

Follow God

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Since the year 1789, when the government of the United States began to operate under the newly adopted Constitution, there have been periodic elections to select a President as head of the executive branch of the Federal government, and representatives to serve in the Legislative branch.

Political parties emerged, led by influential politicians. Implied in this system of government is an appeal by the various office holders or would-be office holders to “follow me.”

Those chosen write the laws, set the policies, and administer the government in line with their ideas of how the nation should be governed. Fortunately, the framers of the Constitution had the wisdom to limit the powers of government, ostensibly guaranteeing certain rights to the citizens that the government could not impinge on, such as freedom of speech, freedom of worship, etc.

At times those rights have been respected, but on other occasions they have been violated. Under slavery those enslaved had no rights to speak of. Since slavery was outlawed, theoretically everyone is to have equal rights under the law, including individual freedoms recognized by the Constitution.

Today, in the year 2021 as this is being written, we live in a time when those who wield power over the country seek more and more aggressively to impose their views on its citizens with or against their will. Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and other individual rights have rarely been less secure on a national scale in the United States than they are today, because of the leaders the people, at least many of them, have chosen to follow.

Government oppression in the United States and some other western nations has not yet reached the level prevailing in many other nations, but it is headed in that direction. Oppression has been the rule among the governments of mankind throughout history.

Human beings are by nature social creatures. In any organized society there have to be leaders, and there have to be those who follow. Most of us function in some way as leaders in certain situations, and as followers in other respects.

We all make choices in whom to follow, and what to follow. The leader or leaders you choose to follow can have far reaching consequences on your own welfare. So, whom should you follow?

The Bible has a lot to say about leading and following. And the Bible is very specific in telling us whom to follow. We are to follow God. Any other choices about this question are subordinate to that choice. Either we are following God, or we are not. And the choices we make determine the answer to that question.

The title of this article is “Follow God.” And we will explore briefly what the Bible has to say about this subject.

Human beings in some ways are like sheep. Humans have an inborn herd instinct, somewhat like sheep. But we also have minds to think with. We are given responsibilities and decisions to make in how we will behave.

Even so, human beings often follow a particular path simply because other people are going along in that path. Peer pressure, societal pressure, not infrequently is decisive in determining human behavior, the choices people make in whom or what to follow. Yet, the excuse, “everybody’s doing it,” is no excuse, as far as God is concerned. And when following a crowd leads to disaster, the fact that “everyone did it,” won’t save you.

As I mentioned, people are in some ways like sheep. Indeed, the Bible often uses “sheep” as a metaphor for people, human beings. Domesticated sheep need a shepherd, one who will lead them in the right path, because without a faithful shepherd, they will wander away, get lost, fall prey to predators, or other ills. Even when they have been led to green pasture and good water, they will tend to wander away if not guided by a shepherd.

In an article I read about sheep, is related a case where evidently the shepherds were inattentive, and one of the sheep wandered over to a cliff, being followed by other sheep. The lead sheep walked over the cliff and fell fifteen meters to his death. The others followed, fifteen hundred in all. Many of them, almost a third, were killed.

While we humans are likened in the Bible to sheep, we are given warning that we are not to blindly follow other human beings. We are forbidden by God to just follow the crowd in a path of destruction.

“You **shall not follow a crowd to do evil**; nor shall you testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after many to pervert justice” (Exodus 23:2).

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and **follow Me**’”(Matthew 16:24).

In effect God said the same thing to Israel in the wilderness. He entered into a covenant with them, in which they agreed to follow him, to obey his laws, and in turn they would be blessed (Exodus 19:3-8; Deuteronomy 28:1-14).

But it wasn’t long before they wandered off the path. Moses was called up into the mountain to receive the instructions—the laws—God had prepared for Israel to follow.

“Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, ‘Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him’” (Exodus 32:1).

“Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. **They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them.** They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!’” (Exodus 32:6-8).

God was ready at that time to destroy the nation, but Moses appealed to him and God relented. Even so, thousands were punished with death for their rebellion (Exodus 32:9-14, 26-28). Of those who remained, not one of the transgressors was allowed to enter the promised inheritance, not only because of this sin of indulging in idolatry, but other sins of rebellion that they committed along the way, as discussed below. And God sent a plague on them for good measure (Exodus 32:33-35).

Aaron, Moses’ brother, who was in a leadership position, was weak. He did not have the fortitude at that time to take a stand against the mob spirit of rebellion which had spread among the congregation.

All too often, those who are supposed to be leaders, those with some office or title, are more followers than they are leaders. Some ministers are people pleasers. They are more interested in pleasing people than pleasing God, so they teach what they think will be pleasing and popular with the people (cf. II Chronicles 18:9-17; Isaiah 30:9-10; Jeremiah 5:31). Actually, many ministers, and many Churches that call themselves Christian, are that way. They may attract a large following, but they are false shepherds. They really are tools of Satan, and wolves in sheep’s clothing.

Those willing to teach and follow the right path, those willing to truly follow God, are few and far between. “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:13-15).

“... Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (II Corinthians 11:14-15).

Joshua was a faithful follower of God. He was up on the mountain when the people persuaded Aaron to make an idol to worship. Later, he was sent along with others to survey the land God was leading the Israelites to. Only he and Caleb brought back a positive report. The others lacked faith that God could give them the land he had promised them.

Moses reminded the Israelites of this forty years later, as they were about to enter the land. The nation had been punished for their disobedience and lack of faith by wandering in the wilderness for forty years. All of that generation died in the wilderness, except Joshua and Caleb.

Moses spoke the following to them: "Yet, for all that, you did not believe the Lord your God, who went in the way before you to search out a place for you to pitch your tents, to show you the way you should go, in the fire by night and in the cloud by day. And the Lord heard the sound of your words, and was angry, and took an oath, saying, 'Surely not one of these men of this evil generation shall see that good land of which I swore to give to your fathers, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him and his children I am giving the land on which he walked, because he **wholly followed the Lord.**' The Lord was also angry with me for your sakes, saying, 'Even you shall not go in there; Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall go in there. Encourage him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit it'" (Deuteronomy 1:32-38).

Often as you read through the Bible you find that when there were strong and faithful leaders who followed God, the people followed along with them. But as soon as a weak or corrupt leader came along, the people, most of them, turned to idols.

"So the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the Lord which He had done for Israel. Now Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died when he was one hundred and ten years old. And they buried him within the border of his inheritance at Timnath Heres, in the mountains of Ephraim, on the north side of Mount Gaash. **When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord nor the work which He had done for Israel. Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals; and they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. They forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.** And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel. So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. Wherever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for calamity, as the Lord had said, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were greatly distressed. Nevertheless, the Lord raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they would not listen to their judges, but they played the harlot with other gods, and bowed down to them. They turned quickly from the way in which their fathers walked, in obeying the commandments of the Lord; they did not do so. And when the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them. And it came to pass, **when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods, to serve them and bow down to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way.** Then the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel; and He said, 'Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and has not heeded My voice, I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, so that through them I may test Israel, whether they will keep the ways of the Lord, to walk in them as their fathers kept them, or not.' Therefore the Lord left

those nations, without driving them out immediately; nor did He deliver them into the hand of Joshua" (Judges 2:7-23).

Years ago, the Worldwide Church of God had grown to include nearly 150,000 members, and millions of others who read the Church's magazine, called "*The Plain Truth*." The Church's leader, Herbert W. Armstrong, died, and within a few years the corrupt leaders who succeeded him had cast off many of the Biblically sound teachings of the Church and replaced them with false teachings more popular with the world. Some ninety percent of the members followed along with the corruption, and abandoned the true worship they had ostensibly committed themselves to.

Mr. Armstrong probably would not have been surprised at this.

Following is a commentary about this that I received by e-mail years ago. It was written dated March 21, 1996 by a man named Ken Burrell. I've corrected some of the punctuation and typographical errors in the e-mail quoted below, and added emphasis in a few places, otherwise, it stands as written:

Mr. Burrell introduced the transcript of a portion of a radio broadcast by Mr. Armstrong: "The following is an excerpt from a sermon HWA gave some time in the early 1960's while doing a series on the World Tomorrow radio program on the book of Hebrews. It touches on the subject of apostasy within the church, and why it happens, and what we should do about it. Food for thought.

"This is verbatim, from the audio tape":

[Mr. Armstrong's radio broadcast] "Next I wanted you to turn over here to Exodus 32 now, and first four verses.

""When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount...'

"Now this is after the Old Covenant had been made, and Moses is up getting some of the laws from God on the mount. He was up there 40 days and 40 nights. And what did the people do while Moses was away from them 40 days?

"Just let God send a leader. People will follow the leader. They want to follow a man instead of following God. And they'll follow the man. And if a man is a man of God they're following God because they follow the man.

"But just let that man go away about 40 days and the people forget all about him. And they get back into their own ways, again. My friends, most of you are like that. That's human nature.

"And my friends, listen. That's the thing you were put on this earth to overcome. That's the thing you were put here to eradicate out of your nature. Why don't you begin to **really** follow God?

“Now, ‘Moses delayed to come down....’

“Yes, God kept him up there for 40 days.

“Then, ‘The people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, “Up, make us gods....”’

“Make some idol gods, in other words.

”...make us gods, which shall go before us; and as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.’

“You know, my friends, in my personal experience I have learned that's exactly the way people will act. I've had a little flock that had been raised up. People had been brought to God, which God had brought to Him through my efforts. I hadn't done it. God had done it; but He had used me.

“But, the people looked to me. And as soon as the Work began to expand, and I was taken to Hollywood and New York and Chicago and different places in order to get the Work of God going on radio stations coast-to-coast and all over the nation, I only needed to be gone about 40 days and the people say, ‘Oh, as for this Herbert W. Armstrong, we wot not what's become of him. Let's go off into some other doctrines, and let's get off into other... Let's throw away this truth!’

“I have seen it happen. What kind of human beings are we anyhow?

“And I found they'd only been looking to a **man** in the first place. My friends, I'm not trying to get you to look at me. I'm trying to get you to look at Jesus Christ. He's your Savior! He's on the throne of grace and He's there night and day! And you can go direct to Him anytime. Don't you know that? He **is** there.

“I'm merely a—just another human being to sort of help you a little, that's all. But God is the One that does it. I haven't any power. I just have a little faith, and God has given me faith. And I know He hears” [end of recorded remarks].

Ken Burrell comments: “It makes you wonder about those who take Paul's statement, ‘follow me as I follow Christ’ as if it meant ‘follow me’ instead of ‘follow Christ’. Or, who boast, ‘I am a Jesus Christ **man**,’ directing the attention to themselves. Those who criticize HWA [Herbert Armstrong] for teaching a gospel about himself never got the message. The message has always been the same, ‘Don't believe me, believe your Bible,’ and yet I have actually heard WCG [Worldwide Church of God] ministers say that it only applied to unconverted people. It seems that after all, they were truly only following God because they followed a man. I think I understand now why so many have accepted the new WCG doctrines without so much as cracking open a Bible, after years and years of professing another doctrinal stance.”

Yes, there have been ministers in the Church—the Church of God—who've claimed that certain laws and principles apply only to unconverted people. Why would the admonition repeated frequently by Mr. Armstrong, "Don't believe me, believe your Bible," apply only to unconverted people, who, by the very fact they aren't converted, don't believe the Bible, as opposed to those who claim to be converted, and who thus ostensibly do believe the Bible.

God's word applies to everyone, and it especially applies to those who are a part of his Church. If we don't believe the Bible, and if we are not really following the Bible, but simply the dictates of men apart from the Bible, we aren't really following God and any claim to be converted is hollow.

As quoted above, "Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and **follow Me**'" (Matthew 16:24).

Jesus also appointed shepherds to assist him in taking care of the sheep, as Joshua was appointed to assist Moses in the wilderness.

Paul was appointed as an apostle to take the gospel to the world and to administer Churches under his supervision. Others were also appointed as helpers to shepherd the flock. Paul spoke to a group of them at Miletus near the coast in Asia Minor on his way to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. He said to them:

"Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure **savage wolves** will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also **from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves**" (Acts 20:26-30).

In another analogy Jesus likened himself to the **door** to the sheepfold, an enclosure where the sheep were cared for.

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the **sheep follow him**, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this illustration, but they did not understand the things which He spoke to them. Then Jesus said to them again, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who ever came before Me [making bold claims to draw followers to themselves, cf. Acts 5:35-37] are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. **I am the door**. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for

the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:1-16).

God has given us clear instructions in his word, and told us to follow him, which means follow his instructions (cf. Exodus 15:26; 20:6; Leviticus 26:1-46; Matthew 19:17; James 1:22; 2:8-12; John 14:15; 15:10; Revelation 12:17; 14:12; *et al*). We are to do the will of God, as expressed in his word, properly understood. Ministers who claim to be ministers of God are required to faithfully teach God’s word (II Timothy 2:15; 4:2; I Peter 1:22-25). But each of us must put them to the test. “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (I John 4:1).

“For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the Lord’” (Jeremiah 29:8-9).

“The simple believes every word, But the prudent considers well his steps” (Proverbs 14:15).

“If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods’--which you have not known--’and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. **You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him**” (Deuteronomy 13:1-4).

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