



# Biblical Followership: An Exegetical Examination of the Call, Costs and Rewards of Followership

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The present study is an exegetical study of the call, costs, and rewards of following Jesus using socio-rhetorical criticism (Robbins, 1996). The specific dimensions of socio-rhetorical criticism used in this study include inner texture, intertexture, and sacred texture analysis. Biblical followership from Jesus' call to follow me, to the leadership development of his followers is richly depicted in scripture. In a divine play on words, he called ordinary fishermen to become fishers of men. The journey from followers to early church leaders is recorded in scripture during the three-year earthly ministry of Jesus. The findings of this study show that the socio-rhetorical criticism elements of inner texture, intertexture, and sacred texture analysis can be used to answer the research question: What does it mean to become a biblical follower of Jesus? Each of these facets of followership provides fertile ground for further research.

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Keywords: followership, discipleship, apprenticeship, follower development

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## Introduction

Biblical followership can be broadly divided into the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) concepts of followership. Generally speaking, the OT concept of followership was embedded in the God-given instructions that Moses delivered to the Israelites as the command: "You must follow the LORD your God and revere only him; obey him, serve him, and remain loyal to him" (Deut. 13:4, NET, as cited in Patterson, 2016, p. 1). This command connotes a wholehearted commitment to the Lord and his commands (Merrill, 1994, p. 231, as cited in Patterson, 2016, p. 1). As the OT unfolds, this command takes on the added prohibition against listening to false prophets and worshiping false gods. Moving to the NT – the focus of this study, the concept of followership can be encapsulated in the words of Jesus when he called the disciples to "Follow me" (Matthew 4:19; English Standard Version).

## Research Question

Within Jesus' command to follow me, are embedded the ideas of discipleship, apprenticeship, commitment, and follower development of the future leaders of the early church. As such, the research question becomes: What does it mean to become a biblical follower of Jesus? To answer the research question, the call, costs, and rewards of followership will be examined. Each of these facets of followers provides texture, depth, and color to the emerging understanding of biblical followership.

## Conceptual Underpinnings

The conceptual underpinnings of followership theory emerged from leadership theory after several decades of leader-centric research in the field (Meindl et al., 1985, as cited in Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 84). Stereotypes abound of leaders influencing others to achieve organizational goals, while the stereotypical follower is seen as falling in line with the leadership direction, carrying out orders and directives, with little - if any, resistance, or initiative (Kelly, 1998 as cited in Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 84). This leader-centric perspective often relegates followers to a pejorative position of hapless subordinates who speak when they are spoken to. Followership research, conversely, in many ways seeks to "reverse the lens" (Shamir, 2007, as cited in Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 84; Khan et al., 2020) to view followers as causing many leadership outcomes and as "co-constructing" (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012 as cited in Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 84) organizational outcomes.

## Biblical Followership

This section extends the conceptual underpinnings to examine biblical followership. Discipleship, calling, and following are recurrent themes in the Bible. These ideas embody the concepts of social identity (Cartsen et al., 2010; Barentsen, 2011; Epitropaki et al., 2017), courageous followership (Chaleff, 2009), and proactive followership (Benson et al., 2016). The ancient themes in the scripture transcend the secular pejorative of being just followers. In the language of the NT, the Greek word translated discipleship – **μαθητεία**, means to follow as an apprentice (Wiktionary, 2020). From this perspective, biblical followership can be viewed as the seedbed of leadership development (Steffens, et al., 2018; Bufalino, 2018).

Neufeld (2009) presented a robust review of disciple-making in the book of Mark, including a comprehensive background, examples from Christian history, and current research on the subject. Csinos (2010) unpacks the practical teaching ministry of Jesus that resulted from his followers responding to his invitation to "Come, follow me" (p. 45). Jesus used apprenticeship and discipleship to teach and form his community of followers. Osiek (2011) questioned how much we really know about the lives of early Christ-followers. House churches were the norm in the first century and Osiek (2011)

cites Mary, the mother of John Mark, hosting such a gathering in her house – the place Peter went in the middle of the night after he was released from prison (Acts 12:12). That Peter would automatically seek out Mary's house indicates the central role of house churches in that day. Lydia, Priscilla, and Aquila also hosted house churches (Osiek, 2011, p. 2). These house churches were the seedbeds of followership in the early Christian church and were the epicenter for the disciples living out their calling to follow Jesus (Osiek, 2011).

Bunch (2012) offered a counterpoint to the pejorative perspective of followership by framing it in terms of a higher calling. Drawing on the writings of both Aristotle and the Apostle Paul, Bunch identified the required virtues and actions of a follower. While Aristotle argued that the virtues could be taught, Paul argued that the fruit of the spirit is a divine gift (Bunch, 2012, p. 68). From a counseling perspective, Albritton (2016) developed an effective strategy for disciple-making targeting the whole person - addressing an "ongoing issue of immaturity that is a result of emotional baggage that is carried far too long by followers of Jesus" (p. 2). Jesus certainly dealt with such immaturity and emotional baggage as he apprenticed his followers in the calling, costs, and rewards of their followership for three years during his earthly ministry (Matthew 20:20-28).

Approaching followership from the leadership development methods of Christ, Thomas (2018) probed the close mentorship Jesus established with his followers by having the disciples near him (p. 107) as he conducted his earthly ministry. Friendships were no doubt developed (Oc & Bashshur, 2013; Laustsen & Petersen, 2015). Before being sent, the disciples needed to spend time at the master's side (Tidball, 2008, as cited in Thomas, 2018, p. 110). In a topic that could have been taken from a contemporary headline, Reinhardt (2020), studied the impact of servant leadership and Christ-centered followership on police brutality against minorities. This study found that "Christ-centered followership informs servant leadership, it serves as a veritable and applicable model that can address the shortcomings of servant leadership in law enforcement" (Reinhardt, 2020, p. 77). But beyond the extant headlines, these studies inform the costs of following Jesus in terms of denying ourselves in the service of others.

Drawing into sharper focus "the kenotic route of Jesus," Joubert (2019, p. 1) invited readers into the Markan paradox and the church as authentic followers of Christ. While Jesus was clearly the Son of God – indeed deity himself (Popper, 2016), he had an unpretentious presence and walk during his earthly ministry (Joubert, 2019, p. 4). Teaching his followers this paradoxical message of kenotic humility even within his pleromatic power as God was a major theme of Jesus' ministry. This study points to the rewards of following Jesus by providing the follower a front-row seat in observing the deity of Christ, albeit through the lens of self-denial and humility – two primary costs of following Jesus.

Rather than a profession, Whitt (2019) saw calling as “a distinctive way of living that all followers of Christ are to exemplify” (p. 317). This broader calling transcends vocation by enveloping the professing Christian in an all-encompassing followership that includes all they think, say, and do – recalling the call to holiness as God is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16). Siniscalchi (2020) investigated how Jesus’ first followers believed God raised him from the dead. A followership so strong that it convinced the disciples to believe in the resurrected Christ “requires unconventional means to understand” (Siniscalchi, 2020, p. 503), and looks very much like the faith of contemporary followers of Christ. Sarver (2020) examined the Christ-centered followership in the pastoral epistles “where it leads instead toward the habits of a shepherd, the heart of a servant, and the humble disposition of a fellow participant in the sufferings of Christ” (Wilder & Jones, 2018, as cited in Sarver, 2020, p. 64). These studies offer a panoramic perspective of the calling, costs, and rewards of following Jesus.

## Method

The present study is an exegetical inquiry of the call, costs, and rewards of following Jesus using socio-rhetorical criticism focusing on several short NT pericopes. Three pericopes were examined to unvale the call to followership, three were probed to understand the costs of followership, and the remaining three were explored to reveal the rewards of followership. “Socio-rhetorical criticism is an approach to literature that focuses on values, convictions, and beliefs both in the text and in the world in which we live” (Robbins, 1996, p. 1). As such, this type of analysis integrates the use of language with the way we live in the world. The primary contribution of socio-rhetorical criticism is to create an integrated approach to interpretation by bringing together literary, social-scientific, rhetorical, post-modern, and theological criticism into a coherent system of analysis (Peterson, 1978; Powell, 1990; Watson & Hauser, 1994; Moore, 1992, 1994; Adam, 1995; Schneiders, 1991, as cited in Robbins, 1996, pp. 1-2). The five elements of socio-rhetorical criticism are: (a) inner texture, (b) intertexture, (c) social and cultural texture, (d) ideological texture, and (e) sacred texture. Inner texture analysis takes the reader inside the text, while intertexture criticism delves into the interactive world of the text. Social and cultural texture analysis draws into sharper focus specific social and cultural topics. Ideological criticism probes the opinions, preferences, and stereotypes of a given writer and particular reader. And finally, sacred texture analysis examines the relationship between human life and God. Each of these elements of socio-rhetorical criticism provides a structured method to intensely investigate scriptural passages for more meaningful understanding.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Using socio-rhetorical interpretation probing several short New Testament pericopes, the present study provides an exegetical analysis of the call, costs, and rewards of following Jesus. Three pericopes examine the call to followership, the following set of

three pericopes probe the costs of followership, and the remaining three explore the rewards of followership. Analysis of the data collected in each of these pericopes illuminates the practical understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

### *The Call to Followership*

Matthew 4:18-22 records the calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. These fishermen were working in their trade when Jesus called them to follow him. Consider the context of their calling as recorded in scripture:

18 While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. 19 And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him (ESV).

Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen plying their trade when Jesus called them to follow him. In a divine play on words, Jesus called them from being fishermen to become *fishers of men* (Malina, 2001, p. 208). The fishing theme is an important intertexture element. As Jesus transitions his call from commercial fishing to the higher calling of fishers of men, he establishes a chreia (Robbins, 1996, p. 55) that magnifies the fishing theme. Indeed, a major element of Jesus' earthly ministry involved teaching his followers to become fishers of men. In rebuttal to feminist criticism, the Greek word translated man - *ἄνθρωπος*, refers to both men and women and could be better-rendered mankind. As such, Jesus taught that all mankind – men, women, boys, and girls, need redemption by being caught by the fishers of men.

The calling of Matthew, the tax collector, is recorded in Matthew 9:9: "As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.'" And he rose and followed him" (ESV). Likewise, Matthew's (Levi) calling is also recorded in Luke 5:27: "After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, 'Follow me'" (ESV).

One of the most striking things about the call of Matthew is that he did not hesitate. He seemingly dropped everything to follow Jesus. The narrative structure of the first four chapters of Matthew is an important inner texture element of the pericope (Robbins, 1996, p. 15; DeSilva, 2004, p. 239). As a tax collector for the Roman occupiers, Matthew was despised by the Jews (Patterson, 2016). Yet, Jesus called him as a disciple to minister to both the Jews and the Gentiles. The "noteworthy tension within [Matthew's] gospel between an exclusive mission to Israel and a strong emphasis on gentile

inclusion" (Hagner, 2003, as cited in DeSilva, 2004, p.236), exacerbated the irony of a former tax collector called to kingdom work.

The calling of Philip and Nathanael are recorded in John 1:43-51(ESV) and is noteworthy because of the absence of immediate followership. Consider Philip's first seeking out Nathanael before following Jesus.

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 of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." 46 Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." 47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" 48 Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." 49 Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" 50 Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." 51 And he said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'

Unlike Matthew, who dropped everything to immediately follow Jesus, Philip responded to the call to follow Jesus by seeking out Nathanael, to tell him of the calling. But Nathanael was more circumspect. He had questions. To answer his questions, Philip took him to meet Jesus, who called Nathanael by name. Nathanael's encounter with Jesus as deity – an important sacred texture element (Robbins, 1996, p. 120), convinced him to become a follower. The linchpin in Nathanael's followership appears to be when Jesus said, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you" (John 1:48b). At that moment, Nathanael seems to have had an epiphany that Jesus was the long-awaited messiah.

### ***The Costs of Followership***

The costs of following Jesus include self-denial, humility, total commitment, and a disdain for hoarding material possessions. Matthew 16:24 records Jesus' description of the cost of followership: "And he said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me' (ESV). To *take up my cross daily and follow me* is a phrase steeped in cultural intertexture implications (Robbins, 1996, p. 58). In the first century cultural context – an intertexture dimension, the cross represented a gruesome death, because the Romans forced condemned criminals to carry their own cross to the place of execution by crucifixion. Accordingly, the phrase

*take up my cross daily and follow me* means the follower should be willing to die in order to follow Jesus – the ultimate in self-denial.

Total commitment is another cost of following Jesus, even if it means alienation from family or friends outside the faith. In Matthew 8:22, Jesus admonishes the man to “follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead” (ESV). This may have been an allusion to the spiritually dead who are outside Christ as unbelievers, but it could also have cultural overtones in that a Jewish older son had a duty to bury his father, which would portend a cultural intertexture interpretation (Robbins, 1996, p. 58). Either way, Jesus made it clear that putting tradition or personal desire ahead of serving him was contrary to true followership.

A disdain for hoarding material possessions is another cost of following Jesus. When the rich young ruler claimed to follow the letter of the law, Jesus said to him: “You lack one thing; go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mark 10:21; ESV). But the young man went away sorrowful because he was unwilling to part with his earthly treasure. This pericope can best be understood using inner texture criticism (Robbins, 1996, p. 39). The story has a beginning, middle, and ending, and it also has repetitive words. The beginning is the initial encounter and inquiry, the middle is the young man’s claim to follow the letter of the law, and the ending is the young man leaving disheartened by the cost of following Jesus. The repetition of the word teacher is significant. When the young man first inquires of Jesus, he addresses him as a good teacher, then later, he replies to Jesus as teacher. This word repetition in the text implies a certain deference to perceived authority. But deference alone was not enough to become a follower of Jesus. The cost for this young man was too much, because he cherished his great possessions more than he valued his followership of Jesus.

### ***The Rewards of Followership***

Among the rewards of following Jesus are spiritual power to witness, eternal life, and sitting in judgment of the twelve tribes of Israel. Acts 1:8 promises that “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” A sacred texture analysis of this pericope identifies the spirit being in the phrase *you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you*. But the antecedents to such spiritual power are faith, trust, and belief in Jesus, the source of all such power (John 1:12). The residual effect of such power is to become a witness for the Gospel.

Eternal life in heaven with Jesus and all believers is another reward of following Jesus. Luke 9:24-24 promises: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?” Although the call to followership may be tough at

times, the reward is incomparable. These short verses speak to human redemption (Robbins, 1996, p. 125), a subset of sacred texture analysis.

Sitting in judgment of the twelve tribes of Israel is a mysterious reward of following Jesus. This intriguing reward is recorded in Matthew 19:28: "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Sitting on a throne as a judge implies an ethical dimension to the role. Robbins (1996) asserts that "ethics concerns the responsibility of humans to think and act in special ways in both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances" (p. 129). Ethical considerations are another form of sacred texture analysis.

## Findings and Discussion

The calling, costs, and rewards of following Jesus were examined in this study through the lens of socio-rhetorical interpretation (Robbins, 1996). The calling to follow Jesus was both a specific calling to the original twelve followers and a universal calling to all mankind. "Many are called but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14) [as Christ-followers] because the price is too high.

The cost of following Jesus is self-denial, total commitment, and a disdain for hoarding material possessions. Consider the symbiotic nature between human followership of Christ and Christ's divine followership of the Father in the ensuing perspective on self-denial:

To serve Jesus one must be where he is. And as Jesus and the believer travel the same road of self-denial, they will be together honored by the Father. The essential point is that Jesus and his followers are one in their obedience to the Father and have together embarked on the road of obedience to the Father. (Mounce, 2007, as cited in Patterson, 2016, p. 11).

Jesus requires nothing less than total commitment of all his followers, even at the cost of family alienation, financial reversal, and untimely death. "According to Christian tradition, all of Jesus' disciples (including Matthias, who replaced Judas, Jesus' betrayer [cf. Acts 1:15-26]) were martyred for their faithful service to Christ except John, who died in exile in his later years" (Kraeling, 1996, as cited in Patterson, 2016, pp. 11-12).

A disdain for hoarding material possessions is another cost of following Jesus. This is by no means a prohibition of the accumulation of wealth, but rather an admonition not to put material things before the service of the Lord. Money itself is not evil, but "the love of money is the source of all evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). The findings of this exegetical study indicate that the rich young ruler left the presence of Jesus dejected because the cost of followership was too high for him to bear.



The rewards of following Jesus are the spiritual power to witness, eternal life, and sitting in judgment of the twelve tribes of Israel. The findings of this study show how these rewards are embedded in specific scripture. Spirit beings, human redemption, and ethical considerations are all dimensions of sacred texture analysis wherein the exegetical researcher seeks the divine in the text.

## Conclusion

The Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) are natural divisions in the study of biblical followership. Broadly speaking, the OT concept of followership was embedded in the God-given instructions that Moses delivered to the Israelites as the command: “You must follow the LORD your God and revere only him; obey him, serve him, and remain loyal to him” (Deut. 13:4, NET, as cited in Patterson, 2016, p. 1). This command connotes a wholehearted commitment to the Lord and his commands (Merrill, 1994, p. 231, as cited in Patterson, 2016, p. 1). As the OT unfolds, this command takes on the added prohibition against listening to false prophets and worshipping false gods. Moving to the NT – the focus of this study, the concept of followership can be encapsulated in the words of Jesus when he called the disciples to “Follow me” (Matthew 4:19). These two words take on powerful overtones in that they embody the calling, costs, and rewards of following Jesus, which answered the research question: What does it mean to become a biblical follower of Jesus?

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