

Follow Paul?

Introduction

A fascinating but largely unknown fact of the New Testament is Paul's command to believers to follow or imitate him. He issued this command several times throughout his letters. No other writer of Scripture issued such an imperative. We do not find it with Peter, John, James, etc. in the New Testament nor Moses or any of the prophets in the Old Testament. The only other person to issue such a command was Jesus the Messiah, the Lord God Himself. How could Paul make such a claim? Why was Paul unique in issuing this command? And most importantly, what did Paul mean by it? Why did he command us to imitate him?

The Language of Following and Imitation

One of the problems of translations is that translators are inconsistent with language. The word Jesus used most frequently for following Him was ἀκολουθέω (cf. Matthew 8.22, 9.9, 19.21, 28; Mark 1.17, 2.14, 8.34, 10.21; Luke 5.27, 9.23, 59; 18.22; John 1.43; 8.12; 10.27, 12.26, 21.19, 22). This word means "to follow one who precedes and accompany him." Another word Jesus used was δεῦτε (Matthew 4.19, 11.28; Mark 1.17). This word means "come" and is used often as an interjection, "Come!" Paul used neither of these words. Instead, Paul used the nouns μιμητής, συμμιμητής and the verb μιμέομαι. From them we derive the word "mimeograph," to copy something. The nouns mean "imitator" and the verb "to imitate." Paul used the same term (μιμητής) in Ephesians 5.1 in his exhortation to be followers of God. Coupled with the "μιμ*" words (Philippians 3.17, 2 Thessalonians 3.9) Paul used τύπος. This noun means an "example" or a "pattern."

The Imitation Passages

Passage	Greek Text
1 Corinthians 4.16	παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς, μιμηταί μου γίνεσθε.
	I beseech [present active indicative] you therefore, become [present middle imperative] imitators of me.
1 Corinthians 11.1	μιμηταί μου γίνεσθε, καθὼς κἀγὼ Χριστοῦ.
	Become [present middle imperative] imitators of me, as I am of Christ.
Galatians 4.12	Γίνεσθε ὡς ἐγώ, ὅτι κἀγὼ ὡς ὑμεῖς, ἀδελφοί, δέομαι ὑμῶν. οὐδέν με ἡδίκησατε:
	Become [present middle imperative] as I, because I became as you, brethren, I beg of you. You have done me no wrong;
Philippians 3.17	Συμμιμηταί μου γίνεσθε, ἀδελφοί, καὶ σκοπεῖτε τοὺς οὕτω περιπατοῦντας καθὼς ἔχετε τύπον ἡμᾶς.
	Become [present middle imperative] fellow imitators of me, brothers, and fix your attention on [present active imperative] those who walk according to our pattern.
1 Thessalonians 1.6	καὶ ὑμεῖς μιμηταὶ ἡμῶν ἐγενήθητε καὶ τοῦ κυρίου, δεξάμενοι τὸν λόγον ἐν θλίψει πολλῇ μετὰ χαρᾶς πνεύματος ἁγίου,
	And you have become [aorist passive indicative] imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction with joy of the Holy Spirit.
2 Thessalonians 3.7	αὐτοὶ γὰρ οἶδατε πῶς δεῖ μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς, ὅτι οὐκ ἠτακτήσαμεν ἐν ὑμῖν

	For you yourselves know [perfect active indicative] how it is necessary to be imitators [present middle infinitive] of us, because we were not disorderly (quit ranks) [aorist active indicative] among you.
2 Thessalonians 3.9	οὐχ ὅτι οὐκ ἔχομεν ἐξουσίαν, ἀλλ' ἵνα ἑαυτοὺς τύπον δῶμεν ὑμῖν εἰς τὸ μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς.
	Not that we do not have the power (or right), but in order that we might give [aorist active subjunctive] ourselves as an example to you to imitate [present middle infinitive] us.

Understanding the Passages

Introduction

Paul's letters indicate he had to defend his apostleship constantly. He was not one of the Twelve or a follower of Christ in His earthly ministry. Instead, the glorified Christ specially commissioned him as the apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11.13). The God who separated (ἀφορίζω, i.e., ἀπό + ὀρίζω)¹, i.e., marked him from the womb (Galatians 1.15) and separated him from the Twelve (cf. Galatians 1.12, 16-19) after his salvation. Why? God had a special plan for Paul. The risen, glorified, heavenly Christ revealed "secrets" (μυστήριον) to Paul that He had kept unrevealed in His earthly ministry to the Twelve. Some of these "secrets" included the revelation of the Church, the body of Christ, the believer's identification with Christ in His death and resurrection, the gospel of the grace of God, the Rapture, etc.² Because he was not one of the Twelve and because Paul taught doctrines completely unknown by the Twelve, some believers regarded him with suspicion. For example, in the matter of salvation, concern and controversy over Paul's gospel came to a head in 51 A.D. at the Council of Jerusalem. Believing Jews rejected Paul's gospel to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). They

declared Gentiles had to be saved like Jews. They had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15.1, 5).³ Paul rejected their arguments and objections. Why? Paul had received his gospel and doctrine directly from the Lord (Galatians 1.1, 11-12). He wasn't for a minute going to let the ideas of the Twelve overturn Christ's direct commands to him. Fortunately, at the end of the day, the Holy Spirit moved Peter to recall his encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10), and Paul carried the day. This was a watershed event. In the conclusion, Peter made a stunning statement: "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are" (Acts 15.11). The idea that Jews would now be saved as Gentiles was unthinkable before this time. The conclusion of the Jerusalem Council was a massive paradigm shift in salvific history. After that decision, Paul wrote the Galatians that anyone who preached a gospel different from his gospel was accursed (Galatians 1.8-9).

Lifestyle and Doctrine

1 Corinthians 4.16

In chapter 4, Paul wrote that he should be regarded (λογίζομαι) as a servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God. The word λογίζομαι was a favorite of Paul's, which he used many times, particularly in the book of Romans. It means "reckon," "count," "consider" and has in view fact or reality. The "secrets" of which Paul wrote were secrets the risen Lord had revealed to him alone. In the remaining part of the chapter, he defended his work as an apostle and reminded the Corinthians that while they might have countless tutors (παιδαγωγός) in Christ, they had but one father in Christ: Paul. Paul became their father through his proclamation of the gospel to them and their believing it (1 Corinthians 4.15). Because of this, Paul commanded them to imitate him. While Paul's life was worthy of emulation, his chief point was that they should imitate or follow his *doctrine*.

In 1 Corinthians 4.17, Paul wrote that he had sent Timothy to remind (ἀναμνησκω—another μιμ* word) them of his ways (ὁδός) in Christ which he taught everywhere in every church. Paul’s “ways” were his doctrines. The Corinthians needed to be reminded of these doctrines due to their many problems.

In the previous chapter, Paul wrote the following:

Κατὰ τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι ὡς σοφὸς ἀρχιτέκτων θεμέλιον τέθεικα, ἄλλος δὲ ἐποικοδομεῖ ἕκαστος δὲ βλεπέτω πῶς ἐποικοδομεῖ.

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise architect, I laid the foundation and another builds upon it. But let each one discern how he builds (1 Corinthians 3.10).

Paul stated that he laid the foundation of the doctrines of Christianity, i.e., the “secrets” ([μυστήριον](#)) the Lord had revealed to him. As the master architect, Paul warned believers to be careful that their “building,” i.e., teaching, was consistent with his “architectural plan,” i.e., his body of doctrine.

Paul revealed more information in this line of thought when he wrote Timothy.

πιστὸς ὁ λόγος καὶ πάσης ἀποδοχῆς ἄξιος ὅτι Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς ἦλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἁμαρτωλοὺς σῶσαι ὧν πρῶτός εἰμι ἐγώ. ἀλλὰ διὰ τοῦτο ἠλεήθην ἵνα ἐν ἐμοὶ πρῶτῳ ἐνδείξηται Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς τὴν ἅπασαν μακροθυμίαν πρὸς ὑποτύπων τῶν μελλόντων πιστεύειν ἐπ’ αὐτῷ εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

It is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first. But for this reason, I obtained mercy, in order that in me first, Christ Jesus might demonstrate all patience as a pattern to those about to believe in Him for eternal life (1 Timothy 1.15-16).

In the passage above, Paul claimed that he was the “first”

(πρῶτος) to be saved in a new program of salvation. The word πρῶτος means first in succession and/or rank. He went on to explain that as “first” he formed a prototype of those who would follow him in salvation. Those who would follow Paul in salvation compose the Church, the body of Christ. God revealed to Paul the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24; Romans 15.15; 1 Corinthians 15.10). In Paul’s gospel one is saved by faith + nothing—believing that Christ died for one’s sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). Those who respond to this truth form the great organism of the Church, the body of Christ, which was one of the mysteries God revealed to Paul alone. Paul elaborated further on this new program in passages such as Colossians 1.24-27.

Another passage that confirms Paul’s uniqueness in terms of the doctrines he revealed is Ephesians 3.2-7:

²εἴ γε ἠκούσατε τὴν οἰκονομίαν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ τῆς δοθείσης μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς, ³[ὅτι] κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν ἐγνωρίσθη μοι τὸ μυστήριον, καθὼς προέγραψα ἐν ὀλίγῳ, ⁴πρὸς ὃ δύνασθε ἀναγινώσκοντες νοῆσαι τὴν σύνεσίν μου ἐν τῷ μυστηρίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ⁵ὃ ἑτέραις γενεαῖς οὐκ ἐγνωρίσθη τοῖς υἱοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὡς νῦν ἀπεκαλύφθη τοῖς ἁγίοις ἀποστόλοις αὐτοῦ καὶ προφήταις ἐν πνεύματι, ⁶εἶναι τὰ ἔθνη συγκληρονόμα καὶ σύσσωμα καὶ συμμέτοχα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ διὰ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, ⁷οὗ ἐγενήθη διάκονος κατὰ τὴν δωρεὰν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ τῆς δοθείσης μοι κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ.

²if indeed you heard of the stewardship [dispensation] of the grace of God given to me to you ³that according to revelation was made known to me the mystery just as I wrote previously in brief, ⁴as to which you are able by recognizing to perceive my understanding into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men as it was now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit: ⁶the Gentiles to be joint-heirs and a joint body and joint-sharers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, ⁷of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me according to the operation of His power.

In verse 1, Paul declared that he was the prisoner of Jesus Christ for Gentiles. This was in fulfillment of his special commission as “the apostle of the Gentiles” (Romans 11.13; cf. Acts 9.15. Notice the “pattern.” The Lord gave the “mystery” to Paul. Now Paul revealed it to the Ephesians. From his statement in verse 3, we learn that Paul had written them an earlier, brief letter in which he told them about “the mystery.” He now expanded upon the things he had written. Paul declared that “the mystery” was just that. It was a “secret” God had kept hidden until He revealed it to His “holy apostles and prophets.” We know this cannot be Peter or the Twelve because they never mention the mystery and never had a ministry to Gentiles. These have to refer to Paul and then Paul’s co-workers: Barnabas, Silas, Titus, Timothy, etc. Paul was the first to receive the “mystery” and he communicated it to others. What was the mystery? For one thing, it was that Gentiles were now joint-heirs with Christ in a new body—the Church, the body of Christ. The Old Testament knew nothing of the Church, the body of Christ. None of the covenants revealed it. The prophets were wholly ignorant of it. Jesus, in His earthly ministry, revealed nothing about it. His ministry was wholly to Israel, not to Gentiles (Romans 15.8). It was a

secret! In Ephesians 3.8-9, Paul again reiterated that the stewardship or dispensation of the “mystery” or “secret” was given to him.

1 Corinthians 11.1

In this passage, Paul commanded the Corinthians to become imitators of him as he was of Christ. Some might think Paul is speaking of his lifestyle, his behavior. Paul probably would have agreed but that is not the point of the passage. What Paul had in mind was his doctrine. The next verse makes this plain.

Ἐπαινῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς ὅτι πάντα μου μέμνησθε καὶ καθὼς παρέδωκα ὑμῖν τὰς παραδόσεις κατέχετε.

Now I praise you because you have remembered me in everything just as you hold firmly to the doctrines I delivered to you (1 Corinthians 11.2).

Galatians 4.12

Paul’s letter to the Galatians was to correct their doctrinal error of leaving grace and placing themselves under the Law of Moses. In Galatians 3, Paul asked:

² This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ⁴ Did you suffer so many things in vain— if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

The Galatians had been saved by faith (grace) alone. Paul asked them since they had received life through grace did they think they were going to live by Law. Could they be that foolish? Continuing his appeal in Galatians 4, Paul wrote the

Galatians they were not slaves (as one was under the Law) but sons (under grace). Being under the Law was bondage (Galatians 4.3). Thus he wrote:

⁸ However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. ⁹ But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? ¹⁰ You observe days and months and seasons and years. ¹¹ I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.

The “weak and worthless elemental things” were the requirements of the Law (Romans 8.1-4). This was the context in which Paul issued the command to the Galatians to “be as I.” He wanted them to return to what he had taught them and enjoy their Christian lives in freedom rather than place themselves in bondage. They were free! They were sons, not slaves!

Philippians 3.17

These passages provide a pattern. Paul wrote the Philippians to copy him and those who walked according to his example. In the next verse, Paul explained the primary reason for his insistence.

πολλοὶ γὰρ περιπατοῦσιν οὓς πολλάκις ἔλεγον ὑμῖν, νῦν δὲ καὶ
κλαίων λέγω, τοὺς ἐχθροὺς τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῦ Χριστοῦ,

For many walk whom I have often told you, and now I tell you weeping, that they are hostile of the cross of Christ (Philippians 3.18).

What was the “walk” Paul was concerned over? Again, it was the doctrine of these men. They were hostile to the cross of Christ. Who were these men? They were all who taught doctrines

different from those Paul had received from the ascended Christ. The preaching of the cross, the good news of Christ's death for our sins and His victory over sin and death by His glorious resurrection was Paul's essential message but Paul's doctrines also included much more—the whole body of truth he called "mysteries."

1 Thessalonians 1.6

In this verse we find Paul acknowledging and praising the Thessalonian believers' for their imitation of him. Again, Paul associated their action with his gospel. In the previous verse (1 Thessalonians 1.5), he wrote,

"for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake."

When the Thessalonians had received the word (message, doctrine) from Paul they imitated him (1 Corinthians 1.6).

2 Thessalonians 3.7 and 2 Thessalonians 3.9

The two verses in view here focus more on personal behavior. Paul warned against associating with unruly (ἀτάκτως) believers (2 Thessalonians 3.6). Paul reminded them that when he was with them that he did not eat their food without paying for it (2 Thessalonians 3.8), that he and his companions worked day and night so as to not be a financial burden (v. 8), and that when he was with them the rule he gave was that if someone was unwilling to work he was not to eat (2 Thessalonians 3.10). But even here, Paul appealed to the matter of the doctrine (παράδοσις, 2 Thessalonians 3.6) they had received from him.

Conclusion

Paul commanded believers to imitate him. We have seen that

while personal behavior was sometimes in view, (2 Thessalonians 3.7, 9) Paul's primary concern was that believers follow the doctrine they had received from him. Paul had received his doctrine from the risen, glorified Lord. Paul called these doctrines "mysteries" (μυστήριον) or "secrets." Paul used this term because the teachings the Lord gave him were secrets, i.e., doctrines the Lord had revealed to no one before. The ascended Lord saved Paul to become a prototype for a new creation, namely, the Church, the body of Christ. As believers today, to imitate Paul means to recognize and obey the truths Paul revealed. Such obedience is essential to the process Christians call sanctification. Apart from it, the believer in Christ cannot mature spiritually and conform to the image of His Son (Romans 8.29). Only by obeying the doctrines the glorified Lord revealed to Paul can we grow into the person Christ has destined us to be.

¹ The verb ὀρίζω means "to mark a boundary" and ἀπό means "away from." God kept Paul away from the Twelve in order that He might reveal a new and different program to him than the prophetic program He had revealed to the Twelve. Incidentally, ὀρίζω with the α privative is how we get the word "aorist" as in aorist tense. The aorist denotes past action without definition or boundary as to the extent of time of the action. It is also described as punctiliar.

² See the author's article on [Paul's "Mystery"](#).

³ These events took place 14 years after Paul was saved. During this period Paul preached his gospel, the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24), and the Twelve preached the gospel of the kingdom, inaugurated by John the Baptist and continued by Jesus and the Twelve.

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