

“RESPONSE PAPER TO DEIRDRE BROWER LATZ AND RUBEN FERNANDEZ”
Nell Becker Sweeden, Director, Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, USA/Canada

The juxtaposition of the synoptic gospel portrayal of Jesus’ question: “Who do you say that I am?” and the mandate to “take up your cross and follow me” is no coincidence. Jesus’ words and actions never are in Scripture. In fact, Jesus’ appeal to “take up your cross” comes just after Jesus’ rebuke of Peter: “Get behind me Satan,” and this on the heels of Peter’s previous confession of Jesus as Messiah. Peter neglects to understand, however, that to be the Messiah is not a triumphant call but a road wrought with suffering, rejection, and death. Just like the waffling of Peter’s and the disciples’ understanding, we disciples fail to understand.

Despite my affection for the word ‘Evangelical’, its meaning is now contested and utterly skewed in the U.S. context. Christian discipleship today, I argue, lies in the narrative frame of Peter’s refusal to accept the Messiah’s suffering and rejection. Specifically, wealth and comfort are more characteristic of a U.S. Christianity than entering into the suffering of the world. In this regard, U.S. Christians often fail to see the corporate vision of salvation and restoration that Jesus inaugurated for the world. Inevitably, this feeds into the easy construction of a “sanitized” world in which Christians can easily cover over their sinful complicity in the suffering of the world and attempt to “fix” suffering through the pretentious strength of their money and strategies. Such a soteriology is fundamentally flawed. Just as the disciples portrayed in the Gospel of Mark—“we are seeing but not perceiving, hearing but not understanding” (Mark 4:12). Now is the time for U.S. Christians to repent and rediscover what it means to follow the Crucified one who came to redeem creation.

Brower-Latz's and Fernandez's papers call the church to the dangerous memory of the Cross and propel the church toward a costly discipleship. Their papers call to mind how the

personal nature of discipleship is inherently corporate. My response will focus on the latter because a recognition of systemic sin and corporate redemption is sorely needed in the prevailing U.S. culture of individualism and self-interest. The church in the U.S.—and specifically that of evangelical leaning—is drowning in its hyper-focus on the personal. Of course, God’s salvation is deeply personal, but the conflation of personhood with ‘autonomous individuality’ has clouded U.S. Christian understanding away from the corporate salvation Jesus proclaimed.

U.S. Christianity has given Christians permission to pursue individual economic interests with little regard for one’s neighbor; it has even given permission to “follow Christ” in the privacy of one’s home and outside the formation of the church. As a result, one finds corporate rhythms of the church year (such as Advent) often trumped by the habits of individual consumerism (Black Friday and Cyber Monday); understanding discipleship as radical dependence on God is replaced by a national motto of “independence;” Christian discernment is co-opted by national, partisan politics and protection of individual rights; and love and devotion to God and to one another have become relegated to disembodied messages on virtual media platforms. The evangelical tradition which so desperately needs to recover the corporate nature of Christianity has become swiftly indoctrinated by other kinds of “corporate.”

Saint Cyprian’s classic third century phrase: “outside the church there is no salvation,” is a ripe critique for U.S. Christianity.¹ Though, naturally, the church so presently conceived, may in fact manifest itself quite differently than expected as disciples are being shaped continually into the Body of Christ. Salvation has an ecclesial shape because it is about a people being

¹ Cyprian of Carthage, Epistle 72:21. Also see Bryan P. Stone “The Missional Church and the Missional Empire,” 4 presented at the Global Theology Conference, Johannesburg, South Africa, March 23-26, 2014, published in *Didache: Faithful Teaching*, 13: 2 (Winter 2014).

shaped into a distinct way of life together that will be sign of the ‘already/not yet’ restoration of God. Just as the personal is never divorced from corporate embodiment and habit-forming practices of discipleship, in fact, individual discipleship is not prior or more basic than the corporate. The sum of individual disciples to make a whole does not constitute the church. A commodified Christianity, however, tends to orient its end goal toward the number of individual converts, thus limiting discipleship as the means to populate church growth.

In so doing, the church woefully neglects discipleship as patterning into an entire way of life shaped toward the express purpose of pointing to God’s transformative reign that is salvation for the world. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the failure to understand the church’s task of proclaiming and demonstrating the good news of God’s Reign. In the neo-evangelical tradition of the twentieth century, we so prioritize individual proclamation and pragmatic methods for “saving souls” that we distill the good news down a formula, steps, or “thingamajig” in a box. On the contrary, the way of Jesus, as Scripture attests, is so much more than a prescription or formula. In fact, it points to a reign that is unfathomable and incomprehensible even for Jesus’ own disciples!

In turn, “How do we participate in Christ’s redemptive suffering on behalf of a broke and bleeding creation (that cannot redeem itself)?” And “How can we exchange the spiritualist paradigm for the paradigm of commitment to service to the world?” I take both Brower-Latz’ and Fernandez’s challenges to their own contexts also to be a U.S. ecclesial challenge. Together, the church can only extend God’s redemption by being shaped into Christ’s body, which begins with brokenness and is expressed in discipleship. Jesus own life and ministry—indeed his inauguration of God’s reign—opened outwardly toward a “broke and bleeding creation” to offer a new way for all. Jesus beckons his disciples to do the same.

The Markan passages preceding “take up your cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34) illustrate the kind of reign to which Jesus points his followers. Herein, Jesus provides many opportunities for his disciples to see the coming Kingdom, yet they remain blind.² Mark 6 and 8, for example, present two uncannily similar miracles of feeding performed by Jesus. First in Mark 6:30-44, when the Jewish crowds had followed Jesus and it began to get late in the day, the disciples suggested Jesus dismiss them to return home to get food. Much to the disciples’ surprise, Jesus asked them to feed the people. They gathered the five loaves and two fish, and miraculously Jesus blessed them and fed the people abundantly. While this was a glorious sign, it was not necessarily unexpected for the Messiah of the Jewish people. Curiously in Mark 8, when Jesus and the disciples were in gentile territory, and the crowds had followed them for three days (three days without food!), the disciples did not empathize as readily with their hunger. Jesus too had waited three days while the disciples said nothing. Yet, ultimately, in the fullness of compassion, he again fed them abundantly. In these two acts, Jesus illustrates that the Kingdom of God knows no bounds. Jesus’ own disciples who witnessed these things, however, did not understand. Continually in Mark, the disciples failed to see, while the Gentiles—the Syrophonecian woman (Mark 7:26), the deaf and mute man (Mark 7:32), and the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22)—witnessed Jesus inaugurating an abundant Kingdom.

In recalling the feeding miracles in the gospels, it is often the multitudes—that is the say, the numbers—that evangelical Christians remember. The numbers, however, only signify *a lot* of people (and *a lot* of leftover bread). Rather, the sign of the Kingdom lies in *who* Jesus is feeding—Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus’ compassion knew no bounds and pointed to a reign that

² I’m indebted to Andy Johnson, Nazarene Theological Seminary, for illuminating conversations about the Markan passages.

has no boundaries. Jesus came for the whole world. Continually in Mark, Jesus beckons the disciples to share the good news indiscriminately. But, first they must turn from their own conceptions of Kingdom, and follow the way Jesus came to offer the world.

Rooted in the continual act of following, discipleship requires turning away from one way to embrace another. In following Jesus, lives become patterned by a particular path—one that begins to take on the character and mission of Jesus, and one that is marked by love and healing for all people. The cruciform path of Jesus' life and ministry conjures the word compassion—God's compassion for creation most poignantly revealed in Jesus' own suffering on behalf of a bleeding and hurting world. As our church collectively considers what it means to “take up your cross and follow,” may it take seriously the call “to suffer with” for the sake of offering God's hopeful future for the world. The way of Jesus beckons his disciples to places of brokenness and to the neglected and forgotten to offer God's love indiscriminately. The Kingdom belongs to those who do not count or who are rejected in society because they have no stake in keeping things the way they are, which in turn gives them eyes to see differently. Meanwhile, in Mark, Jesus' disciples—those who literally “had a personal relationship with Jesus”—so often failed to see what he was doing, while those they least expected did see. Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on your disciples and show us your way.