

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

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 form *matheeteuoo* in Greek, which is the noun "disciple" (*matheetees*) 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?

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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

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