended, Jقب under extreme duress, left his public work and went to jail under the orders of Herod Antipas (see Matthew 11:2; 14:3, 10; Mark 6:17; Luke 3:30; John 3:24). It was not easy for Jقب to let go, and his imprisonment led to all sorts of doubts about the identity of Jesus in his mind (see Luke 7:18-23; Matthew 11:2-6). And yet Jesus assured him by telling about the Messianic works of healing, and further supported Jقب before the crowds, calling him the greatest of the prophets. For Jقب to let go meant the end of one age and the dawning of a new one. In its role as witness to Jesus, the church embarks on the same mission with the same vision of seeing human beings leave the old way of life and start the new one.

Thus, we come to the definitive statement in 1:37 that two disciples followed him. There seems to be a degree of protocol in their actions, as if following Jesus, like following a rabbi, was the first step in an unfolding act of initiation. “Jesus turned and saw them following” introduces the next step in which Jesus poses a crucial question: “What are you looking for?” Much could be poured out of those words, including the idea that they were simply along for the ride and were not necessarily committing to a life-long relationship to the Son of God! After all, Jesus was a fascination to the popular mind with his miracles and teachings, full of wonder and mystery. Were these two simply spiritual groupies? Jesus vets them with his question. Their response “Rabbi” immediately identifies them as true seekers of his instruction, true learners of the kind indicated by the Hebrew word talmidim. They wanted to cement a formal bond whereby he would become their master-teacher. Nor was this only about words and ideas of the classroom sort, for they add the additional question: “Where are you
staying.” In effect they were asking if they could do life together with Jesus, allowing them to observe not only how Jesus thought but how he lived every detail of his life. Ultimately such rabbi-talmidim relationships took seriously the connection between truth and life, doctrine and practice, word and deed. And Jesus, they would quickly learn, united all of these within his own person as the embodiment of God’s coming kingdom on earth. To follow Jesus meant to bear witness to how this all worked out in reality — his reality as God’s Son become human, living among us (see John 1:14). Jesus was eager to have these two as his disciples — his learners, and so he issues his invitation, “Come and see” (1:39).

What followed this encounter, told with some level of detail, is the arrival of the two (yet unnamed) at the place of Jesus’ residence (also unnamed) where they spent the rest of the day “with him.” There is even a diary note: “about four o’clock in the afternoon” (the Greek text says “the tenth hour,” based on sunrise at 6 a.m. as the beginning of the day)! Why bother with such a trivial detail? Speculation has been endless. We might suggest that a literal meaning implies an eyewitness accounting that those involved distinctly remembered and faithfully reported. A more symbolic interpretation leads to the common belief that “ten” has to do with fulfillment. Further comes the thought that if this was Friday, then the disciples would have been committed by Torah regulations to remain with Jesus through the Sabbath of the following day. In any case, the inclusion of this detail reinforces the reality of the event.

We are now introduced to one of the two unnamed disciples of JBap who followed Jesus. He is Andrew, and he is not silent! What follows in the text is a chain reaction of cascading calls from one person to another to follow Jesus. Naturally, Andrew, partner in the fishing business with his brother Simon, seeks out his sibling first (1:41). No doubt he imagined the implications for their vocation of following the Rabbi Jesus, and thus he does not wish to act without consulting Simon. But his consultation looks more like recruitment, as he enthusiastically tells his brother “We have found the Messiah,” at the same time “bringing Simon to Jesus” (1:42a). John’s Gospel consolidates much material in this section, for Jesus immediately says to Simon, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (=Peter)” (1:42b). The other Gospels (Matthew 16:17-18; Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14) dedicate a separate section to the renaming of this disciple, whereas John offers an advance announcement. In either case, we cannot help but be impressed with the style of Andrew’s witness. To follow Jesus, he realizes, means telling others about the One he has found, with special emphasis on close family members. John’s treatment of Andrew and Simon is highly personal, and this becomes a distinctive feature of his Gospel, namely, to present the encounter between Jesus and particular persons in concrete and personal ways. Of all the Gospels, John handles the matter of following Jesus in just such a fashion: individuals receive direct invitations and are nurtured by face-to-face conversations. Further, by receiving members of existing families, Jesus begins the process of forming a new family. By promising to change Simon’s name, Jesus is also promising to change his life.

Much has been made of the name Peter which comes from the Greek petros. Actually, the word was spoken in Aramaic by Jesus and would have been Kepha, commonly translated as Cephas. When Matthew gives us a fuller conversation between Jesus and Simon, he has Jesus play with the words so that the emphasis falls on the disciple’s role in the building of the church that can withstand the forces of Hades. John doesn’t want to wait several chapters to get that transformation before the readers, and so he gives Simon the name change in his very first chapter. Following Jesus means building the church through transformed lives. Following Jesus may begin individually but it doesn’t remain an individual endeavor. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote:

“Only in the fellowship do we learn rightly to be alone and only in aloneness do we learn rightly to live in fellowship...Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone” (From Life Together).

Elsewhere he said that when Christ calls a person he calls them alone, but then he doesn’t leave them alone. By offering Simon a new name, Jesus offered him a new future where other people would be intimately involved. At this point, it is helpful to compare John 21 where Jesus restores Peter after his passion week denials, and in so doing he commissions him “feed my sheep; feed by lambs.” Following Jesus would one day make Peter responsible for others.
The words “the next day” (1:43) introduce a new scene set in Galilee. Most of Jesus’ ministry happens in Galilee according to the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), almost to the exclusion of Judea and Jerusalem until well into their writing. For John there is less concentration on making Galilee quite so central. Still, John follows the general outline of a Galilean ministry even if he lacks the details. In this case, Galilee is the place where Jesus “found Philip” and issued a direct call: “Follow me.” Notice the variety of personal encounters arranged by John in his Gospel. If we compare the synoptic accounts, the call to follow Jesus is usually direct and initiated by Jesus, as is true in this instance.

As an aside, the writer of 1:44 offers a glimpse of the man Philip: “from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.” Once more attention falls on inter-personal associations which include connections through geography. A few comments on this city are in order.

Bethsaida is known as the birthplace of three of the Apostles – Peter, Andrew and Philip. Jesus himself visited Bethsaida and performed several miracles there. (Mark 8:22-26; Luke 9:10)

Et-Tel, the mound identified as ancient Bethsaida, is located on a basaltic spur north of the Sea of Galilee, near the inflow of the Jordan River into the Sea of Galilee. The Tel covers some 20 acres and rises 30 meters above a fertile valley. Geological and geomorphological studies show that in the past this valley was part of the Sea of Galilee. A series of earthquakes caused silt to accumulate, thus creating the valley and causing the north shore of the Sea of Galilee to recede. The result of this process, which continued until the Hellenistic period, was that Bethsaida, which had originally been built on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, came to be situated some 1.5 km. north of the shore.

The name Bethsaida means "house of the hunt" in Hebrew. Identification of Et-Tel with the site mentioned in the New Testament was proposed as early as 1838 by Robinson, but was not accepted by most contemporary researchers; yet excavations conducted since 1987 have confirmed the identification.

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Several courtyard-houses dating from this period were uncovered in the excavations. Constructed of basalt and probably two stories high, they included a paved, open courtyard surrounded by several rooms. Numerous fishing tools – lead weights for nets, iron anchors, needles and fishing hooks – were found in the houses, attesting to an economy based on fishing. One of the houses had a cellar in which ceramic wine amphorae and several vine pruning hooks were found (From Jewish Virtual Library: “Archaeology in Israel: Bethsaida”).

Later in Jesus’ ministry he takes this city to task for largely rejecting his kingdom work (Matthew 11:21; Luke 10:13), though they initially thronged him (Luke 9:10-11) and benefitted from his feeding of the 5,000 (9:12-17). According to John, at the end of Jesus’ public ministry, Greeks came from this city to meet with Jesus — a crucial moment that shifted his attention to the events of passion week and the cross (John 12:21ff). It is Philip, named in our text, who brings the word of the Greek arrival to Jesus (12:21). By accepting Jesus’ call to follow him, Philip would one day perform this important work. Following Jesus unlocks opportunities for unexpected ministry.

In our text, Philip tells his friend Nathaniel about Jesus, using unusual language to do so:

"We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth" (1:45).

His testimony is simple and closely related to the Jewish scriptures which he refers to as “law and prophets.” He also identifies Jesus as “son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Such a witness illustrates the variety with which people connected with Jesus: they were not necessarily using language that agrees with our present understanding. Following Jesus begins with where people currently are in their comprehension of him. We might be tempted to correct Philip’s perception, but might want to be patient with his process. Does he not effectively appeal to Nathaniel and finally draw him to Jesus? Is his lack of theological precision a hindrance to what he is able to do for his friend? It is enough for Philip to appeal to Law and Prophets — to the texts of his religious faith — in order to recognition that God is up to something important in the life of “Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”
With Galilean cynicism, Nathanael mutters under his breath, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (1:46). Later in John’s Gospel (21:2) we learn that Nathanael was from Cana, a rival town to Nazareth and possibly the source of his sarcasm. The synoptic Gospels never include his name in their lists of the Twelve Apostles, but they do include Bartholomew, leading the 9th century Ishodad of Merv to propose that they are the same person with different Hebrew names — a view commonly held, though disputed by scholars like Raymond Brown.¹ We do know that Galilee, if not Nazareth in particular, was a hotbed of revolutionary activity in the 1st century as evidenced by uprisings of the sort exemplified by Judas the Galilean. Was Nathanael alluding to this fact, even though he too was from Galilee? It’s hard to say. He clearly resisted the idea of Jesus as biblically relevant based on the reputation of his hometown. How often do people reject the message of Jesus because of his many bad associations in the contemporary world — associations like the way his presumed adherents dishonor his reputation?

Philip wisely sidesteps the digression about Nazareth and offers his invitation instead — one that we have heard already in this section of John: “Come and see.” On their first encounter, Jesus tells Nathanael what he thinks about him: “Truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit” (1:47). The conciseness of John’s Greek hides the power of Jesus’ meaning. Our version might be: “Here’s a guy who tells it like it is!” Or, “With Nathanael, what you see is what you get!” In other words, Jesus likes people who are plain speakers, even if they are edgy and socially intemperate; even if they come across as just a bit raw and undiplomatic. Nathanael didn’t care much about political correctness when he cut to the chase and spoke his mind about Jesus. Smelling a rat, Nathanael wants to know how Jesus found out about his straight-talking ways: did Philip rat on him? Or, is Nathanael becoming curious about the stranger from Nazareth? He decides to find out with, “Where did you get to know me?” (1:48). Notice the attention paid by the writer to Jesus’ ability to “know” people in ways that disarm them. This pattern will reappear elsewhere in his Gospel, as in the case of the woman at the well in chapter 4, and in John’s comment about how Jesus “knew what was in a person” in 2:25. Following Jesus means risking transparency with the One who knows us better than we know ourselves.

So it is that Nathanael discovers that transparency head on in Jesus’ reply to his question: “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” In other words, Philip is free of tattling on his friend, and Jesus has knowledge of Nathanael that exceeds ordinary human insight. The reference to the “fig tree” probably has several connections in Jewish thought. There was a popular saying about God’s blessing on Israel when “everyone sits under their own vine and fig tree” (1 Kings 4:26; Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10; Haggai 2:19) used as a promise for Israel’s hopeful future. Also, rabbis often taught or studied while sitting under a fig tree, and the Torah they read was compared to a fig tree (see Midrash Rabbah on Ecclesiastes 5:11 and the Babylonian Talmud Erubin 54a). Such ideas led early scholars like Augustine to propose that Nathanael himself was a rabbi. The imagery of “sitting under a tree” has been connected to other trees in the Bible, including the ones in Eden. These associations are speculative, to be sure, but might have relevance to our text. On a more practical note, the act of sitting under a fig tree might simply be a detail that Jesus knew about Nathanael that surprised the man, as if Jesus had no way of knowing such a thing unless he had special insight from God.

Because of its level of detail, Jesus’ response unsettles the cynical Nathanael, and opens up for him a whole new world that can only be understood in his confession about Jesus: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (1:49). What other “Rabbi” ever earned recognition as “Son of God” or “King of Israel”? Combining these phrases in the same sentence is a substantial achievement and can hardly happen without the power of Jesus’ words, spoken directly and personally to his new found disciple. The Gospel of John dwells on the ideas of sonship and kingdom, combining them into a single fabric when proclaiming the Gospel through Jesus’ words and deeds.

There is a familiarity in Nathanael’s response, reminding us of Peter’s confession given in Matthew 16:16: “You are the Christ the Son of the Living God!” which occasioned Jesus’ promise of his name change. By contrast his reply to Nathanael accents the reason for his faith, namely, Jesus’ ability to “see him under the fig tree” (1:50), but then moves forward to even “greater things than these” — a phrase also found in 5:20 and 14:12. Borrowing language from the story of Jacob’s ladder vision (see Genesis 28:12), Jesus invites Nathanael to “see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (1:51). If we take into consideration the context of the story of Jacob, does this suggest that Nathanael was in some way like Jacob? Was he also a fugitive in search of a purpose he had not yet found, and is not Jesus offering him the way to discover it? Or, by referring to Nathanael as a man in whom there is no “guile,” is Jesus deliberately contrasting him with Jacob who was the quintessential deceiver? Though Jacob was a man of guile, yet God chose to meet with him in a directly personal way, as captured in his exclamation: “Surely God was in this place and I didn’t know it! … How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven!” (Genesis 28:16-17). Drawing the parallel to Jacob, Jesus is implying that he is the house of God and the gate of heaven, a declaration he will make in John 10 and John 14 using other language (“the gate; the way”). Nathanael did not know who Jesus was either, until the words of Jesus confirmed his identity to him.

The image of the “open heaven” is consistent with his previous confession about Jesus as king and son. Seeing such a vision is the reward for Nathanael’s willingness to follow Jesus. Later, Jesus will tell the grieving family of Lazarus, whom he raises from the dead, “Didn’t I assure you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” (11:40). Choosing to follow Jesus opens up a new world where Jesus is present and active in human lives as God’s Son and king.

The phrase “Son of Man” used by Jesus of himself may strike us as odd in light of Nathanael’s seemingly bolder confession, “Son of God.” And yet the history of the expression has roots in Old Testament texts like Daniel 7:13 that foreshadow the coming One who brings salvation and righteousness to the world by the direct authorization of God. In the Gospel of John which often speaks of Jesus as “Son of God” there are twelve instances of the phrase “Son of Man” that include the prediction that he will be “lifted up” (3:14; 7:28; 12:34) both in death and in glory. Three main ideas nest within the phrase:

1. What Jesus did as a man living among human beings.
2. The suffering one.
3. Jesus the glorified and coming One.

An Unlikely Follower (Luke 5:27-32)
We usually know him as “Matthew” and connect him with the Gospel by the same name. Luke calls him “Levi” in our next chosen text. Matthew began his life as a religious man who gave up on religion and embraced the world of cheap government finance. In so doing he cut himself off from the religious elite and fell in with a crowd of greedy money-makers who fleeced their own brothers through farmed-out tax collection. What could Jesus possibly have in common with Matthew? Why would our Lord bother with a loser like that who betrayed his countrymen and forsook his God?

We believe that Matthew had been a Pharisee, but don't know which kind. His decision to become a tax collector no doubt led to his exclusion from the more radical wing of the party, and certainly would have raised the ire of the Zealots. Tax collection was dirty business. The language used to describe Matthew's participation in it suggests he was a kind of tax collector's broker, who farmed out his work to other tax collectors, a sort of taxation franchise. The revenues collected from taxation were on behalf of Rome, though the Herodians might also have had a stake in them, being pawns of the Empire. In a country where 90% of the population were peasant farmers, fishermen and day laborers, such tax collection would have been seen as an unforgivable evil. Not only were they required to pay the taxes under Torah-law (religious), they also had to shill out their hard-earned produce to Rome (state). By one estimate, the double taxation rate approached 40%! Matthew the taxman was a bad boy, and this stigma drove him farther away from the normal life of a religious Jew.

-8-
Finding Matthew in the Gospels is its own wonder. Disconnected from mainstream Jewish life, Matthew no doubt formed his own alliances with fellow tax collectors and other "secular Jews", having given up on traditional Second Temple Judaism. Into his life stepped Jesus, whose simple call to follow him must have shaken Matthew to the core. As we shall see, Matthew found in Jesus what he had not found in his former life. And what he found was enough to call him away from his secular diversion as tax collector for Rome. We are tempted to imagine how Matthew must have fallen away from Judaism and into the employ of Rome's tax collectors: that he saw the hypocrisy of his fellow-Pharisees, and then he yielded to the grave temptation to make money on the fast-track. When a person's spiritual life is empty it is only natural to fill it with very secular things, like money, fame and fortune. In a world where few economic opportunities existed for men like Matthew, he opted to sell his soul for common gold. That is, until he met Jesus. This encounter would not only transform his life, it would radiate outward to his colleagues, as we will see.

The story of Matthew is much like other accounts in the Gospels. Each writer tells the same story but in different ways. Scholars call this "the synoptic problem", although it proves to be less a "problem" and more a "perspective". The word "synoptic" simply means to "see together". In fact, three of the four Gospels tend to "see" the life of Jesus in many similar ways (Matthew, Mark, Luke) while the fourth (John) has a sharply different take on things. Had God intended the marvelous life of Jesus to be told in just one way, we would have only one Gospel and not four!

Three of the four Gospels tells the story of how Jesus called Matthew. Below, I have placed the three Gospel versions side-by-side to show the nuances between them. John, on the other hand, does not have this account. When we arrange the texts in this way, both the concurrence and the divergence of each Gospel stands out clearly.

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<td>14 And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, &quot;Follow me.&quot; And he rose and followed him.</td>
<td>9 As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, &quot;Follow me.&quot; And he rose and followed him.</td>
<td>27 After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, &quot;Follow me.&quot; 28 And leaving everything, he rose and followed him.</td>
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<td>15 And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.</td>
<td>10 And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.</td>
<td>29 And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.</td>
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<td>16 And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, &quot;Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?&quot;</td>
<td>11 And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, &quot;Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?&quot;</td>
<td>30 And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, &quot;Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?&quot;</td>
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<td>17 And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, &quot;Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.&quot;</td>
<td>12 But when he heard it, he said, &quot;Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'&quot;</td>
<td>31 And Jesus answered them, &quot;Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.&quot;</td>
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<td>3:18 ...Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus, and Simon the Cananaean...</td>
<td>10:3 ...Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus...</td>
<td>32 I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.&quot;</td>
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<td>Note: See also Luke's second volume: Acts where the same listing appears in 1:13).</td>
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Based on this comparison, we can make a number of observations:
1. The Gospel of Matthew calls this man "Matthew", which we can safely conclude was his given name: "a man called (Greek: legomenon) Matthew (Greek: Mathtaios; from the Hebrew: Mattay, the shortened form of Mattatyahu)". The Gospel also uses this name in 10:3, "Matthew the tax collector". If we accept the ancient tradition of Papias and the later history of Eusebius, the writer of this Gospel is indeed Matthew who, it is suggested, first composed his work in Hebrew, and later it was translated in Greek, the form we now possess. [Note: Of additional interest, is the precedent for this name in Jewish history. The father of the famous Maccabees brothers was also called by this name. He was a retired priest from the tribe of Levi who hated the corrupting influence of Greek culture on his Jewish homeland. By his heroism, he helped raise a revolt against their pagan Syrian overlords and his sons brought it to victory as celebrated by the Jewish feast Hanukkah.]

2. By contrast, Mark and Luke identify him as "Levi". Each in turn then gives a slightly different description of him:
   a. Mark: "Levi (This is the tribal name. Priests and other Temple leadership came from this tribe of Israel.) son of Alphaeus (Greek: Halphaios; His father's Hebrew name is Halfay)".
   c. Curiously, in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke there is a list of the Twelve apostles in which James is called son of Alphaeus (see Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15), whereas Matthew is simply listed by his given name. Was Matthew a brother of James? Nowhere does Scripture tell us this.
   d. From these texts it appears that Matthew is his given name, whereas "Levi" is his tribal affiliation. That is, his name is Matthew the Levite, son of Alphaeus. Once again, it is helpful to read all three accounts, and gather the necessary evidence from them.

3. The idea that Matthew was a Levite has significance. Not all Levites were priests, but many of them became Pharisees and devout students of Torah. Though not qualified to serve in the Temple, they found an equally holy calling in explaining the Scriptures to others. Careful readers of Matthew's Gospel discover his love for connecting the Old Testament Scriptures with the life of Jesus. After he met Jesus, Matthew became a Messiah-teacher, and his background made this possible.

4. Which makes his change to "tax collector" somewhat unusual. How is it that this "Levite" takes on such a hated profession? In the introduction we suggested some reasons. It is likely that Matthew saw little hope in the various options open to him for improving his life as a Jew in Israel. Judging from the Gospel he would one day write, Matthew had real skill as a scholar, no doubt learned from his Pharisee teachers. He may have been a "scribe", based on the frequency he mentions that profession in his Gospel. Meticulous, accurate, with attention to detail, Matthew had little difficulty transferring those abilities to the tedious bookkeeping associated with tax collection. The difference? One promised to make him rich (in spiritual ways), while the other one delivered on the promise with material rewards. Until he discovered the wealth of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus, tax collection suited him just fine.

5. All three accounts are unanimous in telling us that when Jesus called out "Follow me", Matthew complied. All three synoptic Gospels record that he had been "sitting" at the tax collector's station, but when he heard from Jesus, "he arose and followed him". Matthew would never return to this sedentary life again, but would, like the Twelve find himself on a mission for Jesus.
   Note: Luke is unique here. He adds the statement: "And leaving everything....". This was one of Luke's deepest passions: the sort of discipleship that "left it all" behind for the sake of Jesus (see Luke 9:23 where Jesus asks that his disciples "deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow"). Matthew is no exception, Luke tells us. Matthew left the tax collecting business behind; he made a clean break.

6. "Guess who's coming to dinner?" would be the question Matthew might have sprung on his other guests. After all, it was his house and his dinner. Luke once again gives us some important detail left out by the other two synoptic writers: "And Levi made him a great feast (Greek: dochē) in his house." This is no
ordinary meal, but a banquet-style feast where hospitality was lavishly given and received. Such gatherings were for friends and intimates. The meal was a place where trust was expressed: you don't eat food with people you don't trust. They might poison you! Matthew offers the feast in honor of Jesus and he wants his buddies there to share in the joy.

7. The situation at the feast is laid out by all three writers:
   a. The guests and the host are "reclining". The Greek words for "reclining" used in the three Gospels are compounds of one basic word "to sit", each adding a prefix which intensifies the way they sat, namely "together", "alongside" each other. Recall how Jesus found Matthew sitting at his collector's booth? That word for sitting lacks the prefix--just ordinary sitting. Here, the sitting is collective, shared, and part of a community. Most importantly, Matthew and his friends share the feast "with Jesus", implying a new kinship and personal regard the one for the other.
   b. The size of the feast is variously described as "large" where "many" people joined with Matthew and Jesus. One scholar suggests as many as forty people could occupy the roomy space of a tax collector's house.

8. Matthew's feast created quite a stir among another group who were present (Note: Did Matthew invite these old associates of his?) , but staying aloof were keeping a watchful eye on the actions of Jesus. Critics of Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees embraced strict ideas about something called "purity" or "holiness". To them, separation from unclean things frequently meant refusal to associate with unclean people. Matthew Levi would have been a notorious embarrassment to them. We have already seen that as a Levite he would have had some connection to the Pharisees, an association that at some point he abandoned to collect taxes. It is possible that these were Matthew's old associates, and they would have seen him as a backslider of the worst kind.
   a. "Eat and Drink", says Luke
   b. "Eat" say Mark and Matthew.
   c. Either depiction meant putting one's lips and hands on the unholy vessels touched by unholy hands of a tax collector, and sinner.
   d. Being a sinner meant simply being like a pagan, a Gentile: one of the goyim.
   e. "Why?" ask the Pharisees scornfully. To what end? What good can come from this?
      i. Only Luke has the Pharisees putting the question directly to Jesus.
      ii. Matthew and Mark put the question to Jesus' disciples. This is understandable. A rabbi (and they would consider Jesus to be one, albeit not one of theirs!) was responsible for the actions of his disciples. And, the reverse was true: he represented them, being their greatest influence. "What kind of rabbi are you following?" they imply by posing their query to the disciples. Or, the Pharisees might be looking for proof that Jesus actually taught his disciples to act this way and want to see how well the disciples can make a good argument in defense of this behavior.
      iii. It's interesting to see how easily the Pharisees can "bury" Matthew beneath the generality of the phrase "tax collectors and sinners." They don't say "this tax collector, Matthew". The Pharisees want to make general rules affecting everyone; there is little room here for the salvation of the individual person. Jesus, on the other hand, embraces the individual wherever he finds him. Matthew is no exception.

9. Jesus no doubt thought his disciples were not quite ready to take the final exam from the Pharisees, so he speaks up, offering a solid justification for his actions. From the three Gospels we can collect three distinct supporting points Jesus gave for his action:
   a. All three Gospels generally agree on the wording of the first: Sick people need a doctor, well people don't. Luke, however, uses a distinctive medical term for "well people": the Greek word hygianontos from which we get "hygiene". Why? Because Luke was a physician and prefers correct terminology! Mark and Matthew opt for the generic "strong people". They all agree on the idea of sickness as literally "being in a bad way" (Greek: kakos). The general saying Jesus cites is well-known to his listeners, a proverb from the Greek writer Diogenes.
b. In a passage found only in his Gospel, Matthew doesn't quote from a Greek thinker. He quotes the Old Testament prophet Hosea (6:6) and introduces it with the words "Go and learn what this means." That's significant. The venerable Pharisees are instructed by Jesus to "learn" something new: something they apparently failed to grasp. And this quotation gets to the heart of why Jesus agreed to attend Matthew's banquet in the first place: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." It's not a difficult Scripture, but its application requires that the Pharisees make a major adjustment in their thinking. What is "mercy"? Behind the Greek word used by Matthew lies the Hebrew word hesed, the covenant love of God. Be faithful to the true meaning of Torah; be concerned about those things God cares about. Foregoing the feast in Matthew's house was a sacrifice in the eyes of the Pharisees that would somehow make God look on them with favor. Yet, Jesus tells them to learn an even greater lesson: God wants mercy before he wants sacrifice. Jesus is telling them: show covenant love to Matthew first of all. Think about yourselves last of all.

c. Then all three Gospels join their voices in proclaiming the Good News brought by Jesus: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." And then Luke adds his unique emphasis: "... to repentance." Jesus declares himself to be "the coming One", "the calling one". He proclaims his goal: "repentance", which translates the Greek word metanoia which means "change one's mind" or "re-direct one's life", a word rooted in the Hebrew term which means simply "turn" or "return". What God wants, Jesus says, is "changed lives". And it's pretty hard to change them if you don't get next to them.

i. "Righteous": used in a cynical sense here, I believe, to suggest "self-righteous": those who define righteousness in a certain way, see themselves in that way, and judge others as not being that way. Not the righteousness of God, but "their own righteousness".[Note: St. Paul speaks in similar ways in Romans 10:3: "For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."]

ii. "Sinners": The Pharisees had already pigeon-holed the tax collectors this way. Jesus associates with "sinners", that is, Gentiles, pagans, undesirables, unholy people. Again, Jesus reverses the meaning by referring to the "sick" who need a physician. He has come to bring healing to the sick, true righteousness to those who recognize their need of it. [Note: Once more, we hear from Paul in the same vein in Romans 3:9 "What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin..."]

iii. Matthew lived the life of a sick man. He knew he was unrighteous. But he apparently also knew that his former Pharisee associations as a Levite hadn't made things much better for him. Judaism in its present form had failed him. But Jesus reached out and called him precisely because he was sick and in need. Here was a man who found more fulfillment in collecting taxes than in being a self-righteous Pharisee. Jesus calls him away from both, and, in Luke's words, "to real change", "to repentance".

10. The sequel to all of this in Matthew's Gospel appears in chapter 10 (and in Mark 3 and Luke 6). In that passage, the Gospel writer lists the names of the Twelve apostles. It is as if all the Gospel writers are trying to say, "Now that Jesus has called and embraced the 'tax collector and sinner', the number of apostles is at last complete. For if Jesus can save a tax collector, he can save anyone. And what's more, who better to reach the unreachable than one who has been there himself." Indeed, Jesus then sends all of them forth to bring his message and his healing to the four corners of Israel. And there, included in that cohort is Matthew Levi, tax collector and sinner, a man sick and in need of healing, a sinner whom Jesus called to repentance.

It's tempting to ask the question, "What happened to Matthew?" His name appears in the list of those who gathered for prayer on the eve of Pentecost when God would fill all of them with the Holy Spirit. Traditions about Matthew place him in Rome, Ethiopia, and Persia before he undergoes martyrdom. Religious art depicting his life alternates between placing him behind a desk, pouring over his manuscript of the Gospel he reputedly wrote, or holding in his hand the emblem of his martyrdom, a spear, sword or other instrument of
execution. Still other portraits show him grasping a money-bag, a reminder of his former life. None of this, of course, is known for certain, although the way people remember him in this three-fold way is important.

Two versions of this third “follow me” narrative are found in Matthew and Luke. To benefit again from the comparison, I am including them in parallel columns here:

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<tr>
<td>18 Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side.</td>
<td>57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>19 A scribe then approached and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.”</td>
<td>58 And Jesus said to him, &quot;Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 And Jesus said to him, &quot;Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.&quot;</td>
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<td>21 Another of his disciples said to him, &quot;Lord, first let me go and bury my father.&quot;</td>
<td>59 To another he said, &quot;Follow me.&quot; But he said, &quot;Lord, first let me go and bury my father.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 But Jesus said to him, &quot;Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”</td>
<td>60 But Jesus said to him, &quot;Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.&quot;</td>
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<td>61 Another said, &quot;I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>62 Jesus said to him, &quot;No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”</td>
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A few pertinent observations about each Gospel’s version of the text:
1. Matthew places the text within “great crowds” as Jesus prepares to sail across the Sea of Galilee, while Luke simply has Jesus walking “along the road.”
2. Matthew’s account includes two conversations, and only one of them uses the language “follow me,” while Luke’s version has three conversation and places the word “follow” on the lips of the other person twice (“I will follow you” and on the lips of Jesus once.
3. Matthew identifies one person as “a scribe” and the other as “another of his disciples,” whereas Luke uses indefinite terms like “someone,” followed by “another” twice.
4. Luke expands the meaning of the second encounter by adding the command “go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

Each writer preserves different aspects of the exchanges with Jesus and are clear that involvement with him requires commitment that exceeds all other commitments. This receives support in Luke’s account when the respondents use the phrase “but … first,” allowing for competing loyalties that take priority over following Jesus. Two of them amount to excuses for delaying their full-time life with Jesus. One (the first) seems too good to be true. Jesus counters the first by describing the details of following him in terms of basic human need for sleep, citing his own experience: “nowhere to lay his head.” What does Jesus mean by each of his responses?

1. Foxes and birds: not what we think. It is tempting to form a romanticized image of wildlife living in peaceful ways with nature, complete with places to live (holes and nests, e.g.) when hearing of foxes and birds in Jesus’ sayings. Since he could have chosen any animals for his illustration, why did he choose these? The connotation of the fox as a symbol for human behavior is not cordial but predatory. When Jesus used the word “fox” in criticism of King Herod (Luke 13:32), he was not paying him a compliment but suggested that the king’s apparent interest in Jesus was a ploy for a sinister plot that Jesus would successfully resist. Remember what he did to John the Baptist! Thus we have the expression “sly as a fox.” Like the undomesticated dog, the fox is a scavenger, preying on the misfortunes of others. In Luke 7:25 and Matthew 11:8 he speaks sarcastically about those “who live in luxury in royal palaces” as was the case with Herod Antipas. “Birds of the air” contrast with nesting birds and refer to aggressive species with rapacious and predatory habits. Jesus is not, therefore, calmly citing neutral examples from nature but
instead picks cases that illustrate the hostility of the power brokers who controlled the world where followers of Jesus would need to do their work.

2. As Scott Spencer writes:

   In leading his followers on a homeless course, with no place to lay their heads, Jesus identifies with those are marginalized and displaced in occupied Palestine and counterpoints the vulturish imperial authorities and their cohorts who live in palatial splendor.²

3. Few would object to the sentiment Jesus expressed about the power elite and how to handle them. But in his second exchange, he sounds blunt and insensitive. After all, is it asking too much to allow a man to bury his dearly departed father? Surely you can’t begrudge ritual courtesy like that, can you? Civilized societies, whether Jewish or not, had their version of “last rites” that help survivors cope with loss through grief, especially when parents are involved. Extra-biblical Jewish texts, like Tobit 4:3-4 and 14:11-13 tie proper burial with the command “honor your father and mother” from the Ten Commandments. How is neglecting parental burial consistent with Jesus’ insistence elsewhere to obey the command about father and mother (see Matthew 15:3-6 and Mark 7:8-13)?

   Clever solutions to this seeming inconsistency try to make “dead” into a spiritual term not a physical one, and yet the man asking Jesus for permission clearly has a literal death in mind. So, we are left with a harsh picture of Jesus’ followers allowing piles of bodies to accumulate without burial by the living. One helpful study by Byron McCane³ reminds the reader that Jewish burial was a two-stage affair which happened like this: 1) at death, a first burial involved placing the corpse in a sealed tomb for initial decomposition down to bones; 2) then, a year to eighteen months later, the tomb was opened, the bones collected into a container or placed in a stone family burial known as an ossuary or “bone box,” usually with an inscription which added the name of the newly placed person. It was the second stage to which Jesus referred by his words. If unremoved through second burial, the dead would accumulate in the first-stage tomb as disarrayed skeletons, disjoined from one another. In effect, the dead (already in the tomb) would “take care of” the new dead placed there. The image is, of course, upsetting and shocking since second stage burial reinforced kinships ties and sense of natural family. What Jesus seems to be doing here is purposely casting an apocalyptic vision where his followers bear witness to a future marked by judgment, possibly on the city of Jerusalem where bodies pile up in the wake of sudden invasion and war at the hands of the Roman armies (i.e. 66-73 CE).

   Such images of “dead burying the dead” by letting the bodies pile up appear in the Old Testament vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14, as well as in the extra-biblical account of Tobit 1:17-18 and the words of Jeremiah (16:3-4). Whenever invading armies (Assyria, Babylon, Rome) conquered Israel, they left a trail of unburied bodies. Since the dead do not bury the dead, but leave them without ritual interment, they reinforce a brutal message on the conquered: “We are in charge here, now, and you are not!” Similarly, the Romans, through crucifying enemies of the state, ordinarily threw the dead victims into unmarked graves or common “potter fields,” thus isolating them from families in death. Worse, if the bodies were left on the crosses, birds of the air and wild animals would tear them apart where they hung until nothing was left. The foxes and the vultures did the work of undertakers in a grisly manner to be sure. Even Jesus reminded his audience “Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” (Matthew 24:28; Luke 17:37). Thus, both the image of domiciled predators and unburied bodies intersect in the Matthew account.

   Put in perspective, Jesus refuses to cooperate with the fear of death or the predation of imperial power. He will not react to it. Instead he calls upon his followers to live contrary to the prevailing winds of politics and

social coercion and to establish a way of life that obeys his command, “Come, follow me.” That is, “Do as I do and as I say.” As Spencer frames it:

Jesus accentuates this separation by his vagabond, anti-Herodian existence: he dwells in no royal villa on the beach. Aligned with the unsettling image of unburied bodies, we might then imagine the homeless Jesus wandering among his dead compatriots in sympathy and lamentation, even with eschatological visions of divine restoration and resurrection on the horizon — not unlike those that came to Jeremiah and Ezekiel in their dark valleys of dry bones (Jer 16:14-15; Ezek 37:3-14).³

Yet, in spite of the radical nature of this portrait of a Christ follower,
…we can be assured that his head was not in the clouds and his feet were not off the ground. Preoccupied with the realities of fishing, feeding, taxing, and dying, Jesus places himself squarely in the jaws of imperial politics. And he bites back with imperious force, marshalling followers with a simple, yet sweeping, command to leave everything for the sake of advancing the kingdom of God. … he uses the talk and tactics of empire to subvert the current regime and to promote a just, alternative order, the empire of God, “on earth, as it is in heaven.”⁵

Similarly, Martin Hengel remarks that Jesus, like charismatic leaders calling followers, does so “very concretely and with an unconditional ultimacy.”⁶

4. For the third conversation in this context, we turn to Luke’s Gospel where we hear a man tell Jesus “I will follow you, Lord” if I am allowed to say farewell to those at my home” (9:61). The Greek word translated here as “Farewell” is ἀποτασσό which literally means “to set apart, separate” and can even mean “renounce, forsake.” Leaving family, like death in a family, was no small matter in a kinship society where urbanization did not fragment families. In one sense, “leaving home” was a family affair that required proper interaction, discussion, and decision. Much was at stake: parents, property and children. The person requesting time for transition knew all of this and acts quite normally. But Jesus refuses. There are parallels in the case of the Old Testament story of Elisha who is summoned by Elisha to follow him in the role as prophet for Israel. Permission is granted for Elisha to kiss his parents, to slaughter and cook his plough ox, fueled by the wood of its yoke and shared with his coworkers (see 1 Kings 19:19-21). Jesus doesn’t allow even that much separation ritual for his followers. Instead, fully aware of the Elisha story, he picks up its language and speaks about “putting your hand to the plough and not looking back.”

Farmers immediately recognize the imagery Jesus uses, as did my grandfather Jones who explained how he fixed his eye on an object at the opposite end of the field and ploughed toward it without looking away once, thereby keeping his furrows straight. My dad suggested I mow lawn with the same diligence, advice I took only casually until this day. Following Jesus requires straight furrows without distraction. By waving off the man’s request, Jesus wants to keep his followers on track, leaving behind reliable rows where seed will soon be soon, crops will grow, and the harvest become plentiful. Failing at any one of those tasks puts the whole enterprise at risk, and Jesus knows the urgency of focused agriculture within a peasant society where most people live on the margins. Kingdom people, he suggests, also live on the margins, constantly at risk and always in danger. There can be no misstep in the process he outlined. Following Jesus means keeping the hand on the plough and the eye on the goal so that the furrow will be straight.

Conclusion
What if a Muslim decided to follow Jesus? Perhaps our readers, like many Americans, would rather not deal with the reality of Islam in the west. After all 9/11 left a deep scar on American exceptionalism and our leaders have not always responded appropriately in the aftermath. The church is not exempt from this criticism. Move the scenery into the Arab world itself where the Islamic resurgence looks like “the worst of times” in Dickens Tale of Two Cities. Long before 9/11 there was 1979 and the Iranian hostage crisis that shocked our sensibilities every night during the news hour and spawned a new genre of reporting.

⁴ Spencer, 152.
⁵ Spencer, 153.

The article came in response to answers in a questionnaire given to converts between 1991 and 2007 — some 750 Muslims who decided to follow Jesus. They came from 30 countries and 50 ethnic groups in every major region of the Muslim world. Respondents ranked influences that resulted in their conversion. Here are the results:

1. **The lifestyle of Christians** was the most important. Included in this phrase was the consistency between profession and practice. One student witnessed the love of a Christian group at an American university in contrast to its absence in a university at Medina. Treatment of women and spouses in marriage stood out favorably among Christians. Willingness to adopt modest local styles of dress, food, and drink set Christians apart when they entered foreign cultures. Rates of violence between Christians was decidedly less than among fellow Muslims.

2. **The power of God in answered prayers and healing and deliverance from demonic power.** This usually happened where sorcery was common. The Jesus pictured in the Qur’an is a prophet who heals lepers and the blind and raises the dead.

3. **Dissatisfaction with the type of Islam they had experienced.** Found the Qur’an deficient in God’s love. Wonder why an all-knowing God requires His word to be in Arabic. One man said, “Doesn’t God know Indonesian?” Decried militancy and imposition of Sharia Law which does not transform society or hearts.

4. **Visions and Dreams.** 27% of respondents reported dreams and visions before deciding to follow Jesus, 40% when they converted, and 45% afterward. The dreams depicted Jesus, encouraged seeking help from a Christian pastor, and strengthened during persecution.

5. **Beliefs.** The offer of forgiveness and salvation to more pronounced in Christian theology than in Islam. Persons can actually have assurance about their relationship with God.

6. **Spiritual truth in the Bible.** Ironically, the Qur’an confirms that Torah, Psalms and Gospels (in our Bibles) are from God, but are led to think they have been corrupted. Yet, by reading the Bible Muslims testify to understanding “the true character of God.” This is especially true of the Sermon on the Mount. Also, they discover a new perspective on the love of God which reaches those who did not love Him but loved sinners. This affected love for one’s enemies as well, a surprising belief for Muslims. The life and teachings of Jesus attract Muslims to follow him, even before they accept Christianity. The idea that Jesus is the Good Shepherd is especially powerful.

7. **Effects of relief efforts during disasters.** Muslims watch Christians who need relief as they react to hardship, and they watch Christians give relief without asking for anything in return.

Muslims choose to follow Jesus under extreme threat, putting in jeopardy safety, family, and life. Those who choose to follow clearly put aside excuses in order to satisfy the requirements of Jesus, even as they accept his love and grace. Many discover blessing through persecution as Jesus promised. They also come to know “an experiential truth unknown to them before. As a Zambian Muslim exclaimed, “God loves me just as I am.”

By sharing this account from the *CT* article, I do not suggest that all of this agrees with your own experience. In the West, we are isolated from the rough and tumble consequences of following Jesus as a threatened minority within a hostile religious society. Our afflictions here are truly “light and momentary” by comparison. What Muslim converts experience every day is closer, however, to the environment of the first century where the Christ followers began their journey under the leadership of Jesus.

In his excellent article, “‘Come, Follow Me’: Apprenticeship in Jesus’ Approach to Education,” David Csinos presents a model rooted in the teaching and practice of Jesus that may be more conducive to our experience. He examines Jesus’ ministry as it relates to what he calls “legitimate peripheral participation” and then briefly

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7 *Christianity Today* 51 no 10 O 2007, 80-85.
discusses some implications for contemporary Christian faith communities. Jesus followed a pattern when he called people to be his followers, and it always involved an invitation to become part of his community. He didn’t begin with intellectual understanding of doctrines, creeds, and statements of faith — though the community would eventually formulate these. Rather, he showed a way of life that is learned, experienced, and developed in community. The newcomer needed to come, observe, and experience how he lived. Csinos calls this “peripheral participation” where the word “peripheral” has to do with working around the edges of community in order to know what it is about. Churches need to create room for this process. To follow Jesus intrinsically involves entering the community and learning its key practices, thereby developing identity as members of Christ’s community. This is illustrated by a poignant encounter Jesus had with Peter in John 6:67-68, after a major defection of would-be followers from his movement. Turning to his disciples — the Twelve — Jesus asks, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? For you have the words of eternal life.’” Csinos summarizes:

When we are truly engrafted into the community of Jesus, we find our core identity as members of this community. The work of the church is to help people form such an identity through learning what it means to be a part of the community and participating in its core practices. As demonstrated through the ministry of Jesus, this can be accomplished through legitimate peripheral participation.

What our series will continue to emphasize are the ways that following Jesus fit tightly into community participation and ultimately into identity formation. Through consideration of key texts, this week’s Background Notes lay the Gospel groundwork for considering how all of this works out in practice for us today.

Glory to God! Amen.

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8 See the whole article in Religious Education, 105 no 1 Ja-F 2010, p.45-62.
9 Csinos, p. 61.