

The Public Face of Discipleship  
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As part of its evangelism program, a Lutheran church in Denver canvassed its neighborhood to determine the church and un-church. The canvassers went door-to-door. Among the first questions was “Are you a Christian?” As they approached one house, the occupant was leaving, apparently in a hurry. The canvassers said, “Can we ask just a couple questions? We won’t take much of your time.” He replied, “I am late. But what do you need from me?” They went directly to: “Are you a Christian?” He reached for their pad and pencil and wrote. “This is my name,” he said. “Go up this side of the street and down the others and ask my neighbors. They are the ones who can answer what you’re asking.”

This is the public face of discipleship. But of course one anecdote does not the whole story tell. So get comfortable and pay heed.

The public face of discipleship and its churchly character will corner our attention. What kind of shared discipleship is needed in this time and place will share it. For both, we draw upon the dimensions of “righteousness,” a key term of the Hebrew Bible. Righteousness is deeply personal and, at the same time, the Way expected of a People of God across the whole of their life together. Righteousness includes character structure and social structure, personality and public policy, piety and socio-environmental justice. Its reach is deep inside, to what the Hebrews called the “bowels” (compassion is a gut reaction), the Latins called “heart,” Christians following Augustine called “will,” and we might call “soul.” Righteousness goes to what makes us the particular persons we are, morally and spiritually, and asks how that critical formation happens. Yet its reach is also about how lives are publicly ordered by the institutions that comprise “society”—how the economy is structured, governance organized, (homeland) security provided, sexuality and family life shaped and regulated, how race, class, gender, and culture fall out in the public order. These are matters of what the Hebrew Bible deems binding “covenants.” The prophets measure no less than Israel’s faithfulness to God by covenantal compliance; by, if you will, Israel’s collective discipleship.

But righteousness is not only a strong biblical notion. It is the name for the comprehensive goal of Christian ethics itself: namely, a good (or virtuous) life in just institutions.

The point, however, is the meaning of righteousness for discipleship. Righteousness means that discipleship is deeply personal and communal piety or it is nothing: no formative exercises and practices, no discipleship. At the same time its domain is the whole of earthly life or it is not discipleship: no pathways into all the nooks and crannies of life, institutional life included, no discipleship, either. Walking the Way, then, is a journey inward tethered to a journey outward, and never the one without the other.

Initially, I intended to say little more than this by way of introduction. I was set to plunge into public issues that convulse us and join the four questions I have for discipleship in our time. Let me at least pose them so you know where we are tending.

1) Is there a non-imperial or an anti-imperial discipleship for us today? Christian discipleship was initially forged in the context of empire and as an alternative way of life. What does that mean for Christians carrying U. S. passports at a time when the nation is “noisy with believers” at home and feared and loathed abroad? 2) Is there a discipleship of the Spirit? Discipleship is always associated with following Jesus. But is this a proper reading if what Jesus himself does he does “in the power of the Spirit?” And if he says he must depart so that the Spirit might dwell among us, guide us, and produce in us the fruits of the Spirit as the fruits of discipleship? Or if Jesus dares to say his followers will, in the power of the Spirit, do even greater things than he? Are we sufficiently Trinitarian in our discipleship? 3) Is there a “green” discipleship for a planet in jeopardy at human hands? Addressing “Earth and its distress” (Bonhoeffer) is *the* moral assignment of our time. What has discipleship to do with it? What kind of discipleship honors the only covenant explicitly deemed “everlasting,” the covenant between God and earth and every living creature of all flesh (Gen. 9)? 4) Is there a worldly discipleship savvy about the play of power and human responsibility when privilege continues to reign, as it does, instead of rightly ordered relationships of mutuality? What kind of power-savvy discipleship is wise as a snake while pure as lambs and doves?

### **Discipleship as “the Way”**

My plan to engage those four questions straight-away was foiled by the need to say more about the basics of discipleship if we are to unearth its public character. Thus I turn to “the Way,” “the Call,” and “Practices.”

New religions are not usually born of bejeweled emperors and a mass parade to and from the Coliseum. They are born of a few undaunted, and usually poorly dressed, disciples. These religions are not, on that count, modest, however. They provide nothing less than a “cosmic” story to which we—and all else—belong. They offer a grand narrative about the origin, destiny, meaning, and end of life, all of it. *And* they propose a manner of life in keeping with that generous meaning. They provide the practices, rituals and disciplines appropriate to the cosmic story. They stipulate a “way,” a way of life.

The stories religious traditions tell are as diverse as the peoples and cultures who tell them. Please note: you shouldn’t even *try* for one religion for all people—you’ll end up killing them in order to have your way as the mandatory way. History is littered with the corpses of only-one-way religion and one true faith crusades. Ironically, this well-intended imperial faith is an unfaithful faith. The gracious God is a spacious God. One-way religion is neither gracious nor spacious; it has no space for the “uncontained God.” (Denise Levertov’s phrase, via Kathleen Norris).

The ways of life embodying the varied stories are similarly diverse. Nonetheless there always *is* a story, a grand narrative threaded with familiar tales told innumerable times, often with new twists and turns. And there *is* a way, a way woven of numerous paths tried and taken and argued about without end, sometimes ferociously. We call this contested legacy “tradition,” and if it is the tradition of a *living* faith it is rich, varied, and changing. Too, there is a key leader, a sage, a messiah, a guru who teaches a way of life that embodies the meaning of the grand story. Moreover—and this is not a marginal point—the revered leader teaches a way and walks a path that is in tension, or outright conflict, with the conventional wisdom and currents of the age. Death may in fact come early for such leaders. Often it does *not* come gently, like it should, quiet as morning fog. But whether death comes early by violence or as the peaceful end to fourscore years and ten, the life of the sage or messiah somehow triumphs on the precincts of the tomb itself. Still, the point is that whether the leader’s way is weal, woe, or both together, his or her path is sufficiently askew of normalcy so as to appear as a new thing upon the earth. This is Prince Siddhartha become the Buddha in fifth-century BCE India; it’s Lao Tzu in six-century BCE China; it’s Moses in Egypt, then out from Egypt into the wilderness; and it’s Jesus and his messianic movement in the Roman Empire.

In sum, new religions are usually born in discipleship, they spring, mustard seed fashion, from small beginnings and they are led by a sage or charismatic healer who teaches and embodies an alternative way, a way taken up by the “disciplined” ones who think themselves wielding a power against which even the gates of hell, or the purveyors of empire, will not prevail.

Let’s not describe discipleship in generic terms only, however. Let’s turn to the children of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar and specifically to the public face of discipleship there.

Discipleship is “public” in three ways in all three Abrahamic traditions. (In the interests of both time and audience, I will illustrate with Christianity.)

Discipleship is about a “*people of the Way*” and a *community* pattern of life. This people is a “public” in its own right. Tertullian calls the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. church a *societas dei* (a society of God); Paul calls the first c. churches a “body” that constitutes a new humanity; Peter calls this people “a holy nation,” “a chosen race,” “a peculiar people.” All these images are quintessentially “public.” Like the *polis* itself, they are images of a structured social body where decisions are made, roles are assigned, and powers are exercised for life together in keeping with the commitments of the community. The specific word, “church,” is also quintessentially “public.” *Ekklesia* is Greek for a called meeting or an assembly, like a town meeting. It is a gathering to deliberate and discern, on behalf of the wider society, how the common life of its members is to be ordered. [Yoder, *Body Politics*, ix, 2]

Secondly, in the Abrahamic traditions, the Way is “public” in that it is lived across the whole of earthly life. The Way is comprehensively righteous, or just, living, living in a manner that suffuses the whole and marks the meaning of the whole in its practices. This whole includes what is poorly named “spirituality”; namely, a world within to match the world aspired to—moral, religious, and cultural dimensions aligned with technical and institutional ones.

Thirdly, the Way is publicly *visible*. It is marked by rites and practices that are strong enough to form the next generation and assure that the faith has children and the children have faith; practices that are strange enough to arouse the curious and gather them in for initiation; and practices that are intelligible enough to provide compelling reasons for a faith that moves mountains and peoples.

For Jews, Muslims, and Christians, then, discipleship is a righteous life in a community faithful to God. Posting markers on this journey is a collective undertaking that is, at the same time, deeply personal. There are hidden dimensions and quiet, even empty, spaces we hardly dare enter on our own. But even these worlds within worlds are the internal recesses of a public faith intended to be no less than “a witness to the nations.”

### **Discipleship and the Call**

For Christianity, at least, discipleship as “the Way” of a People is invariably associated with a call to follow. The call is usually presented as a direct address demanding an unequivocal answer. The reason, of course, is the “*Urstory*,” the founding story that became the foundation story; namely, Jesus’ calling of the disciples. This is the story that hovers over all Christian discipleship. In it Jesus’ call is direct, personal, and very public: a call to ordinary people in their work-a-day world to fold up the nets, or close out the tax accounts, and pack for a different future.

I came across a call passage by a consummately public figure, a past Secretary General of the United Nations that haunted me long enough to know I had to sit with it awhile. I had to sit with it, in part, because it *doesn’t* conform to the classic call of the foundation story. Yet it has all the marks of utter integrity as a call to Christian discipleship. The Secretary General writes:

I don’t know Who--or what--put the question. I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment, I did answer Yes to Someone--or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore my life, in self-surrender had a goal.

From that moment I have known what it means “not to look back,” and to “take no thought for the morrow.”

Led by the Adriane’s thread of my answer through the labyrinth of life, I realized that the Way leads to a triumph which is a catastrophe, and to a catastrophe which is a triumph, that the price for committing one’s life would be reproach, and that the only elevation possible to a person lies in the depths of humiliation. After that, the word “courage” lost its meaning, since nothing could be taken from me.

As I continued along the Way, I learned, step by step, word by word, that behind every saying in the Gospels stands one person and one person’s experience. Also behind the prayer that the cup might pass from him and his promise to drink it. Also behind each of the words from the Cross.

To walk in the Way was, for those first generations of Christian disciples, to follow this Jesus whom John calls “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Similarly, to answer “Yes” to that Someone—or Something, as our text has it—incribes life as meaningful despite all. It is a joyous life and an abundant life, in imitation of Christ; a life that savors life, yet a life that also entails drinking the earthly cup to the dregs and taking up the executioner’s Cross. “When Christ calls, he bids one come and die,” to remember Bonhoeffer in [*The Cost of*] *Discipleship*.

## Practices

The passage I cited from Dag Hammarskjöld is from *Markings*. The English title is not quite right. The original Swedish is *Vagmarken*, “Markers of the Way.” The steady markers of the Way of discipleship, the reason the Way is not chaos or simple waywardness, are located in the same reality; namely, the *practices* of discipleship, its disciplines. These practices, done over and again across eons and ages, are strikingly also the furnishings for the necessary improvisation discipleship requires in different settings and circumstances, when new things appear upon the earth. In this splendid paradox, conserving allows reforming and reforming conserves. Imagination plays nimbly, creatively, with well-rooted legacies. But whether hoary with age or improvisatory, these practices supply a moral pattern and provide a moral guidance system even when the practices themselves are not explicitly moral or ethical in tone or formulation. Indeed, apart from these practices, Christian moral discernment really has few markers at all, and little real substance. Without formative practices, what is called Christian judgment is little more than an opinion poll of those who happen to be on the membership roles at the time. This is not discipleship. This is judgment devoid of the disciplines that create the alternative path of the Way. This is judgment devoid of that which crafts the Christian life like the work of a fine potter, gardener, carpenter, teacher, or caregiver, none of whom invented their craft or mastered it at first, second, or third outing.

We can call the recurring core practices of discipleship its “focal” practices. There are also ancillary practices, many of which are the stuff of necessary improvisation. We will treat focal practices first—and briefly, so briefly I will consider only one in any detail.

First, however, this comment to all focal practices. Focal practices embody dramatic distillations of the grand story, the foundation drama and narrative of the faith. For Christians it is above all the drama of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit as the incandescence of God in a fully human and godly way. These distilled disciplines take the form of repeated individual and communal actions. They speak to something deep in human nature and they bear moral substance whether that is named or not. They take place in the present but they bespeak a world longed for, a world in the making, the Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven, the “beloved community” (to remember Martin Luther King here in Memphis and Rosa Parks in Montgomery).

Baptism, for example, is such a focal practice, so let’s ask about its public, moral dimensions. How do the waters of life both capture and forge the Way? How is being water

washed and Spirit borne, and “remembering our baptism” as wet branches are waved over the congregation, a quiet formation of moral orientation?

Consider this account. Paul has to explain his innovative missionary policy of Jews and Gentiles in community together on terms that honor the outsiders as new insiders. In 2 Cor. 5:17 he does so in these words: “If anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (New English Bible) Baptism is the focal practice that celebrates this new world in which the previous ethnic identities and the inherited social definitions are transcended and eliminated in Christ. Paul to the Galatians could hardly be more explicit about baptism initiating a new people (a new “public”) by crossing and canceling the boundaries that the world insists upon: “Baptized in Christ, you are clothed in Christ, and there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female; you are all one in Christ Jesus.” [Yoder’s trans. of Gal. 3: 27, 28, p. 29 of *Body Politics*] This baptism of both Jews and Gentiles is itself an improvisation on a core Jewish practice. Yet the point is that it initiates what Paul deems a “new creation.” It is one in which, according to Ephesians 2, enmity as the dividing wall between peoples is broken down and peace is made, now in the form of a new multi-ethnic community, here named “a new humanity” in Christ (Eph. 2: 14,15). And don’t overlook that this reality of a new humanity is the church’s message to “the principalities and powers” of the way of God. (3:10) In different words, baptism celebrates and effects a concrete alternative to empire and its rule by division. Empires use differences (Jew/Gentile, male/female, slave/free) to separate people and set them against one another in order to rule them. In baptism the new status is a new kind of social relationship that overarches social stratification in a new unity, an “oikumene” embodied as a “public” that contrasts with empire (which Rome, referring to the empire, also declared the “oikumene”). A multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-cultural humanity gathered on equal terms, with shared leadership, but no army and little wealth, in contrast to hegemony, privilege, ostentation, and the fearsome projection of military and economic power. [Yoder, *Body Politics*, 30] Later baptism goes wildly wrong, as does much Christian discipleship, when Christianity turned itself on its head and allied its fate with empire. It became a very different “public” and ended up mimicking empire. Baptism, like eucharist, morphed into a core practice of *exclusive* membership in the only true imperial faith, Christianity. We ought not make the mistake of idealizing the pre-Constantinian churches and demonizing the post-Constantinian ones; there is both compromised and authentic discipleship on both sides of that ominous shift of status to establishment power and privilege. In any event, all I want is for us to sense the profound public moral substance of baptism as this practice of community-creating, inter-ethnic unity on egalitarian and nonviolent terms. The distinctions that separate and set people against one another dissolve in the cleansing waters, yet the richness of differences of culture, language, art, and personal gifts remain as community treasure for life together. Baptism is the creation of a new society by way of creating a new people. Treating the “other” as alien is left behind in a new covenant of inclusiveness and justice. [Yoder, *Body Politics*, 32-34] I hope you can feel how baptism in the early church is a moral pattern and guidance system for walking the Way and a focal practice for the discipleship of this new “public,” the *ekklesia*.

Yet even a new society joyously defiant of the principalities and powers by virtue of the structure and disciplines of its life together is not all that baptism is. So I add this note, now in anticipation of a green discipleship for our time. Often discipleship means improvisation and the

development of ancillary practices. Presently, we must of needs discern anew what the waters of life in the font or the tank or the river of baptism mean for a planet in jeopardy at human hands. I can't do the needed survey of the waters of life in Scripture, from Eden to the wilderness and desert narratives to Jordan and New Jerusalem, where crystalline waters flow from the throne of God, with trees of life flourishing along the banks. Simply trust me that water is more than a handy metaphor for those writers and their people. Nor, for that matter, would *we* consider baptizing with a handful of lint or dust.

What is shocking is that we seldom connect the waters of life of baptism to the waters of life on which absolutely all life depends. To dramatize this connection, I once proposed that we either call a moratorium on all baptisms until we have safe water for all children, or that, alternatively, we consciously baptize with toxic water. (Neither got any takers.)

In sum, the focal practice of discipleship named “baptism” can be a powerful moral guidance system for the public expression and deliberation of societal and environmental life-and-death issues. Baptism is about creating a new human world in Christ, from difference and on the home turf of enmity, and it is about planetary care of a creation element on which all life literally depends utterly.

A fuller account, had we world enough and time, would take up other focal practices. Eucharist and the hungers of the world, for example; or “binding and loosing,” (or “forgiveness and reconciliation,” or “nonviolent conflict resolution,” or whatever name you wish to give Jesus’ instruction to his disciples in Matthew 18—and can you think of a more important moral imperative today than a working ethic of enemy love?) There is hospitality, feasting, fasting and foot-washing, all a far cry from fast foods and hardly even the *family* eating together, much less welcoming the stranger next door or across town. There is saying “yes” and saying “no” in a simple life, discipleship’s stand-up answer to a global consumerism that is killing us spiritually and the planet literally. There is testimony and witness, i.e., the power of proclamation and example. The power of living testimony (*martyrion*) is the power to change the world. Think of your own exemplars—their witness shaped you. And there are, of course, certain fundamentals that *are* stated in straightforward moral terms: the Words of Life of the Ten Commandments and the “but I say unto you” instruction of Jesus (on the Mount or on the Plain, depending on your altitude). All these shape our public living, they form a community of discipleship morally, and they provide a guidance system for the discernment we need to address day-to-day issues, small and large, old and new.

I have a coda of sorts, if you will grant a couple minutes more. Presbyterians and Lutherans and others schooled in the tradition of faith-as-belief and revelation as creedal knowledge need to pay particular attention to how discipleship practices do their formation work. Beliefs mean nothing apart from practices. What sense would it make to have a richly articulated theology of baptism if the faith community never gathered around the font, never made the vows, and never took week-by-week responsibility for the life of the child? What sense would it make if Christians claimed a rich, cognitive understanding of the eucharist as the real presence of Jesus Christ in the tangible touch and taste of bread and wine, but never broke

bread together or shared the cup of blessing? Apart from their practices, beliefs, creeds, and theology are utterly empty.

But we must go further. Practices shape belief and give rise to theology and creed. They are the “doing” that provokes reflection and gives rise to meanings that can reorder our ways. As the practices change and develop, so, too, does the faith. (I must say I missed this vital insight about discipleship in the Task Force work on peace, unity, and purity, where revelation is propositional and creedal.)

I provide but one example of the power of practices to shape belief. The African Association of Earthkeeping Churches in Zimbabwe is a network of 2 million Shona farmers whose churches are African-initiated churches (rather than the missionary-planted churches of European church bodies). Chiefly for reasons of survival, their expression of Christian faith became focused on “earthkeeping”—reforestation, prevention of further erosion, improved soils, animal husbandry, village nurseries. The cycles of the life of these farming peoples were all gathered up into the church year—tree-planting, seedtime and harvest became liturgical events, etc. Waters of baptism were linked to the waters of life for themselves, their crops, and the animals. Planting trees was done as part of a very long eucharist service carried out on the prepared soil, and was linked to the Tree of Life and the picture of trees as symbols of steadfast faithfulness in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the Psalms and in Isaiah. Some of the tree-planters have even been given tree names as their nicknames, when there is a match-up of the qualities of the tree and the personality of the farmer. Earthkeeping, via improvisation on core practices, became the shape of these farmers’ Christianity. So I was along on Theological Education by Extension and listened to the questions of the faculty to the students. “What did we used to believe?” asked the professor. “We used to believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins.” “What do we now believe?” “We now believe that Jesus Christ died for all creation.” Earthkeeping practices yielded new theology and new dimensions of an old creed about the atoning work of Jesus.

The same kind of transformation happened for both ecclesiology and theology when slavery was finally abolished and the struggle continued in Civil Rights and Human Rights campaigns. It happened again when ordination practices came to include women. And it is happening, and will happen, when baptized “glt” Christian are joyously draped in ordination stoles at the altar and take vows of marriage at that same altar. Discipleship practices, including exacting deliberation as a “process practice,” live into the new reality and folks go from there, humbly and with tenacity until peace, unity and purity come together.

“*Tempus*” has “*fugited*” yet again and I must simply close. We have surveyed some basics of discipleship—the Way, the Call, the Disciplines—to find them all profoundly public as well as deeply personal. Indeed, even the conclusive test of personal piety is a public one. The canvassers asked, “Are you a Christian?” The queried reached for their pad and pencil, wrote his name, and said, “Go up this side of the street and down that, and ask the neighbors. They will have the answer to your question.”