Discipleship and the Visible Church

By Rich Lusk

Discipleship is a vital dimension of the church's life. The church's motherly, nurturing role as discipler is indispensable. Indeed, the church is the school of discipleship. We are enrolled in her school in baptism, educated in the word by her pastors and teachers, and fed at her table in the weekly covenant renewal service. Consider Calvin's wisdom:

[B]ecause it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn from the simple title 'mother' how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.

The ancient saying is true: One cannot have God for his Father unless he has the church for his mother. The church, like Noah's ark, may stink on the inside, but it sure beats drowning in the wrath of God on the outside. All through the New Testament, abandoning the covenant community is equated with apostasy (e.g., Heb. 10:19-25). To forsake the assembling together of the brethren is to trample Jesus underfoot. We simply cannot live without the nourishment God provides through the church.

The church's educational ministry is varied. After all, Jesus called upon his first ministers to teach disciples *everything* he had commanded them (Mt. 28:19-20). This holistic discipleship begins with the proclamation of God's great work of salvation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And though we never stop learning the glories of what Christ has done for us, we have other things to learn as well. The Bible addresses all of life, and thus the church's teaching ministry must be wide ranging. Far too many churches today have narrowed the scope of their preaching and teaching, leaving their members to be "discipled" by the world in most areas of life. But the Bible deals with public matters, as well as private, and so the faithful pastor must as well.

True discipleship includes learning God's will for family, business, and society, as well as the practical skills needed to live the Christian life (e.g., how to pray; how to be a peacemaker; how to share and defend the faith; how to apply biblical principles to one's calling; how to use and enjoy the things of the world without becoming

"worldly"; etc.). Through preaching, teaching, and catechesis we are educated in God's glorious truth. We become a people saturated in the whole counsel of God's wisdom-imparting Word. We learn how to be *in* the world without being *of* the world.

But we must also remember that discipleship can never be reduced to a matter of 'ethics' or 'values,' in the way these are commonly understood. To paraphrase Stanley Hauerwas, "the church does not *have* a social ethic; she *is* a social ethic." But this social ethic cannot be grasped on the world's terms. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "The whole purpose of the gospel is to deliver us from morality." Morality, after all, is still something the world can deal with.

Discipleship, therefore, is not *mere morality*; rather, it is a matter of what the apostle Paul calls the "obedience of faith" (or "faith's obedience"; Rom. 1:5, 16:26). Faith and obedience are not two separate ways of relating to God, as though we had faith for justification and works for sanctification. Rather, faith-filled obedience is the holistic, full-orbed response to God's grace that the gospel calls for and calls forth, by God's Spirit. The obedience of faith is nothing less than eschatological life – the life of the new age, the life of the world to come -- already experienced in some measure by virtue of our union with the resurrected and glorified Christ. Obviously then, this eschatological discipleship is not a matter of becoming "moral;" in fact, countless millions of "moral" people are in desperate need of genuine discipling.

In addition to confusing discipleship with morality, many Christians think of discipleship outside the context of the church. Discipleship means having daily devotions or family prayer. Or it means attending a Bible study after school or on lunch break at work. These activities are well and good. But we must never lose sight of the centrality of the church as the chief agent of discipleship.

The privatization of Christianity in the modernized, secularized world has made the church seem irrelevant for many Christians. The key thing, they think, is to be part of the "invisible church." After all, the visible, institutional church has all kinds of problems and may even be detrimental to spiritual growth.

But the book of Acts points us in a different direction. Think about Pentecost in Acts 2. When the Holy Spirit is poured out, what kind of institution does he form? Or does he shed the "husk" of institutional forms and practices, leaving only a naked spirituality?

We find that Christ poured the Spirit out upon a *visible* community of saints, indwelling an identifiable body of people. The new temple is just as visible as the old. Peter – an officer in the community (cf. Acts 1:20) – preached publicly, announcing in unmistakably political terms that the world had a new King and Emperor, the

crucified and risen Jesus (2:36). He called on those who desired salvation to repent and submit to the public, external rite of baptism (2:38). At the end of the chapter, we find that the disciples are countable – they are not free floating individuals, but have been bonded together in an organized, formal, institutional community (2:41). Moreover, we find they practice various bodily, corporate rituals together, such as the Lord's Supper and prayer (2:42-45). Through these means, they knew Christ continued to be present with them; through these means the invisible Spirit worked visibly to grant forgiveness and new life. In short, Acts 2 shows us that to be saved is to be added to the visible church (2:47).

Later in Acts, we see that the disciples gathered for scripted, prayer-book style intercession. Acts 4:24 seems to indicate their prayer was verbalized in unison. (This is not a stretch of the interpreter's imagination since it is virtually certain they would have all known Psalm 2 from memory). They formally elected officers and commissioned missionaries (Acts 6; 13). Their leaders met in a "Christian Sanhedrin," a sort of general assembly, to make authoritative decisions on behalf of the body (Acts 15). The earliest Christians clearly did not lodge ultimate religious authority in the individual's private conscience, nor did they think institutional structures could be discarded in the new, messianic age. Pentecost did not mark the founding of a new, de-publicized, de-ritualized, disembodied religion. If anything, it intensified these features of the Old Covenant pattern of religion by calling for their worldwide application.

The entire New Testament is clear: God works in and through the ordained, public, communal practices of the church. Even a form of church polity is God-established. The Spirit is not opposed to structure, but rather creates structure out of chaos (cf. Gen. 1).

The core of God's work is in the word and sacraments. God gives us himself in and through these means. God has made himself publicly available – *he's there for the taking*, if I may put it crassly – in the church's means of grace. As Luther said, "Not a pope or even an angel from heaven can give you more than God does in your local parish church."

Insofar as we have privatized biblical religion, we have made God virtually impossible to find. So would-be disciples end up turning inward . . . and that's when things start to get weird. Luther described the essence of sin as being "curved in upon oneself." But if Jesus is not found with confidence in the means of grace, where can he be found? Where should aspiring disciples go to find him? As Puritanism drifted further and further from its magisterial, Calvinsitic moorings, this was just the problem it faced. God became progressively hidden and assurance became

increasingly impossible. Emily Dickinson's poem about the elusive Puritan Jesus sums the matter up:

At least – to pray – is left – is left –
O Jesus – in the air –
I know not which thy chamber is –
I'm knocking – everywhere –
Thou settest Earthquake in the South –
And Malestrom in the sea –
Say, Jesus Christ of Nazereth –
Hast thou no Arm for Me?

She looks everywhere, but no where in particular. She can't find Jesus because he's been vaporized into thin air! He's not present in the communal practices of the church, so he's no where to be found. She looks and grasps for the strong arm of the Savior, but finds nothing. No wonder Dickinson believed it was fine to forsake the church and worship God through nature!

This is how Luther would answer Dickinson's search:

Therefore, he who would find Christ must first of all find the church. How would one know where Christ and his faith were, if one did not know where his believers are? And he who would know something of Christ, must not trust himself, or build his own bridges into heaven through his own reason, but he must go to the church, visit, and ask of the same . . . for outside of the church is no truth, no Christ, no salvation.

The Holy Christian Church is the principal work of God, for the sake of which all things were made. In the Church, great wonders daily occur, such as the forgiveness of sins, triumph over death, . . . the gift of righteousness and eternal life.

Thus, a Christian can no more be discipled apart from the church than a fish can live outside of water. If we want to grow and thrive, we must inhabit the basic means entrusted to the body of Christ – especially preaching and sacraments. We come to know God through these practices.

But we must also avail ourselves of corporate prayer and the authoritative accountability of church discipline. Other aspects of traditional church life – such as the ecclesiastical calendar and hymnody – are useful discipleship aids as well. This is also why things like vestments and church architecture are important. They are further ways of making the church – and therefore God's presence – *visible* in and to the world. Pastors need to dress like pastors (not businessmen) and church buildings need to look like sacred houses of worship (not shopping malls or concert halls).

We will not find God, or ourselves, by turning inward, but by attending church. In the gathered assembly, we corporately enter God's Most Holy Place, his heavenly sanctuary. He gives himself to us through his means and we offer ourselves back in body and heart. Together, we are discipled by the master teacher, Christ himself, through his ordinances. The body of Christ – especially in her liturgical gathering – is the engine that drives true discipleship.

But discipleship is never merely for our own sake. The community of disciples exists to serve the world. The church is not a cozy, privatized community, but an open-faced, outward-moving army. Our mission is to conquer in the sign of the cross and the power of divine love. As Luther said, the mission of each Christian is to be a christ (with a small "c") to his neighbor, replicating in a miniature way the mission of Christ (with a capital "c") to the world. But this is also true of the church corporately. We are sent even as Jesus was sent (cf. Jn. 20:21). Our calling is to be a cruciform people, dying for the life of the world. Discipleship that never reaches further than one's own personal piety is a travesty.

While disciples certainly enjoy community with one another in the comfort of the church walls, they must never lose sight of their calling to minister to the stranger and the alien in God's world, namely the unbeliever. This is *our* world (cf. Mt. 5:5; Rom 8:17ff; 1 Cor. 3:21-22) and we must be good hosts. Discipleship has an inescapably public dimension. It means the church must serve the common good, not merely by inculcating private virtue (as important as that is), but by acting in the public square in a Scripture-shaped fashion. Alasdair MacIntyre's famous conclusion to *After Virtue* just misses the mark:

What matters at this stage [of history] is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another -- doubtless very different – St. Benedict.

Local forms of community, especially parish churches, are badly needed. But creating "safe havens" of virtue to protect ourselves from the barbaric rulers of culture simply won't cut it. Indeed, such a strategy fundamentally misses the heart of the church's calling – to be the face and hands and feet of Jesus to a hurt and broken world. (After all, what else could Paul's "body of Christ" metaphor mean?) The creation of small enclaves of virtue are important, but not if they are only formed for self-serving ends.

The need of the hour is not so much for another St. Benedict and a new smattering of monastic cells, but for a public theologian like Ambrose or Augustine to step to the fore and wrestle with wickedness in high places. After all, the monasteries could only thrive *after* the very public pre-Constantinian church had conquered Rome with the gospel. The point of discipleship, then, is not the establishment of warm and fuzzy centers of community that have their backs turned to the world; rather, it is the creation of a host of servants willing to live in and die for the world. Christianity is an incarnational, not an ideological, religion. It is sacrificial, not self-serving.

The church's discipleship tasks, both inward and outward facing, must be viewed in an eschatological frame. We must allow biblical theology to grind out the lenses of discipleship, or else everything will be out of focus. Without a proper awareness of ecclesiology and eschatology, we are bound to fall short of the goal. The church, as a community of disciples, living under the sign of the cross and in the power of Christ's Spirit, is a signpost pointing ahead and above to the world to come. The church, in short, is a colony of heaven on earth, living the life of the future in the present and living the life of the new creation in the midst of the old. The church is the foothold of the world to come in the present age.

N. T. Wright has made the point that Paul's mention of "heavenly citizenship" to the Philippians (3:20-21) is likely a take-off on their Roman citizenship. But a Roman citizen in Philippi knew his hope was not "going to Rome when he died" (!). Rather, it was bringing Rome – that is, Rome's way of life, Rome's culture -- to Philippi while he lived. In the same way, heavenly citizenship is not a free pass to check out on worldly culture, becoming so "heavenly minded that you're no earthly good." The point is not to dream of harps in the sky while the world slowly teeters into hell. Rather, the point is to bring heaven – the life of heaven, the culture of heaven – to earth. Our citizenship above shapes our citizenship – and everything else – here below.

Most of our talk about the Christian life (and the church!) is far too mundane; we must envision grasping once again Paul's eschatological consciousness that declares to the church body, "The new age has come! You are a new creation! Live accordingly!" And as we do so, this world will become more and more like the world to come.