

'The First Disciples' Ch. 1:35-51

by Charles Alexander

The sermon highlights the misconception of evangelism and the true nature of the first disciples of Christ, emphasizing the importance of a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23

Topics: "Discipleship", "Divine Sovereignty"

Description

Charles Alexander preaches about the calling of the first disciples of Christ, emphasizing their deep piety and earnest attention to John the Baptist's ministry before encountering Jesus. He critiques the modern notion of personal evangelism and the focus on activism over seeking God and true worship. The sermon delves into the significance of Christ's interactions with the disciples, highlighting the divine nature of His words and the prophetic symbolism in their encounters. The narrative explores the profound spiritual insights revealed through the calling of Peter, Philip, Nathanael, and others, showcasing the divine sovereignty and majesty of Christ in initiating the New Covenant.

Transcript

The first disciples of Christ were called from that company of young men who were gathered out of Galilee by the ministry of John the Baptist. The first chapter of John (verses 35-51) records the calling of the first five John (the writer of the gospel), Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael otherwise known as Bartholomew, or the son of Tholmai). All were Galileans, but as John did not baptise in Galilee but only in Judea (three days' journey to the South) it is evident that the young men had temporarily left their homes in the Northern Province to wait upon the ministry of the Baptist.

The deep piety of the young men and their earnest attention to the ministry of the Baptist is shown in the remark of Christ concerning Nathanael - "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile". In other words the work of conversion was already complete and in evidence before they first encountered the Son of God.

It is extraordinary how in the face of these simple and obvious facts, the general opinion should have been propagated amongst our evangelical community for so long that the narrative of the calling of these young men by Christ is an adventure in personal evangelism!

Only too congenial to modern notions of proselytism, is this baseless theory that Peter was "evangelized" by his brother Andrew and Nathanael by his friend Philip.

"Operation Andrew" is tastelessly advertised or projected by men who ought to know better, for the purpose of enlisting youth in enterprises, the general effect of which is to condition the minds of youthful evangelicals to the idea that the chief thing in life is to "do" rather than to "be"; to be busy rather than to "know" and to "worship".

At a formative period of life when (if there has been any conversion at all) the true believer should be taught that the first principle of conversion is to seek after God and learn to Meditate upon His statutes and precepts, to sit quietly in congregations under the powerful influence of the preached word, and to elevate the spirit upon wings of worship, praise and prayer at such a time of life, to impose notions of activism is fatal to any uprising of serious religion.

The results are only too manifest. Girls and boys are encouraged to think on the slenderest of evidence that they have been "converted" and the next step is to be a "soul winner" - by which is meant that their chief business henceforth is to go into the highways and byways, preferably with a handful of "tracts" as introductory material, and "win" converts by telling them how to be "born again".

The holy art is reduced to a technique easily acquired in a few simple lessons often presented, by leaflets or pamphlets which tell what texts should be used, what questions or objections may be anticipated and what the correct answers are.

The "tracts" supplied are not expositions of the Word of God (as the original word "tract" was used to denote) but mere leaflets which usually never use the word "repentance" or its equivalents but, in a few brief sentences, exhort the reader to "accept Christ" and all will then be well for time and eternity.

CARICATURE OF EVANGELISM

This caricature of evangelism is fairly general, and getting steadily worse, as the pulpit is more and more relegated to an obscure place in evangelical life. The failure of the pulpit, largely because of the decline of knowledge of the Word of God and of expository power and unction in the preaching of it, has exposed contemporary evangelicalism to all the evils of activism - a terrible blight upon the cause we, have at heart.

The term "soul-winning" has been invented (or perverted) from an entirely fallacious interpretation of one verse of Holy Scripture found in the enigmatic Book, of Proverbs:

"He that winneth souls is wise".

This verse has nothing to do with "personal evangelism", or even with public preaching. Of the former there is not a trace in Old Testament writings or history and, in the form presented today, does not derive from the New Testament either. We have arrived at the time when a man can be described as a "great soul-winner" without any sense of disgust or even of impropriety being aroused.

The "winning" of souls referred to by Solomon in Proverbs 11:30 is not remotely connected with anything which contemporary evangelism has in mind. It has to do only with that seemliness in our conduct which is otherwise described by Christ Himself in the words:

"Thou hast gained thy brother" (Matt. 18:15).

ALREADY BORN ANEW

No, Andrew did not evangelise his brother Peter. Peter had already been "evangelised" by John the Baptist - else what was he doing down in Judea, far from his home and work, attending on the ministry of the great preacher? He was already one of that elect company which earnestly "looked for redemption in Israel".

Andrew and his companion (though the latter is not named, there can be no question that he was John the apostle, the writer of the gospel, who always preserves his incognito except where his name is required) were already disciples of the Baptist (see John 1: 35). So were the others mentioned in the chapter. They were all young men, evangelically awakened and born anew, eager for divine knowledge and altogether uninhibited by any of the evangelistic notions invented in our decadent age.

This was the first public proclamation of Christ by John the Baptist (the only man on earth qualified to identify and point out Christ as the expected Messiah, the Saviour of the world).

Hence Andrew's eager declaration to Peter - "We have found the Messias (which is, being interpreted, the Christ)" (John 1: 41).

So busy is modern evangelicalism with its depreciatory ideas of preaching and its exaltation of human individualism, that it utterly fails to comprehend the inner glory of this great passage.

Even our Calvinistic or "Reformed" theologians and writers have been so affected by this climate of thought dominating the evangelical scene that few of our contemporaries seem capable of more than a cursory glance at John's carefully recorded history with its strange, almost cryptic, dialogue between Christ and the young men.

MAN HOMELESS AND RESTLESS

It is the third day of that "holy week" with which the Gospel of John opens (see verses 29 and 35). Does the sacred historian have his eye on those glorious three days at the end of which life issued forth, grand and majestic, from the garden tomb, and the New Covenant Day was born?

The Baptist stands with the two young men, Andrew and John. For the second time in two days he proclaims: "Behold, the Lamb of God". Jesus of Nazareth, only begotten of the Father passes by, and John fulfils his prophetic purpose as he points the two young men to the Mediator of the New Covenant. They leave their Old Testament instructor, for this was his only task, to prepare the way for New Creation's mystic day and send forth those who had been instructed under the shadows of the Old Covenant into the full light of the New.

The two disciples do not act for themselves. By an original divine impulse (which the one who wrote the Fourth Gospel clearly understood as he looked back from Patmos to that first day when he encountered the Son of God) - by that impulse of inspiration of which at the time they were not conscious, "they followed Jesus".

He, who knew them from all eternity as His own, given to Him by the decree of the Father in the Everlasting Covenant, knew they were there behind Him. He needed not to look in order to perceive and know. His divinity shone forth in His words and acts.

"Jesus turned and saw them following and saith unto them, What seek ye?"

What indeed! They scarcely know why they act as they do, not being then aware that they are acting prophetically. They are the Church of the Old Covenant, the whole object of which was to point to Christ and create a seeking and an expectation for the ERKHOMENOS - the One who should come.

Their confusion at thus being discovered is natural to them but governed by a predestined purpose entirely divine, so that they answered correctly for our restless and troubled human race, lost and homeless, banished from their original Eden:

"Rabbi (which is to say, being interpreted, Master) where dwellest thou?"

Two, things are taught in their reply. Because John wrote in Greek he must translate that word "Rabbi" for gentile understanding. It means (he says) "Master". It is derived from a root which (designedly in its use here) indicates greatness, majesty, supremacy, eternal wisdom, divinity, Lordship.

The second thing disclosed, is the longing of the Church for its true rest in and with Christ, her true Husband and Lord. Here is the matchless splendour of the Song of Solomon, written specially for this eternal moment:

"Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside (margin, as one that is veiled) by the flocks of thy companions". (Song of Solomon 1:7).

The inspired Solomon is writing of the Church in her Old Testament state, about to pass into the glorious liberty of the New Covenant. She stands veiled and unperceived by the shepherds (the prophets, teachers and rulers of the Old Covenant), for she is incorporated in a sinful nation and the veil is on her mind and heart (2 Corinthians 3: 12-18).

She longs to break away from the confinement and restriction of the Old Covenant and yearns for the noonday of the Gospel when she will be released from her earthly tutelage under temporary mediators and will enter into full and direct communion with the Beloved, the true Shepherd of a redeemed, blood-bought and regenerate flock.

For this is the key to the Song of Solomon, perceived by very few of the expositors, either of old time or of modern days. The Song of Songs portrays the passage of the Church from her Old Covenant state to the New. The transition takes place exactly half-way through the Song, in the early verses of chapter 5. She awakes from her Old Testament sleep (verse 2) to hear the voice of the Redeemer. He knocks and cries, "Open to me ..." He uses the same language as in Revelation 3:20.

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door I will come in to him, and will sup with him and he with me".

The two quotations are identical. They do not relate to any "call to the ungodly", or to the sentimental thought behind a certain pre-Raphaelite painting in St. Paul's Cathedral, London.

The real thought is the separating of the true church from the false. In the Song of Solomon the bride (the true church) struggles in the confinement of the Old Covenant which compels her to be identified inseparably with a "visible" church (the nation of Israel) which for the most part is apostate and unregenerate - a situation often repeated in our era.

The call of Christ as He first comes to Israel, rouses the sleeping Church, but still in her bondage to the old order, she speaks with two voices. Natural Israel refuses to be roused. The voice of Christ means nothing to her. She is concerned more with her Old Testament coat and Ornaments, her "sweet-smelling myrrh" (that is, her legal righteousness, her sacrifices and feasts, her Jewish ordinances and observances).

The elect within that dying order are roused and struggle to the door to open it and admit the Beloved. But the bridegroom has departed from Israel (by whom He is despised and rejected for "He came unto His own and His own received Him not'). The Church must leave the earthly Israel. The transition period was an exact probation of 40 years from the Crucifixion in A.D.33 to the final destruction of the Jewish order by the Romans in A.D.73. The Church then finally broke away from her Old Testament moorings. Her Jewish element (the election of grace in Israel) was beaten by the watchmen (the Jewish leaders - see Song of Sol. 5:7).

Her veil was taken away. She was shamed and despised like her Saviour before her. She was wounded and cast out, (the fate of awakened and believing Jews to this day, though the interpretation belongs primarily to the time of the nation's last probation).

There follows in that great transitional chapter of Solomon's Song, the new and glorious and full revelation of the Beloved in unexampled words, as the majesty of Christ is unfolded in the New Covenant:

"My beloved is white and ruddy (that is, His kingliness is as the mystic David of the New Covenant, see 1 Sam: 16, verse 12) the chiefest among ten thousand"

Too few have perceived the real clue to the Song of Solomon, which is, that the entire poem is a highly mystical exposition of the two covenants, and the Church's historic position under each, with the differing gradations of knowledge, experience and privilege marked in the transition (in the centre of the poem) from the one to the other. A true exposition of the Song is long overdue, and this we hope to execute in some future day, if it please the Lord so to lengthen our days. So many of the books published as alleged expositions of the Song, including many by otherwise excellent expositors of former days, fail completely in their purpose because the profound principle around which the poem is written is unperceived.

Because of the light which all parts of Holy Scripture shed upon all, we have introduced, these comments to aid us in our understanding of the disciples' words, "Master, where dwellest thou?"

Their cry was the cry of the O.T. Church struggling in the womb of the ages and longing for the time when her desires would be fulfilled in the dwelling place of the Bridegroom.

It is the cry of all those, past or present, in whose heart is awakened the consciousness of deprivation through the Fall. "Our souls are restless till they find rest in thee" is Augustine's incomparable manner of expressing the same truth.

The fallen angels, who have no hope of ever returning to the habitations they left behind in heaven, are involved in the same principle of desolation. They "walk through desert places seeking rest and finding none".

For man alone is there hope, since He who took not on Him the nature of angels, but the seed of Abraham, and whose delights were always with the sons of men, came by eternal decree to destroy death by enduring death, bringing to an end the reign of that fallen spirit whose dominion is founded on the fear of death. Thus did "the seed of the woman" bruise the Serpent's head though the heel of His humanity

was bruised in the conflict.

"Rabbi - Lord - thou-who goest forth- conquering and to conquer - Eternal Son in whom is centred all our hope - where dwellest thou? We have no abiding place save in thee. Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting thou art God. Thou art our hiding place and our reek of refuge. In thee we live and move and have our being. As thou wast made flesh and dwelt among us, so do thou tell us where thou dost dwell and tell us only that thou mayest bid us come and see and dwell with thee for evermore".

This is what John and Andrew were saying when they inquired, "Where dwellest thou?"

"COME AND SEE"

The answer they received was Godlike in its sublimity: "Come and see". Perish all those false exegetical puerilities which see nothing in words so momentous except a mere invitation to a night's lodging. The recorded words of the Lord Jesus are all measured and weighed. How could the words of the Word be otherwise?

Christ's great "Come and see" denotes His divine nature. They are the words of the 46th Psalm - "Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made in the earth". This great 46th Psalm is the psalm of all-conquering omnipotence. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Nothing need create fear in the believer, for all is under His control. Let the mountainous kingdoms and empires of this world be plucked from their foundations and hurled into the midst of the sea. Let the heathen rage and the kingdoms be moved. Let the earth melt when He utters His voice. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

"Be still and know that I am God", O ye heathen, for Christ will be exalted among you and ye shall know yourselves to be but men.

This is the language of the 46th psalm, and Christ takes His "Come and see" deliberately from this description of God's omnipotent and sovereign reign over the nations. So daring a claim to be the Person spoken of in the Psalm could only be made by One who was in fact God. The words lived with John, who is peculiarly the apostle of the divine sovereignty and majesty of Christ. In the Book of Revelation the words appear again as the voice of omnipotence once more proclaims "Come and see" and there appears in response a rider on a white horse, carrying the bow of judgment and who is crowned "Conquering and to conquer" (Rev. 6:1-2).

No, dear reader, this is not antichrist whom the Living Creation introduces with words which are the insignia of deity. This colossal error of "Dispensationalism", actually confusing Christ with Antichrist, surely could have arisen only in an age like ours when "teachers" and writers are abysmally ignorant of the Holy Scriptures and of the first principles of exegesis. Did they not know that Psalm 46, John 1 and Revelation 6 are united in their use of the great "Come and see"? Do they for one moment expect us to believe that the agents of creation in Revelation 6, speaking with the voice of God, should confer upon some personal and devilish antichrist the honours of deity? To such depths has Biblical exposition fallen in our day - and there are actually multitudes of evangelicals who believe the monstrous fable.

"They came and saw where he dwelt and abode with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour".

The tenth hour is our 4 p.m. Night was coming on fast. It was time men looked to their rest and shelter. Israel especially was being summoned, for her day was almost done.

[Editor's note: Brother Alexander's original mimeograph page 8 states: "The tenth hour is our 6 p.m." In this reckoning of time, from our 6 a.m. plus ten hours is 4 p.m. If I have misrepresented the intent of Brother Alexander it is only from ignorance on my part.]

The words are those of an eye-witness. Such details as these could only be relevant to a history written at first hand, by which we know that the incognito of the "other" disciple was that of John, the first (with Andrew) of the apostles to be called, as he (John) was also the last of the devoted band to survive that generation and see the Church fully launched on the gentile sea through the wreck and storm of history so mysteriously etched on the pages of the last book of the Bible.

PETER NAMED

But it was not so late in the day but that there was time for Andrew to leave the house and find brother Peter and arouse him with the eager words, "We have found the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed".

Did he leave John behind with the Saviour while he went out in search of his brother? Did the well-loved John begin there that heavenly correspondence with Emmanuel which henceforth was to mark indelibly his own life and work and affect the thought of redeemed humanity till the end of time?

Certainly enough had been said already in the presence of the divine "Come and see" for Andrew to go out into the street again to declare to Peter that the long-expected Redeemer was here; the long night of dereliction was over and elect humanity had found its God - or rather had been found of Him.

What wonder is here, brethren! What drama! What expansive possibilities in a handful of words! What dimness of vision of so many of our commentators who have lacked the penetration to behold that wisdom which is concealed and must be sought as for hid treasure!

Simon meets the Saviour and receives immediately the names by which he must hereafter be known. "Thou art Simon the son of Jona; thou shalt be called Cephas (which is by interpretation, A Stone)".

The Saviour needs no introduction to any man. He knows His own from before the foundation of the world. He has been working for this day. He gives Peter his commission. Cephas and Peter are identical in meaning.

"Thou art Peter and on this rock I will build my Church" (Matt.16: 17-18). Non, not on Peter (need we say it?) but on the rock of His own divinity and mediatorship. Peter's new name would remind him of this when the leadership of the little band of the apostles so largely devolved upon him.

But why should He say - "Thou art Simon the son of Jona"? A reminder here, to Peter, through his father's name of that other Jonah, prophet of Israel, who was compelled to work for gentile salvation, a reminder that he (Peter) also had a mission for which he must be ready: the first to bring the Kingdom of God to the gentiles (Acts 10).

The fourth day arrives - it is time for Christ to leave Bethabara where John was baptising, and depart for Galilee. But first He must find Philip (of Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter also) and to Philip He says, "Follow me". Here again is a Galilean far away from his home, a friend and companion and fellow

citizen of the sons of Jona. How strange that so many of the apostles should be taken from so small a community. Here was no selection from a wide area but a predestinated few from a locality with no claim to fame or distinction. The Lord chooses His men where He will.

THE SECOND "COME and SEE"

Already John (the apostle) has had time to consider Christ's "Come and see". He imparts the discovery to Philip. This Jesus of Nazareth is not only "the son of Joseph" (that is, the heir to the throne of David, for Joseph's genealogy was well known in Bethsaida and in Nazareth where he wrought as carpenter) - not only was this Jesus the heir to the throne (Joseph was surely already dead) but he was the omnipotent God, the "Come, behold the works of the Lord" of Psalm 46.

This is clear from the words of Philip as he goes to find Nathanael (Bartholomew), and finding him, answers, "Come and see" to his friend's question "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" For Nazareth, as its name denotes, was the city of the despised and rejected. If out of Galilee no prophet had ever arisen, how much less would it be expected that from Nazareth, despised even among its contemporaries of a despised province, the Word of God should arise?

"Nathanael - come and see for thyself, and taste this day of the wonder and glory of deity".

The two young men approach Christ. What would Nathanael expect?

There flashed out the lightning of deity as the Word uttered His first word to Nathanael. God speaks before man speaks. Let that always be the order.

AN ISRAELITE INDEED

Nathanael was known of Christ from before the foundation of the world, for there is no time in deity, only the eternal NOW. Nathanael's soul lies bare before Him and He sees in the young man His own evangelical carpentry gloriously begun:

"Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile".

The Lord was quoting from Psalm 32:2. This great psalm makes a distinction between "the two Israels" - Israel after the flesh and Israel after the spirit. This, the Lord emphasises in the words - "an Israelite indeed".

He only is an Israelite who, according to Psalm 32, is forgiven, pardoned, justified by grace (See Paul's quotation of this psalm in Romans 4: 7-8, in proof of the doctrine of "imputed righteousness" - that is Justification by grace, through faith alone).

The token that one is "an Israelite indeed" lies in the words "in whose spirit there is no guile". These words do not describe a state which is without sin, but one which is without hypocrisy. The true Israelite does not hide his sin: "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord, and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin" (verse 5). The distinction is between the elect Israel which humbly confesses its sin and repents thereof, and the Pharisee who covers his sins with a cloak of self-righteousness. Nathanael belonged to the elect Israel and hence was "an Israelite indeed".

Was this the subject of Nathanael's thought before Philip called him? Was it this reading of his mind which caused him to burst out with the question - "Whence knowest thou me?"

The Lord's reply is that of the omniscient Jehovah - "Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee".

What was there in these words which so astonished Nathanael as to cause him to cry out, "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God: thou art the king of Israel"?

The fig tree is the place of meditation and rest. It is one of the symbols of the divine covenant. That was Nathanael's situation. No doubt there was in his case an actual fig tree, but the scene is none the less prophetic. In his contemplations that day Nathanael had been considering two psalms - the 32nd and the 2nd, psalms which pre-eminently set forth the hope of the election of grace: the revelation of Christ as Redeemer and Saviour from sin: His pre-eminence as King and Lord of all creation, the arbiter of all time and history, the "Son" to whom the nations of the world must either submit or endure His wrath.

The words of Christ cut right into Nathanael's line of thought. Such a miracle of omniscience could only denote that there stood before him the object of his search and his hope - this could be none other than "The Son of God - the promised King of Israel".

It has been questioned whether the words of Nathanael, "Thou art the Son of God" could have the same force as with us, with whom the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ is well established.

But doubters should remind themselves that the Sonship of Christ is already fully established in the great Second Psalm. Moreover, Nathanael had sat under the fiery ministry of the Baptist who, as we have seen in our last chapter, was marvellously equipped to set forth and expound the Messianic glory of the Son of God.

"Kiss the Son lest he be angry and thou perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him". (Ps. 2:12).

These words from the Second Psalm were very illuminating to a man of Nathanael's contemplative spirit. Likewise the earlier words in the same psalm:

"I will declare the decree: Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee". (V.7)

Nathanael knew that these words applied to the Davidic King, the expected Deliverer of the people of God, and though he could not then associate the sentence with the atoning death and glorious resurrection of Christ whom the Father was to beget again from the grave (as Paul later on clearly taught, Acts 13:33), nevertheless he (Nathanael) was well acquainted with the underlying truth that

the King of Israel, the promised Messiah, or anointed one, was none other than the Son of God, to whom, by appointment of the Father the eternal throne was ordained.

Hence his words: "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God: thou art the King of Israel".

The remainder of the history is soon told. Did Nathanael already believe simply because the Lord said to him, "I saw thee under the fig tree"? He would see greater things than these. He would see as Jacob saw at Bethel, heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man (John 1:51).

This is the climax of Christ's revealing of Himself to the first few of the men who later would be called to the apostleship. The vision of the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man denotes the inauguration of the new dispensation.

The ladder which Jacob saw becomes in the New Testament vision Christ Himself, wearing our humanity as our true mediator. The ladder of the Law sufficed for the time then present, in its sacrifices and ordinances, to keep hope alive and maintain faith, in Old Testament times. To Nathanael and to the Twelve, and through them to us who are the Israel of God, is granted the spiritual vision of the communication between heaven and earth, once broken by sin, now re-established fully and eternally in Christ; the Son of God, the Son of Man, and the King of the elect Israel in whom is no guile, or fraud, or hypocrisy, or false notions of human merit.

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