

# The Bishop (Church Executive) as Disciple

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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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.

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