

# ICOC Reimagined

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## Abstract

My reflection about the International Churches of Christ, its doctrines and practices and why I left.

*“And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” - Luke 14:27*

The ICOC has been known to be a discipleship movement and the above verse has been a significant part of its main tenet. Every member is expected to not only be a disciple but also a sold out disciple. The above is usually used during the conversion process as a criterion of whether someone can be a Christian, if one is not willing to carry one's cross he's not allowed to be a disciple. This is done by putting the potential convert through some sort of trial period where he's expected to show his commitment by showing up to every meeting and even participating in evangelistic outings.

We, however, have to be very careful in interpreting this verse. The word “can” colloquially has two major uses, one is to deal with permission and another is to express the ability to do something. For example, “You can't cheat on a test” doesn't mean that students are not able to cheat, many of them do, but the word “can” here means you are not allowed to while in the following “You can't avoid death” the word “can” means we are not able to avoid death as everyone will die, it has nothing to do with permission.

When Jesus uttered the above I believe he meant that we won't be able to be his disciples unless we carry our cross, it is not supposed to be a barrier to entry for discipleship.

We can easily see why this is the case as when you read the gospels and Acts you will observe that nobody went through a trial period to determine whether he/she should be allowed to be a disciple, whoever believed was immediately baptized (Jesus himself didn't lay out this requirement when he chose the twelve).

Furthermore, taking Luke 14:27 as an acceptance criterion leads to various difficulties, for example

- Say one carried his cross became a Christian and then failed to carry his cross for a day, is he no longer a Christian for that day? Note that this happened to the apostles as they deserted Jesus when he was captured
- What does carrying a cross mean? Does it encompass obeying all of God's commands? Since nobody can do that, how many of his commands should we obey to qualify as carrying a cross? At best, this leads to an arbitrary standard

- More importantly, if this is some sort of an entrance exam to Christianity and if we can pass it on our own, doesn't that indicate that we are able to save ourselves?

What this verse in essence is saying is that becoming a Christian is **not** "to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be "good." We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way – centered on money or pleasure or ambition – and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you *could not* do" (page 168)

Instead, carrying our cross is this "Christ says "Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it . . . Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked – the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours"" (page 167)

This is in the same vein as Jesus's utterance in the sermon of the mount "be perfect therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect". It does not mean "“Unless you are perfect, I will not help you”; and as we cannot be perfect, then, if He meant that, our position is hopeless. But I do not think He did mean that. I think He meant "The only help I will give you is help to become perfect. You may want something less: but I will give you nothing less"" (page 171)

The cross means death and following Jesus is to have our natural self killed so that in exchange we can have His glorious life and this is to be a life long process, not an assessment of one's eligibility in becoming a Christian.

This pitfall in reading the gospel as some sort of an entrance exam is actually fairly natural to us. Most people have the idea of God as a hard teacher who gives us exam after exam, it is then no surprise if we see the gospel as another test.

But there's an even more dangerous pitfall in reading Luke 14:27 as some sort of an entrance ex

as one's action might not necessarily a reflection of one's heart, a good man does good thing but just because you do good things doesn't mean you're a good man

the truth will set you free, but the truth is a person, john 14?

300 times

helping the poor

CS Lewis said it best be ye perfect

But the biggest danger is making the bible about us

then nobody would be able to fulfill it not even the apostles since they fell away when Jesus was captured not to mention the impracticallity of it

no test falls away

*“Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more peremptory urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor?” - Jonathan Edwards*

What does poverty have to do with our doctrines? Everything. You see, the way we see and treat the poor betrays our beliefs more clearly than anything else.

A lot of people believe that the gospel was about spiritual things, it is how we go to heaven, as Galileo said. Well, yes and no but before we delve into poverty let me say a few words about myself.

I grew up in a reformed Calvinistic church, my family was heavily involved in it but I didn't feel like I was a real Christian, nobody knew my sins that I was struggling with and there was no accountability. So when I discovered ICOC (or when they discovered me) I was elated, “This is the *true* church” I exclaimed in my heart. Everyone in ICOC was very committed and serious about their religion. Accountability was not only exist, it was also heavily enforced. But it's not just accountability, commitment, church attendance and tithe were also heavily enforced.

This suited me well as I was a very disciplined person (and also a self righteouss one, these qualities go hand in hand). Little did I know that being disciplined was actually bad spiritually. Why is that?

***Jesus replied “How do you read it?” - Luke 10:26***

How do we read the bible? For most people, the bible is a guide book. In it you read what good deeds you should do and what bad things you should avoid (it also says that you've done bad things).

The problem with this is that the bible becomes all about *me*. What *I* should do and don't do. But isn't our self centeredness what's wrong with this world in the first place? We sin because we put ourselves above others (and God).

Reading the bible as a guide book telling what to do and not do shifts the whole focus to *me*. There is another problem with this approach, if this is the case then what will be the difference between christianity and other religions. All other religions tell us to do the right things and stop sinning. This is religion and not the gospel.

The gospel is Jesus died the death we should have died and lived the life we should have lived