

# Who Can Abide?

by John H. Niemelä

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In John 8:32, Jesus promised that by abiding in Him, His disciples would experience freedom. What did He mean? How can we become free too?

## ABIDING IS DISTINCT FROM BELIEVING

All interpreters recognize the Eleven as believers by the Last Discourse. Jesus urged those believers to abide (John 15:7-10):

*If you abide in Me and [if] My words abide in you, you will ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. My Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit. So you will become My disciples. “Just as the Father has loved Me, I also have loved you. Abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love” (italics added).*

Note that Jesus told the Eleven that abiding in His word was how they would become His disciples.<sup>1</sup> Does not this sound like John 8:31f?

Then Jesus told Judeans who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you truly are My disciples. So you shall know the truth and the truth shall free you.”

In both cases (John 15 and John 8), Jesus addresses believers. In each, He urges them to abide and to become His disciples.

## WHO CAN BE A DISCIPLE?

My view of the word *disciple* is probably narrower and more literal than our common usage. We talk of twenty-first century disciples, in an application sense. But a disciple literally followed his teacher around the countryside.<sup>2</sup> Hence, John sees *disciple* as a literal *follower*. This is essential to understanding the context of what is being said. We can apply what Jesus said about disciples to our lives, but He was aiming for something that exceeds our usual application, i.e. literal followers.

Note how Jesus uses the word *follow* in John 13:36f. It is not yet Peter’s time to die, so he could not follow Jesus right then.

Simon Peter told Him, “Lord, where are You going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot *follow* Me now; but later you will *follow* Me.” Peter asked Him, “Lord, why can I not *follow* You now? I will lay down my life for You!” (italics added).

In John 21:18f, Peter was told He would follow Jesus—even into death. He would give up his life in service to Christ, not again denying Christ three times. Yes, indeed, Peter would later follow Jesus—even into death.<sup>3</sup>

“Amen amen, I tell you: When you were young you used to fasten your belt and walk wherever you wanted. But when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and carry you where you don’t want to go.” *In saying this He was indicating the kind of death by which he would glorify God.* After saying this, He told him, “*Follow Me!*” (Italics added.)

What did Jesus again exhort Peter to do (21:22)? “*Follow Me!*” From John 13:36f and 21:18f, I conclude that following Jesus meant walking in His footsteps.

## HOW TO ABIDE

On the other hand, John grants more flexibility to the word *abide* than to *follow* or *disciple*. In the Last Discourse, Jesus urges the Eleven to abide in Him. They could abide in Him while He was away (in the presence of the Father), even though they could not follow Him as

He left them on earth. The Last Discourse makes clear that both Jesus and the Eleven were *in* the world, but neither was *of* the world. Disciples could literally follow Jesus as He *abode* [*menō*] on earth. But, when He returned to the Father, believers still can *abide* [*menō*] with Him, even if literal following in His footsteps is not now possible.

What did Jesus want new believers to do (in John 8:31f)? He urged them to become His abiding disciples: ones who would follow in His footsteps—even during the last six months of His ministry. Even this late in Jesus' ministry, He still urged people, "Follow Me."

Lest anyone get the wrong impression, Jesus would also welcome these new believers to abide in His word, even if they did not literally follow Him as peripatetic (walking) disciples.

## THE RESULT OF ABIDING

What does He promise to those who abide (even to those who would not take a road-trip with Him)? He promised freedom. John 8:34 clarifies: *Amen, amen, I tell you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.* Freedom from sin's domination does not automatically result from believing in Christ. Has anyone here achieved total freedom from sin? We do not do so in our mortal bodies, but Romans 6–8 show that believers in mortal bodies have available to us that which can free us from sin (to the degree that we avail ourselves).

John 8:30f says many believed in Christ. He gave them a *free gift*: everlasting life. John 8:31f speaks of abiding in His word as freedom giving *free-dom*: freedom from sin's dominion.

## CONCLUSION

Jesus urges new believers: *Follow Me*. Though one can abide in Christ's word without being in His physical presence, disciples are ones who literally followed in Jesus' footsteps. Jesus urged believers to put on their walking sandals and to become abiding disciples of Him. Clearly, He would be pleased for people to abide in His word, even if they did not take to the highways and by-ways of Israel with Him. Such people possessed a tool for gaining freedom over sin: His word. Yet, in the final analysis, Jesus urged people to become *Follow-Me* disciples. That was the best way for them to move beyond a *free gift* to *freedom*.

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1. Note the translation of *become*. It is *ginomai*, not *eimi*. The Eleven were already believers, but still needed to become disciples—even fifty-two days before Pentecost.

2. John 9:28 bends this definition somewhat. I acknowledge that there is some flexibility, but suggest that the flexibility is less than we tend to imagine.

3. Our older son, George, had an insight into why Jesus told Peter how he would die after urging him to ministry. See the following link:  
<http://www.mol316.com/pdfs/Newsletter%20December%202011.pdf>