

Following in Jesus's Steps

OFELIA GARCÍA AND VICTOR PEDROZA¹

Richard Showalter's presentation gave us the itinerary for the way. Showalter spoke of the successes and failures of various disciples attempting to obey God's call. He also underscored the saving actions of God, who is faithful in the history of a people. Showalter brought us to the New Testament and signaled for us some of the characteristics of discipleship, such as obedience and love for God and our neighbors.

I have been asked to speak on the theme of "following in Jesus's steps." Let us open ourselves to the voice of the Holy Spirit and, finding ourselves on the way, consider together our mission itinerary.

I will first highlight three important aspects of discipleship from Luke 9:57–62.² The first aspect is contained in the passage's opening lines: "As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'" These lines suggest that we must count the costs of discipleship. The next lines say, "To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'" Put otherwise, we must understand what life's true priorities are. The final part of the passage says, "Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of

1 *Ofelia García and Victor Pedroza are missionary pastors in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico. They have done similar work in different Mexican states over the past thirty-six years. They currently work with the Mexican Mennonite Conference (a German conference). Ofelia is studying for a degree in Anabaptist theology at the Anabaptist Seminary of Latin America (Seminario Anabautista Latinoamericano, Semilla), and Victor has a degree in anthropology from the National School for Anthropology and History (Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, ENAH). This essay was presented by Ofelia as one of the plenary sessions at the meeting of the Mission Commission of Mennonite World Conference, the Global Mission Fellowship, and the Global Anabaptist Service Network in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in July 2015. The essay was translated by Jamie Pitts, who is co-editor of Anabaptist Witness and an assistant professor of Anabaptist Studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.*

2 All Scripture quotations in this essay are from the New Revised Standard Version.

God.” The passage gives us a clear challenge: nothing should delay us from following Jesus!

We are missionaries in Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, Mexico. In Mexico, paradoxically, secularization advances at the same time as religiosity does. The combination of secularization and religiosity is worthy of analysis.

All missionaries work in particular and unique social contexts. There are, to be sure, similarities between some contexts, but the specific environment to which we have been called challenges us and requires our transformation in specific ways. How we face those challenges and transformations depends much on our fidelity to Jesus Christ.

Some of the features of the context in which Victor and I work include the following: corruption; impunity; the dominance of the “laws of the free market,” which have developed into a savage neoliberalism; a constitution manipulated at will, so that those with power accumulate more and more and escape all accountability; and the dominance of drug trafficking, which grows unceasingly, challenges all authorities, and has sufficient power to corrupt and terrorize and to unleash a war that year after year leaves thousands of dead, widows, and orphans. All of these features are, without a doubt, scandalous social sins; among them, it is especially the enormous gap between the rich minority and the immense poor majority that cries out to heaven for justice.

Christianity continues to be the dominant religion in Mexico, though it is incredibly diverse and contains extremes. On one side are the conservative groups that count all other groups as heretics, and on the other side are syncretic groups that do not hesitate to incorporate any ritual that makes their worship more attractive and emotional. Examples of the latter include those quite “mystical” worship songs that proclaim a glorious Christ who is very, very far from the realities of human life; other songs proclaim a Christ who makes no demands on us but rather is dedicated only to the happiness of the individual believer—“Jesus is my friend,” they say. Common religiosity in Mexico is such that many people no longer feel it necessary to commit to a community of believers. Individualism is rampant in these forms of piety, which is perhaps paradoxical but, regardless, is an unequivocal sign that we are in a post-Christian era.

Various additional phenomena also face us on the mission field. For instance, our city—a medium-sized city of 150,000 inhabitants—currently exceeds the global average for suicides. At the moment we are writing this article, there have already been almost seventy to this point in the year. Most of those who kill themselves are youth between fifteen and twenty-five, and they are mostly males. Some of the explanations commonly offered by commentators

are existential frustration, social isolation, and anger directed at themselves and others.

We have had at least four generations of children with abandoned-child syndrome. These children grow up without ethical and moral references, without any reference to authority or limits. Moreover, they know nothing of God, which may seem like a contradiction in this context that is so religious—and, in fact, it is. At the age of fifteen, these youth abandon their homes and schools and adopt a form of life that lacks any clear purpose. Our city, furthermore, has some of the highest rates of alcoholism and car accidents [in the country]. All of this is a sign of disenchantment and despair—society has failed. Many churches ignore these phenomena and focus on being the biggest and most attractive in the city.

This is the context in which we follow Jesus, attending to his exacting demands for social and personal transformation. In the passage from Luke cited above, three determinants for discipleship stand out. In the first part of the passage, we observe that Jesus's young interlocutor has much enthusiasm and a true passion to follow Jesus, but Jesus invites him to reconsider. Passion and enthusiasm are insufficient; it is necessary to be ready to count the cost. Are we ready to renounce our comforts to follow in his steps? It is necessary to submit to the lordship of Jesus and from that posture follow our King and Teacher. This is what it means to be a disciple, to constantly learn the Lord's character and what the Teacher teaches, and to find one's greatest joy in obeying him.

The disciple, the missionary, the one who follows Jesus—this person accepts that in innumerable occasions working conditions will not be optimal. It is therefore necessary for disciples to strip themselves of the tyranny of private property and wealth accumulation; to accept that the new family—the community of believers—has priority over our families of origin; and to accept that we cannot postpone discipleship for other projects. We must also accept that to look back [at our old lives] with longing incapacitates us for mission, for entering fully into God's reign, for consoling and giving hope to those who have no hope for a future.

The first challenge is to teach believers to follow Jesus and not the latest fashions of the day. I read somewhere that even the supply and demand system has been overtaken by fashion.³ Fashion imposes comprehensive criteria for behavior and thought. In our city, which is at once very secularized and very religious, we see forms of Christianity that move from fashion to fashion. The problem with fashion is that it has no solid foundation, and when believers get

3 [Here and elsewhere in this essay "fashion" (moda) does not primarily refer to clothing but rather to broader cultural—especially religious—trends.—trans.]

bored, in the best case scenario they change religious organizations as they search for something more emotional, or they become solitary Christians. In the worst case scenario, they cease being Christians altogether and follow secular fashions.

In our small Mennonite church, we study the Teacher's teachings in the New Testament, specifically in the four Gospels, and we set out to apply them. We strive above all to become a community of love, faith, and hope, of mutual aid and an open table, of support for the helpless and aid for the sick. But there is a difference between sending out invitations [to friends and family] and inviting the first person who passes by, regardless of who they are—a [gang] assassin, gay, indigenous, or a Central American migrant—to share food.

We focus on children and treat them as very important persons. We present ourselves to children as good adults who will not abuse them or deceive them or otherwise mistreat them; adults who will give them care, respect, attention, and guidance and who, in this way, will lead them to know Jesus the Christ. We also evangelize women. We bake a cake together, and while it is in the oven, we reflect on the call of Christ. We pray with the poor and those in need. An emaciated man came to us and said, "For a while I've wanted to come here," and without hesitation he began to share his story. "I have been a very bad man," he said. "So bad that my first wife committed suicide because she couldn't bear how I treated her. I don't want the same to happen with my current wife." We reprimanded him and then announced that only the Messiah Jesus could forgive and transform him, could make him a new man.

God wants to reconcile everyone with himself, and to reconcile us with our neighbors. Salvation is spiritual and personal, but it has social consequences. Therefore, we do not get entangled in the conflict over "evangelism or social action." We cannot refuse either task; they go together.

Missionaries and pastors are the first called to model such discipleship. I have already noted some of the commitments that one makes upon accepting the call to discipleship. The disciple, the one who follows Jesus the Christ in life, explicitly renounces every pretension to power, fame, riches, autonomy, and loyalty to the media. The disciple also renounces the promotion of religious fashions; these only seek to keep the sheep captive without giving them food that would convert them into faithful disciples.

We aim, then, to form communities of faith that visibly manifest such discipleship. These communities practice justice, equality, love, and mercy. These communities participate with Christ in the reconciliation of the world.

This work is not easy. Mammon, manifested in the laws of the free market, has deranged believers, who search for and construct ideological justifications

for their economic materialism, their individualism, their “legitimate” social ascension, and their alliances with many powers. Their loyalty is not unified; it is not to Christ but rather is divided among many powers.

It is not easy. Many churches have incorporated into their way of being an entire sensory system [*todo un aparato sensorial*] that thrills them [*los ilusiona*] with material riches and justifies individualism. These churches have hierarchical religious structures and charismatic leaders [*santones*] who stir up [*ilusionan*] believers with hopes for wealth and power and freedom from suffering. Carrying Christ's cross has nothing to do with discipleship for these churches. “Christ has already paid it all,” they believe unquestioningly.

This is the secular and religious environment in which we do the work of mission.

To be sure, it is not easy to follow the Messiah, to live the gospel and promote a simple lifestyle among believers. Such a lifestyle is blatantly countercultural with respect to materialism.

The promotion of a simple lifestyle in response to the call of the gospel is not the same as promoting poverty—poverty is always the result of socially unjust economic relations. Nor is it promoting wealth, since this too is always the result of socially unjust economic relations. Both poverty and wealth promote relations of slave-master, servant-lord, exploited-exploiter. The alternative society of the gospel, on the other hand, is a society of equal relations where all are brothers and sisters and where we proclaim Christ for the liberation of all. Nor is the promotion of a simple lifestyle the promotion of individualism, as if the rest of the human race were unimportant; following Jesus involves the rejection and renunciation of racism, nationalism, classism, and xenophobia.

Following Jesus in life, together with other disciples, is to become part of an alternative community for the sake of secular and religious society in the post-Christian era. Following Jesus is to always be on mission and on the way, and to always remember, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”