

**Final Paper: The Nature and Practice of Christian Discipleship**

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What does it mean to be Christian? The New Testament as a whole documents the earliest Christians' attempts to answer this question. The often-contentious history of the Christian church over the last two-thousand years is evidence of how volatile, variable and deeply held different people's answers can be. Christians in every time and place have debated this question, in their own contexts, in an effort to live faithfully. The New Testament provides a valuable perspective on our history and spiritual continuity.<sup>1</sup> For Presbyterians, like me, the *Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order* are part of the context, so may also shed some light on what it means to be Christian. What are the unique opportunities and challenges for the life of Christian faith in our time? Now, as ever, how we answer the former question will shape our understanding of the latter.

Any meaningful examination of what it means to be Christian must start with Jesus of Nazareth. His followers believed he was the Messiah, or the Christ, but what did Jesus believe about himself as a person of faith? While trying to assess this, we must keep several things in mind; otherwise, we risk distorting the truth with erroneous assumptions.

First, we have no texts written by Jesus. The entire New Testament was written after his death and we must never forget that its authors had their own agendas. Language is another important issue. The New Testament was written in Greek, although Aramaic was "the language of Palestine during the time of Jesus and the early church"<sup>2</sup>, yet we read it in English. Therefore, subtleties of translation certainly influence our understanding. Finally, we must be mindful that ordinary, daily life for Jesus and his contemporaries was starkly different from ours. We take for

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<sup>1</sup> All Bible quotes are NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Spivey, 456.

granted many things which were unimaginable then, so we must not lose sight of the historical setting.

“The historical setting of Jesus, early Christianity, and the New Testament was first-century Judaism.”<sup>3</sup> All the evidence we have suggests that Jesus considered himself a law-abiding Jew. “Jesus speaks of ‘the law and the prophets’ (Matt. 5:17) and quotes from the Psalms (Mark 15:34).” He did not advocate violent revolt (cf. Luke 4:5-8; Matt. 4:7-10; John 6:15; 8:36), nor did he forbid the payment of Roman taxes (Mark 12:13-17 parr.; but cf. Luke 23:2).<sup>4</sup>

Jesus evidently saw himself as a teacher, since he called others to follow him, and he was not unique in doing so. Spivey puts it this way: “Jesus’ authoritative self-consciousness is implicit in his call to discipleship... The Gospels report that the Pharisees had disciples (Matt. 22:16), as did the later rabbis and John the Baptist (cf. Mark 2:18 parr. and John 1:35).”<sup>5</sup> What was unique about Jesus was the unconventional authority with which he called people.

Jesus did not possess authority backed by military might. Unlike the Sadducees and Pharisees, Jesus’ authority rested on neither tradition, nor social class.<sup>6</sup> “Although Jesus surely felt himself to be a son of Abraham... (Gal. 3:29), and consciously stood in the tradition of the law and the prophets, he was the heir of ideas and perspectives that were unknown to [them].”<sup>7</sup> Instead, he spoke with authority, urgency because he viewed the inbreaking of God’s kingdom as proleptic, both a present reality (Luke 11:2) and a promised future (Mark 13).

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>6</sup> Holman Bible Dictionary, 792-793.

<sup>7</sup> Spivey, 27.

By quoting Isaiah at the start of his ministry, Jesus identified himself with the Old Testament prophet (Matt. 12:17-21; Luke 4:16-21). From this, it seems clear that Jesus also regarded himself as a prophet. New Testament writers identified him with Isaiah's image of the suffering servant (1 Peter 2:21-24), "from 1 Peter on—and perhaps earlier."<sup>8</sup> However, we must guard against the modern tendency to think of prophets as psychic or clairvoyant. Jesus was raised in a tradition that viewed the Hebrew prophets from a different perspective. "Prophets functioned as channels of communication from God to humans, and from humans to God... As the people's representatives to God, prophets had a duty to intercede."<sup>9</sup>

"The proclamation of the kingdom of God was central to Jesus' preaching and teaching (Mark 1:14)."<sup>10</sup> As a prophet, Jesus proclaimed the present and future coming of God's kingdom. As a teacher, he explained and demonstrated the proper human response. Jesus' bold words and actions, culminating in his crucifixion, exemplify his sense of duty.

We know that Jesus was also a healer. The Gospels report that Jesus miraculously healed the sick (Mark 1:29-31, 40-45; cf. 32-34; Matt. 8:16-17). We may be tempted to dismiss these miracle stories as ancient superstition, but how did Jesus and his followers understand them? Again, Jesus must have seen his actions as consistent with Hebrew scripture and other healers in his day. These miracles were deeds of power—God's power. Jesus' healing work is best understood in light of his other roles as teacher and prophet. By healing them, Jesus restored marginalized people to full participation in the community. This seems far more significant than any supernatural aspects of either the illness or the cure.

The Gospels portray Jesus of Nazareth as a teacher, prophet, and healer. One who, asserting God's power and authority rather than his own, interceded to bring people into right rela-

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 409.

<sup>9</sup> Bowker, 196.

<sup>10</sup> Spivey, p. 196.

tionship with God and each other. He spoke of love and modeled it, through daily service and sacrifice to ease the suffering of others.

This is the example that Jesus called his disciples to follow. He clearly intended his disciples, as those who “fish for people”, (Mark 1:17; Matt. 4:19; cf. Luke 5:10) to be more than passive pupils. Jesus specifically instructed and commissioned them to go out and do as he had done (Matt. 10:1). Jesus understood discipleship as a radical demand to announce God’s kingdom and to do God’s will.

Being a disciple of Jesus was radical in two ways. First, his disciples were required to leave everything that was familiar behind and to do so immediately (Matt. 8:19-22). “Jesus speaks; people drop what they are doing and follow then or not at all (cf. Luke 9:59-62).”<sup>11</sup> One’s home, wealth, and family are all forfeit to doing God’s will. Second, discipleship demanded a radical reinterpretation of the law of Moses. In his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), Jesus exhorts everyone to a “righteousness greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matt. 5:20). In doing so, he explicitly rejects the conventional wisdom of the day while urging a seemingly unattainable perfection.

How did Jesus’ original disciples interpret their roles in light of his message? Jesus named his inner circle Apostles (Luke 6:13). Apostle “comes from the Greek term *apostolos*, which means a messenger, envoy, or ambassador.”<sup>12</sup> As the title suggests, Jesus sent these earliest disciples to continue his message and work (Matt. 10:1, 5-15; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6). However, this commissioning was not limited to the twelve (Luke 10:1-24). Surely, the disciples understood themselves as preparing for this.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>12</sup> *Holman Bible Dictionary*, 362.

Yet this awareness must have come gradually. At first, the Apostles must have viewed discipleship as following Jesus of Nazareth and learning from him. They struggled with Jesus message (Matt. 21-23). They believed Jesus was the messiah, but may have construed this in a more political sense than Jesus intended. The state of Israel was an independent nation in name only, ruled by Rome, with most Jews living outside of Jerusalem since the Diaspora began in 587 B.C. Therefore, the disciples hoped for a return to Israeli autonomy. They may have thought of the kingdom of God in apocalyptic terms, expecting it to be revealed very soon.<sup>13</sup> Initially, they thought about power and authority in a traditional sense, and tried to curry favor for themselves in this life and the next (Matt. 20:20-21; Mark 9:33-34; Luke 22:24).

Jesus' message is God centered. The Apostles' early faith was Jesus centered, so we can imagine them badly shaken by his death on the cross. While still struggling to cope with this, the disciples encounter the resurrected Christ, who commissions them to "go forth and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19; cf. Mark 16:15). Yet, only after Pentecost (Acts 2:1-42) did they come to fully understand Jesus' message and shift their focus, due to the action of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit enabled the Apostles to overcome their fear, see things in a new way, and act boldly to fulfill their role. The Holy Spirit adds an important dimension to discipleship. Accordingly, we celebrate this occasion as the beginning of the church.

"The birth and development of Christianity as a world religion came about during the two centuries when Rome was at the zenith of its power... the *pax romana*..." The historical setting is one of relative peace, free trade, and reliable transportation.<sup>14</sup> Groups of believers met in each other's homes for study and worship. These early churches had to cope with persecution and

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<sup>13</sup> Spivey, 44-46 and Bowker, 146-147, 158-159.

<sup>14</sup> Spivey, 33 and Bowker, 402-403.

uncertainty about the end times, while coming to grips with their identities in relation to Judaism and other prominent religions.

It is noteworthy that, “neither Jesus nor Paul uses the terms *Christianity* or *Christian*.”<sup>15</sup> These communities of believers did not call themselves Christians yet. In time, the term disciple became synonymous with “all those who come to Jesus in faith.”<sup>16</sup> Eventually, the term apostle “was expanded by the early church to refer not only to the twelve, but to a wider circle of authoritative preachers and witnesses of the resurrected Lord”<sup>17</sup> This includes the Apostle Paul, who is the most prominent figure in the New Testament regarding the spread of the faith.<sup>18</sup> He brings the gospel to diverse, cosmopolitan groups of Gentiles (Gal. 1:15-16; 2:7-9) in many places. Paul’s epistles give us a glimpse of the daily lives of these churches. In them, he addresses their concerns, offering practical advice for the community’s life together.

Paul’s faith is rooted in his own dramatic story of conversion from persecutor to follower of Christ (Acts 9; Gal. 1:11-17). “Yet Paul himself refers to it, not as conversion, but revelation (*apokalpsis*; Gal. 1:12). This event shattered, and ultimately reversed and reformulated, his expectations.”<sup>19</sup> Paul, therefore, understands the gospel as the will of God revealed through the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. By emphasizing divine revelation, Paul keeps the focus on God’s initiative in human affairs. Only from this perspective is Jesus’ obedient submission to his passion, death, and resurrection understandable as God’s power, love, and mercy made manifest for the salvation of humankind. Paul teaches that, thus, we are justified by grace through faith (Rom. 3:21-31).

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<sup>15</sup> Spivey, 274.

<sup>16</sup> *Holman Bible Dictionary*, 366.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>18</sup> Spivey, 274.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

Christ's crucifixion and resurrection again turns conventional thinking upside down, demonstrating God's power to achieve victory through apparent defeat (Rom. 1:16). The risen Christ fulfills the messianic expectation in an unexpected way, creating a new Israel free from ethnic, geographical, and political constraints. "The term **church**... means, literally, 'called out.' So Paul is called to be an apostle, and the disciples or church members are described as called ([1 Cor.] 1:2)."<sup>20</sup> Disciples are those called out of the life of the flesh, into life in the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-39).

As members of this new community, believers are also free from sin (Rom. 6:1-23) and slavish devotion to the law (Rom. 7:1-25), but this is only possible through the Spirit. "For Paul, the knowledge of this new reality is given in and by the Spirit."<sup>21</sup> So Christian disciples in the early church maintained their distinctive character as witnesses to the kingdom of God as revealed in the gospel, in their midst, and as promised in time to come. That is what it means to have eyes to see and ears to hear (Matt. 13:16). Paul's hopeful urging of the disciples to stay awake and alert for the day of the Lord, can be taken this way also (1 Thes. 5:6).

Paul is instrumental in helping to define the church's identity, theology, worship. The church finds its unity in the body of Christ, enlightened by the mind of Christ, and enlivened by the Spirit. Faith (Greek *pistis*) implies trust.<sup>22</sup> Responding in faith and trust, disciples open themselves to the Spirit and proclaim what God is doing.

This understanding of Christian discipleship, which we have inherited from Paul, is at the core of reformed theology today. We also live in a heterogeneous society, so face many of the same issues as the earliest Christians, although we experience the church in a much different context. The church now has an institutional structure and an established Biblical canon. In

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 364.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 358.

Western New York, we do not face persecution, as was the case under the Roman Empire. We commonly worship in public, in church buildings specifically built for the task. Christianity has evolved several distinct denominations.

I attend church with people who have lived their whole lives in this environment of religious freedom and diversity within solidarity. According to the PC (USA), “The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”<sup>23</sup> I think most members of my own congregation, North Park Presbyterian Church, understand Christian discipleship in this way.

North Park Presbyterian Church (NPPC) officially closed in September of this year, so I may be in a good position to assess our strengths and weaknesses. As members of NPPC, we lived out our discipleship in weekly worship, ongoing mission projects, and fellowship in various activities. I experienced them as sincerely welcoming, especially to young people and people with disabilities. We had an active prayer chain and supported Christian education for all ages. The members were always hopeful and supportive of each other, emphasizing faith as a comfort through hard times, illness, and death. We were generous in giving internationally and locally. Many of us sacrificed and persevered for years working to keep the church open.

Nonetheless, in spite of these and many other strong points, NPPC had to close after 93 years. Of course, we had areas of weakness too but I am not sure how much any of these contributed to the result. Shrinking population in this region has led to shrinking church attendance, generally, so closing was the result of a long process of attrition. In retrospect, closing

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<sup>23</sup> Book of Order, G-1.0200.

NPPC may have been inevitable. I want to believe that it is consistent with God's will and I sincerely hope to learn from the painful experience.

It is part of the Presbyterian stereotype that we have a natural reserve, if not a lack of enthusiasm. I shared the congregations' reluctance to evangelize. I negatively associate it with proselytizing, on the one hand, and marketing the church as a product, on the other. Yet we put a great deal of effort into growing our membership in spite of some reticence. The fact that NPPC was no longer a neighborhood church was a major hindrance. Most residents of the neighborhood claimed membership in Roman Catholic churches, whether they actually attended or not, while NPPC members came in from the suburbs. My family was one of few exceptions living nearby. Furthermore, NPPC members did not know un-churched people; all of their family and friends attend somewhere. As Christian disciples, we were witnessing to God in our midst. But were we where we needed to be?

We went to those in need, but there were lines that the congregation would not cross, in order to bring them to us. Proposals that we start our own soup kitchen, or use our ample space to house homeless people, were rejected because of fear that we could be robbed or vandalized. It seems only natural to take pride in the building, especially since every window and piece of furniture is a memorial to someone. In this case, however, the value placed on stewardship of church property seems out of proportion with NPPC's mission. At the extreme, some members even mistrusted the Presbytery of WNY because of concern that they coveted the property. As the membership shrank, the property became a burden; this illustrates how it may have also become a barrier to true discipleship.

Similarly, NPPC made some efforts to share resources with other area churches. Yet, they were always more willing to invite others in, rather than to attend services elsewhere. Many

at NPPC focused on their traditions so that they became resistant to change. I believe there was a bootstrap mentality that made them much more willing to give help than to accept help.

Perhaps this is because NPPC aligned its values too closely with our achievement-oriented culture. Dykstra characterizes the American achievement-oriented culture as self-destructive. It leads to hiding our suffering and our sin, so is a barrier to community.<sup>24</sup> It is incompatible with the radical demand of Christian discipleship, if it causes us to become too protective of our way of life.

NPPC was an aging community, wanting comfort from religion. My wife and I raised our daughters in that church, but we lost some young families simply because we were so few. We could not offer the resources, diversity, or social interaction they were looking for. As young people, they (and we) wanted religion to help them meet life's challenges. Yet, this is a false dichotomy; both young and old need to be comforted and challenged, whether they want it or not. If NPPC was guilty of anything, it was that they looked for comfort, more than challenge, in their faith; and they gave comfort more than challenge in return. Again, the problem really involves balancing everyone's needs.

In the final analysis, I think NPPC was a faithful congregation. Although we may have suffered due to divided loyalty, even closing our church was not a failure of discipleship. Many of our members, who wintered in warmer climates, were already active in other churches. Did they leave North Buffalo for self-serving reasons, or answer a divine call to go elsewhere? It is not for me to judge. NPPC took responsible action in closing the church when it became clear that it was unsustainable. We handled this apparent defeat with dignity. In doing so, we shared the memories, the joy, and the sorrow with a great many people. I feel humbled by the number of lives touched by NPPC and the legacy that may continue to ripple through history.

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<sup>24</sup>Dykstra, 86-90.

My understanding of my own Christian discipleship continues to evolve as I strive to learn more and live faithfully. In my youth, I thought of faith as something that some people have and others do not. The goal, from this perspective, is to be saved or born again. I now recognize Christian faith as a dynamic, life-long process of change, rather than a static state of being. This insight reveals that faith is active, not passive, and accessible to everyone. Faith maintains its mystery, as a gift from God, but there is a discernable pattern for cultivating openness to it.

"The process of coming to faith and growing in the life of faith is fundamentally a process of participation."<sup>25</sup> As disciples today, we engage in traditional Christian practices that we have inherited. Throughout church history, believers have understood and expressed these fundamental practices in many different ways; yet they remain consistent with the example of Jesus, the Apostles, and the early church that we have from the New Testament.<sup>26</sup> The various interpretations in the *Book of Confessions* testify to Christians' need to redefine our practices periodically.

I like Maria Harris' approach because it has scriptural authority and simplicity. She convincingly describes the whole life of the church in terms of shaping and reshaping its five traditional forms. Quoting from the book of Acts (2:32, 42, 44-47), she names "the classical activities of ecclesial ministry: kerygma, proclaiming the word of Jesus' resurrection; didache, the activity of teaching; leiturgia, coming together to pray and to re-present Jesus in the breaking of bread; koinonia, or community; and diakonia, caring for those in need."<sup>27</sup> She asserts that our identity and mission, as the people of God, are realized in this continual process of reinterpreta-

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 42-43 compares Christian practices in the *Larger Catechism*, *A Brief Statement of Belief*, *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*, the *Confession of 1967*, *The Book of Order*, and his own list.

<sup>27</sup> Harris, 16-17.

tion. “Our human vocation is to be in partnership with God to fashion even as we are being fashioned...”<sup>28</sup>

No matter how one describes the disciplines, individually or collectively, a common thread is that the practice of Christianity is transformative. John Calvin put it this way, "Our religion will be unprofitable, if it does not change our heart, pervade our manners, and transform us into new creatures."<sup>29</sup> “These practices, when engaged in deep interrelation with one another, have the effect of turning the flow of power in a new direction. After a time, the primary point about the practices is no longer that they are something we do. Instead, they become arenas in which something is done to us, in us, and through us that we could not of ourselves do, that is beyond what we do.”<sup>30</sup> In this sense, the nature and practice of Christian discipleship are inseparable because they exist in dynamic relationship to each other. What one does, encourages openness to the action of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit transforms one’s understanding of the nature of discipleship, which in turn, alters one’s practice.

In this way, by God’s grace, I believe that practicing my faith will lead me to experience the gospel as “personal... and present.”<sup>31</sup> As this happens, I become a more authentic witness to God in the world. This is life in the Spirit, just as the Apostle Paul described it, which frees us and empowers us to achieve the obedience of Christ. On the other hand, closed-minded people throughout history have used scripture to justify every conceivable agenda. Some skeptics accuse religions of brainwashing and some religious fanatics commit acts of terror. So, how am I to know if I am opening myself to the truth, or to manipulation?

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>29</sup> Dykstra, 23. He quotes Calvin from *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>31</sup> *Confession of 1967*, 9.21.

Furthermore, it is a scientific fact that we human beings are subjective creatures, incapable of true objectivity, because we have only an indirect connection to the world. Our five senses filter all stimuli, which are then transmitted via our nervous systems and processed by our brains before we are aware. In an instant, we make myriad decisions on a subconscious level, to form emotional reactions and first impressions.<sup>32</sup> Scientists, journalists, and judges all strive for objectivity in their own ways, but it is elusive. Thereby, faith has an important role in our lives.

If one approaches the gospel message cynically, trying to discredit it, or find loopholes, this is easily accomplished. As the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-9) reminds us, not everyone who hears the gospel will take it to heart. Opening one's self does involve risk and it is important never to lose sight of this. That is why I accept the authority of scripture as primary. By reading, hearing, studying, and sharing the Bible Jesus remains our truest example of faithful discipleship. Hatred and violence are incompatible with his preaching, teaching, and healing. Love takes precedence over all (Mark 12:28-31; 1 Cor. 13:13), so Christian discipleship is truly lived out only as part of a loving, supportive community. In this way, our Christian practices help us to perceive the truth and discern how to respond.

Fundamentally, science and religion are tools. We use these constructs to try to make sense of our experience. Nothing inherent in either system makes them mutually exclusive. Our spiritual knowledge and scientific knowledge should inform each other. "We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don't know; God wants us to realize his presence, not in unsolved problems but in those that are solved. That is true of the relationship between God and scientific knowledge, but it is also true of the wider human problems of death, suffering, and guilt."<sup>33</sup>

Doubting and questioning are important in both arenas. As we mature in faith, our questions

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<sup>32</sup> This knowledge is at the core of my undergraduate education in Communication.

<sup>33</sup> Bonhoeffer, 164.

should also mature. Children tend to ask, “Why, why, why?” and we may sometimes question God this way. Faith may lead us to more mature questions like, “What does it mean?”, “How can I help?”

A Christian disciple must be a malcontent to some degree, not satisfied with the status quo. "Life in the Spirit... is life imbued with freedom from conventionality. To live in Christ is both to be and to do in new ways. There... is also an unpredictability to those who, following God's law and purpose, no longer necessarily think and behave in ways common to their culture and society or adhere to conventional and fixed patterns of response to people and situations."<sup>34</sup> Christian faith is love in action, not patient suffering.

The experience of living all of my life with a physical disability has influenced my understanding of Christian discipleship. I certainly have a personal perspective on human imperfection and suffering, having been shunned or treated like an object of pity by churches. Rejecting convention, “We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.”<sup>35</sup> Suffering is a universal human experience; accepting this can free us from guilt, and open us to support one another. My experience supports a library theology of disability as described in *The Disabled God*.

It is an important distinction that we are united in suffering, not by it. Contrary to what people with disabilities have often been taught, there is nothing noble about suffering and it does not develop faith. Suffering in silence isolates, so it is contrary to Christian community. Suffering unites humanity and grace redeems humanity. The proper response is love, forgiveness, and thanksgiving.

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<sup>34</sup> Dykstra, 28.

<sup>35</sup> Bonhoeffer, 9.

The promise of Christian discipleship does not free us from the trials of this life. Bonhoeffer described the “profound this-worldliness of Christianity... living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In doing so we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane.”<sup>36</sup> Dykstra calls it learning to be sent: “To be a missionary—an apostle, a disciple, a Christian—is to be wherever you are and go wherever you go with a sense not of just being there for God knows what reason but of having been sent there precisely for God’s reason.”<sup>37</sup> We become present in fellowship, free from egoism. Free from fear of judgment, we may act boldly for justice and reconciliation.

We have spiritual continuity with the past. In a broad sense, humanity has not changed much. We are still the sinful people of the Old Testament. We are obese because of gluttony and sloth. We have environmental and financial crises because of greed. Through God’s grace in Jesus Christ, we may choose to be people of the New Testament. That is the ever-present challenge of the church today.

What unique opportunities and challenges are present in the early twenty-first century for the life of Christian faith? Many challenges and choices of modern life are beyond anything that the writers of the New Testament could have imagined. Spreading the good news must also take forms that they could not have envisioned. For my Christian Education class, my proposed final project was to create a website teaching about discipleship. I originally imagined this as a way to grow NPPC. I have been granted permission to repurpose the website, so I may still try to implement it, perhaps naming it in memory of NPPC.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 192-193.

<sup>37</sup> Dykstra, p. 159.

I consider myself a beginner at discipleship. It is easier to intellectualize about it than it is to practice it. The concept of Jesus as divine intercessor has always drawn me. I think our highest calling is to intercede in the lives of others in a caring way. That is what I have tried to do as a professional counselor and advocate, and increasingly as a Christian. This requires me to be vulnerable and responsible. I bear responsibility for my present action or inaction, even though I trust the ultimate outcome to God. I am learning to appreciate that, if we are genuinely open, we may be emboldened by the Holy Spirit to act; then even our failures may act as agents of the divine to facilitate the kingdom of God.



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