

# Spit Miracles

## “Spit” Miracle One (Big Sigh)

◊Feeding of 5000 Jews (6:35-44)

◊At sea (6:45-56; disciples think they see ghost, are terrified; see the sea calmed are beside themselves; “didn’t understand about the loaves; hearts were hardened”)

◊Argument with Pharisees re. clean/unclean (7:1-23)

◊About bread (7:24-30; discussion with Syrophenician woman)

*Then-*

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 3 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’

35 And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

36 Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. 37 They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’

# “Spit” Miracle Two (Double Pass)

◇Feeding of 4000 Gentiles (8:1-29)

◇At sea (8:10)

◇Argument with Pharisees (8:11-13). Again to the sea

◇About bread (8:14-21; “Beware the leaven of the Pharisees.” Disciples, dimwitted, don’t understand about baskets of leftovers. J.: “Are you hearts still hardened? *Having eyes do you not see, and having ears, do you not hear?*”)

*Then—*

22 They came to Bethsaida.

Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him.

23He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, ‘Can you see anything?’

24And the man looked up and said, ‘I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.’

25Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes **again**;  
and he looked intently and his sight was restored,

and he saw everything clearly.

26Then he sent him away to his home, saying, ‘Do not even go into the village.’

[Spit\\_miracles \(PDF\)](#)

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# The Bishop (Church Executive) as Disciple

John Roth  
Crossings Conference  
January 2012

Ever since Martin asked if a couple of us would be willing to join with him in reflecting on what it means to be a denominational executive/Bishop and a disciple of Jesus Christ, I've been trying to figure out how to frame that question in such a way that it truly draws on what is specifically vocational to bishop. I cringed when I read the assigned heading for Martin's paper, "The Church Executive as Disciple of Christ". But that was nowhere near the cringing I did when my mentor and good friend Fred Danker and I greeted each other for the first time after I had been in office as Bishop. [I was elected this past June and took office September 1. Fred and I were at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in San Francisco this past November. Those of us who know Fred are unsurprised that the four score and ten year old Dr. Danker presented a paper there entitled "Syriac Lexicography Problems: Synonymy and Metonymy and Related Issues."] I said, "I guess you know I'm not at Faith Lutheran anymore." He said, "Yes, you are bureaucrat now." "Executive" – "bureaucrat" – with all due respect to the positive vocational callings of executives and bureaucrats, those are dispiriting labels for the ministry to which I hope God is calling me.

Back in the days prior to the formation of Seminex, the faculty of Concordia Seminary produced a collection of essays with a great title, "Faithful to Our Calling, Faithful to Our Lord." I hope as a bishop is to be faithful to my calling and faithful to my Lord. Wouldn't that be the bishop as disciple?

But even if so, it begs the question, "what is my call?" What is now my calling?

It seems to me that in an open forum such as this, for me to wax poetically about what I perceive to be my calling as bishop runs the risk of being an exercise in narcissism. After all, does anybody who is not a bishop really care?

But here we go: bishop as disciple.

To find a place to start, I figured that I'd look at what Bonhoeffer had to say about it.

By the way, I don't know what title to use anymore. For decades, as we all know, the English language book title has been *The Cost of Discipleship*. That is how most people know it still. But Augsburg Fortress has recently published a translation as *Discipleship*. I'll say *Nachfolge*. But if at some point you look at the page number references in my printed notes, those are page numbers in 1975 printing of the Macmillan Paperbacks Edition of *The Cost of Discipleship*.

To begin my musings on the topic, with an eye on Bonhoeffer's *Nachfolge*, let me go to Bonhoeffer's definition of discipleship: "Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship" (63).

It strikes me that this starting point is crucial – and I wish that it would have been the first thing that I thought of when

Martin asked us to take on this little project. The first thing that crossed my mind – on the topic of “Bishop as Disciple – was fidelity to my responsibilities as a bishop – for the sake of Christ, to be sure, but still the adherence initially at the forefront of my mind was adherence to responsibilities, performance of job expectations, fidelity to a body of duties. As a dyed-in-the-wool, Law-Gospel, JBF, double dipstick Lutheran, I should have known better, right?

As this goes on, I will say some things about what I perceive to be my responsibilities as a bishop, because I do think that, even under Bonhoeffer’s definition of discipleship, the actual living out of discipleship is contextual, and the context is responsibilities as a bishop. But I hope to do so without losing sight of the fact that the overarching good is adherence to Christ.

In other words, deliberately flipping the words: Faithful to our Lord, Faithful to our Calling.

Bonhoeffer says almost nothing about bishops in *Nachfolge*. When he does, it is in a general discussion of church order.

“Church order is divine both in origin and character, though of course it is meant to serve and not to rule. The offices of the Church are ‘ministries’. They are appointed in the Church of God, by Christ and by the Holy Spirit. They are not appointed by the Church. Even where the Church makes itself responsible for distributing offices, it does so only under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Both ministry and Church spring from the triune God. The offices exist to serve the Church, and their spiritual rights only originate from this service...Apostles, prophets, teachers, overseers (bishops), deacons, elders, presidents and helps are ministers of the church, the body of Christ...Of all the offices of the Church,

the uncorrupted ministry of the Word and Sacraments is of paramount importance...The aim of proclamation is always the same-namely, healthy and wholesome doctrine and the guarantee of true order and unity" (282, 283 The Visible Community)

The phrase, "The uncorrupted ministry of the Word and Sacrament" resonates with AC 28: "Our people teach as follows. According to the gospel the power of the keys or of the bishops is a power and command of God to preach the gospel, to forgive or retain sin, and to administer and distribute the sacraments."1 I say, "Great." Preach and preside: I'm all in. In practice, I do preach almost every Sunday.

"Healthy and wholesome doctrine" and "guarantee of true order and unity" – that's where the rub is. And the rub for me stems from AC 28's absolute insistence upon distinguishing between spiritual power and secular power, between the power given to bishops by Christ and power of the sword. "Where bishops possess secular authority and the sword, they possess them not as bishops by divine right but by human, imperial right, given by Roman emperors and kings for the secular administration of their lands. That has nothing at all to do with the office of the gospel."

The sword-wielding errors of bishops decried in AC 28 include exerting authority in church administrative matters, such as imposing ceremonies and insisting upon practices that can be omitted with sin.

In our context, is the administrative dimension of the office of bishop an exercise of the power of the sword or the power of the gospel? Don't answer too quickly. Is what Bonhoeffer identifies as an aim of proclamation ("healthy and wholesome doctrine" and "true order and unity") pursued also in administration? How can it not be? Am I faithfully carrying out the aim of proclamation

when I nominate (or do not nominate) a particular person to a congregation for to a call? A pastor can wreck havoc in a congregation while living in conformity to Visions and Expectations (the ELCA standard for conduct by pastors). Are there times when I have an obligation to “not nominate” someone to any congregation? What this means though, for the aim of healthy and wholesome doctrine and true order and unity, is that action or inaction from me can de jure or de facto end a person’s career – with all of the wide-ranging painful consequences of that decision on my part.

The synod constitution begins its lengthy list of roles and responsibilities of a bishop (“shall” rubrics) with an echo of AC 28: “S8.12. As this synod’s pastor, the bishop shall be an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament who shall: a. Preach, teach, and administer the sacraments in accord with the Confession of Faith of this church.”

But the constitution goes on to list administrative and juridical duties that feel every bit as left hand of God as the power of the sword for bishops that Luther denied.

In my acting as bishop, I hear God’s accusing word. I do not dismiss or treat lightly my actions or their consequences. Ultimately, I have no recourse other than this promise, to quote Bonhoeffer, “(Jesus) is the righteousness of the disciples... (The) righteousness of the disciples can never be a personal achievement; it is always a gift, which they received when they were called to follow him... it is grounded solely upon the call to fellowship with him who alone fulfills the law” (141).

Switching gears, another statement from Bonhoeffer got me thinking about application to bishops. Speaking of the apostles, “The only bond of unity between the twelve is their choice and call...no power on earth could have united these men for a common

task, save the call of Jesus. But that call transcended their previous divisions, and established a new and steadfast fellowship in Jesus” (227).

In the ELCA we speak often of “interdependency” – the context of this being the interdependency of what we in the ELCA call the three expressions of the church: congregation, synod, and ELCA churchwide. The intent of the discourse of “interdependency” is, I think, to teach that we all need each other: congregations need the synod and the denominational expression, etc. In the time that I have been bishop, I have experienced ecclesiastical interdependency, the reality of it, more than I did as a parish pastor. But I experience an interdependency that cuts across a plane perpendicular to our denomination’s public one, namely, the interdependency of synodical bishops. My sense is that you cannot help but do a disservice the congregations and pastors of your synod if you function as a lone ranger, or worse, if you do not interact with fellow bishops with complete candor and in good faith. This is so even though “the only bond of unity between the (65 bishops) is their choice and call...No power on earth could have united them for a common task, save the call of Jesus.”

Let me bring this back to discipleship as adherence to Jesus through the gospel. This particular perpendicular interdependency appears to me to be a derivative of the broader mutual conversation and consultation of the brothers and sisters – which is broader than bishops and going to take me back to discipleship as adherence to Christ based on the gospel.

A key calling of our life together as colleagues in ministry is what Luther calls in the Smalcald Articles “the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters<sup>2</sup>”. We get together to build one another up, to renew our zeal for ministry, to be encouraged.



When Luther refers to “the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters,” what he is speaking of is the gospel, the message to sinners of reconciliation with God. Here is the full quote from the Smalcald Articles: “We now want to return to the gospel, which gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in God’s grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the gospel); second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters.”

Thanks be to God for the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters.

For reference purposes if needed:

†S8.01. Bishop

†S8.11. The bishop shall be elected by the Synod Assembly. The bishop shall be a pastor who is an ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

†S8.12. As this synod’s pastor, the bishop shall be an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament who shall:

a. Preach, teach, and administer the sacraments in accord with the

Confession of Faith of this church.

b. Have primary responsibility for the ministry of Word and Sacrament

in this synod and its congregations, providing pastoral care and leadership for this synod, its congregations, its ordained ministers, and its other rostered leaders.

c. Exercise solely this church’s power to ordain (or provide for

the  
ordination by another synodical bishop of) approved candidates  
who  
have received and accepted a properly issued, duly attested  
letter of  
call for the office of ordained ministry (and as provided in the  
bylaws  
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America).

d. Commission (or provide for the commissioning of) approved  
candidates

who have received and accepted a properly issued, duly attested  
letter of call for service as associates in ministry; consecrate  
(or

provide for the consecration of) approved candidates who have  
received and accepted a properly issued, duly attested letter of  
call for

service as deaconesses; and consecrate (or provide for the  
consecration

of) approved candidates who have received and accepted a  
properly issued, duly attested letter of call for service as  
diaconal

ministers of this church.

e. Attest letters of call for persons called to serve  
congregations in the

synod, letters of call for persons called by the Synod Council,  
and

letters of call for persons on the rosters of this synod called  
by the

Church Council.

f. Install (or provide for the installation of):

1) the pastors of all congregations of this synod;

2) ordained ministers called to extraparish service within this  
synod;

and

3) persons serving in the other rostered ministries within this synod.

g. Exercise leadership in the mission of this church and in so doing:

1) Interpret and advocate the mission and theology of the whole church;

2) Lead in fostering support for and commitment to the mission of

this church within this synod;

3) Coordinate the use of the resources available to this synod as it

seeks to promote the health of this church's life and witness in the

areas served by this synod;

4) Submit a report to each regular meeting of the Synod Assembly concerning the synod's life and work; and

5) Advise and counsel this synod's related institutions and organizations.

h. Practice leadership in strengthening the unity of the Church and in so

doing:

1) Exercise oversight of the preaching, teaching, and administration

of the sacraments within this synod in accord with the Confession

of Faith of this church;

2) Be responsible for administering the constitutionally established

processes for the resolution of controversies and for the discipline

of ordained ministers, other rostered leaders, and congregations of this synod;

3) Be the chief ecumenical officer of this synod;

4) Consult regularly with other synodical bishops and the

Conference of Bishops;

5) Foster awareness of other churches throughout the Lutheran world communion and, where appropriate, engage in contact with leaders of those churches;

6) Cultivate communion in faith and mission with appropriate Christian judicatory leaders functioning within the territory of this synod; and

7) Be *ex officio* a member of the Churchwide Assembly.

i. Oversee and administer the work of this synod and in so doing:

1) Serve as the president of the synod corporation and be the chief executive and administrative officer of this synod, who is authorized and empowered, in the name of this synod, to sign deeds or other instruments and to affix the seal of this synod;

2) Preside at all meetings of the Synod Assembly and provide for the preparation of the agenda for the Synod Assembly, Synod Council, and the council's Executive Committee;

3) Ensure that the constitution and bylaws of the synod and of the churchwide organization are duly observed within this synod, and that the actions of the synod in conformity therewith are carried

into effect;

4) Exercise supervision over the work of the other officers;

5) Coordinate the work of all synodical staff members;

6) Appoint all committees for which provision is not otherwise made; 7) Be a member of all committees and any other organizational units of the synod, except as otherwise provided in this constitution;

8) Provide for preparation and maintenance of synodical rosters containing:

a) the names and addresses of all ordained ministers of this synod and a record of the calls under which they are serving or the

date on which they become retired or disabled; and

- b) the names and addresses of all other rostered persons of this synod and a record of the positions to which they have been called or the date on which they become retired or disabled;
- 9) Annually bring to the attention of the Synod Council the names of all rostered persons on leave from call or engaged in approved graduate study in conformity with the constitution, bylaws, and continuing resolutions of this church and pursuant to prior action of this synod through the Synod Council;
- 10) Provide for prompt reporting to the secretary of this church of:
- a) additions to and subtractions from the rosters of this synod and the register of congregations;
  - b) the issuance of certificates of transfer for rostered persons in good standing who have received and accepted a properly issued, duly attested, regular letter of call under the jurisdiction of another synod; and
  - c) the entrance of the names of such persons for whom proper certificates of transfer have been received;
- 11) Provide for preparation and maintenance of a register of the congregations of this synod and the names of the laypersons who have been elected to represent them; and
- 12) Appoint a statistician of the synod, who shall secure the parochial reports of the congregations and make the reports available to the secretary of this church for collation, analysis, and distribution of the statistical summaries to this synod and the other synods of this church.

### **References:**

1 Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*

(92). Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

2 Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (319). Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

[DiscipleshipBishop \(PDF\)](#)

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# CROSSINGS CONFERENCE JANUARY 2012

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My first Sunday in the parish now 31 years ago, young and freshly ordained, I was shaking hands at the end of the worship service and a little five year girl walked up to me. She put her hands on her waist and said in the clearest possible way, "Say, Whatever happened to the other Jesus!"

I thought of that story again some years go when I was driving towards home from a congregation council meeting about 120 miles from my house. Bishops attend meetings—that is what I was doing that night. And in my rural synod bishops drive long lonely roads to church basements in very small towns. The meeting, that night had been very contentious as we struggled with issues

surrounding the pastor. The council and the pastor were frustrated. In one evening I had been called by my own name Bishop Skrenes by the council members, but I also had been called by different members of the council, Bishop Skogman, Bishop Anderson and Bishop Wilch—all predecessors of mine in my synod. Bishop Martin Lind from the Church of Sweden tells us that “the ministry of bishops is a gift to the church and not a power over the church. It is a ministry of service and not private property and it is definitely not control.” (1)

And that is my point today. When we were baptized, we became in the words of Martin Luther, “Little Christs” one for the other. All of us are representing Jesus Christ in some small way. And when you elect a bishop you are asking one to represent the Church, the teachings of God’s Word, and the whole Christian community. And so that night in that church basement, agonizing over yet again another personnel matter—I a bishop was called to represent the people of God. Bishops are called to lift up the polity, the work and custom of our church body, but most of all bishops are called too represent Jesus Christ. Indeed, we are called to share Christ with all people as a teacher and preacher of the Gospel.

Every place, every meeting, every ministry opportunity, every committee meeting, every congregation council meeting, I have been about in these past twelve plus years – I have carried with me the responsibility, the privilege of being bishop of this church. It is an honor to be a bishop in Christ’s church, because of the beautiful news that Jesus lives for us. Christ is Risen!

Four points:

1. The constitution of the synod in the ELCA defines the office of bishop this way: “As this synod’s pastor, the bishop shall be

an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament who shall:

a. Preach, teach, and administer the sacraments in accord with the Confession of Faith of this church.

b. Have primary responsibility for the ministry of Word and Sacrament in this synod and its congregations, providing pastoral care and leadership for this synod, its congregations, its ordained ministers and its rostered leaders.”

2. “Bishops are accountable to the Gospel. Bishops also are accountable to those among whom they serve, to one another, and to this entire church.” That is a quote from the ELCA Bishops Relational Agreement.

3. The passion of a bishop must be a lively tending of the Gospel. For the past year our synod council has been reflecting on and studying Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “Life Together.” On Chapter 4 “Ministry” our synod council summarized the work that we have together:

“Let us speak to build up and not to tear down. We try to self-justify our thoughts and actions by comparing ourselves to others, and in so doing we condemn and judge others. We must not utter negative thoughts out loud in any other way but confession. Listening can be a greater service than speaking. He who no longer listens to neighbor will soon no longer listen to God. God grants us the gift of humility in order to truly listen, emptying ourselves so that we can receive our neighbors. Proclaiming Jesus as Lord is offering ourselves and our Lord to others in love and patience through our words and our actions. We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God, sharing God with others as God gives us opportunity.”

4. As a former bishop of my said told me once, “Try to remain a



moving target"! I serve as bishop in the Northern Great Lakes Synod—the counties of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and six counties of northeastern Wisconsin. My synod is in decline in all ways numerical. We have twelve less congregations than we had in 1988—8 congregations have left us to date over the decisions at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. Four congregations have merged or closed. In terms of baptized membership we are down big time. Since the merger of 1988, our synod has declined in membership 26%. Worse our average worship attendance has declined from 1988 to 2010—29%. Only nine of our congregations are growing in terms of worship attendance. Most are down by 20 to 30%. Our synod income in 2010 was about what it was in 1991—and down 23% from where it was four short years ago. In the face of all that, my calling must be a lot more than just managing our decline.

Bishop Martin Lind tells us that "the bishop's job is to pray. Bishops are also to be encouragers and sometimes the bishop's job is criticism." (2) And Bishop Manas Buthelezi tells us that "synods and dioceses elect bishops but the whole church makes a pastor a bishop. That person is a spiritual officer of the whole church within the borders of the synod or diocese." (3)

The turmoil is not over. Distrust and anxiety abounds. We are wounded as a synod and as a churchbody and we need the healing presence of Christ. We need leaders who are trusted. I have sought to serve Jesus Christ by being present for God's people. And especially in these last years when controversy and struggle has come our way, I have been lifted up by St. Paul as he wrote in the second letter to the Church of Corinth:

**"Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart...but we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us..."**

As God gives us vision, we move forwards serving the One who gave us life. I feel God has called me to this work of serving as bishop, as pastor of a synod who proclaims Jesus.

(1,2,3- "The Role of the Bishop." Edited by Maria Erling and Kirsis Stjerna, 2002)

[CrossingsConferenceJanuary2012 \(PDF\)](#)

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# **"The heart-disease of Self-Referential Faith"**

Address to the 4th Annual Crossings Conference, January 22-25,  
2012 Conference Theme: "The Gospel-Given Life: Discipleship  
Revisited"

I'm very grateful to Dr. Kuhl for this invitation and still more grateful for the committee's flexibility in shifting from a presentation by one bishop to this panel format. I'm deeply grateful to my partner bishops for stepping into the breach on behalf of the conference.

This change was occasioned by the loss of preparation time last fall as a brother came to live with us—and now it looks like it will be for the whole winter— seeking treatment for a papillary squamous-cell carcinoma, a nasty mouth cancer. We have become my brother's keeper not out of big hearts, but because he had no place else to go and welcoming him was minimally required under the commandment to honor father and mother. Besides, he's a

wonderful fellow and he and I have learned to live with the ways we drive one another nuts! The same can't be assumed for a spouse who is asked to open the intimate space of home, particularly when she does her work from home. Thank you to Susan Briehl, my wife.

Please continue to pray and work for those who under the present healthcare system must show up at culture's door and hope to be let in and be cared for. I see how we pay for it now; how much better if we could give all citizens the chance to seek this care with dignity rather than beg for it. Scott is in the last weeks of radiation and chemo and we are hopeful for a full recovery.

I'm so grateful for the excuse to re-read "Discipleship" by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and reflect on his words in our present cultural moment. It is a time of serious and deep transition for much of the human family and the aspect of this transition that is most interesting to me is the call to enter the globalized context and in some way move beyond formerly powerful tribal, and religious, and national loyalties into something like a world community.

But shedding old loyalties isn't easy, even if only for the purpose of making room for others. I've experienced this in making room for a brother, but others are experiencing it as a deep threat, made clear by the nativist voices that we hear calling for new protections around that which is supposedly "ours" in this country. "Ours," the air we breathe? "Ours," the clean water we need for the basics of life?

Of all the aspects of the work, the most challenging during my 12 years as bishop has been to face what I've come to call such "entitlement thinking." Such thinking is like the quiet passing of gas in a closed car. It fouls the Spirit and leaves everyone

gasping for fresh air and room to breathe. It is the opposite of a deep sense of gratitude, living from gift, the expansive, fresh sense that life means us well, and instead of binding and blinding us, calls us to a sense of “enough,” and for disciples of Jesus, more than enough, pure gift, pure grace, gratitude.

There isn't time enough to talk about the ways in which such entitlement thinking is choking our church but I think it is, and my fear is that it will finally demand all the air and smother us, cramping us down into cells of white-hot resentment that look a lot like the congregationalist model of church and put us on an inevitable way to the “Sheilaism” anticipated by sociologist Robert Bellah. It reminds me of the classic joke about the shipwreck survivor, who after years alone on an island is finally rescued. He's eager to show his rescuers the world he's built for himself, and passing along, points out a small church and then later a second church building. Asked why he needed a second church the man replied, “Oh I had a fight in the first place and left!” And so it goes.

Against this model of culture and church I believe God intends to call us from gratitude, that expansive sense of release, unbinding, and joy that comes, ultimately, from the gift of trust, the most ancient way we connect with God.

The well I draw from as a disciple and as a church leader, is Luther's description, in the introduction to the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, that—and here I paraphrase—“Our god is that which we ultimately trust, the place to which our hearts incline, cling and entrust themselves.” As a believer and as a church leader, the first matter of concern—and discipleship—is a matter of the heart.

So to reflect on discipleship as a church executive my attention turned to my own “habits of heart” and brother Bonhoeffer's

provocations on Matthew 6, particularly section 167 entitled, "The Simplicity of Carefree Life." It's here that Bonhoeffer turns to Luther and the first commandment as well.

Luther and Bonhoeffer spend a good deal of time addressing the false god of mammon and, like you, I don't spend any time worrying about that except as I obsess about the 10% of my salary I gave up two years ago, a gift I'm pretty sure nobody remembers!

No, the line that caught my attention was this line from Luther: [P. 386ff, Kolb/Wengert, para 10]: "So, too, those who boast of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor and who trust in them have a god also, but not the one, true God."

Great learning, wisdom, power (or ambition), honor (or reputation)...and I think we could add today, "conscience:" These are the false gods that draw my eye as a bishop.

I say this to those of you who wonder if you should be called to the office of bishop: It's true what they say...if you pursue the office out of ambition then you will always wonder if it is God's call. When you reach for authenticity and the deep authority of the gospel all you'll remember is that it was always about you. A New Yorker cartoon from 2008 has the patron leaning over the bar whispering to the bartender: "I'm nothing, and yet I'm all I can think about."

And if you seek wisdom without understanding where it comes from—unusually terrible loss and the way of the cross—and yearn to be known as one who is wise, you will always know that such wisdom is a false god to which you cannot give your heart because you avoid suffering.

To rely on the god of great learning is to end up, as I have, with an office full of books that mock me because I haven't read them.

Finally, my favorite false god is worry. Here is Bonhoeffer: “We want our worrying to make us worry free.” Hmm.

Against these challenges I’m here with you today to learn more about the heart and how it trusts, how it follows after the source of trust. I’m here because I think I have seen in these famous lines from Pastor Bonhoeffer what the heart looks like when it clings to Life Itself:

“Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, Thou knowest O God, I am thine!”

The clinging heart, fresh and wet in the embrace of God, lives in ultimate gratitude.

[Crossings2012Martinsfinal \(PDF\)](#)

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# **PART ONE: The Disciple and Christ: Faith Alone**

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

### **Introduction: Discipleship and Death**

“Every call of Christ leads unto death.”<sup>1</sup> With those words Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenges forever the course of Christian reflection on the topic of discipleship. Taken in light of his martyrdom,<sup>2</sup> he added a witness to those words that gives real

world credibility and concreteness to them. Yet, it is my observation that virtually every would-be admirer of Bonhoeffer tends, in some way, to soften the shock value – indeed, the scandal – that is intended by this statement. Admirers of Bonhoeffer tend to single- mindedly focus on his outward life: admiring the heroic stance, political savvy and cautious actions he took in the face of real concrete evil. But they don't, in my judgment, do justice to what he says concerning his actions. Bonhoeffer is, above all, a man of the Word, a man of faith, and as such, he knows that actions are always at best ambiguous and often subject to misunderstanding. He knew actions were always in need of clarification with real confession. In that sense, then, Bonhoeffer was no glib Franciscan. His motto as a disciple might well be "Confession with your lips always that Jesus is Lord, for only then will the reasons for the actions that proceed from the heart be clear." Following Jesus is at its core, in its essence, faith in Christ.

To be sure, Bonhoeffer was also cautious in his verbal confessing of his faith. And that's not only because of the semiotic limitation of words to grasp reality, including the reality of the gospel. It also has to do with an incipient unbelief that holds captive the human heart—an unbelief that might best be characterized as "self defense," to use H. Richard Niebuhr's term,<sup>3</sup> that inborn instinct to "save ourselves" as Jesus diagnoses it (Mt 16:25). He was quite aware that you do not cast pearls among the swine. Not because swine are morally worse off or any more unworthy than the disciple who has them, but because they are not yet spiritually ready to receive them and make use of them (cf. Mt 7:6). No. Bonhoeffer was also very aware that words – including THE WORD – can be as easily misunderstood as actions.

It is for that very reason, I believe, that Bonhoeffer could not tell even his closest church friends (except for Eberhard

Bethge) about his involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler. Many of his Protestant Christian friends and clergyman could not believe that a disciple could be involved in such a morally ambiguous activity and still be a disciple. For Bonhoeffer this was a false pietism that harbored a Pelagian Soteriology, a form of "cheap grace," that saw discipleship as the literal ability on the part of the disciple to avoid sin. Contrary to these false pietists, Bonhoeffer came to believe that, given all he knew (a knowledge that he correlated to the calling of Christ), not to become involved in the guilt of the plot was to host the false pietistic illusion that a he could "save himself" through escape from the world. That illusion was nothing less than the old monastic illusion, in Protestant garb, harboring the belief that discipleship meant escape from this world, a distortion of Luther's Two Kingdoms Teaching into a Two Spheres Thinking. Such an idea was, to Bonhoeffer's thinking, a contradiction of the gospel that justification is a justification of sinners by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Justification entails the real death of the disciple as sinner. False pietism reduces to the idea of the death of the disciple to an escape from the world and God's condemnation of it—indeed, as escape from real death itself. In truth, the death of the disciple happens in the world, with the world, as part of the world, even as that death happens at the hands of the world. What distinguishes the death of the disciple is denial of self (repentance) versus self assertion and faith in Christ (costly grace) rather than flight from world. This means that the disciple, while still in the world, is also one who is free to love and serve the world, as the moment calls for, because of the promise of the resurrection.

Because Bonhoeffer was so intent on exposing this false pietism, interpreters of Bonhoeffer, especially his greatest admirers today, often fail to see that he is equally concerned with a



false activism, and for the very same soteriological reason. This false activism was characterized by Bonhoeffer as “ecclesiastical theocracy,” the idea that there is a “law of Christ,” of which the Church is in possession and that is meant to be imposed on the world to bring it into conformity with God’s will. As Robert Bertram notes, it is in response to this “legalistic interpretation” of the gospel of Christ that prompted Bonhoeffer to offer his most thoroughgoing interpretation of Luther’s Two Kingdom teaching as corrective.<sup>4</sup> For Bonhoeffer, the false pietism separated the two kingdoms (God’s two authoritative ways of relating to the world) into two unrelated autonomous spheres; the false activism (of which Barthianism was the great offender) collapsed any meaningful distinction of the two kingdoms. Barth’s dictum is illustrative of this conflation: The gospel is the content of the law, and the law is the form of the gospel. For Bonhoeffer, spiritual authority (the authority by which God through Christ saves the world from what it is – sinful) and secular authority (the authority by which God restrains to preserves the world in the mean time as it – sinful) co-exist in a “polemical unity” until the final death of the old age (the kingdom of this world) and the consummation of the new age (the Kingdom of God). For Bonhoeffer, therefore, the gospel is not a moral or social teaching, Christ is not a law giver and the disciple as disciple of Christ is not a social activist. Rather, the gospel is a call to sinners to die to self (and with Christ) so as to rise in Christ (to a new self). The outward form of action or inaction this call may engender in the world is open ended, depending on the moment, spontaneous and free.

So much for Bonhoeffer and discipleship. In what follows, I intend to present an understanding of discipleship that is rooted in the Gospel of Matthew and that seeks to address the so-called post- Christendom setting we find ourselves in. By

post-Christendom, I mean the apparent irrelevance of the call to “follow Christ” today. As I do I will be sensitive to the way that both, a false pietism (whether in the form of new age spiritualities or prosperity gospels) and a false activism (whether in the form of social gospel movements of the left or the right or church programming schemes), are still distorting the message of the gospel today and still obscuring the meaning of discipleship today, even as they are purported as ways of making “following Christ” relevant. I choose Matthew because he, as much as any gospel writer, was concerned about the relationship of the disciple of Christ to the church and the world. My presentation, therefore, will be divided up into three lectures according to the three publics before which the disciple stands: Christ, the church and the world. The relationship with Christ is what constitutes the disciple as disciple and consists of faith alone. The disciple’s relationship to the Church is the means by which Christ nurtures the disciple and consists in fellowship in Christ. The relationship of the disciple to the world is the way Christ makes new disciples and it consists of witness and service to the world.

## **Discipleship as Accompaniment**

In the Gospel of Matthew, the overarching framework for understanding the gospel, generally, and discipleship, specifically, is accompaniment: that is, *being with* God through Christ.<sup>5</sup> Matthew’s Gospel opens with the announcement that Jesus is “Emmanuel,” “God with us” (1:23). At the center of his Gospel, when Jesus teaches on how the post-resurrection church conducts its business, he promises that “wherever two or three are gathered in [his] name, there [he] is among them” (18:20), leading the deliberations. Finally as Matthew’s Gospel closes, as Jesus authorizes his disciples and ascends into ubiquity

("everywhereness"), he assures them that he is "with them always, to the end of the age" (28:20). Nothing has changed. Accompaniment is still the essential framework for understanding Christian discipleship. Above all, discipleship is being with Jesus *always*. Though we no longer see him with the eyes, he is, nevertheless, with his disciples wherever they are – by way of his promise and their faith. Moreover, this means, for Matthew, that the disciple is always a follower, never the leader. Therefore, "following me" is the signature statement for Matthew of what it means to be a disciple and the juxtaposition of Christ as leader and the disciple as follower is the structure of discipleship. Even as I stand before you here today at this podium, looking like I'm leading you, in truth, I am not. Jesus is. "[Y]ou are not to be called rabbi," says Jesus, "for you have one teacher...one instructor, the messiah" (23:8-10). Therefore, I am standing here speaking as a follower, relaying to you what Jesus wants you to be heard. The measure of discipleship, then, is *faithfulness* to the Jesus who is *with us* as leader, not originality of thought or action.

To be sure, this abiding "with-ness" of Christ and the disciple makes being a disciple of Christ very different from being a disciple of other kinds of earthly leaders. The disciples of Freud, for example, no longer have Freud to guide them, and so in a sense, the disciples of Freud will surpass Freud. I say this neither because Freud was limited in his teaching and understanding nor because he couldn't possibly have covered every scenario that might emerge. Both of which are true. But then, if we think about it, the earthly Jesus did not cover every possible scenario his disciples might encounter either. No. I say this because Freud is no longer *personally* with his disciples. He is dead and cut off from his disciples. Jesus, by contrast, is still *personally* with his disciples, *always*. Therefore, the confession of faith that Christ is the disciples

risen and ascendant Lord is foundational to any Christian understanding of discipleship. This also means – and I apologize if this raises offense for Biblical Fundamentalists – that Christian discipleship is not about “following the bible” literally. On the contrary, Christian discipleship is always about “following the Jesus” whom the bible proclaims as the crucified and risen Lord, who is with us always. The heart of Christian discipleship, then, as the story of the transfiguration presents, is a matter of listening to Jesus (17:1-13). The challenge to Christian discipleship, as Matthew’s Jesus constantly warns is being led astray by other voices, whether that be of false messiahs (cf. 24:4-5 ), false prophets (7:15), the Pharsisees and Saduccees (16:11) or by our own inner thoughts.

Indeed, as redaction criticism implies, the very character of the “gospel genre” presupposes that Jesus is *not* an absent figure but a present one, still teaching and guiding his disciples. The gospels, therefore, are not modern historical accounts of the activity of a past figure, dead and gone. Therefore, what looks to some modern historians like human manipulation of the historical Jesus is not that at all, and for one very important reason: Jesus is not dead and gone – he is risen! The gospels are an account of how the historical Jesus – now crucified, risen and ascended – asserted that he is still present teaching the Church as it confronts new situations. That we moderns might wish Matthew to be more upfront about that fact is a fair criticism to make of him – though anachronistic. Matthew is concerned about the continuity (not the replication) of the Church’s teaching in 90 A.D. with Jesus’ teaching in 30 A.D. and he employs the gospel genre for that purpose. The reason the teachings of Matthew’s Church in 90 A.D. are in continuity with the teaching of Jesus in 30 A.D. is because the same Christ is present among the disciples teaching them. That

is consistent, says Matthew, with the fact that Christ is resurrected and ascended. He is not a figure who is dead and gone. He is still alive, present, and leading his disciples, just as he told them he would be.

Accompaniment, then, is still the overarching framework for understanding discipleship today, even as it was, for example, for Bonhoeffer. The true disciple of Christ, Bonhoeffer says, acts not on the basis of a set of rules or system of principles posited from start regardless of circumstance, but in the concreteness of the moment and in response to the imminent “command of Christ,” understood not as a law-imperative, but a grace-imperative, to use Werner Elert’s distinction.<sup>6</sup> Of course, this should not be confused with a new age-type of spirituality or a sentential pietism or, even, a theological liberalism that equates an “inner voice” or an innate intuition or a naturally occurring *gefuhl* with God.<sup>7</sup> To hear the command of Christ in the moment presupposes Christian formation in the external Word or the *vox Christi* as something that has its origins from outside us and which happens through participation in Christian community and sacramental activity.<sup>8</sup> But more on this later.

## **Accompaniment and Faith**

To accompany Jesus as one of his disciple means much more than simply being in his physical presence. Throughout the gospel of Matthew, numerous groups are identified as “following Christ” as he wends his way throughout Galilee into Samaria and finally to Jerusalem. Matthew is very playful with the word “to follow” (ἀκολουθέω). The crowds may follow him around for all kinds of reasons, from curiosity to wanting to cash in on his miracles. The scribes and Pharisees follow him around because, at first, they are wary of him and, later, they want to collect evidence to make their case against him. Especially, playful is the way the word is used when Peter (26:58) and “many women” (27:55), in

a very anti-disciple-like manner, follow him “at a distance” as he undergoes his arrest, passion, and crucifixion. But when Jesus himself issues the call, “follow me,” it has one very specific meaning. It is a call to trust him with our whole being. It is a call that has as its correlate “faith.” Faith alone is the essence of discipleship.

Matthew’s view of discipleship as accompaniment, further defined as faith, is very different, in my judgment, from the dominant image of discipleship today: discipleship as the “imitation of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> One popular expression of this view of discipleship in recent times has been the so-called “WWJD” movement, “What Would Jesus Do.” However, the view is so ubiquitous and so infused in contemporary Christian consciousness, that most Christians don’t even realize they are operating with it. This is true in all denominations, including those denominations, like Lutheranism, that subscribe to Confessional Documents that refute it.<sup>10</sup>

At the risk of oversimplifying, let it suffice to say that in the imitation of Christ model of discipleship, Jesus is portrayed primarily as a “model of the godly life,” a life that the disciple is to study and emulate. “To follow,” in other words, means “to study or observe and to emulate.” The model by no means settles the debate about what that “godly life” might look like. For example, by piously focusing on depictions of Jesus as a man of retreat and prayer, some locate its meaning in acts of piety or in therapeutic health practices that are meant to bring peace in a hectic world. Others, by focusing on Jesus words and actions with regard to the poor, the sick, and the marginalized, locate its meaning in social activism and the correction of the world’s wrongs: whether that activism be confined to personal acts of charity (as Mother Theresa conceived it) or political acts of social reconstruction (as either “left leaning” or “right leaning” theologies might conceive it). Still others might focus its meaning on modes of

personal conduct or attitudes of positive thinking or the development of life-skills that will help disciples to get “[their] best life yet” or realize their ultimate “purpose” in life. However the imitation of Christ model of discipleship is interpreted and enacted, Jesus becomes little more than a clarifier of values and an expert personal conduct or social policies. By extension discipleship becomes a mantra for perfecting these behaviors, attitudes and values and thus achieving life’s fulfillment.

The ubiquity of this way of thinking about discipleship is evidenced by the fact that the common response to the above description is, “What’s wrong with it?” So, what is wrong with it? The answer, in my judgment, is that it hasn’t sufficiently grounded biblical discipleship in biblical Soteriology. First, doesn’t give due recognition to the fact that salvation is by *faith alone* and, second, it doesn’t give due account that salvation is in a *crucified Christ alone*. I will finish this section by focusing on the first point, discipleship and faith alone. I will cover the second point, discipleship and the cross, in the concluding section

In contrast to the imitation of Christ model of discipleship, Matthew’s idea of discipleship as accompaniment has a very different picture of Jesus and a very different understanding of why he wants us to accompany him. Jesus states over and over again, in the face of persistent misunderstanding, that he invites people to accompany with him, first and foremost, *not because of what he wants them to do for him, but because of what he wants to do for them*. The saying, “the Son of man came into the world to serve and not to be served and to give his life as a ransom for many” (20:28), is emblematic of this. Faith as trust is a matter of letting Jesus do for us what he wants done for us. This faith is the essence of discipleship from the human side. When Jesus says “follow me” he makes no demands as such.

Rather, he invites us to trust him to do for us what he desires for us.

At the risk of oversimplifying again, let me tell a story to illustrate this idea of faith and accompaniment. Once upon a time there was a basketball team that never won a game. They were simply lousy. One day Michael Jordan is seen working his magic with a basketball on the sidelines. Someone says to the team, "All you need to do is imitate Michael Jordan and you can't lose." But that's just the problem. They are not Michael Jordan. They do not possess his skill and ability. They cannot do what Michael Jordan does. No matter how hard the team might try, they simply cannot be other than who they are—losers. But all is not necessarily lost. The solution to their problem lies elsewhere. It lies not in *imitating* Michael Jordan, but in having him as their teammate. That the sports version of accompaniment: letting him lead the team, trusting him with the ball, and accompanying him up and down the court. Only then can the team defeat its opponent. And note. Only as long as they have him on their team will they be winners. With him they are a different team than without him. Moreover, the team's hope rests not in their performance, but in their abiding relationship with Michael Jordan and his performance for them.

The call to discipleship, I suggest, is like that. And it begins with a simple invitation. There is no coercion, no deal making, either by Jesus who issues it or by the disciple who receives it.<sup>11</sup> Matthew makes this clear, so it seems to me, in two separate healing encounters. In 8:1-4, a leper in the crowd, following Jesus, steps forward for healing, acknowledging that it was up to Jesus to decide whether or not he should have it. "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean" (8:2), he said. Jesus, in turn, says, "I do choose. "Be made clean!" And the partnership is made. In 9:27-31, a blind man calls out to Jesus for mercy. Jesus asks, "Do you believe I am able to do this?",



implying that Jesus will not heal without his consent. The man said "Yes, Lord." And Jesus said, "According to your faith, let it be done to you." And the partnership is made. Together, these two periscopes illustrate that the faith relationship between Jesus and the disciple is by definition non-coercive and mutual. Jesus gives his services freely and the disciple receives that service freely.

This mutuality in the relationship between Jesus and the disciple explains why Jesus is *genuinely amazed* when people make the leap of faith and *deeply saddened* when they don't. Concerning the former, Chapters 8 through 15 of Matthew's Gospel contain numerous incidents of different people, from different backgrounds, under different circumstances all who make the leap of faith. The most striking illustrations of Jesus' "amazement" over this leap of faith are a Centurion, who comes to Jesus for help concerning his sick servant (8:10), and a Canaanite woman who doggedly clings to faith in spite of the brutally honest rebuffs she gets (15:28). Both are foreigners, by no means a part of the team, the house of Israel, to which Jesus was presumed to belong de facto. Yet both became healed, not because they imitated Jesus, but because they trusted him and received from him what he wanted to give them. Concerning the latter, Chapters 19 through 23 give us a mix of people who reject Jesus. Some simply decline his invitation, as in the case of the so-called rich young ruler (19:16-30). Others outright oppose his invitation, illustrated by the numerous incidents of Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, lawyers and priests who all seek to discredit Jesus and try to dissuade others from following him. Jesus' sadness at this unbelief comes to a climax as he overlooks Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under wings, and you were not willing." (23:37).

What we also learn from these acceptance and rejection accounts is that the call to discipleship always confronts the hearer as a moment of decision. There is no such thing as an “anonymous Christian,” as Karl Rahner has suggested, a notion which he, in my judgment, mistakenly advances in light of misinterpretation of passages like Matthew 25:31-46. (More on that later.) But, there is such a thing as a pseudo-disciple. Jesus says as much in his oft neglected closing paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount. It deserves to be quoted at length.

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father. On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name. Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evil doers. (7:21-23)

Who are these pseudo-disciples who seem to say the right words, “Lord, Lord,” and who, to all appearances, seem to do the right things, including, things like, prophesying and casting out demons, and doing many deeds of power – and even who do them “in his name”? They, I suggest, are those who misinterpret the Sermon on the Mount and reduce the call to discipleship to a call to imitate Jesus. But note, it is a truncated view of Jesus. In their litany, they boast that they can *imitate* Jesus the prophet, Jesus the exorcist, Jesus the miracle worker – but note what they exclude. They cannot imitate Jesus the crucified. What the imitation of Christ model of discipleship fails to comprehend is that the essence of discipleship is not about emulating Christ, but receiving from him what he wants to do for us – in a word, faith. And above all, what Jesus wants to do for us is *manage our death, so as to tally it into new life*. To trust Jesus to do this for us is what it means “to do the will of the [Jesus’] Father.” The heart of discipleship is not

*imitating* Christ, but *accompanying* Christ in faith to our death. We, therefore, turn to explore the meaning of Christ crucified for the understanding of discipleship.

## **The Heart of Discipleship: Accompanying Jesus to the Cross**

It is commonly observed that Jesus predicts his passion three times in the Gospel of Matthew. But what is not so commonly observed is that those predictions are the entre into his most succinct teaching on discipleship. Biblical soteriology and biblical discipleship are inseparably linked. To be a disciple of Christ is to be saved by Christ. Everything else flows from that. To understand why, I will focus on the first and most elaborate passion prediction because it is accompanied by the most thoroughgoing teaching on discipleship, Matthew 16:21-26. I quote it at length.

16 21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' 23But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

The incident recorded here is a turning point in Jesus' relationship with his disciples (cf. 16:21). Peter had just confessed Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16) and Jesus was amazed. He exclaimed that this confession was no ordinary human achievement, but the doing of his Father, the working the Father's will amongst the disciples. In light of that Jesus now for the first time lets the disciples in on the nuts and bolts of "the will of [his] Father" (cf. 26:42): that is, the plan of salvation that Jesus, the Son of God, has concocted with his Father God. The "must" (16:21) character of the plan is not meant to indicate a constraint on God. On the contrary, it indicates that nothing can stop the "will of the Father" from being done. And as we see in the passion story, every attempt to thwart the will of God, whether by the religious establishment or the political establishment, not only fails, but gets turned into a way of accomplishing it.

To be sure, no matter where one stands (with or against the will of his Father) this is not a pretty plan. It involves in no uncertain terms Jesus' suffering condemnation (cf. 20:18, 26:65-66) "at hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes" (16;21) and his dying criminally at the hands of the duly constituted political authorities (20:19). But, neither is this plan a Greek tragedy. Though he will die, he will also "on the third day rise" (16:21). But that fact in no ways minimizes the depth of terror Jesus must suffer— death! Death — not reduced to a mere biological fact as human thinking is want to do, but as the judgment of God by which the sinners are destroyed "body and soul" (10:27-28) by which they lose selfhood itself.

It is important to note the blunt — indeed, literal — character of Jesus' description of what must happen. He is not speaking metaphorically, as both, Peter's reaction and subsequent events show. All that Jesus "predicts" not only "must" but "will" happen literally! Even as Jesus in the garden later agonizes

with his Father, in prayer, over the execution of the plan, whether it “must” be, the answer is clear. This plan *is* the will of the Father (26:36-46) and Jesus willingly concurs. What is not yet obvious, however, is *why* this must happen.

The answer to *why* is inseparably linked to the meaning of discipleship as accompaniment and an understanding of the human predicament that makes it necessary. We get a partial glimpse into the nature of that predicament in Peter’s initial reaction to Jesus’ blunt disclosure of the saving will of the Father as the way of cross. Although Peter in no wise realizes it, his rebuke of Jesus is nothing less than an act of pure unbelief, outright enmity and absolute rebellion against God. We know this not from Peter himself (we have no idea how Peter the man might rationalize his rebuke) but from Jesus’ counter-rebuke to Peter: “Get behind me Satan!” Shocking word perhaps, but remember, we are observing here a moment unprecedented candor. And here we have a candid statement on the human predicament. But we must be careful about interpreting this rebuke. We should use it neither to postulate a naïve doctrine of the devil nor make light of the real experience of evil as a personal other, as a unified front against God, that haunts human existence and draws it into captivity. As Werner Elert reminds us, we can no more prove the existence of a personal devil than we can a personal God. 12 With regard to both there is a veil of mystery that has not been lifted, even as there is an existential experience that cannot be avoided.

The key, in my judgment, to understanding this rebuke is the existential or personal address character of it. Just as Peter was earlier addressed by Jesus personally, and existentially, as “the rock,” as one rightly grounded in the will of the Father, so now here he is addressed by Jesus as “Satan,” as one wrongly grounded in absolute opposition to God, specifically, the will of God in Christ. If earlier Peter stood as the representative

of all disciples in his confession of faith, so now here he stands as the representative of all humanity in its opposition to God. Humanity, says Jesus, is not only in the grips of evil, as a victim, it is also in league with evil and therefore, responsible for it, even though it is enslaved to it. The deep seated truth of the human predicament, as Jesus' rebuke further reveals, is that humanity's interests have become so opposed to God's interests that to set your mind on them is to oppose God and to court evil. Sin, then, is not comprehended in heinous acts of evil that outrage nearly everyone. More subtly, sin is a matter of thinking in terms of "me first" or as Augustine and later Luther put it, as a state of being turned in on self, being *for* the self and *against* God. Peter was counseling Jesus to think from a human point of view, not God's point of view (cf. 16:23), from the perspective of personal self-preservation as opposed to God's will. For this reason, the rebuke that pertains to Satan (as the source and symbol of all that opposes God) also pertains to Peter – and to all who are in evil's grip.

But the rebuke of Jesus to Peter and Satan is not the first time such rebukes have been issued against those who oppose God. On the contrary, that rebuke has existed as long as human rebellion against God has existed, such that it is sown into the fabric of this world (cf. 5:18). Therefore, Jesus is simply reiterating in this rebuke the ancient law of God that has existed in various historical expressions from Adam through Moses to the present (cf. 4: 15-16). Moreover, we should not be surprised to hear Jesus himself make use of and thus confirm the truth of this cosmic rebuke. In the opening lines of his so-called Sermon on the Mount, Jesus announced to everyone that he had not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (5:17). Indeed, he was so good at teaching what the law and the prophets said – interpreting them in such a way that it encompasses the whole of our being, including our mind's thought (cf. 5:22), our

mouth's words (5:22), our fist's reaction (5:38-39), and our heart's desire (cf. 5:27- 30) – that some thought teaching the law was his central mission. This is revealed in the survey of answers that people gave to the question Jesus asked at Caesarea Philippi: "Who do people say that I am?" (16:13).

What still needs to be clarified is what Jesus means when he says that he has come to "fulfill the law." Truth be told, God being God, the law of God is always fulfilled as a matter of course. That is insured by the retributive character of the law as illustrated, for example, by Jesus when he asserts "hell" (meaning death as punishment) as the consequence of sin (5: 22, 29, 30, etc.) or by Paul when he says, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Law breakers never thwart the law when they break it, even though they may think they do when they seem to evade its consequences for a time. First of all, they become guilty by it regardless of appearance. But also, the law is also always fulfilled, one way or another, in the outward consequences it declares. In theory, this can happen one of two way: by law doers, when they satisfy what God requires and receive life as a consequence, and by law breaker, when they fail to satisfy God's requirements and receive punishment, ultimately, death, as a consequence. In actually fact, only the second option truly exists in the world because "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Therefore, the existential fact of death has deep theological consequences with regard to the status of people before God. Although there may be a large historical gap between the birth and the death of a sinner, that gap in no way nullifies the fact that the law is always fulfilled.

Therefore, when Jesus says that he has come to "fulfill the law" of God he does not mean primarily that he fulfills it in the first sense, as one who has not sinned, even though that is true. This is the way the imitation of Christ model of

discipleship has taken it because it fits well with their portrait of Christ as a model of the godly life that the disciple is to emulate. Rather, when Christ fulfills the law, he fulfills it in the second sense, as one who dies as a sinner, not because he personally committed sin (he alone as the Son of God was perfectly obedient to God in all things) but because he personally chose to become the friend of sinners. This choice, this embrace of what Jesus calls the "will of the Father" to reconcile sinners back to God, implicates Christ in a theological contradiction. Matthew's gospel abounds in examples of Jesus fraternizing with sinners and the corresponding attack he receives from the guardians of the law. But no incident more clearly shows the contradiction it creates than the story of the calling of Matthew, the Gospel's namesake.

The details of the story are well known (9:9-13). Jesus calls Matthew to "follow [him]" and then accompanies him to his home for table fellowship. Soon the table is full of Matthew's friends. The Pharisees see this and inquire, innocently enough, about Jesus' choice of company: "Why does [he] eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Obviously, the Pharisees see this as a stark disregard for the law of God, which commands the righteous to separate from the unrighteous. In a calm, deliberate, manner, Jesus answers their query. I quote: "Those who are well have no need for a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

With these words, Jesus recognizes the apparent contradiction that exists in the will of God. Indeed, there seems to be two competing wills or desires of God: sacrifice and mercy, judgment and promise, law and gospel. These two wills of the one God logically conflict, at least when one thinks from a human point of view. Yet, quoting Hosea (6:6), Jesus asserts that God's logic has a preference for mercy over sacrifice, and that that



preference is evidenced by the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' saving mission to reconcile sinners to God, therefore, *does over ruler* the law of God, but not in the sense that the law is simply abolished, but in the sense that it is fulfilled in the death of Christ and rendered obsolete in the resurrection of Messiah Jesus, the Son of God. Why? Because the law pertains to the old creation, "the earth" (5:18), as Matthew here calls it, understood as that which is engulfed in human sin, God's law and under the sentence of death. The resurrection entails a new creation, Matthew calls it the Kingdom of Heaven, comprised of Christ's higher righteousness, the Spirit's guidance, and the promise of life everlasting. The law whose function is to condemn sin, has no relevance, no use, in the Kingdom of heaven. Fulfillment, thus, also means retirement, no longer necessary, when it comes to the death and resurrection of Christ and the consummation of the Kingdom of heaven.

It is from this soteriological point of view that Jesus' teaching on discipleship springs. And remembering that we are at a moment of stark candor, we see also that Jesus' words about discipleship are as blunt as his words about his passion. "If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and following me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what does it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

Notice, there is no hint here of what is popularly described today as "getting your best life yet" or of fulfilling God's "purpose" for your life. There is no mention here of either moral improvement or a left or right-leaning social agenda as the great cause of Jesus. There is no advice given here on how to "master the world" or "achieve self-fulfillment." Why? Because these ideas all miss the soteriological point. They have

misread both the problem of the human condition as one of sin, judgment and death, and the reason for which Christ came to bear the cross. They have done exactly what Jesus says the Pharisees did in the "Woe" passages of Chapter 23: They have limited their focus on what people can do, like "tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, judgment (κρίσιν), and mercy and faith" (23:23). They have set people's minds on human things (the things that are in their capacity) and away from divine things (the things that God alone can do for them). Preachers who set people's minds on such things are doing exactly what Jesus criticizes the Pharisees who "sit on Moses' seat" for doing. "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to remove them" (23:4). In the mean time, such preachers produce, at best, "anxious Christian," to use Philip Cary's term, the worriers of Matthew 6:25-34), and, at worst, presumptuous ones, like the Pietists Jesus describes in Matthew 6:1-5, who erroneously think that the praise they receive from the public is reflective of a praise they must be getting from God. In the mean time, these preachers and their followers are deluding themselves. It remains to be seen in the end time how they will fair. The indication from Jesus is that it is not good. Since these preachers and their followers seem never to have really known Jesus as he wanted to be known, it follows (cf. 7:22-23, 25: 31-46) also that Jesus has never really known them as they presumed he should have: that is, as righteous. "For I tell you," says Jesus, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (5:20).

The blunt language Jesus uses to describe discipleship is the very opposite of "laying burdens on others." It has nothing to do with human works and effort, and certainly nothing to do with

“imitating Jesus.” Rather, discipleship has everything to do with Soteriology, with the will of Jesus and the Father to save sinners through the way of the cross. Discipleship is about entrusting our very being to Christ. To trust Christ for this is to truly know him for who he wants to be known as the crucified messiah. Therefore, when we hear Jesus say “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me,” he is not commanding disciples to do something for him or to imitate him. It is not a call to a life of asceticism or to this or that social agenda or to a set of moral principles or biblically defined lifestyle. With regard to these things, disciples are free. Rather, discipleship means letting Jesus handle everything concerning our ultimate future with God, especially, as that future is complicated by sin and law’s sentence of death. Discipleship is about letting Jesus manage our death, a death that we have coming because of our sin and the law that condemns it, a death that can be surpassed only by the work of Jesus who in dying confronted death head on and in rising conquered death once and for all. Discipleship is about including humanity in on his victory over sin, judgment and death.

It is now possible to interpret Jesus’ candid teaching on discipleship when he says “deny yourself, taking up your cross, and following him” (16:24). The key phrase in Jesus’ teaching on discipleship is the one he has been using from the beginning of his ministry: “follow me.” By this he does not mean “imitate me” or put into practice a set a skills or moral principles that I will teach you. Rather, he means, quite literally, “accompany me.” The words “follow me” need to be understood as an invitation into an enduring relationship with the crucified and risen Christ that is based on faith alone. Indeed, the “cost of discipleship” is that it entails placing our faith in Jesus alone as the proverbial basket that holds all our eggs. Two things are distinctive about Jesus’ teaching on discipleship.

First, *he is unflinchingly honest about the necessity of our death in light of the reality of our sin and God's law.* There is no escape from death. We can either die alone, in which case death is ultimate, or we can die with Christ, in faith, in which case death is penultimate, the prelude to resurrection. Indeed, repentance is the main category for describing the disciple's acceptance of that fact concerning death. The call to "follow me," then, is no different from the call "to repent, for the kingdom of heaven [God's victory over sin, judgment and death] has come near" (4:7). Second, *Jesus is unequivocal in his claim that he alone can lead the disciple through death to new life.* Indeed, that claim is essentially the reason he gives for "following him." Therefore, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is emphatic, as are the divinely sent messengers at the tomb side, that his disciples go to Galilee to "see him" (28:10), the crucified one, raised. The resurrection of Jesus is not a psychic phenomenon or a mythical construct designed to underscore certain elements of Jesus' teaching. On the contrary, it is a historical fact: meaning, a one time, unrepeatable event that has been witnessed by others. What is essential here is the reason for Jesus' appearance to his first disciples. It was so they could bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus as confirmation of all that he had claimed. God the Father has placed his power and reputation on Messiah Jesus, the Son of God. The resurrection appearances of Jesus are, therefore, his way of discipling his disciples in faith. Even though the disciples are not yet raised, but still on their way to death, they can be certain that what God done for Jesus will also be done for those who trust their death to Christ Jesus.

The words "deny yourself," as we said earlier, is not a euphemism for asceticism and it certainly is not a call to self-deprecation. Rather, "to deny yourself" means to give up on any illusion that you can save yourself (16:25). As such it is a

call away from the illusion of self reliance and toward faith in Christ. What distinguishes it from the words, "follow me" is that it identifies the "false god" to which sinful humanity desperately clings: namely, the self. Sinful humanity sets up the self as a "god," not because we necessarily believe we are all powerful (that myth may persist for a while, but it is pretty well punctured by the time we reach middle age) but because our natural, sinful inclination is to believe we are the only one whom we can truly trust to look out for our own good. A "god," as Luther notes, is that to which we look for our good. 13 I say *false* god, because, ultimately, the self cannot deliver up that for which its hopes above all else: namely, life as an escape from death. Moreover, we dare not overlook just how repulsive these two little words can be either. The call to "deny yourself" flies in the face of modernity's most universally accepted axiom: "Look out for our own self-interest because nobody else will." We dare not be naïve. This axiom is true. In this sinful world, where everyone is looking out for their own self-interest, reason dictates to every "self" to do the same. But this is not a truth that sets us free. On the contrary, it is a truth that enslaves us to our self and insures our death. Only as these words, "deny yourself" are accompanied by the words of Jesus, "follow me" is that axiom replaced by another: "those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (16:25).

The words, "take up your cross," are the most metaphorical of the three phrases, but not as is often thought. The words are not a call to service per se, but rather a call to repentance, understood as an acknowledgment of sin and the acceptance of the consequences. While it is true that the gospel does free the disciple *from* self-absorption and *for* other-concern, that is not what the words "take up your cross" mean here. The cross, in Jesus' day, was literally the instrument upon which enemies of

the state were executed, not a vehicle by which others are served. It was punishment for opposition to and rebellion against the duly constituted authorities. Of course, the natural tendency is to avoid the cross at all cost, not “to take it up.” Therefore, these words are even more shocking than the words “deny yourself.” Jesus’ metaphorical reference to the cross is nothing other than a reference to the law of God, as interpreted by Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount, as that which makes us ultimately “liable to hell of fire” (5:22; cf. 5:25, 29, 30, etc.). The “cross” that Jesus is talking about here is the one that the law of God lays up those who oppose God in the course of everyday life. Wherever we experience God’s accusing word, *there* the cross is being assigned to us. And it is everywhere, as the Sermon on the Mount attests. It is embedded in the very fabric this old creation; it is inescapable and it is deserved. The temptation, of course, is try to avoid it, but all such attempts are illusory. Therefore, with all candor, Jesus says, “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.” This is not a call for us to give up on hope or to give in to despair, but to give over to Christ. Jesus is not here commanding his disciples to do something. Rather, he asking them to trust him to take over their very cross-ridden selves and turn it into new life.

This, then, is what discipleship is essentially all about. It is not about “imitating Christ” but “accompanying Christ” in faith through death to new life. To be sure, though the promised new life is still just that – a promise yet to be fulfilled – the very anticipation of it by the disciple does have great *consequences* for the disciple’s involvement in both, the ministry of the Church and the wellbeing of the world. Concerning that, all I can say is, stay tuned.

Steven C. Kuhl  
Cardinal Stritch University

Milwaukee, WI  
1-21-2012

### **References:**

1 I am indebted to Marcus Felde for pointing out this more literal and provocative translation of Bonhoeffer's famous line in his work known in English as *The Cost of Discipleship: Jeder Ruf Christi führt in den Tod*. See The Crossings Newsletter entitled *Crossings*, Christmas 2011, p. 2. <https://crossings.org/newsletter/christmas2011.pdf>

2 See Craig J. Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004) for a discussion of this topic of martyrdom and whether the political character of Bonhoeffer's witness disqualifies it as "martyrdom" in the traditional sense of the term. I think it is, but not because of its political character, but because of its spiritual character, the faith, borne witness in his words to clarify his deeds, that informed his whole life and being.

3 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers), 142.

4 Robert W. Bertram, *A Time for Confessing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2008), 93.

5 Jack Dean Kingbury, *Matthew*, Proclamation Commentary Series, ed. Gerhard Krodel, 2nd ed. Revised and Enlarged (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 83.

6 Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, trans. Carl J. Schindler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 224.

7 Philip Cary, *Good News for Anxious Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 2-4. Chapter 1 and 2 in this book

address this question from different angles.

8 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1955), 80- 88. I am referencing here the two sections entitled “Conformation” and “The Concrete Place.”

9 See, for example, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, 1999), 133-144. The concept is by no means new and term *imitatione Christi* goes back at least to 14th Century and the so-called *Devotio Moderna* initiated by the movement known as the Brethren of the Common Life. That movement was highly critical of the opulent and power-oriented behavior of the church – and rightly so – and advocated the life style of Jesus as a model for Christian behavior. Its most famous member, Thomas à Kempis, encapsulated the ideal of the movement in his famous devotional treatise call *De Imitatione Christi*. In the view of à Kempis, the imitation of Christ was seen as a highly interiorized spiritual devotion to the Eucharist, the “do this in memory of me,” and tended toward an otherworldly posture. During the period of the Reformation, through the influence of Desiderius Erasmus, the idea of the imitation of Christ shifted to the imitation of the kind of man Jesus was—the virtuous man—and the kind of lifestyle he lived. This, then, became the theological centerpiece of Christian Humanism in its attempt to Reform the corrupt institutional Church. While in the 16th Century , Luther’s and Calvin’s views of Christ as the atoner for sin verses the model of the godly life prevailed, the subsequent emerges of Pietism (against Lutheran Orthodoxy), Arminianism (against Calvinist Orthodoxy), and theological liberalism (against Classical Christianity) along with the modernist tendency to equate religion with morality, all served to reintroduce the imitation of Christ concept as a dominant view today.



10 In an insightful little book by Phillip Cary, entitled, *Good News for Anxious Christians: 10 Practical Things You Don't Have to Do* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press), Cary notes how this mindset also permeates the contemporary consciousness of the American Evangelical tradition, generally. Calling it the "New Evangelicalism," Carey correctly sees 1) how the subtle legalism of this theology is "anxiety-producing" and 2) how it desperately needs correction by the evangelicalism of Luther. The Gospel, Carey correctly notes, is burden relieving. Unfortunately, Cary comes close to Luther in his correction of the New Evangelical, but ultimately misses the mark. In my judgment he verges on the opposite problem of antinomianism. This is because he fails to include Luther's Law-Gospel dialectic in his analysis. The oversight, if that is what it is, obscures the fact that God's wrath on sinners is the most basic problem disciples face and is the primary reason why the crucified and risen Christ calls them fellowship with him.

11 I have become aware of this fact from my reading of Werner Elert, especially, his, *The Christian Faith: An Outline of Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans., Martin H. Bertram and Walter R. Bouman (1974), Unpublished Manuscript, p. 77.

12 Elert, 175.

13 I am following Martin Luther's line of argumentation from his explanation of the First Commandment in the *Large Catechism*. In his own kind of existential way, Luther sets forth a definition of "god" that is utterly factual and applicable to all. "A 'god'," he says, is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need." Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 386.

## Mission in Mark

Colleagues,

Our guest writer for the next three weeks is Pastor Paul Jaster of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Elyria, Ohio. If you keep up with Sabbaththeology, the weekly text study series from Crossings, you'll recognize the name. Paul has been writing for us since 2004. Lately I've been hearing colleagues say that they read extra closely whenever his name pops up. I'm not surprised. I do that too. Paul feeds us well, and without fail. He also demonstrates that his local reputation as a model of the pastor at his or her scholarly best is richly deserved.

You'll see an even stronger demonstration of this in what you're about to read. Paul presented it last month at a meeting of the ECLA's Cleveland West Conference. It's a fast overview of Mark, the featured synoptic Gospel in this second year of the Revised Common Lectionary's triennial cycle. I got to hear the presentation and asked Paul to let us publish it. He graciously agreed, and sent it to us under the title "A Tour of Mark." We've changed that to "Mission in Mark," in part to keep you focused as you read on our Epiphany theme (see the intro to last week's post) but also because the mission of Jesus, the Son of God, is the very thing Mark writes about. We think you'll be intrigued by Paul's insights into what that mission was and continues to be.

Paul's copy, by the way, runs to 15 single-spaced pages. That's why you're getting it in three parts. Enjoy them!

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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## **The Year of Mark (2012)**

In many ways we are in a position to capture Mark's message better than ever before because many of our issues now are like issues then: violent separation, political polarization, tribalism, imperialism. Even in the church. "Religion kills" a piece of graffiti on the bathroom wall says (Hall, 1).

Religious surveys in American Grace indicate the fast growing denomination is "None." Why? The authors think it's largely due to a politicized and polarized church both on the right and left. Churches have lost their spirituality.

Does the Gospel According to Saint Mark have "good news" for times like these? Absolutely. Mark is a theology of the cross, which has good news for both the vertical and horizontal—the spiritual and the sociological.

Spiritually, a theology of the cross says that it is precisely when Jesus is the farthest from God ("My God, my God why have you forsaken me") that God is the closest to us, where we are. Even in—especially in!—our forsakenness, faith perceives that God is close to us in Jesus.

And sociologically, a theology of the cross opens us into a life-enhancing unity with those who are so very different from ourselves (Hall, 6). That's good news, too! Because otherwise all too often religion kills. Especially monotheistic religion, some would say.

## Mark 1:1-15

Mark 1:1: "The beginning (arche) of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God." The word "beginning" makes us think of Genesis 1. A new start, a new creation. Just as in John 1. Only where does this gospel begin? Not with Christmas as in John, but with baptism.

And not only is baptism Genesis 1 all over again, it is also the exodus and entry all over again. Implicit in John's baptism is a critique of temple. The current custodians of the temple are so corrupt that this son of a priest, John the Dipper, says you have to go back to the beginning, to the Jordan River, and start all over again. Enter Israel again like Joshua did. Or like a gentile would into the Jewish faith via a ritual bath (mikvah). John is saying that we need someone stronger, not only than I, but also Herod Antipas (the temple's patron), Caiaphas & the current temple crew, or even the Roman emperor, whose agent, the Syrian legate, controlled the high priests during the days of Pontius Pilate. Like the great prophet Elijah before him, John the Dipper is not only a forerunner and announcer of God's coming but also "an agent of revolution against an oppressive regime" (Horsley, 140).

And no sooner does John say that "one more powerful than I is coming" than it is said that "Jesus of Nazareth came and was baptized by John." With this one line this Jesus of Nazareth is put into the place of sinners AND of God. In Isaiah's prophecy it was GOD who was to come. Lord equals Yahweh (adonai). And so this is amazing! What is said of God is said of Jesus. And yet Jesus is baptized in the place of sinners, too. Jesus stands in for both God and us.

And the heavens are "torn" (a violent word, schizomenous, schism). The very same verb that Mark will use at the end for the tearing of the temple curtain at the moment of Christ's

death in Mark chapter 15.

And there is a voice. The only time God speaks (except for its loud echo in Mark 9:7 of course)., "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Not only is God declaring a unique filial relationship with Jesus, but God is also indicating that Jesus, his unique son, speaks for him: that the paterfamilias has entrusted his adult son with power of attorney.

And the Spirit immediately "drove" Jesus out into the wilderness. In Greek, the word is ekballo! Another violent verb. Like driving a donkey with a stick. Or a bouncer throwing a bum out of the bar. God doesn't put a protective bubble around his beloved son. Jesus is driven out by the Spirit to be with us in the wilderness. Tempted by Satan. In our exile. In a place of danger and hostility. And yet, miraculously like the wilderness of Sinai, it is also a place of God's provision: "...the angels waited on him."

And then there comes his proclamation and theme sentence: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." Two indicatives; two inviting imperatives. The gospel declares and the gospel forcefully invites. And how do I get in on this good news? By believing it and acting according to it. With the gospel comes imperatives! Not legal ones. Not new laws, but a new life driven forcefully by the Spirit.

Mark 1:16-45: "Creation" of disciples and the first "new day" in the ministry of Jesus

The first thing Jesus "creates" (the Greek verb poieo when used of God as in Gen 1:1 LXX) is fishers of people, common laborers to accompany him on his mission and engage in it as well. This story is just as much about the disciples as it is of Jesus. "There is no Christology apart from ecclesiology" (Boring, 57).

Jesus is calling people to a new life and to participate in God's saving work by creating a new social entity among his followers and an alternative social practice. And like commercial fishing, journeying with Jesus is labor-intensive, strenuous, and persistent work, involving long hours, often without success: "Human beings are a hard species of creature to catch" (Witherington, 85). Sound familiar? What better way to describe ministry! There is no parallel to this kind of call story in all of ancient literature.

God's "new day" begins with an exorcism on the Sabbath. Only Mark chooses an encounter with the demonic as the opening scene of Jesus' ministry (and the last positive miracle of his public ministry, if you treat the healing of blind Bartimaeus as a call story and the cursing of the fig tree as an enacted parable of judgment). In his teaching, Jesus invades and confronts the whole demonic world. "Have you come to destroy US?" the demon sibilantly hisses. There is an evil greater than ourselves. We are occupied territory (conquered and controlled), just like the Romans conquered, controlled, and occupied Jewish territory. And there is no better time to free those possessed and occupied than on the sabbath; for resting in God means true freedom. The standard verb in Mark for casting out demons is *ekballo* (13 times). The bouncer throwing the bum out of the bar by the neck of the collar. Only this bouncer is "the Holy One of God," the very divine title Isaiah so often uses (30 times) for God.

The response to the exorcism is recognition of "a new teaching-with authority (*exousia*)," a word used 13 times in Mark always with reference to Jesus and conferred on the disciples. In Judaism, divine authority is mediated by Torah, which is interpreted through debate and voting by qualified scholars [sounds like the Jesus Seminar]; but for Mark, God's authority is mediated by Jesus who simply pronounces. From day one Jesus appears as one who has unprecedented authority. Again nothing

like it in all of ancient literature: the number of exorcisms and the detail of the narratives. No other ancient exorcist comes close. This is truly something new.

Then Peter's house turns into a clinic. "House" has special meaning for Mark. It is a place of ministry and private instruction for "insiders." It probably reflects the fact that for Mark's community "house churches" replaced the temple as the "house of prayer for all nations."

Jesus goes out to pray, comes back. And the disciples want to institutionalize it. "Let's build the Cleveland Clinic," the enterprising disciples suggest. And Jesus says, "Move on. My mission means more than that." That's what we always want to do—institutionalize, not move on to the greater mission.

#### Mark 2:1-12: The healing of the paralytic—a paradigmatic story of Jesus

Jesus does two things: heals him and forgives him. To Jesus which one is more important? Forgiveness, clearly. Jesus does it first and without being asked.

This passage is so important because it shows that Jesus is more than just a teacher/healer/preacher. He is the forgiving savior. We have an illness we don't even realize. A broken/distant relationship with God. And that's what needs mending first.

Which is easier—to forgive on behalf of God or to heal? Pastors forgive every Sunday. We forget what an "awesome" power this is. Do you shake? Do you tremble? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone? Pastors should be stoned for that! How dare you! We would never dare to do it had not we been authorized by Christ to do so.

It is NOT that God is unforgiving. And it is NOT that a human being can't mediate that forgiveness. Grace is NOT the issue.

Some of the greatest songs of grace are Dead Sea Scroll hymns authored by the strictest of the Jewish sects. Rather, HOW that grace is mediated—that's the issue.

The Jewish people of Jesus' day already had a system for conveying God's forgiveness: repentance, making amends, temple, sacrifice, Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the scape goat, and the high priest going through the curtain into the holy of holies, encountering God, and then throwing a great party of thanksgiving with his friends when he came out alive.

Here Jesus is offering forgiveness on God's behalf without temple, without the proper ritual, without repentance first and the making of amends. N.T. Wright: It's like a private individual approaching you on the street and offering to issue you a passport.

For the urban Judean aristocratic priests, the Temple worked well as a system of mediating God's forgiveness (it also gave them economic control over the people and made them one of the chief tax collectors via the tithe). But the temple state favored Judeans over Galileans, Jews over gentiles, men over women, rich over poor. The temple floor plan is a "social map" of who is close to God and who is farther away (in descending order: high priest, priests, Jewish men, Jewish women, gentiles) and the urban rich had more time, education, resources, and leisure to engage in all the rituals and be obedient to Torah than the rural poor and those on subsistence living. Here Jesus is offering an alternative way to closeness with God to anyone, anywhere, at any time regardless of their wealth or status.

This helps to explain what got Jesus killed—which is perhaps THE key historical and theological question to any understanding of Jesus. Jesus' forgiving of sins in the name of God is blasphemy! If Jesus is just a healer and a teacher, why kill him? Wouldn't



you want to clone him? By challenging the temple system Jesus is challenging the heart of Jewish theology/ritual and the entire religious, political, social, and economic map.

Now here's the kicker: Where did that temple system come from? God. Ultimately, it came from God, revealed to Moses and preserved in Torah. And so, there is this tension: one word of God vs. another word of God. One authority against another authority. Which one is the ultimate word? Which one has the last word?

### Mark 2 & 3: Conflict stories

Jesus' new teaching with authority challenges the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees in a series of conflict stories in which Jesus breaks through some of the very key boundary markers and national symbols for which many Torah-observant Jews had died: including, table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners, fasting, sabbath, ritual washings, and dietary laws.

Jesus and the Pharisees are directly at odds because the Pharisees believe they can hasten the day of the Lord by encouraging the strict observance of Torah and its boundary markers, while Jesus is asserting that the kingdom of God draws near in his own person and ministry and that one of its most prominent features is the breaking of these very boundaries that separate observant Jews from non-Torah-observant Jews and gentiles. Agents of the existing authorities gather evidence and give Jesus the required warnings in preparation for a formal change.

### Mark 4: Purpose of Parables

The parable about the seed(s) and soils explains the various responses to Jesus' challenges in chapters 2 and 3. Parables become a particularly effective medium for speaking truth to power as the proclamation of Jesus challenges those in

authority. R. T. France: a parable functions much like a political cartoon. Its meaning and effect depends upon the amount of awareness that the listener/viewer brings to it as the parable/cartoon challenges its audience and proposes a radically new way of life and action. It is a message that some will accept and others oppose, while still others will fail to see any point in it at all (France, 183-184). The hidden, yet challenging, nature of parables is demonstrated the most clearly in the one exception to the rule, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, through which the custodians of the temple finally realize that Jesus “told this parable against them,” which leads immediately to their determination to arrest Jesus (Mark 12:12).

#### Mark 4:1–8:22: The Positive Ministry of Jesus Christ in Galilee

Galilee is the place of the positive ministry of Jesus as Jesus exercises his authority over wind and water, demonic possession, illness, and even death itself. Nothing positive happens in Jerusalem. In fact, Jesus doesn't even spend one single night there until the night of his arrest. This is not like John (three trips, signs, discourses). Everything positive happens in and around Galilee. Jerusalem is a place of confrontation and rejection. In fact, at the end, after Jesus rises, the angelic messenger tells the disciples to go to Galilee, “there you will see him.” The risen Jesus doesn't even appear in Jerusalem. He goes back to the Galilean ministry. There (!) he will meet them.

This Galilean ministry revolves around the Sea of Galilee. It is THIS ministry around the lake and NOT the temple that is God's real social map. The travels of Jesus takes him N (Caesarea Philippi), E (east bank), S (Decapolis), W (Tyre-Sidon).

And Jesus keeps going back and forth across this lake from the Jewish (Galilean) side to the gentile (Decapolis) side. And every time he goes from the Jewish side to the gentile side there is resistance—a storm and fearful disciples. And yet,

every time Jesus persistently pushes them through. And what Jesus does in Jewish territory, Jesus also does in gentile territory. The first miracle on the Jewish side is an exorcism and the first miracle on the gentile side is an exorcism. Jesus multiplies loaves on the Jewish side with 12 basketsful left over and Jesus multiplies loaves on the gentile side with 7 baskets left over. Jesus heals a woman in Jewish territory and heals a woman in the Gentile territory.

Jesus is bridging the gap, breaking down the barriers, pushing through the resistance to build a new community, a new social map that revolves around this lake. God “rending” the heavens and empowering Jesus to be his POA, the one who speaks for him, now bridges the gap between the most fundamental of all divisions (to a Jew, at least)—the tribal one, Jew and Gentile. We always like to divide the world in two. Us and them. Jesus wants to pull us together. This map is very different from the temple map. “Mark wants to stress that the Gentile mission was a direct and legitimate consequence of Jesus’ own mission” (Witherington, 178).

#### Mark 5: The first miracle on the gentile side

The first miracle on the gentile side is an exorcism in the country of the Gerasenes. What is your name? “My name is Legion.” Demons dive into 2,000 pigs (an animal associated with Roman worship and the insignia of the Roman legion stationed in Palestine) and they rush into the sea. This is the very thing that many Jews wanted to do to the Romans by violent force (religious force with God’s aid)—push them right back to the very sea from which they came [the sea (Yamm) being an opponent to God and that ancient source of chaotic monsters].

And yet, it is not the Romans Jesus pushes out into the sea but demons! Is Jesus saying that Rome may be the physical embodiment of evil (just as Jesus is the physical embodiment of the

goodness and graciousness of God); and yet, those strong and intimidating Romans are also possessed by powers larger than they know and need to be liberated, too? They, too, are occupied territory. They should be targets of God's compassion and liberation and NOT the targets of Israel's violent revolt and resistance. Is Jesus saying, "Hey, they are in the same 'boat' as us" (another image for the house church)?

Rome may be the enemy we can see, but Satan is the greater enemy. There is a legion of demons in us all. And it takes a "stronger one" from outside of this world and into ours to free us from them. It takes Jesus, the Son of the Most Holy God, whom the demonic forces themselves name before any human does. By this act, Israel is no longer exclusively the holy land, and Jesus makes all lands clean and holy.

And what a way to look at people different from ourselves! Not as the enemy, but as those who share a common humanity and a common struggle that afflict us all. Which is of course the real meaning of the word "jihad"—not "holy war," but rather spiritual struggle. Right here in this story, Christians and Muslims should have one tremendous bridge over the great ocean that divides us.

### Mark 7: Corban

What is a sacrifice? We often think of it narrowly as offering up something costly to atone for a sin. But the Jewish people had many different kinds of sacrifices for different purposes with different names for them all.

What, however, is the generic Hebrew word for "sacrifice"? Corban. And what does "corban" mean? "To draw near." All sacrifices were so that God would draw near. Which is why sacrifices were offered for the people in the morning and evening every day. Not so much to atone for the sins of the

people (Yom Kippur did that), but to keep the temple pure from the sins of the people so God would draw near.

In fact, there were some who felt God had left and that they were still in exile. Sure, they were back from Babylon, but foreign rulers were still in charge. When exile was truly over (1) God would return to the temple, (2) a true Davidic king would return, (3) the people would be forgiven and (4) the exile will be reversed and (5) the foreign nations will come and worship God in Jerusalem. These are the very events that will happen in the last third of Mark's gospel, but very differently than anyone expected.

#### Mark 8:22-26 & Mark 10:46-52

The two major sections of the Galilean mission each end with a blind man seeing. Blind men see, while seeing men are blind. The question is will you and I see after the last section, the death & resurrection of Jesus. Remember what the angel said: "Go to Galilee, there you will see him" in that mission around the lake.

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In the Thursday Theology pipeline—

January 26 and February 2: Parts 2 and 3 of Rev. Paul Jaster's "Mission in Mark"

February 9: A wrap-up report on the Fourth International Crossings Conference

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## Best Books on Mission

Colleagues,

Last Friday was the Feast of the Epiphany. Blessed be the ears that got to listen once again to the great account of wise ones drawn from the nations to the worship of Christ. Blessed too be the minds that made connections with prophetic promise on the one hand and apostolic vocation on the other, the latter laid out in Matthew's final chapter where Christ dispatches some not-so-wise ones (28:17) to head for the nations with good news to tell.

For your editors, Epiphany is a grand excuse to return again to one of Thursday Theology's central concerns during the many years of Ed Schroeder's stewardship. Ed worked hard and persistently to make us think about the Church's mission and to

embrace it as our own compelling vocation. Others are busy too, of course, with that same sort of work. We'd like you to hear from a few of them.

First on the list is Richard Gahl. Dick is a retired pastor and church executive who continues to be the ranking Lutheran expert in my neck of the woods (Greater Cleveland; Northeastern Ohio) on matters missiological. If you attended the Crossings Conference in 2010 you may have met him or, better still, found your way to his workshop presentation. Getting to know him as a good friend and trusted advisor has been one of the Lord's better gifts to this pastor in recent years. I asked Dick a couple of months ago if he might have something to contribute to Thursday Theology especially on the subject of mission. He sent along the following list of books he'd recommend to anyone who wants to catch up on the best and latest that the scholars and thinkers are saying these days. You'll want to add some, we're guessing, to your Amazon wish list.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editors

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This annotated bibliography of recent mission studies grows out of a twenty-five year service as mission executive for the Ohio District LCMS. Over the years Vicedom, Bosch, Newbigin and a host of others have fueled my passion for the renewal of the mission of the church. We even started calling district congregations "mission outposts." The response from one pastor was telling. "We are not a mission congregation." Of course, he only thought of mission as receiving financial support, not God's mission in which the people of God are called to participate. Mission is much like a vision that is continually pursued. We live it, teach it, proclaim it. One of my current interests is including mission in Sunday proclamation-not just



stories of what is happening, but encouragement and support for doing it as a congregation and as members of the congregation. The works of Lincoln and Ware in this list are invaluable for that effort.

1. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. 2006. Wright has written this book to develop an approach to biblical hermeneutics that sees the mission of God and the participation in it of God's people as a framework in which to read the whole Bible. He begins with the teaching of Jesus on the journey to Emmaus where the Lord took his travelling companions through the scriptures to understand what was happening with the crucifixion and resurrection. With a solid background as an OT professor, Wright sets forth the roots of mission clearly and creatively. His working with Isaiah, care of creation, and covenant are thoroughly enriching.
2. Christopher J.H. Wright, *A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI. 2010. A reworking of the *Mission of God* in shorter chapters for group study. Hits all the main points. Lutherans may wish to do a rewrite of Chapter 14, *People who Praise and Pray*, to include essential sacramental elements.
3. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (2 volumes), Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 2004. One reviewer suggested many will use this 1600+ page work as reference encyclopedia. Look up a topic and mine the comments. This reviewer was fascinated with the detail of the Galilee mission in Luke 10: 36 teams spending 3 days in each town or village could cover 150 such places in six weeks. Later information details participation of bishops of new churches at the ecumenical councils-begun with the mission of the 72, strengthened in Galilee by the apostles, grown

into important mission bases. The subjects are manifold. A big read, worth every page.

4. Craig Van Gelder & Dwight Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, Missional Trends and Shaping the Conversation, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI. 2011. Luther Seminary continues the work of the Gospel and Our Culture Network from the 90's that came to the U.S. to unfold the significant work of Leslie Newbigin. This is the latest of a very important series reporting on annual events hosted by the seminary. The first chapter of this book is an excellent historical review of the missional conversation in the US.
5. Alan J. Roxburgh & M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church, What it is, Why it Matters, How to Become One*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI. 2009. Allelon is another group of missional thinkers and writers well-worth paying attention to. Roxburgh, an Anglican and a prolific writer in the Allelon group, spends considerable time on the lecture circuit well beyond the US and Canada. His work is both provocative and practical. Other Roxburgh titles worth noting: *Missional, Joining God in the Neighborhood* (2011), *Missional Map Making, Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* (2010).
6. Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Mission from the Cross, The Lutheran Theology of Mission*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO. 2009. Well thought out from a systematic point of view. If there is a weakness, it is the assumption that readers are able to fill in biblical background. I confess to being uncomfortable with the presumption of the subtitle, *THE Lutheran Theology of Mission*.
7. Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Black's New Testament Commentary, Hendrickson Publishing, Peabody, MA. 2006. Lincoln contends that John is a mission instruction manual for the NT church. In effect Lincoln

works backwards from 20:30-31 and traces the instructional process from the prologue through chapter 31. He notes the extensive and interchangeable use (42 times) of “pempo” and apostello. My gleanings about mission fill ten pages. Refreshing. Inspiring.

8. James P. Ware, Paul and the Mission of the Church, Philippians in Ancient Jewish Context, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI. 2011. This is a last-minute addition to the top seven. Ware does an impressive job of highlighting the inclusion of the nations in the end time vision of mission in the OT. This understanding welcomed the proselyte but did not actively seek them. He then demonstrates from Phil 2 the new understanding that the end times has taken place necessitating an intentional outreach to all people. An extensive eight-page presentation of “epecho” as “setting forth” grounds every participant in the NT church in reaching out to others. This completely overturns the position of Lutheran Orthodoxy that the Great Commission did not devolve to the church beyond the apostles. Breakthrough theology for mission.

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In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

January 19 through February 2: Rev. Paul Jaster’s three-part tour through the Gospel of Mark

February 9: A wrap-up report on the Fourth International Crossings Conference, by Cathy Lessmann

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# How to Disagree Well

Colleagues,

Christians are a contentious lot. They always have been. Flip open the New Testament to just about anywhere, then ask yourself whether the passage you're staring at would have been written had the people it was addressed to not been at each other's throats over some kind of issue, whether great or small. Chances are very good that your answer would be "no."

That's my theory, at any rate. Were I to look for a colleague to discuss it with, I can't think of a better partner for that conversation than the Rev. Dr. S. John Roth, a New Testament PhD who has been an active participant in the Crossings Community for the past several years. A few of you who are reading this attended Christ Seminary-Seminex with him in the late 1970s. More of you will remember his father, Pr. Sam Roth of Zion Lutheran Church, Ferguson, Missouri, who, in that same stretch of years, was the president and key spokesman for the protest movement of Missouri Synod moderates known as Evangelical Lutherans in Mission, or ELIM for short. Still others of you may have met John at one of the recent Crossings conferences, and if that meeting included a conversation of any substance at all, you'll have walked away from it edified and refreshed.

Late last spring John was elected bishop of the ELCA's Central/Southern Illinois Synod. The key reason for that, I'm guessing, is the informal leadership he had exhibited as a rostered pastor of the synod (Faith, Jacksonville, IL) in addressing the ELCA's great contention of the past decade, namely the question of whether it's fitting and appropriate for the Church to sanction life-long same-sex unions and to receive persons so partnered into the Church's official ministries. Anyone involved in that knows how easily contenders have lapsed

into the age-old sinners' habit of using arguments like trenching tools to establish fixed positions from which epithets get hurled at the incorrigibles on the other side to the edification of no one and the dismay of many, not least of whom will be Christ our Lord. From some email swaps around the time of the 2001 Minneapolis assembly I gathered that John was trying to tackle that habit in his local conference and wherever else people might lend him an ear. When he was kind enough to send me a copy of the speech he gave in the course of last year's election, I saw that he tackled the habit there too-and I wasn't surprised that the saints chose him as their bishop.

I asked John if we could share that little speech with our Thursday Theology readers, folks who think hard and well and clearly, and, like any group of thinkers, will arrive at an assortment of conclusions on hot-button issues. He said yes, so here it is. A caveat as you read. In keeping with standard operating procedure at ELCA elections for bishop, John was given five minutes to speak, not a second more. Five minutes is enough to make a point. It's by no means enough to elucidate it to the satisfaction of the thoughtful. But if the point itself deserves hearing-the Church's entire history suggests that it does-then let the thoughtful hear and receive with thanksgiving, as I pray all of you will do. It would be nice indeed were John able and willing at some point to write more for us on this topic. We'll ask. In the meantime Steve Albertin of our editorial team is putting together some further thoughts of his own on the same matter. Look for them in about a month or so.

A reminder to all, by the way, that we welcome responses to this or any other item in Thursday Theology, always hoping that what you read here will foment a conversation.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

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I grew up in the St. Louis area. My home church was Zion, Ferguson. (Ferguson is a near north-side suburb.) My father was the pastor at Zion all through my growing-up years. I grew up determined not to be a pastor, and started college as a math and business major. But it didn't turn out that way. I changed colleges, and went to seminary. One of earliest and best lessons I learned about ministry was taught to me by my home congregation. I was ordained at my home church, and right after the service ended I was standing in the fairly large entry room just off the sanctuary. Willard Hammerson, one of the many adults of the congregation who in a sense helped raise me, came bounding out of the sanctuary and over to me, he was smiling from ear to ear and his face was beaming, and he said, "Well, John, we did it." "We did it," he said. Mr. Hammerson was right-absolutely right. It wasn't my day; it was the whole congregation's day. It hit me like a ton of bricks that it wasn't me that got me to that point; it was everybody that got me to that point, and going forward it would not be "my" ministry; it would be "our" ministry.

My home church and I were among those who left the LCMS and joined the AELC in the 1970s (the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches). As right about the gospel as I believe we were back then, I have to say that neither we who left the LCMS nor those who stayed in the LCMS learned how to disagree well. And the fracturing continues. That experience substantially shapes my perspective on church conflict now.

We all came together into the ELCA for good reason: we were joyfully united by our trust that we sinners are reconciled to God and to one another by God's grace through Christ Jesus-a gift, purely a gift.

What will our synod look like 5 or 10 years from now? I don't

know. But my experience suggests that the look of our future hinges greatly on the extent to which we are able to disagree well. It seems to me that disagreeing well has at least three characteristics.

1) Fairness. I am disagreeing well when I can state the position of the person I am disputing with accurately enough that that other person recognizes that position as genuinely his/her position.

2) Intellectual integrity. I am disagreeing well when I can state the strongest, most compelling argument against my position. In other words, I am disagreeing well when I can recognize and acknowledge where my own position is most vulnerable and where a contrasting position makes valid points.

3) Honest humility. I am disagreeing well when, after thinking through my position and expressing it with true conviction, I acknowledge that as a fallen, flawed human being I myself may be wrong.

Potentially divisive issues will always come up in the church. Unless we learn how to disagree well, we will all end up losing—we who stay in the ELCA and those who leave to LCMC or NALC or wherever. And I think this holds true not only for synods and church bodies, but also within congregations.

My goal always is that we be, as the apostle Paul said, “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Philippians 2:2). But I would contend that, as sinners dependent upon God’s grace, we enjoy this full accord where, among other things, we are skilled in the art of disagreeing well.

Hope is strong. God has reconciled us—all of us—to God’s self through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation

(2 Corinthians 5:19)-not my ministry of reconciliation, our ministry of reconciliation.

If you call me, I would do everything I can to equip the saints for the work of this ministry-our ministry-for the building up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12).

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In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

January 12: Rev. Richard Gahl's annotated bibliography of recent mission studies, springing from twenty-five years of service as mission executive for the Ohio District LCMS

January 19 through February 2: Rev. Paul Jaster's three-part tour through the Gospel of Mark