

Discipleship—Lutheran Style

Colleagues,

We're but two weeks away from closure in our 3 months as ELCA Global Mission Volunteers with the Lutheran Church in Singapore. The calling card (everybody has to have one in Asia) they created for me says: "Theologian in Residence." So I've preached 16 times (two more to go), held 8 weekly seminars with pastors (one more to go) on the theology of the Book of Concord, taught six sessions for Lutheran students at the ecumenical (mainline denominations) Trinity Theological College on "Lutheran Distinctives," had 11 presentations on various topics for church-wide audiences (3 still coming), and done some consultations. Last week there was a five-day gap in our chores here in Singapore, so Marie and I flew northwest across the Straits of Malacca (70 minute plane ride) to the island of Sumatra (Indonesia) to Medan, the second largest city—so we were told—in the country after Jakarta. There we were the guests of retired bishop Armencius Munthe and his wife Floriana—both fabulous people—friends from ancient days when Armencius and we too were students in Germany at Hamburg University. Munthe was bishop of one of the several Batak churches—"several" because of differing local languages (and also some church squabbles). The Bataks were missionized by the famous Lutheran Ludwig Nommensen back in the 19th century. [His "saint's day" is Sunday after next in the Lutheran calendar.] The whole countryside in this slice of North Sumatra (and we saw a fair slice of it) is dotted with Batak Lutheran church buildings. That part of Sumatra is "majority Christian" in an otherwise "majority Muslim" nation.

Of course, I didn't escape from being asked to sing for my supper. It was a two-hour presentation (basically how to do "Crossings"—a Lutheran way to read the Bible and also to "read" the world) at "STT Abdi Sabda," the Joint Protestant Seminary in

Medan. Apparently it was a “y’all come” assembly with 300 students showing up plus quite a few faculty.

Last Friday it was back to Singapore for a Saturday workshop, Sunday preaching and the Monday clergy seminar. May 23 is the last task here. Thereafter we’re “free at last.” Well, sortuv.

Present plans call for a 2300-mile (one way) trip to eastern India to the state of Manipur where for two years now we’ve been hustling support for a mission up in the mountains with tribal folks. The local pastor and wife in this Manipur mission, Roel and Shangthar Moyol, were my students two years ago when we were working in New Haven, CT, at the Overseas Ministries Study Center [OMSC]. And they insist that since we are “so close,” we visit the mission—and, of course, preach and teach. The place is in what’s called a “restricted area” so that we need a special permit (besides our India visa) to get there. But Roel says he’s got it all taken care of, so we’re scheduled to be there May 26-29. Airfare there is not cheap, but we cannot say no.

Thereafter we’ve got two weeks before our plane ticket says: Go home. Invitations from 2 other OMSC students—one an Anglican cleric, one a Baptist pastor—will take us to Yangon, Myanmar (formerly Rangoon, Burma). Also a visit to Hanoi, Vietnam (another former student), and possibly a few days in Jogjakarta (Indonesia) for a meeting with people we know in the Asian Christian Art Association, some of whose creations grace the walls of our condo in St. Louis.

All of the above is, “deo volente,” if God so wills. But now back to Singapore.

Even before we left St. Louis, the job description they sent from Singapore for work with the Lutherans here asked for sessions on “Lutheran discipleship and disciple-making” during our time here. My first response while still at home was “Huh?

That's not Lutheran language, not our vocabulary for faith and life. Those are strange wineskins. How easy or hard is it to put the Reformation Aha! of 'promissory faith' and 'daily work in secular vocations' into those skins?" But I said I'd try.

Luther's catechisms commended themselves to me as the rock from which we are hewn, the place to quarry for Lutheran discipleship. The grand finale for this assignment comes next Monday and Tuesday at a concluding Pastors' Retreat on that topic. It'll be across the border in (majority Muslim) Malaysia—a mere five miles away from where I sit at this computer—at a retreat center there. Depending on what happens, I may tell you about it in next week's posting.

In "practicing" on this topic at congregational events in these months I learned some things. There is no NT term for "discipleship." So it's a new wineskin. That's not necessarily a demerit. But it commends caution. And the serious question: Is this skin capable of holding the New Wine that Jesus offers? Even more, of being a vessel for the New Wine that Jesus IS?

So far my answer is a mixed bag. Much of that arises from the fact that these terms in contemporary church parlance come with heritages. They are not empty wineskins. If I didn't know that before, I have learned so here. Discipleship (and its beloved cognate amongst Lutherans hereabouts, "disciple-making,") comes with pre-packaged instructions. Since it is a borrowed term, it already has had wine in it, and some is still there. The vineyards for that wine are the conservative evangelical tradition, mostly "made in America," so with the skin some wine comes along.

Such as these items: "Discipling" Jesus comes with "some assembly needed," and the instructions are specific. The specifics are regularly behavioral. Disciples do some things

that non-disciples don't do, and disciples do NOT do some things that non-disciples DO do. "Faith-in-Christ-as-SAVIOR" is seen as step one –usually called a "decision" or "giving your life to the Lord." And after that given we move on to "following Jesus as LORD." It's basically ethics. That's the difference between Christ as Savior and Christ as Lord. Au contraire Luther, of course, where they are synonymous. See the Small Catechism, 2nd Article of the Creed.

And because faith is taken as a given, as a presupposition, faith itself easily moves to the background as we now concentrate on ethics. But as the "Augsburg Aha!" insisted: when faith becomes a given, but not the constant and recurring grounding, then ethics become legal. Stuff you "gotta" or at least "really oughta" do if you are genuinely Christ's disciple. Melanchthon's agenda in Apology 4, "How to commend good works without losing the promise," is fundamental. And it is a clear alternative, seems to me, to the discipleship theology from American fundamentalism. It's finally the difference between a lawgiver Lord and a Gospel-giver Lord. Again in Apology 4 Melanchthon responds to Augsburg's critics by exposing their ethics of "law-obedience" and their cluelessness of the ethics of "Gospel-obedience."

Discipleship is a big item amongst Lutherans here. We've seen it regularly in the "vision statements" of several congregations—printed on the bulletin cover and bannered in the sanctuary. Here's one: "Vision Statement: To Glorify God through a life of True Discipleship and Disciple making." The pastor of this church told me he borrowed it from "Reformed sources" because discipleship is "big time" among Christians in Singapore and his congregation wanted to be in step. Another factor here is that only two pastors of the 20-plus in LCS have had a Lutheran seminary education. [Granted, a Lutheran Seminary does not necessarily make a Lutheran theologian.] Most all LCS

pastors are grads of the two protestant seminaries in town: the ecumenical main-line-denomination seminary mentioned above or the more recently established Singapore Bible College with its “evangelical” commitments. The only Lutheran stuff offered to Lutheran seminarians at either place is a one-semester seminar in “Lutheran distinctives.” Thus the problem—and they all tell me it’s the reason we were invited here—is that if a pastor’s “theological cake” was baked by a “reformed recipe,” Lutheran icing is unlikely to sink in very deep.

Back to discipleship. I’m trying to mine Luther’s catechism to put a Gospel-vintage into the discipleship wineskin. We’ll see next week what happened. Some items are:

1. There is no “one-size-fits-all” of behavioral specifics for faith in Christ and a lifestyle that follows therefrom. There are a variety of gifts—though the same Spirit.
2. The variety of callings in the various placements (relationships) where God puts each of us also makes generic “do’s and don’t’s”—even when Gospel-grounded as “grace imperatives”—hard to envision.
3. The primal challenges Christians face in the world are challenges to their trust in Christ, not the ethics that flow therefrom. Even behavioral dilemmas, “ethics issues,” are faith-focused. It’s either to trust Christ in this crunch and act accordingly, or to trust some “other gospel” and “march to its tune.”

At my final seminar on the Book of Concord this week, I got sassy enough to hand out what I’ll append below.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

Some thoughts about Lutheran Vision Statements for the LCS: Step 1. Give “discipleship” back to the Baptists. [Danger: wineskin with “old” wine still in it.]

Step 2. Use Lutheran Distinctives instead. Perhaps some of these—

- A. Pursuing good works without losing Christ’s promise (or, . . . BY using Christ’s promise) (Apology IV)
- B. Dedicated to the Care & Redemption of All that God has made. (Luther: God’s 2 hands)
- C. Proclaiming repentance & forgiveness of sins in Christ’s name to all nations. (Lk.24:47)
- D. Sent into the World as the Father sent Jesus (John 20)
- E. Ambassadors for Christ...with a message of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:19f.)
- F. Easter people: Offering Christ’s hope in a hopeless world (I Peter)
- G. Easter people: Offering Christ’s freedom to a world in bondage. (Galatians)
- H. 100% free and 100% servants: Christ’s Formula for Living the Good Life. (Luther: Christian Liberty)
- I. Dying and rising with Christ in our daily life callings. (Luther: Small Catechism)
- J. Showing forth Christ’s death—and resurrection—until he comes. (I Corinthians 11)
- K. Saved by forgiveness. Sent to Serve. (Matthew)
- L. “The time is fulfilled. God’s kingdom is here. Repent and Believe the Good News.” (Jesus’ own “vision statement” in Mark 1:15).