

Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective

by MARK MATTES

Discipleship has once again become an important topic for Lutherans. In worship Lutherans sing of the desire to follow Jesus, “Let Us Ever Walk with Jesus,” or more recently, “I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light,” to cite just two hymn titles that bear the theme. In assemblies and publications of all kinds Lutherans are taught techniques for effective discipleship. Congregations devote staff to help their members connect faith with daily life. Current approaches to discipleship tend to run along one or the other of two tracks. One type copies the neo-revivalist tactics of North American Evangelicals. It anchors discipleship in a unique experience of God in worship and serves then as the basis for specific practices designed to move “nominal” members of the church into more disciplined lives of faith. The other, far more prevalent, approach mimics the Mainline Protestant “Social Gospel.” It conceives discipleship in terms of progressive social agendas, sees “moral deliberation” as the dominant purpose of congregational life, and views the public witness of the church primarily in terms of social and political action. This essay critiques both approaches and proposes in their place an understanding of discipleship grounded in the classical Lutheran distinction between law and gospel. Accordingly, discipleship is pictured as a matter of death and new life.

God uses the law to reduce sinners to nothingness and the gospel to create new beings in Christ. In this light discipleship is more properly viewed as something God does to believers, rather than something that believers do for God or for the world. The law/gospel approach to Christian life resists reducing discipleship to acquired techniques. Instead, it views discipleship in terms of Christians faithfully living out their vocations as baptized children of God. Through the preaching of God’s law/gospel Word believers are created and formed to live by trusting God’s promise to be God and by loving the neighbor in service of creation’s wellbeing.

Critique of the Recent Approaches to Discipleship

Both contemporary types of discipleship are apologetic in the technical theological sense of the term. The first responds to modern secularization by accommodating to the secular conviction that faith does not interfere with public life but is properly located in the privacy of experience. Practices are fostered in order to help sustain such “God experiences,” deep within the pious. The fundamental attitude with respect to religion in the modern world has been to make it a private, interior matter and the first type concedes to this tendency. The second seeks to justify the legitimacy of faith through its ability to effectuate ethical change in the world, particularly on behalf of the powerless and voiceless. An important aspect of modernity—challenged in light of world wars, genocide, and abuse of the environment—is social progress, the quest to establish an ideal community in which class divisions will have disappeared. Both socialists and (perhaps surprisingly) many capitalists have sought such an ideal community—albeit through different, competing economic strategies.¹

In contrast to the prevailing approaches to discipleship, the Lutheran tradition is more ambitious, more radical. It speaks to the heart of personal and public sin. The aim is not to reform immoral humanity or immoral society, but to announce the death of sinners. Sinners, along with the old order, are passing away. The Christian gospel declares God’s promise to bring forth a new creation in Christ. The Lutheran tradition continues to approach discipleship in the tradition of Isaiah and Jeremiah’s confidence in the power of the Word of God alone to make disciples (See Isa 55; Jer 18 and 31; and Rom 9:20ff). The church can make the most difference in the world when it tends to the Word. It tends to the Word in catechesis and proclamation. The church is most authentic when it makes truth claims that deal with ultimate matters in distinction from penultimate matters. Its critique of society is always to unmask idolatry in the public realm for the sake of a truthful relationship with God. In addition, it moves Christians and others to speak up on behalf of the oppressed in the wider public. As a “creature of the gospel,” the church is sustained by God’s grace. Its mission is to administer, freely,

this grace to sinners who are in no position to reciprocate with merit. The church offers a genuine alternative community to a politics prone to idolatry and an economics prone to greed. Its uniqueness is found not primarily as an alternative ethical community. Rather, it is a community established through the Word, a recipient of grace given in the proclaimed gospel and administered in the sacraments. Its life is grounded in God's truth and generosity; its mission consists of sharing this truth and generosity with others.² Christians continue to be *in* the world (as God's good creation), yet not *of* the world (as in rebellion against God). Offering no excuse for "quietism," they trust that ultimately God will rectify injustices in his left-hand rule. Discipleship happens best when peoples' horizons are situated and discerned through the variegated and manifold lens of Scripture and guided by properly distinguishing law from gospel. In this essay we will first examine Luther's view of discipleship; then critique the two schools of discipleship mentioned above; and close with a brief elaboration on the alternative suggested here.

Luther's View of Discipleship

Some historians contend that for Luther discipleship was a superfluous notion. In their view, the concept of discipleship adds nothing to ethical reflection that is not already present in Luther's view of the two kingdoms. According to the two kingdoms' outlook, God is working in the political community, God's "left hand," to maintain social order and stability, in which humans can grow and thrive. This kingdom is distinctively a realm of law and justice, an aspect of God's on-going creativity. The purpose of authorities, among other things, is to curb violence so that life can flourish. It is to be distinguished from God's "right hand," in which God offers the means of grace, forgiveness of sins, and new life.³ For these historians, then, discipleship, conceived as a student's mimetic following of Jesus as a teacher and role model, offers nothing that cannot already be discerned from ethical reflection available in God's left hand. Discipleship in this view distorts the nature of Christian ethics and establishes a hierarchical self-righteousness.

Additionally, if discipleship implies self-improvement, moving from sinfulness to righteousness, it is incompatible with Luther's central affirmation that we are ever simultaneously righteous and sinful. Discipleship which conceives the Christian life as continuous growth via learning through trial and error is an inappropriate category to apply to Luther's theology.⁴ There is no progress to speak of in the Christian life, but instead as Gilbert Meilaender, critiquing Werner Elert, expressed it decades ago, only a continuous oscillation between the accusing law and the comforting gospel.⁵

There is no question that these critiques of discipleship touch on important aspects of Luther's approach to the Christian life. Since the initial impetus for Luther's approach to reformation was his critique of Gabriel Biel's view that God gives his grace only to those who do their very best. All approaches that see the Christian life as one of progressive, or upward growth, must undergo critique. Luther rejected both medieval Roman Catholic approaches to spirituality and renewal movements initiated by reformation groups. Specifically, Luther's critique was leveled against traditional medieval Catholicism, which advocated a two-tiered approach to faith: (1) those who led a distinctive, and superior, "religious life" by following the "evangelical counsels" that included poverty, chastity, and obedience and (2) those ordinary Christians who simply lived their callings in the world.⁶ Later, Luther's appraisal was directed against the Anabaptists, who envisioned discipleship as offering an alternative ethical community wholly defined by non-violence. The upshot of Luther's critique was, as is often noted, an affirmation of ordinary life. Imitation of Christ is expressed not by living a unique, "holy" life, antithetical to the world, but that one lives as a "little Christ" right *within* the world, in the specific vocation which God gives.⁷

Carter Lindberg points out Luther's objection to the two-tiered approach to Christian living. Luther observed that it was inherently self-righteous to claim that some Christians, through their self-sacrificial behaviors, are superior to others.⁸ Lindberg explains that Luther's breakthrough was based on "the discovery that God's righteousness is a gift, not a demand," and that this "displaces the principle of likeness by that of unlikeness as the basis for fellowship with God. The sinner does not ascend to God; rather, God descends

to the sinner.” Luther’s use of biblical “bride-bridegroom” imagery contrasts sharply with the way that other medieval thinkers saw it. For them the bride needed purification. For Luther, as brides of Christ believers are “poor, wicked harlot[s].” Luther reinforces this metaphor with that of “testament” as a monergistic, unilateral giving action of God, a promise. “There is nothing which the sinner can bring to God in order to attain forgiveness—except his or her sin! It is only the ungodly, only the sinner, who is acceptable to God. Paradoxically, to acknowledge sin is to justify God and thereby oneself. ‘Real sin,’ not likeness to God, is the presupposition for justification.”⁹ Justification by faith alone allows God to be in charge of the sinner’s salvation—allows God to be God, while simultaneously allowing the human to be human. We are one in the same, sinner and saint. It follows that discipleship does not involve growth in holiness as traditional Catholicism with its evangelical counsels or as the Anabaptist and spiritual movements have taught.

Luther clearly was skeptical of human ability to contribute to our growth in the Christian life. He saw that the nature of the old Adam and Eve always to exploit programs designed to improve the lot of nominal Christians. The old Adam and Eve appropriate such techniques in service of do-it-yourself righteousness. Luther approaches the question of discipleship more soberly and more realistically. In the tradition of Augustine he sees that self-righteousness constitutes the core of our sin. This does not mean that Luther lacks a positive outlook on discipleship. His positive teaching about discipleship can best be seen in his reinterpretation of Augustine’s view that Christ is both *sacramentum* and *exemplum*.¹⁰ But Christ as example is only understood from Luther’s dictum: “It is not the imitation that makes sons; it is sonship that makes imitators.” As he states in his 1519 Galatians Commentary (Gal. 3:14),

This faith, I say, was promised in the blessing. Here again, therefore, he [Paul] touches briefly and obscurely on the fact that the Gentiles will be children of Abraham, not because they will imitate him, but because they have received the promise; and that they will imitate him because they will be his children as a result of God’s promise and its fulfillment, not as a result of the deeds and the imitating of the Gentiles. It is not the imitation that makes sons; it is sonship that makes imitators.¹¹

Christ as a sacrament means that he is sheer gift. But as sheer gift, he is also the end of our self-righteousness, and thus we as sinners die with him in his death. But we also share with him in his resurrection and walk in newness of life. It is because we are adopted children of God that we can imitate Christ, not vice versa. Christ as our example understood in this way precludes self-righteousness. Christ is not our example in the inherently self-righteous, two-tiered approach to Christian life seen in the evangelical counsels or its reinstatement among the so-called radical reformers. Instead, Christ is our example as we live lives of service to others in the various offices which we hold in relation to others.

Helpfully, Oswald Bayer notes that in Luther's view of ethics, the "table of household duties" is balanced with the concept of "imitative discipleship." The household duties ground ethics in the stuff of lived experience, while imitative discipleship provides the criteria by which to evaluate how we proceed in such duties.¹² If imitative discipleship alone were to reign in the Christian life, untethered from the daily obligations of household duties, Christian faith would tilt towards perfectionistic or utopian leanings. By contrast, if the household duties alone were taken into account apart from imitative discipleship, there would be no distinctively Christian standard by which to evaluate problem-solving in life. While for Luther we follow the example of Christ, that does not make us to be Christian. What makes us to be Christian is nothing other than God's favor granted to sinners. It is God's external Word which renews the inner person. And, this Word is not distinguished by its ability to empower us to do good works but instead in that it grants freedom to do them—when and where they are needed.

And this Word proclaimed in preaching or the sacrament grants us new a identity and a shared life not only with Christ, but with those in need. Commenting on the fellowship deriving from the Lord's Supper, Luther indicates that

Christ with all saints, by his love, takes upon himself our form [Phil. 2:7], fights with us against sin, death, and all evil. This enkindles in us such love that we take on his form, rely upon his righteousness, life, and blessedness. And through the interchange of his blessings and our misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common . . . Again through

this same love, we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own; we are to take upon ourselves their form and their necessity, and all the good that is within our power we are to make theirs, that they may profit from it. That is real fellowship, and that is the true significance of this sacrament.¹³

Bernhard Lohse notes that Christ as *sacramentum* and *exemplum* was not a holdover from Luther's early pre-Reformation theology but instead a theme by which he understood the Christian ethos throughout his life: "What is important here is that discipleship consists precisely in 'offering oneself to the cross,' not in supplementing the sacramental appropriation of salvation through one's own works. At this important point, Luther not only had adopted central ideas from Augustine, but very early had given them precision in his own way."¹⁴ We offer ourselves to the cross not in that our suffering saves us. Rather, Luther has a realistic conception of life, and alerts us to the reality of conflict and suffering. It is guaranteed that following Christ in the world will garner opposition from the world. To be true to God will provoke opposition from the adversary, who is operative *both* in world and the church (and not just the world). Just as one dimension of Christ's suffering was that of being a faithful witness, which led to his martyrdom, so too our witness may very well make us to be martyrs.¹⁵

Hence for Luther, Christians in the world encounter suffering and the cross, and are called sometimes to martyriological witness precisely because they are disciples of their Lord. Indeed, a distinguishing mark of the church (one of seven)¹⁶ is "holy possession of the cross" in which believers "endure every misfortunate and persecution . . . by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's Word, enduring this for the sake of Christ."¹⁷ Indeed, if there is any analogy that exists between the Christian and Christ, it is not established by growth in holiness but instead by suffering—we are being conformed to the image of the crucified.¹⁸ Properly speaking, it is not we but God who makes us to be Christ's disciples.

In spite of his criticism of growth, when it is evaluated on the basis of likeness between our achievements and the achievements of Christ, Luther claims that we make “some progress” in the Christian life.¹⁹ That is, the Christian life is no perpetually reoccurring oscillation between law and gospel, accusation and liberation. Not oscillation but simultaneity—*simul iustus et peccator*—characterizes Christians, even when they flee from God as wrath to God as mercy. Nevertheless, it is precisely God’s Word defining this *simul* that opens another dimension—the horizon of living *outside* oneself, first of all in honoring God, the source of goodness, and second, in serving the neighbor. As new beings, we are not trapped in the oscillation because the gospel’s goal is to effectuate trust in God’s promise which allows us to live outside ourselves in God and the neighbor. Or, as Gerhard Forde put it, “There is a kind of growth and progress, it is to be hoped, but it is growth in grace—a growth in coming to be captivated more and more, if we can so speak, by the totality, the unconditionality, of the grace of God. It is a matter of getting used to the fact that if we are to be saved it will have to be by grace *alone*.”²⁰ In other words, if I thought I needed grace yesterday, I need it even more today. But even with this conviction that we do make some progress, a growth in grace, there is no empirical gauge by which to measure the impact of this growth on our behavior. Perhaps we can notice over the decades that we have grown to some degree in being more patient. The degree to which we are where God wants us ultimately to be is solely in God’s hands, however, and not in our estimation. Luther’s insight is always that old beings are prone to self-righteousness, especially in religious and moral matters. Luther will have nothing to do with that. We walk by faith—all of our life is in God’s care—and not by sight, namely, our ability to measure and master our progress.

Lutherans should not give up on the language of discipleship, first of all, because that discourse is so closely bound to the identity-formulating narratives of the Christian New Testament.²¹ True, the gospels are primarily about Jesus—“passion narratives with extended introductions.”²² But that does not displace the fact that the gospels provide identity for Jesus’ followers. No slacker with regard to the proper distinction between law and gospel, Werner Elert beautifully illustrated this truth:

Jesus could direct the attention of all who wished to practice them [traits of Christian discipleship] to himself because he was master of these virtues. He could say, "Learn from me." He who learns from him is his *mathetes*, whether this means "pupil" or "disciple." If a pupil has a good teacher he can learn from him what gentleness is or means; the disciple learns from his master how to practice it. To preach the cross is no simple task and, humanly speaking, Paul did it "masterfully." But in order to bear the cross we do not look to Paul but to Jesus, "the author and finisher of our faith."²³

Discipleship answers not the question "how am I saved?" but instead "what is my life about?" Ponder the words of Luther's Morning Blessing: "I ask you [God] that you would also protect me today from sin and all evil, so that my life and actions may please you completely. For into your hands I commend myself: my body, my soul, and all that is mine."²⁴ This pithy expression within the context of prayer summarizes Luther's view of Christian motivation. For Luther, the fact that we no longer need to justify ourselves before God liberates our nature: it means that we want to honor and love God for his own sake and thus please him in all we say and do.

Luther opened a whole new way to approach the Christian life when he claimed that before God we live a wholly passive life. While grace is not given to empower good works in the world per se, we can be confident that such grace-filled living will issue in good works—an active life.²⁵ Luther is indeed an "activist"—not primarily as a politician but as an academic, writing with the intent of changing the world. (There is no separation of church and state in the sixteenth century.) The fact that he did not side with the peasants during their rebellion (1525) indicated his firm commitment for the need for social order.²⁶ For Luther, no social health can be obtained when everything is marked by social chaos. Indeed, Christ frees us to receive once again the gifts of creation (including order) as gifts—not as threat or idol (to worship or appease or abuse). Nevertheless, from early to late in his career, Luther was concerned for the wellbeing of the poor.²⁷ Luther's "activism" is highly realistic and tinged not one whit by idealism or utopianism. In it we bear the identity of co-workers with God.²⁸

Discipleship versus Fixing the Church

Having summarized salient features of Luther's view of discipleship, we are now in a position to examine contemporary attempts at embodying it. First we will examine the model of discipleship situated by a "God-experience" and then the view which enfolds discipleship within various social agendas. Many appeal to "discipleship" as the cure which can revitalize congregations. They advocate "evangelical style, Lutheran substance"²⁹ along the lines of the revivalism of the North American Evangelical establishment. In this mode of doing church, the church needs a jumpstart for renewal of conservative American social values. The church delivers an experience which Americans want and for which they are willing to give of their time and talents through regular attendance at worship.

In this paradigm for renewal, if specific marks of discipleship are encouraged, then one can expect greater commitment to the church—moving the church from an oasis of members to a strip mall of discipleship. What are these marks? One author notes that there are six crucial characteristics of discipleship: (1) prayer, (2) worship, (3) Bible-reading, (4) service, (5) cultivating spiritual friends, and (6) giving or stewardship.³⁰ These characteristics distinguish discipleship from mere church-membership. For this particular author, membership is about getting; discipleship is about giving. Membership is about dues; discipleship is about stewardship. Membership is about favoring a select group; discipleship is about changing lives.³¹

In contra-distinction, the Lutheran tradition contends, as the baptismal service proclaims, that church membership entails discipleship. If the church takes the sacrament of baptism seriously, then there should be no difference between membership and discipleship. To be a member is to be a disciple and vice versa. Promises made in baptism and promises made at confirmation are substantially the same as the requirements listed for discipleship above. However, the critique on the part of the "disciple-centered" advocates that the church is now competing with other civic and social organizations merits attention.³² They may have a point. But if they do, it is a damning critique of our mission and ministry. At what point did we stop seeing ourselves as

a body which deals with *ultimate* matters—God’s *wonder* and *mystery*—and start viewing ourselves as *penultimate*, one civic organization or club among others? No doubt, the church as an institution in this world has a civic dimension to it—but is that or should that be the only reality that we encounter in the church? Even more to the point, have theologians contributed to the loss of the church’s identity and focus on ultimate matters?

If our congregations have become clubs—perhaps something akin to the Masons which also promotes good ethics, fellowship, and a “spiritual” dimension to life—it would only betray that we no longer believe the proclamation of the baptismal liturgy or the Lord’s Supper. Apparently we speak words that claim salvific efficacy—dealing with ultimate (not penultimate) matters, but we do not believe them. Employing the language of salvation without actually believing it is most sad and troublesome. It would betray that we have become the hallowed-out shell of a church.

Adherents of the “discipleship model” of congregational reform and church renewal are greatly concerned about the church’s losses. All mainline Protestant churches are losing members and no churches, including Evangelicals, are growing at a rate that would match the overall population growth of our country. The urgency of these reformers and the attempt to establish discipleship as an alternative to membership is understandable. Still questions remain: Is discipleship something different from membership? Does the technique approach to discipleship work? Can the rhetoric of discipleship fix the church?

The rhetoric of discipleship may seem fresh and new. But historians will tell you that the church has heard it before. Current approaches to discipleship are similar to Spener’s proposals for reform in *Pia Desideria* (1675). The new pietism links itself to the old by its focus on *experience*.³³ The contemporary practices of discipleship aim to sustain the private “Jesus” experience. This formula for revival is similar to the program of revival advocated by the nineteenth-century American revivalist Charles Finney. It is not miraculous.³⁴ What Finney did not say explicitly is that you can manipulate a revival with the right instruments and tools (like the mourner’s bench). Today’s way is primarily through praise

bands, big-screen video presentations, and flashy showmanship. Post-1950s Lutherans eschewed the legalistic pietism of its past. Today's pietism likewise eschews such legalism which had been centered around policing card-playing, dancing, and drinking, and offers instead a highly therapeutic, upbeat, can-do approach to faith. Given Luther's marks of the church, what is strikingly different between Luther and the new pietism is that the new pietism is a "cross-less" Christianity. It is exactly the criticism that Bonhoeffer leveled toward American Christianity (seen for example in Harry Emerson Fosdick's upbeat, low-stakes moralism at the Riverside Church).³⁵ Bonhoeffer's digs against cheap grace should not primarily be seen as targeted against Luther (certainly Bonhoeffer himself did not see it that way), but instead against his own safety-seeking Confessing Church as well as the heritage of Schleiermacher and Protestant Liberalism in general for which religion is adapted to the needs of the "cultured dispersers"—and rendered completely harmless and voiceless in the process. For Luther, there is no forgiveness without repentance, no grace without the cross. Possibly from the perspective of the new pietism's therapeutic moralism, the cross does not sell.

The "discipleship model" of congregational renewal is pietist because it builds into its diagnostics an inherently two-tiered hierarchy between those who are the disciples versus those who are mere members, rather than seeing all in the church as disciples (even if some seem to take their discipleship more seriously than others). Can such self-righteousness serve the church? Is "discipleship" here really discipleship or is it more akin to the values of the scribes and Pharisees (even though clearly it does not intend to be that). Likewise, pietism takes leave of an external Word and seeks refuge in a specific inner, psychological *experience*—for many Americans, accepting Jesus as one's savior, or as presented here, a more generic "God" experience. Historically, confessional Lutherans have distanced themselves from this approach because when experience is singled out as the source of truth, we end up on shaky ground. Experience is fickle. It comes and goes; often it deceives. Against the spirituality of inner experience, Lutherans have historically appealed to the external Word as the source of truth.

There is no question that the church needs renewal. The question is whether or not the church can trust the *Word* to renew the church. The church may have lost confidence in the Word. Lack of confidence says more us than about the Word of course. About such an experience the Word of God is not silent. God's Word promises to kill and make alive. As law the Word of God judges our lack of confidence, but only that as gospel it might enliven our trust in the saving power of Jesus. Remember how it was for the disciples of Jesus in that frightening storm at sea. In panic they had awakened Jesus, "Lord, save us. We are perishing?" To which the law of God asked, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" (Matt 8:18ff). The law of judgment was not, however, Jesus' last word to them. He went on to save them from the raging storm, to their utter amazement (Matt 8:26-27).

Discipleship versus Fixing the World

The other route of "discipleship" current today seeks to fix not the church but the world. Frederick Schmidt calls this the "issue-driven church."³⁶ These church leaders do not place themselves within this new pietist camp. It is not as if they are insulated from pietism, but theirs is a pietism of a higher order. More than a private "God experience" it seeks to make the world peaceful and just. Accordingly, the church is an instrument by which to create genuine moral community on earth. If the new pietism centers faith not in Word and sacrament but in experience, then this more sophisticated moralism centers faith in moral transformation, the promise of an ideal community. Discipleship here is best seen as doing ethics within a community of moral deliberation.³⁷ Or as Kant said, "The true (visible) church is that which exhibits the (moral) kingdom of God on earth so far as it can be brought to pass by men."³⁸

Who doesn't want a world of peace and justice? But how do we get there? Conservatives and liberals both have a formula to accomplish this. As different as the formulas may be politically, they share a common orientation. Both conservatives and liberals spring from the *common* heritage in Enlightenment thinking. It affirms individual autonomy, in opposition to unfair and artificial hierarchical class

structures, and a capitalist economy (which likewise is perceived as a better alternative to feudalistic economics). Historically, the Republican vision of the ideal world is invested in a *laissez faire*, hands-off approach to the free market, confident that wealth will trickle down to the lower classes. As well, the Republican vision champions the traditional family as a safe environment for child rearing. In contrast, Democrats tend to affirm government regulation of the economy with transfer payments for the least well off, along with affirming a hands-off approach to family life as private matter.³⁹ In either case, under administrations of *both* leading parties, the rich become richer and the poor poorer.⁴⁰ That phenomenon is not likely to further peace and justice, either in this country or the world. The political right and left should be seen less as genuine alternatives and more as extremes of the same thing—both autonomy and capitalism are non-negotiable in each view. It is merely to observe that God's promise of the kingdom to come demythologizes political programs, left and right. They do not usher in the kingdom. Political visions deserve to be debated on the ordinary basis of what serves the common good of the temporal order, most justly and peaceably.

The current movement to view congregations as centers of moral deliberation—presumably not in opposition to congregations as centers of Word and sacrament—needs to be examined critically from a theological perspective. More specifically it needs to be examined in the perspective of the classical Lutheran insight regarding God's two kingdoms. For all the criticism that the doctrine leads to quietism, its concern has been to liberate Christians from post-millennial fantasy for the genuine care for *actual* (not hypothetical, idealized) flesh and blood victims. Further it seeks to instruct the Christian community that the creation is most effectively cared for through worldly means. On its face, moral deliberation sounds like a good thing. But under closer scrutiny several problematic concerns arise.

First, counter to many convictions, moral deliberation is not something for which Christians, or anyone else, need to strive. It is a given, a fact of life. All human communities deliberate morally—hospitals, businesses, universities, and the government have codes of ethics and often committees set aside to ponder the ethics of specific

decisions and goals. Likewise, congregations have always had to deliberate over stewardship of financial and other resources. Moral deliberation is an “is” that does not need to become an “ought.” Unless, that is, we in the church foolishly believe that we can somehow deliberate better than people in the world. Perhaps we believe that we can bring God into the picture and that other communities fail to do this. But if that is our rationale, then I suspect just the opposite obtains. It is not that our moral deliberation in the church makes the world more spiritual but instead the church simply becomes more secular.⁴¹ Our nod to the authority of Scripture while doing moral deliberation is undermined by the many different criteria and agendas for ethical assessment brought to the table in moral deliberation. We simply import into the congregation the maelstrom of ethical opinions that is so distinctive of our pluralistic society. Thereby, the Bible is a resource and not the authority when we do moral deliberation. If that is the case, we become more relativistic in our approach to ethics. Relativism may seem to encourage greater tolerance, seemingly an attractive alternative to the moral absolutism of previous generations, but it is more likely that such relativism ironically enervates change agency in the world: at best, we agree to disagree. But that does not result in greater solidarity with victims. Deliberation is relatively easy; rubbing shoulders with people in need is not.

Second, the value of the products of moral deliberation, such as social statements adopted by church-wide assemblies, needs assessment. In higher education, we are constantly asked to assess the effectiveness of our work. We claim to teach—but do our students actually learn? Where’s the documentation? It is time to assess: do our social statements do what they are intended to do? Mainline Protestants tend to provide social statements on various ethical matters. However, it is worth bearing in mind that the *active membership* of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is a tiny fraction of the total USA population. Rather than centering the witness of the church on what other agencies ought to do, the witness of the church is more profitably spent on what the church *alone* can do. Instead of the church duplicating measures that properly belong to God’s left hand rule in the world the church *per se* should

primarily focus on *ultimate* matters—God’s wonder and mystery—and not on penultimate matters. Such a witness would certainly include publically critiquing any politician or government that claims ultimate authority over peoples’ lives. That is idolatry, and the church, true to its mission, will publically declare the truth of it.

As believers, we may trust that God is working in the world through the political process and through temporal institutions to establish his righteousness in the world. Not only Christians, but all people are capable of ethical insights—and moral deliberation and action. As active in love, faith works *within* worldly venues on behalf of the powerless, never naïve to the fact that the world—for the most part—prefers the status quo. Our point here is not to argue against ethical reflection in congregations. We certainly are not making the case to privatize faith. The point is simply not to ethicize the gospel. Let God’s law be law and let God’s promise be promise.

If the church is transformed into another advocacy group, then the message of the church is cheapened and the importance of advocacy is undermined. Churchly social advocates are under the illusion that the church has some kind of big say in the world. In today’s world, “Lutheran” is as meaningful to our non-Lutheran neighbors as “Lollards” is to us—and this is increasingly true even in those old guard Lutheran strongholds like Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Missouri. If we truly care about the world, we are advised to let the church be the church—let it do what no agency in this world can do—bear witness to God’s wonder and mystery, not least of which is the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. There we need to trust that the Word of God can and will change the world as God sees fit.

The church need not compete with or supplement the wisdom of the world in seeking to address temporal problems. God has never abandoned the world. It is not Christians alone who have the motive or the wit to improve the world. And, even if the world cannot be fixed, God provides the world with capable people who help sustain his on-going creativity. Certainly Christians want to work with non-Christians in the world to address social issues. But we should keep in mind the standard of justice, and the quest for equal opportunity and freedom, is not the only way by which to approach such matters.

Stewardship of resources might prove to be an equally good, if not better, more persuasive and effective strategy. Ultimately, no economic theory affirms that poverty and hunger, for instance, provide efficient usage of resources. When lives are wasted there is an economic incentive to address poverty and hunger, even when the most well-off are oblivious to such needs. It is not in the self-interest of the well-off to remain indifferent.

The church does its calling best not by imitating an advocacy agency, but instead by challenging all powers with the truth that no human power is ultimate and that all human power is dependent on the all-powerful, all-good God to whom all humans should be grateful and to whom they should render their worship. The church has no more important mission than to challenge such penultimate powers with what is ultimate—God himself. So, akin to Bonhoeffer, we need to ask the state to be the state and not pretend to be its own self-serving cult.⁴² Unfortunately, for many, the rhetoric of “moral deliberation” comes across as more an attempt to alter the fabric of the church along the lines of a partisan progressive social agenda rather than an attempt actually to help the world. In wider society thoughtful people of good will are bound to disagree about the means of, as well as the ends for, social justice and improvement—and such rifts are best handled in wider democratic society and not the church.

The More Promising Approach to Discipleship

Where do we go with respect to discipleship? How might we be true to Luther’s view of discipleship? Given the challenges facing today’s church—long in the making—the “solution” I propose will appear ridiculous: Can we trust the Word? Will we tend to it and preach it—*let it have its way* with us? We have lost confidence in both tending to the Word and preaching it. By tending to the Word, we must seek to cultivate a renewed catechesis.

Most people leave the church not due to burnout but indifference. If we are one more agency or club among many, we have no right to insist that people stick with it. The more promising approach is to tend to the Word, allowing people to walk within the thick

narratives of Scripture—to see themselves in the accomplishments and failures of Israel’s history and the early church, to see themselves as Jesus’ sometimes brash, sometimes cowardly disciples and to learn from him. Imagine the vitality of a church membership engaged with the prophetic books of the Bible, believing that they speak to us and challenge us, every bit as much as they spoke to Israel of old. Imagine a church membership that has learned to express joy and grief as we pray the Psalter and meditate on Wisdom literature. What if it were to get in our imaginations that Revelation’s longing for Christ’s return is our longing? Wouldn’t the promise of it compel the leaders of the church to tend to the biblical story as though it were the story of disciples today? The Christian Scriptures make ultimate claims on believers. In that way people will see penultimate matters in a new light: the life of the disciple is not about religious self-improvement, but about the freedom of trusting God to be God and taking care of his creation.

When Scripture is at the forefront of our imagination, we have a compass by which to discern our discipleship to Christ, wherever we are called in the world. There is no “one size fits all” here. Instead, how we juggle our responsibilities, and the accountability which we have before God and the world, measured in tandem with our abilities, can only be discerned by us. This is no license for relativism. God’s commands stand. However, our assessment of how each individual is to live as disciples of the crucified Lord, within the places where each lives will be distinct, just as Peter’s, or Mary Magdalene’s, or Paul’s ministries were different from one another. Each bears witness to Jesus, but each does so in his or her own way. Clergy need to be at the forefront of educating youth and adults, inviting them into the horizons and depths of Scripture.

However, we must also preach law and gospel so vitally that God’s promise may clearly be heard by sinners who are, for all practical purposes, lost in hell. Our preaching is not simply to keep cantankerous people at bay or entertained. There is no technique by which to fix the church, any more than there is a technique to fix the world. In fact, it is not our job to redeem God’s creation. As citizens, disciples of Jesus, like all other citizens, are obligated to speak out

against injustice as it is encountered in social structures. In living out the obligation of citizenship, disciples require wisdom, not technique.

And, as disciples in the world, it is our calling to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, care for the sick and imprisoned. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40). It is appropriate for us, as citizens of this world, to call the powers of this world to accountability on behalf of those whose wellbeing is least well-off. But in so doing, along with Luther, we acknowledge and honor God’s right and left hand ways of governance, and do not confuse the two. We are not motivated by the goal of achieving a (post-)millennial utopia but by easing the pain of those who hurt and providing hope to those whose power is limited.⁴³ Ultimately, it is the forgiveness of their sins for which Jesus died, and not, as Marcus Borg or Benjamin Franklin (who in fewer words long ago presented Borg’s image of Jesus as a sage) would have us believe, an egalitarian political community, as desirable as that may be. As the church, the calling of disciples is to administer the office of the keys—to forgive and retain sins.

In so honoring this distinction, we actually fulfill Stanley Hauerwas’ admonition to let the church be itself.⁴⁴ That is, the church continually witnesses to ultimate and not merely penultimate truths.⁴⁵ But we stand against Hauerwas at the point where he truncates his own conviction, seeing the church as a “political alternative.”⁴⁶ The church is not a political alternative, as, perhaps say, Vatican City is with respect to Italy. Instead, it is in the world as witness to the King of kings and Lord of lords, whose coming reign shall last forever.

We have lost confidence in the gospel; we have been so seduced by the world’s promises, whether they are the promises of therapy or politics or the economy. If we tend to the Word, there is promise that the Word itself will open us up from the inside out—just as it did at the time of the Reformation—and use us to change the world. To be wrapped up in the Scriptures and in their proclamation of good news may occasion the change which we seek. As Klaus Schwarzwäller puts it, we would move from kneeling (prayer) and

sitting (study), as necessary as they both are, to enter the fray, fighting for the wellbeing of the world, cooperating with the Lord who is ever-creative of the world.⁴⁷

NOTES

1. See Robert H. Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), especially page 110.
2. "The Augsburg Confession," Article 7, in *The Book of Concord*, eds., Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 42.2–4.
3. For a helpful summary of this teaching, see John Stumme, "Interpreting the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms" in *Dialog* 27:4 (Winter 1988): 277–289. The doctrine helpfully distinguishes politics from salvation without sacrificing one for the other. For further reading, see Mary Jane Haemig, "The Confessional Basis of Lutheran Thinking on Church–State Issues" in *Church and State: Lutheran Perspectives*, eds., John R. Stumme and Robert W. Tuttle (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).
4. For one of the best treatments of Luther's view of the simultaneity of the Christian's sinfulness and saintliness, see Carter Lindberg, "Justice and Injustice in Luther's Judgment of 'Holiness Movements'" in *Luther's Ecumenical Significance: An Interconfessional Consultation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 161–181.
5. See Gilbert Meilaender, "The Place of Ethics in the Theological Task," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 6 (1979): 199.
6. In his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, Luther identified twelve "evangelical counsels." See *Luther's Works* [American edition], 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86), 21:132. Hereafter, LW.
7. The affirmation of ordinary life does not come without critique. See Risto Saarinen, "Finnish Luther Studies" in *Engaging Luther: A (New) Theological Assessment* by Olli-Pekka Vainio (Eugene: Cascade, 2010), 2.
8. Lindberg, "Justice and Injustice in Luther's Judgment of 'Holiness Movements,'" 162.
9. Lindberg, "Justice and Injustice in Luther's Judgment of 'Holiness Movements,'" 163.
10. "Lectures on Galatians" (1519) in LW 27:238.
11. "Lectures on Galatians" (1519) in LW 27:263.
12. Oswald Bayer, "Nature and Institution: Luther's Doctrine of the Three Estates," trans. Christine Helmer, *Lutheran Quarterly* 12:2 (Summer 1998): 104.
13. "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods" in LW 35:58.
14. Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, trans., Roy Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 48.
15. Of course, Christ's death is an atoning sacrifice and not merely a prophetic, martyriological witness. See Robert W. Bertram, *A Time for Confessing*, ed., Michael Hoy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
16. The first six are, in order: (1) possession of the holy Word of God; (2) the sacrament of baptism; (3) the sacrament of the altar; (4) the offices of the keys exercised publicly;

(5) the possession of consecrated ministers; and (6) the offering of prayer, public praise, and thanksgiving to God. See “On the Councils and the Church” in LW 41:148ff. See William J. Abraham, “Discipleship: On Making Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ” in *Marks of the Body of Christ*, eds., Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 154.

17. “On the Councils and the Church” in LW 41:164–5.

18. See Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 120–121.

19. “As long as we live in the flesh we only begin to make some progress in that which shall be perfected in the future life.” See “The Freedom of a Christian” in LW 31:358.

20. Gerhard Forde, “The Lutheran View of Sanctification” in *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, eds., Mark Mattes and Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 240.

21. Alister MacIntyre, “Virtues, Unity of a Human Life, and Tradition” in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 106.

22. See Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 80, n. 11.

23. W. Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, trans., Carl J. Schindler (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 201.

24. “The Small Catechism” in *The Book of Concord*, eds., Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 363:2.

25. Gerhard Ebeling, “The Necessity of the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” *Word & Faith* (London: SCM, 1963), 404.

26. Hans Hillerbrand, “‘Christ has Nothing to do with Politics’: Martin Luther and the Societal Order” in *Seminary Ridge Review* 13:2 (Spring 2011): 20.

27. See Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) and Samuel Torvend, *Luther and the Hungry Poor: Gathered Fragments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

28. See *The Bondage of the Will*, trans., J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 268–69.

29. David Luecke, *Evangelical Style, Lutheran Substance: Facing America’s Mission Challenge* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing, 2000).

30. See Michael W. Foss, *The Disciple’s Joy: Six Practices for Spiritual Growth* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2007) and *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

31. Foss, *Power Surge*, 21.

32. Foss, *Power Surge*, 14.

33. See Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans., Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 117.

34. Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on the Revival of Religion* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, and Co., 1835), 91.

35. Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism without the Reformation,” in *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928–1936*, ed., Edwin H. Robertson, trans., Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (London: Collins, 1965), 92–118.

36. See “The Issue-Driven Church” in *Patheos* (November 7, 2011), <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Issue-Driven-Church-Frederick-Schmidt-11-07-2011.html>.

37. The 1991 ELCA Social Statement, “Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective” claims that the church is a community of moral deliberation. While it is hard to trace the encapsulating of the phrase “congregations as communities of moral deliberation” we are reminded of James Gustafson, “Moral Discernment in the Christian Life” in *Moral Discernment in the Christian Life: Essays in Theological Ethics*, ed. Theo A. Boer and Paul E. Capetz (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2007), 25–40.

38. *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans., John Silber (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 92.

39. In order to assess the millennial aspirations in economics, see Robert H. Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

40. See Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

41. Nathan Hilkert, “Searching for Wisdom in the ELCA’s Genetics Statement,” *Lutheran Forum* 45:2 (Summer 2011): 56–7.

42. Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 153.

43. See Mark Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 105.

44. “The primary social task of the church is to be itself—that is, a people who have been formed by a story that provides them with the skills for negotiating the danger of this existence, trusting in God’s promise of redemption.” See *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds., John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 113.

45. See Mark Nygard, *The Missiological Implications of the Theology of Gerhard Forde* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2011), 169.

46. “The church does not exist to provide an ethos for democracy or any other form of social organization, but stands as a political alternative to every nation, witnessing to the kind of social life possible for those that have been formed by the story of Jesus Christ.” See *The Hauerwas Reader*, 115. My comments are directed likewise against the positive political teachings of Radical Orthodoxy. See Mark Mattes, “A Lutheran Critique of Radical Orthodoxy” in *Lutheran Quarterly* 25:3 (Autumn 2001).

47. “Thus no program is called for, but instead a *necessity* which grows out of the gospel of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The gospel demands that *from now on*, on the basis of prayer (kneeling) and scholarship (sitting), we *stand* and accept responsibility for it in the world in which we live. When we no longer approach the gospel from a trail-blazing stance or as a simple demonstrable witness of the proof of Spirit and power, we find ourselves instead included within it and come to recognize ourselves as part of it. At that point both prayer and humility can break out of the confines of the form and structure of our work within the church, with its private chambers of study and struggle, and can discover its place and form in the world we live. Thus, we can find a substantive theological scholarship and, not for the last time, win back the Bible. Then instead of using and standing in judgment over the Bible, we allow ourselves to be led by it into God’s wonder and mystery and thereby attain the language of truth.” See Klaus Schwarzwäller, *Cross and Resurrection: God’s Wonder and Mystery*, trans., Ken Sundet-Jones and Mark Mattes (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 101.