



Defining and Pursuing Discipleship

Theological Reflections on Discipleship from Dr. Nathan Howard Yoder

The following paper was written by Dr. Nathan Howard Yoder, an NALC pastor and a member of the Commission on Theology and Doctrine. Dr. Yoder wrote this paper in response to a request from the Commission.

The Commission sees this paper as a valuable theological introduction to the ministry of discipleship among our congregations. Its intention is to support and ground theologically the NALC's ongoing emphasis on discipleship. The Commission trusts that this paper will provide a Biblically-based rationale for our life and mission as disciples of Christ.

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Already you are clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:4-5, ESV).

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The call to discipleship brings about the reality of having Jesus Christ as one's Lord. Being a disciple does not mean, first and foremost, subscribing to a particular course of instruction or a discipline of service and morality. It means to be in *fellowship* with Jesus Christ, and thus to persevere in the calling to hold fast to his person.¹

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth (New York: SCM Press Ltd, 1959; reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 59. See also David Yeago, "Theses on Discipleship," TMs, 1 July 2014, Thesis 1.1, 1.2.

Following a Risen Lord

There is an “irreducible discontinuity”² separating the band who followed Jesus along the trails of first-century Judea — the Twelve, the Seventy-Two (Luke 10), and their larger circle — from the multitude of us who have been brought into fellowship with the Lord after his crucifixion and resurrection. Pre-resurrection discipleship failed. It ended in sinful betrayal, denial, and fear. Jesus told the Twelve this would happen: “You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered’” (Matt. 26:31-35). The Lord had chosen them to accompany him to his Passion — an end he clearly, patiently, and repeatedly explained to them (Matt. 20:18; Luke 18:31; Mark 10:33). He described fellowship with him in the language of this terminus: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24).³ But when his hour came, they denied *him* instead. The cross marked the end of the disciples’ road with Jesus. It stood in judgment of their guilt in abandoning him, just as it stands in judgment against the pathology and complicity of the whole fallen human race (“This Jesus, whom *you* killed,” Acts 3:15; 5:35).

In light of the empty tomb, the cross also marks the *beginning* of *post*-Easter discipleship. Everything has changed. Jesus died *for* those who denied him, for the sinners of every time and place who handed him over to death. He took our pathology upon himself, before his Father in heaven. Risen from the dead, he himself is our righteousness. The post-resurrection call to discipleship is therefore a sacrament of the *forgiveness of sins*. Holy Baptism is this call and sacrament: it is both the inception of fellowship with Christ and the enduring bond between the Lord and his disciples.⁴ No one is “fit” to be a disciple; in Baptism, the Holy Spirit grafts dead sinners onto the True Vine of their living Lord (John 15:1) and exchanges their sin for his righteousness. The new disciple has received a priceless treasure: “victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts” (Large Catechism 4:41).⁵ To be a disciple is thus to be *redeemed*, delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the ownership and kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13).⁶

Citizenship in Christ’s kingdom entails responsible recognition of his lordship — both reliance upon him in his Word for life and salvation, and acknowledgement that he is worthy of obedience.⁷ Post-Easter, the bond of fellowship conveyed in Christ’s command to “take up your cross and follow me” is incorporated into the reality of the Paschal Mystery: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness

² Maurice Lee, “Discipleship” (paper presented at the 2014 Younger Theologians Colloquium, Charleston, SC, July 21, 2014), 5.

³ Bonhoeffer, 87.

⁴ Yeago, Thesis 2.4. See also Bonhoeffer, 231-232.

⁵ *The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* [hereafter cited as BC], trans. and ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 441-442.

⁶ Yeago, Thesis 1.9. See also Bonhoeffer, 231.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, 57-58. See also Yeago, Thesis 1.4, 1.9.

of life” (Rom. 6:4).⁸ To have faith thus entails *holding fast* to Baptism, our bond with Christ in his suffering, death, and resurrection, an identity that is not of our making or our choosing but stems from the Lord’s command.⁹ No longer naked in our sin and hiding from the sight of God (Gen. 3:7), we now stand with Christ before the Father and, in the Holy Spirit, wear the righteousness of our Lord himself (“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ,” Gal. 3:27).

St. Paul uses λογίζομαι, “reckon,” in describing the *active engagement of faith* with Baptism (“So you also must *consider/reckon* yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”).¹⁰ The Lutheran Confessions frame this reckoning as consciously wearing the “daily garment” of Baptism (Large Catechism 4:84)¹¹ and the continual return to Baptism in repentance, always adhering in faith to the forgiveness that flows from the vine of Christ. “If we wish to be Christians,” writes Luther, “we must practice the work that makes us Christians... [and] where amendment of life does not take place, Baptism is not being used but resisted” (Large Catechism 4: 85, 68).¹² Where branches remain on the source of their life, flowers and fruit will readily appear (John 15:8).

Christ Present in Word and Sacrament in the Church

With the Lord’s ascension, the post-Easter call to “follow after Christ” has changed. Discipleship no longer means to follow a visible person; instead, it means to be joined to Christ’s Body by the Holy Spirit and to hold fast to the Risen Lord by the means of grace he personally specified. Through Baptism, the Holy Spirit brings us into the Church, “the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God” (Large Catechism 2:42).¹³

Christians of all ages are called to engage actively with Holy Scripture. Indeed, the “first and most basic way” one recognizes the authority of God’s Word is by *reading* it¹⁴ and *listening* to it being read. Parents thus promise at the Baptism of children to “place in their hands [and in their ears] the Holy Scriptures.”¹⁵ The daily study of Scripture is thus an essential part of the “reckoning” of faith. First and foremost, however, we are not called to keep the Bible to ourselves, but to share in it. In the assembly of the baptized, Scripture is read publically, and exposition is offered. The Gospel is *proclaimed* in the midst of Christ’s people.¹⁶ This proclamation is the apostolic kerygma; St. Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 engaged the Scriptures to declare to the people both the advent of the

⁸ Yeago, Thesis 2.6.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, 231. See also Yeago, Thesis 1.3.

¹⁰ David Yeago offers that “reckon” is preferable to “consider,” as it implies “taking something into account practically.” See Thesis 2.9 and accompanying footnote.

¹¹ BC, 446.

¹² BC, 445-446.

¹³ BC, 416.

¹⁴ David Yeago, “Authority in the Church 1: The Authority of the Word of God in the Church” (paper presented at the NALC Pastors Conference in Orlando, FL, February 10-12, 2015), 5.

¹⁵ *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) [hereafter cited as LBW], 121.

¹⁶ Yeago, “Authority 1,” 6.

Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-32) and the coming of the Davidic Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of God.¹⁷ “Cut to the heart” by the Spirit through the Word and with Peter’s instruction, three thousand people follow the Lord’s command: they repent and are baptized. And, St. Luke writes, “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

The three thousand thus act in obedience to another command: to “do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:24). These words “are addressed to disciples of Christ; hence whoever would be one of them, let him faithfully hold to this sacrament, not from compulsion, coerced by men, but to obey and please the Lord Christ” (Large Catechism 5:45).¹⁸ Trusting that Jesus is precisely where he indicated, the baptized receive his very body and blood for the forgiveness of sins and the nurturing of their faith and life in him. The “specific and concrete way” in which the Lord has specified his availability to his disciples is in Holy Communion.¹⁹ **Before all else, to be *Christ-centered* is to recognize the Eucharist at the heart of discipleship: obedience to the command and reliance on the accompanying promise.** “The fellowship consists in this,” writes Luther, “that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament.”²⁰ The Lord’s Supper serves up the fullness of salvation, an honest-to-God foretaste of the eternal feast to come.

Even public reading, proclamation, and sacrament, however, do not constitute the full scope of sharing God’s Word. The entire service of the *ecclesia* is rich with it. “Let the word of Christ dwell *in/among* you richly,” writes St. Paul, “teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16). In the liturgy of the Word – the “public work” of the Church to declare to the world who she is and what she is about²¹ – the Church rehearses and celebrates the entire Gospel story, the wondrous love of salvation history. In the liturgy, the flock of Christ practices confessing the faith together (*I believe in God the Father Almighty*). Here the Church prays together in clear imitation of our Lord himself, instructing its members to approach their heavenly Father in like manner in the name of Christ with every need, concern, and opportunity for thanksgiving throughout their daily lives. The liturgy is not provided to suit the perceived “religious needs” of people, but to praise and honor the Holy Trinity, and thus to form the assembly in orthodoxy (“right praise”).²² **The service of Word and Sacrament, and the liturgy in which it occurs, is therefore the primary form of *evangelism* (sharing the Gospel), and its task is the formation of disciples of all nations and ages.**²³ In the Eucharistic assembly formed by the Holy Spirit, one is made a disciple, fed as a disciple, and learns what it means to *be* a disciple.

¹⁷ Yeago, “Authority 1,” 7.

¹⁸ BC, 452.

¹⁹ Frank Senn, *A Stewardship of the Mysteries* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1999), 30.

²⁰ *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. E. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 35:51.

²¹ Senn, 31.

²² Robert W. Jenson, “Catechesis for Our Time,” in *Marks of the Body of Christ*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 143-144. See also Senn, 31.

²³ Senn, 31.

“.... Teaching them all that I have commanded you.”

Along with the bath and the meal, the proclamation and the praise, comes the *instruction*. “Make disciples of all nations,” our Lord said, “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching* them all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20a). This catechesis accompanies Baptism, both its inception and its continuation.²⁴ At every stage of faith and life, intentional and thorough instruction remains the “solemn responsibility of the Christian community.”²⁵

Catechesis occurs in multiple forms and settings: one-on-one, in small groups, and in larger educational circles. Adult initiates to the faith prepare for their Baptism through measured instruction. Parents of children to be brought to the font prepare for their promise to cultivate their children’s faith by consciously reviewing their own. Young people raised in the Church prepare to affirm their Baptism by studying the content of the faith in which they were baptized. Those who have returned to the Church after a time of absence prepare to rejoin the assembly by reviewing the blessed heritage that is theirs. Concrete human relationships are a fundamental part of this instruction, but they are not unmediated.²⁶ In every stage and in every form, catechesis is *congregationally focused*. It involves the disciple in the liturgical life of the community, its worship and its fellowship.²⁷ And fellowship with the Lord in Holy Communion remains the center of catechesis – as with Baptism, both as to inception and continuation.

Earthly Vocation

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Catechizing into the faith entails holding one another accountable to the Lord’s commands, prominent among them the two commandments upon which “depend all the Law and the Prophets”: “You shall love the Lord your God with all our heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-40). A life centered in the assembly of Word and Sacrament is formed for service in courageous joy in the common tasks and relationships of human community. “Go in peace, serve the Lord,” we say; and so, disciples go forth into the world to serve, bearing the peace of Christ with them. They go to be salt, to prepare and preserve the world for its final fulfillment. They go to be light, reflecting in dark places the True Light that shines on them. They do this as teachers, physicians, soldiers, farmers, millworkers, merchants — any number of vocations — practicing humble kindness and justice for the glory of God.

Discipleship in the world calls for careful, measured obedience to Christ in love. “It seems to me,” writes Luther in the Large Catechism, “that we shall have our hands full to keep

²⁴ Senn, 29.

²⁵ *Occasional Services, A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 15.

²⁶ Senn, 30.

²⁷ Senn, 30-31.

these commandments, practicing gentleness, patience, love towards enemies, chastity, kindness, etc., and all that is involved in doing so. But such works are not important or impressive in the eyes of the world” (Large Catechism 1:313).²⁸ Baptismal identity interacts with civic responsibility, and the fruit of the Spirit is transformative of human community in many and various ways. The righteous pursuit of civil justice is an arena for discipleship, as government is an estate ordained by God to curtail the outward effects of sinful violence and thus make possible the peaceful sharing of Christian love. Likewise, marriage is a holy estate, a “wedding” of Gen. 2:28 (“be fruitful and multiply”) with Matt. 28 (“make disciples”). Parenthood is a divinely ordained office whereby mothers and fathers provide for their children’s instruction in the faith, and the whole congregation — whether married, single, or widowed — shares in the ongoing catechetical task of welcoming these children “into the Lord’s family.”²⁹

In the shifting circumstances of life, a disciple is called always to reckon with the baptismal mystery of having died to sin and risen a new creation in Christ.³⁰ And the world being what it is, the yield of such persistence in faith will mean suffering. Jesus bluntly explains this reality: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household” (Matt. 10:34-36). To follow Christ as Lord is to be *partisan*: to remain steadfast in the external Word of God, a Word that is blessedly accessible to all but uncompromisingly opposed to alteration.³¹ To know the truth of the Lord is to be free from the empty promises of the devil, and holding fast to Baptism means refusing to “submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). To be a disciple means to confront the forces of evil with the discerning mind of Christ and the courage of faith, and to suffer the consequences — even unto death — with the joy and peace of the Holy Spirit and the sure and certain hope of life everlasting before us.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide... (John 15:16)

To be a disciple is to be formed by the Word of God. In obedience to our Lord’s Great Commission, the North American Lutheran Church should understand its call to be *mission-driven* in the context of the baptismal vocation to be *Christ-centered* and *congregationally focused*. The NALC was formed precisely as an act of discipleship — to speak the truth in love, obeying the Risen Lord’s command to “feed my sheep” (John 21:17) by faithful discernment in wisdom and committed action in accountability to ensure that the Gospel is properly preached and the sacraments rightly administered (Augsburg Confession, Article 7).³²

²⁸ BC, 407.

²⁹ LBW, 125.

³⁰ Yeago, Thesis 2.8, 2.9.

³¹ Yeago, “Authority 1,” 2.

³² BC, 32.

We are living in a time when the story, content, and morality of the faith are alien to the world around us, a world that is rapidly engaging in open hostility toward the Gospel. Our Lord's command is to make disciples: to sow the seed of the Word and to tend the stalks of faith when they sprout forth. We should use Luther's Catechisms regularly as serious introductions to the study of Scripture and indispensable tools in the reckoning process of faith ("What does this mean for us?").³³ We are to teach what it means to be chosen by our Lord in Holy Baptism and to adhere to Christ and be conformed to him in Holy Communion, proclamation, sharing the Word in reading and liturgy, and daily prayer. The Church will thereby prepare disciples of all ages to confess Christ, to live out their calling, and to suffer for the Lord's sake amidst the changes and chances of life.³⁴ We must recognize that fruit in the world blossoms from branches connected to their eucharistic source, and thus that discipleship occurs, first and foremost, in the worship life of the congregation. This is life together in the Body, the *totus Christus* of the Paschal Mystery: complete participation of disciples in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ.³⁵ Discipleship in human community thus depends upon active incorporation in the divine community: with the Son, before the Father, in the Spirit.

³³ Yeago, "Authority 1," 14.

³⁴ Yeago, Thesis 2.8.

³⁵ Jenson, 141.