



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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And Jesus Said...

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You who read these papers may get tired of my referring to my childhood so often. However, I don't think that I can be faithful to my context when I write if I am not clear about my beginnings, my becomings, and my where-I-am-now. So here I go again.

I grew up in the church. By that I mean that one of the main involvements of my life was what was going on in the church. I was there "every time the doors of the church were open," as the saying goes. It was almost literally true for me, especially after I became the janitor. In various ways, being janitor at the church was one of my jobs from the time I was ten years old until I went off to college.

We had revivals at my church at least once a year, and sometimes more often. Upon occasion, my church participated in a community-wide revival. Traveling evangelists were invited to come to town and preach – a mini Billy Graham campaign, although Graham hadn't started his work at that time. Then, Billy Sunday was the world-renowned evangelist.

It was at one of those community-wide revival services that I was converted and joined the church. I was seven years old, and the memory remains clear and sharp to this day. The services were held in a tabernacle built for the purpose. The evangelist was Mrs. Demmorest. I doubt that I ever knew her first name. In response to her forceful and pleading invitation, I went forward one night and accepted Jesus as my savior. It was a profound and emotion-filled experience for me, even though I know now that I had very little understanding of what was taking place.

A few weeks later, I joined the church – another emotion-filled experience for me. After that, I knew that I was a Christian, although I didn't really know what that meant, or how it made a difference in my life. I remember that I felt elated – and frightened – and anxious – and guilty – and very responsible – and determined to be the best Christian I could possibly be – seven years old.

I didn't know what the criteria were and really didn't know where to turn to find out. It seemed likely that I would learn if I stayed active in the church, and I did – stay active, I mean.

I finally decided that being Christian meant to follow Jesus. It was such an obvious answer – so obvious that I tended to doubt that it was true. But it was the best I could do at the time. So, I tried to follow Jesus.

Actually, it has turned out to be the best answer. I've been searching all my life to really know what it means to be Christian – that is, to follow Jesus. Routinely, the search brings me face to face with what Jesus said, and how what he said applies to me. Hence, the title of this paper.

AND JESUS SAID, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

I believe this is the last statement attributed to Jesus in the Bible.

AND JESUS SAID, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mt. 28:19-20)

There it is. AND JESUS SAID, “...”. Every time I read the words I am confronted. Every time I think about them, I am confronted. If I follow Jesus, I do what he says to do, one way or another. Since I claim the name of Christian, the world has a right to assume that, whatever I do and say, I am being a witness; I am teaching by word and example what Jesus has instructed me to teach. Yes, I am confronted by Jesus’ words.

AND JESUS SAID, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Mt. 4:17)

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people (Mt. 4:19)
(This Jesus said to Peter and Andrew)

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you? I will tell you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them.” (Lk. 6:46-47) Then Jesus tells a story about a house built with its foundation on rock, and one built on the ground without a foundation.

“Repent,” basically, means to turn around, or to go in a different direction. I knew early on that, if I followed Jesus, I would need to go in a different direction. I saw myself as having committed to do just that. I would need to act on different values than many that I had taken for granted. At least, following Jesus meant that I needed to bring into question, and reevaluate, the values by which I was living. I’ve put the verbs of those statements in past tense, and, when I make them present tense, I remind myself that I need to be questioning and reevaluating in the present moment, too.

When Jesus asked, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not do what I tell you?” he was addressing his disciples, and the crowds also listened. I wonder how the disciples reacted. As I think about the words, my reaction is that there is little reason for me to refer to Jesus as my Lord, and then refuse (or fail) to do what he teaches me to do. I feel confronted when I contemplate these words.

I feel that same confrontation when I read any part of the Sermon on the Mount.

AND JESUS SAID, “Do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (Mt. 5:39-42)

In the world as I know it today, I don't think I want to do what Jesus said. I'm not a panty-waist. I don't want to be a victim. It seems pretty obvious that, if I do what Jesus has said, I leave myself wide open to be exploited – neither to my good nor to the good of the person exploiting me. Surely Jesus isn't asking me to be a doormat. I don't see that Jesus was a doormat.

But Jesus did live what he said. What did he really say, then? Maybe he didn't mean for me to just lie down and let anybody and everybody walk all over me. Maybe these aren't rules that I am supposed to obey if I follow Jesus properly. Maybe I need to study the meaning behind the words.

I notice that Jesus didn't do battle with anyone. Neither did he compromise his own beliefs. He stood for what he believed. He acted on what he believed. And he didn't attack or defend to try to protect himself. I observe, also, that his being that way proved to be a major frustration to those who opposed him and tried to trick him. At times they became very angry, and were all the more determined that they would find a way to discredit him. As it turned out, they never were successful, although, at times, it looked as if they were.

All of a sudden it strikes me. Maybe Jesus wasn't saying, "If you want to be my follower, do things this way, and you will become a follower." Maybe he was saying, "If you are intent on being a follower, then you will choose to live as I have lived and taught." Not, "in order to become," but "because you are."

AND JESUS SAID, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (Lk. 6:27)

As I said earlier, Jesus really confronts me. What he says appears to be pretty unequivocal. I wonder what would happen if I were this way with those who see themselves, as my enemies, hate me, curse me, abuse me. Would I win them over? Not necessarily. Even though Jesus loved, did good, blessed, and prayed for those who were so vehemently against him, there is little evidence that any of them were won over.

Winning people over didn't seem to be a main objective in Jesus' life. What did seem to be was that he live by a particular set of beliefs because, as he saw it, they were the way of life. All else leads to death.

AND JESUS SAID, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Lk. 6:31)

Continuing the same line of thought, it occurs to me that Jesus wasn't talking about a process designed to get people to treat me in particular ways, but was offering me a guideline by which to measure my own behavior.

It is a startling thought. Jesus wasn't telling, or showing, me how to influence people to a different behavior. He was telling me, and showing me, how I would behave if I were committed to being a follower. This is a different reason for behaving in

another way. I must really concentrate on this thought.

AND JESUS SAID, “Do you want to be made well?” (Jn. 5:6)

What a question! Could my answer to it ever be, “No.”? Doesn’t anyone who is sick want to be made well? If I am cured of a chronic illness, what do I lose, and how do I make the adjustments to being well? I can hear myself saying, “I sure would try hard to make the adjustments. I know I want to be well.” However, if I really confront myself, I just might say, “No.”

The man of whom Jesus asked the question had been ill for thirty-eight years. Oddly enough, as it turns out, he never did really answer Jesus’ question. He hedged. Even so JESUS SAID, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” (Jn. 5:8) And the man did what Jesus said. He was a well man, able to take his place in society with all the privileges and responsibilities of a well man.

The responsibilities caught up with the man who had been healed rather quickly. The day he was healed was a Sabbath, and everyone knew that, on the Sabbath, one did not work. It was the Law, and it was not lawful for him to carry his mat that day. The Jews, who policed the people, saw him and accused him of breaking the Sabbath Law. In all his thirty-eight years, he had not had to keep the Law – certainly that Law about carrying his mat. I can envision that this was but the first of many disconcerting experiences where he was expected to take on all the responsibilities of a healthy man in that society. I wonder how he managed.

Do I want to be made well? I have to think about that a bit. I realize, however, that it is highly desirable for me to take on the full responsibility of wellness if I really mean that I want to be a follower of Jesus.

I need to be careful with what I have just said. I have some physical problems that mean I won’t ever be well if I measure wellness by the state of my body. Does that mean I can’t be a follower of Jesus? I think not. The wellness of my spirit may be the real key. When I seek to understand what it means to follow Jesus – this, basically, having to do with belief, attitude, and understanding, that shapes my behavior – I just might find that physical and emotional limitations do not need to keep me from following Jesus.

AND JESUS SAID, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Mt. 16:25)

“If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor,...then come, follow me.” (Mt. 19:21)

“For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” (Mt. 25:29)

What am I going to do with these words of Jesus? I get all mixed up in the

“having” and “not having.” I get confused about the issue of reward for sacrifice and for good behavior. The words seem to say that, if I want my life I must lose it, and, if I try to save my life, I will lose it.

What a dilemma! All the sayings of Jesus quoted here are, of course, lifted from their context. Even so, they seem pretty clear, though contradictory. If I want my life, I must lose it. If I want to be perfect, I must divest myself of my possessions. But, the more I have, the more I will be given. The concepts seem to disagree with each other. I don’t know if I can make sense of this.

As I contemplate these words of Jesus, I gradually come to realize that they center in the motive behind my behavior. If I follow Jesus, I am not concerned with saving my life, but with expending it. If I follow Jesus, my objective in life is not to amass possessions, but to use those I acquire as Jesus would. If I follow Jesus, I have what I need to do the work to which I am called, and more. All these words point me to the issue of what I am about as a follower of Jesus, and away from the issue of what I may gain.

AND JESUS SAID, “You give them something to eat.” (Lk. 9:13)

The multitude was hungry, and the disciples didn’t know what to do about it. There was no more than five loaves and two fish. AND JESUS SAID, “You give them something to eat.” Then Jesus “made do” with what was there, and the people were fed.

There is so much more to feeding than food for the body. If I would follow Jesus, it appears to me that I make a commitment to make use of what I have available to feed those who are hungry – body, mind, and spirit. And, in the story, an abundance was left over. Do I dare put that principle to the test? This that Jesus said confronts me, in some ways, with more power than any other of his words. But maybe not with more power than the last quote I will use in this paper.

AND JESUS SAID, “Love one another.” (Jn. 13:34)

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mk. 12:31)

Love. Love one another. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love yourself. Love myself. Love me. Love. Love as God loves. Love myself and you as God loves me and you. Yes, this confronts me more than anything else that Jesus said. It isn’t that I have to – that is, that it is a requirement if I am going to be a follower of Jesus. Not a requirement. But I know that I am really following Jesus when I love in this way. I don’t love so that I can follow Jesus, but, because I follow Jesus, I love as Jesus loves and as God loves. It is a gift of God. When I commit to following Jesus, I discover that I am able to use that gift.

The Gospel of John ends with these words, “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.” (Jn. 21:25) I feel the same way

about what Jesus said.

A POSTSCRIPT

We had been friends for a long time. But something happened – I don't know what – and he became my enemy. He attacked, disparaged, distanced, did all the kinds of things an enemy does. And I suffered. I suffered a grievous loss, and felt the pain at the core of my being.

AND JESUS SAID, "Love your enemies."

How could I love my enemy, who was once my friend, when he has treated me so badly? It doesn't make sense, I told myself. But could I treat him as he was treating me? To do so would only add to the misery. I knew that.

AND JESUS SAID, "Love your enemies...do good...etc."

Does that mean that I should love my enemy because Jesus told me to? I think not. Would I do so because I profess to be a follower of Jesus? Again, I think not. Why, then would I?

Because – bottom line – it actually makes sense to do so. Jesus was wise in what he said.

When I love my enemy instead of returning hatred, it changes everything. It stops the conflict, or, at least, makes it one-sided. It leaves him solely responsible for his behavior. It removes his excuses. It does not feed his enemy-like behavior. It does not encourage his defensiveness. It adds an unexpected dimension to his situation that may enable him to reconsider, and maybe even change. It even reduces my pain. And – bonus that it is – neither he nor I can possibly be any worse off if I choose to love him and treat him kindly.

When I listen to Jesus and apply what he has said, I discover – sometimes to my amazement – that it really works. Even though it goes against our common beliefs and practices, it makes sense. Because it makes sense, I do what Jesus said, and I end up being a follower of Jesus.

Who could ask for anything more?