

The Call and Invitation of Jesus to Discipleship in Luke's Gospel



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Introduction to This Issue

Luke offers a very distinctive portrayal of discipleship. In the Third Gospel, taking up one's cross is a "daily" discipline (9:23). Following Jesus means setting out and not looking back (9:62). It involves persistence in prayer (11:1–13; 18:1–8). It requires humility (14:7–11). It necessitates giving up possessions (14:33). It entails being a neighbor to people kicked to the curb (10:29–37). It involves welcoming the poor and disabled (14:12–14). It invites looking out for the least among us (17:1–2). It entails extending abundant forgiveness (17:3–4). It means following in the footsteps of Someone who extended his life for the world. All these traits are distinctively emphasized in Luke's Gospel.

As Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary dawns this December, we enter a season when the call and ethics of discipleship are needed. In a world increasingly marred by social and political division, the call of Jesus invites us to unite in following him. In a society where humility and compassion for the foreigner are not widespread aspirations, Jesus' teaching gives a vision of status reversal—turning the tables and welcoming outsiders in—as a more faithful reflection of God's kingdom. In an age where socio-economic disparities are growing and constructive proposals for radical change are met with apathy and indifference, Jesus challenges us—especially those of us with social privilege and wealth—to embrace and embody good news for the poor. In a world where conscience and conviction are used to justify violence against others, the way of Jesus in Luke's Gospel calls us

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to be neighbors to the harmed and to extend hospitality to all. In short, this upcoming year is a ripe time to revisit the call and invitation of Jesus to discipleship.

In a way that is more dynamic and explicit than in other accounts, the Jesus of Luke's account invites all who encounter him to a distinctive "way" of life. As Joseph Fitzmyer points out, "for Luke Christian discipleship is portrayed not only as the acceptance of a master's teaching, but as the identification of oneself with the master's way of life and destiny in an intimate, personal following of him."¹ In this Gospel, Jesus calls people from all sorts of backgrounds to embrace the teaching and way of Jesus, as it is conveyed in both word and deed. The essays in this issue help unpack and

1. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I–IX*, AB 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 241.

flesh out this call of Jesus, as it is presented in Luke's Gospel, and what its implications are for discipleship today.

John Carroll shows reversals of status and position as prominent features of Jesus' mission in Luke, giving shape to the community of disciples and challenging those outside it. Carroll explores status inversion in three episodes: the embrace of young children (18:15–17), an exchange with a wealthy man (18:18–30), and an encounter with the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus (19:1–10). Here we find a Jesus who flips the script: those who are last take first place in God's dominion, while those who enjoy first position are now last.

Troy Troftgruben explores parables and teachings in Luke's Gospel that are open-ended. Stories such as the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son end without clarifying how characters respond. Especially in Luke's Travel Narrative (9:51–19:44), Jesus poses questions and teachings that remain unanswered, creating a sense of ongoing dialogue with his call to discipleship. Troftgruben suggests the lack of closure throughout these stories makes for open invitations to both narrative characters and hearers today to hear and respond.

Jennifer Pietz explores connections between clothing and discipleship in Luke's Gospel. She examines several passages and nuances distinctive to Luke in which clothing, whether literal or figurative, plays an important role. Pietz argues these references convey key traits of what it means to be disciples of Jesus and to embrace life in the kingdom of God. This offers a fresh perspective from which to consider the nature of Christian discipleship today.

Melvin Otey surveys prayer as an overarching theme in Luke-Acts. Luke's Gospel presents Jesus as a person modeling a life of prayer, teaching his disciples about prayer, and encouraging them to pursue their own lives of dialogue with God. The Book of Acts portrays early disciples following Jesus' example. Otey shows how this distinctly Lukan emphasis invites hearers and readers to consider and emulate these examples for empowerment, ministry, and connection with God today.

Amanda Brobst-Renaud considers female disciples in Luke's Gospel, faithful to Jesus from Galilee to the crucifixion and the first heralds of his resurrection. What influence did they have on Jesus' ministry? Brobst-Renaud points out how in Martha's ministry there is evidence women were influential to what Jesus depicts as ideal discipleship. Women such as Martha both influence and remain faithful to Jesus and his mission, setting the stage for what will become the norm for discipleship.

Benjamin Isachsen explores the call and cost of discipleship in Luke-Acts for would-be followers who are wealthy and sometimes antagonistic to Jesus' message. While marginalized groups such as the poor are a focus (Luke 4:18), calls to discipleship are also issued to Pharisees, householders, people of means, and householding Gentiles in Acts—creating a fuller picture of the cost of following Jesus. Isachsen suggests the different social groups who hear these invitations make for complementary portrayals in Luke's economy of salvation.

Yung Suk Kim explores Luke 5:1–11 as a call story that weaves together themes of new vocation, transformation, and discipleship. The story involves a miraculous catch, Peter's confession of faith, and Jesus' invitation to a new vocation following him. Kim highlights how this transformative experience takes place through a step of faith at Jesus' invitation into the deep sea. All this informs how we think about the call of Jesus as we hear it today.

In addition to these essays, we have two thought provoking *Currents Focus* articles in this issue. **Bishop Meggan H. Manlove** proposes that one of the most overlooked gifts within the Lutheran tradition, especially for the next season of being the church, is openness to mystery. The article explores the work of several theologians but especially the Finnish Lutherans as read by Kirsi Stjerna. The author explores theosis, Lutheran spirituality, and encounters with God in the Word. The article ends by explaining how this research was connected to a faith storytelling workshop created for a congregation.

John F. Baldovin and **Thomas H. Schattauer** provide an introduction to and the text of a recent statement from an ecumenical seminar of liturgical scholars, teachers, and practitioners that offers a liturgical perspective on the continuing dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. The conveners of the seminar offer the readers of *Currents* reflections on connections to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) at its twenty-fifth anniversary, emphasizing the statement's distinctive approach and the specific opportunities for each tradition in relation to liturgical understanding and practice. The statement itself takes up the challenge of the *Declaration on the Way* (2015) to address some of the remaining issues in relation to baptism, eucharist, and ministry on the way to full communion. The method of the seminar's work stems from a conviction that the liturgical practice of our churches—most fundamentally the regular assembly around word and sacrament—already unites Lutherans and Catholics profoundly. Thinking from the viewpoint of liturgy can contribute significantly to overcoming remaining differences. Based on a liturgical ecclesiology rooted in baptism, our churches are encouraged to take bold steps in regard to eucharistic sharing and the mutual recognition of ministries.

Preachers will have to wait until Advent to engage texts from Luke, but it's important to keep track of this issue of *Currents* so you can retrieve these essays on Luke as December approaches. October and November bring the church year to a close—and coincide with political campaigns in the United States. This will be a challenging time for preachers and for congregations. **Preaching Helps** opens with words from a pastor in Maine thinking about the 90th anniversary of the Barmen Declaration. That document could give us courage to preach in this difficult season.

Troy Troftgruben and Craig Nesson, Editors

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