

# Mission in Mark, Part 2

Colleagues,

This week's Thursday Theology features Part 2 of "Mission in Mark," the tour of Mark's gospel by Pastor Paul Jaster of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Elyria, Ohio. In it, Paul begins with a short discussion of Jesus' shift from the public ministry in Galilee to the private instruction of the disciples—a fitting follow-up for the day after the Fourth International Crossings Conference ("The Gospel-Given Life: Discipleship Revisited"). I had the pleasure of meeting Paul at that conference, and I expect that his words here will stir up fruitful reflections on the past few days in Belleville for those readers who were able to attend.

In what follows, Paul carries us from Mark 10 into the beginnings of Holy Week, offering yet more keen insights into what Mark has to say about the mission of Jesus. Along the way, he digs into the usage history and significance of words like "ransom" and "repentance," and he sheds intriguing light on the incident commonly known as the cleansing of the temple. We expect that you will find rich food for thought in today's excerpt, and we encourage you to look ahead to the third and final installment of "Mission in Mark" next week, which will carry us through the end of Holy Week and the conclusion of Mark's gospel.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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## Mark 8:27-11:33

In Mark 8:37 the narrative makes a decisive turn. Jesus plants his foot in Caesarea Philippi, the northernmost part of his

Galilean ministry, and he turns his eyes to the south. And he asks two questions: "Who do people say that I am?" "But who do you say that I am?" And then he began to teach his disciples that "the Son of man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." Jesus shifts from public ministry to private instruction, discipling. If Discipleship 101 is "Jesus is the Christ," then Discipleship 102 is "there has to be a cross (crucifixion and resurrection)." Ultimately the authority of Jesus as the Christ cannot be asserted, challenged, and vindicated any other way.

Mark can be divided into three parts: Positive ministry in Galilee (1:1-8:21), a deliberate confrontation with powers in Jerusalem that leads to a violent rejection of Jesus (11:1-16:8), and, in between, this journey to the cross and instruction about "the way" (8:22-10:52).

Jesus predicts his passion three times, four if you add Mark 2, five if you add Mark 10, six if you add the foreshadowing death of John the Baptist, seven if you add the parable in Mark 12. And God himself affirms it the second time God speaks from the cloud on top of the Mount of Transfiguration, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!" That is, listen to him about what he is telling you about the cross.

The disciples don't come off well in Mark. They are stubborn, blind, and dull, and they misunderstand. Werner Kelber in The Story of Mark says they don't do one good thing. Eugene Boring goes much easier on them. They can't possibly understand before the cross. From a literary standpoint, this is good. This gives Jesus a chance to clarify and explain. Theologically, this is also good, because we aren't all that great at being disciples either. And Jesus still uses us anyhow. It's amazing.

## Mark 10

The epitome of that misunderstanding is Mark 10 where James and John ask Jesus to sit at his right and at his left when he comes into his glory. And Jesus says, "You do not know what you are asking."

The others are jealous. Jesus says, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Again, this is an exodus theme. The "ransom/redeem" word group is frequently used in the Old Testament for "God's powerful, liberating act" without any thought of a price being paid. God ransomed Israel from Egypt with no payment being made to Pharaoh (Exodus 6:6). It is simply liberation language. Ransom liberates. And "many" is a Semitic way of saying "all." And so, this passage does not commit us to the Anselm/Mel Gibson/Latin view of atonement.

Jesus indicates that there are two kinds of authority: The kind that coercively dominates and "lords it over" you (the Gentile way, the Mosaic way, the law) and the kind that graciously serves and "lifts you up" (the Jesus way, the gospel). These two kinds of authority are spelled out in Ezekiel 34 (First Reading, Christ the King A). God says (pretty much to all earthly authorities past and present), "with force and harshness you have ruled them." And so God counters, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak, watch over the strong and feed them all with justice." Right before the feeding of the 5,000 it is said, "and he (Jesus) had compassion

for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd [a good king]" (Mark 6:34).

"Every 500 years the church has a rummage sale," Phyllis Tickle says quoting Bishop Mark Dyer. And each time there is one question which must be answered, "Where now is our authority?" Mark 10 has an answer for that. And it is not only "where" is our authority, but also "of what kind" is our authority.

But we never get it, do we? We always want to call the shots. When I was in Michigan, Ford Motor country, I was one of three remaining pastors. The previous senior pastor had just left, and now the board of directors (note the name for a church council) wanted to make me "senior" pastor and the other two "assistant pastors." But the three of us said, "This is crazy. We were all of the same age, the same schooling, the same experience. There is only one ministry: Word and Sacrament. There is only one power or authority that we have, which is to proclaim the Gospel through Word and Sacrament and to forgive. And we all have that same authority, no more no less. Just call us 'pastors.'"

And the response was, "But who do we blame if something goes wrong?" Interesting way to think of parish leadership, isn't it? As someone to blame. And we said, "Jesus took the blame and we are free to serve others in love." And that was very hard for them to comprehend.

As Ched Myers points out, the concern of Mark's Jesus "is not only liberation from the specific structures of oppression embedded in the dominant social order of Roman Palestine; it also includes the spirit and practice of domination ultimately embedded in the human personality and corporately in human history as a whole" (Myers, 103).

Mark 11-15: Holy Week.

Most of Mark 11-15 is NOT in our lectionary and what little is

placed in the lectionary is not positioned in its original context of holy week. This is most unfortunate, for this is the longest narrative in Mark's gospel (about 40% of the entire gospel!). It is tightly and meticulously woven. And, like the robe of Jesus, it needs to be seen as a seamless whole.

#### Palm Sunday:

Jesus enters Jerusalem on a colt, goes up to the temple, looks around, checks his watch, sees it's late and goes out of the city. Before the night of his arrest Jesus doesn't even spend one night there! Normally, pilgrims were expected to walk into the holy city at Passover. For Jesus to ride in on a colt is a claim of royal authority, not humility. Jesus enters on a colt like David and Solomon did. When the old and ailing David wanted to identify Solomon as his true successor, he sent Solomon in Jerusalem riding on his mule (1 Kings 1:28f.). Jesus is the Davidic king, the proper owner of the temple. In fact, Jesus is more than that (greater than David). Jesus is God returning to the temple after years of exile just as Malachi 3:1 promised, "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple."

#### Holy Monday:

Jesus curses the fig tree (the most fruitful of all trees and often used to produce the firstfruits brought to the temple). It is an enacted parable expressing God's judgment on the temple and its current guardians. Jesus causes a disturbance, drives out (ekballo) those buying and selling, and interrupts the sacrifices by not allowing the carrying of the sacred vessels necessary for the rituals. And then Jesus gives an interpretive word: "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a den of \_\_\_\_?"

A den of what? NOT robbers as we think of robbers (shoplifters and corporate raiders). The Greek word is lestes, not kleptos. A much better translation would be "freedom fighters" or

“terrorists” (depending on which side you’re on). Or, maybe “violent separatists,” which covers both. Lestes is the word used to describe Barabbas, who was not your run-of-the-mill thief, a kleptomaniac. Barabbas was an insurrectionist, a freedom fighter. He committed murder during the insurrection, Mark tells us. He wasn’t a shoplifter. Lestes is used by Josephus to refer to a whole range of persons: the rural social bandits mainly from Galilee but also from Judea, the urban terrorist group called the Sicarii (scribal dagger-men who did carefully targeted assassinations of native aristocratic priests who cooperated with Rome), and the Zealot party (which was comprised of dissident peasants from Judea and lower priests in Jerusalem).

There are three very different strands of tradition in the Hebrew scriptures. One strand said to separate yourself from those who are unclean. We see it in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalm 1. The ultimate example in the Old Testament is Phinehas in Numbers 25, a priest, the grandson of Aaron, who takes up the spear and kills a Moabite woman and the Jew who is having sex with her. Phinehas is the classic model of one who is truly “zealous” for the Lord (so devoted to God and Torah that one is willing to use armed resistance and force, if necessary, to kill collaborators and drive out foreign oppressors). And for displaying this zeal, Phinehas is given “the covenant of everlasting priesthood” according to 1 Maccabees 2:54.

Phinehas is a model for the Maccabees, the Hasidim, the Pharisees (“separatists”), the Essenes, and ultimately, in Mark’s day, the various groups of pious zealots who holed up in the temple (one candidate for the “desolating sacrilege” of Mark 13) and resisted the Roman army until Titus came in, tore those walls down and entered the temple himself (another candidate for the “desolating sacrilege” of Mark 13). It is much like the Taliban (“students” or “seminarians”) who are zealous, armed

resistors.

A second strand said to accommodate and acculturate to the culture of the kingdoms around you. It happened when Israel clamored for a king (1 Samuel 8), when Solomon entered into a whole host of foreign alliances through his 700 hundred wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11), and when King Ahab married Jezebel and merged the worship of YHWH and Baal (1 Kings 16). The position of cooperation and accommodation was taken by the Herodians, who eagerly allied themselves with Rome, served as clients of the Emperor, and promoted Roman ways, and by the Sadducees (named after Zadok, the original high priest under David), who reluctantly but pragmatically cooperated with Rome in order to maintain their wealth and highly privileged status as aristocratic priests. The Sadducees are the managers of the temple and the highest local authority in Judea in absence of a king. Often the first and second strand battle violently with each other.

A surprising and imaginative third strand, however, provided yet another way: one that was inclusive of foreigners without being either separatistic or conforming to the dominant imperial culture. This strand said God welcomes all who are willing to worship and trust God. This strand is epitomized by Isaiah 56:1-8 where Isaiah says "maintain justice and do what is right." And what is justice and what is right? "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people;' and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give, in my house [the temple] and within my walls [Jerusalem] a name and a monument [in Hebrew, Yad Veshem!] better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

And what name is that? What name could possibly be better than a son or daughter of God? Answer: Priests. Or, as the text puts it, "servants" who "minister to him [the Lord]" (Isaiah 56:6). By the time of Isaiah 56, ministers = priests; as is also the case in the Priestly source and Deuteronomy (Blenkinsopp, 140). This is an amazing claim. Foreign eunuchs will become ordained clergy (!) who don't just bring sacrifices to the temple for the Jewish priests to offer. They themselves will be priests who offer these offerings and they will be accepted at my altar, says the Lord, for "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." This prophecy is literally fulfilled when Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 and the eunuch becomes a member of the priesthood of all believers.

Isaiah takes the most excluded person he can think of—an enslaved, sexually mutilated foreign male—and says he will be a priest, an ordained minister. [Later in t. Megillah 2:7, the rabbis rank persons according to their purity with the priests first and the eunuchs, those with damaged testicles, and those without a penis last.] It's like saying a married prostitute from New Jersey will be the next pope. The foreign eunuch doesn't have to be circumcised. Doesn't have to eat kosher. Doesn't have to get a new set of gonads and corrective surgery to reverse the mutilation. Just has to keep the Sabbath and worship God in a God-pleasing way (which ultimately means repenting of one's violent separatistic ways or one's self-aggrandizing accommodating ways and believing the good news of the closeness of God and the nearness of the kingdom in the person and ministry of Jesus, God's beloved Son).

This is the very passage Jesus quotes to interpret the act that is the proximate cause of his death and gets him killed.

And notice the reversal! Foreign, sexually mutilated males who think they are "just a dry tree" become a Yad Veshem, "a name



and a monument better than sons and daughters.” They are promised the very “everlasting priesthood” that the Maccabeans claimed that Phinehas had (Isaiah 56:5 in contrast to 1 Maccabees 2:54). And the current accommodating priestly keepers of the temple and the separatistic zealous Jews using the temple as a place to plot the violent overthrow of Rome literally become a cursed and withered fig tree and are terminated and cut off from the temple.

Jewish people call their holocaust museum Yad Veshem. Isaiah uses what has become the most sacred of names to refer to foreign, sexually mutilated males becoming ordained priests. And Jesus quotes him at the most significant moment of his life.

Jesus is not “cleansing the temple.” Jesus is using carefully staged prophetic theater to indicate the temple’s proper use and purpose, which is to be a “house of prayer for all people,” for all who worship God. And Jesus is warning against the social and political agendas that were leading the people into a ruinous war with Rome, which could only end in disaster. The temple was intended to symbolize God’s dwelling with Israel for the sake of the world (“light to those in darkness,” as Paul says in Romans 2:19), but in the hands of its current occupants and custodians it had come to symbolize God’s exclusion of the world by violent separatists and the robbery of the poor, especially small farmers and widows, by the priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem (as will soon be described in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants).

In Mark 3:22, Jesus was accused of being in league with Beelzebul, a name that possibly means “Lord of the house.” If that is the case, then this action of Jesus very well may be saying that Jesus, as God’s ultimate earthly agent, is the true “Lord of the house” (temple) and that the demonic political and religious powers (which form an incestuous relationship of governmental, military, and commercial interest) are being “cast

out" (ekballo). The temple is so corrupt that it must be destroyed and/or replaced (Myers).

This is the "Return of the King" from Lord of the Rings part 3—Aragorn, the rightful king returning to take command and possession of his temple. When Jesus comes to Jerusalem, this is God coming to Jerusalem. This is God's return. People forgiven. Exile over. Gentiles coming. Spirit given. This is what is meant by "the time [of promise] is fulfilled, the kingdom of God at hand." And we get in on it by believing it and acting accordingly. And "repent" means above all "abandoning one's violent, separatistic ways," which is precisely the way that the word group "repentance" (metanoia) is used by Josephus as he urges his fellow Jews to lay down their arms and abandon their violent resistance at the time of the revolt against Rome (at the very time and in the same context as Mark was written).

The custodians of the temple do not believe it, they do not want to surrender custody of the temple to its true owner (Jesus/God) and so they seek to kill Jesus, God's son and the holder of God's power of attorney. However, they are fearful of the popular support that Jesus has, which indicates how estranged they are from the very people they seek to serve.

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### **A Partial List of Resources for Mark**

- Blenkinsopp, Joseph. Isaiah 56-66. The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 2003.
- Boring, M. Eugene. Mark: A Commentary. (The New Testament Library) Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.
- Kelber, Werner. Mark's Story of Jesus. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1979.
- Myers, Ched. Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988.

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In the Thursday Theology pipeline—

February 2: Part 3 of Rev. Paul Jaster's "Mission in Mark"

February 9: Steve Albertin responds to John Roth's "How to Disagree Well"

February 16: A wrap-up report on the Fourth International Crossings Conference

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## **"THE FREUDIAN SLIP"**

Matthew 6:24-34

Crossings Conference, Homily 5  
January 25, 2012; Morning Prayer

You are hungry. You remember that cookie jar in the kitchen and decide to indulge yourself in a little late afternoon snack. You open the jar already imagining the taste of those chocolate chip cookies. But the jar is empty! No cookies! Who ate them? You turn around and standing there behind you looking up at you with a funny look on his face is your six-year-old.

"I didn't do it! I didn't eat those last four chocolate chip cookies!"

You are staring at the culprit. A slip of the tongue was as good as a confession of guilt.

We often call such an accidental slip of the tongue a "Freudian

slip” after the great Austrian thinker and father of psychotherapy, Sigmund Freud. Freud theorized that buried deep within the subconscious of every person are urges and desires that control our thoughts and actions. We may not even be aware of them. We may want to keep them hidden. However, an occasional “slip of the tongue,” a “Freudian slip,” reveals the secret within.

At the center of our text is such a “Freudian slip:” worry. Worry is part of life. It comes with being human. A certain amount of worry is good. It motivates us to work hard and plan for the future. It keeps us on our toes. Of course, too much worry creates problems. Always fretting about what to eat and what to wear can become an unhealthy obsession.

But where do you draw the line? When does a healthy concern for the future become a self-destructive obsession about tomorrow?

Jesus is uninterested in making such distinctions. He offers no checklist by which to monitor our worry so that we can keep it under control. Instead, Jesus says any kind of worry, big or small, long or short, is a “Freudian slip,” a revelation of something much bigger, deeper and more dangerous within us: our lack of faith in God.

Any worry, fear or moment of anxiety reveals that we are First Commandment breakers. God demands that we have no other gods, that we fear and love God above anything else. We don’t. We are always trying to serve two masters. It doesn’t work.

We throw up our hands and scream, “Time out!” Jesus is over-reacting here. Since when is worrying about what I will wear to work or what I will cook for supper the equivalent breaking the First Commandment? This hardly seems like praying to some ugly stone statue!

Martin Luther's commentary on the First Commandment in his Large Catechism reminds us that we all have our gods. What do we fear, love and trust more than anything else? Over what are we anxious? What do we worry about? The answers to those questions are our "Freudian slips." They reveal our masters. They expose who and what own us. They uncover our gods! That is what makes us different from a rock or a flower or a bird of the air. We are not prisoners of our genes or our circumstances. We "have to" make choices. We CANNOT NOT CHOOSE to believe in someone or something. We MUST have a god.

Jesus knew that his disciples were chronic worriers just like us. When he tells them not to worry, he is actually accusing them and us of being First Commandment breakers. "Look at the birds of the air . . . Consider the lilies of the field." They don't scurry about trying to keep up with the latest fashions. They don't have their days rise and fall on the Dow Jones average. They don't count calories or grams of fat to win the admiring glances of others. So why do we worry even though God says we are worth so much more than flowers and birds?

Because our hearts cling to them instead of God. They promise so much but are relentless tyrants who never stop demanding more and more, never letting us rest. They are the empty calories that forever leave us hungry. They are the fool's gold that leaves us stuck in our poverty.

BUT God will not give up on us even though we have repeatedly given up on Him. Jesus is clear and unequivocal about that. There is no "Freudian slip" here.

When Jesus says, "Strive for the Kingdom of God," he is talking about himself. He is inviting us to follow him. So that we will, he hangs out with all of us who fret, agonize, wring our hands and sweat what tomorrow might bring. To us who are unable not to

worry, to us who shudder as God stands in judgment over our faithlessness, he says, “Never mind! You are mine! You are my sons and daughters! I forgive your sins, even your worry. All that worries you, that makes you tremble and will ultimately kill you, I will suffer them WITH you and FOR you.”

Jesus did. He suffered and died. And God was so pleased that God raised Jesus from the dead to assure us that God will keep His promise no matter what. Nothing can keep His love from us.

Jesus gives us a God different from any other. In Jesus we have a God who will never give up on us, a God we can trust when everything else is falling part, a God who always gives us enough to keep on believing and never having to fear that tomorrow will leave us high and dry. This is the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.

With that Kingdom “all these things will be given to you,” things like peace of mind, confidence in the future, a willingness to love and a generous spirit that does not worry about tomorrow but freely gives itself away in the service of a frightened and worried world. Others may wring their hands and rend their hearts. Their anxiety pops up in all kinds of Freudian slips. They hide the fear that is lurking in their subconscious. But not us! We are following Jesus.

[FreudianSlip\\_Mt6\\_Epi8A \(PDF\)](#)

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# **“YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING?”**

Matthew 5:20-37

Crossings Conference, Homily 3

January 24, 2012; Morning Prayer

Perhaps some of you remember one of the best selling books of the 1980's, Robert Fulghum's *All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten*.

*ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten.*

.....

*Share everything.*

*Play fair.*

*Don't hit people.*

*Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess.*

*Don't take things that aren't yours.*

*Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat.*

*Flush.*

.....

*Think what a better world it would be if all – the whole world – had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.*

*And it is still true, no matter how old you are— when you go out into the world, it is best*

*to hold hands and stick together.*

© Robert Fulghum, 1990.

*Found in Robert Fulghum, All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten, Villard Books: New York, 1990, page 6-7.*

Fulghum makes it seem so simple. If we would just stop making things so complicated, focus on the essentials, try to do our best, life would turn out to be pretty good.

Then Jesus comes along and blows it all out of the water. In fact, after listening to Jesus, it seems impossible. Even the simplest of commandments like not killing and not committing adultery, that we thought we could keep, at least some of the time, Jesus makes impossible to keep. According to Jesus, we are all murderers, adulterers and liars.

**“Jesus, you have got to be kidding!”**

Like an Xray exposing the tumor within, like a surgeon using a scalpel to cut out diseased tissue, like the drunk caught driving, sitting in jail and no longer able to avoid facing the truth of his addiction, Jesus won't let us off the hook. He applies *tough love* not because he hates us but because he loves us. He loves us so much that he won't let us go on denying the truth, destroying ourselves and wrecking the world.

Robert Fulghum makes it all seem so doable like the Pharisees did in Jesus' day. But that's not good enough. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.” (5:20)

We all want to know how to live, what to do and how to be, because we want to be right. We long to be good. We want know that we matter. Maybe we are not so much thinking about how to



be right with God, but we sure want to be right with everyone else. When it comes to the job we are doing, to the class we are taking or to the marriage we living, we all want to be right. Righteousness may not be the hottest topic on Twitter, but it is the hottest topic around the coffee pot, in the lunchroom and on the family vacation. Our anger reveals it. Our gossip confirms it. Our plotting exposes it. However, the more we try to be right, the more it slips away. The more tightly we grip, the more quickly it disappears, . . . like sand running through the cracks between our fingers. The more we try to be right with the crowd, the more we expose that we don't care about being right with God.

But Jesus does even more than just expose the cancer, drive us to our knees and rub our face in the dirt. Jesus joins us there IN the dirt, UNDER the scalpel, ON our knees, IN the midst of the hatred, lies and deceits . . . ON the cross. The same accusations and incriminations which make us want to run and hide, Jesus embraces. Hanging with sinners and tax collectors, willing to be numbered with the unclean and unwanted, he is arrested in the Garden, attacked by his enemies and nailed to a tree

because he cavorted with sinners . . . LIKE US. The beauty of it all is that Jesus wanted it that way. He is no unwilling victim. He wanted this. Jesus is guilty as charged for daring to do what no one else dared to do: love sinners, murders, adulterers and liars like us . . . and declares us right, righteous, OK, born again, a new creation . . . defying God in the name of God!

Jesus, **you gotta be kidding!** It is one thing to expose our cover, but then to turn around and tell us to stand tall, take heart and rejoice because all is now well, **you gotta be kidding!** Who do you think you are to over rule God? . . . God or something?

Dying on the cross he seemed like a liar and fool. But when God raises Him from the dead, God says “Yes! That’s my boy! He did exactly what I wanted Him to.” There God confirms everything Jesus said and did, not only His forgiveness of murders, adulterers, liars, cheats and any other shameful name you can call us, but also Jesus’ decision to overturn God’s own accusations in order to make the wrong . . . right, the unsuitable . . . just, the crooked . . . straight . . . and sinners . . . saints.

**You gotta be kidding!**

God says, **“No, I am not kidding.”**

As sure as we hear the waters splash in the baptismal font, as we taste wine on our lips and bread in our mouths, as we feel a hand grasp ours and a voice say, “The Peace of the Lord be with you,” we can be certain. Our righteousness even exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. We have been welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven.

**No kidding!**

[YouGottaBeKidding\\_Mt5\\_Epi6A \(PDF\)](#)

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## **“A PERFECT WORLD”**

Matthew 5:38-48

Crossings Conference

Tuesday, January 24, 2012; Prayer at Midday

These are some of the most well known words in all of the New

Testament. "Turning the other cheek, . . . going the extra mile, . . ." have almost become clichés. They are startling, surprising, unsettling . . . and dangerous. I would like to have a dime for every time I have heard some street-wise realist complain, "Pastor, maybe you could live that way in a perfect world, but not in the real world."

The entertaining National League infielder and hall of fame baseball manager, Leo "The Lip" Durocher, put it well once when he tried to motivate his players by reminding them that "nice guys finish last."

What do you do when someone breaks into your home and threatens the life of your family, when someone attacks you in a dark alley, when someone tells lies about you in order to ruin your reputation? Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile and give the thief not only the keys to your car but your checkbook as well? This might make sense in a perfect world but not in the real world.

The law of retribution, *lex talionis*, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," cited by Jesus, actually makes much more sense. It was a humane way to make sure that punishment remained proportionate to the crime committed. Without it violence will only escalate. It was an enlightened attempt to restrain the impulse for revenge. There is always a danger that our retaliation will be more severe than the hurt inflicted. When somebody does us wrong and we seek to get back, get even and get our "pound of flesh," there is always the temptation to make that one pound of flesh into two or three "pounds of flesh." We reason, "This will teach the bully never to do that again."

We are all for law and order, a strong police force and getting what you deserve until the flashing red light appears in our rear view mirror. We are all for getting what you deserve until

we are the ones who can't pay back what we owe. We are all for retaliation until we discover that retaliation only escalates and worsens the conflict. When differing opinions become bloody lips and black eyes, we wonder what happened.

As if this was not enough, Jesus makes matters worse by forbidding the retaliation that seems so justified. Jesus pulls out the rug from under us just when we thought we were learning how to survive in a world where evil must be resisted and getting what you deserve is a way of life. Jesus switches course midstream. He decides to drive the wrong way on a one-way street. He tells us that we ought NOT to give others what they deserve. He wants us to give gifts to those who will never thank us. He insists that we care for those who don't give a rip about us. He expects us to cooperate with those who want to destroy us. You don't just let your enemy strike you on the cheek, you offer him the other one as well. If a stranger wants your coat, you don't just let him have the coat. You take him home and let him pick from your closet. If the boss forces you to walk one mile, you don't just go the one mile. You volunteer to go a second mile . . . without pay. You don't just love those who are nice to you. You love those who would kick dirt in your face, who would steal you blind and who might even take your life. You love your enemies.

What is going on here? In what kind of world does Jesus think we live?

Unless . . . what Jesus is talking about here are not demands that we must meet or rules that we have to follow. What if the perfection that God demands is the perfection that Jesus gives? What if, contrary to what we can see, feel, measure and calculate we do live in a perfect world?

That startling promise is what lies hidden behind the seemingly

impossible and irrational demands of Jesus. What Jesus demands FROM us, He does FOR us. He would turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, love His enemies, pray for those who crucified Him and suffer the consequences. He seemed like a fool. He naively believed in perfection in the midst of an imperfect world. He trusted in God when everyone else wanted him to retaliate. So, God raised Him from the dead confirming Jesus' faith. Jesus was no fool and had every right to believe that he could change the world, forgive our sins and give us the perfection He demands.

We receive that perfection at the font, the table, from the Scriptures, in this imperfect world whenever the perfect Promise is spoken. Despite our imperfections, Jesus declares us perfect. A perfect world begins.

Trusting that promise, Jesus' unreal demands become tantalizing promises.

Someone strikes us on the cheek. They expect us to come back swinging, hoping that we do so that then they will feel good about hitting us again. What if we turn the other cheek to the one who struck us? What if we gift the one who was secretly planning to steal from us? What if our enemy discovers that we are praying for him? We will begin to disarm him. It will no longer be so easy for him to think of us as his enemy. Miraculously, as if it was a miracle worked by God himself, which, of course, it is, our enemy begins to think of us no longer as an enemy but as a friend, even a brother or sister. Who else would love him this way? Certainly not his enemy, but Christ and those who are his disciples do.

And suddenly the **perfect world** that seemed so farfetched is real, here, among us already . . . now!

[PerfectWorld\\_Mt5\\_Epi7A \(PDF\)](#)

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# **The Church Executive as Disciple: Some Personal Reflections (Or Is It a Confession?) With Help from Matthew 10:38-39 and 11:28-29**

## **I. Diagnosis**

### **A. Aspiring to follow**

When I was a junior in high school, my parents asked me if I really wanted to be a pastor. After several days of thought, I found myself thinking, if the story of what God has done in Christ is true, it is worth staking my life and my vocation on that truth. In a sentence, that thought has carried me to this day.

True enough, when faced with the possibility of this particular calling, my response was less than enthusiastic; I had come to know something of the nature of the bishop. But once I was called to this office on occasion I found myself thinking, "This isn't such a bad thing. Some people think I gifts for this office. They want to know what I'm thinking and what we should do and I'm pleased to tell them and, actually, to have them listen. In addition I get a credit card. I think I can do this."

## **B. But I'm not too big on losing, or dying to myself for that matter**

As I spend time in this office, I find myself having second thoughts. I have to use all the gifts that I have but where is it getting me? A number of congregations remain in conflict despite the best efforts of my staff. Many congregations have little sense of mission. In others, I wonder about whether or not the Gospel is being preached. Some of the most difficult stuff relates to the necessity of responding to pastoral misconduct. Others engage in the misconduct but I am the one required to respond and then I'm blamed. In such moments trust is absent. At one point I find myself saying to my family, "There is something in me that is dying."

## **C. God, you are killing me**

In the stress of recent years, I have been required to do any number of consultations with unhappy congregations. For almost 14 years, I and the staff have spent hours developing relationships, stressing the centrality of the Gospel for mission and ministry. At this point all that work sometimes seems to be in vain. I point to the centrality of the cross, work to be an empathic listener but am called to participate in conversations in which my references to Christ are made akin to "talking like a politician." I am called to respond to slander to which nothing that I can say is adequate. I cry out one evening, "God you are killing me."

# **II. Prognosis**

## **A. "Come to me"- a Word of Life**

On the way home after one such meeting, I called a pastor who

had sat in silence throughout the evening. In sorrow, I asked, "Can I meet with you tomorrow? I need to know what happened. What am I doing? Where am I failing? As we talked the next morning I spilled my heart. He listened and then recalled for me the story of the crucified and risen Christ who died and rose for me, who called me. He anointed me with oil and pronounced forgiveness." Other words came to mind. "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls."

## **B. Found**

To know myself to be carried by Christ to discover again the identity bequeathed in baptism, to receive the gift of peace, to find the space for self-forgetfulness. It is to learn again what it means to come and follow, to live by faith. In such moments I find myself grateful for the way in which the Holy Spirit uses others to tell the Story, to embody Christ, to carry me,, to nurture my faith through their prayers, their gifting me with the Body an Blood of Christ, by their embodiment of Christ.

## **C. Empowered to take up the cross**

Given the nature of sin in others and in myself, obstacles, burdens, suffering is in evitable. When by the Spirit of God I catch the Gospel I am freed to follow and to point to the One whom I follow. That means going into the hard places in the world, in the church and in the lives of the baptized people of God. It means being freed to be a sign of and participant in God's in-breaking reign in Christ Jesus, wherever that leads. Better yet, my eyes increasingly are open to see the manner in which that in-breaking reign is happening in the lives of others, in congregations and in Christ's church.



A Parting Comment: I don't die easily. God is still very much at work putting me to death, joining me to Jesus' death and resurrections, and by the Spirit of God bidding me to come and follow. I don't expect that to end for a bit.

Submitted by Marcus C. Lohrmann  
Crossings Conference  
January 24, 2012

[Crossing\\_Personal\\_Reflections\\_2012 \(PDF\)](#)

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# **Following Jesus when things are falling apart – a post-liberation perspective from South Africa.**

By Felix Meylahn

## **A. Brief auto-biographical and historical perspective on the South African Context**

### **a) Introduction – Who am I and where do I live and work?**

I was born in the Northern Cape on Pniel, a mission station of the Berlin Mission Society, where my father was appointed

agricultural manager (to generate funds for the mission work of the Lutheran Church in Southern Africa). My first language was German, then I learnt Afrikaans in primary school, was taught Latin by Irish monks (CBC) and learnt to speak English under the tutelage of an Anglican Canon (Kimberley Boys' High). I will briefly come back to my place of birth a little later. I studied theology together with students from all the various Lutheran Churches in Southern Africa at the joint theological training institute (funded by the LWF) which is linked to the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg. And now I am a pastor in the "Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Cape Church)" and work in the Port Elizabeth Congregation (Friedenskirche). Our congregation in Port Elizabeth was founded by German immigrants just over 112 years ago, but we have since the early 70's become more and more an English speaking Lutheran community in which people from all the different backgrounds feel at home.

## **b) The first "falling apart".**

After this personal introduction let me begin with a description of the historical context of my presentation, which will make clear why I use the "falling apart" phrase in my title. I believe it is very important to mention that we all see things through our own eyes and lenses. What I present here is thus my perspective, which, although I have tried to make it as wide and unbiased as possible, is still limited and one-sided, and should obviously not be taken as the only view of the situation in South Africa. However, the perspective that I offer is not based purely on my own view but tries to give an account of the way many people in my community/congregation experience and perceive South Africa today.

At first, a little historical review: The continent of Africa has been ravaged by Colonialism and imperialism for many centuries. The effects have been well documented in various

studies (Pakenham's *The Scramble for Africa* is still a good overview). But I'd like to refer you in particular to a novel by **Chinua Achebe**, who movingly describes the detrimental impact of colonialism on his own culture in the book, "Things fall apart". He describes hauntingly how, through the onslaught of western imperialism together with the work of Christian missionaries, Western, Christian "civilisation" has fragmented and almost totally destroyed the once stable culture and belief system of his people. Of course I do not insist, as some critics do, that the missionaries came merely as the "advance troops of the colonialists" to soften up the people for later exploitation. I believe that many missionaries had the best intentions and brought much to Africa which even today is worth keeping (Education, Medical Training and agricultural know-how and, of course, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which liberated many from fear and superstition).

## **c) The rise of the "liberation movements"**

Across the continent there arose at the turn of the previous century liberation movements of various kinds. I can't go into too much detail here, but I need to mention the founding of the African National Congress in 1912. Its first secretary was Sol Plaatje, who was raised and educated by Lutheran missionaries on Pniel, the Berlin Mission Station in the Northern Cape Province which I mentioned as my birthplace. The history of the rise of African Nationalism and Black Consciousness is very interesting and important to understand the later developments in South Africa, but again I can only refer you to the literature. One of the first books on the subject written by an African is Sol Plaatje's "Native Life in South Africa", first published in 1916 in response to the "Native's Land Act" introduced when South Africa was part of the British Commonwealth in 1913. The author was part of a delegation sent by the ANC to Britain to ask the

Queen and the British parliament to address their grievances against the harsh laws instituted against black South Africans, but this was to no avail.

## **d) Diamonds and Gold**

I need to speed up a little to get through important stretches along the road to the “New South Africa”.

British imperialism was insatiable and, among others, Cecil John Rhodes had the dream of acquiring land all across Africa from “Cape to Cairo”. The agricultural and mineral wealth of the continent was just too tempting to leave unconquered. When Diamonds and later Gold were discovered in the two Boer republics of the Freestate and the Transvaal respectively, a war was instigated (the so-called “Boer War”), which today is seen by many as the first desperate attempt at a “liberation war” of a South African “tribe” against the imperialism of Britain. The “Afrikaner” people, who called themselves “Boere”, farmers, were made up mostly of Dutch, German and French descendants, who had been living in Africa for several generations by this time and had often freely mixed with indigenous people as well as with slaves from the Far East. For the first time in military history, the British used “concentration camps” to imprison the women and children of the farmers (where many of them died) and a burnt-earth policy to force the heavily outnumbered “Boere Kommandos” to capitulate.

## **e) The rise of Afrikaner Nationalism**

In the wake of the lost Boer war and jumping on the band wagon of nationalisms arising around the world the “Afrikaners” started seeing themselves as a “Nation” oppressed and exploited by foreign rulers, the Reformed theology of their pastors added fuel to this understanding, using language like, “we are the

chosen people to bring the faith to the heathen of this land". In 1948 the "National Party" came to power in the "democracy" of the Union of South Africa and began instituting an ideology that became known as "Apartheid". The basic idea was that different ethnic groups should stay segregated and be allowed to develop separately. Looked at from the perspective of world history the implementation of "Apartheid" as a government system was the legal codification of the elitist, western world-view (white or European supremacy) joined with a Nationalism that took its cue from Nazi Germany. The main ideologues of Apartheid studied theology and law in Nazi Germany during the late 30's and early 40's.

## **f) The "liberation struggle".**

Another jump to get through this background stuff:

The opposition to racism, which had already taken a big step with the founding of the ANC in 1912 of course grew immensely as the harsh racist laws of Apartheid were implemented. But the ANC was not the only, nor even the most popular liberation movement initially. Other strong protagonists of the liberation struggle were the Pan African Congress (PAC with a strong Black Consciousness element as represented by Steve Biko) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which had a strong national following until its leaders were systematically eliminated by ANC cadres. (See Anthea Jeffery's book for the details).

Under the influence of Gandhi and others the struggle for the most part was a non-violent one until a faction within the ANC came to the conclusion that non-violence was not going to bring the necessary results and founded the military wing of the ANC (MK. "Umkhonto we Sizwe") and began the violent struggle against Apartheid. In 1978 a senior delegation made up of members from the ANC and the SACP went to North

Vietnam to gather information and to receive training in “People’s War”, a strategy developed by General Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the North Vietnamese army. The ANC adopted this military and political strategy as its “blue-print” for taking over South Africa by force (see Anthea Jeffery, “People’s War. New Light on the Struggle for South Africa”). *“A people’s war, as the term suggests, revolves around the use of people as weapons of war. As many people as possible must be drawn into the war, whether by joining organisations allied to the insurgents, or taking part in demonstrations, or helping with the propaganda campaign, or taking part in violent attacks. In addition, all individuals within the arena of conflict – including those who support the insurgents – are regarded as expendable in the waging of the war, in the same way as arms and ammunition are expendable in a conventional conflict. It also means that children are just as expendable as adults and that there is no bar against using children either as combatants or as targets for attack. As a combatant, a child may be more willing to take risks, and as a victim of violence the child has much greater value in subsequent propaganda and mobilisation.”*

For a summary of the various elements of this strategy and the long term consequences becoming visible in SA now, see the detailed study by Anthea Jeffery.

## **g) The church’s involvement in the “struggle”**

As is well known, prominent members of the Christian community in South Africa were part of the liberation struggle from the beginning – well known among them are Father Trevor Huddleston, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak. (John De Gruchy’s books: “The Church Struggle in South Africa” and “Bonhoeffer and South Africa” are well worth reading for a detailed history of

the church's resistance to Apartheid.)

As soon as I began my studies of theology at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg in 1981, I tried to inform myself about liberation theology and the struggle for freedom. At first we joined clandestine seminars on liberation theology, led by Father Theo Kneifel, which were announced innocently as meetings of the Catholic Students' Society on the Campus. We read various "banned" works, mostly by South American liberation theologians. We lived together in a residence for theology students, in which black students were officially not allowed to live, but we managed to dodge these rulings for the most part. We studied Liberation theology, we read Bonhoeffer, saw many parallels between the Barmen Declaration and the South African situation and saw this concern expressed in the now famous "Kairos Document", which has a very clear theology of resistance and liberation.

"It was all so clear and simple" is a thought that often goes through my head now. We knew who the enemy was and what "they" were doing wrong and we also knew how it should be "done right". The world-wide pressure that was created especially by the church's support of the liberation struggle was an important factor influencing the Nationalist Party to dismantle Apartheid and hand over power to a democratically elected government.

## **h) Freedom**

At last we had a new Constitution, a "New South Africa" and we were a "Rainbow Nation". We are the most progressive democracy in the world, on paper. I remember with great fondness the 27 April 1994, the day of our first democratic election. I was then serving in Philippi, a congregation on the "Cape Flats", near Cape Town – in one of the most diverse and volatile communities in South Africa at that time. On the day we all came to the

polling station in peace and joy, stood in the long queues for over seven hours to be able to make our mark on the ballot paper to elect a new, fully representative government to rule in justice and peace. I will never forget that day! There are many beautiful examples of the “rainbow nation”, a phrase coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, actually becoming a reality – just one example that I need to mention is the Alexander Road High School which my children attend.

## **i) The second “falling apart”**

But, sadly, things are falling apart again. The first 17 years of “freedom” saw an unprecedented increase in nepotism and corruption among the elite rulers of South Africa (see R.W. Johnson’s, “South Africa’s Brave New World – The Beloved Country since the End of Apartheid”). The saddest part of this development for me is that many of these leaders were once our heroes, they stood up for justice, freedom and accountability against all forms of discrimination and now they have fallen into an elitist, greedy, power- grabbing way of leadership, that they back up with an African National-Socialist ideology, that in too many ways reminds me of the ideology of the “previous regime”. It is as John Holloway puts it, that, “the nationalism of the oppressed (anti-imperialist nationalism), although it may aim at radical social transformation, is easily diverted from its broader aims into simply replacing ‘their’ capitalists with ‘ours’, as the history of anti-colonial movements makes clear.” (*Change the world without taking power. The Meaning of Revolution Today*. Page 64). And so, after all the idealism, the courageous struggle for freedom and justice, things are falling apart again. From our experience in South Africa I have to fully agree with John Holloway’s sad cry: “How many times has the scream against oppression been diverted into the assertion of national identity in national liberation movements which have



done little more than reproduce the oppression against which the scream was directed?" (ibid. Page 73)

Some of the symptoms of this new "falling apart" that I see are:

- appointments to government positions are made according to party loyalty and often family loyalty and not according to competence,
- billions of Rand could not be accounted for in the Eastern Cape Province's Education Department last year (the poorest of the Provinces of South Africa),
- the so called "Secrecy Bill" (giving the government the right to declare any information secret and threatening vicious punishment on journalists – 25 years imprisonment).
- Poverty, social disintegration and unemployment are worse than ever before, while the ANC members of parliament and local government officials are living in decadent abundance, granting themselves salary increases and so-called "performance bonuses" every year far in excess of the inflation rate. The activists of the liberation struggle have become mindless consumerists who unscrupulously take what they can get without regard to their fellow South Africans for whom they allegedly struggled for freedom and justice.
- This year (2012) marks the centenary of the founding of the ANC (1912) – the higher party officials celebrated this before a huge crowd of supporters with expensive champagne and other luxuries. I quote from the "Tuesday column" on "Facebook" by one of our foremost anti-Apartheid journalists, Max du Preez, called "'A Better Life for All' will have to wait" (posted: 10 January 2012):

*"Just about the most memorable moment was when deputy president Kgalema Motlanthe, surrounded by the ANC bigwigs with glasses of champagne in hand, proposed a toast "to ANC unity" and told the ordinary faithful that if they did not have champagne, they could take photographs of their leaders*

*drinking, or raise clenched fists. "The leaders will now enjoy the champagne, and of course they do so on your behalf through their lips," he said. As they have been doing for quite a while now".*

- Very high crime prevalence, very often accompanied with extreme violence. The rape statistics show that a woman is raped every 20 minutes in South Africa and many white farmers have been murdered or driven off their land by threats of violence).

- With the exception of the Revenue (Tax) Department, no Government department is functioning efficiently (corruption and mismanagement are rife).

- Government schools, especially in township and rural areas, are in total chaos and the teachers often do not get paid, and do not come to school because they "have" to earn money with other "business" etc. Jonathan Jansen, black rector of the University of the Freestate in Bloemfontein, and a well known educationalist, wrote in the Sunday Times that if he was a poor black South African, he would rather send his children to school in Zimbabwe than to a school in rural South Africa.

- "race" has to be filled in on all documents and applications, and is then blatantly used to discriminate against "white" students and candidates for appointments, bursaries etc.

This all begs the question, why? There is, of course, not one simple answer, but way back in 2001 George Soros already said, "South Africa is in the hands of global capital. That is why it can't meet the legitimate aspirations of its people." Today I believe one would have to add: The ANC elite, many of whom have become multi-millionaires over these last 17 years, are not even trying to meet those legitimate aspirations, they are merely making sure that they remain in power.

## **B. Following Jesus when Things are falling apart**

### **Or falling into the hands of the “ambidextrous God”.**

There is a verse in the letter to the Hebrews (10,31) that has always intrigued and frightened me, it sounds even more frightening in German: “Schrecklich ist’s, in die Hände des lebendigen Gottes zu fallen.” Hebräer 10,31 – “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Hebrews 10,21

And yet, I believe, to fall into the hands of the living God is our only hope, and the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ could be described as precisely that for both the preacher and the hearers: a falling into the hands of our “ambidextrous God”. This phrase or metaphor has helped me to understand better what has been happening to us in South Africa. In this critical, dangerous and often hopeless situation, I see God getting a hold of us with both of his hands and not letting go. I will try to describe now, what that means to us as South Africans (remember that I am speaking for myself and for the members of my congregation and community).

#### **a) Before “Liberation”**

it was all so clear and simple – we knew what we had to do: resist Apartheid, support those who struggle for freedom, take God’s “preferential option for the poor and the oppressed”, and make it a practical reality in our communities. Much good was done, and this way of life, practiced by many brave Christians, despite all its ambivalences, was a major factor in bringing about the changes that led to the liberation from Apartheid. But, in view of our present situation and the symptoms I have

described, I have to ask the question: Did we not confuse our activism, and even our political ideologies with the Gospel, using the Law only against the others and claiming the Gospel for ourselves in smug self-righteousness? Looking back at that time, I shudder to remember the smug hypocrisy that I and many others displayed as we condemned the “others” and yet lived quite well in a system that granted us privileges, while harshly discriminating against others. But, as much as we should critically reflect on our own part in the past, there is something more than our personal failings at stake here: to put it in rather harsh theological terms, the “wrath” of God’s left hand, of God’s Law is showing us in no uncertain terms that God’s law is not to be mocked.

## **b) The “post-liberation” reality**

that I have merely begun to describe above reveals the costs at which the glorious “liberation” was bought: The “People’s War” strategists taught the youth that education, law and order, obeying civil authorities, as well as thinking for yourself and taking responsibility for your actions are not to be seen as valuable in the “struggle”, as things one should strive for, whereas disobedience to state authority, destruction of public property, “making the country ungovernable” and, of course, blind party loyalty (ignoring nepotism and corruption in your own ranks) are acceptable means of gaining and keeping power. Whoever did not abide by these “rules” was eliminated by the most horrible death imaginable (“necklacing”, a tyre drenched with petrol, hung around your neck and set alight). The results of this “education” are clearly visible today. In addition, the youth have learnt that entitlement on the basis of your “victim status” is the best card to play and if that is somehow questioned, it can only be because your questioners are irredeemably racist. Teachers in schools and universities are

often threatened with assault by students who fail their end-of-year-exams, because “they have the right to pass” and the professors are just being racists, who do not want them to earn the degree to which they are entitled. The concept that (in its first use) the Law is there to sustain and protect life and make living in a community possible has gotten lost along the way. I suppose that this is not something unique to South Africa, but the stark consequences of such forgetting can be seen clearer there than in a society where a lot of “first-use-of-the-law-things” still seem to function quite well.

I have a question that I would want to ask you here today in this regard, because I am not quite clear on this yet. Looking at the stark consequences of ignoring our joint responsibility for “first-use-of-the-law” matters in our South African context, could one say that the killing/drowning of the old Adam, second use of the law can also be seen in this “falling apart”, in other words a kind of socio-political second use?

And could such communal second-use-experiences drive communities to the crucified Christ, like the second use of the law does with the individual Christian? Perhaps I’m completely off the track with this, that’s why I thought I should ask.

I very briefly want to describe the stark consequences of ignoring the first use of the law as they are experienced by various members of our communities:

- **Teachers** struggling with little or no salaries with huge classes and no material
- **Nurses** and other **medical staff** working in hospitals that are in a mess
- I have already mentioned the struggles that **lecturers** at university and other staff working at tertiary education institutions are having.

- There is a grass-roots organisation in the townships, calling themselves **Abahlali baseMjondolo** (shack dwellers), that have established themselves to fight the battle against a government on local level that has not come through for them in any way, although at election time far reaching promises of poverty alleviation etc. have repeatedly been made.
- These people are trying to make life work in their communities, trying to do the necessary work of caring for life, and in my estimation, unwittingly co-operating with God's left hand.

I could continue endlessly describing the critical situation our country is in and the many people that are quietly going about keeping life safe and possible, but I need to get on to the next part of my presentation.

In describing our situation like this, which could be understood as mere moaning and groaning, I need to remind myself and others to not fall into a similar trap of smug hypocrisy about these problems in the “new” South Africa, as happened to us under the previous regime. We are all in some or other way co-responsible for the situation and there are none that could be called innocent or blameless. Troubled consciences abound, because it is certainly not just a matter of separating the good from the evil and then siding with those that are deemed to be good. If we want to stay, we need to soberly face our own failings and those of each other with the clarity that comes from living as forgiven sinners.

## **c) And yet, many People are leaving the country,**

because for them the situation has become unbearable. Many trained and skilled people cannot find work (often because untrained or not well trained people are appointed on the basis

of their race). Many others do not want to continue living under the constant threat of violence. I know of no family in my congregation/community, white or black, in which there has not been a case of serious crime perpetrated against them with impunity by criminals who get away with it more than 50% of the time, because the justice system is so corrupt – so they leave – and those that remain, either can't leave (for financial reasons) or are tenaciously holding on to the idea that they do have a responsibility, a calling (vocation, "Berufung") to be in South Africa, and to do their share of the work of "care and redemption" in this part of the world.

## **d)**

My question as a pastor and particularly as the trainer for the "lay preachers" of our church is this: what does the task of preaching, fulfilling our calling as servants of the Word, contribute towards dealing with this crisis situation?

The more my work has been governed by the distinction of "Law from Gospel" (getting to know the Crossings Community and your resources on the internet has revitalized this thinking in my work tremendously), the more have people been saying: "We need that Word!" "We come on Sunday to get our shot of Gospel adrenalin for the week!" I have tried to understand what is happening, why they say that and how it works – I'm a little scared that systematizing it too much may in fact mess it up – but for my own clarity I need a system of sorts, even though every system is also an oversimplification of the matter. Such a systematization does help me to keep my focus clearly on the distinction of "Law and Promise" and helps me to recognize it at work in the people around me and in myself.

e)

I have found for myself as well as for the members of our congregation and church, that such clear “law – gospel” distinction, **the understanding of God as “ambidextrous”**, as caring for and redeeming the whole of creation is a welcome help in keeping us in South Africa and keeping us sane while we work and live there as disciples of Christ.

After again reading Werner Elert, Christian Möller and Oswald Bayer together with the writings of Ed Schroeder and Robert Bertram and many others on the Crossings Website, I believe that this kind of preaching, this way of “experiencing” the Word, is a rediscovery of the **sacramental character** of the Word and of its proclamation. (c.f. Christian Möller, Seelsorglich Predigen “Die Gleichzeitigkeit von Jesu und unserer Situation ist ein sakramentales Ereignis” page 22, and again on page 23 Luther’s “sacramentaliter meditari”.) Christian Möller puts it very succinctly: “Den biblischen Text *sacramental* zu meditieren, heißt für Luther, ihn mit der Erwartung auszulegen und zu predigen, daß Gott auch tut, was er verheißt (Ps.33,9) weil Christus für sein Wort einsteht, es mit seiner Gegenwart begleitet und in die Herzen der Menschen übersetzt.” (Seite 24) *“For Luther, to meditate on the biblical text sacramentally means to listen to and to preach the text with the expectation that God will do, what He promises (Psalm 33,9), because Christ stands in for his word, accompanies it with his presence and translates it into the hearts of the people.”* (my translation). And recently Oswald Bayer has reminded me again of the “Performative Word” that does what it says!

Based on this rediscovery of the “sacramental word”, I’d like to introduce to you a **“pattern”** that I am using as a “grid” for my thinking, preparation and practice of teaching and preaching God’s Word in the South African context, so that the Christian



community to which I belong and in which I serve up the Gospel can itself also discern and consciously experience/recognize the two hands of God in their lives, and thus become “coworkers of joy”(2 Cor.1,24) with and for one another in Christ.

## C. Finding ourselves in the Story of God's Faithfulness

The model presupposes/takes as its point of departure Luther's three experiential “rules” for being a theologian (oratio, meditatio, tentatio), and then takes the “Law – Gospel” framework also found in his Small Catechism and combines that with the three steps of meditation used by the mystics of the middle ages (purgatio – illuminatio – unio) which Luther had learnt and practiced during his years in the Augustinian Order and later filled with new theology, in order to understand what the “Word of God” is doing to us and with us – or, to use the ambidextrous metaphor, how God is handling us, what it is like to fall into the hands of the living God – or, to use narrative language, how we find/discover ourselves and the life we are called to live in the Story of God's Faithfulness, which kills us and creates us anew as free children of God.

Luther encourages all Christians into a life-long Catechumenate which takes us into the pattern and process of Baptism. Johannes Viebig calls this the “practice” of the Word of God. And Martin Nicol's Book, “Meditation bei Luther”, shows in a lot of detail the meditation practice in which Luther lived and worked all his life, and it shows very clearly, how the Reformational rediscovery of the Gospel was in fact the result of this continuous “practice of the Word of God” in **prayer, meditation** and **agonizing struggle** (oratio – meditatio – tentatio). This threefold experience (Erfahrung) of the Word of God is what makes one a theologian, says Luther.

In his Small Catechism, chapter IV Part 4 on Baptism, Luther reminds us that Baptism “signifies that the old person in us with all our sins and evil desires is to be drowned through sorrow for sin and repentance, and that daily a new person is to come forth, and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” How does such drowning and being raised up happen in daily life? It happens when we practice the “Word of God”.

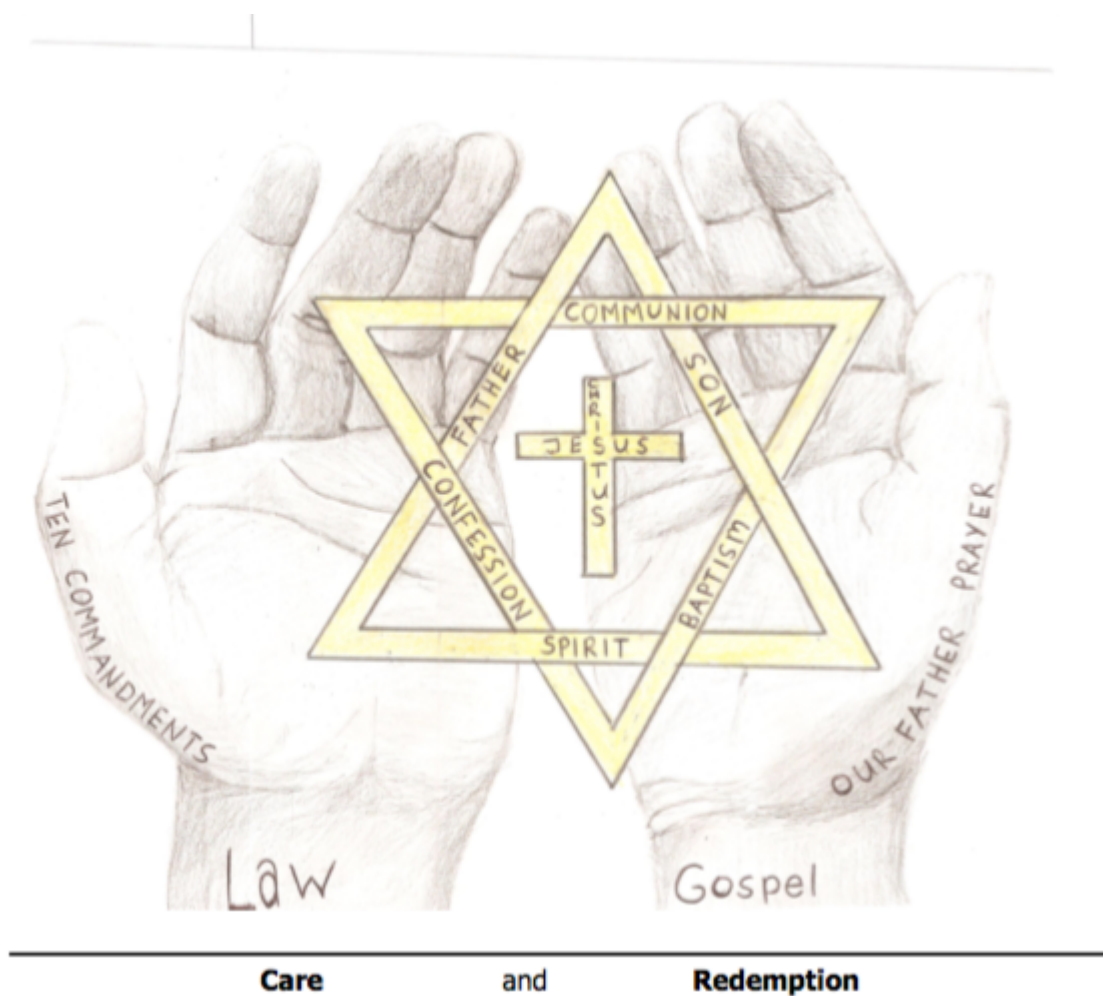
In an article called, “Evangelische Meditation als ‘Übung des Wortes Gottes’, Anstöße aus Luthers Kleinem Katechismus und Erfahrungen mit Meditationstagungen.” Johannes Viebig, in view of the meditation retreats that he leads, asks the question: “How does God meet us personally? And we found the answer: in his ordering Word, in the witness of what he did for us and in his giving himself to us (Hingabe), through which he binds us to himself. In this we rediscovered the three phases of meditation, the ‘purgatio’ (Reinigung), the ‘illuminatio’ (Erleuchtung) and the ‘unio’ (Einung) – and that these three ways of meeting God (Begegnungsweisen) are congruent with the order found within the Small Catechism of Martin Luther, which mirrors these three steps: In the **Ten Commandments** we encounter the **ordering Word**, which purges us, the ‘purgatio’, in the **Baptism Creed** we have the **witness of what he did for us**, the ‘illuminatio’, and in the **Communion** at the Table we have **the giving of himself to us**, the ‘unio’.” (Viebig 82, my translation). The basic distinction of “Law from Gospel” and its impact on us can be seen working behind the scenes here. The Law does the ‘purging’ and the Gospel does the ‘illuminating’ and the ‘unio’, the binding together with God in Christ.

In my work as pastor in the congregation, in preaching, teaching and pastoral care, in the retreats that I lead with our church wardens and our confirmands, I have taken this scheme and developed it further into a pattern for discerning how God

handles us in our context, in our daily life. I'd like to briefly show this pattern to you, using a drawing by my daughter, Mia Meylahn, which shows the two hands of God and the gift these hands give to us through the Word, as summarised in the Small Catechism.

## **The work our ambidextrous God does through the Word "Care and Redemption"**

### **Care and Redemption**



To make it easier to remember left and right, the hands are facing away from the viewers, as if they were our hands. Of course they should be turned around towards us, since they are God's hands, giving the gift of Life in Christ to us. But that would just make things more complicated, as the left hand of God

would then be on our right and the right hand on our left.

On the left we have God's Left Hand, the Law, the Ten Commandments; this is the hand which cares for the whole of creation. It makes life possible, bearable, livable for all beings, and it calls, entices and even forces all to work with it for the sustaining of creation. Much of what I have been talking about above happens here, as we experience the left hand of God caring for us and as we work with it to "make the new South Africa" work as best we can.

But this hand is also experienced in the terrible, fatal experience of wrath (the second use of the Law), which drowns the Old Adam, punishes and puts down all that within us that is born out of mistrust and unbelief, all the stuff we do to impress God and boast before humans. As I asked before, could we see this part of God's Left-hand-work happening in the terrible falling apart that we are experiencing in South Africa today? Is this the cross we are called to bear as we stay, work and struggle on in South Africa? If yes, then we can only do it, because we have "inside information" about God's further plans of action, we know about the Right hand of God.

On the right, then, we have God's Right Hand, the Gospel, the hand that reaches out to us, that grabs a hold of us and does not ever let us go again. It is inscribed with the Our Father Prayer, although, of course, the Gospel is more centrally found in the Creed (especially in the Second Article). However the Lord's Prayer, and in particular the explanation that Luther gives to the "Introduction", i.e. the "Our Father in heaven", is to me a core experiential description of how the Gospel-God deals with us, how the Right Hand of God handles us: "With these words God wants to attract us (Luther says, "Gott will uns locken"), so that we believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children, in order that we may ask him boldly and with

complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father."

And in His two hands, God holds out the greatest gift there is: His Son Jesus Christ, and in Him we receive faith (Trust) in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How? We are called, invited, or even grabbed by the scruff of our necks, to join the creative and loving dance of the Holy Community (perichoreisis), the dance of "care and redemption". This Divine "handling" takes place through the Word and through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, as well as through Confession, which Luther never quite took off the list of the Sacraments. These different aspects of God's handling of us, the dynamic Trinity and the gifts of new life in Baptism, Communion and Confession, are composed into a star of David, reminding us of the truth that "salvation comes from the Jews" (according to Christ in the Gospel of John), and in the midst of these peculiar people, the Jews, we find the Saviour of the World, the crucified Lord, Jesus Christ.

As you can see I am still stammering about these matters myself, but I have had some very interesting conversations about this drawing and the message it tries to convey. And what is more, it seems to reach down deeper than our understanding, because it uses the image of the ambidextrous God holding out the gift of Christ to us, and as we are joined to this Christ in Baptism (we celebrate the remembrance of Baptism regularly in Port Elizabeth), we come to understand at an experiential level, that, united with Christ, we are safe (saved) in these two hands of God. And then the adventure begins of discovering exactly how that is true for us:

Then the teachers, the nurses, the doctors, the lecturers, the shack dwellers get to know, experientially, perhaps through prayer, meditation and agonizing struggle, or more probably,

through hearing the proclamation of the Word, that while the left hand of God lies heavily upon their shoulders, pushing them to stand firm for the sake of the children, the patients, the students, the community, and this heavy hand makes them realise that they are co-responsible for the mess, for the “falling apart” all around them and they experience how their trust in themselves has to die, how it is in fact killed every day – while experiencing all of that, they suddenly or gradually come to the glorious illumination, the discovery that they are also, gracefully held by the other, the right hand of God, where they find sustenance for their failing faith/trust and true peace through forgiveness for their troubled consciences. And bound together with Christ in their Baptism, they discover that whoever is plunged into the waters of union with God in Christ, surfaces next to the Poor, and discovers that he/she loves God by serving the neighbour. “Wer in Gott eintaucht, taucht neben den Armen wieder auf.”

I end off here, with the hope that I have been able to give you some insight into how the community I serve tries to hear the Word of God and live by it (which is my very simple understanding of Discipleship), as it faces the critical situation in which South Africa finds itself at present.

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[Following Jesus when things are falling apart \(PDF\)](#)

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# **"WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?"**

Matthew 5:1-12

Crossings Conference, Homily 1  
January 23, 2012; Morning Prayer

You are patiently waiting in a traffic jam when a car suddenly speeds by on the shoulder passing up all the traffic and cuts in at the last moment just before the lane ends. How can someone be so rude and inconsiderate? All you want to say is "Who do you think you are?"

I am sure that Jesus encountered a similar reaction when he uttered the Beatitudes. He brashly declares that the world is



not as it appears to be and that he has the authority to create new one. Those who heard him must have wondered, **“Who do you think you are?”**

Jesus dares to rearrange the world as we know it. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart . . . and those who are persecuted, reviled and against whom all kinds of evil is spoken.”

Like some brash heckler in a crowd or some speeding driver who cuts in line, Jesus thumbs his nose at a world that has got it all wrong. No wonder Jesus’ critics complained, **“Who do you think you are?”**

It gets worse. Jesus not only defies the social conventions of the world, he dares to contradict God. God gives people what they deserve. God blesses those who follow God’s Law and curses those who don’t. God loves the righteous and punishes the wicked. BUT Jesus insists that God is partial to those who don’t deserve a thing and smiles on those for whom life has gone south.

Those who heard him must have wondered, **“Who do you think you are?”**

And Jesus sighed, “I’m glad you asked. Watch, listen and you will find out.”

Jesus’ answers startle and surprise. He dares to call the creator of the universe, “Daddy.” As an uppity adolescent in the temple in Jerusalem, he declares that he must be about his “father’s business.” He wasn’t referring to the carpentry business in Nazareth. He audaciously claims that “No one comes to the Father but by me.”

Repeatedly Jesus dares to hang out with sinners as if God

approves!

Jesus tells stories that portray what God is up to in him. In these odd stories merit does not matter. Here there is no ladder to climb or pecking order to defend.

Laborers in the Vineyard are all paid the same whether they worked all day or for only the last five minutes.

A shepherd runs a crazy business by leaving behind 99 sheep unprotected in the wilderness for the sake of one dopey sheep that got lost.

A father welcomes home a wicked, ungrateful and undeserving son who had wasted his life in riotous living.

In this new and crazy world God blesses the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful and the outcast regardless of how undeserving they might be.

“Jesus, **who do you think you are**, . . . . God or something?”

Such an upstart cannot be tolerated! Blasphemy! Jesus must die.

It was people like us who killed Jesus. It was people who wanted to be good, who get out of bed on a Sunday morning to go to church, who go to conferences in the middle of winter . . . in the cold, . . . who could not tolerate this recklessly generous Jesus.

So they, we, hung Jesus on a cross. They, we, mocked him and demanded that Jesus come down from the cross. When Jesus doesn't come down from the cross and dies, they, we, are relieved.

“See, he was wrong. God only loves those who are worth loving. Jesus was misguided. God will not be mocked. Everyone finally gets what they deserve. Jesus, did you actually think that you

could get away with undermining God?"

But because that was not the end of the story, we are here today. When Jesus was raised from the dead, all bets were off. It was a stunning conclusion to Jesus' story, every bit as stunning as it was that day when Jesus uttered these blessings on the mountain. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God vindicated everything that Jesus had said and done. Yes, Jesus got it right! "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful and the outcast!"

Because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, Jesus truly is what he claimed to be. The reversal he authorized in the Beatitudes was not wishful thinking or the deranged dreams of some fool. It was no pie in the sky sweet by and by. It was "the real world!"

When we believe what Jesus says, we "get to" live our lives differently. We "get to" live with honesty, integrity, doing what is right and not just what is approved by the latest opinion poll. In the midst of an anxiety-ridden world, we like lilies in the field do not need to worry about what to eat or what to wear.

Even when we are at the end of the line, the back of the bus, the rear of the room, the bottom of the list, the last one chosen because no one wants us on their team . . . or as their pastor, . . . sitting on the bench because the coach won't play us, alone on a Saturday night without a date, . . . even when we wonder if we can make ends meet, if we can survive the terrifying diagnosis, . . . even when tears flow down our cheeks, . . . we can rejoice and be glad . . . because standing there next to us with his arm around us is Jesus!

We can turn the other cheek and go the extra mile. We can believe that our dreadful past has been forgiven. We no longer need to be ashamed. We can come clean. We can tell the truth . .

. in this brave, new, real world of the Kingdom of God.

So, when someone snidely remarks, “**Who do you think you are?**” we can answer, “Just ask Jesus. He says we’re blessed.”

[WhoDoYouThinkAre\\_Matt5 \(PDF\)](#)

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## “MAKING A DIFFERENCE”

“Matthew 5:13-20

Crossings Conference, Homily 2

January 23, 2012; Evening Prayer

Have you ever eaten french fries without salt? They are bland potatoes. Have you ever lost your electric power in a storm? Groping around in the dark tripping over furniture is no fun. Salt and light make a difference.

Jesus uses both images to portray the difference his disciples make in the world. We are salt transforming bland potatoes into hot, juicy French fries. We are light in a dark room transforming a dangerous, cluttered trap into a relaxing, beautiful space.

Really? Can Jesus be serious? Can this be true . . . that the world would lose its zest without us? . . . that our neighborhoods, communities and places of work would be boringly insipid without us?

*One morning an elderly man was walking on a nearly deserted beach. He came upon a boy surrounded by thousands and thousands of starfish. As eagerly as he could, the youngster was picking them up and throwing them back into the ocean.*

*Puzzled, the older man looked at the young boy and asked, "Little boy, what are you doing?" The youth responded without looking up, "I'm trying to save these starfish, sir."*

*The old man chuckled aloud, and queried, "Son, there are thousands of starfish and only one of you. What difference can you make?"*

*Holding a starfish in his hand, the boy turned to the man and, gently tossing the starfish into the water, said, "It will make a difference to that one!"*

How often have we not just kept walking down the beach? Tossing one starfish back into the sea, when thousands remain, seems futile. But Jesus doesn't back off. He only piles on.

We shudder. It sounds like Jesus has a "zero tolerance policy."

Jesus seems to toy with us. On the one hand, he thumbs his nose at God's "zero tolerance policy," breaking the rules, hanging out with sinners and tax collectors, daring to forgive them on behalf of God. On the other hand, he is a thundering prophet hammering us for our hypocrisy, insisting on the very "zero tolerance policy" he just defied.

What gives here? Is Jesus FOR the Law or AGAINST the Law?

Jesus is FOR the Law SO THAT ultimately He can be AGAINST the Law. Jesus does not just "blow off" the Law and its demands. Jesus reminds us that God is not the sleepy old man in the sky who really doesn't care if we are good and bad, because He will let us off the hook anyway. No. God cares about right and wrong.

God cares about the Law and the prophets.

Jesus reminds us that God is not going to fudge on the Law. In fact, Jesus has come on behalf of God to “fulfill” the Law, to properly use the Law, . . . by not letting us off the hook, reminding us that we are not God, telling us the truth we don’t want to hear. Jesus is “tough love.”

At the same time, Jesus joins us under the law, befriending us “zero tolerance” breakers, bearing our sin, carrying our sorrows and hurts all the way to the cross. There he “suffers” the fate that all us “zero tolerance” breakers must suffer.

When Jesus died and breathed his last, God’s Law was fulfilled. The Law had done its thing. “Zero tolerance” breakers would not be tolerated, . . . even Jesus. But God raised Jesus from the dead because God was determined that **Jesus would be the difference maker** and not the Law. Love would have the last word. Sinners would be forgiven. The accusations of the Law would be silenced.

Jesus says something truly extraordinary to this rag-tag bunch of followers sitting there with their toothless grins and calloused hands, who under the Law did not amount to much. “You ARE the salt of the earth. . . . You ARE the light of the world. You ARE difference makers.” He does NOT say, “You CAN BE salt and light or you OUGHT TO be salt and light IF you really try hard to do this or that.” No. This is an incredible, flat out, unconditional declaration of a new world. Jesus gives them . . . and us . . . the-no- strings-attached . . . Kingdom of Heaven.

Because JESUS IS THE DIFFERENCE MAKER, we also GET TO make a difference. Because of Jesus, we ARE salt and light. We GET TO salt and lighten the world. That IS who we ARE.

Have you ever noticed how salt and light make a difference not

by calling attention to themselves but always by pointing away from themselves? They exist for others. When we salt our favorite meat, salt brings out the flavor of the meat. When the salt calls attention to itself instead of the meat, we say that it is “too salty.” The same is true of light. The light exists for the sake of what it illumines. Turn on a light in a dark room, we look at the room. We don’t stare at the light bulb.

As salt and light, we GET TO bless others. Our good works are not about us. We don’t need good works to show what great salt and light we are. Our neighbors need our good works. Our good works season and brighten a world that has become bland and tasteless. They bring zest to the lives of those laboring in the drudgery of the daily grind.

They bring light to the darkness of those grieving a wounded world. They point to our God who in Christ has **made all the difference in the world.**

[MakingADifference\\_Mt5\\_Epi5A \(PDF\)](#)

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# The History of Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition

Robert Kolb

If we wished to be fundamentalistic, we could make this a very short lecture. Even though Luther used the words for “disciple” and “discipleship,” in his translation of Scripture, the word

itself did not become a part of Lutheran theological vocabulary until much later, perhaps first in the twentieth century – Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Nachfolge* (he did not think it was necessary to mention the cost in the title) being the first, or at least one of the first, major work promoting the vocabulary in our tradition.

On the other hand, trying to survey in forty-five minutes, what Lutherans have emphasized in their teaching of the Christian life is an impossibly large task since different cultural situations and different eras have made a variety of demands on Christian leaders' thinking about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. So this lecture will only try to use some examples and observations, mostly from the first two centuries of Lutheran history, to provoke our thinking about our own following in the footsteps of the one who has buried our sinful identities and raised us up to walk in his footsteps as trusting children of God.

The lecture will offer some positive examples of faithfulness to Luther's insights into the nature of the life of faith, fostered in repentance through the proper distinction of law and gospel, but negative examples of straying from Luther's insights also abound. The lesson to be drawn from this historical picture admonishes us to remember that we stand always in the midst of the eschatological battle between God and Satan, between the truth of Jesus and devil's deception, which seeks to weaken and misdirect the faith that creates the believer's person as a child of God.

The dynamic equivalent of "disciple" in Wittenbergese was simply "believer" [*Gläubiger*] or "listener" [*Zuhörer*] or "child in the congregation" [*Pfarrkind*]. Some in our day may protest that "believer" is something less than a disciple, only the starting point. But Luther, Melancthon, their students, and their



students' students believed that if you trusted in the Lord above all that he had made, you would do what the logic of faith makes inevitable: those who have been buried with Christ and raised with him walk in his footsteps.

Many Reformation historians today are emphasizing the continuities between late medieval piety and Luther's thought; the continuities should not surprise us since the most original of human geniuses have been the products of their time and carried much of whatever traditions they inherited with them into their new way of thinking. At the same time, however, Luther remains the most celebrated sixteenth century denizen of the planet not because of the continuities but because he transformed the basic definition of what it means to be Christian. He abandoned the definition of the Middle Ages – a religion conceived of within the framework of pre-Christian Germanic worship of the gods, in which ritual performance of sacred rites and practices insured the relationship between God and human creatures. If ritual secured the individual Christian's life, the hierarchy secured the life of church and society in this system.

Luther turned instead to the definition he found to be biblical – a life of trust in the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, who is a God of conversation and community, a life which proceeds from God's address to his human creatures in his Word, in all its several forms. In that definition the entire life of the Christian is determined by the fundamental relationship of love and trust that stems from listening to God's Word and turns into a life of praise to God and service to other people. Ritual and liturgy are not absent from the life of the church in his vision of Christian living; they serve as vehicles and setting for the proclamation of God's Word in all its forms and the response in the believers' praise and prayer. The daily life of believers is complicated by the presence of sin and evil, which create the

situation in which God's law must crush false faiths and their symptoms, so that his gospel promises can re-create that trust that defines the fullness of our humanity. Medieval ritual performance gave way to faithful hearing of God's Word as the key to the dynamic equivalent of what we call discipleship.

## **The Dynamic Equivalent of Discipleship in Luther's Thought**

The first element of Luther's understanding of discipleship focused on the communicating God and the trust that defines human life by defining him as the source of all good and a refuge in every time of need – the ultimate source of the our core sense of identity, security, and meaning. On the basis of this redefinition of what a Christian is – a hearer of God's Word, one who trusts in him through Christ, and who lives a life as a joyful child of God in Christ –, Luther also transformed the word "*fromm*" "upright," the kind of person you want for a neighbor, into a word which carried the connotation of a faith-based life of new obedience – "pious" in the best sense of the word. Brian Brock notes that "the preoccupation of antique conceptions of ethics with individual flourishing is displaced in Luther by an inquiry into what it means to live with God, in which the dramatics of fellowship are emphasized. ... Luther's emphasis is on transformation into the form of Christ understood in terms of *Nachfolge*, the following of ... a God who is leading in time. ... Luther's is a dialogical ethic of hearing and speaking *with* God."<sup>2</sup> The relationship between loving God and trusting child of God and hearer of his Word determined all of life. Luther presumed that God's newborn, re-created children reflect the fact that they are chips off the old block. That Luther seldom used the word discipleship need not distract us from the fact that he was very much concerned about *Nachfolge*, as the sense and shape of the life of faith. For instance, his

Small Catechism was designed to serve as a handbook for Christian living, on the basis of the personal acquaintanceship which its text, particularly that of the Creed, fosters.

The second element of Luther's understanding of discipleship stems from his placement of repentance – being turned from false gods to Jesus Christ – at the heart of daily Christian living. Luther's conception of how human life proceeds within God's greater history of dealing with his people shaped the reformer's understanding of daily life. He struggled his entire life with the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized. Emerging from the penitential piety of the monastery, which had burdened him with his guilt over his sins in ways that the ever-easier pastoral discipline of the fifteenth century failed to alleviate, Luther recognized in the pattern of Israel's apostasies, God's call to repentance, Israel's return to faith and faithfulness, and its subsequent falling away a pattern for each individual believer's own history. He defined true biblical repentance as the heart of the daily Christian life: "the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance ... and daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, "the whole life of the Christian is a life of repentance,"<sup>4</sup> of daily dying through the surrender of sinfulness to the buried Christ and the daily resurrection to a new life defined at its core by trust in the one in whose footsteps faith dares to follow. Convinced of the devil's power, Luther viewed everyday life in both the realm of faith and that of life as battlefields on which God's truth battled Satan's lie, Christ's gift of life stood under attack from the legions of the murderer, the great deceiver (John 8:44). The whole life of the Christian is part of the great eschatological conflict between God and Satan. His reordering of the medieval program for

instruction, the catechism, in his handbooks for catechism, placing law before gospel and the Christian life thereafter reflects this fundamental conviction about the shape of the believer's life.

A third element in Luther's understanding of faithful hearing and following in Christ's footsteps emerged from his supplanting of the medieval exaltation of "sacred" activities and the entire religious realm over the "profane," the everyday. He did not ignore those activities that reflected faith in Jesus, such as prayer and praise, but he emphasized that everything done in faith is God-pleasing (Rom. 14:23). Thus, he added to the instruction he gave in carrying out God's commands and practicing human virtues, e.g., in the Large Catechism, the framework of service in the responsibilities, the callings, of everyday living in home, economic activities, and the wider society, the *politia*.<sup>5</sup> To provide clues for living out this life Luther concluded his Small Catechism with instructions for daily meditation on God's Word and prayer and a table of succinct pointers on how to live within the structure of God's ordained situations according to his callings and commands.

A fourth observation about the shaping of Lutheran piety, from the days in which, according to a recent issue of *The Economist*, "Luther went viral"<sup>6</sup> until now. James Nestingen has pointed out that Luther's catechisms provided not only a linguistic but also a cultural translation of Latin models of conveying the faith.<sup>7</sup> Yale missiologist Lamin Sanneh points out that when such cultural translations take place, the culture experiences change from the input of the Christian message, and the message is shaped by the language and perceptions of the culture.<sup>8</sup> Among many very important cultural factors was the use of media, especially in two forms. The Reformation developed the potential and place of the sermon, locally prepared and delivered for the most part, as the most effective way of shaping minds and lives

of villagers, townspeople, and courtiers alike. It exploited the half-century-old but not yet fully developed potential of movable type for shaping minds and lives across a wide geographical area. Luther's catechetical revolution rode on the development of Gutenberg's way of printing as well as the rhetorical rules for oral delivery of the message which Melanchthon was developing precisely for this purpose, among others. The development of the relationship of love and trust in God, as he has revealed himself as Jesus Christ, the daily dying and rising accomplished in repentance through the use of God's law and his gospel, the cultivation of new obedience through the motivation of the gospel according to instruction given in the law all took place through the use of God's Word, in oral, written, and sacramental forms. It is a commonplace that, although the Wittenberg Reformation took place to a large extent as an oral event, it was fueled and driven by effective use of the printing press.<sup>9</sup> We dare not lose sight of both verbal components as integral parts of this Way of the Word: Lutherans have always lived from what was said and what was read. Sermons, absolution, and the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another live from and foster the reading of the Word in Scripture and every other form of Christian literature as the agents by which repentance and faith are created and new obedience finds its forms.

A negative cultural factor in the development of the Lutheran way of ecclesiastical life came with the inevitability of continuing close association with political power. All cultures need a religious element, but they need it for social and political purposes. Establishment as such an official religion always brings with it social-cultural obligations that always fall in the realm of the law, not necessarily but often to the disadvantage of the gospel. Lutheran churches were not unaffected by such developments.

## The Second Generation

To a large – though varying – Luther's students and adherents in the sixteenth century caught these profound changes in the understanding of basic concepts and conceptions of the faith. Throughout the following centuries the most perceptive of those claiming the name "Lutheran" have understood that, as Erik Erikson told us without being Luther's disciple, trust determines human personhood and personality, and that the object of our ultimate and absolute trust determines much of the way we act, or at least want to act.

Luther's students and adherents also used many of the same rhetorical tools and other methods which they had learned from him and Melanchthon. Lutherans were initially, for the most part, listeners because many could not read or write. During the last half millenium, they have generally recognized that, as Luther observed, oral forms of communicating the gospel that arise from Scripture, such as the sermon and catechism instruction as well as absolution and the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another, have played an important role in Lutheran cultivation of Christian living in every era. But the printing press did serve Luther and Melanchthon well, and their followers put its technology to use with skill. Devotional literature, catechisms, sermon books, and hymnals have cultivated Lutheran following in Christ's footsteps in every era.

In the first and second generations after Luther and Melanchthon had launched the profound alteration in the perceived form and shape of Christian faith and life, the emphasis on trust in the suffering and dying Savior, and on his resurrection, remained clearly at the heart of Lutheran preaching. The sermons in the postils and other printed homiletical works, including funeral sermons, focused on what Christ has done for sinners and on

their need for the working of both law and gospel in their daily lives. The mortification of the flesh and the call of the Holy Spirit to cling to Christ remained a key to at least the published preacher's message. But even as Luther had been most concerned about giving his hearers and readers clear, forthright instruction in what to do to live in trust toward God by following his plan for human living – for instance, in his Wartburg Postil of 1521/1522 – so his students and followers also focused repeatedly and strongly on helping their congregations understand what God wanted them to do as his trusting children, where many of them were straying from his plan, and how they should carry out their callings by obeying his commands.

Much Lutheran literature aimed at the fostering of trust in the Savior and care for the neighbor by grounding the hearer's understanding of human existence in the Scriptural address of the sinner/saint and deepening the desire of believers to fear, love, trust God above all else and to love the neighbor as oneself. Luther had designed his Small Catechism for use by parents in cultivating the faith of their children and servants. His ideal of a life guided by meditation on the catechism took concrete form in the second section of the Small Catechism, in which children were to learn the discipline of consideration of the content of Scripture in the form of the commandments, creed, and Lord's Prayer and response in prayer.

His colleagues and students were convinced of the importance of home devotions for the nurture of faith and new obedience: Some sixteen years after Luther's death his friend Nikolaus von Amsdorf penned a critique of parental irresponsibility in neglecting the regular preparation of children and servants for Sunday morning services, and the review of the sermon, particularly its admonitions and its comfort, afterwards.<sup>10</sup>

This devotional discipline did take place in the home of the Saxon court physician and municipal physician, Matthaeus Ratzeburger, whose personal practice of the devotional life is chronicled in the account of the doctor's dying days by his pastor Andreas Poach. Before he turned to Hippocrates and Galen, the physician began the day by reading a half or whole chapter of the Bible, along with Luther's interpretation of the passage. Early mornings he read Luther's commentaries on Genesis, Joel and other prophets, and his Galatians commentary (which he had read several times), as well as the volumes of Luther's Works as they came from the presses, first the Wittenberg edition and then the Jena. His volumes contained underlining, little crosses in the margin, and other notations. Afternoons and evenings at table he read the German Bible or the appropriate sermons from Luther's Hauspostille or Kirchenpostille or some other German work of Luther for his wife and children. On Saturday evenings he read to his children and servants from Luther's Large Catechism and heard their recitation of the Small Catechism. Sunday mornings he read his older sons passages from the Latin Bible or Luther's commentary on Genesis. Ratzeburger read the Bible and Luther's works not only for his own benefit. He also applied their message to others. When visitors stopped by, the physician often told them what he had been reading and "applied it to our own times and activities, for our instruction, comfort, and warning."<sup>11</sup>

In fact, most families seem not to have been capable of meeting Luther's expectations and Ratzeburger's example, but the tradition of catechetization remained strong in late sixteenth and seventeenth century Lutheran churches. Preaching the catechism, continuing the chief medieval mode of offering instruction, was mandated in most church orders, but increasingly pastors or schoolteachers also used Luther's catechisms and the flood of expansions of them that appeared



throughout the period to train up children in the way that they were to go. At every level of learning, from primary school to university catechetics, throughout the period, from Johann Spangenberg's early supplements to Luther from 1541 and 1542 to Conrad Dietrich's range of catechisms and university textbooks, pastors and professors contributed to the burgeoning body of manuals of the faith, which sometimes justified the judgment of Hans-Jürgen Fraas, who saw an "*Akademisierung des Katechismus*" – a trend toward theoretical language and detailed information .12 This judgment compares apples and oranges, to a large extent, for the expansions of the catechism were aimed at upper level students in many cases. Nonetheless, most perpetuated Luther's understanding of the catechism as instruction not only for the head, but for heart and hand as well. The way of life that this instruction molded found its grounding in faith in Christ even when the balance of emphasis shifted to the law, as it inevitably does in instructing children, also through the Lutheran catechisms, which strove to serve as handbooks for Christian living.13

The catechisms taught people who also absorbed the faith from a variety of other forms of literature. In sermons and devotional literature the successors of the Wittenberg reformers continued to present God's structure for daily life in terms of his calling his people into specific vocations in home, economic life, society, and congregation. There they were to live the life of new obedience to God's commands, living out the virtues that God had designed for good human living, avoiding the vices that Satan was trying to seduce them to practice. The charge of some social historians that Lutheran pastors functioned merely as agents of socialization in slavish service of their rulers is false; it ignores not only Luther's call that preachers serve as critics and consciences for their princes but also the bare facts of continuing, often sharp, criticism and calls for

repentance for abusing powers that came from Lutheran pulpits throughout the early modern period.

But a kernel of truth lies behind the charge, too. For good Christians make good citizens and subjects, these preachers were convinced. They rebuked and condemned the practice of vice as well as the failure to trust in God, and they, like Luther, offered many positive suggestions for the practice of new obedience, in the realms of family life and economic activity especially. Yet many were anything but the legendary toadies of princes they are often reputed to be. Repeatedly in their postils they admonished princes and municipal counselors to behave according to God's law and to practice justice. Repeated stories of the exiles of Lutheran pastors throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – most prominently, the hymnist Paul Gerhardt – confirm that they followed Luther's admonition to preserve the peace by calling rulers to repentance so that their subjects would have no cause for discontent and their God would not send his wrath upon their unjust practices.

These sixteenth-century disciples of Luther and Melanchthon continued to emphasize that the Christian life is a life of repentance, in the midst of an eschatological battle with Satan and all his minions, they also believed. About mid-century new literary genre arose and flourished for a generation in the Wittenberg circle – and was peculiar to it – as a means of calling for repentance and for instructing in the new obedience which flows from faith: the "devil book," the *"Teufelsbuch."* The devil played a relatively small role in this genre, but he provided the occasion for focusing on a variety of sins that plagued the baptized of the later sixteenth century. While placing full responsibility for violating God's law on sinners, these works also highlighted the devil's wiles and the formidable conflict, not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, that confronts the baptized. Several

of these works addressed problems of faith: Andreas Fabricius' *Holy, Clever, and Learned Devil, opposing the First Commandment of God, opposing Faith, and opposing Christ* (1567), Simon Musaeus's *Melancholy Devil*, Andreas Lange's *The Worry Devil, or Against the Pagan Worry over the Belly or Bodily Sustenance* (1573).<sup>14</sup> Others addressed the actual sins of peasants, artisans, merchants, and nobles, with implications for personal behavior and social deviation. Andreas Musculus's *Trousers Devil* excoriated the rich young men, burgher and noble, of Frankfurt an der Oder for their sexually explicit mode of dress and called them to repentance with fierce threats of God's judgment. The hunting practices of the nobility and the consequent losses suffered by peasants for the sake of the hunt brought Cyriakus Spangenberg's expression of God's wrath down upon his superiors.<sup>15</sup>

The Ratzeburger home may not have been typical in German, Nordic, Baltic, and Slavic Lutheranism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the large number of devotional books in one form or another indicates an increasing use of such materials for personal and family edification.<sup>16</sup> Sermon books served the purpose – and not only German homiletical collections but also the first work published in Latvian, the postil of Georg Mancelius (1654), aimed at such a cultivation of trust in the Savior and the practice of a life which reflected his love.<sup>17</sup> Similarly Bernhard Liess's study of the published sermons of Johann Heermann, pastor and hymn-writer, focuses on Christ's person and work, the use of the means of grace in personal devotion as well as congregational life, and on personal repentance.<sup>18</sup>

Mancelius wrote for use by preaching pastors and the devotion-leading heads of households, but others wrote specifically for individual or family meditation. Never completely free from the mystical side of the monastic piety which had sustained Luther

in part on his way to his evangelical maturation, Lutheran tradition contains some formative thinkers who returned to certain elements of that way of coping with reality in the late sixteenth and seventh centuries. One example of this literature is found in the writings of a Silesian pastor, Valerius Herberger (1562-1627), who suffered persecution from Counter-Reformation forces in Fraustadt, where Lutherans were thrown out of their church but did get to build a chapel. He promoted a strong personal trust in Jesus with meditations on Bible texts, which found symbols of aspects of the person and work of Christ at every turn but which did little to cultivate new obedience in daily interaction with other human beings. His works treated the passion stories, the Psalms, the pericopes, and Genesis, among others. They reflect a change of mood from the mid-sixteenth century, a more “spiritual” kind of engagement and exchange with God.

Luther’s style of piety requires exertion, for loving the neighbor in the boring grind of the every day is hard work and often not at all exciting. Luther preached the joys which await us in heaven but focused largely on surviving Satan’s assaults and taking care of family and neighbors on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps because other forms of religiosity seem more religious, or perhaps because life in the seventeenth century was evermore grueling and arduous, due particularly to the war, Lutheran piety took a turn toward the other-worldly in a more intense way than we notice in its first two generations. That is seen both in the relatively little attention paid to service in vocation in the daily course of life as well as a more emotional and also other-worldly expression of devotion to Jesus.

Herberger’s reflections on the verses of Genesis sought to exposit “the mysteries of Christ” found there, training readers to think upon the Savior in complete dependence on the Holy Spirit, and with a focus on his suffering and death. He began:

“Dearest Reader! Since ‘no one can call Jesus “Lord” except in the Holy Spirit’, and no one can say, write, or think anything beneficial, comforting, or noteworthy about Jesus without God’s Spirit, and since the Holy Spirit’s particular work of grace is to reveal Jesus Christ to our heart and to make Him known: therefore may you first begin by appealing to God the Father in the name of our sweet Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the light and grace of the Holy Spirit, that you may be able to read this beneficial, comforting work profitably, piously, and to your betterment.”<sup>19</sup> The attitude of total reliance upon Christ led Herberger to pray with his readers, ““If I am wrapt in sickness and the anguish of death, if language escapes me and my lips cannot speak, nevertheless, I will groan in my heart, O Lord Jesus, essential Word of the heavenly Father! . . . Prove now that You are my Spokesman, my Advocate, and my Witness.”<sup>20</sup> The Wittenberg heritage combined with incipient Baroque style to shape the readers’ thinking through the use of intricate literary devices, including metaphors or allegories elaborating on words and phrases of the biblical text, sometimes with more, sometimes less connection to the text itself. Mention of the mustard seed which served as a red dye recalled the blood of Jesus; the use of mustard seeds smoked over coals to ward against snakes reminds readers that Jesus was placed as an offering on the coals of the Father’s wrath to repel Satan’s forces.<sup>21</sup> The “fish and birds” of Genesis 1:21 produce the comparison of Jesus with seven birds; the honeybee provides ten points of comparison with Jesus, the “broody hen” eight.<sup>22</sup> The shedding of Abel’s blood opened a discussion of the vicarious atonement in twelve points of comparison.<sup>23</sup> Not careful exegesis nor the intent of the author but rather the edification of the pious of his own time commanded Herberger’s *modus operandi* as he moved from the text to Christ’s work in the first century and its significance in the seventeenth. Herberger’s aids for meditation cultivated a sense of repentance in readers but

provided little direct encouragement for serving the neighbor and fulfilling one's callings in home, occupation, society, or, for that matter, the congregation. The charge that Lutheran Orthodoxy perpetrated an individualization and spiritualization of the faith seems justified in Herberger's work.

Out of this mood of devotional writing grew the concept of an "unio mystica" that united Christ and the believer, propagated, among other sources, by the posthumously edited writings of the Wittenberg-educated Saxon pastor Valentin Weigel (1533-1588). In part out of independent roots, in part to counter the mystical, neo-platonic approach found in the Weigel bequest, forms of piety developed within the "Orthodox" teaching at the university that developed significantly different emphases than Luther had accented while trying to remain within the structure of Christian faith and life which Luther had constructed.<sup>24</sup> The publication of Weigel's ideas attracted the immediate criticism of Wittenberg professor Nikolaus Hunnius of Wittenberg. His colleague Friedrich Balduin also rejected Weigelianism but argued that a certain union between God and his human creatures takes place through the Word in which God is present and which establishes trust in Christ, who through faith dwells in believers' hearts. This indwelling is not substantial, however, he insisted. Balduin's ideas formed the basis of the thinking of one of the most popular of Lutheran writers, who cultivated the life of following Christ through the seventeenth century and into the twentieth, Johann Arndt. Arndt's opposition to the introduction of Calvinism had earned him exile from Anhalt, and as superintendent of the Lutheran church of Braunschweig-Lüneburg he authored some of the most widely-read devotional materials in subsequent Lutheran history. Some scholars have argued that Arndt fully abandoned reliance on the means of grace for an inward spirituality that posited a substantial union between believer and God. Eric Lund has recently shown that in

his pericopal sermons, published and widely distributed in his own day, Arndt indeed was proclaiming to his hearers a piety rooted in the external word of promise that forgives sins and moves God's children to lives of devotion and communion with God through the Word as well as service within the callings of daily life to the neighbor.<sup>25</sup> His *True Christianity* and *Little Garden of Paradise* did seek to cultivate a practical piety but did so by emphasizing the spiritual communion and union of the follower of Christ with the Lord in mystical expressions.

Other parish pastors in Arndt's generation and the next found the mystical union a helpful description of the relationship between God and his chosen children but stressed that this union does not result in any substantial "divinization" of the human being. Philipp Nicolai and Statius Buscher (d. 1641), superintendent in Lübeck, both Orthodox in their teaching, insisted that the relationship of bride and bridegroom, a union which preserves and enhances the distinct identities of the two, bound believers to their Lord in working for common goals, and this viewpoint persisted over the century. The Orthodox dogmatician and parish pastor David Hollaz (1648-1713) distinguished the formal or relational union of faith with its personal object, God, from the mystical or sanctifying unity of God and believer: faith justifies and results in indwelling of (the totally distinct) Creator; God is present in the believer's repentance and justifying faith and that presence produces the life of devotion and service that marks the children of God.

In differing forms of expression this mood of devotional writing is found in the two most popular authors of the genre: the parish pastor and ecclesiastical official Johann Arndt (1555-1621), whose *Four/Six Books on True Christianity* and *Little Garden of Paradise* attracted criticism in his own day as spiritualistic and continue to be read in that manner today, and Johann Gerhard (1582- 1637), perhaps the most prominent of the

so-called Orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians and who had found in Arndt's personal counsel the peace of conscience for which Luther had striven. Eric Lund has shown that Arndt's postils demonstrated a more traditional, means of grace based sense of the pious life than he displayed in his devotional bestsellers,<sup>26</sup> and Gerhard's work certainly did that. Both sought to nurture an intimate trust in Christ and the rhythm of repentance that turns in horror and sorrow from sin to him.

Gerhard's *Sacred Meditations* grew out of a bout with serious illness as a young man, and it begins with thoughts on "the true recognition of sin": "every hour I think about death because death is looming everh hour. Every hour I think of Judgment because an account must be rendered for every day at the Last Judgment. ... My actions are vain and useless, and many of my words are vain, and many of may thoughts are even vainer."<sup>27</sup> He responds, "To whom, then should I flee? To you, O holy Christ, our only Redeemer and Savior. My sins are great, but your satisfaction is greater; my unrighteousness is great, but your righteousness is greater."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, "the foundation and beginning of a holy life is salutary repentance."<sup>29</sup> It leads to faith, "a lively and efficacious apprehnension of Christ," uniting us again with our Savior, and producing all virtues.<sup>30</sup> Without Herberger's allegorical improvisations on biblical images, and with a strong emphasis on the use of the oral, written, and sacramental forms of God's Word, Gerhard moved on to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love and harmony, who "joins us to Christ through faith, ... to God through love, and ... unites us with our neighbor through loving affection."<sup>31</sup> The *Meditations* does not offer instruction in the conduct of daily life as Gerhard does in his postils, but Meditation Twenty-Eight does present "general rules for a godly life": "Live dutifully toward God, upright with regard to yourself, and justly toward your neighbor. Act graciously toward your friends, patiently



with your enemies, benevolently toward everyone, and also generously, as far as are able. While you live, die daily to yourself and to your vices, so that when you die, you may live unto God. Show mercy always in the disposition of your mind, kindness in your countenance, humility in your manner. Modesty in your dealings with others, and patience in tribulation.”<sup>32</sup> The focus on the personal attitude and disposition received here no guidance for taking larger social responsibilities seriously though that realm was not neglected in the preaching of the period.

Jonathan Strom’s study of the reform efforts of the “orthodox” clergy of Rostock in the third quarter of the seventeenth century shows a deep concern among clergy and other civic leaders over the increasing “unfaithfulness” of the laity, despite active participation by most in the religious obligations of worship attendance and outward conformity to the commandments. The sermonic call for repentance sounded constantly from their pulpits.<sup>33</sup> Johann Jakob Fabricius’ promoted reform efforts in behalf of the integrity of the church over against secular authorities and the lives of the faithful in Schwelm (county of Mark), earning dismissal from office.<sup>34</sup> Princes could also support the cultivation of piety: Ernst the Pious of Saxe-Gotha was a good example of the pious prince who strove to inculcate religion among his subjects, though with at best mixed success.<sup>35</sup> Alongside any question of “success” is the question of how skillfully any of these authors actually employed Luther’s distinction of law and gospel, to what extent they grounded the performance of the Christian in the promise of life fashioned by God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

These examples from “Orthodox” church leaders remind us that the work of Philip Jakob Spener, who regarded himself as Orthodox and was so regarded by many who claimed the title themselves,

did not inaugurate concern for abuses of the gospel in the people's and the clergy's way of life. Many "Orthodox" preachers and professors anticipated Spener's hope to enlighten "eyes of understanding to discern what is the hope of our calling, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance for his saints, and how boundless is God's strength in us who believe that his mighty power is effectual, " to foster "diligence and zeal to be of good cheer and to strengthen others who may grow faith," as well as " strength and courage " to pursue the Christian life and "blessing and success to observe with joy that the Word that goes for from God's mouth ... shall not return to God empty but shall accomplish that which he purposes and prosper in the thing for which he sent it."36 Spener criticized civic leadership, clergy practices, and "defects in the common people," especially lovelessness, unfaithfulness in hearing and reading God's Word, drunkenness, resort to law courts to gain advantage over one another, selfishness and exploitation of the poor, and neglect of public worship. Spener believed that he was reviving the "reformational" program of Luther and his colleagues. Indeed, that program continued to be reflected in a variety of ways and combinations in Lutheran churches throughout subsequent generations. As with many of the representatives of the tradition mentioned throughout this essay, Spener understood the various elements of Lutheran piety or discipleship in his own way, but he did strive to deliver God's Word in oral, written, and sacramental forms to call sinners to repentance and to comfort and console the repentant, and to move them to service to God and the neighbor in their various callings.

The Enlightened cultural domination of the Lutheran churches in Germany and, in milder form, in the Nordic lands, during the eighteenth century considerably weakened Lutheran piety because it altered perceptions of Christ, sin atonement, and the nature and power of God's Word. It at least partially gave way to the

confessional revival of the nineteenth century. Both periods demand more study.

A few disconnected observations about these more recent eras in Lutheran history. In this lecture we have ignored Nordic church life. It reflected many of the same tendencies of the German scene, but especially in the nineteenth century the history of efforts to cultivate faithful living in daily life cannot be written without taking into account the varied efforts of Hans Nielsen Hauge and others in Norway, Carl Olof Rosenius and his Swedish comrades in the revival of Lutheran piety, figures like Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig or Johann Vilhelm Beck in Denmark, and Lars Levi Laestadius, whose influence crossed into Finland, where Fredrik Gabriel Hedberg and others led comparable revivals of the faith and life in the Lutheran tradition.

Such movements emphasized foreign and domestic mission, outreach with the gospel to those outside the church and outside the faith. They often cultivated small group Bible study and prayer, as did Wilhelm Löhe, for they followed Luther and Spener in their belief that faithful hearing and reading of Scripture lay at the heart of the cultivation of piety or discipleship.

Another stray observation about this later period: It is easy to misrepresent Lutheran views of the active participation of the Christian in society in the nineteenth century, for it is such a multi-faceted topic. As in many other sectors of European society, some who had earlier advocated a loosening of royal power turned against political Liberalism in the wake of the revolts of 1848..<sup>37</sup> Despite the efforts of those such as Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808-1881) and others, congregations in the larger, industrializing cities failed to minister to the boys and girls from peasant villages who came to better themselves in the new factories of the burgeoning manufacturing areas or in the homes of their managers and owners. The church's failure to

address the social and spiritual needs of these internal emigrants from the villages produced the turn to Marxist labor unions that significantly reduced the Christian role in central and northern European lands.

Yet "quietist" cannot describe all nineteenth century Lutherans. Lutherans were active in giving cultural and political leadership in some lands in the nineteenth century though not all were equally pious in terms of their personal faith. Louis Kossuth (1802-1894), a Hungarian nobleman and faithful member of his local congregation as well as the larger church, led the revolt of his people against Austrian Habsburg domination in 1848-1849. Kossuth escaped the clutches of the Habsburg government and lived in exile until his death. Another case of Lutheran cultural leadership took place in Hungary's Slovakian domains. A Lutheran pastor, an opponent of a proposed merger of Lutheran and Calvinist churches in the Hungarian kingdom, the Slovak Jozef Miloslav Hurban (1817-1888), along with his brother pastor Michal Miloslav Hodza (1811-1870), and the author and politician Ludovit Stur (1815-1856), created literary Slovak through their linguistic and author and were active in opposition to Hungarian domination of their people. These Slovaks campaigned against the abuse of alcohol among their people as fiercely as did Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824) in Norway. These church leaders all took some latter-day version of Luther's understanding of the callings of daily life, which had not been clearly passed on in the great theological works of the periods, seriously. They understood that God had placed them in positions of service to their societies and cultures.

We have not only ignored Nordic and eastern European Lutherans, but we have also neglected to mention that in the Majority World churches, both immigrant and mission, new forms of piety have developed among Lutherans, a mixture of their heritage brought by the missionaries and their own cultures. They have

experienced and experimented with how to take Wittenberg theology seriously at the level of daily life in ways that can be helpful as those in the lands of historic establishment Lutheranism and their cousins in the lands of emigration, as we move into the new situations imposed upon us by the weakening of the Christian tone of traditional Western cultures.

Perhaps, however, the most important question we face as we look at the more recent history of Lutheranism is why in the last two hundred years, and particularly in the last fifty years, have Lutherans not done a better job at the task of the cultural translation of our understanding of the pious Christian life into the world of today. Many answers may be offered, from the power of media and our failure to capitalize on new developments as quickly as Luther did, to the demise of the culture and more immediate communities around us that supported that piety instead of undermined it. But the most basic reasons that command our attention lie at the foundation of our existence as believers, hearers, disciples, children of God in his congregation. We need to examine again the ways in which we deliver the promise of life from and in Jesus Christ to his people. We need to work on the ways in which both the law and the gospel speak to people who conceive of sin and evil and of life, its sources and its several dimensions in much different ways than their parents and certainly than their forbearers several generations ago.

From Lamin Sanneh we have learned that the church cannot help but be enculturated, by the very design of the Creator, just as the culture in which the proclamation of Christ is heard cannot help but be bent at least a little out of its old shape by the presence of the biblical message. These facts bring both blessings and dangers, especially since sinners seem sinfully naturally to tend to two false perceptions of fundamental reality. The first divides the spiritual and the material, the

“sacred” and the “profane,” ignoring the more fundamental demarcation between Creator and creatures, often because there is no grasp of the personal and speaking nature of the Ultimate and Absolute. The second, perhaps because of the absence of the personal God who can be gracious and who likes to be in conversation, involves the focus on human performance of one kind or another as the defining action for humanity rather than recognizing that human actions only proceed from God’s performance as the Creator and Re-Creator, in the cross and resurrection. Apart from the Holy Spirit, we have no ears to hear that re-creative Word that proceeds from cross and empty tomb.

These false teachings are bad because they lead to false trusting and false living, that is, to false following, which bends the core of our persons and personalities out of shape. Bent personalities produce bent actions, twisted works, no matter how good they appear. In the face of that phenomenon Luther called good works detrimental to salvation and Gerhard Forde received his sweatshirt stating “weak on sanctification.” Both were avid advocates of discipleship, in fact, but discipleship just looks different in a Lutheran context. It begins with listening and it never stops listening, even as the words it hears from the mouth of the Lord drive it into action – common, ordinary ways of action in the midst of details of daily life that are the mechanics of God’s created order.

Therefore, our challenges include experimenting with how best to dedicate all the developing forms of communication and the cultural phenomena they foster and by which they are nurtured, so that the Word that kills and makes alive can do its tasks anew. We need to figure out how to speak with those whose sense of personal responsibility and desire to justify themselves on their own terms does not permit them to hear the law as accusing and killing. For them the conversation can still begin, in

Luther's language in any of its crushing and terrifying forms. Today's hearers also need what Lutherans have not needed in most of their cultural settings previously: aid within God-forsaking societies to raise up their children in the ways that they are to go, in the footsteps of Christ, when the culture no longer helps point the way but designs detours through life that derail and disorient. For them the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, which they must finally hear, can be prefaced by the good news of God's justifying those whom the world dedignifies and renders unworthy for any number of reasons. For Christ died and rose to give life and deliverance also from all that others do to us to make us victims of their sins. In a world in which speech is recognized as performative, the additional insight of how God's speech re-creates and renews is one of our easier tasks. Luther's affirmation of the God-pleasing goodness of life in this world, in all its realms and situations, is also tailor-made for adaptation to twenty-first century hearers. Like Luther, we follow in Christ's footsteps, pushed along by the Holy Spirit, into the world that belongs to our Father, and we are moving to reclaim it and its inhabitants for the family.

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10 Robert Kolb, "Parents Should Explain the Sermon, Nikolaus von Amsdorf on the Role of the Christian Parent," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 25 (1973): 231-240.

11 *Vom Christlichen Abschied aus diesem sterblichen Lebgen des lieben thewren Mannes Matthei Ratzenbergers der Artzney Doctors Bericht durch Andream Poach Pfarherrn zun Augustinern in Erffurdt/ vnd andere/ So dabey gewesen/ kurtz zusammen gezogen. Anno Domini M. D. LIX. Mense Ianuario* (Jena 1559), A2b-A3b. See Robert Kolb, "Ars moriendi lutherana, Andreas Poachs Schrift 'Vom Christlichen Abschied aus diesem sterblichen Leben . . . Matthei Ratzenbergers' (1559)," in *Vestigia pietatis. Studien zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeit in Thüringen und Sachsen. Ernst Koch gewidmet*, ed. Gerhard Graf, Hans-Peter Hasse et al. (Herbergen der Christenheit: Sonderband 5; Leipzig, 2000), 95-112.

12 See Hans-Jürgen Fraas, *Katechismustradition. Luthers kleiner Katechismus in Kirche und Schule* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971) 72. Fraas suggests that Melanchthon's *Catechesis*



*puerilis* (1540) is an early example of an academic catechism.

13 See Gerhardt Bode, "Instruction of the Christian Faith by Lutherans after Luther," in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture, 1550-1675*, Robert Kolb, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 159-204.

14 See Heinrich Grimm, "Die deutschen 'Teufelbücher' des 16. Jahrhunderts. Ihre Rolle im Buchwesen und ihre Bedeutung," *Archiv für die Geschichte des Buchwesens* 16 (1959)..

15 These works by Musculus and Spangenberg are discussed in Robert Kolb, "The Devil & the Well-Born. Proclamation of the Law to the Privileged in the Late Reformation," in *Let Christ Be Christ, Theology, Ethics & World Religions in the Two Kingdoms, Essays in Honor of . . . Charles L. Manske*, ed. Daniel N. Harmelink (Huntington Beach, CA: Tentatio, 1999), 161-171.

16 See Christopher Boyd Brown, "Devotional Life in Hymns, Liturgy, Music, and Prayer," in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture*, 205-258; cf. on the use of such literature and other forms of popular piety, see Robert Christman, "The Pulpit and the Pew: Shaping popular Piety in the Late Reformation," *ibid.*, 259-303.

17 Jānis Krēsliņš, *Dominus narrabit in scriptura populorum. A Study of Early Seventeenth-Century Lutheran Teaching and Preaching in the Lettische lang-gewünschte Postill of Georg Mancelius* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992).

18 Johann Heerman (1585-1647): *Prediger in Schlesien zur Zeit des Dreißigjährigen Krieges* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2003).

19 Valerius Herberger, *The Great Works of God. Parts One and Two: The Mysteries of Christ in the Book of Benesis, Chapter 1-15*, trans. Matthew Carner (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2010), 15.

20 *Ibid.*, 58.

21 *Ibid.*, 83.

22 Ibid., 96-101. 23 Ibid., 245-251.

24 The following discussion relies heavily on Theodor Mahlmann: "Die Stellung der unio cum Christo in der lutherischen Theologie des 17. Jahrhunderts, in *Unio. Gott und Mensch in der nachreformatorischen Theologie*, ed. Matti Repo and Rainer Vinke, Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1996, 72-199.

25 Lund, "'modus docendi mysticus': The Interpretation of the Bible in Johann Arndt's Postilla," in: *Hermeneutica Sacra. Studien zur Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift im 16.- und 17. Jahrhundert / Studies of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Torbjörn Johansson, Robert Kolb, and Johann Anselm Steiger (eds.) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010).

26 Eric Lund, "'modus docendi mysticus.' The Interpretation of the Bible in Johann Arndt's Postilla" in *Hermeneutica sacra. Studien zur Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift im 16.- und 17. Jahrhundert / Studies of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Torbjörn Johansson et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010).

27 *Seventeenth-Century Lutheran Meditations and hymns*, ed. Eric Lund (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 43. 28 Ibid., 45.

29 Ibid., 48.

30 Ibid., 71.

31 Ibid., 94-95. 32 Ibid., 112.

33 Jonathan Strom, *Orthodoxy and Reform: The Clergy in Seventeenth Century Rostock* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

34 Harm Klueting, *Reformatio vitae Johann Jakob Fabricius (1618/1620)-1673. Ein Beitrag zu Konfessionalisierung und*

*Sozialdisziplinierung im Luthertum des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2003). 35 See note 60 above.

36 Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. Theodore g. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 30-31. The historical introduction to this edition is filled with errors and so must be used with caution.

37 Angelika Dörfler-Dierken, *Luthertum und Demokratie. Deutsche und amerikanische Theologen des 19. Jahrhunderts zu Staat, Gesellschaft und Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001).

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# **PART TWO: The Disciple and the Church: The Fellowship of Faith**

## **The Gospel-Given Life Discipleship Revisited**

### **Introduction: The Problem of the Separation of Discipleship and Church**

As we noted in Part I, the biblical view of salvation is the key

to understanding the biblical notion of discipleship. Discipleship is not first and foremost about what the disciple does for Christ or anyone else for that matter. It is first and foremost about what Christ wants to do for the disciple. In a nutshell, he wants to lead the disciple as sinner through death (understood ultimately as God's judgment upon all that opposes God) into a new life in Christ (understood ultimately as a life reconciled to God). Therefore the call to discipleship, "to follow me," is not a call to imitate Christ's life but to trust Christ with our life, or more precisely, with our death, which is where our life is going in the first place because of our sin and God's law. When Jesus says "follow me," he is inviting us to trust him to manage our death under the promise that he can raise us to new life. The significance of his own death and resurrection is that he has already done just that – namely, conquered death and established the possibility for the new, resurrection life. The call to discipleship is about placing our lives under this death- defeating, new life-creating management of Christ.

But truth be told, the call to discipleship relates us not only to Christ – and through Christ, in a new way, to God. Even more, as the New Testament makes abundantly clear, the call to discipleship also relates us to all other disciples who also are related to him by virtue of *his call* and *their faith*. Because there is only one Christ to which the disciple is drawn, the disciple is, therefore, inescapably drawn into relationship with all other disciples. This relationship of all believers to one another through Christ is what we commonly call "the church." Paul called it, among other things, a *koinonia*, a "participation in common things," the common thing being Christ himself. Matthew called it an *ekklesia*, those "called out" of the world to be gathered to Christ. That *koinonia* or *ekklesia* I am calling a fellowship of faith.

Yet, today, we hear over and over again Christians (especially the young) claiming they can be Christian without the church. They assume that discipleship as following Christ and the church as a fellowship of faith are mutually exclusive things. I will by no means attempt here to list the various arguments these separationists, as I will label them, give for justifying this separation. But if my students are representative, their beliefs are rooted in a deep misunderstanding of the biblical notions of discipleship and church, and in a naïve affirmation of the modern ideas of individual autonomy and self-actualization. It is my belief that this comes from the fact that the world is much better at “disciplining” the young than is the church.

Of course, we dare not be naïve about the root causes of this tendency to separate the life of discipleship from life in the church. Those who advocate this separation, while woefully deficient in their understanding of both, nevertheless, need to be listened to. That’s because their rejection of the church as an integral part of their discipleship emerges from an experience of “the church” that is often in fact harmful to discipleship. Truth be told, what goes by the name of “church” today is often “bourgeois,” as Bonhoeffer also labeled it, and in the literal sense of that term. The bourgeois church operates as though “church” is a voluntary organization of like-minded people in which the members (whether clergy or lay or both) define the agenda and determine the admission criteria. In general, the Church is seen by the separationists as an institution that advances a “gospel” that justifies the membership’s prevailing way of life. True, the church may drop the name of Jesus and splash their initiates with water and host a meal of bread and wine or grape juice. But the prevailing focus is to turn all this away from any notion of discipleship as accompanying Jesus to the cross and toward a notion of socialization into the group’s bourgeois values and practices

and habits. The bourgeois church, as the separationists perceive it, tends to want to be known for its ideas about civic and moral virtue (whether liberal or conservative) or its stand on cultural and lifestyle choices (whether traditional or contemporary). While these may be important choices, the separationists know that they do not need a church to underwrite them. And they are right. These things are "human things," they pertain to the law in its critical, political, cultural function in the world. Concerning this, the church has no unique competency. Thus, they are confirmed not only in their belief in individual autonomy and self-actualization, but in the irrelevance of the church to discipleship, to their way of being "Christian" understood as a self-fulfilled person.

In what follows, I will attempt to explain how discipleship and the church are necessarily and inseparably linked and why that is important. The answer presupposes the fact that discipleship is first and foremost about what Christ does for the disciple, a soteriological matter, as argued in Part I. The essence of discipleship is about being "disciple" by Christ. The church becomes an essential piece in this process of discipleship because it is the "people" among whom and "space" in which Christ-discipling actually happens in the world. Characteristic of the Church is that it is a "totality" that is defined by the presence of Christ as opposed to the sum total of its members. Also, it is characterized by a distinctive ethos, namely, Repentance and Forgiveness, and the objective means by which this ethos is maintained is Word and Sacrament. Finally, I will show how Matthew's idea of the priority of the "little ones" helps to give practical focus for evaluating church life and for keeping the community of faith focused on the central thing of forgiveness through faith in Christ ministered through the activity of Word and Sacrament.

# The Church as a “Totality” in the Post-Ascension Era

The picture of the church that Matthew's Gospel gives us is striking for its simplicity. The church is simply that company of disciples who “follow Jesus.” The definition, if we may call it that, that Matthew's Jesus gives for this simple view of the church is contained in one simple sentence: “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (18:20). The only essential criterion for defining the church, then, is the presence of Jesus Christ. It is that simple. The church's reality is tied neither to the *number of* disciples nor their *outward characteristics*. Moreover, even though it is generally assumed that Matthew's church has some kind of organizational form, that structure in no way enters into Matthew's *essential* definition of the church. As Ray Brown notes, throughout the Gospel of Matthew, and especially in Chapter 18, Matthew gives “practical treatment” of how the church handles such things as disputes between members and bullying of the “little ones” by the mighty ones, but in no way hints at an organizational structure for doing this.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is always Jesus who is regarded as the one handling matters, as the leader in charge and, hence, the significance of the words, “in his name,” in Matthew's definition. This is true even when Matthew reads back into the narrative of the earthly ministry of Jesus a discussion on dispute resolution for his Post-resurrection church in Matthew 18:15-20. It may seem that this is strictly an affair between disciples, but it is not. For when the community is gathered as *church*, and Matthew makes it absolutely clear that that is how they are here gathered (18:15), Jesus is in the midst of them, not casually, not, say, as he is ubiquitously present throughout the cosmos, but authoritatively, as the one who is actually, concretely, leading them, guiding them, and directing them. The word *church*, then, for Matthew is a technical term for a

gathering that is authoritatively and definitively under the management of Christ.

The simplicity of this definition of church certainly did not go unnoticed by the early Post-resurrection church. In his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, Ignatius of Antioch, writing in 107 AD, echoes Matthew's definition when he writes, "Wherever Jesus Christ is there is the catholic church."<sup>2</sup> As historians often note, this is the first time in Christian literature that the word "catholic" is used to describe the church of Christ. In the subsequent nineteen hundred years of church history lots of baggage has been loaded onto that word, "catholic." Some argue that Ignatius himself uses the term to add his own baggage to a definition of the church, specifically, the ingredient of hierarchy. But that, I think, is a misreading of Ignatius. By employing the adjective "catholic" to his describe of the church, Ignatius is simply amplifying, not adding onto, Matthew's Christological definition of Church. Therefore, a better translation of the line would read, "Wherever Jesus Christ is there is church in its totality." He is emphasizing the Christological essence of the church. Christ alone is the defining center of the church.

To be sure, Ignatius did think that his times called for bold organizational and leadership moves in to order to confess Christ with integrity against the proto-gnostic enemies of the gospel. But this move, as this definition indicates, did not insert human organizational structure as part of the *essential* definition of the church. On the contrary, it asserts that no matter what kind of human accoutrements adorn the church in a particular place, what makes the church "church" is the presence of Jesus Christ and him alone. In establishing an episcopal polity in Antioch, Ignatius did what Peter did at Caesarea Philippi: he simply stepped forward and confessed the gospel (16:13-20), which is what all good bishops are to be about



according to the Lutheran Confessions.<sup>3</sup> That was not an assertion of human power on his part, but an act of service for the Church. For the “rock” upon which the church stands is nothing other than the confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (16:16). No matter who professes it, that confession has not only the blessing of Christ, but Christ’s further clarification that it was made possible not by “flesh and blood,” meaning, any human construct, hierarchical or otherwise, “but by [Jesus’] Father in Heaven” (16:17). When Ignatius says, “Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the church in its totality,” he is saying that the presence of Jesus Christ is what makes the Church the church. He is saying what Matthew’s Jesus says, when he says “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

It is precisely the issue of the presence of Christ in the Post-ascension Church that concerned Matthew in his day and that still concerns us today. For discipleship, remember, is about being personally disciplined by Christ. And if there is no Christ, there is no Christ-discipling; and if there is no Christ-discipling, there is no church. The church as the fellowship of faith is a natural consequence of, not the principal cause of discipleship. It is also important to remember that Christ-discipling is not primarily a matter of learning information or gaining certain kinds of skills, though both may happen as a consequence. Rather, it is about faith in Christ who promises to lead the disciple, personally, through the sufferings of death into the joys of new life. Discipleship, understood as Christ’s discipling of us, means exactly what Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30: “Come to me... carrying heaven burdens ... and I will give you rest ... take my yoke upon you and learn from me ... for my yoke is easy, my burden light.”

Matthew’s answer to the question of the presence of Christ in the Post-ascension church is given in Jesus’ parting words to

his disciples. Those words are at once simple and profound, and deserve to be quoted at length.

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The ascension does not mean that the crucified and risen Jesus has abandoned the disciples to some spatial "heaven" and is now absent from their world of space and time, the "earth." To the contrary, it means that the crucified and risen Christ is now "exalted" in such a way that he is personally present everywhere and always. In a word, he is ubiquitous (as the word "I am with always" indicate) and Lord over all as the words ("all authority has been given to me," indicate. The promise of his ubiquitous presence is essential to Matthew's view of the Church as a totality in Christ (versus a human society) and discipleship as personal relationship with Christ (versus imitating a past life). For the only way for the whole world to be disciplined by him is for him to be ubiquitous. The church, therefore, is neither a society that Jesus established and left behind for his disciples to run, nor an installed hierarchy that is set apart from the rank and file disciple. No. Jesus makes it clear that even in the post-ascension era, the church is directly under his gracious and heavenly management, which is the management of the whole Godhead, "the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," as he here teaches us. The only difference between the Church before and after the ascension is the way Christ is present. In the former he is "locally" present (confined by

space-time and seen with human eyes), in the latter he is "ubiquitously" present (in but not confined by space-time and not seen with the eyes).

But the question still remains. Does this ubiquitous Christ in the Post-ascension era still concretely and personally continue to make new disciples? The answer is yes, but not without his present disciples. As the Great Commission states and the experience of the Post-ascension church attests, God's work of salvation is carried out not only *on* his disciples, but also, without exception, *by* his disciples. Christ's promise is that he is really and personally present in the activity of his disciples. But which activity of the disciples? Here, too, Matthew is very clear. Christ himself instituted the activity in which he promised to be definitively present for the purposes of making disciples. Matthew summarizes it as "baptizing" in the name of the triune God and "teaching" obedience to all that Christ had commanded, what we often refer to as Word and Sacrament. These activities that are now being done among the disciples in the Post-ascension era are contiguous with the activities being done in the Pre-ascension era. "Baptism" is understood as personal encounter with Christ crucified and raised and places the baptized in the church, among the community of those who belong to Christ. Baptism is contiguous with the early Christ's call to "follow me" and places us in relation to Christ. "Teaching," then, is the ongoing process of discipleship. It is contiguous with journeying with Christ and hearing what- all he has to say to us, in light of our daily experience of sin, law and the reality of death: especially, his word of promise that "those who lose their life for [his] sake will find it" (16:25).

We dare not forget that this view of the church is itself an article of faith rooted in the promise of Christ. What a disinterested observer sees in this community is nothing more

than an interesting study in human anthropology: a collection of people engaged in the ritual splashing of water and the formal teaching of idiosyncratic, religious, moral and philosophical ideas. But note: it is not that he cannot observe the church as objective activity. Rather, it is that he cannot experience the church as church, because he lacks faith in the promise. Faith alone is the difference between the believing disciples experience and the disinterested observers experience. Believers experience in this community the work of the crucified and risen Christ (in, with and under these activities of the disciples) leading them through death to new life. Of course, believers could never "prove" their experience to the satisfaction of the disinterested observer as long as the categories of "proof" remain that of disinterested observation. Indeed, from that viewpoint the believer cannot even explain why he or she believes. The most they can say experientially is they have been struck by the message and believe. The best reason they can give for believing is the one Jesus taught them: "flesh and blood has not revealed this, but my Father in Heaven" (16:17). In other words, faith is not a human achievement as we normal understand such things, but it is a human experience. It is the experience of the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, that Spirit that proceeds from the Father and attests to the Son. The only thing the disciple can do is invite the observer into the arena of baptizing and "teaching" and see what happens.

It should be evident now how and why discipleship and church are inseparably linked. Whoever hears rumors of Christ will encounter him personally as Christ-for-them only through the church, the baptizing fellowship of faith. Whoever wishes to be a follower of Christ can do so only as they attach themselves to Christ through the activity of the church, the teaching fellowship of faith. For that is where Christ promises to be encountered and heard "to the end of the age."

# Forgiveness as the Distinctive Ethos of the Church

As we noted earlier, Matthew does not give an organizational treatment of the church, but a “practical treatment,” as Ray Brown described it. That’s because the church is primarily about relationship: the relationship of the disciple to Christ and the corresponding relationship that emerges between the disciples. What Matthew is concerned about is the distinctive quality of that relationship, what might be called the ethos of the Christian community. That ethos, in a word, is “forgiveness,” understood as something that is freely given and received. As ethos, forgiveness is not an episodic activity that might take place in the church. Rather, it is the very essence of the Church, and the way of life that ensues between disciples because it is the ethos of Christ: “Go, and earn what this means, ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice’” (9:13).

This is illustrated, specifically, in the incident where Peter asks how often he should forgive a fellow member of the church who sins against him (18:21-22). As Ray Brown notes, Peter is more than generous, as the world views generosity, when he suggests to Jesus “seven times” as an appropriate number to forgive an incessantly offending member.<sup>4</sup> But to reduce Jesus’ concept of forgiveness to a question of calculus is to miss the point. Jesus’ exorbitant number of “seventy-seven times” is not a disagreement on the calculus of forgiveness. Rather, it is Jesus’ way of saying that forgiveness is not a quantitative, but a qualitative feature of church life. Forgiveness is the way of the church, because forgiveness is the way of the gospel.

This stands in stark contrast to the way of the world. The world operates on the basis of a very different ethos, the ethos of law and retribution as opposed to the ethos of gospel and forgiveness. Both, of course, have their source in God, as

Matthew makes preeminently clear in the Sermon on the Mount. But they represent very different kinds of relationships, both before God and before fellow human beings. The ethos of the world is characterized by “pay up or suffer the consequence” (cf. 5:25-26, 18:35). The result is that the offending party suffers the consequences alone and is estranged from the offended party. The ethos of the church, by contrast, is characterized by “you’re forgiven, be reconciled.” The result of this is that the offended party bears the consequences for the sake of winning the offending party back.

It is important to note that Jesus does not forbid his disciples from operating in the world by its ethos of the law. After all, it is God’s law and it does have a civic function of restraining sinners and keeping the flow of God’s desired goods and services going in the world. Therefore, in the Sermon on Mount, Jesus says “In everything do to others as you would have them do unto you; for this is the law and the prophets” (6:12). By “everything,” Jesus here means everything that pertains to life in this world. Like the things we tend to worry about, what to eat, what to drink, what to wear (6:25-33). The disciple’s heavenly Father knows they need them, and God says that those things will be provided to the disciple in the same way they are provided to everyone else – through the workings of the law. But this must be remembered. Participating in that legal reality, though important for life in this world “today,” neither endears a person to God nor spares them the judgment of God. The same law that keeps goods and services flowing throughout the nations (cf. 6:32), also eventually puts them to death. For this reason, Jesus concludes his discussion of this theme with the words, “Seek first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (6:33).

Matthew was chiefly concerned about the way these two kinds of ethos were confused and manipulated by members of his church *in*

*the church*. Unfortunately, some of his most strident attempts to untangle the confusion and to assert the stark incompatibility of these two kinds of ethos have tragically led to further confusion and to a legalistic reading of Matthew. Only if one understands how to properly distinguish law and gospel, can this confusion be cleared up. Matthew, in my judgment, does make an honest attempt to do that. One example that we mentioned in Part I is his use of Hosea 6:6 in Matthew 9:13 (with regard to his eating with Matthew) and 12:7 (when the disciples unlawfully pick grain on the Sabbath): "Go learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" But he also tries to set forth this law/gospel hermeneutic, in my judgment, in Matthew 13: 51-53. I quote it at length.

51 'Have you understood all this [referring to the parables of the kingdom]?' They answered, 'Yes.' 52 And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' 53 When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

If Ray Brown is correct in asserting that Matthew is making reference to himself in this passage (that he is the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven), then Matthew is saying to his own readers, you cannot understand what I am saying here unless you know how to distinguish "what is new" (the gospel) and "what is old" (the law) from among the works of God. Indeed, as Matthew says in 9:17, not to properly distinguish them is like putting "new wine (gospel) in old wine skins (law)." The result will be disastrous. The old skins will be destroyed and the new wine will be lost.

Chapter 18 is Matthew's attempt to show how to distinguish law and gospel in light of practical issues that exist in his church. We will look at three. The first is Matthew 18:15-20. It

has to do with a brother who doesn't want to admit he needs forgiveness. The second is Matthew 18:21-22. It has to do with Peter's question about the extent of forgiveness that we briefly touched on earlier. The third is Matthew 18:23-35. It is a parable that has to do with man who wants to have it both ways, be forgiven but not forgiving.

If we envision Matthew 18:15-20 as an ecclesiastical court to justify excommunicating a member of the church so we no longer need to concern ourselves with them, we have totally missed the point. Then we have turned what is an exercise in the gospel into an exercise of the law. The problem is real enough: Christians do sin against one another. The church as Matthew presents it is not a gathering of the sinless but a gathering of the forgiven. But the concern in this passage of the "you" who has been sinned against is not about bringing suit against the offender and making him pay restitution. Rather, the concern of the "you" is wholly and completely for the wellbeing of the one who has sinned. The concern is that he might be forgiven. Why? Because unforgiven sinners "lose their life," forgiven sinners "find their life" (16:25). The incident is all about this "you" drawing on all the resources of the church to do all in its power to save this sinner. That, after all, is its ethos! But forgiveness by its very nature is an offer to be received, freely, by faith, not a demand that can be imposed by force. And as this passage makes clear, sometimes the gospel is not received. That, too, unfortunately, is a real possibility. In such cases, how should the "you" regard such a person? Answer, as a "Gentile and a tax collector," that is, as one who remains the very focus of the gospel.

Three things are highly significant here. First, the gospel is not a cheap thing. The "you" here doesn't act as though the offense doesn't matter and the gospel is not needed. It matters deeply that this offender remains unforgiven. But, second, that



in no way means that the “you” who is offended will dissociate from the offender. It means that the “you” will constantly be concerned about the wellbeing of this unforgiven sinner. Forgiveness is the ethos of this “you” as it is of the whole church. Third. The fact that forgiveness was not received and that the person remains “bound” is not the fault of the “you.” The success or failure the ministry of reconciliation is ultimately in God’s hands. That, I’m suggesting, is the meaning of Matthew 18:18 on “binding and loosing.”

Matthew 18:21-22 is Peter’s question about the extent of forgiveness. Jesus’ response, as we said earlier, is that there is no limit to forgiveness. Again, the very question underscores the fact that the church is not a community of the sinless, but of the forgiven. The fact that the offending member is a repeat offender makes no difference. It is a basic assumption here that forgiveness is something that Christ’s disciples need continuously throughout their entire life. Christians will be repeat offenders. But that does not contradict the nature of the church. What would contradict the nature of the church is the refusal of a disciple to forgive a fellow disciple who is repentant, who believes in the need of the forgiveness of sins. Consequently, the forgiveness Christ gives knows no limits. Jesus’ remark to Peter about forgiving the offender “Seventy-Seven times” is a euphemism for that fact forgiveness is simply the church’s way of life, the ethos of the church.

Matthew 18:23-35 is all about the duplicity of heart that potentially endangers every disciple. A slave is forgiven billions of dollars by the king and, then, refuses to forgive his fellow slave the ten dollars owed him. The duplicity is that he is trying to have it both ways: play by the ethos of mercy when he’s the debtor and the ethos of sacrifice when he’s the creditor. Matthew is quite aware of the possibility of a disciple, in one moment repenting and receiving forgiveness,

and, then, in another moment, refusing to forgive others as they have been forgiven. Indeed, much of Matthew's discussion around forgiveness is focused precisely on this issue. A particular case in point is the petition on forgiveness in the so-called Lord's Prayer: "And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (6:12). So intent is Matthew on underscoring forgiveness, not as an episodic transaction but as the ethos of the church, that he amplify the point in the prayer with commentary: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your Father in heaven will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others neither will your Father forgive our trespasses" (6:14-15).

What are we to make of this? Certainly not that God's forgiveness is a payment for our forgiving others. Such would totally obliterate the gift character, not only of forgiveness, but of faith. It would also contradict Matthew's own law-gospel hermeneutic that he learned from Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy not sacrifice." No. The only thing I can make of this is that Matthew is keenly aware of just how dangerous life in this world is for the disciple. The human heart is a battle ground between desiring mercy and desiring sacrifice, between faith and unfaith. The disciple should not take that for granted.

That the church is an ethos of forgiveness is true! That disciples, as members of the church, are to live out that ethos is also true! But the stability of the church as an ethos of forgiveness is not ultimately rooted in the disciples. Disciples are always weak and fragile in faith. This is apparent from the fact that throughout the Gospel, Matthew presents Jesus as say, over and over again, to his disciples: "O you of little faith" (8:26, 14:31, 16:8, 17:20). So where is the stability of the church as an ethos of forgiveness grounded? It is in Christ himself and the means of grace – the activity of baptizing and teaching that he has given to the church do. As long as these

things are happening Christ is present and the church is an ethos of forgiveness. That activity is also the only remedy for the duplicity of heart that threatens every disciple. So in a sense, Chapter 18 comes full circle, back to the idea of a church that never gives up on the unforgiven offender. For it is of the church's very nature – its very ethos – to pursue forgiveness for everyone, to desire mercy and not sacrifice.

## **The Priority of the “Little Ones”**

As we said earlier, drawing on the insights of Ray Brown, Matthew is much more interested in a “practical treatment” of the Church than an organizational one. That's because for him the church is defined by its ethos of forgiveness and is, therefore, the locus of a reconciliation that begins with the relationship between God and humanity and extends into the relationship between disciples. One of the practical implications of this for Matthew is that the Church has a preferential option for, what he calls, the “little ones.”

Exactly who these “little ones” are sociologically speaking is debatable. It has been suggested that they are recent converts, new comers to the community, who therefore have no standing or seniority in the community. This lack of seniority need not necessarily be defined in reference to a formal leadership structure. It may very well be like the informal power arrangements that exist in our congregations today. We all know of those who, for whatever reason, have come to be the ones who call the shots and guard the “traditions of the elders” (cf. 15:1-9) so to speak. In the eyes of these guardians, these new comers may be seen as a threat to the way we've always done things or the informal power arrangement that get things done. The other possibility is that the “little ones” represent those who lack the requisite gifts (spiritual or financial) that can help the community thrive from a social point of view. They

may be the poor or sick or have checkered backgrounds. Whatever the deficiency may be, they, in short, need more from the community than they can give. In a word, they are dependent, like children (18:1-5), and for that reason Jesus uses a child to illustrate his point. Matthew 25 may be a representative list of these needy ones.

In my judgment, the term "little ones" is general enough to cover all these sociological possibilities and more. What is crucial with regard to the identities of these "little ones" is that Jesus identifies them as "those who believe in me" (18:6). For Jesus that which connects the members of the Christian community together is not that they share the common values of a bourgeois culture (whether of a Jewish or the Gentile style) or that they continue in the "tradition of the elders," or are especially rich in spiritual gifts. What is common is that they all share in the one Jesus Christ by faith. What is central is that they are being made into Christ's disciples, that they are people who know the secret of the Kingdom of heaven, the plan of salvation, and that all this comes to them through the community's activity of baptizing and teaching – including the teaching of Jesus here concerning the "little ones."

What needs to be seen is that, with regard to faith, all disciples are "little ones," regardless of what "gifts" and "strengths" they may possess. The phrase, "little ones," I believe, has its correlate in Matthew's Gospel in the phrase, "you of little faith." Over and over again, Jesus identifies this deficiency in his "leading disciples," if I may call them that. Therefore, Jesus' concern to give priority to the "little ones" is not at all an exclusionary priority. The problem is that the talented and wealthy and powerful members of the community are excluding themselves by not seeing that that category of "little ones" also applies to them. Therefore, as an act of pastoral concern, Jesus says to his "leading disciples,"

who asked about the meaning of greatness in the Kingdom: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (18:3-4). When it comes to faith, all are "little ones," all are dependent, all need to be constantly disciplined by Christ through the baptizing and teach activity of the church. Accepting that humbling truth about ourselves, that we forever remain dependent and in need of Christ's disciplining, is precisely what makes us "great"! Such humility is faith at its best.

It is important to note that Jesus is not giving, here, a "social teaching" per se. Rather, he is giving an "ecclesiastical teaching" that follows from his own ministry to offer, free of charge, the forgiveness of sins and the promise of new life to all who believe. It's not that social matters are not important. They are. But Jesus has no fundamental message to give about social matters, except "what is old," what has always been said about them: that they fall under law of retribution. This is true believer and unbelievers alike. One of the few lines on "social teaching" by Jesus is given in Matthew 6:12, which we referred to earlier: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; this is the law and the prophets." The phrase, "do to others as you would have them do to you" is Jesus' definition of basic social fairness. That is the ethos of the law. But that is not the ethos of the church. If it were, the "little ones" would be lost. The ethos of the Kingdom is the opposite of this, as illustrated when Jesus sent out the twelve two by two: "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'the kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment" (10:8).

On the basis of this notion of the "priority of the little ones," Matthew brings forth at least three practical words of

instruction for his community. The First concerns leadership. Although Matthew says nothing about the organizational structure of his community, he says a lot about the nature of leadership. One example is the request of the mother of the sons of Zebedee that they rise to power when Jesus comes into his kingdom. First, I'm amazed at Jesus' restraint at such an audacious request. Second, we need to remember that the Zebedee boys came over to Jesus from the Zealot party. For them power was coercive power to get things done. Third, Jesus says he has no say in such things. Is Matthew saying here that whatever authority structure exists in the church is not one that Jesus set in place? I think so. That doesn't mean that the church may not set up an authority structure, but that if it does, it is at best provisional, a human, not a divine thing. The main point concerning leadership, however, comes when the other disciples hear about the audacity of the Zebedee boys. Jesus teaching is clear. The purpose of leadership in the church is not about personal advancement or status over others. Rather, it's about being a servant to others. Christ's own leadership provides the clue. He is one who rules by dying for his subjects, that they may live. That is the opposite of the world's view of leadership. The subjects are to serve the king that he might live.

A second practical implication that Matthew draws out of this idea of the priority of the "little ones," is that everyone is responsible for the wellbeing of the "little ones" (18:6-7) "If any of you," he says, "puts a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe" and causes them to fall, that is, to lose their faith, "it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea." The church is a place, in a sense, where everyone is to be a leader, understood as a servant to the "little ones." Regardless of what formal role a disciple may

have in the church, their words and actions matter because they can become either a rock to support faith or a stumbling block to tumble faith. In many ways this issue remains today the single most problem in the church today. The young, especially, can be scandalized by the bullying and bickering behavior that goes on in the Church.

Of course, Matthew is aware that disciples as “little ones” can also be a stumbling block unto themselves, too. They might have expectations or desires or behaviors or habits or attitudes that are destructive to faith and in need to be amputated (18:8-9). Concerning third practical implication of the priority of the “little ones,” Matthew says it is important that the community of faith not “despise them.” They need help. They need someone to walk with them. In Matthew’s Gospel, this third situation leads into the discussion of that process of pastoral concern that, as I said earlier, is often misunderstood as a court of excommunication. It is not. It is about marshalling all the resources of the Christian community to build up the faith of the “little ones.”

In sum, we have seen how Matthew’s view the church is a totality in Christ and not a human society. Christ still leads the church, albeit not without his disciples, but as they are actively engaged in baptizing and teaching. Second. We have seen that the essence of the church is its ethos of forgiveness and that to mix that ethos with the ethos of law, the ethos of “payback” is to destroy both. Accordingly, the stability of the church as an ethos of forgiveness does not depend on the person of the disciple, but upon the presence of the person of Christ and the activity of Word and Sacrament he instituted. Finally, we have seen that the idea of the priority of the “little ones” was employed by Matthew to help to give practical focus for evaluating the Church’s ministry and ethos. It is my hope that this discussion will help us to better understand how the church

and discipleship are inseparably linked and what practical considerations we need to make if we are fulfill the great commission to go and make disciples of all nations.

Steven C. Kuhl

Cardinal Stritch University Milwaukee, WI

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