

Introducing the Practice of Ministry

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Preface

Introducing the Practice of Ministry is a book intended for people who are discerning a call to ministry in both Catholic and Protestant communities, students who have entered ministry studies at the undergraduate or graduate level, as well as members of parishes and congregations who want to understand the call to ministry and its relationship to Christian discipleship. No single book can say everything about ministry, which is a large and complex topic. It is important at the outset that I clarify what the book attempts to bring to our conversations about ministry.

Over the past ten years I have taught a course titled Introduction to Pastoral Ministry at Saint John's University School of Theology-Seminary, a Catholic and Benedictine school that educates both ordination candidates (priesthood and diaconate) and lay ecclesial ministers. In the course students explore six basic questions about ministry: Who is the minister? What is ministry? Why do we practice ministry? Where and when does ministry take place? How do we practice ministry? Presently, there is no book that introduces students to these six questions in their entirety, and I'm sorry to say this book does not either.

But several questions have become particularly interesting for me, and they serve as the focus of this book. First, what do ministers do that is unique to ministry? In other words, what constitutes the practice of ministry as a vocation and profession in the postmodern world that is continuous with, and rooted in, the long Christian tradition? Second, why is there ministry in the church? What is a rationale for ministry that is both consistent with the Scriptures and tradition and compelling for people today as they explore and take up this vocation? Exploring the "what" and "why" questions led me to ask a more difficult question: is ministry a distinctive vocation and practice that some are called to, or

do all Christians participate in the call to ministry, as we commonly hear today in many churches? In other words, who is the minister in the Christian community and how is that vocation identified, recognized, and formed in practice? Oftentimes answers to this question turn immediately to roles or offices such as bishop, pastor, priest, or deacon with the accompanying discussion of the meaning of ordination and who can be ordained. I have put this question aside here, not because it is unimportant, but because I wanted to answer the question “who is the minister” through another route—that of charism and practice. If ministry is a particular vocation, what charisms or gifts from God’s Spirit form the theological basis of a distinctive set of practices? How can we understand practice as a way of connecting the “who” and “what” and “why” questions about ministry together? The answers to these three questions, as presented in this book, are closely connected—once I attempted to answer one question I was pushed into considering the next.

The first question—what constitutes the practice of ministry—is important to me because it is a question that we can take for granted or often ignore. I began exploring this question because I felt that ministry is a distinctive vocation with distinctive practices, but the traditional way of thinking about ministry, at least in the Catholic context, has not highlighted practice, but rather identity. It is not uncommon, among Catholics, in discerning a call to ministry to first discern a call to religious life or the priesthood: am I called to be a sister? a brother or monk or priest? The prevailing question has been one of identity that is tied to a celibate way of life. Many people who receive a call to ministry have to first discern their identity in relationship to one of these paths. If I know who I am and what my office, role, or status is in the community, then what I do will follow from that position. Identity nearly always precedes and often trumps practice. You can hear this echoed today in the idea that what is essential about Catholic priesthood is *who* the priest is, not *what* he does. In this book, I want to find a way to overcome this long-standing divide between the person and identity of the minister and practice, what the minister does. I think they are deeply connected, and I believe that discerning a vocation to ministry begins with discerning whether a person has the gifts for the practice as much as it does discerning one’s state of life. Identity and practice are inextricably intertwined, but how can we explain this theologically?

Today, the discernment about a call to ministry, and the formation of the identity of a minister, arises primarily through engaging in the practice of ministry over time, and not prior to it. Even in the case of ordina-

tion candidates (Protestant or Catholic), it seems woefully inadequate to educate and form a person in the identity of pastor or priest and then expect them to lead a community in full-time parish ministry if we have not given them sufficient training in the practices of ministry. Ministers learn ministry over time, from observing ministers in their childhood and youth, trying on different ministerial roles as youth and young adults, attending seminary and learning some basic knowledge, but also when they step out of formal training and ordination to “practice” ministry each and every day. For many ministers today, ordained and lay, the issues of identity and practice are deeply entwined over a lifetime and the discernment about who I am as a minister and what the call means in my life unfolds over the course of engaged practice in multiple contexts of learning and service. The questions about what constitute the central and enduring practices of ministry and how we understand what “practice” means in relationship to ministry are primarily addressed in chapters 3 and 4.

I begin the discussion of ministry with a lengthy analysis of Christian discipleship in chapter 1 and vocation in the Christian life in chapter 2. Ecclesialogists point out that ministry is rooted in baptism and that we need to understand ordination as well as forms of diaconal and lay ministry in relationship to baptismal call and identity. I agree, but I also have come to understand that baptism does not make us all ministers; in other words, baptism is the ground of ministry but not all the baptized are ministers. I began to see that the practices of ministry arise from, directly relate to, and seek to serve the baptismal reality the New Testament calls “discipleship.” In other words, baptism initiates us into the life of discipleship. In chapter 1 I explore seven features of discipleship (follower, worshiper, witness, neighbor, forgiver, prophet, and steward), looking closely at the Hebrew Bible and Jesus’ teachings. I argue that discipleship forms the core identity and life of the baptized Christian.

But how does this relate to ministry? Chapter 2 explores Paul’s theology of charism, the particular gifts of the Holy Spirit that allow us to be graced with a capacity or competence to serve the common good of the community. I link charism to vocation, the call in adulthood to live our whole life (who I am, what I do, and how I live) in relationship to the gift of discipleship and of charisms, the unique gifts each person receives from the Spirit. In chapter 3, I define ministry as the leadership of the Christian community through six practices of ministry (teaching, preaching, leading worship and prayer, pastoral care, social ministry, and administration). Here I argue that ministry is a unique and particular

vocation for which some Christians receive charisms related to these six practices. This means that while members of the Body of Christ share a common calling to discipleship, they do not all have a vocation to ministry. All Christians do, however, have vocations to serve the common good, but the charisms they receive for such service are distinctive and unique. Chapter 4 explores the theological grounds for each of the six practices: how Jesus' life and ministry and the Spirit's charisms form the vocational and ecclesial foundation for each practice of ministry. In chapter 5, I link this understanding of vocation and charism to recent theories of practice and explore a theological way of understanding practice as far more than "doing something." Chapter 6 explores how the life of practice within the profession of ministry, over time, shapes and forms a person toward prudence, the goal of wise practice. In chapter 7 I conclude the book with a reflection on Trinitarian practice, the idea that God is constituted by relationship and practices that draw us into communion. I draw on the biblical wisdom tradition and its influence on early Christology and pneumatology to demonstrate one way in which we can understand the life of practice in relationship to the way of wisdom, the way God practices Trinitarian life and community.

The following outlines the major claims of the book:

1. We experience God reaching out to us in relationship through God's "two hands": the power of the Spirit in creation; vivifying, healing, and renewing life by drawing all things into divine communion; and through the incarnation, life and ministry, and death and resurrection of Jesus, the indwelling of the Spirit in our history.
2. Jesus initiates a group of followers to live in a particular way to seek communion with God and neighbor. Discipleship constitutes the fundamental identity, call, and practice of the baptized Christian.
3. All disciples receive charisms that are unique gifts granted by the Spirit. Charisms are the pneumatological foundation of vocation, which includes how I live my life, what service I offer in community, and who I am. They account for the diversity of vocations in the community, all empowered by the Spirit to serve God's mission in the world.
4. Ministry is one vocation among many vocations in the Christian community and is best identified through the charisms for six practices of ministry. These practices are grounded in both the ministry of Jesus as well as the Spirit's ongoing charismatic expression in

human persons throughout ecclesial history. Ministry exists in the church to serve the life of discipleship for the sake of its mission.

5. Ministry is a verb: it is something people do. We can understand ministry as a practice that is social and communal, expressed within a historical tradition, embodied, relational, spiritual, and professional.
6. Ministry is learned over time in and through practice. The professional practice of ministry constitutes the dynamic interaction of what we know, competence in the skill to act, and the moral virtues of the person we are and are becoming. Practice is the integration of doing, knowing, and being.
7. God practices divine communion as three persons in relationship. This divine communion is practiced with all creation. As “Trinity” God is a communion of divine relationality who made us for relationship and communion. The “practices” of God are meant to draw us into deeper communion with one another and the three divine persons.

Each of these claims could constitute a book on their own, but because this is an introductory book for students and church members, I have kept footnotes to a minimum and included a bibliography at the end of each chapter to point out excellent authors and books. The lists will show my theological sources and conversation partners over the past ten years, those who have helped me think through these questions and claims. I am not, however, directly in dialogue or debate with scholars of ministry, Trinitarian thought, or ecclesiology—the scholarly conversation that informs this book is in the background. Rather, the foreground, I hope, is the introduction to a basic way of thinking about discipleship and ministry that can help students discern if they have gifts for ministry and a call to this vocation, as well as to help those who are responsible for calling forth and educating ministers for their practice.

I dedicate this book to the students of Saint John’s University School of Theology-Seminary. In our discussions together, each semester over the past ten years, I was pushed to clarify my thinking about the vocation and practice of ministry. I’ve taught ministry in perhaps one of the most difficult periods in the Catholic community, certainly in modern times. These issues, then, arise from a particular Catholic context, and I rely largely on Catholic sources, but I intend this discussion of ministry

to be “catholic” in the best sense of the term, by inviting Protestant and Orthodox Christians to consider these issues for their communities. I am not addressing the identity and vocation of the ordained or lay ecclesial minister, but I hope it will not be difficult to connect the theology of vocation and practice here with those discussions. I believe that sorting out the questions addressed in this book can go a long way to helping discussions about ordination in all Christian churches. I recognize, as well, that various communities use different terms to describe their ministers, such as pastor, priest, deacon, rector, bishop, and lay minister. I am using the category “minister” in the broad sense, as an umbrella term, that hopefully can capture much of the particularity in each tradition’s way of naming and identifying various ministers and ministries.

There are many friends and colleagues I wish to acknowledge and thank for accompanying me during the research and writing of *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*: Carol Lytch and Melissa Wiginton, who first heard the sketch of this book many years ago; Dorothy Bass, Jim Nieman, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Craig Dykstra, Chris Scharen, and Ted Smith, the “Collegeville group,” who meet annually to discuss practice, phronesis, and wisdom in theological education; the women of Spirit Search who have accompanied me in the quest for discerning the Spirit’s call; Peggy Thompson and Judith Main, two artists who have taught me that book writing can be as beautiful as book making; the staff of Liturgical Press for their expert practice in book editing and production; Bill Cahoy, dean of the School of Theology, as well as colleagues Jeff Kaster, Vic Klimoski, and Barbara Sutton, who have offered continual support and friendship; the support of Lilly Endowment Inc., especially Craig Dykstra, who is unwavering in his commitment to strengthening the church’s ministry and theological education; and, finally, my family, for their love and support, especially my husband Donald B. Ottenhoff, who has accompanied me in the writing of this book as a true companion and friend.

Chapter 1



The Call and Practice of Christian Discipleship

Jesus is clearly a man with a mission. In the opening of Mark's gospel, the first words he speaks are the proclamation: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (1:15). The mission that Jesus proclaims is God's mission to all humanity: to know and love God in the here and now, to leave aside sinful ways that keep us from knowing and loving our neighbor and God, to give our life to this good news until God's promises are complete and fulfilled in the end times. Jesus takes up God's mission with his whole life as well as his death and resurrection: he becomes the witness, the sign and the sacrament, of what God is doing in the world. He gives his life to be God's mission and those who heed his call to "follow me" will be asked to give their life to this same *missio Dei*.

Christians believe that God's mission in creation, history, and the future eschaton is made known through the life and story of Jesus of Nazareth and the movements of the Spirit throughout history. The patristic theologian Irenaeus (d. 202 CE) described God's mission as being carried out through God's two hands, one hand the incarnate Jesus Christ and the other hand the Spirit. The image powerfully captures God's active presence in the world: God's mission is divine redemptive love that is actively at work in molding, shaping, and engaging the creation toward the fullness of life, the transformation of all that is into full relationship with God. The Spirit that breathes life into creation is the source of the incarnate Jesus, calls and empowers his life and witness, raises

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him from the dead, and births the church of his followers into being. Through “the two hands,” we can say that God is drawing near and reaching out in multiple ways to embrace all of creation and humanity. Who God is as “trinity” and what God does through the divine “two hands” are one and the same thing: divine love in relationship, communion, and mission.

The Christian claim that God is Trinity, three-persons-in-one, is claiming two fundamental things about who God is. First, it points to the fact that the divine reality is fundamentally relational, that the essence of divine life is a relationship. The second claim is that the Creator, Son, and Spirit share in a perfect communion of relational love, “a perfect communion of gift and reception, identity and openness to the other, communion in relationship and communion in mission,” as Stephen Bevans writes.¹ God’s very self, if we can use these terms in an analogous way, is relationship and communion. To inquire into God’s mission we can say that who God is is what God does. In other words, God’s mission is to bring all creation into loving communion and relationship with the divine mystery, its origin, and God’s Trinitarian life points to mutual persons in relationship and community, reaching out to draw all creation into this life of divine communion.

Despite humanity’s rejection of God’s offer for loving communion, the particular history of the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible and the followers of Jesus in the New Testament tell of God’s unrelenting love, compassion for the sinner and outcast, healing mercy for the sick and weak, prophetic demand for mercy and justice, and promise of faithfulness until divine reign is final and complete. We can see in Jesus’ ministry a persistent dialogue with people to invite them into this loving relationship with God. Jesus’ invitation is to become a disciple and to live the life of discipleship. In and through this radically new identity and practice, God’s mission becomes embodied in a community that seeks to live in dialogue and response to the call of reconciliation and justice, mercy and love—all the elements essential for mutual relationship that leads ultimately to loving communion. In this chapter, we look at Jesus’ call to invite his followers to live in a particular way and practice a particular way of life. In the next chapter, we turn to the Spirit’s active presence in the life of these followers.

¹ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 348.

Disciples for Mission

“Disciple” is clearly the most prevalent term to identify followers of Jesus in the New Testament. It is mentioned about 260 times in the gospels and Acts of the Apostles. “Disciple” literally means a “pupil” or “learner” (*mathētēs*, from the verb *manthanein*, “to learn”) and was used in ancient times to designate a “follower of a great leader,” “one who follows after,” and “one who learns.”²

In antiquity the term “disciple” was used in common discourse and was not necessarily a term applied to religious teachers and pupils. In Greek philosophical schools, for example, many teachers had “disciples,” though Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all seem to have refused such titles for themselves and their pupils. The term “disciple” is found only once in the Old Testament, not at all in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and only later finds its way into the Talmud, where it refers to disciples of particular rabbis. The most prominent and common usage in late antiquity of the term “disciple” is found in the canonical accounts of Jesus of Nazareth. Here it refers to people who physically followed Jesus as well as those who take up a way of life that he embodies and teaches. The term “disciple” also refers to followers of other religious leaders such as John the Baptist, the Pharisees, and Moses, all of whom have “disciples” who follow their teachings. It is difficult to know when “disciple” was introduced into Christian vocabulary, but by the time of the writing of the gospels it is clearly the most common way of designating Jesus’ followers.

The first name for Christians seems to be one used by Luke in the book of Acts, “those of the Way,” which refers to people, primarily Jews, who accepted salvation through Jesus Christ (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). The term “Christian” was then used, probably first in Antioch, to refer to “those of the household of Christ” or “Christ-followers” (Acts 11:26). It was used to distinguish those who followed Jesus, Jew or Gentile, from Jews who did not follow Jesus. Eventually it was adopted by Jesus’ followers to refer to themselves (Acts 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16). These three early terms—followers of the Way, Christian, and disciple—accomplished a similar purpose. They identified a person as a member of a group by who they claim as their teacher and the way of life they have taken up in accepting that person’s teaching. This amazing teacher was proclaimed

² John F. O’Grady, *Disciples and Leaders: The Origins of Christian Ministry in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 23.

to be Lord and Messiah by followers of “the Way.” Christian identity, from the start, was forged in and through relationship and practice.

As much as the gospels are an account of the story of Jesus, accompanied by theological interpretations of the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection, they are also an account of the disciples and a theological interpretation of discipleship. Each author, in a unique way, creates a portrait of the disciples and the meaning of discipleship that is intended to inform readers about who we are to become and what we are to do as disciples. The Christian tradition is born out of the first followers who pass on what they learn from Jesus about discipleship.

Though each of the four gospels has a distinctive way of portraying the disciples, we can discern a common call pattern. When compared to other teachers of his time, Jesus is unique in that he chooses his first group of disciples, rather than the more common practice in which disciples chose their teacher. At the outset of each story, Jesus calls by name a group to follow him. (Oftentimes the Twelve are equated with the disciples, though for each author there are many more disciples than the initial group called the “Twelve.”) Perhaps to emphasize the radical change demanded of this call, Mark tells us that this initial group “immediately” left everything and followed (1:17-18). The gospel writers tell us nothing of the agony or difficulty in leaving behind families, jobs, and homes to follow this itinerant preacher, perhaps because Jesus will later emphasize that nothing can stand in the way of following him. In addition to leaving everything behind, discipleship entails a radical conversion.

Clearly the first step of discipleship is responding to the call to follow Jesus. A disciple is a follower first and foremost. But what does following mean? What must a follower learn along the way? Who do we become when we follow Jesus? To be a disciple means learning a way of life that embodies particular dispositions, attitudes, and practices that place the disciple in relationship to, and as a participant in, God’s mission to serve and transform the world. In addition, then, to become a follower, disciples are called to be worshipers, to learn what it means to pray and to worship in “Spirit and truth” (John 4:23). To be a disciple means to become a witness to the risen Christ, to tell others the story of what God has done. To be a worshiper and witness means to learn to be a neighbor, not just to kin and friends, but also to the stranger and the enemy. To follow the way of Christ a disciple must become a forgiver, to learn the practice of seeking forgiveness when they do wrong and offering reconciliation when they themselves are wronged. And becoming a neighbor

means becoming a prophet, concerned for all the harm and violence that befalls neighbors. And, finally, to be follower is never a solitary or single endeavor. It means being a member of the community of disciples. To nurture and sustain the Body of Christ and all facets of discipleship, disciples are to be stewards of the gifts of creation and “of God’s mysteries” (1 Cor 4:1). These seven features—follower, worshiper, witness, forgiver, neighbor, prophet, and steward—are the central aspects of the life of the disciple that I will elaborate here.

Follower

To be a follower means that a person enters into a lifelong process of learning from Jesus, to come to know who and what Jesus is and what Jesus is claiming about God’s call to relationship, communion, and mission. As the theology of the adult catechumenate emphasizes, initiation into the Christian community means living in a state of permanent mystery, a lifelong immersion into mystagogy. To be Christ’s follower is to embrace Christ as teacher, to seek wisdom and understanding for what the path and cost of discipleship entails, and to be schooled in the paschal mystery of death and new life.

The beginning of discipleship is Jesus’ summons, “Follow me” (Matt 4:19). In the call narratives, several important elements can be noted. First, Jesus calls disciples by name, thus establishing a personal relationship with each disciple. And yet disciples are called into a community that accompanies Jesus, and they are most often referred to in the plural, as disciples. In Matthew’s gospel, for instance, the names of disciples are not included in stories until chapter 14. It is the case that we do not know a great deal about the twelve disciples or other disciples that join the journey. Disciples, then, have a personal and a communal relationship to Jesus and to each other.

The story of Jesus and the disciples entails roughly two parts. The first part of each gospel tells the story of the disciples schooling in the way of Jesus. They are taught by him through parables and discourses, and they witness a large number of healings and exorcisms. They are eye-witnesses to the full reality of who and what Jesus is: the proclamation of the presence and future coming of God’s reign. And during the course of the early part of Jesus’ ministry the disciples grow in understanding and faithfulness, with some being called to take up Jesus’ ministry of healing, preaching, and teaching.

The second part of the gospel story entails the journey toward Jerusalem and the dynamics at play when Jesus' death and resurrection become the focus of his life and teachings. A drama unfolds in which an increasing number of disciples, along with the crowd, grow weary and leave, and some continue to follow Jesus. An important element in the story is the growing opposition to Jesus from Jewish religious authorities, Roman officials, and his own followers. As the conflicts heighten, the disciples do not always understand Jesus' teaching, they see but do not believe in God's mission proclaimed by him, and they are increasingly weak, ignorant, and hard of heart (Mark 8:14-21). One denies, another betrays, many flee. Following becomes more complex as the path to suffering and death becomes the route, with some disciples who continue to follow, including a few who stand at the foot of the cross, anoint, and bury him.

The gospel writers do not spare the disciples: they paint a realistic picture, not in order to cast blame or put the disciples down, but because they know themselves that discipleship is a difficult path to follow, one that their own communities struggle to embrace and endure. The first followers stand as powerful witnesses in both their faith and their failures. The tensions in discipleship are real: it entails learning, growing, changing, and converting, as well as turning away, failing, doubting, and at times rejecting the summons. It means taking up with a community of friends, brothers and sisters, a new family and household that includes the unclean and sinners. It also means competition, grabbing for power, and attempts at being first. It can mean a growing distinction and conflict from those who do not believe and follow, and yet it entails a call to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19) and to embrace the whole world as a place for service and mission. The "way" is one of ambiguity, dichotomy, and tensions that are never neatly resolved but that push disciples into an ever deeper and more difficult discernment of what following really means. Jesus teaches disciples what it means to be a perfect "follower" of God's mission and way when he embraces his death and places his trust completely in God.

Worshiper

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is portrayed as a man of prayer. In each significant moment of his life—entering his ministry, during ministry, setting out for Jerusalem, facing his death, and hanging on the cross—

Luke portrays Jesus engaged in the act of praying. Jesus becomes the perfect worshiper, a model for how his disciples are to pray and worship. He also teaches his disciples how to pray (Luke 11:2-4; 18:1), teaches them about prayer (Luke 11:5-8, 9-13), and how to become “true worshipers” in “spirit and truth” (John 4:23).

Prayer, for Jesus, is an ongoing dialogue and source of communion with God. Jesus recognizes God as the source of all that is in creation, the source of healing power and authority in his teaching, preaching, and healing ministries. Prayer is an opening of his heart, mind, and soul to this source of divine love and mercy and a willingness to be transformed into the servant that God is calling him to be. In prayer Jesus offers praise and thanksgiving, asks for forgiveness for those who would harm him, and seeks guidance, direction, and support.

Luke portrays Jesus at prayer during his baptism. He receives the empowering gift of the Spirit and hears God’s announcement that he is the Beloved One, the one called to carry forth the mission. In the early phase of his ministry, Jesus seeks solitude to pray. We do not know the words he speaks to God, but it is not hard to imagine that Jesus seeks guidance, direction, and rest. He is overwhelmed by the enthusiastic response to his initial teachings (Luke 4:16-30, 43-44) and the healing of unclean spirits and the sick (Luke 4:33-37, 38-39; 5:12-14). In a fairly brief amount of time “a report about him began to reach every place in the region” (Luke 4:37), and Jesus was attracting large crowds (Luke 4:42; 5:15) as well as initial opposition (Luke 4:29). What could all this mean? What was he to do? At several important points along the journey, Jesus turns to prayer as the source of his ministry and life: prior to his calling the Twelve and teaching the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:12); when he asks the disciples “who do you say that I am?” and reveals the first passion prediction and its link to discipleship (Luke 9:18-27); at the transfiguration (Luke 9:28); in the garden at Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46); and on the cross (Luke 23:46). Jesus both prays for his disciples (Luke 22:32) and asks them for their prayers (Luke 22:40). Through prayer, and by the power of the Spirit, Jesus is able to continue the journey from his ministry to Jerusalem and his death.

Jesus fully embodies what it means to be worshiper, offering his disciples a model to follow and imitate. What disciples learn is that prayer is a dialogue that demands total trust and dependence on God, even in the darkest hour when only lament rises to our lips (Mark 15:34). In following Jesus, disciples learn to join him in worshiping God as creator and redeemer, calling upon God as “Abba” (Matt 6:7-15; Luke 11:1-13).

Prayer and worship become immersions into the divine life and mission.

What does it mean to be a worshiper as Christ is a worshiper? The author of the Letter to the Hebrews explains that Christians have to come to a new understanding of what is distinctive about worship now that they stand in relationship to Christ, the High Priest. Christ, who is the Anointed One in his incarnation, takes on all of what it means to be human and becomes, through his death, the High Priest, the “only” priest necessary for Christians as they stand in relationship to God. Christ changes the divine-human relationship by embracing humanity and by transforming humanity’s relationship to God, for all now stand *in Christ* in relationship to God. Jesus, we might say, is the “perfect” disciple insofar as he embodies the servant who through obedient love follows the path and drinks of the cup that he must drink. He is a perfect worshiper insofar as he offers his whole self to God in trust and hope, abandoning everything in his life, including his family, friends, and ministry to take up the cross. Christ, as the one true mediator, stands as the door, the gate, and the opening into God, drawing disciples on a path into that same relationship.

Since early times, Christians pray “through Christ our Lord,” a phrase that captures the belief that all Christian prayer is prayer in and through Christ to God. This, of course, is what it means to be the Body of Christ, the community joined in Christ’s prayer. Disciples are true worshipers when prayer becomes one with Christ’s prayer, a prayer of obedient love, a prayer of a servant, of one who will follow, taking up the cup and following the way of the cross. Even when prayer evades our hearts and lips, the Spirit prays in and for the community of disciples united as Christ’s body (Rom 8:26-27).

To be a worshiper is to understand human persons as created for worship. As Jesus is the embodiment of worship, disciples are to become worshipers. Disciples are to take up “doxology as a way of life,” according to Catherine Mowry LaCugna. Christians are “most fully human when we praise God” and giving glory to God is not only in prayer and liturgy but also with our whole lives. Living in doxology transforms us to live in “right relationship” so that “once we fathom that *everything* is created for the glory of God and not necessarily for our own consumption, this changes how we relate to the totality of the universe.”³

³ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1991), 342ff.

Witness

To be a follower and worshiper, a disciple must also become a witness, one who gives voice to the claim that Christ has made on their life. As Jesus is the Word made Flesh, the Word who gives witness to God's mission, each disciple is created in the image of the Word and becomes, in and through the Spirit, a witness to the risen Christ.

To be a witness means to offer a testimony, to proclaim and announce a message. In both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, to give a witness is related to speaking the truth about what one has seen and what one knows. In the Pentateuch two basic understandings of witness are recorded: injunctions that require two witnesses to give testimony, the firsthand knowledge of a fact or event, in a court of law to ensure justice and fairness (Exod 23:2; Num 5:13; 35:30; Deut 19:15-16), and injunctions against bearing false witness, speaking untruths against a neighbor (Exod 20:16; 23:1; Deut 5:20; 17:6-7; 9:18-19; Job 10:17).

Both the legal and moral traditions point to the essential claim on the witness: to give testimony to the truth about what they know. "Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say, 'It is true'" (Isa 43:9). The ultimate witness in the Hebrew Bible, of course, is Yahweh, who knows the truth regarding the people's promise to keep the covenant and their words and deeds that repeatedly break the promise (Jer 42:5). In fact, God is often a witness against the people and a witness of the promises people make to each other (Gen 31:50; 1 Sam 12:5-6; 20:23; Mic 1:2; Zeph 3:8; Wis 1:6; Job 16:19). At the climax of his preaching Moses often calls out for heaven and earth to be a witness against the people (Deut 4:20; 30:19), and he even gives them a song as they are about to enter the Promised Land that "will confront them as a witness." He is of course concerned they will forget and turn away from the covenant (Deut 31:19-21). Moses also claims the book as a witness (Deut 31:24-29; Isa 30:8), and Joshua claims the altar as a witness to the covenant (Josh 22:26-28, 34; Isa 19:20). Later in the prophetic tradition, God calls on the prophets and the people to be witnesses of the Lord (Isa 43:9-12; 44:8; 55:4-5; Zeph 3:9).

The legal and moral meanings of bearing witness can be found throughout the New Testament as well.⁴ The New Testament writers

⁴ Two witnesses in a court of law: Matt 18:15-16; 1 Tim 5:19; John 8:17; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:9; Heb 10:28; Rev 11:3. Bearing false witness in a court: Matt 26:60-65; Mark 14:63; Luke 18:20; Acts 6:13. Injunctions against bearing false witness: Mark 10:19; Matt 15:19; 19:18; Luke 18:20.

place emphasis on Jesus as a witness, a witness to the truth at his own trial (Matt 26:60-65), the one who came to give witness to the light (John 1:7), and the one who is a faithful witness (Rev 1:5). Jesus called upon his disciples to follow him as witnesses, just as he bore witness to the Father, so they are called to be a witness to all that God has done through him. Luke begins and ends his gospel with a focus on witness. Luke claims at the outset that the sources of his proclamation are eyewitnesses of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Luke 1:2; 24:48; Acts 1:8), and in the concluding scene, Jesus tells the disciples, "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke is concerned to show that the apostles are witnesses to Jesus, living eyewitnesses who can give an account of his death and resurrection (Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31). Of course, Paul, who is not an eyewitness, becomes a witness through his direct encounter and conversion, and his own ministry is based on this witness (Acts 23:11; Rom 1:9; 8:16; 2 Cor 1:23; Phil 1:8). Furthermore, for Paul, through baptism into Christ, the Holy Spirit is "bearing witness" through each disciple that they are "children of God" and "heirs in Christ" who will share in his suffering and glory. Together with other disciples, the church becomes a "cloud of witnesses" on which later generations can depend (Heb 12:1).

As the early Christians learned, giving a witness has consequences. Claiming to be a follower of Jesus in public can mean opposition, hardship, imprisonment, and for some, death. The word "martyr" comes from the same Greek root for "witness" and is claimed for those who meet a violent end because of their testimony but are prepared to suffer gladly "for the name." A witness bears by testimony and a martyr by death.

Testimony is also a liturgical act and when disciples worship, they give witness to the truth of God's mission in their lives. Many churches invite people to give testimony in Sunday morning worship or weeknight prayer services. In the free church tradition, for example, a believer describes what God has done in his or her life and is affirmed by the community's response, "Amen!" A believer's story is witnessed through the biblical story. The personal testimony points to the truth of God in human frailty as well as strength in order that each individual life becomes bound to a common story.

Testimony extends outside liturgy as well. It is a form of evangelization that calls disciples to tell the truth to those who may not know or have experienced it. Thomas Long points out that talking about faith is more than expressing what we believe; we talk about faith because "we are always talking ourselves into being Christian." Likewise, the truth

Christians encounter in the gospel compels them to witness to others not just about themselves, but about God. Long states, "To speak about God is to be in relationship to God, which means that speaking about God is more than speaking *about* God; it is also speaking for, in, with, and to God. Authentic speech about God, therefore, can be said to be a form of prayer."⁵ And, in that sense, to be a witness is clearly an aspect of being a worshiper.

Neighbor

The love command that guides disciples is stated clearly in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. When he is asked by the rich young man what is the greatest of all the commandments, Jesus does not hesitate: "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-31; also Matt 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-28; Deut 6:4). On this great law all other commandments, rules, laws, and principles must find their bearing and measure.

In the Old Testament a neighbor was understood to be a person who was a fellow member of the covenant community, similar to a brother or kinsman. "Neighbor" quite literally refers to those who dwell next to or nearby, people who share land, resources, and traditions. Because of this close proximity and the problems and tensions that arise from dwelling closely together, the Israelites had to work out codes of conduct to guide friendly and peaceable neighbor relations. What precisely did living in covenant mean between neighbors? Neighbors were instructed to be honest and fair in financial dealings with each other, not to covet or steal what a neighbor possesses, not to judge a neighbor's actions harshly, and to help a neighbor in need. Conflict between neighbors brought about serious consequences for the whole community, sometimes ending in national catastrophes. Yahweh was believed to be a harsh judge of those who treated their neighbor badly. Prophets' visions of a new age included images of peace between neighbors, an end to war and bloodshed, with joyous feasts where all neighbors would eat together (Isa 11).

⁵ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 7, 11.

Jesus builds his neighbor ethic on the Great Commandment that links love of God and love of neighbor, even going so far as to place this above all forms of temple sacrifice and worship (Mark 12:31-33). Jesus also teaches honesty between neighbors and warns against the hypocrisy of judging neighbors harshly, since a person's sinfulness is as great if not greater than a neighbor's, a point Jesus brings home with the humorous image of the speck in the neighbor's eye and the log in the judge's eye (Matt 7:3). But Jesus continually expands and challenges the teaching on neighbor love to the point of emphasizing love of enemies (Matt 5:43-48). In Jesus' community this often meant neighbors who had come to be hated, rejected, and defiled as unclean and unworthy, such as Samaritans, lepers, tax collectors, and prostitutes. In fact, this is a group of neighbors with whom Jesus often shares food and subsequently breaks laws of ritual cleanliness. Through table fellowship with outcasts, Jesus is a witness to "who is my neighbor," a radical display of who God considers to be neighbor.

The type of community that Jesus envisions is one that welcomes all, not discriminating people or groups based on social categories. He envisions a "neighborhood" where people share food and rejoice together in what is lost and found (Matt 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-10). In John's gospel he places the love commandment in the context of the new community that Jesus has formed. Here Jesus calls the disciples "friends," bound to him not as servants or by family ties, but because he has chosen them to follow him together (John 15:12-17). And for Paul it is the bond in and through Christ that makes neighbors into the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-31). Jesus tells his disciples to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth, and early disciples realize that they must take the gospel into neighborhoods beyond Israel where Gentiles abide. In fact the early "disciples really do not fully *recognize* themselves as church—a separate reality from Judaism—until they recognize that they are called to a mission that has as its scope 'the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8)."⁶

Forgiver

If upholding the great commandment of neighbor love is difficult, certainly one of the most complicated aspects of discipleship is to learn how to become a forgiver. Practicing forgiveness and reconciliation bring a disciple face-to-face with their wrongdoings as well as the hurts and

⁶ Bevens and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 10.

wounds born from others' actions, emotional as well physical. Both of these human dynamics—admitting failure and sin and seeking forgiveness, and forgiving another's sin—shape human life, families as well as societies, in multiple ways. How disciples respond as both sinner and sinned-against determines to a large extent the quality of their lives as well as the testimony it bears. If disciples fail to make amends for the wrongs committed, they can become self-righteous or self-justifying, believing there is no need to seek forgiveness, or they can hide in fear, shame, and guilt, paralyzing and binding life into a kind of death. And when disciples are hurt by others, if they do not, in time, work toward forgiving, they risk living in anger, bitterness, and revenge, eventually seeking an eye for an eye. Disciples can also make excuses for the other's wrongdoing and not hold them accountable, leaving themselves open to being a doormat that others can step all over. None of these conditions is a particularly appealing way to live and is not what following Jesus is all about. Being called into the fellowship of Christ with other disciples means learning to become a forgiver, to reconcile grievances with our neighbor, which involves both the practice of forgiving those who sin against us and seeking forgiveness from those we sin against. In the great dance of forgiveness, disciples seek and receive God's forgiveness.

In the Hebrew Bible, forgiveness is associated with a number of ideas: "wiping away," "sending away," "removing," and "covering." The Israelites came to understand over the course of their relationship with Yahweh that their sins separated them from the divine covenant but that the covenant could be restored through repentance, atonement, and seeking Yahweh's forgiveness. Seeking reconciliation in the context of the Hebraic covenant means restoring relationships to their rightful place, both with God and with neighbor. The Israelite community developed rituals of atonement and sacrifice through burnt offerings that expressed the destruction of their sin. Animal sacrifice symbolized a "guilt offering" through which sins are confessed and the priest declares, "you shall be forgiven" (Lev 5:10ff). In addition to rituals, the community's leaders pleaded with God in prayer to forgive the people's sins and restore the bonds of the covenant. Moses prayed, "Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love" (Num 14:19), and Solomon implored God to "Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive" (1 Kgs 8:30).

The authors of the Hebrew Bible texts were not afraid to reveal the reality of unforgiveness, the struggle to forgive and the desire at times to not forgive. The psalmist is well known for hurling bitterness toward

his or her enemies and the enemies of God: “O that you would kill the wicked, O God!” (Ps 139:19). The prophets also tell God *not* to forgive the sinner. Isaiah says, “And so people are humbled, and everyone is brought low—do not forgive them!” (Isa 2:9). Jeremiah repeats a similar refrain, “Do not forgive their iniquity, do not blot out their sin from your sight” (Jer 18:23). But in that struggle to understand divine forgiveness, the prophets also proclaim God’s perspective on forgiveness: “I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me” (Jer 33:8). What disciples of Yahweh must learn is that God’s forgiveness does not make sense (Isa 55:8): a follower can never gain forgiveness or equality with God by an act of reparation or ritual sacrifice. “For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased” (Ps 51:16). Rather a “broken and contrite heart” is the sign that the follower knows his or her sin and lack of love and seeks to be in communion with Yahweh again. The prophets too had to learn that God forgives because God loves: “I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them” (Hos 14:4).

An essential claim to Christian faith is that no person on his or her own can relieve him- or herself of the burden of sin or muster what is needed to forgive the wrongs they endure. Forgiving neighbors and asking forgiveness is not a matter of human accomplishment, greater personal effort, or heroism. The practice of forgiveness is grounded in the recognition that God’s love conquers all sin, a love that empowers disciples to seek and grant forgiveness in the face of much pain and hurt. Neighbor love precedes neighbor forgiveness in the Christian story. Joseph’s brothers realize when their father is dead that Joseph will not only hold a grudge against them but pay them back in full. They go to ask forgiveness: “please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father” and they do so “as your slaves” (Gen 50:17ff), never imagining that Joseph will accept them as brothers. Joseph weeps upon hearing their request for forgiveness and embraces them, not as slaves, but as brothers, promising that “I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” Joseph models the practice of love through forgiving those who sinned against him.

This is the model Jesus follows and teaches: because Yahweh loves, Yahweh forgives, but this forgiveness comes when sinners seek forgiveness from one another, thereby restoring a community of love. In fact, for Jesus, divine and human reconciliation are caught up with each other: without forgiving a neighbor a wrong, God will not forgive our wrongs,

and without seeking God's forgiveness for our sins, we have little capacity to become forgivers. "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt 6:14-15).

Central to Jesus' witness about God is the radical, abundant, merciful love that God offers. Forgiveness is God's very nature and mission, because God is divine communion that is self-giving love. God is forgiveness who empowers Jesus to practice divine forgiveness and extend the power to forgive sins to his followers. Forgiveness is not a hardship for God, as the Israelites learned over time, and God does not respond in anger or retribution, but embraces all sinners who return with a humble heart. Reconciliation is at the heart of divine mission.

Jesus preaches this radical gospel of divine love and forgiveness, and heals sinners who are estranged from God and community. Jesus comes on the heels of John the Baptist announcing the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; Luke 1:77; 3:3). A paralyzed man receives both healing and forgiveness (Matt 9:2ff), and the woman who anoints Jesus' feet pours out love that flows from the forgiveness she has experienced (Luke 7:47). To those who do not observe the ritual law, to the outcast and the sick, to those who have done wrong, Jesus proclaims, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you" (Luke 5:20).

Not always good news, however. Some could not accept this view of divine forgiveness, or Jesus' claim that he forgives sinners. Jesus tries to make the teaching on forgiveness easier to practice: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). Yet even that teaching is rejected. Charges of blasphemy against Jesus are closely tied to his proclamation of forgiveness of sins (Luke 5:21). His own suffering and execution, as an innocent person in the face of false charges, brings Jesus to a place of abandonment, loneliness, and pain. And yet, Jesus' love for God and his followers led him to a radical step of obedience, to lay down his life for his friends and to offer forgiveness to those who crucify him. In Luke's gospel, Jesus is the ultimate reconciler, offering healing and hope to the guilty criminal being crucified alongside him at the same time that he begs God to forgive those who wronged him (Luke 23:32-43). Jesus bears a forgiveness born out of neighbor love and compassion, even for those who reject, betray, judge, and condemn him.

But forgiveness in practice is a difficult path to follow, both in seeking forgiveness and in granting it. Many of the wounds people bear at the expense of violence, murder, war, torture, or rape are so horrible it takes

years to find comfort, healing, and reconciliation. Because disciples understand their call as members of the Body of Christ, it seems hard to accept that the very relationships that are meant to give life and companionship are oftentimes the source of our greatest pain and suffering. Forgiveness is not a simple matter in human relationships. Most often, it is a process that takes time, healing, and the help of others. Those who suffer innocently need time to gain perspective on painful situations, face difficult emotions, and search for strength and courage—facets of human experience that can easily be ignored or repressed. Methodist theologian Gregory Jones calls the process the “dance of forgiveness” by which he means the movements that must be learned to live a way of forgiveness. He reminds us that forgiveness begins in witness: telling the truth about what has happened and identifying the anger, hurt, and pain experienced. From this pain comes a desire to live beyond it, not necessarily forgetting or dismissing it, but living differently in relationship to the hurt. Forgiveness also invites a disciple to see the wrongdoer as God sees them, as a child of God who needs healing and forgiveness. It may be difficult to initially grasp this view of a wrongdoer, but disciples take the first step when they utter the prayer of Jesus, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34). In other words, disciples are invited by Christ to see sinners as neighbors.

When disciples face their own sinful acts, the steps of the dance apply as well. For the sinner, the steps to forgiveness begin with contrition, the heartfelt sense that I have committed a wrong and must seek to restore the broken relationship with my neighbor and with God. Contrition is the desire to be free from the burden of sin and guilt. I must be able to confess my sin, to give a witness to the truth of what I have done, and to acknowledge that the person I have harmed is a child of God. I repent the sin: admitting I was wrong. I can also give witness to the reality of God’s all-embracing love that has forgiven and healed me in the past. In seeking God’s forgiveness disciples are renewed to take up the life of discipleship again, which entails a commitment to change. From this broader vision of God’s loving mercy in relationship to the sinner and the victim can come a commitment to change the circumstances that lead to such brokenness. Forgiveness is the path that leads to reconciliation, a commitment to change.

To be forgiven by God demands that the Christian become a forgiver: to offer forgiveness to others when sinned against, to accept the forgiveness of others, and to offer healing and consolation when there is pain and misery. As Jones says, forgiveness is not an isolated act or feeling, but a way of life that is “shaped by an ever-deepening friendship with

God and other people” that aims toward restoring communion.⁷ Being a forgiver involves a lifetime of learning, because forgiveness means not just forgiving “seven times” but “seventy-seven times” (Matt 18:21-22).

Prophet

To be a neighbor is also to be a prophet. Prophets are a witness with a keen perception for what harms a neighbor: scorn, hatred, disobedience, hubris, unbelief, greed, and selfishness. Prophets see a larger reality within the neighborhood: they give witness to neighbor relations that become distorted, forgotten, and abused. A prophet can see social and cultural realities that harm people’s lives on a personal, interpersonal, and systemic level. Disciples are called to embrace their call to be a prophet when they witness harm, evil, or oppression that besets a neighbor. Disciples are prophets when they demand that neighbors not be harmed by either individuals or systems, when they call the community back to its covenant with God, and when they work to change patterns of wickedness that destroy human life and flourishing. Prophets are witnesses to the power of the Spirit in transforming human hearts and minds. As Bevans notes, “The church’s mission is about cooperating with God in the call of all people always and everywhere, to justice, peace and the integrity of the creation.”⁸

In Hebrew *nabi* means “one called” or “one who is called” to speak, not his or her own words, but to speak God’s words. In this sense, prophets are witnesses of God’s justice. The later prophets, or writing prophets, were clearly called to exhort the people to renounce the popular though false actions and values they had adopted, and return to the life of the covenant. Being called upon to be a prophet was surely not wanted (Amos 7:14-15) or deeply admired by the people. Prophets are sent to their neighbors with a message about the state of human dignity and the dire prospects of the common good. Each prophet directed his message to a particular people undergoing a particular hardship, yet each focused on the need for diligent faith in the face of hardship, repentance for how neighbors were being treated, especially the poor and vulnerable, warnings of Yahweh’s wrath and judgment if change did not come about, and hope in returning to God’s covenant and favor (Isa 9:1-6;

⁷ Gregory L. Jones, “Forgiveness,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 134.

⁸ Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 369.

11:1-9; Mic 6:8; 7:8-20; Jer 31:31-34). Hosea, a prophet of divine compassion (Hos 11:8-9), reminds the people that God's covenant is not just a legal agreement, but born of a deep love for the people, a personal relationship between Yahweh and the people. He reminds the people that even though God punishes their stubborn ways, Yahweh is always ready to forgive and welcome them back.

Prophets arise in Israel and are active during political and religious crises. Prophets preached repentance and reform during the Assyrian invasions and occupations (Amos, Hosea, First Isaiah, Micah), the decline of Judah and the Babylonian exile (Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Second Isaiah), and the postexilic period (Third Isaiah, Zechariah). Each in their own way look to Israel's history as one of unbroken faithfulness by Yahweh and continual unfaithfulness by the people. This dynamic helps to explain what has happened over the course of history as Israel moves from being a great and mighty nation to one dominated and oppressed by outside forces. Obedience easily turns to disobedience and true worship becomes a mockery as idols and foreign gods were praised and trusted over Yahweh. Prophets are particularly sensitive to practices of false worship and false testimony (Isa 1:13; Mic 7:7).

Jesus is also regarded as a prophet, a teacher, and preacher who is part of the prophetic tradition. In Luke's gospel he begins his ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:18-19). Many recognize him as a prophet (Mark 6:15; 8:27-29), an identity and ministry he shares with his cousin, John the Baptist. Like prophets before him, Jesus calls people to repentance, invites them into a relationship with a loving and merciful God, and warns them against false religious practices and injustice toward the poor and outcast. Unlike Israel's prophets, however, Jesus does not attempt to interpret the history of the covenant and the decline of the nation. Rather he is announcing "good news" about God's presence in the midst of the people now, a presence he seems to know and experience and that emanates from him as something radically new and different.

Jesus' preaching challenged prevailing conceptions about the course of history. While many awaited the coming of the Messiah, the Jewish community expressed a variety of attitudes about what God would do: some preached an apocalyptic end; the Essenes withdrew to create a separate, holy community; zealots sought a revolution; and the temple priests continued to seek God through ritual sacrifice. Jesus chose none of these routes, but rather preached the reign of God, not as a place or a new phase of Israel's nationhood, but a profound way of encountering

God in the present and future times by a new set of relationships. The reign of God, he teaches, is the power of God active in history that liberates the oppressed, saves the lost, forgives the sinner, mends the broken-hearted, heals the sick, and offers new life to the dying. The kingdom Jesus preaches is in continuity with the covenant tradition, but in ways that shocked and upset many of his listeners. Jesus' prophetic message is that God's love and mercy extends to all regardless of their sin, status, or ritual purity. In other words, no barrier stands in the way of God's love and justice to people. Jesus' healings also point to God's radical power to overcome all forms of evil and suffering, to restore all brokenness to wholeness, the sick to health, and the dead to resurrection. Jesus claims that God's work is taking place now, it is "at hand" and can be known and experienced. But it is also "not yet," something to come in the future, which will be like a great wedding banquet, including many neighbors most people would *not* want to be invited (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:16-24).

Jesus' message disappoints and infuriates listeners, both because they want another kind of kingdom but also because he is making claims about God and his relationship with God that are deemed blasphemous. Jesus is forsaken and rejected, crucified and killed, because of his prophetic stance. After Jesus' resurrection, prophecy became one of the gifts of the Spirit and at least in some congregations was a regular part of worship (1 Thess 5:20; 1 Cor 12:28-29; 14:26-32).

In following Jesus as prophet, a disciple grows into a profound sense of each aspect of discipleship: the cost of following, the practice of true worship, the struggle to see others as neighbor, the dance of forgiveness, and the practice of stewardship. With a view to the whole of discipleship, a disciple can claim a prophetic voice in the community, calling fellow members to the fullness of life in Christ. As Jesus shows, prophets do not change much in people if they only condemn their faults; a prophet seems to have a better chance if they announce the good news about God's mission.

Stewards

Being a steward, and practicing stewardship, derives from being creatures of a created world. God creates and is the first steward of creation, extending the responsibility for stewardship to humanity. Because God is the source of all that is and because God claims creation to be "good,"

disciples live in the world for the sake of the world with a spirit of gratitude, humility, and awe (Gen 1:31). Each human person is created as *imago Dei* (Gen 1:27), as “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:3), and this radical identity includes responsibility for filling the earth and practicing dominion over all living things (Gen 1:28). The psalmist notes the amazing juxtaposition between humanity’s smallness in comparison to their immense calling and responsibility: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor,” sharing in God’s stewardship over all creation (Ps 8:3-8).

Dominion means disciples pursue a proper relationship to the whole order of creation, to keep and till, to serve, preserve, and cultivate the gifts of the earth (Gen 2:15). Stewards have dominion over the earth in order to be its guardians, custodians, and preservers. The authors of the Genesis story identify humanity’s connection to the earth through two important names: “Adam,” which in Hebrew (*Adama*) means of the earth, topsoil, or ground, one who comes from the dust and the earth and returns there; and “Eve” (*Hava*), meaning “living,” the mother of all living things (Gen 3:20). Together humanity’s parents are *Adama* and *Hava*, soil and life.

Through this connection to the earth and all living things, the biblical understanding of a steward develops in relationship to the person who has responsibility for the goods of the household, including food, property, money, and land. A steward, in the Greek Hebrew Bible, is called *oikonomos*, which combines the terms “house” and “to manage” (*oikos* + *nemein*), a term drawn from common ancient Greek usage. A steward serves his or her master by overseeing the master’s table, property, and finances. The sustenance of the family household depends on proper stewardship to thrive (Gen 43:19, 24; 44:1-4).

Stewardship is a dimension of the covenant and is directly related to the community’s care for its neighbors as well as its religious rituals and laws, all of which serve to express thanksgiving and praise to and for its divine source. In the Hebrew Bible the covenant requires that members care for the material needs of impoverished family members (Lev 25:35-43), celebrate sabbatical and jubilee years (Lev 25:1-17), offer first fruits (Deut 18:3-5; 26:1-2), tithe (Gen 14:20; 28:22; Mal 3:8; Neh 10:37), offer hospitality to the stranger (Gen 18:1-15), and remember and observe the Sabbath (Exod 20:8-11). In a variety of ways, then, the covenant entails the practice of stewardship through concern for the poor, sharing of personal resources, and recognition of the true source of life and sustenance.

But even good stewards can be tempted by riches, the false promises of other gods, and prosperity. Moses, who God “entrusted with all my house” (Num 12:7; Heb 3:1), tells the Israelites time and again to remember their liberation from slavery and all that God has done for them (Deut 8:1-6) and will do for them when the Lord God brings the community “into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters” (Deut 8:7-10).

Jesus is called the good shepherd (John 10:11), but he could easily, like Moses, be called the good steward. He shares the same stewardship over God’s house and people as its servant, as steward of all God’s gifts. Jesus is God’s gift to the world, and he extends himself as a gift to everyone he encounters. He stewards the vocation he has been called to, faithfully fulfilling his call to serve and to die, completely emptying himself in obedient love (Phil 2:6).

Jesus also uses the image of the steward to demonstrate generosity, wisdom, and prudence (Matt 24:45-51; 25:14-30), as well as shrewdness (Luke 16:1-9). The disciple is like a good steward, a person who is given great responsibility but who can easily be tempted by power and authority. Whether it is great material wealth or authority over land, slaves, or armies, Jesus links faithful stewardship to discipleship. “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” (Luke 12:48). In this sense, disciples are stewards of the goods of creation and the goods that society produces and uses; they watch over and care for the resources of the Christian community, including its organizational structures, processes, material goods, and financial resources. Stewardship is essential to mission.

St. Paul uses the idea of steward in relationship to the faith that has been given to the community. Paul reminds the Corinthians that disciples are “servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Cor 4:1). Disciples are stewards of all that is necessary to carry forth the church’s mission, including the Scriptures and tradition that bear the truth to which they give witness. For Paul the church is the “household of faith” (Gal 6:10), and the “economy of God” pertains to the way God cares for the whole household of the universe from creation to the final coming. Disciples are made in the image of God through Christ (Col 1:15; 2 Cor 4:4), and all things are brought to perfection in and through Christ (Eph 1:9).

Paul identifies himself as a servant in God’s plan of salvation (Col 1:25), one who is commissioned by grace to bear the message of salvation (Eph 3:2). Within the “economy of salvation,” the whole church becomes a witness, a servant, and a steward of the great mysteries of faith. In

Colossians 1:25 the author links *diakonia* and *oikonomia*: “I became [the church’s] servant [*diakonos*] according to God’s commission [*oikonomian tou theou*] that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints.” Early Christian authors of Ephesians and Colossians emphasized the idea of the economy of God’s plan for all creation that is now fully revealed in Christ, which comes to full expression in the patristic idea that everything is “from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.”⁹

Finally, disciples are stewards of a vocation, the gifts received for service in the community. Like Paul, disciples must become stewards of these gifts: “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Pet 4:10).

In this chapter I have examined seven features of discipleship. There are no doubt many other ways of naming and analyzing the life and practice of Christian discipleship. In some ways discipleship cannot be fully defined and grasped. It is not a program to be implemented or something we can set out to achieve. It is an identity, a commitment, a way of life, and a response to a call. In naming these features I have attempted to identify the particular parameters and markers of discipleship as I understand them in the New Testament. To be a disciple means to be a follower of Christ, committed to learning his ways; to be a worshiper, joining Christ and the community in praise of God’s wonders; to be a witness who proclaims the good news to the world; to be a neighbor by living mindfully of others’ needs and reaching out to them with compassion; to be a forgiver by practicing reconciliation, healing, and peacemaking; to be a prophet willing to tell the truth about the injustices that harm neighbors; and to be stewards of the creation, the community, and the mysteries of the faith. Disciples are able to take up and imitate the way of Christ because Jesus embodies first and foremost the way of being a follower, worshiper, witness, forgiver, neighbor, prophet, and steward.

In Jesus, we experience the divine life drawing near in a human person. By the power of the Spirit, his followers continued the practices of discipleship that he taught them, taking up a life in community that gives witness to his life, death, and resurrection. Hence the church is born of water and blood, death and new life, Jesus and the Spirit. The same Spirit that empowered the first followers continues to grace Christians today

⁹ LaCugna, *God for Us*, 25.

in the path of discipleship. We turn now to consider the ways in which the Spirit is present in the life of Jesus' followers.



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