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Discipleship of Yesterday for Today

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DISCIPLESHIP OF YESTERDAY FOR TODAY

Matt Gardner

Review of Eric D. Huntsman, *Becoming the Beloved Disciple: Coming unto Christ through the Gospel of John* (Springville, UT: CFI, an imprint of Cedar Fort, 2018). 176 pages. \$19.99.

Abstract: *What does the Gospel of John say about discipleship? Does early Christian discipleship matter today? Can coming unto Christ be different for each person? Eric Huntsman offers answers to these questions through his excellent scholarly background in Greek, which lends to crisp exegetical interpretations on the fourth gospel. Even more, Huntsman provides valuable hermeneutic applications for a growing diversified membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Indeed, this book delivers a better understanding of how each child of God uniquely comes to know Jesus Christ.*

When I think about the Book of John, my mind recalls reading a Hugh Nibley statement years ago given in response to Wilford Griggs when he asked Hugh Nibley if he had ever considered writing a commentary on John. Nibley's response was something along the lines, "No, I haven't. It would take 300 or 400 pages, and then I would be to verse 5."¹ Such a commentary is needed. However, Eric Huntsman, whom I respect and call a friend, opted to write a pleasantly restrained yet nuanced exegesis of discipleship such as permeates John. All who read this book, no matter their background, will likely come away motivated to either start, resume, or continue in their individual path of discipleship in Christ.

1. LeGrand L. Baker, "John 1:1-4 & Alma 13:1-20 — 'in the Beginning' — 'Orders' of Premortal Priesthood — LeGrand Baker" (January 2, 2015), <https://www.legrandlbaker.org/2015/01/02/john-11-4-alma-131-20-in-the-beginning-orders-of-premortal-priesthood-legrand-baker/>.

Becoming the Beloved Disciple showcases Huntsman's lifetime of consecrated expertise and research. A professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, Huntsman is trained in classical Greek and as an expert in Johannine literature never fails to maintain and exemplify Elder Neal A. Maxwell's attitude toward scholarship: "LDS scholars can and should speak in the tongue of scholarship, but without coming to prefer it and without losing the mother tongue of faith."²

The overarching intent in Huntsman's book is to detail the time, place, and actions of the timeless people in the gospel of John. In doing so, we can come to understand the different ways people come to know and accept Jesus. In turn, Huntsman invites us all to apply this to our own lives and the lives of others.

At a time when the Church and society-at-large are grappling with questions of unity and diversity, the characters of John show that there are many ways to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Yet there are some fundamental beliefs and experiences that we must share if we are to remain faithful in this turbulent and changing world and press forward in Christ to lay hold of life and salvation. (xvi–xvii)

Huntsman offers the reader both a prologue and a conclusion, along with seven wonderful devotional chapters of exegetical and hermeneutical material that capture the early disciples' processes of conversion, each unique and individualized.

Chapter 1, *The First Disciples: Come and See* (1–15), comfortably displays a seemingly prosaic but powerful approach to gaining a relationship with and testimony of Christ, primarily by hearing about the good news through prophets, friends, and family. Some perceive that to know that Jesus is the Christ, we must have a "road to Damascus" moment. However, heeding the words and testimony of friends and family appears to be one way to begin a relationship with the Savior.

Huntsman stresses how Andrew and John the Beloved represent

how we can respond to what we hear from prophets like John — especially the fact that Jesus is both the Lamb and Son of God, come to take away all our sin. If we are not careful, however, this core belief can get lost in our perceived need to understand and accept the entirety of the history, teachings,

2. Neal A. Maxwell, *Deposition of a Disciple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 16.

and experience of the Church and its people in the almost two centuries that have passed since its restoration. (20–21)

Chapter 2, *The Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene: Women as Witnesses* (28–39), discusses how women were treated primarily as second-class citizens during the life of the Savior. However, according to Huntsman, the Gospel of John displays how the Savior contested cultural norms and practices in the way he treated women in his ministry. Huntsman illustrates this through the Savior’s interactions with Mary the Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene:

The importance of their testimonies is striking given the time and culture in which they lived, when the witness of a women was not even admissible in court. Their examples show us the importance of every person’s discipleship — regardless of sex, ethnicity, economic status, or other background — and encourage us to learn from and be led by such women of faith today. (29)

Moreover, Huntsman reveals remarkable exegetic insight concerning John’s phraseology that surrounds the tender moment when the resurrected Savior calls out Mary Magdalene’s name near the empty tomb:

Although the King James Version reads, “Jesus saith unto her, *Touch me not*; for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (John 20:17), the Greek text actually reads, “Do not keep touching me.” ... This conveys the impression that Mary, having found Jesus, was holding on to him and did not want to lose him again. (35–36)

Indeed, this already tender moment now becomes more tender when we are exposed to the Greek.

Chapter 3, *Nicodemus: How Can These Things Be?* (40–52), may prove useful to those who may struggle in coming to receive a witness of the Savior. Nicodemus perhaps represents a growing segment of Church members today who struggle to accept Jesus based primarily on trusting and believing in the words of others.

Sometimes we have a desire to believe, but our questions take us along a different path than others travel. We may struggle to understand what others accept more easily, looking for more evidence or trying to square gospel propositions with what we already accept or assume to be true. Sometimes we may be hesitant to embrace privately or proclaim publicly what we either suspect or want to be true. Still, though our path may be different

than the paths others follow, when we come to know Jesus for ourselves, our discipleship can be no less genuine — and in the end, no less saving as long as we still come to Christ. (41)

Huntsman's sensitivity and perspective mirror the sensitivity Christ showed to Nicodemus. Huntsman's interpretation highlights this sympathy in John 3:11: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness." "By shifting from the singular, 'thee,' to the plural, 'ye,' ... Jesus indicated that Nicodemus was not alone in having difficulty understanding these kinds of spiritual matters" (45). In other words, you're not alone and are not the only person who may struggle with faith. The path of discipleship is different for all, and doubting can potentially be a component for later, lasting faith, as when Nicodemus procures a suitable burying place for the Savior.

The example of Nicodemus reminds us that we must be careful about judging the spiritual journeys of other people. Sometimes we can be too quick to judge the faith of others, faulting them for questioning or perhaps insisting that people testify that they "know" when sometimes what is important is just believing or having the desire to believe. (49)

Chapter 4, *The Woman at the Well: Drinking the Waters of Life with the Woman of Samaria* (53–70), is another example how Jesus flipped cultural customs to recast proper social relations concerning God's children in society and in God's kingdom. Huntsman's acumen provides the reader with valuable historical insight regarding the social relations between Samaritans and Jews. One especially clear example is how Jewish men avoided contact with those outside their ethnic group and, even more, generally avoided contact with women in public (56). Interestingly, when there was such contact, wells were common places where men went to find a wife. "Rather than resulting in marriage, the Samaritan woman's meeting with Jesus resulted in her entering into a covenant relationship with him when she accepted him as her Messiah and Lord" (57).

Christ's actions show that he is willing to go out of his way to meet people where and as they are. Along the way, Jesus broke social rules and customs to ensure that the marginalized had the proper chance to receive a witness of his divinity, including the opportunity to enter a covenant relationship.

Chapter 5, *Followers of Jesus and "Hard Sayings": Murmur Not among Yourselves* (71–88), is yet another excellent example for members today who struggle to find belief in an age of disbelief. Huntsman catalogs the miraculous events Jesus performed in Galilee. However, when Jesus

proclaimed higher truths behind these miracles that reveal his identity, such as “the bread [Jesus/Jehovah] came down from heaven,” it caused potential followers — including his own disciples — to cease to follow and believe in him. “This is a hard saying; who can hear it? And [they] walked no more with him” (John 6:60, 66).

Jesus’s hard sayings created adverse feelings among his disciples: “doth this offend you?” (John 6:61). Huntsman reveals that the Greek word *offend* “means to repel, shock, or give cause to anger; it originally meant to cause to fall or trip” (82). Likewise, many today within the Church may find reason to repel, trip, or become angry. Nevertheless, Huntsman stresses, “Peter did not claim that Jesus’s sayings had not been hard; rather he simply clung to the testimony of Christ that he did have” (73).

Further, Huntsman provides guidance:

Historical questions, former racial attitudes, the behavior of past and even current leaders, difficult doctrines, the roles of women, the sometimes unkind treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals by other members, and policies that impact social issues such as contemporary views of marriage equality or the status of the children of same sex couples can also be hard sayings for us that require additional faith to understand or at least accept in faith until better understanding comes through the inspiration of the Spirit or future revelation. (83)

Chapter 6, *Friends of Jesus: Lord, If Thou Hadst Been Here* (89–105), underscores another instance of faith promotion through the tragic death of Martha and Mary’s brother Lazarus. Huntsman skillfully navigates the nuances of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus’s background, mainly their social and economic status, including prior episodes of sisters with the Savior. By juxtaposing the historical context, Huntsman leads the reader to greater appreciation of the family’s personal actions of faith toward the Savior amid Lazarus’s tragedy.

Martha’s faith was revealed in word, though still accompanied by service, while Mary’s was in deed, in an action that was born from love and richly symbolic. ... On the other hand, Lazarus, a character who does not speak and is acted upon rather than acting, represents how all of us are recipients of grace and saving power if we obey his call. (101)

The family’s responses to Lazarus’s death teach us that discipleship allows us all to respond differently to tragedy while still preserving a faithful integrity. Moreover, we learn through the Savior that “perhaps

the best consolation we can offer those who grieve as Mary did is simply to express sorrow” (96).

Chapter 7, *Peter and Thomas: Impulsive but Devoted Disciples* (106–22), demonstrates great examples between two gospel approaches. On one hand, Peter has a habit of jumping full-heartedly into the gospel before fully understanding and thinking through the nuances. Conversely, Thomas, reluctant to trust others’ reports, cynically doubts what he hears.

Huntsman contrasts these men’s imperfect approaches toward the Savior. For example, before accompanying Jesus to Bethany, Thomas proclaims that the twelve should be ready to die with Jesus there. However, Huntsman explains, “his declaration on that occasion was fatalistic, expecting the worst, and he seems not to have taken seriously Jesus’s foreknowledge that what was about to happen in Bethany was intended to build their faith” (107). Further,

despite their lapses in faith and faithfulness, through Christ they overcame their weaknesses and went on to be powerful, faithful witnesses of him. Second, the contrast between their early failings and later, complete restorations is a powerful example of Christ’s grace that can give us hope and encouragement. If the Lord was able to use such imperfect vessels, he will also forgive us and then use us in his kingdom as well. (108)

The depth of Huntsman’s message in *Becoming the Beloved Disciple* is most evident in its simplicity. I mean that in the most complimentary way. By no means does Huntsman’s devotional approach lack crisp exegesis and valuable hermeneutic application. His overall approach is the right approach, and Johannine commentaries lack the sophistication inherent in simplicity. It takes extraordinary skill to boil the fourth gospel into bite-sized pieces and yet feel spiritually fed and satisfied.

Becoming the Beloved Disciple is an exceptional book in that it has the power to increase one’s desire to trust and follow Christ. It teaches me that we all have our own distinctive ways to come to know Christ. It also shows that despite the various kinds of discipleship, Christ achieved both unity and welcomed diversity within his flock of disciples. While unity and diversity may at times appear to be mutually exclusive, Christ’s grace is sufficient to draw imperfect people and institutions together.

Huntsman sums it up in his conclusion:

Seeing this vast array of believers and their varied responses underscores that diversity in the family of Jesus Christ is real — and good. However, John’s presentation of such a variety of

experiences is not just a validation of diversity. This Gospel also contains a powerful call for unity. ... Jesus pled, “Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are ... I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one” (John 17:11, 23). (124)

Even more,

With the Beloved Disciple we can be embraced in the love of Jesus, which love we can feel and receive in great measure through priesthood ordinances. With him we can stand at the foot of the cross, firm in our faith in his atoning sacrifice. And with him we can run to the empty tomb, sustained by the hope that because he lives, we all shall live. (130)

Matt Gardner was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and raised in Provo, Utah, where he later graduated from Utah Valley University. He holds a Master of Divinity in Biblical Studies from Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Currently, Matt is an academic advisor at Utah Valley University. He is also a seminary teacher at UCASS. He and his wife Katie are the parents of two children, Carmen and Britain.

