

# Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition

Colleagues,

If “mission,” our general theme for these past many weeks, is a hot topic in the church at large these days, so is “discipleship.” It stands to reason. The one requires the other. Who can be sent—missioned, if you will—unless they know what the sending is for and are ready to serve the one who sends them? Mission agents need training, in other words, and if the mission they serve is Christ’s they need intense training of a sort that God alone is able to accomplish. St. Mark’s Gospel is especially vivid on that point.

That said, what’s the training about and what does it aim to achieve? The Church’s multitude of traditions continue to answer that in many and often conflicting ways. Today’s offering brings you Luther’s view of it and begins to explore how that view played out among subsequent bearers of the Law/Gospel tradition. What you’re getting is the first half of a paper delivered at January’s Crossings conference, the theme of which was discipleship. The author is Robert Kolb, Missions Professor of Systematic Theology (Emeritus) at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and, famously, co-editor of the latest and definitive English translation of the Book of Concord. Dr. Kolb’s scholarship is prodigious. We learned in January that he’s been spending six months of every year poring through archives in Germany that bear on the development of the Lutheran tradition over the centuries. You’ll see abundant fruits of that research as you read, not only now but next week too, when we send you the second half of his paper. His assignment at the conference was to tell us what our Lutheran forebears understood discipleship

to be, and how they practiced it. You'll be surprised, we're guessing, by his opening observation. Then you'll be enriched by the wealth of what follows. It bears a close and careful reading, especially today when too many Lutherans, intent on "making disciples," are repeating old mistakes that Luther et al. corrected. More on that two weeks from now.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editors

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## The History of Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition

If we wished to be fundamentalistic, we could make this a very short lecture. Even though Luther used the words for "disciple" and "discipleship," in his translation of Scripture, the word itself did not become a part of Lutheran theological vocabulary until much later, perhaps first in the twentieth century—Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Nachfolge* (he did not think it was necessary to mention the cost in the title) being the first, or at least one of the first, major work promoting the vocabulary in our tradition.

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

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

The dynamic equivalent of "disciple" in Wittenbergese was simply "believer" [Gläubiger] or "listener" [Zuhörer] or "child in the congregation" [Pfarrkind]. Some in our day may protest that "believer" is something less than a disciple, only the starting point. But Luther, Melanchthon, their students, and their students' students believed that if you trusted in the Lord above all that he had made, you would do what the logic of faith makes inevitable: those who have been buried with Christ and raised with him walk in his footsteps.

Many Reformation historians today are emphasizing the continuities between late medieval piety and Luther's thought [1]; the continuities should not surprise us since the most original of human geniuses have been the products of their time and carried much of whatever traditions they inherited with them into their new way of thinking. At the same time, however, Luther remains the most celebrated sixteenth-century denizen of the planet not because of the continuities but because he transformed the basic definition of what it means to be Christian. He abandoned the definition of the Middle Ages—a religion conceived of within the framework of pre-Christian Germanic worship of the gods, in which ritual performance of sacred rites and practices insured the relationship between God and human creatures. If ritual secured the individual

Christian's life, the hierarchy secured the life of church and society in this system.

Luther turned instead to the definition he found to be biblical—a life of trust in the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, who is a God of conversation and community, a life which proceeds from God's address to his human creatures in his Word, in all its several forms. In that definition the entire life of the Christian is determined by the fundamental relationship of love and trust that stems from listening to God's Word and turns into a life of praise to God and service to other people. Ritual and liturgy are not absent from the life of the church in his vision of Christian living; they serve as vehicles and setting for the proclamation of God's Word in all its forms and the response in the believers' praise and prayer. The daily life of believers is complicated by the presence of sin and evil, which create the situation in which God's law must crush false faiths and their symptoms, so that his gospel promises can re-create that trust that defines the fullness of our humanity. Medieval ritual performance gave way to faithful hearing of God's Word as the key to the dynamic equivalent of what we call discipleship.

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

The first element of Luther's understanding of discipleship focused on the communicating God and the trust that defines human life by defining him as the source of all good and a refuge in every time of need—the ultimate source of our core sense of identity, security, and meaning. On the basis of this redefinition of what a Christian is—a hearer of God's Word, one who trusts in him through Christ, and who lives a life as a joyful child of God in Christ—Luther also transformed the word “fromm” “upright,” the kind of person you want for a neighbor, into a word which carried the connotation of a faith-based life of new obedience—“pious” in the best sense of the word. Brian

Brock notes that “the preoccupation of antique conceptions of ethics with individual flourishing is displaced in Luther by an inquiry into what it means to live with God, in which the dramatics of fellowship are emphasized. ... Luther’s emphasis is on transformation into the form of Christ understood in terms of *Nachfolge*, the following of ... a God who is leading in time. ... Luther’s is a dialogical ethic of hearing and speaking with God.” [2] The relationship between loving God and trusting child of God and hearer of his Word determined all of life. Luther presumed that God’s newborn, re-created children reflect the fact that they are chips off the old block. That Luther seldom used the word discipleship need not distract us from the fact that he was very much concerned about *Nachfolge*, as the sense and shape of the life of faith. For instance, his Small Catechism was designed to serve as a handbook for Christian living, on the basis of the personal acquaintanceship which its text, particularly that of the Creed, fosters.

The second element of Luther’s understanding of discipleship stems from his placement of repentance—being turned from false gods to Jesus Christ—at the heart of daily Christian living. Luther’s conception of how human life proceeds within God’s greater history of dealing with his people shaped the reformer’s understanding of daily life. He struggled his entire life with the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized. Emerging from the penitential piety of the monastery, which had burdened him with his guilt over his sins in ways that the ever-easier pastoral discipline of the fifteenth century failed to alleviate, Luther recognized in the pattern of Israel’s apostasies, God’s call to repentance, Israel’s return to faith and faithfulness, and its subsequent falling away a pattern for each individual believer’s own history. He defined true biblical repentance as the heart of the daily Christian life: “the old creature in us with all sins and

evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance ... and daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” [3] Indeed, “the whole life of the Christian is a life of repentance,” [4] of daily dying through the surrender of sinfulness to the buried Christ and the daily resurrection to a new life defined at its core by trust in the one in whose footsteps faith dares to follow. Convinced of the devil’s power, Luther viewed everyday life in both the realm of faith and that of life as battlefields on which God’s truth battled Satan’s lie, Christ’s gift of life stood under attack from the legions of the murderer, the great deceiver (John 8:44). The whole life of the Christian is part of the great eschatological conflict between God and Satan. His reordering of the medieval program for instruction, the catechism, in his handbooks for catechism, placing law before gospel and the Christian life thereafter reflects this fundamental conviction about the shape of the believer’s life.

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

situations according to his callings and commands.

A fourth observation about the shaping of Lutheran piety, from the days in which, according to a recent issue of *The Economist*, “Luther went viral” [6] until now. James Nestingen has pointed out that Luther’s catechisms provided not only a linguistic but also a cultural translation of Latin models of conveying the faith. [7] Yale missiologist Lamin Sanneh points out that when such cultural translations take place, the culture experiences change from the input of the Christian message, and the message is shaped by the language and perceptions of the culture. [8] Among many very important cultural factors was the use of media, especially in two forms. The Reformation developed the potential and place of the sermon, locally prepared and delivered for the most part, as the most effective way of shaping minds and lives of villagers, townspeople, and courtiers alike. It exploited the half-century-old but not yet fully developed potential of movable type for shaping minds and lives across a wide geographical area. Luther’s catechetical revolution rode on the development of Gutenberg’s way of printing as well as the rhetorical rules for oral delivery of the message which Melancthon was developing precisely for this purpose, among others. The development of the relationship of love and trust in God, as he has revealed himself as Jesus Christ, the daily dying and rising accomplished in repentance through the use of God’s law and his gospel, the cultivation of new obedience through the motivation of the gospel according to instruction given in the law all took place through the use of God’s Word, in oral, written, and sacramental forms. It is a commonplace that, although the Wittenberg Reformation took place to a large extent as an oral event, it was fueled and driven by effective use of the printing press. [9] We dare not lose sight of both verbal components as integral parts of this Way of the Word: Lutherans have always lived from what was said and what was read. Sermons,

absolution, and the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another live from and foster the reading of the Word in Scripture and every other form of Christian literature as the agents by which repentance and faith are created and new obedience finds its forms.

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

### The Second Generation

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

Luther's students and adherents also used many of the same rhetorical tools and other methods which they had learned from him and Melanchthon. Lutherans were initially, for the most part, listeners because many could not read or write. During the last half millennium, they have generally recognized that, as Luther observed, oral forms of communicating the gospel that arise from Scripture, such as the sermon and catechism instruction as well as absolution and the mutual conversation



and consolation of Christians with one another, have played an important role in Lutheran cultivation of Christian living in every era. But the printing press did serve Luther and Melanchthon well, and their followers put its technology to use with skill. Devotional literature, catechisms, sermon books, and hymnals have cultivated Lutheran following in Christ's footsteps in every era.

In the first and second generations after Luther and Melanchthon had launched the profound alteration in the perceived form and shape of Christian faith and life, the emphasis on trust in the suffering and dying Savior, and on his resurrection, remained clearly at the heart of Lutheran preaching. The sermons in the postils and other printed homiletical works, including funeral sermons, focused on what Christ has done for sinners and on their need for the working of both law and gospel in their daily lives. The mortification of the flesh and the call of the Holy Spirit to cling to Christ remained a key to at least the published preacher's message. But even as Luther had been most concerned about giving his hearers and readers clear, forthright instruction in what to do to live in trust toward God by following his plan for human living—for instance, in his Wartburg Postil of 1521/1522—so his students and followers also focused repeatedly and strongly on helping their congregations understand what God wanted them to do as his trusting children, where many of them were straying from his plan, and how they should carry out their callings by obeying his commands.

Much Lutheran literature aimed at the fostering of trust in the Savior and care for the neighbor by grounding the hearer's understanding of human existence in the Scriptural address of the sinner/saint and deepening the desire of believers to fear, love, trust God above all else and to love the neighbor as oneself. Luther had designed his Small Catechism for use by parents in cultivating the faith of their children and servants.

His ideal of a life guided by meditation on the catechism took concrete form in the second section of the Small Catechism, in which children were to learn the discipline of consideration of the content of Scripture in the form of the commandments, creed, and Lord's Prayer and response in prayer.

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

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

applied their message to others. When visitors stopped by, the physician often told them what he had been reading and “applied it to our own times and activities, for our instruction, comfort, and warning.” [11]

In fact, most families seem not to have been capable of meeting Luther’s expectations and Ratzeburger’s example, but the tradition of catechization remained strong in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheran churches. Preaching the catechism, continuing the chief medieval mode of offering instruction, was mandated in most church orders, but increasingly pastors or schoolteachers also used Luther’s catechisms and the flood of expansions of them that appeared throughout the period to train up children in the way that they were to go. At every level of learning, from primary school to university catechetics, throughout the period, from Johann Spangenberg’s early supplements to Luther from 1541 and 1542 to Conrad Dietrich’s range of catechisms and university textbooks, pastors and professors contributed to the burgeoning body of manuals of the faith, which sometimes justified the judgment of Hans-Jürgen Fraas, who saw an “Akademisierung des Katechismus”—a trend toward theoretical language and detailed information. [12] This judgment compares apples and oranges, to a large extent, for the expansions of the catechism were aimed at upper level students in many cases. Nonetheless, most perpetuated Luther’s understanding of the catechism as instruction not only for the head, but for heart and hand as well. The way of life that this instruction molded found its grounding in faith in Christ even when the balance of emphasis shifted to the law, as it inevitably does in instructing children, also through the Lutheran catechisms, which strove to serve as handbooks for Christian living. [13]

The catechisms taught people who also absorbed the faith from a variety of other forms of literature. In sermons and devotional

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

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

## Endnotes

[1] Prominent among them has been Bernd Hamm; see the collection of his essays, *Religiosität im späten Mittelalter*.

Spannungspole, Neuaufbrüche, Normierungen, ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

[2] Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God. On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 165-166.

[3] SC Baptism 4, BC 360.

[4] SC, Table of Christian Callings, BC365-367.

[5] SC Confession and Absolution, 20, BC 360.

[6] "How Luther went viral," *The Economist*, December 17th, 2011: 93-96.

[7] James A. Nestingen, "Luther's Cultural Translation of the Catechism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001), 440-452.

[8] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

[9] Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), e.g., 1-2, 11, 37, 172.

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

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

[12] See Hans-Jürgen Fraas, *Katechismustradition. Luthers kleiner Katechismus in Kirche und Schule* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971) 72. Fraas suggests that Melanchthon's *Catechesis puerilis* (1540) is an early example of an academic catechism.

[13] See Gerhardt Bode, "Instruction of the Christian Faith by Lutherans after Luther," in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical*

Culture, 1550-1675, Robert Kolb, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2008)159-204.

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