

# The American Myth

Colleagues,

Theology is suddenly up for discussion again in the old public square. By “old,” I mean the square as Richard John Neuhaus conceived it when he wrote [his famous book about its nakedness](#). Since then a new square has been imagined and built under names like Facebook and Twitter, the public flocking there en masse to say its unconstrained piece. Theology has frothed and bubbled in that setting from the start. In the older one, where editorial gatekeepers remain on mostly useful patrol, the god-talk has continued to languish. That’s been my impression, at any rate, and nothing more than an impression. Substantiating it, perhaps, is the series of surprises I’ve had over the past year and a half on seeing thoughtful essays about matters religious popping up in venues like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. It’s as if the gatekeepers have grasped that if they want to stay relevant they too have got to grapple with the God-thing again, however gingerly. Good for them. And since they continue for the most part to keep the gates with careful intelligence, good for us all.

All this is prelude to two pieces that surfaced in the old square this week, one via the *Post*, the other via the *Times*. Both merit the attention of odd ducks like us who still think that theology is the most relevant of all the disciplines. [In the first](#), the Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas argues against the grain that the new 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States operates with deep religious convictions. Not that Professor Hauerwas admires those convictions. I say this by way of warning to those of you who want their fellow citizens to cut Mr. Trump some slack. Hauerwas does not. He finds in him a version of the American national theology that also goes by the name “American

exceptionalism," the idea being that God has chosen this land and this amalgam of conquering immigrants to carry out a redemptive project in the world. This notion has long been wildly popular. It gets venerated in churches that dare to wrap themselves in the American flag. Hauerwas calls it idolatrous. Years ago he combined with William Willimon, then a colleague at Duke University and later a United Methodist bishop, to write a jeremiad on that topic entitled [Resident Aliens](#), which is still a good read. Under the subtitle "Life in the Christian Colony," they insist that Christian identity is inherently counter-cultural, with ultimate Christian loyalties belonging exclusively to Christ. Both these ideas, of course, are being vividly reinforced in these present weeks of post-Epiphany, as the lectionary hauls us once again through the opening salvos of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

[The second piece](#), appearing even as today (Feb. 2) slides into tomorrow, is a nuanced musing on competing national theologies by columnist David Brooks. That's how I describe it to you, at any rate. Brooks, for his part, stays away from the word "theology" and speaks instead of national myths, beginning with the one he happens to treasure, as Hauerwas does not. Parenthetically, were I instructing a class of neophyte theologians on the meaning and function of "myth," I'd want to feed them this essay. Brooks captures it with the succinct lucidity that makes him one of the few columnists I'll pause to read whenever his latest effort comes out. Thus, "Myths don't make a point or propose an argument. They inhabit us deeply and explain to us who we are. They capture how our own lives are connected to the universal sacred realities. In myth, the physical stuff in front of us is also a manifestation of something eternal, and our lives are seen in the context of some illimitable horizon." Here is my translation of that: myth is theology embedded in the gut. As Brooks sees it, this deep-down

stuff is of the essence to America's future as a nation. Roiling the present moment is the question of which myth will rule. Will it be the good one, the genuine American myth as articulated for the Massachusetts Bay Colony by John Winthrop and refreshed at Gettysburg by that master of succinctness, Abraham Lincoln? Or will it be an alien import, reeking of Russia, that appears in Brooks' view to have seized the souls of Donald Trump and his advisor, Stephen Bannon? Here the meaning and greatness of America is absolutely at stake. Again to quote: "We are in the midst of a great war of national identity. We thought we were in an ideological battle against radical Islam, but we are really fighting the national myths spread by Trump, Bannon, Putin, Le Pen and Farage." Yes indeed, theology matters. Thus Mr. Brooks.

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If you haven't paused yet to read the essays I mention, let me urge you at this point to go back and follow the links. Of the two, Brooks' is the more important, I think. Sure, the theology embedded in my own gut puts me in much closer agreement with Hauerwas; but Brooks is the one who nails what the Crossings crowd refers to as "tracking." That's where you dig beneath the surface of an issue you're wrestling with to identify those matters of faith and heart that are driving it. Brooks excels at this. In the present instance he leaves me, for one, recalling why and how I've sometimes been proud to be American, and at other times not so much. In either case the myth Brooks celebrates has played a key role, now driving the pride, now exacerbating the embarrassment, the latter arising less from the myth itself than from the country's failure to live up to it. It is, let's face it, an attractive, compelling myth, so compelling that it once caused American flags to sprout in almost every chancel in America, Lutheran ones included; and if those flags have since been pulled from some of those chancels (and always with much weeping and gnashing of congregational teeth), the

driving reason for that will not have been the contradicting theology, centered on the cross, that churches exist to celebrate. Instead someone will have sensed that the myth was being betrayed and was eager to make a statement about that. "America is sinning, not against God so much as against its own animating idea—or is it?" Thus the contention that, since Vietnam, has done much to push the country onto competing carpets of red and blue, with churches dutifully lined up on either side in accordance with the way the powers that be in any given assembly or jurisdiction have answered the question.

Still, as Brooks points out, there's more at work here than an argument about the one myth. Amid the swirl of spirits competing for American hearts are those "alien myths," those other conceptions of what "makes America great." It would be fascinating to see what Brooks might do with this idea were he to expand his column into a 10,000 word essay, or even a book. I imagine him tracking the competition of mythologies through the sweep of American history, with useful reflections on how "the true myth," as he calls it, has managed to endure.

What Brooks wouldn't and couldn't do, I suspect, is to push his analysis still deeper, to the question that a confession Lutheran, say, is obliged to ask. Where is the real God in all this? That's "real God" as opposed to the "providence" or the "universal sacred realities" or the "something eternal" that Brooks restricts himself to talking about. Those of us who stand with St. Paul and his apostolic colleagues in knowing this God as God-in-Christ will immediately suspect that real-God is not amused; or if we don't intuit that, we should. This Sunday we will hear Jesus speak the words that John Winthrop repeated: "You are the light of the world," "the city set on a hill." Presumably Winthrop the Puritan was faithful enough to recognize this as a statement of Christian identity. Would it have grieved him to see it turned into a definition of American identity? I'd

like to think so. In any case, the hijack happened; and these days it falls to those of us who know real-God to remember with penitent humility that the "true American myth," as Brook calls it, rests on a fundamental fallacy. Can America at its best be a blessing to other nations? Well, of course. So can England at its best, or even Zimbabwe at its best, I suppose, though that poor land has been trapped in its worst for ever so long. The point is that even at its best America is not, never has been, and absolutely cannot be the light that Christ is talking about as he sits on the hilltop introducing fresh disciples to the new world that God is busy making in and through him. Of course I take this to be obvious to those of you who read this. It will not be so obvious to lots of people you go to church with. Will their preachers startle them this Sunday with the observation that the light Jesus is talking about is not an American light, but a distinctly Christian light, the one that shines through people who trust that real-God is at work in Jesus, forgiving sins and drilling like a laser through the heart of death? Blessed be they if that should happen.

In the meantime, we also do well to recall Luther's great distinction between God's "alien" work and God's "proper" work. I don't suppose that David Brooks, for all his insightfulness, would think to imagine that God in his alien mode is behind the swirl of "alien myths" that, in Brook's view, are tearing the country apart. On the other hand, those of us with ears to hear will recall the words: "He brings down the mighty from their thrones." "He scatters the proud in their conceits." How more conceited can a country be than to fancy itself as the light that Christ alone is? Yes, that American myth, the fraying of which Brooks mourns, is compelling and attractive. It is also untrue. And if that's the point that God is making at the moment, then may God have mercy on us all even as he makes it.

With that I quit, leaving gobs to be said and good news not

discussed. More on that next time, perhaps, with some thinking about the great Matthean phrase, “the kingdom of heaven.” So much the better if all of us can hear some good news this Sunday. After all, Christ is Lord. The pretenders are not, a point our liturgies are designed to drive home even if the preachers don’t.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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# **Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Epistle, Year A**

SEEKING GOD’S WISDOM

1 Corinthians 2:1-12 [13-16]

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Michael Hoy

1When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. 2For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. 4My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. 6Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. 7But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8None of the rulers of this age understand

this; for it they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" – 10these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is only God's except the Spirit of God. 12Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. [13And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. 14Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. 15Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. 16"For who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.]

## DIAGNOSIS: False Wisdom and Bad Intelligence

### Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Seeking Wisdom in All the Wrong Places

There are plenty of sages out there. You could find them in abundance in a city like Corinth. And people were tuning in and listening to what it is they were selling. Some of the messages of these sages permeated the church, and not everything these sages were selling was the gospel (who wants something so pure and simple as that?). Our cities and places today are not without that kind of human sophistry that can captivate our eyes and ears. And obviously, we haven't tired too much of buying what it is they are selling, even if it is not really good for us. Paul lifts up how this human wisdom it is also readily being sold by "the rulers of this age" (v. 6). Hmm. And that kind of

consumerism is as popular now as it was in Corinth.

#### Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Foolishness

We have not only let this poison slip in through our eyes and ears (v. 9), but it finds a way to poison our brains and hearts and soul. We may not even realize it. It is that “foolishness”, a failure to “understand” or “discern” anymore what is good for us (v. 14), that becomes our faith. And the heart continues to cling to that which it thinks of as godly, and can never get enough of, even as our whole being is weighed down by its burden.

#### Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Doomed to Perish

Where does it all end? There is an ending. It ends with perishing. And that may be our own personal perishing (in death, which shows its ugly face up all along the buying-and-selling journey); and it may also be our perishing as a whole (for which we are getting increasingly planetary evidence). But it will end. And we can count on God to make sure of it, whether we buy that or not.

#### PROGNOSIS: True Wisdom and Good News

#### Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Power/Wisdom of the Cross

The cross of Christ, however, gives us a no-less-real but alternate ending to this madness of doom. Here, Jesus the Christ makes our ending his own, not simply as one among countless millions, but in order to put an end to the ending—of us! Death will not have the last word for our being! This cross is the “power of God” and “wisdom of God” (v. 5; cf. 1:24) to overcome the final verdict of the end.

#### Step Five: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Faith Resting on This

Even in the nickel-words of St. Paul who knew he was never as



eloquent as others (v. 1), faith comes to rest on this promise (v. 5). This faith grasps the power that God gives, through the Spirit of God, who continues to nurture us and feeds us back to health through the faithful proclamation of the gospel and sacraments. Through faith we find our souls restored. We get to have the “mind of Christ” (v. 16) given to us as a gift that helps us “discern” and “understand” where before that was never possible. What ends here is the cycle of being burned out pursuing human wisdom, as we lay our burdens down at Christ’s cross.

#### Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Living Wisdom for All in the Wrong Places

What we get to do is share the promise with others. The sages of Christ, who may seem “foolish” to the world (1:20-25), have something not to sell but to give away—as a free gift, even as it was given to them. To be sure, there are plenty of people in all the wrong places and cities and dwellings who have been looking for wisdom; but what they get in Christ and ourselves as living wisdom of his promise is a gift for which they, with us, may cherish the best “mystery” (musterion) of all in the witness (marturion) of all in God’s promising, free, freeing, good news (v. 1).

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## What Does It Mean “To Follow Jesus”? Tips from Ed Schroeder

Colleagues,

This coming Sunday’s Gospel will feature two of John the

Baptist's disciples hearing him identify Jesus as "the Lamb of God," whereupon (as it will say), "they followed Jesus" (John 1:37).

"Following Jesus" is something of a mantra in American Christian discourse these days, especially in so-called "evangelical" circles. Lutherans who lean in that direction are increasingly addicted to it too. It follows naturally (no wordplay intended) on earlier discussions, also widespread, about "making disciples." Four years ago a Crossings conference explored the word "discipleship." Were we to do a rerun this year, the title would need to be redone, as in "Following Jesus: What Does This Mean?"

And with that, Eureka! I think I've just stumbled on the title for the forthcoming Lenten Midweek series at the congregation I serve. I commend it as well to others of you who are charged with organizing such things. The expression does need our attention. For an example of how it's being used in those aforementioned and influential evangelical circles, you might glance at a fresh blog post by Philip Yancey, entitled "[Election Reflections: Bridging the Gap](#)." A sample sentence: "Those of us who follow Jesus have some repair work to do in helping to heal our nation."

But who are these ones who follow Jesus? Is it a subset of "all Christians," and if so, how is the subset defined? Yancey doesn't address these questions. Nor do others who use the language, at least in my hearing and reading. Again we hit the standard problem with mantra-like speech. Those who employ it take it for granted everyone else knows what they mean and employ it the same way. Maybe they do. More likely they don't, as Lutherans keep discovering, notoriously, with their pet shibboleth, "gospel."

So “*Was ist das?*” as Luther keeps asking in the catechism. “What is it,” and in this case, what is it “to follow Jesus?” By happy chance I put that question to Ed Schroeder a week and a half ago. He mulled for a night or two, and then came back with more than enough to get some of us started on our plans for that Lenten series. See below.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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### **On Discipleship, or “Following Jesus”**

“Discipleship,” I think, came into widespread English theological language usage with the translation of Bonhoeffer’s book *Nachfolge*, though the Disciples of Christ denomination had laid claim to the term long before that. “*Nachfolge*” is German for the word “following,” stemming from Jesus’ invitation, “*Folge mir nach.*” Follow me.

The expanded English title, *The COST of Discipleship*, chosen for Reginald H. Fuller’s 1948 translation of Bonhoeffer’s 1937 original, already spilled the beans for what was between the covers. Bonhoeffer’s contrast, “cheap grace” vs. “costly grace,” became an English theological idiom.

Strictly speaking, the abstract noun “discipleship” is not to be found in the New Testament, though Jesus speaks of “making disciples,” the standard English translation of *matheeteuoo* in Greek, which is the noun “disciple” (*matheetes*) turned into a verb. It can be rendered “become a disciple” or “make a disciple” according to NT Greek lexicographer Frederick Danker.

A contemporary Lutheran theologian has suggested, perhaps with some whimsy, that “apostleship” rather than discipleship might

be closer to the heart of Jesus' mission mandate to us disciples. At least, according to Jesus' words at the end of the Gospel of St John: "As the Father sent me, so send I you." The Greek verb for "send" here is *apostelloo*.

So, is it apostl-ize or discipl-ize? Are these two sides of the same coin? Perhaps this is just front view and back view of the same item. "Apostle" looks to the front as someone on assignment, eyes focused on the task ahead. "Disciple" is rear-view, with the focus on where we are coming from, namely from an already existing Christ-connection, and from that connection now "on assignment." But then discipleship also has its front-view, keeping focused on the Lord whom one is following. *Nach-folge*. Following after.

Fundamental to both terms is the nature of the Christ-connection.

From my golden-oldie vantage point the Christ-connection in much of the discipleship talk I've heard over the years is a moralistic one, regularly linked to the phrase "Christ as Savior and Lord." Here salvation—"full" salvation — is a two-step procedure. The first step is Jesus-as-Savior—Good Friday and Easter and all that "to save us." Then comes a "stage two" where, though already saved from sin, the "saved one" is not yet "home." Rather she still needs discipleship-training. She still needs Jesus-as-Lord, and some mentor, some guidance, some outside assistance, to assist her in "filling out the agenda" that now lies before her in her new life-in-Christ. Once saved, she needs to be mentored (discipled) in actually following the One who redeemed her.

This raises the question: Is "following Christ" in the language of the New Testament a term for what happens *after* faith in Christ has happened, or is "following Christ" another of the New

Testament's many metaphors for faith-in-Christ itself?

Here are the New Testament "Follow me" texts.

–Matt. 8:19. A scribe said "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied "Foxes have holes, birds have nests,"etc. Also Luke 9:57.

–Matt. 8:21-22. Another disciple said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." Also Luke 9:59: Jesus said "Follow me." But he said "Lord, first let me go..." Jesus said, "Let the dead bury..."

–Matt. 9:9. Jesus said to Matthew, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

–Mark 2:14. Jesus saw Levi at the tax booth and said "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. Also Luke 5:27-28

–Matt. 19:21. [To the young man with many possessions] Jesus said, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." v.22: . . . he went away grieving. Also Mark 10:21, Luke 18:22

–John 1:43 Jesus found Philip and said "Follow me."

–John 21:19 Asking Peter "Do you love me?" When you were younger you went wherever you wished, but when you are old... (to indicate his death)... v.19 After this he said to him, "Follow me."

–Matt. 10:38 "whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

–Matt. 16:24 "If any want to become my followers, let them deny

themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

–Mark 8:34 “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

–Luke 9:23 “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

–John 12:24 If a grain of wheat dies, bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it . . . v.26: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.”

–Matt. 19:27. Peter said, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” Also Mark 10:28, Luke 18:28

–John 8:12. Jesus said “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

–John 10:4. ...The sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger...

–John 10:27 My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.

Seems to me that these *Nach-folge* (“Follow me”) texts are the invitation to faith, not initially focused on a new lifestyle, a new ethics, which surely comes when you are following THIS leader.

And because no one’s own life is identical with another’s, can there even be a “one size fits all” biographical description for the specifics of what follows when any person becomes a Christ-follower? If there could be such a standard handbook for the practice of discipleship, what would that be? Who would spell it out?

This brings to mind for me—no surprise—once more my teacher Elert and his ethics book section on “Christ as Lord and Master.” Whether he was aware of it or not, these pages are Elert’s Lutheran alternative to much of “evangelical” theology’s mantra “Christ as Savior and Lord” mentioned above. For in the fleshing out of that mantra, the benign Christ-the-Savior morphs into a New Moses of Christ-as-Lord. Christ’s “new commandment” loses its law-free novelty and back-slides into being Moses-redivivus,—even more, Moses with addenda. Not only the Decalogue but Christ’s own imperatives which get added to it, also morphed from their native grace-imperative-voice (“you now get to . . .”) into law-imperatives (“you’ve now got to . . .”). In short, morphed back into the pattern of the Galatian “other gospel,” St.Paul’s own label for what was replacing “the freedom for which Christ has set us free” in the Galatian congregation.

Herewith my summary of Elert’s *The Christian Ethos*, Chapter 5, “The Christ Encounter,” Section: “Christ as Lord and Master”

- The new ethos of a forgiven sinner, the new quality of Life-in-Christ, is biographically real, not imaginary. It is grounded in Christ’s forgiveness verdict, and thus we live IN grace by continuous connection with Christ. Lord and Master—*kyrios* and *didaskalos*—are two New Testament terms for this ongoing connection.
- Christ’s lordship is not “legalistic lordship” (Latin: *imperium*), to rule “over,” as does an emperor.
- His lordship is a “gracious lordship,” (Latin: *dominium*). He rules “under” as servant. His pyramid of authority is upside-down. This Lord lays down his life for his people.

With emperors, the people lay down their lives for the emperor.

- As “master” (*didaskalos*, teacher) Jesus has disciples (*matheetes*), apprentices learning his “trade.” But he does not “teach” us what we are to be and do, as rabbis did in his day. He IS what we are to be and do. He teaches as a master-craftsman does in the ancient guild system. Master means “Meister,” the expert. “Watch what I’m doing. Now you do the same thing and I’ll watch. And, when you fail, I’ll show you again how I do it.”
- Christ continues in this Meister-role for his disciples throughout history. His ascension and exaltation have not recast him into any other kind of Lord and Master than he was to his first disciples, the Meister of love, of forgiveness, of prayer, of bearing the cross. And of much more. Christian discipleship is living as apprentices of this Meister constantly attuned to his invitation: “follow me.”

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What are the lineaments of discipleship built on this basis?

- Christ himself continues as the major mentor.
- Parallel is “being led by the Holy Spirit,” Christ’s co-coach for living the Christ-life.
- And carried out, not solo, but in the conversation and consolation of others who also are following in his train.

Edward Schroeder

The Eve of Epiphany 2017