



Towards a Contemporary Theology of Discipleship: Sources for the Church of England

Introduction and Summary

This paper was written by The Revd Canon Dr Jeremy Worthen, Secretary for Ecumenical Relations and Theology – Council for Christian Unity, in July 2014.

The Archbishops' Council wishes to explore the potential benefits to the Church of England of a renewed emphasis on discipleship, and in particular on discipleship as the lens through which ministry is seen. The paper aims to support this task by offering brief reviews of two areas: first, what recent thinking there has been within recent Church of England reports on the relationship between discipleship and ministry; second, how material from official documents of one kind or another around the related themes of calling, baptism and ethics might provide some useful points of departure. Finally, it looks briefly at a handful of examples of approaches to discipleship from Christian history beyond the Church of England with which it might be profitable to engage. While there are important resources in all three areas, there is no well-developed authoritative source for the theology of discipleship to which the contemporary Church of England can readily look to inform its teaching here.

Mark 9 of Developing Discipleship in the life of a diocese emphasises specific diocesan plans which are theologically rooted. This paper will inform this.

Introduction

1. The Archbishops' Council wishes to explore the potential benefits to the Church of England of a renewed emphasis on discipleship, and in particular on discipleship as the lens through which ministry is seen. This paper is written to support the main report on this subject by briefly reviewing existing sources for this in terms of documents with some kind of formal standing within the Church of England, rather than the writings of individuals working in the area. The first section highlights passages from existing Church of England reports that sketch out the distinction between discipleship and ministry and ways to understand the relationship between them. The second part draws on material from three main categories: authorised liturgical texts, including supplementary material; recent Church of England reports; and statements produced by ecumenical bodies in which the Church of England participated. It reflects on three themes in relation to which relevant material for a theology of discipleship may be found in these documents: calling, baptism and ethics.
2. A number of ideas and approaches arising from the first two sections merit further consideration, and it is noteworthy that discipleship seems to have moved increasingly



to the forefront in a number of contexts since the 1990s. Nonetheless, the material identified here is however somewhat scattered, and it would seem that discipleship as a theme in its own right seems to struggle to command attention in the sources that have been used. In the third and final section, therefore, the paper notes very briefly three occasions from Christian history when discipleship has come into focus in new and creative ways, and indicates how they might have something to say to the situation we are facing today.

Discipleship and ministry in the Church of England

3. There are at least two occasions where, in the last fifteen years, the Church of England has received documents that explicitly comment on the relationship between discipleship and ministry. In both cases, they are distinguished in terms partly of the former being universal for all Christians and the latter being more restricted in scope. While this may well be a helpful distinction to make, it is not unproblematic either. It is arguably in tension with more recent approaches to the theology of ministry that coordinate it with mission understood holistically.¹
4. The first occasion is the *Common Statement* that was prepared to accompany the Anglican–Methodist Covenant in 2001, which received formal approval from General Synod in 2003.² Paragraph 140 states:

The Conversations have found it helpful to distinguish ministry, first from everyday Christian discipleship, vital though that is, and second from instances of Christian service that individuals may from time to time choose for themselves. The Conversations have come to understand ministry in a more specific sense, namely as work, undertaken in the service of the Kingdom of God, that is actually acknowledged, either formally or informally, by the Church.

The *Common Statement* continues with some careful consideration of the relationship between baptism and ministry, but as the quoted passage indicates the assumption seems to be that ‘everyday Christian discipleship’ is something we all understand and agree on, and therefore requires no further comment, while ministry by contrast merits extensive attention and theological exploration.

5. We can identify a similar pattern in the 2007 report from the Faith and Order Advisory Group, *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church*. The same distinction is made, but in this case a whole paragraph is devoted to developing it, with ‘apostle’ presented as the counterpart to ‘disciple’ and as the term that anchors Christian ministry:

¹ E.g. David Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry* (London: SCM, 2011).

² *Anglican–Methodist Covenant: Common Statement of the Formal Conversations between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England* (2001); available at http://www.anglican-methodist.org.uk/common_statement0506.pdf.



It is, we suggest, discipleship, not ministry, that is the more inclusive category. The Christian life is a life of discipleship; ministry is an expression of apostleship. Discipleship and apostleship are not identical, though they are closely connected. In our baptism all Christians are called to be disciples of Christ and promise to follow and obey him through union with his death and resurrection. The first disciples literally followed Jesus on a journey that would lead to their apostolic commissioning. The same people can be both disciples and Apostles, but they cannot be Apostles until they have been disciples. Discipleship is intrinsic to being a baptized follower of Jesus Christ. Ministry is something that is subsequently discerned and for which we need to be called and equipped. All ministers should be disciples, but not all disciples are necessarily ministers.³

6. The passage is one that might well be worth further reflection, not least because it so clearly relates baptism primarily to discipleship rather than to ministry, which is a helpful corrective to the general tendency in church thinking addressed below at para. 13 and also found in the *Common Statement* of the Anglican–Methodist Covenant, as noted above. Yet this remains one paragraph in a report of 100 pages, whose main function is to clarify the understanding of ministry rather than to articulate a theology of discipleship. Again, the implication, however unintended, seems to be that discipleship is something that does not require extended attention from the Church of England in the same way as ministry does, indeed only being introduced to explain what ministry is not rather than as a term deserving exposition in its own right.

Themes associated with discipleship in Church of England sources: calling, baptism, ethics

Calling

7. In the Gospels, to be a disciple (*mathetes*) is to be one who hears and responds to the call to follow (*akolouthein*) Jesus. There is therefore a natural association in Christian thought between the language of call (including calling and vocation) and the theme of discipleship. To what extent do we find that association articulated in sources from the Church of England?
8. We might look in the first place at the Book of Common Prayer. It reflects the refashioning of the language of vocation undertaken in the first place by Luther, who wanted to appropriate for the whole Church of God what had been a term reserved for those taking vows of religious life or ordained ministry. For Luther, every Christian has

³ Faith and Order Advisory Group, *Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2007), pp. 62–63.



a calling, a vocation, which is understood in relation to everyday work and occupation.⁴ So, for instance, in the Second Collect for Good Friday, we pray:

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church is governed and sanctified: Receive our supplications and prayers, which we offer before thee for all estates of men in thy holy Church, that every member of the same, in his vocation and ministry, may truly and godly serve thee; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The close derivation from this prayer of the fourth 'Collect for Ministry' in *Common Worship* which, following the *Alternative Service Book*, also appears as the preferred option for Ordination Services, might lead us to imagine that 'vocation' for Cranmer meant a vocation to 'ministry' understood as some kind of recognised work in the life of the Church. This is however unlikely. The context of the prayer itself 'for all estates of men' and comparison with a similar reference to 'calling' in the Catechism⁵ indicate that 'vocation' here refers again to a Lutheran understanding of the individual's calling to occupy a particular place in the socio-economic fabric of Christendom, whether as priest, courtier or ploughboy.

9. This sixteenth-century recovery of the language of calling does not, however, relate it immediately to the category of discipleship either. That apparent detachment might be explained by the historical context of Reformation controversies and Christendom assumptions. It is perhaps harder to understand in the much more recent 'Common Statement' that prefaces the 1985 report from the General Synod Board of Education, *All Are Called: Towards a Theology of the Laity*.⁶ At first glance, the text appears to be transposing Luther's teaching into a contemporary idiom:

We are all called no matter what our occupations may be. There is no special status in the Kingdom for those in 'top jobs' or 'important responsibilities'. Cleaners and car dealers are called just as much as professors and lawyers and missionary nurses. And unemployed people and redundant people and 'unemployable' people are called just like everybody else.⁷

10. Rather than identify calling with occupation, however, as we find in the sixteenth century, the authors articulate it in terms of ministry, i.e. the ministries we may fulfil while we work as cleaners, car dealers etc. Ministry therefore becomes the characteristic expression of calling, now extended beyond the 'internal' life of the

⁴ David Hoyle, 'How Did the Reformation Develop the Theology of Vocation?', in Christopher Jamison, ed., *The Disciples' Call: Theologies of Vocation from Scripture to the Present Day* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 95–110.

⁵ The response to the question, 'What is thy duty towards thy neighbour?' ends with 'to do my duty in that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call me.'

⁶ General Synod Board of Education, *All Are Called: Towards a Theology of the Laity* (London: Church House Publishing, 1985).

⁷ *All Are Called*, p. 3.



Church to every part of the Christian's life. At the same time, its roots are located not in the call of Christ to discipleship but in being 'made in the image of God' (according to the opening sentence).

11. Although the theme of calling therefore ought to be a fruitful one for the theology of Christian discipleship, it would seem that in Church of England tradition it has tended to be bound up with an idea of finding and accepting a particular role, ecclesial or secular, rather than embarking on an open-ended journey with Jesus Christ. Moreover, in both the sixteenth and twentieth century examples cited, it is somewhat entangled with polemics about who can be said to have a calling. To say that it is only those with specific responsibilities within the institutional Church seems to detract from the value of ordinary Christian faithfulness in the world. Yet to try to correct that by applying an idea of calling itself shaped by that assumption to all Christians also carries its own risks. Rooting the theme of calling in the primary calling to discipleship would be a promising way to overcome these difficulties.

Baptism

12. In his great work on discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted that one of the reasons that the characteristic terminology of discipleship seems to disappear in the letters of the New Testament is that baptism becomes the distinctive ritual expression of what it means to say yes to the call of Christ, and therefore teaching about baptism here both embraces and builds on the teaching of Jesus about discipleship: 'What the Synoptics describe as hearing and following the call to discipleship, Paul expresses with the concept of *baptism*.'⁸ The contemporary baptism service includes numerous references to following Christ, walking in his way and being his disciple.⁹ Given the energy and attention that have been given to the renewal of Christian initiation within the Liturgical Movement and the Ecumenical Movement since the mid-twentieth century, we might expect to find some important sources for a theology of discipleship in material relating to baptism.
13. Here too, however, discipleship appears to be a somewhat underdeveloped dimension of the Church of England's thinking. An appendix to the important report issued by the House of Bishops in 1994, *On the Way*, cited approvingly a text from the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation which confirmed the centrality of baptism for our understanding of Christian life. In seeking to explicate that, it dwelt on the categories of mission and ministry rather than discipleship:

In this way the whole church is formed as a participatory community, one whose members share life with one another, while at the same time being conjoined to the missionary purpose of God for which baptism calls the community into

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works vol. 4, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 207.

⁹ *Common Worship: Christian Initiation* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), 'Holy Baptism', e.g. pp. 66–68 and 72–73.



existence. Through the lens of baptism the people of God begins to see that lay ministry is important not simply because it allows an interested few to exercise their individual ministries, but because the ministry and mission of God in the church is the responsibility of all the baptized community.... Baptism affirms the royal dignity of every Christian and their call and empowering for active ministry within the mission of the church.... A true understanding of baptism will bring with it a new expectancy about the ministry of each Christian.¹⁰

14. We might compare here the Commentary by the Liturgical Commission contained in *Common Worship: Christian Initiation*, which notes that ‘the equipping of God's people for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4.12) will require continuing ministerial formation for all.’¹¹ The link between baptism and ministry is an important one and is rightly highlighted in The Greeting for *Common Worship: Ordination Services* (2007)¹², as well as being emphasized in many ecumenical documents. The ARCIC I ‘Elucidation’ to *Ministry and Ordination* from 1979 summed up the principle here that would be repeated on many subsequent occasions: ‘The Priesthood of the whole people of God (1 Peter 2:5) is the consequence of incorporation by baptism into Christ.’¹³ Yet in ecumenical dialogue, the principle tends to appear as a kind of preamble to a much more detailed consideration of ordained ministry. There are of course very good reasons why this should be so, given the significance of the theology and practice of ordained ministry in the continuing divisions between the Church of England and other Churches, but it does mean that the rich relationship between baptism and discipleship is hardly mentioned, much less articulated, in these sources.

Ethics

15. In the past couple of decades, it has increasingly become the case that differences over ethics, rather than over church order or even doctrine, threaten not only to impede significant progress in ecumenical relations but also to fracture such unity as already exists. One of the early attempts to treat theological ethics as a critical issue for inter-church dialogue was *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church*, a report from ARCIC II that appeared in 1994. The third main section of the report, ‘Common Heritage’, begins by acknowledging division but also affirming that although they have different traditions, ‘Anglicans and Roman Catholics firmly believe that their respective

¹⁰ The General Synod of the Church of England, *On the Way: Towards an Integrated Approach to Christian Initiation* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995), Appendix 2, ‘Extract from *The Findings of the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, Toronto, 1991*,’ pp. 124–25.

¹¹ *Christian Initiation*, p. 324.

¹² *Common Worship: Ordination Services. Study Edition* (London: Church House Publishing, 2007), pp. 10, 32 and 55.

¹³ Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) I, *The Final Report* (1981), ‘Elucidation: Ministry’, § 2; available at http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/catholic/arcic/docs/arcic1_final_report.cf
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traditions continue to nourish and support them in their daily discipleship....¹⁴ In the following paragraph, 'a sense of discipleship, manifested in the lives of the saints and acknowledged by devotion and piety' is identified as a vital part of the shared tradition that is the property of Anglicans and Catholics together.

16. In contrast with some of the previous cases we have looked at, however, discipleship is not only invoked as a kind of prelude to other, more substantial considerations. Rather, although it is not a major theme in what follow, it is nonetheless used to frame the task of theological ethics in significant ways. It appears, for instance, when the report seeks to articulate the 'mutually supportive' relationship between 'freedom and order':

The obedience of Christian discipleship is neither the mechanical application of regulation and rule, nor the wilful decision of arbitrary choice. In the freedom of a faithful and obedient response the disciples of Christ seek to discern Christ's mind rather than express their own....¹⁵

The report connects discipleship with core practices of the Christian life, including participation in the sacraments, preaching and scriptural meditation. These practices shape a process that 'unfolds through the formation of a character, individual and communal, that reflects the likeness of Christ and embodies the virtues of a true humanity (cf. Gal 5:19-24)...'¹⁶ At the end of this section, the report concludes that Anglicans and Roman Catholics 'possess a shared vision of Christian discipleship and a common approach to the moral life'.¹⁷

17. This deployment of discipleship as a key lens through which to reflect on Christian ethics is picked up in the title of the relevant section of the IARCCUM report, *Growing Together in Mission and Unity: 'Discipleship and Holiness'*. Although largely a summary of material from *Life in Christ* and other ARCIC reports, it also brings out with particular emphasis the place of learning in any discipleship worthy of the name:

We agree that growth in Christ, for believers and for the believing community, arises from a response to the grace of God and is to be shaped according to the mind of Christ. The fidelity of the Church to the mind of Christ involves a continuous process of listening, learning, reflecting and teaching. In this process each member of the community has a part to play. Each person has to learn to reflect and act according to an informed conscience. Learning and teaching are a shared discipline, in which the faithful seek to discover together what obedience

¹⁴ ARCIC II, *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church* (1993), § 12; available at http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/catholic/arcic/docs/life_in_christ.cfm.

¹⁵ ARCIC II, *Life in Christ*, § 26.

¹⁶ ARCIC II, *Life in Christ*, § 31.

¹⁷ ARCIC II, *Life in Christ*, § 46.



to the gospel of grace and the law of love entails amidst the moral perplexities of the world.¹⁸

In a context where the teaching authority of the church appears to be an obvious and highly contentious point of difference, the stress on the church as a community of disciples in which all are learners seeking to know the mind of Christ together has particular resonance.

18. The Church of England is currently in the process of considering the most recent 'convergence text' produced by the World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Early on, in commenting on Matt. 28.18–20, the text identifies three key characteristics of the new community that comes into being in the Church:

This command by Jesus already hints at what he wanted his Church to be in order to carry out this mission. It was to be a community of witness, proclaiming the kingdom which Jesus had first proclaimed, inviting human beings from all nations to saving faith. It was to be a community of worship, initiating new members by baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity. It was to be a community of discipleship, in which the apostles, by proclaiming the Word, baptizing and celebrating the Lord's Supper, were to guide new believers to observe all that Jesus himself had commanded.¹⁹

19. Discipleship, along with witness and worship, is thereby singled out as of primary significance for the doctrine of the Church. As with *Life in Christ*, the focus on discipleship reflects a confidence that here is something that can highlight the inherited common ground between Christians while also providing a fruitful place for engaging with the particular challenges faced by the contemporary Church. Although, somewhat frustratingly, there is no sustained treatment of discipleship in what follows, somewhat analogously with *Growing Together in Unity and Mission* it is used to frame the key section on ethics, which begins: 'Christians are called to repent of their sins, to forgive others and to lead sacrificial lives of service: discipleship demands moral commitment.' The next paragraph then comments: 'The ethics of Christians as disciples are rooted in God, the creator and revealer, and take shape as the community seeks to understand God's will within the various circumstances of time and place.'²⁰ Again, the Church as a community of disciples seeking understanding provides a vital perspective for describing what Christians are doing when they engage with disputed ethical questions.

¹⁸ International Anglican – Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission, *Growing together in Unity and Mission* (2007), § 80; available at http://iarccum.org/archive/IARCCUM_2000-2010/2007_iarccum_growing_together_en.pdf.

¹⁹ World Council of Churches (WCC), *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), § 2; available at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>.

²⁰ WCC, *The Church*, § 61-2.



Other Christian traditions

20. Of course, discipleship has been a frequent subject of Christian speaking and writing from the New Testament to the present day, and the volume of material that might be consulted is overwhelming. The final section of this paper sketches – in highly general terms – three occasions when, it might be argued, there has been a more or less conscious retrieval of discipleship as the focus for Christian living in a way that may have some parallels with the concerns that animate the thinking of the Archbishops' Council today.
21. The first is the Franciscan movement of the thirteenth century. While life under religious vows had by this point been seen for close to a millennium as paradigmatic of what it meant to take the call of discipleship seriously, Francis and his followers moved this into a different key. In particular, by invoking texts about following Jesus of Nazareth as he appears in the Gospels, rather than joining the community of the disciples under the leadership of the apostles in the early chapters of Acts, they provided a scriptural canvass on which to paint their new form of religious community. This would be one no longer bound by vows of 'stability', as Benedictine monasticism had been, but one defined, at least ideally, by itinerancy, a readiness quite literally to go on the road, to travel to where one was needed. Although Franciscans continued to live in community, their way of being in community was shaped by 'doing what Jesus did' in ways that broke with much (not all) of the past history of religious life: works of mercy, preaching the good news, proclaiming forgiveness and urging repentance. There was a kind of literal imitation of Christ here that also released creativity and energy for reaching out to the growing populations of towns and cities that older patterns of ministry were not well positioned to engage. As followers of Jesus, Franciscans sought to live *sine proprio*, without calling anything their own, yet they also quickly came to the forefront of the new movement of learning in the universities of Western Europe; inevitably, there were tensions and accusations of betrayal. The rediscovery of discipleship, however, was a vital strand in this hugely significant movement of renewal for the medieval Church.
22. The second occasion is Bonhoeffer's lectures on discipleship in the mid-1930s in Germany, eventually published as *Discipleship* – the simple title of the original version. As already noted, Bonhoeffer was alert to the apparent disappearance of discipleship language in the Pauline letters but argued that the stress on faith found there could not be separated from the teaching on discipleship in the Gospels, as if somehow Paul had arrived at a higher understanding than Jesus of Nazareth. Baptism was a vital thread connecting the two, as act of faith and also entry into the way of discipleship.²¹ His concern was that the neglect of discipleship for a self-consciously 'Pauline' faith was fostering a complacent, Christendom mentality at the very point where

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, pp. 205–12.



Christianity itself was being threatened by a mortal enemy. Discipleship means commitment, costly commitment, not just receiving a gift that changes nothing; it means life in community with other disciples, not just a relationship with 'my' Jesus; it means seeking and striving to grow in faithfulness, not just waiting for God to do something; and it means taking up the cross every day, and facing the evil of death, not holding on to every place of apparent security and safety while the flood is creeping up on us. We live in times that while close to Bonhoeffer's compared to the thirteenth century are on many levels very different. Yet his urgent pleading for the rediscovery of the power of following Jesus in the face of an established Christianity that preferred to let its attention rest elsewhere may continue to resonate with us today.

23. The third occasion to be mentioned here where we find a creative retrieval of discipleship is the Second Vatican Council. Since the later Middle Ages, the term 'evangelical counsels' had been used to refer to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience that defined the consecrated life: a life separated from, and by definition not accessible to, the vast majority of Catholic Christians. The potential implication was that the 'gospel' life was lived by those under religious vows in a way that was not possible for the lay faithful, as if only the former were truly serious about following Jesus. Across various documents of the Council, we see a profound refocusing of traditional teaching that does not thereby contradict it. Rather than the vows defining what discipleship means, the Council wants discipleship to illuminate what the vows mean: the intentional shaping of a way of life in which we are free to follow in the way of Jesus Christ, which is the way of love for God and neighbour that leads to ever deepening union with the God who became incarnate in Christ for our salvation. The focus on discipleship as growing in love enables the Council texts to embed their teaching about contemporary discipleship in the broad, deep stream of Catholic tradition, while also opening up a conception of poverty, chastity and obedience as attitudes of the heart that need not be confined to those in religious orders, but rather are necessary for anyone who would say yes with all their heart to the call: 'Follow me.' One articulation of this in more recent Catholic theology has been to say that union with God and following Jesus are the final values for all Christians, that for the sake of which everything else is done, and poverty, chastity and obedience are supporting values for all Christians that are indispensable for seeking the first two.²² Might there be scope for the theology of discipleship to enable a comparable renewal of Anglican traditions of spirituality?

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²² L. M. Rulla, *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation*, Vol. 1, *Interdisciplinary Bases* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1986), e.g. p. 284.