

Conversion and discipleship in the synoptic gospels – an exegetical and missiological challenge

Paper for seminar group 15 on mission in NT, Sibiu, Romania 2007

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At the narrative level in the synoptic gospels we should distinguish between the call to conversion and the call to discipleship and following Jesus.

The call to conversion is a common concern for Jesus and his predecessors John the Baptist and the OT prophets. Its presupposition is that the people have turned away from God and his law. They are walking in a wrong direction and have gone astray. They have to turn and find the right way. Behind the call to conversion is a basic image of the life as a journey. They are called to find a new direction and walk on the way of the Lord. Conversion means to listen to his word and obey his will. The public message of Jesus is summarized in the call to conversion: Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven has come near.¹

The call to be a disciple and follow Jesus has not in the same way models in the OT. In the gospels this call is not addressed to the people as a public proclamation. It is directed to individual persons, many of whom are mentioned by name and become key persons among Jesus' supporters and later on in the early church in Jerusalem. The call to be a disciple is a personal call to follow Jesus, and is not explicitly a call to turn to God and obey him.²

The purpose of this paper is to analyze these two important missiological terms exegetically, to see their interrelation to each other and their relevance to churches who want to give the gospel a normative status. In the discussion I want to distinguish between the different levels reflected in the gospel material, the life of Jesus as reflected at the story level in the gospels, the oral level when this material was remembered and applied in the early church, and the literary level when it was integrated into the literary and theological framework of each of the three synoptic gospels. The three different levels can of course not be explicitly discussed for each text and topic, but a reflection on them are important when we try to see how the texts can be understood as basis for teaching and attitudes in church life today.

1) The Call to Conversion

Has Jesus called to repentance and conversion? Some scholars have seen this call as a later "Gemeindetheologie" with no basis in the message of the historical Jesus.³ A survey of the terminology in the gospels shows that the verb μετανοέω (repent) and the noun μετάνοια

¹ Matt 4:17, cf. Mark 1:15. We use the words repentance and conversion as interchangeable translations of the Greek *metanoia*. Our Bible quotations are from the RSV.

² McKnight, S. *Turning to Jesus: the sociology of conversion in the Gospels*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2002, 164 overlooks this distinction when both the call to conversion and to discipleship are presented under the headline "Conversion to Jesus". His otherwise excellent presentation should at this point have been more conscious of the variation in the terminology of the gospels. Our distinction is important when we read the gospels at their own narrative level: the ministry of Jesus before Easter. It is less important when we read the gospels as early Christian proclamation of Christ.

³ Goppelt, L. (and J. Roloff): *Theologie des Neuen Testaments. Erster Teil: Jesu Wirken in seiner theologischen Bedeutung*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1975, opines that Jesus did not call to conversion, but to faith and discipleship. Sanders, E. P. *Jesus and Judaism*, London, SCM Press, 1985 maintains that the unconditional forgiveness of sins to "tax collectors and sinners" has not been conditioned by or followed by a call to conversion. See the refutation of Sanders in B. Chilton, "Jesus and the Repentance of E.P. Sanders", *TynBull* 39, 1988, 1-18; D.C.Allison: "Jesus and the Covenant: A Response to E.P.Sanders" *JSNT* 29, 1987 57-78.

(repentance) are not very frequent in the mouth of Jesus. But they are used in the summaries of the message of Jesus, Mark 1:15 and Matt 4:17, and in the summarizing description of the ministry of the apostles when they were sent out to preach and to heal: "So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent" (Mark 6:12). The call to conversion has a central place in Luke's description of the commission of the Risen Lord to the disciples (Luke 24:47) and of the ministry of the disciples after Easter and Pentecost (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20). Luke mentions a call to conversion in sayings where it is absent in Mark and Matthew. "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners *to repentance*." Luke 5:32: the italicized expression lacks in Mark 2:17 and Matt 9:13. Could this be an indication that the call to conversion is part of the theology of the early church and the authors of the gospels more than of the message of Jesus?

No, this would be a too hasty conclusion. When the summaries point to a call to conversion together with the proclamation of the kingdom as the content of Jesus' message this corresponds to many aspects of the ministry of Jesus. In some sayings Jesus has pointed out conversion as the intended response to his miracles:

"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. (Matt 11:21-22; Luke 10:13)
The men of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. (Matt 12:41; Luke 11:32)

Both these sayings (from Q) compare contemporary Israel with gentile cities known for their resistance to God in the OT. The words of Jesus are provoking because they expose the stubbornness of Israel. The towns Jesus visited experienced greater things than the gentile cities, but would not repent. There is no reason to dispute the authenticity of these sayings.⁴ Conversion is the adequate reaction to a confrontation with God's judgement (Luke 13:3.5; 16:30), and conversion is reason for joy in heaven over "one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). In accordance with the OT prophets Jesus proclaims God's judgement over Israel. But the message of judgement has always as its presupposition that there is still a possibility to repent and be saved. Conversion can also be presented as an entrance requirement for the kingdom of God: "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" Matt 18:3.

It is not sufficient to count the occurrences of the word "conversion." It is more important to evaluate the motif of conversion in the message of Jesus as a whole. An appeal to conversion is present in sayings where people are called to choose between two possibilities. The word about the broad and the narrow way may illustrate this. In Matthew there is a description of two gates and two ways, the one leads to life, the other to destruction (Matt 7:13-14). Any observant reader or hearer will understand the implicit appeal: find the narrow gate and choose the hard way! In Luke the same image is used in an explicit imperative: "Strive to enter by the narrow door!" The following context shows that the narrow door leads to salvation and a place at the table in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:23-30). We do not find the term "conversion" in these texts. But they no doubt are appeals to turn to God and choose the right way.

Many parables present two possibilities. The wise and the unwise maidens show how important it is to have enough oil for the lamps in time (Matth 25:1-13). The good Samaritan, in difference to the priest and the Levite, shows how to react when you see a "neighbour" in need, (Luke 10:30-37). When you are invited to the great banquet, you should come without excuses and hesitation (Luke 14:15-24; Matt 22:1-14). The good father waits patiently for the

⁴ Theissen, G. and A. Merz, *Der historische Jesus: ein Lehrbuch*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996, 242-243.

son who has spoilt his inheritance. But the son has to repent and turn his steps towards his home and come to his father (Luke 15:11-24). These parables warn against the wrong way and invite to make the right choice. “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near” may be put as an adequate headline over them and many other parables. They confirm that the call to conversion has been an important part of the message of Jesus. As in the OT prophets the call is serious and intense.⁵ It is a question of life or death, salvation or destruction, the kingdom of God or the darkness outside!

Conversion means to stop turning your back to God and to direct your way of life wholeheartedly to him. In the message of Jesus conversion is defined by *Shema*, the confession to the one and only God whom you shall love with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength (Luke 10:27; Matt 22:37). But this “first and greatest commandment” cannot be isolated from the second, which is like it in importance: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. The content of Jesus’ call to conversion is given by the double commandment of love. It has a moral as well as a religious side. In Matthew the Sermon on the Mount, and especially the antitheses, can be read as a description of what repentance means.

2) “Follow me!” The call to discipleship

Jesus’ call to conversion means a new relationship to God. His call to discipleship means a new and exclusive relationship to Jesus. His call to follow him has not in the same way as his call to conversion models in the OT. To “follow after”, *chalak achare*, had in Judaism become a term for the relation of a pupil to his teacher. It implies the priority and superiority of the teacher, and the obligation of the pupil to serve the teacher and show him respect. In the OT the terminology is found in the story of Elisha’s call to follow Elijah, to learn from him and to enter into his role as a prophet (1 King 19:19-21). Elisha is allowed to say farewell to his father and mother. After a sacrificial meal with the people “he arose and went after Elijah, and ministered to him.” The story may have given a pattern for the call narratives in the gospels. But the prophetic and charismatic aspect of Elisha’s relationship to Elijah is no part of the terminology of “following” a master at the time of Jesus. Prophets belong to the past, and the relation to a scribe or a rabbi is not to be a prophet, but to be schooled in transmission and interpretation of the written and the oral law and to help others to a life in accordance with the revealed will of God in the Law and the Prophets.

When Jesus calls people to follow him he wants to have them as his pupils. His “school” of disciples corresponds to the use of titles like “master” and “rabbi” in the gospels. He is a teacher both when he is in dialogue with his disciples and when he is in disputation with the scribes and the Pharisees (*Schulgespräche* and *Streitgespräche*). His teaching is not bound to a house, but can take place publicly in the synagogues, at the temple court, in open air as well privately indoor with his disciples. The broad picture of Jesus as a teacher in the gospels is no doubt based on his behaviour and appearance to his followers, to his opponents and to the people who met him.

We easily forget that the Greek word for disciple, μαθητής, in NT times was the normal word for a pupil or an apprentice. It had not the special connotation linked to our loan word “disciple”. The church started as a Jewish school. *Bet Jeshua*, the school of Jesus, can be seen as a parallel to *bet Hillel* and *bet Shammai*, the schools of Hillel and Shammai, the founders

⁵ McKnight 2002, 28-33 gives a concise picture of the message of conversion in the OT prophets compared to the message of Jesus. Schrage, W. *Ethik des Neuen Testaments*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982, 44-45 points to a difference: the conversion in Jesus’ message is not linked to ritual acts of repentance like sacrifices, fasting, sack and ashes, services of repentance etc. Jesus’ appeal to conversion is also not linked to the Law in the same way as in contemporary Judaism. Tobias Hägerland in NTS 2006

of the Jewish Pharisaic traditions that were later collected in the *Mishna* and other rabbinic sources.

But the relationship between Jesus and his disciples differed in many points decisively from contemporary teacher-pupil relationships.⁶ Jesus had no house or building where he gathered his disciples for instruction. His itinerant ministry meant that both his disciples and the people had to “follow” him in the literal sense of the word, too. An even more important difference is that Jesus himself calls his disciples to follow him. There is no open admission for everyone to be his pupil. The call narratives in the gospels are addressed to named individuals, to the pairs of brothers Peter and Andrew and to the sons of Zebedee, James and John (Mark 1:16-20; Matt 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-11). In addition to these fishermen the tax collector Levi, the son of Alphaeus, was called when he was sitting at the tax office (Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32; - in Matt 9:9-13 his name is Matthew). In two *chreiai* or *apophthegms* individuals take an initiative to become his disciples (Luke 9:57f and 61f; par Matt 9:18-22). But in both cases Jesus seems to be reluctant. They first should consider the cost of following him. The story of the rich man can be read as a story of an unsuccessful call to discipleship. It ends in a call: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven; and come, follow me!" But this was too much for the rich man. He chose his wealth instead of following Jesus (Mark 10:17-22; Matt 19:16-22; Luke 18:18-23). Discipleship is not a broad and popular road. Luke 14:25-35 can be read as a warning against such a misunderstanding. He said to the great multitudes that accompanied him: “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.” Jesus did not appeal to the broad public and invite them to easy discipleship. To follow him means renunciation of all competing obligations. He wants wholehearted disciples, not lukewarm adherents.

I shall discuss the topic of renunciation extensively in the next chapter. How has the early church conceived and practiced the radical demands of Jesus – and how can we live up to them as followers of Jesus in our time?

The relationship of the pupils to their master was a personal and lifelong obligation. Jesus did not accept them as disciples for a limited course period until they were authorized to teach others. Discipleship in the school of Jesus is a commitment to the one and only teacher (Matt 23:8-10). Jesus taught with a unique authority. In the antitheses he put his own word “But I say to you” up against the word spoken to Moses by God himself. The disciples of the rabbis should learn the interpretation of their teacher and evaluate it against the teaching of others. The disciples of Jesus should learn the word of Jesus as the definite expression of the will of God.⁷ They remain pupils and cannot become teachers equal to their teacher.

Another important difference between Jesus and contemporary teachers is the composition of the “class”. Only men were allowed to the rabbinical school. Jesus had also woman disciples. Luke informs us that some women followed him in Galilee together with the twelve, and some of them had an important function as witnesses at the cross of Jesus and at the empty tomb (Luke 8,2-3; 23:49.55f; 24:1-11.22f). Luke also tells us that Martha’s sister Mary took the place of a disciple at the feet of Jesus and “and listened to his teaching” (Luke 10:39 cf. Paul’s place at the feet of Gamaliel, Acts 22:3). There is no problem in presenting Tabita as a μαθήτρια, a female disciple, in Acts 9:36. The call to discipleship included

⁶ Theissen/Merz 1996, 198-200. See also the broader presentations in Hengel, *Nachfolge*, Riesner, R. *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung*. Tübingen, Siebeck Mohr. (1988) and Byrskog, S. *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community*. Stockholm, Almqvist and Wiksell, (1994).

⁷ Byrskog 1994 points to the fact that the rabbinic tradition was shared by a great number of rabbis over many generations. The position of Jesus is quite different. He is not solely a link in a chain of traditions. He is the only teacher, and nobody is equal to him. This is valid for the gospel tradition as a whole, and is not dependent of Matt 23:8-10, were it is expressed explicitly.

women. Even small children were allowed to attend the teaching of Jesus, and might be used to illustrate the true greatness among those who followed him (Mark 9:36-37; 10:13-16).

3) A call to renunciation

To be a disciple meant to leave profession, property and family. In the call narratives this is expressed in brief and pregnant expressions. “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” “Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him” (Mark 1:16; Matt 4:22). Luke has an even more radical expression: “they left *everything* and followed him” (Luke 5:11). They had to abandon their profession as fishermen, for now they were called to be fishers of men. In the same way Levi had to leave his tax office. To follow Jesus meant for these disciples to leave the profession that had earned them their living.

Luke 14:25-35 renders three pregnant sayings about the conditions for being a disciple, partly with parallels in Matt 10:37-39. Between the second and the third saying are the parables of the tower builder and the king considering war, both of whom have to calculate the cost of their great project. Discipleship is also a project with great costs:

Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them,

[1] "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

[2] Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

[For which of you, desiring to build a tower...

Or what king, going to encounter another king in war...]

[3] So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

"Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltness be restored?

It is fit neither for the land nor for the dunghill; men throw it away.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Luke 14:25-27 [28-32] 33-35.

In the Greek text the three sayings have the same grammatical form, which is not easily rendered in the translations. The three conditional sentences are followed by an identical apodosis: οὐ δύναται εἶναί μου μαθητής, “he cannot be my disciple.” These three conditions for discipleship are followed by the parable of the salt losing its power. The parable warns against starting a discipleship without implementing it. In Matthew (5:13) this parable is directly addressed to the disciples: You are the salt of the earth. In both versions the point of the parable is not the positive function of the salt, but the possibility of the salt losing its power. To follow Jesus is a great enterprise with great costs. Consider the cost, and do not end up like salt without saltness!

We shall look at the conditions for discipleship in the three sayings one by one.

3.1 Renunciation of family

The first saying gives discipleship priority before one’s own family. Parents, siblings, wife and children are mentioned, and the Greek text talks about “hating” them, as the text is rendered in the KJV: “If any *man* come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” The verb “hate” is kept in NIV and RSV and should be read as an *oxymoron*, an exaggerated expression typical for Jesus. It is important not to connect it with hateful feelings or aggressive actions. In this context, as in Matt 6:24, μισέω is a word for neglecting at the cost of something more important, and some modern translations avoid the verb “hate” in order to prevent misunderstandings. Jesus does not want to abolish the fifth commandment about honouring your parents. His saying does not encourage hating your parents, neglecting your children or abolishing your spouse. But the relationship to Jesus should have priority before

your own family, even your wife.⁸ Conditions like these were unknown in rabbinical master-disciple relationships.

Words like this should be read in light of Jesus' proclamation of the disciples and their fellowship as God's new family. The loss of family ties is not compensated only in the coming kingdom of God. In Mark 10:28-31 Jesus gives a promise to those who had left house and family for his sake: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."⁹ The new family relations "in this time" are illustrated in the story about the true family of Jesus in Mark 3:31-35 with parallels. Jesus here points to his disciples and those who listened to his teaching. They are his true family, a family of those who do the will of God. Jesus himself gives this new family priority before his mother and his brothers. The terminology is coloured by the Aramaic and Greek words for "house" in their triple meaning: house as a building, house as family, and house as school. This brings discipleship or a pupil-master relationship close to the concept of a family or a father-son relationship, as we can see in Mat 23:8-10. To be a disciple of Jesus therefore not only means renunciation and sacrifice, but also to be admitted to a new and attractive greater family. But the condition is a downgrading of the earlier family ties.

The call to abolish one's family ties has got a most radical and provoking expression in the little *chreia* in Luke 9:59-60 and Matt 8:21-22 (Q). The potential disciple is not allowed to go home first and bury his father. To honour father and mother is a commandment in the Decalogue, and to provide a decent burial is the last act of reverence you can do to a fellow human being.¹⁰ "Let the dead bury their dead", is Jesus' laconic comment, indicating that the man now is called to serve the life and the living in a qualified sense of the words. The story gives a contrast to the call of Elisha in 1 King 19:20. Elisha was allowed to take a farewell with his parents before he followed Elijah. Jesus seems to put the man's "first bury my father" in contradiction to his own "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt 6:33). The priority is decisive. The words of Jesus are shocking and scandalous, a real *oxymoron*. Their intention is to provoke, but they are evidently linked to a specific call of an individual and are not meant to establish as a general rule that it is not important to bury the dead or to care for one's parents.¹¹

3.2 Renunciation of one's own life - take up one's cross

To "hate" one's family is in Luke 14:26 connected with hatred even for "his own life," and correspondingly Matt 10:37-39 connects the downgrading of father and mother with losing one's life in order to find it. In both contexts to follow Jesus as his disciple means to

⁸ The wife is not mentioned in the parallel word in Matt 10:37-38: "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Like Luke, Matthew has three conditional clauses, not as conditions for "being disciple", however, but for being "worthy" of Jesus. Luke has only one sentence about the relations to family members, but his saying about renouncing everything you have has no parallel in Matthew. The context in Matthew is persecution and possible martyrdom for the disciples.

⁹ The parallel versions omit the detailed references to the new family relations. Luke 18:30 has a brief reference: He "will receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life." Matt 19:29 does not mention any compensation "in this time".

¹⁰ The obligation to bury the dead is a main topic in the book of Tobit. In rabbinical texts the duty to bury a dead person has priority before religious festivals and the study of the law. In Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone* the very point of conflict lies in Antigone's duty to bury the slain brother in spite of the commandment of king Kreon.

¹¹ Hengel *Nachfolge*. McKnight 2002 points to the holiness of God as source for Jesus' hard words. It is the Holy One of Israel, the God of the covenant, who now for the last time calls the people to radical obedience. There is no excuse for not giving an immediate response.

“take one’s cross”, an expression associated with crucifixion as death penalty. The convicted person had to carry his cross, or more correctly: the *patibulum* or the horizontal part of the cross, to the place of execution, where the vertical pole was fixed in the ground.¹² To “take one’s cross” means literally to start walking to the execution, and is metaphorically an expression for willingness to die or to give one’s life in martyrdom. After the crucifixion of Jesus the expression must have received a new and deeper meaning. To take one’s cross is to follow him who gave his life for others by being crucified.

Renunciation of family and renunciation of one’s own life were closely connected in a society where identity was strongly linked to family and social structure. Life is dependent on belonging somewhere – an idea that may seem strange in a modern, individualistic way of thinking.

Even if “taking the cross” may end in martyrdom, this may not be the first association with the expression for the readers of the gospel. In the Great Commission (Matt 28:19) discipleship starts by being baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. For Matthew and his readers baptism is the starting point for following Jesus. Accordingly baptism means to take one’s cross and surrender one’s life to the Risen Lord and to the Triune God. In Rom 6 Paul reminds his readers of a common understanding of baptism: it is to die with Christ and start a new life together with him. To “take one’s cross” would in this baptismal context mean to say farewell to the old, self-centred life and welcome Jesus as the new centre and the model for a life in service for others.¹³ It is not a program for terminating one’s life, but for the whole life, as indicated by the application in Luke 9:23: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me.” The italicized word *daily* is peculiar to Luke and indicates that taking up the cross and denying oneself is a program for a life-long discipleship. It is probably influenced by an early Christian theology of baptism as presupposed in Rom 6.

The word about denying oneself and taking up one’s cross is rendered many times in the gospels. Luke 14:26-27 and Matt 10:37-39 probably reflect the Q source, and Mark 8:34-38 is the basis for Matt 16:24-28 and Luke 9:23-27. In all three gospels the latter text is placed after the first passion prediction. The call to take up one’s cross is for the disciple a direct consequence of the way of Jesus himself to the cross:

And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."
Mark 8:34-38

The sayings present two possibilities: to follow Jesus and to take the consequences of that, or to be ashamed of him and his words. To be ashamed of a person means to deny him and one’s relationship to him. To follow Jesus means not to deny him, but to confess him and rather “deny oneself”. An expression like this may sound very negative in modern ears, where “self-development” is a great slogan and “renunciation” and “denial” only have negative connotations. It is important to understand the expressions in their biblical context. “Self-denial” is the opposite of “self-cultivation” or “self-development”. To deny oneself means

¹² Hengel, M. *Crucifixion in the ancient world and the folly of the message of the cross*. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1977.

¹³ Paul presents as common knowledge “that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed,” Rom 6:6. From this fact he encourages: “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion...” Col 3:5. For “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” Gal 5:24.

that life gets a direction and a point of orientation outside oneself. Jesus becomes the first priority as Master and Lord, and he gives the new direction for life and conduct. Self-denial is not the same as self-contempt. That would come in direct conflict with the commandment to love your neighbour *as yourself*, which presupposes that you, too, are worthy of love. To deny oneself is a voluntary self-dedication with the crucified and risen Lord as model. Jesus' self-denial at the cross was his way to glory. His disciples are called to follow him. Self-contempt is no adequate attitude for a disciple on his way to victory. When you have found the great treasure and can live under the promise of the kingdom of God, it is possible to deny yourself and live for others. And it is not possible to love God of a full heart and one's neighbour as oneself without denying a self-centred ego.

The sayings about denying oneself are among the few synoptic logia with a parallel in the Gospel of John. Here it is combined with the parable of the seed that must die in order to bear fruit. The image is applied both to Jesus himself and to the disciples as his servants:

And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honour him.
John 12:23-26

Jesus' self-designation here is "the Son of man." This is his preferred self-designation also in the synoptic predictions of his passion. To follow Jesus means to share the way of life of the Son of man.¹⁴ Discipleship has great costs. But it has a promise to "bear much fruit" and at the end to obtain eternal life in glory.

The positive content of saying no to oneself and taking up one's cross is to be a servant for others. The Son of man and his way to the cross is a model for an attitude to fellow human beings without destructive competition and power struggle. Jesus had to give a special lesson on this topic to his disciples. James and John wanted to have the place of honour at the side of Jesus in the kingdom of God. But Jesus pointed to his own way to the cross, to the cup he had to drink and the baptism he would be baptized with. It is not his task to give out seats of honour. This dialogue raises reactions among the other disciples:

And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."
Mark 10:41-45

Jesus here gives a priority and a direction for life in explicit contrast to the values of this world. Not rule, but serve. Not be great or first, but be slave of all. The Son of man has given the pattern for an upside down society of his disciples. *Diaconia*, service for others is the life program for his followers.

3.3 Renunciation of property

The third saying about the cost of discipleship in Luke 14:33 is about property: "whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." The Greek verb for

¹⁴ Mark 8,31; 9,31; 10,33 with parallels. Longenecker, R. N. *Studies in Hermeneutics, Christology and Discipleship*. Sheffield, Phoenix Press, 2004, 241: "Jesus' pattern of ministry as the Son of Man is to be our pattern of life as his disciples." The pattern of self-denial and suffering as way to glory is there in the letters, too, Rom 8:17; Phil 2:5-11; 3:10-11;

“renounce”, ἀποτάσσομαι, is elsewhere in the NT only used with persons as object in the meaning of “say farewell to”.¹⁵ In Luke 9:61 the verb is used by one who wants to follow Jesus, but first will “say farewell to” those at his home. Jesus did not allow this. “No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” The farewell procedure is apparently compared to “looking back”, an expression with biblical associations to the wife of Lot, who looked back when she fled from Sodom and became a pillar of salt (Gen 19:17.26). The new direction of life must be wholehearted and without reservations. In the same way we should read Luke 14:33: To be a disciple of Jesus means a radical farewell with all you have.

The saying may seem paradoxical on the background of the preceding parables. The tower builder must know if his resources allow him to implement his project. And the king considering war needs troops and resources in order to win over his enemy. For a disciple his property is not seen as a resource, but as a hindrance for his great project. The risk of failing does not come from a lack of property, but from the property itself. The point is not to have much, but to be able to give up all you have. This condition for discipleship is confirmed by the many warnings against wealth and property. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25). I cannot here enter a broad discussion of these important texts. I am convinced that the warnings are based on the central position of the double commandment of love in the teaching of Jesus. Wealth and property may close your ears to the word of God. You have to choose between God and Mammon. And your riches may close your eyes to the needs of your neighbour. Discipleship means a new attitude to property because you have got a new relationship to God and to your neighbour.

But renunciation of property should also be connected to the special conditions of the first disciples as they were sent on their mission in Galilee.

4) The mission of the Twelve and the Seventy-two

The mission speeches can be traced back to two sources. Mark’s version of the mission of the twelve, Mark 6:7-13 seems to be the source of Matt 10:9-15 and Luke 9:1-6. But Luke has another mission speech directed to the Seventy-two in Luke 10:1-16, and much of this material is rendered in Matthew’s version of the mission of the Twelve, Matt 9:37-10:16. Apparently Matthew has used sayings from Mark and Q (Luke 10), and has added traditions from other sources, especially from Mark 13 and Q material in Luke 12. Historically the speeches probably reflect one or more commissions where Jesus authorized his disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God in words and actions.¹⁶

The speeches set very strict limits as to what the disciples are allowed to carry as travel equipment:

He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. Mark 6:8-9

And he said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics. Luke 9:3

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road. Luke 10:4

¹⁵ Mark 6,46; Acts 18,18; 2 Cor 2,13. Stettberger, H. *Nichts haben - Alles geben? Eine kognitiv-linguistisch orientierte Studie zur Besitzethik im lukanischen Doppelwerk*. Freiburg, Herder, 2005, 218 reads the use of this verb in Luke 14:33 as a kind of downgrading of the object: all you have can be renounced, because it will be an unnecessary burden for a follower of Jesus. The saying does not raise the question of who shall receive the property that is left behind. But its form as a general rule makes it a condition for discipleship for all who follow Jesus, not only for the twelve of a narrow circle of disciples.

¹⁶ Riesner 1988, 453.

Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the labourer deserves his food. Matt 10:9-10

Mark allows staff and sandals, but Luke and Matthew forbid both. The main tendency is, however, the same in all versions: The travel equipment is extremely simple. The disciples are sent out in demonstrative poverty. Some scholars see in this an influence from the cynical philosophers travelling around in the Roman Empire at that time. Their life and message was a glorification of the simple life and a protest against the luxurious life in the cities.¹⁷ Ragged clothes and minimal equipment marked them out from other travellers. If they are the background of Jesus' speeches it is, however, striking that Jesus forbids bag and staff. These two things were regarded as typical for the cynic philosophers. At this point Jesus is more rigorous than the cynics. But a comparison with these philosophers is probably off the mark. The cynic preachers are far away from the religious and eschatological urgency of Jesus and his disciples.

A more probable explanation of the minimal equipment regulations is to see them in the light of the rules for pilgrims to Jerusalem. "One should not enter the temple mount with staff or sandals or money belt or with dust on the feet" (Berakoth 9,5). When Jesus sent out his disciples on similar strict conditions, the commissioning gives associations to a solemn, "liturgical" act. The disciples are not sent to the temple, the house of God, but to Israel, the people of God. They are not sent to fulfil a religious duty for themselves, but to share the message of the kingdom with others.¹⁸ They are equipped like pilgrims in order to remind the people of the presence of the Holy One of Israel, a presence not linked to the temple as a holy place, but to the messengers of the kingdom.

The mission speeches presuppose that there are people who welcome the disciples in the villages and give them housing and food. They are not beggars, but should receive what they get without shame or hesitation: "And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the labourer deserves his wages; do not go from house to house" (Luke 10:7). They bring a gift to their hosts when they greet them with peace and share the good news of the kingdom with them. But their gift is not connected to any material resources they bring on their travels. The treasure is the kingdom of God as given in their message and confirmed by healings and signs. That treasure is a greater value than the food they eat. Their simple equipment may be seen as an acted parable of their renouncement of material wealth and security for the benefit of the greater value they have received and now share with others: the message that the kingdom has come near "to you" (Luke 10:9).

In the story of Peter and John who heal the lame man in the temple we see that their material poverty underline this greater gift. Peter said: "I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6). The gospel can rise up the lame, physically and mentally, and is worth more than alms and money.

When the disciples were sent out in Galilee they came to men and women that received them and gave them what they need. These people had not renounced home and family, but could serve as supporters for Jesus and his disciples on their travels with the gospel. In the gospels we meet some of these supporters. Martha and Mary received Jesus in their home (Luke 10:38-42). The rich tax collector Zacchaeus was allowed to be his host and certainly provided a good meal for him and his disciples (Luke 19:1-10). Simon the leper was the owner of the house in Bethany where a woman anointed him for his burial (Mark 14:3-9; Matt 26:6-13). In addition to these who are mentioned by name, there must have been many other supporters, both among those whom he healed, among those who heard his teaching, and

¹⁷ Crossan, *The historical Jesus*

¹⁸ Bovon, F. *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, Zürich: Benziger, 1989, Vol I, 147, commenting on Luke 9:3-5.

among the “tax collectors and sinners” with whom he dined and caused offence to his opponents.

On the basis of the mission speeches and Jesus’ radical demands of renouncing family, profession and property Gerd Theissen has elaborated a picture of the early Palestinian church behind the gospel tradition where the “wandering charismatics” had an important role as transmitters of Jesus tradition in interplay with the “sympathizers in the villages”. The wandering charismatics lived literally according to the prescriptions in the mission speeches and the call narratives and had broken up from their homes to live an itinerant life dependent on friendly reception where they came. Jesus was the founder of this movement of wandering charismatics who had renounced the security of a steadfast life in the established structures of rural life. The sympathizers in the villages are only of complementary interest as necessary supporter groups for the itinerant preachers. In the mission speeches we see the wandering charismatics from their own perspective, with the sympathizers as the “others” who receive them. In *Didache* 11 we see them from the perspective of the sympathizers, with regulations for how such itinerant apostles and prophets should be received in the churches. They should not be allowed to ask for money for themselves or for support from the church beyond decency. Hospitality can be misused! According to Theissen this movement was in existence until the end of the first century C.E., with its origin in the mission of the disciples during the ministry of Jesus in Galilee.¹⁹

A weakness in Theissen’s theory is his concept of itinerant “charismatics”. It seems to be coloured by a dogmatic and sociological distinction between church offices and charismatic gifts. But our oldest source for the charismas, Paul, talks about them primarily as gifts in the local church, not among itinerant preachers. Neither Paul’s letters nor Acts give any hint that this was different in the Palestinian churches.

A more decisive weakness in Theissen’s hypothesis, however, is the lack of evidence for the practice of radical renunciation in the early church. After Easter the disciples do not seem to have followed the strict prescriptions in the mission speeches. Acts presupposes that Peter and the twelve in the first time lived steadfast in Jerusalem, and the evangelist Philip had his home in Caesarea (Acts 21:8). Nothing in Acts or in the Pauline letters indicates that Peter, Philip or Paul did not bring normal travel equipment when they visited other churches or came to new cities. Paul seemed to know the principle from the mission speech that a labourer deserves his food (1 Cor 9:14; Matt 10:10). But he wanted to be independent of the churches and worked as a tent maker during his travels. This is a clear indication that the restrictions in the mission speeches had limited validity in the early church. It is not necessary to suppose that the mission speeches only could be transmitted by people who felt obliged to follow their regulations literally. They can have been memorized and written down as pictures of how Jesus instructed the disciples during his earthly ministry, but not as norms for discipleship and mission after Easter.

In Luke we find a passage in Jesus’ farewell discourse to his disciples that clearly indicates that a new epoch starts with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Here is an explicit reference to the restrictions in the mission speeches in Luke 9 and 10:

¹⁹ Theissen, G. *Studien zur Soziologie des Urchristentums*. Tübingen, Mohr, 1979, especially the chapters „Wanderradikalismus“ pp.79-105 and “Wir haben alles verlassen” (Mc X 28): Nachfolge und soziale Entwurzelung in der jüdisch-palästinensischen Gesellschaft des 1. Jahrhunderts, pp. 106-141. Theissen’s thesis is adopted by Ådna, J. “Å vandre livets vei”. *Makt Eiendom Rettferdighet: Bibelske moraltradisjoner i møte med vår tid*. Ed. J.-O. Henriksen. Oslo, Gyldendal Akademisk, 2000, 186-223, and by Sandnes, K. O. “Makt, eiendom og rettferdighet - noen nytestamentlige perspektiver” in the same volume, 139-185.

And he said to them, "When I sent you out with no purse or bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "Nothing." He said to them, "But now, let him who has a purse take it, and likewise a bag. And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one. For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was reckoned with transgressors'; for what is written about me has its fulfillment." And they said, "Look, Lord, here are two swords." And he said to them, "It is enough."
 Luke 22:35-38.

By the expression "but now" Luke the historian marks a distance to the mission of the disciples in Galilee when they literally followed Jesus. The restrictions of the travel equipment at that time are not valid for the continued ministry for the kingdom of God after Jesus' death.²⁰ A new period starts with Easter and Pentecost, a period when Jesus is not present in flesh and blood, but as the Risen Lord and by his Spirit. But the disciples continue to "follow" Jesus and being his disciples. This is evident in Acts, where the "disciples" (μαθητής) is the most frequent name for the first Christians. Its 29 occurrences are found in the chapters 6, 9, 11 and 13-21. But here the word is applied to believers in a broad range of geographical settings, in Jerusalem, Damascus, Joppe, Syrian Antioch, Lystra, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Ephesus, Achaia, and in Tyrus and Caesarea. In Acts 11:26 the "disciples" is used as a self-evident traditional name for the ἐκκλησία at Antioch, and we are informed that in this city the "disciples were first called Christians". This makes μαθητής, as the original name of the Jesus-believers, a key term both in ecclesiology and missiology. In Luke-Acts, the church is the community of disciples in continuity with Jesus' first followers, and mission is to make new disciples. The call to discipleship does not stop with Easter, even if the conditions for the continued mission have changed.

Continuity together with a new start at Easter is also indicated in the gospel of Matthew. The Great Commission expressly commands the disciples to "make disciples" even after Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus is still the Master of his school, and the disciples continue to be his pupils, even if he is not physically present any more. The Great Commission presupposes the extensive mission speech in Matt 10. But now a new epoch begins: the mission is not any more limited to Israel, as in 10:5-6, but is directed to all nations, to Jews as well and to Gentiles. Matthew gives no comments to the restrictions of travel equipment in the mission to Israel, if they are still valid or not. But we may presuppose that they for him, too, belonged to a unrepeatable past. Regulations for a mission limited to the Jewish rural districts of Galilee could not easily be transferred to the city mission in the Roman Empire with its vast distances and multicultural societies.

The farewell speech in Luke 22 and the Great Commission in Matt 28 may be strongly colored by the redaction of the authors. But they show a clear consciousness of both continuity and discontinuity in the mission of the disciples before and after Easter. This makes Theissen's thesis of a broad movement of wandering charismatics in literal obedience to the mission speeches less probable. The conditions of the mission in Galilee belong to the past.

5. Renunciation and discipleship in the early church.

The gospels are told as stories of the past, of events and teachings given a generation or two before they were written down. To "follow Jesus" must have got a new meaning and new conditions after Easter. The call to follow him continued to be a radical new beginning. But the first Christians had to consider how they now should understand and obey the sayings of Jesus, words from a different place and a different time. They were not contemporary with

²⁰ Riesner 421: "Der vorösterliche Jüngerkreis [war] eine besonders geprägte, in dieser Art unwiederholbare Gemeinschaft." To the minimal travel equipment in Luke 9:3 Stettberger, H. *Nichts haben - Alles geben? Eine kognitiv-linguistisch orientierte Studie zur Besitzethik im lukanischen Doppelwerk*. Freiburg, Herder, 2005, 100 remarks: „Diese Anweisung Jesu ist also auf eine bestimmte Situation – die Aussendung der Zwölf – hin ausgesprochen; sie ist damit zunächst einmal auf diese Verkündigungszeit und auf die Apostel begrenzt.“

Jesus, but they carefully kept the memory of him. The authors and the first readers/hearers of the gospels did not live in rural Galilee and Judea, with Aramaic as their mother tongue, but in Hellenistic-Roman cities with Greek as their conventional language. How shall they now understand the call to renunciation of home, profession and property?

The epistles and Acts give no hint that the first Christians generally left home and family. We find household codes encouraging the believers to live a family life “in Christ” (Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-6:9). Paul prefers the single life and renunciation of matrimony for himself and recommends it for those who are able to live so in order to serve the Lord with undivided mind (1 Cor 7). A similar call to live in celibacy is possibly reflected in Matt 19:12 about being a eunuch for the kingdom of Heaven.²¹ From the context in Matt 19 the celibacy must be an exception, with matrimony and sexuality as the normal form of life, instituted by the Creator himself. Correspondingly 1 Cor 9:6 presupposes that Peter and the other apostles are married and bring their wives with them when they travel in service for the Lord. We may conclude that discipleship after Easter normally is lived out by married persons in a responsible family life, and only some few lived in voluntary celibacy. But Christ must in any case have the first priority. The relationship to father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters should be a relationship “in Christ.”

The call to deny oneself and take up one’s cross can be traced both in the baptismal theology about dying and rising with Christ and in the exhortations to follow the example of Jesus and give priority to the needs of the neighbor. We have hinted at these topics already at p. 7, with references in note 13 and 14.

Paul also gives instruction to the young churches that they should not leave their professions. “But we exhort you, brethren, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody.” This instruction in 1 Thess 4:11-12 is repeated and expanded in 2 Thess 3:6-23. Already in this early letter Paul refers to his oral teaching (“as we charged you”). The exhortation to keep working is motivated by the reaction of the outsiders. Their life style should not provoke unnecessary offence, but be attractive and promote their Christian testimony. Behind the exhortation not to “be dependent on anybody” we may see an indication of an intense expectation of the Jesus’ second coming in the church, so that some members stopped working and became dependent on support from others. Paul himself could live from his work as a tentmaker, and in 1 Thess 3 he makes his own work a model for the church. You should not be a burden to anybody. On the other hand he knows the duty of the church to support those who live for the Gospel and have a right to live by the Gospel. He argues for this both from habit and custom, from Scripture and from the commandment of the Lord himself (1 Cor 9:6-14). “Let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches!” (Gal 6:6). Some teachers of the word might live from their teaching, but the majority of the church members would continue in their professions as followers of Christ. The early church was no movement of beggars, but kept their social and economic integration in the existing social structures. But their mutual care and their devaluation of material resources may have challenged their surroundings.

The call to renounce property and to sell everything and give to the poor has neither in the picture of the disciples during Jesus’ ministry nor in the life of the early church been conceived as a demand everyone should follow. The disciples are never beggars who ask for gifts from others, neither in the gospels nor in Acts. The exhortations to give to the poor are directed to the disciples as givers, not receivers of alms. The first Christians after Easter, too, were normally able to help others and support those who were in need. In all his four main

²¹ This difficult saying is still an argument for the celibacy for priests and members of religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church. See Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus, 3. Teilband Mt18-25* EKK I/3, Solothurn: Benziger, Neukirchen: Neukirchener 1995, 88-112

letters Paul is concerned with the collection for the “poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Rom 15:26, cf. Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9). But this does not mean that the Jerusalem church saw poverty as an ideal and made itself dependent on support from others.²² The majority in the Pauline churches came from the lower classes and had no great material resources (1 Cor 1:26-31). But those who had any surplus, and especially the rich, were exhorted to care for those who were poor and destitute (1 Tim 6:17-19; Js 2:1-13). In the small church communities they practice the old ideal of friendship: “No one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common” (Acts 4:32). This would not, however, have implied the establishment of a common property in the legal sense of the word.

When the gospel stories were told and the words of Jesus were applied in the first churches the rich man had surely become a warning example and demonstrated how dangerous it is to be rich. The first disciples and their renouncement of family, profession and property were a constant challenge and have contributed to a change of attitudes, even if they were not followed literally. Money and property can both be seen as a danger – you have to choose between God and Mammon – and means to help the poor. Your resources have to be used in a life style according to the double commandment of love: you shall love God of your whole heart, and your neighbour as yourself. Discipleship has - and must have - consequences for the attitude to and disposition of what you have.

6. Conversion and discipleship in the early church – with an outlook to possible applications in the post-Constantinian Churches

We started with pointing out the differences between the call to conversion and the call to discipleship in the synoptic gospels. These differences would have had less importance in the application of these texts after Jesus’ death and resurrection. We have seen that Matthew presupposes that after Easter all nations should be made disciples. In Luke-Acts “disciples” remain the primary name for the Jesus-followers. The call to follow Jesus and be his disciple is no longer only a call for the few who are chosen by Jesus personally, and it is no more a call primarily in the past, when Jesus was at work in Galilee and Judea. In the early church and for the authors of the gospels the call to discipleship could be applied to themselves and to their contemporaries. They could identify with the stories about the first disciples who were called to follow Jesus, and they could see themselves as pupils of the Master educating them for the kingdom of God by what he said and did according to the gospels.

The call to turn to God could therefore in the transmission process not be distinguished neatly from the call to follow Jesus. Behind Jesus’ ministry and message is the God of Israel, and Jesus says that “he who receives me receives him who sent me” (Matt 10:40). As the Son Jesus has got a unique authority from his Father, so that only Jesus can show the way to God (Matt 11:27). The close link between the call to conversion to God and the call to follow Jesus is evident in Peter’s answer at Pentecost when they ask what they should do: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...” (Acts 2:38). The conversion to God (“repent”) is now expressed in baptism in the name of Jesus so that they belong to him. The new attitude to God implies a new attitude to Jesus. The first mission message and appeal to conversion is a proclamation to the Jews of Jesus as fulfilment of the Scriptures.²³ God’s act of salvation is linked to him, for “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be

²² Leander E. Keck: “The Poor among the Saints in the New Testament,” ZNW 56, 1965 100-129 and ZNW 57, 1966, 54-78.

²³ Acts 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 10:34-43; 13:16-42

saved.” (Acts 4:12). In the preaching of the early church conversion is a conversion to Jesus, a call to follow him and find salvation in him.²⁴

But this means that to say no to Jesus is to say no to God. “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16). In the first missionary preaching to the Jews it was therefore a main concern to show that Jesus, in spite of his shameful death on the cross, was the promised Messiah, the chosen one of God. “God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you in turning every one of you from your wickedness” (Acts 3:26). Their wickedness consisted in treating Jesus as a false prophet and a blasphemer. Repentance is therefore to accept Jesus as the one he really was, as Messiah and the Son of God.

The disciples in the gospel stories were models for those who joined the church, both when the stories were retold orally and when they were written down by the evangelists. In these contexts the distinction between the itinerant followers of Jesus and the sympathizers in the villages has no theological or ecclesiological relevance. Apparently this distinction might support traditional ecclesiologies where one or more groups are given a special status. Both in Roman Catholic, Orthodox and protestant High Church ecclesiology there is a basic distinction between ordained office bearers and lay people. From this tradition it is tempting to make the disciples models for the ordained ministry and the sympathizers in the villages, the people, λαός, models for the lay people, λαϊκός.²⁵ In Low Church revival movements and among Pentecostals there are similar tendencies to conceive the church in two levels. There may be many names for it: reborn Christians versus nominal Christians, revived (vakte) Christians versus Christians by tradition, Spirit filled charismatics versus ordinary believers. Distinctions like these may have had a positive function in the folk churches, in the past as well in the present. They may be seen as variants of the classical saying by Thomas a Kempis: “There are many Christians, but Christ has few followers.” It is a call to the sleepy churches to hear again the call to conversion and discipleship from the Master from Nazareth.

But such ideas of a distinction of two levels in the church would be totally foreign to the gospels and their environment. They were written in small minority churches in mission, not in big and broad majority churches, burdened by centuries of establishment in the existing structures of culture and political power. The Great Commission is a command to make all nations disciples. A baptized person is made a disciple and a pupil in the school of Jesus. He or she is called to follow Jesus and to stand in a life-long discipleship to the one and only teacher, with the Sermon on the Mount as a basic textbook for faith and conduct. In the gospels the disciples are the models for all Christians. The distinction between the itinerant followers and the sympathizers may historically be correct and gives an interesting description of the Jesus movement in a (very) limited period. But from a theological and ecclesiological point of view this distinction is irrelevant. The sympathizers have no function as models for the first Christians or in the tradition behind the gospels. In the early church everybody is called to be disciples of Jesus and follow him, but under the new conditions given by the death and resurrection of Jesus. They now follow the living, risen Lord, in the power of the Spirit.

Possible points for discussion: 1) How can we responsibly invite to conversion and discipleship today? 2) Is my distinction call to conversion/ to discipleship correct and fruitful? 3) In the three levels I have no level for “the historical Jesus”, even if my “story level” may come close to this. I am inspired e.g. by Dunn’s “Jesus Remembered”. Comments?

²⁴ See my comment to McKnight in note 2. In the missionary preaching for the Gentiles conversion would imply both a turn from the idols to the one, living God, and an acceptance of his Son as the way to salvation. This double implication of a transition of non-Jews to Christian faith is clearly attested in 1 Thess 1:8-9.

²⁵ H.J.Degenhardt put forward a thesis like this in a redactional study to the gospel of Luke. But he has gained little support, even from his Roman Catholic brothers and sisters.