

Public Witness through the Church as the Disciple Community in the Context of Christian Nationalism

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Abstract: In Central and Eastern Europe, some branches of the Church have formed alliances with nationalist politics characterized by fundamentalism and fanaticism. To identify this phenomenon, Czech theologian Tomáš Halík coined the term “f-word pseudoreligion.” Pavol Bargár suggests that such an approach to one’s faith and public witness is one of the most serious challenges the church’s mission in CEE must face. First, the other tends to be viewed as a menace rather than a precious gift. Second, its adherents can fall prey to idealized traditionalism rather than drawing from the treasures of Christian tradition, the gospel itself. After defining Christian nationalism, I will focus on the Visegrád nations: Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. In response to this missional challenge, I argue for public witness through the church as a disciple community. Discipleship as apprenticeship to Jesus does not lie in affiliation to an established church representing a particular national identity. Such idealized traditionalism found in settled religious forms can be called temple spirituality. The apostle Paul did not focus on temple spirituality or church planting; he nurtured disciple communities toward maturity in Christ. While Biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism define a certain kind of evangelical piety, the church as a disciple community is both pilgrim and indigenous. When the telos of loving communion with God and neighbor shapes the disciple community’s identity and mission, churches can engage biblical resources and traditions to serve social realities in ways that bring hope, reconciliation, and healing.

Keywords: nationalism, missional ecclesiology, discipleship, public theology, public missiology, evangelicalism, mission

Introduction

In parts of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), branches of the church or individuals within those branches have formed alliances with nationalist politics characterized by fundamentalism and fanaticism. To identify this phenomenon, Czech Catholic scholar and priest Tomáš Halík coined the term “f-word pseudoreligion.” Pavol Bargár suggests that such an approach to one’s faith and public witness is one of the most serious challenges the church’s mission in CEE must face.¹ Elaborating on this issue, Halík states:

¹ Pavol Bargár, “The Phenomenon of ‘F-Word Pseudoreligion’ as a Challenge in Mission in Central and Eastern Europe,” 2021, 40.

In certain Christian circles in the post-communist world, traditionalism and fundamentalism, the yearning for simple answers to complex questions has flourished. This panic-stricken religiosity has found support in nationalism, with the support of so-called powerful leaders, i.e., populists who claim to be saviors from the fear they themselves previously and artificially fueled.²

The most egregious form of this alignment is the “Russian World” ideology of Putin’s Russia which Serhii Shumylo rightly calls quasi-religious and neo-fascist.³ In the Edict of the World Russian People’s Council chaired by the Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill, in March 2024, the delegates supported the military operation in Ukraine, calling it a Holy War.⁴ While this form of what I refer to as Christian nationalism may be the most troubling, other Catholic and Protestant forms exist in CEE with serious ramifications for the mission of evangelical churches. Sociologist of religion Grace Davie points out that the rise of “nones” is increasing precisely when religion has re-entered the public square sometimes in caustic and polarizing ways.⁵ Sociologists call people who break with any form of organized religion nones.⁶

If the rise of nones and Christian nationalism are linked, then the church cannot engage in its mission in a vacuum oblivious to the misuse of religion in expressions of Christian nationalism. First, I will focus on Christian nationalism in three Visegrád nations: Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. Second, I will suggest an evangelical stance towards Christian nationalism in the region. Finally, I will argue for public witness through the church as a disciple community that serves concrete social realities in ways that bring hope, reconciliation, and healing.

I define Christian nationalism as *a political and religious movement that counters the perceived negative impact of globalization by emphasizing Christianity as foundational to one’s civilization or nationhood without calling for the traditional adherence to religious creed, congregation, and discipleship.*

To better understand the missional context, I will present the two main problems Bargár identifies that emerge from Christian nationalism. First, the “other” is viewed as a menace rather than a precious gift, resulting in the absence of embodied commitment to the well-being of others. Second, it’s characterized by idealized traditionalism that few people live by rather than drawing from the treasures of Christian tradition, the gospel itself. Christian nationalism is present in disembodied ways through inhospitable

² Pavol Bargár and Peter Jonkers, eds., *The Faith and Beliefs of “Nonbelievers,”* First, Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change. Series VIII, Christian Philosophical Studies, volume 24 (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2023), 198.

³ Serhii Shumylo: ‘Ordinary Fascism’, or ‘The Russian World of Patriarch Kirill,’ *The Wheel*, April 10, 2024, <https://www.wheeljournal.com/blog/2024/4/10/serhii-shumylo-ordinary-fascism-or-the-russian-world-of-patriarch-kirill>.

⁴ “Наказ XXV Всемирного Русского Народного Собора «Настоящее и Будущее Русского Мира» / Официальные Документы / Патриархия.Ru,” Патриархия.ru, accessed May 14, 2024, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html>.

⁵ Grace Davie’s keynote address, Templeton project final conference on “The Faith and Beliefs of ‘Nonbelievers.’” Prague, Czech Republic. April 18, 2024.

⁶ Bargár and Jonkers, *The Faith and Beliefs of “Nonbelievers,”* 1.

and sometimes confrontational slogans and rhetoric aimed at whatever group or ethnicities it deems a menace. Its adherents can idealize traditionalism, a form of cultural Christianity that lacks meaning and discipleship. Some call it Christianity without the cross, but the contemporary incubator for Christian nationalism is, at least in part, a self-protective reaction to perceived threats.

Christian Nationalism in V4 Nations: Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary

Radicalization and corruption have increased the secularization process. In order to hamper reforms towards integration in the European Union, Halík says conservative bishops in the Visegrád nations have sought to form alliances with populists in their governments.⁷ In light of the experiences of World War II, it seems that Christians would avoid joining forces with authoritarian regimes. However, Halík points out that populists in the Visegrád nations often use Christian rhetoric and, when in power, try to corrupt the Church by offering material benefits and privileges.⁸

Furthermore, Halík laments that the convergence of populist politicians and certain circles of the Church is driving intellectuals, and especially the younger generation, away from the Church. András Máté-Tóth argues that nones are a consequence of the loss of faith in traditional institutions, stating that, “extreme nationalism of the last decade has pushed the cultural-religious base in the direction of radical nationalism and the cultural-nonreligious base in the opposite direction.”⁹ Therefore, Poles have become more Catholic, although that is changing, Czechs more irreligious, and Slovakia and Hungary have become more religiously divided.

Poland

In traditionally Catholic Poland, the Church risks a dramatic loss of credibility. Poland could follow a similar process of rapid and radical secularization in other traditionally Catholic European nations. A study by the Centre for Social Prevention reveals that more than 62% of young people consider themselves religious, but a third do not. Revealing a possible trajectory, 59% of them say their religious observance has weakened in the past two years not due to the pandemic, and 64.8% say it's due to the inconsistency between what religion says and what the Church does.¹⁰ Young people's attitudes towards churches and religion are determined more by current events, especially scandals, hypocrisy, and the Church's involvement in politics, than by deeply religious matters.¹¹ Some point out the ostentation and unjustified wealth of Church representatives, say that the Church does not understand the needs of young

⁷ Bargár and Jonkers, *The Faith and Beliefs of “Nonbelievers,”* 193.

⁸ Bargár and Jonkers, *The Faith and Beliefs of “Nonbelievers,”* 193.

⁹ Bargár and Jonkers, *The Faith and Beliefs of “Nonbelievers,”* 262.

¹⁰ Bargár and Jonkers, *The Faith and Beliefs of “Nonbelievers,”* chap. “Varieties of Religiosity in V4 Societies,” 220-221.

¹¹ Francis X. Rocca, “In Traditionally Catholic Poland, the Young Are Leaving the Church,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-old-school-catholic-poland-youth-are-leaving-the-church-11645263383>.

people and the modern world, or say they left the church due to the Church's lack of involvement in the affairs of ordinary people.

Slovakia

Turning to Bargár's research in the Slovak context, Ondrej Prostředník says the unifying factor of most sermons in churches today, both Catholic and Protestant, is a romanticized view of the past that preachers regard as a "paradise lost."¹² This outlook connects with a contempt for the present and apocalyptic visions of a terrible future that ceases to connect with participation in the reality of Christ's resurrection. Instead, it's driven by a vision of the decay of civilization and values which translates into the disintegration of communal ties within society. The powerful reject solidarity with the vulnerable. Some members of parliament who are self-professed Christians are nostalgic for the Slovak State, a client state of Nazi Germany in 1939–1945 whose president was a Catholic priest. Many people who search for scapegoats for their problems fall prey to conspiracy theories pointing to "Jews, Muslims, Gypsies, and homosexuals" as the ills of society.¹³

Hungary

Zoltán Adám and András Bozoki examine how radical right-wing forces reframe Christianity to legitimize their rule in Hungary.¹⁴ According to their research, Viktor Orbán's regime employs a quasi-religious ideology through which it seeks to elevate the concept of ethnonationalism to a sacred status and mobilize society towards its ends. The nation as a sacred collective entity is crucial to the ideologies of both major political parties, Jobbik and Fidesz, the governing party. While churches provide ideological resources to support right-wing populism, they are not completely without discernment. Certain members of both Catholic and Calvinist Churches support Jobbik, but churches in general and church leaders tend to distance themselves from its anti-Christian cultural tradition. Still, the two largest Churches, Roman Catholic and Calvinist, play a part in the legitimizing role in right-wing politics in line with the historical pattern in interwar Hungary. Orbán himself is a Calvinist. Only smaller churches such as Lutherans and some evangelical communities tend to distance themselves from right-wing views.

An Evangelical Stance Toward Christian Nationalism

In all of these cases of Christian nationalism, Christianity is recast as foundational to one's civilization or nationhood. Andrew Bush proposes that applying the way of Christ to national identity can transform nationalism so that it will be defined by an

¹² Bargár, "The Phenomenon of 'F-Word Pseudoreligion' as a Challenge in Mission in Central and Eastern Europe," *Acta Missiologiae* 9, 2021, 39–40.

¹³ Bargár, "The Phenomenon of 'F-Word Pseudoreligion,'" 40.

¹⁴ András Bozóki and Zoltán Adám, "State and Faith: Right-Wing Populism and Nationalized Religion in Hungary," *Intersections* 2, no. 1 (April 5, 2016): 113.

inclination towards the well-being of others instead of bent towards individual and communal uniqueness and privilege:

The self-emptying of Christ of the prerogative of power and of the consequent rude triumphalism which was the Satanic temptation, and his subsequent embracing of radical servanthood offers the possibility of a human identity based upon a transformed nationalism.¹⁵

In CEE, I argue that while Christian nationalism may seem bent towards uniqueness and privilege, one must consider the memory of indirectly experienced traumas that form what Máté-Tóth calls CEE's wounded collective identity. It's a mindset influenced by a traumatic past with uncertain national and state sovereignty in the center, so the motivations of self-protection and fear are critical towards understanding CEE's unique forms of Christian nationalism.¹⁶ Máté-Tóth identifies five main wounds in the center of the region's collective memory that are present in all societies. First, a lack of nation-state autonomy due to foreign occupations. Second, a prohibition of exercising human rights, especially of ethnic minorities as a consequence of the overlap between cultural/ethnic and nation-state borders. Third, forced mobility. Two types of forced mobility existed throughout the 20th century: the movement of ethnic minorities under ethnic cleansing and deportation; and forced status mobility between social strata and career paths required by loyalty to the regime. Fourth, persecution of religion, churches, and dissidents. And finally, genocide and other mass killings.

Rather than succumbing to Satan's temptations when he suffered, Jesus redefined identity and the use of power amid the violent Roman occupation and corrupt religious institutions. He demonstrated and made the way for us to follow as sacrificial servants obedient to the Father. In *Following Jesus*, N.T. Wright emphasizes that to be a disciple means to be a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2) as we encounter temptations and face our fears in this world, moving toward the fullness of the new creation. He urges us to encounter Jesus' compelling love and radical agenda afresh daily; be sustained by his presence that guides, warns, confronts, and consoles us; and to follow him.¹⁷ The apostle Paul's epistles overflow with his parental yearning for presenting people mature in Christ, centered around what Michael Gorman calls the "resurrectional cruciformity" of participating in the gospel.¹⁸

However, a great disparity often exists between the daily practices and cultural norms of many people who profess faith in Jesus Christ today and the new way of life expressed and demonstrated by Jesus, his disciples, and the apostle Paul. Those who are caught up in Christian nationalism can reinforce the gulf that exists. Since the cultural

¹⁵ Roger Helland and Len Hjalmanson, *Missional Spirituality: Embodying God's Love from the inside Out* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2011), 99.

¹⁶ András Máté-Tóth, "Wounded Words in a Wounded World: Opportunities for Mission in Central and Eastern Europe Today," *Mission Studies* 37, no. 3 (December 2020): 356, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341736>.

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship*, New edition with new preface (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), xiii.

¹⁸ Michael J. Gorman and Nijay K. Gupta, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021, 420.

reality of Christian nationalism can hinder the church's vibrant witness, how can Jesus Christ's kenotic presence of servanthood, humility, and compassion shine forth through his disciples today? More specifically, I will examine how evangelical churches in CEE can disentangle themselves from this cultural phenomenon.

Some evangelicals have aligned with Christian nationalism, while others have sought to distance themselves from the term "evangelical," so what does it mean to be evangelical? Evangelicalism was a new phenomenon of the eighteenth century. David Bebbington frames evangelical as a set of four characteristics, a quadrilateral, that defines a certain kind of piety: biblicism (focused on the Bible), crucicentrism (concentrated on the cross of Christ as essential for the salvation of the world), conversionism (insistent on personal repentance and devotion), and activism (commitment to missionary activity at the grassroots sociopolitical level). Evangelical commitments are deeply experiential, revolving around a vital and personal encounter and ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ.¹⁹ However, like any branch of the Church, evangelicals can become entrenched in traditionalism and lose their missional focus. I will examine Czech perceptions of evangelicals that are impacted by globalization.

While the Czech Evangelical Movement does not represent a significant cultural or political force, Czech social views towards evangelicals tend to be negative. Of the four Visegrád nations, Czech Republic is the most secular. Pavel Hošek presents several reasons Czechs tend to be suspicious of evangelicals.²⁰ First, many evangelical churches and denominations were formed in protest against the spiritual condition in mainstream churches, which caused hurt and resentment among the established churches. Second, evangelical approaches to evangelism have often been direct, simplistic, and sometimes lacking in experience.

Third, divisions and problems within the movement became public. Fourth, numerous cases of foreign evangelistic crusades with little understanding of the complexities of Czech post-Communist culture contributed to negative public opinion. Finally, Czech evangelicals have been negatively affected by foreign stereotypes and caricatures of evangelicals such as the Christian Right in America. Evangelicals in other CEE societies may face similar perceptions. Since evangelicals may face negative perceptions from without and the temptation to lose their missional focus from within, I will critique two evangelical paradigms for the mission of the church in the context of Christian nationalism before recommending a model of the church as the disciple community.

First, the broader evangelical tradition has preserved what can be called a soteriological or inherited-conversionist paradigm that focuses on personal salvation and conversion. The tendency to focus on personal salvation, while it's important, can reduce the gospel to a form of private spirituality that neglects the social dimensions of the gospel. If that is the case, then the church's stance towards society may lack a vision

¹⁹ David Bebbington. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From the 1730s to the 1980s*, Routledge; 1st edition (December 15, 1988), 2–3.

²⁰ Pavel Hošek. "Perceptions of the Evangelical Movement in the Post-Communist Czech Republic," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 38, no. 1 (January 2014): 24–37.

for influencing all areas towards reconciled relationships and flourishing. Furthermore, churches may take a pragmatic approach to converting people without emphasizing ongoing discipleship. When church membership decreases and secular values start to encroach, church leaders can see this as a threat to their viability, so nationalist aims may be appealing as a way to regain prominence.

Second, the missiological paradigm includes, as Phil Meadows puts it, “the social and material reality of Christian community, whose life together is a sign, foretaste, and herald of the kingdom.”²¹ In this paradigm, discipleship is the way kingdom life is embodied and is the proper response to the gospel. This way of life, of discipleship, embraces the cross, which runs cross-grain to Christian nationalism. However, the focus can still be more on the task of mission that can be co-opted by politicians who play on the sentiments of people who impatiently want to bring about the kingdom of God now.

For John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, the ultimate end is not conversion or discipleship but communion of love with the triune God.²² This perspective can integrate and transform the soteriological and missional paradigms. The kingdom of God is among those who seek the perfect love of God and neighbor. Finally, I will recommend the following paradigm: the disciple community with the telos of communion with God in reconciled community on mission.

The Disciple Community

In response to this missional challenge, I argue for public witness through the church as a disciple community. Framing the church as a disciple community with a reimagined memory and hope safeguards the church from Christian nationalism and transforms Bebbington’s evangelical quadrilateral. In the disciple community, biblicism draws from the gospel as public truth towards transformation and flourishing in society, crucicentrism leads to kenotic presence with embodied commitment to the well-being of others (Phil. 2:5-11), conversionism is connected to discipleship, and activism involves the entire community of disciples on mission where they live.

From a Pauline perspective, discipleship is an apprenticeship to a man who walked the earth and suffered for us yet was and is fully God. Although the apostle Paul did not use the term disciple, he planted the gospel and nurtured disciple communities toward maturity in Christ. The treasure of Christian tradition that Paul continually pointed the church towards is the gospel itself through which a new community is formed where others are a precious gift. As an outworking of God’s holy love who seeks communion with us and with outsiders through our loving presence and proclamation of the gospel, we embrace our communities and seek to heal its wounds.

²¹ Philip R. Meadows, “The Journey of Evangelism: Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford, 2009), 414.

²² Meadows, “The Journey of Evangelism,” 416.

Pilgrim and Indigenous

Discipleship is costly. During the Third Reich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth strongly resisted Nazi ideology and publicly criticized the German church's allegiance to Hitler. After Hitler became chancellor, many churches throughout Germany honored Hitler not only through their sermons that paid homage to Nazi ideals, but also through outward displays. Clergy regularly wore swastikas on their clerical robes. Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's biographer and friend wrote about a preacher in Marburg cathedral who pointed to a "forest of Swastika flags around the altar" and said the swastika "has become the symbol of German hope. Whoever defames this symbol defames Germany."²³ In stark contrast, Bonhoeffer's sermons on costly discipleship when he led underground seminaries for the Confessing Church warned his students that faithfulness to Christ would not only put them out of step with society but would also lead to persecution.

Discipleship as apprenticeship to Jesus does not lie in affiliation to an established church representing a particular national identity. In CEE, where established churches are sometimes wedded to a particular national or civil identity, what Roger Helland and Len Hjalmarson call temple spirituality, an emphasis on God tabernacling with the church through weakness could lead to impactful witness.²⁴ Bargár laments that the church in the CEE seeks to profit from its Christendom past through relying on its inherited authority and prominence to leverage social and political influence. Instead of being on mission, the church seeks to reinforce the status quo and does not stand with people in their daily concerns, struggles, and joys. This stance represents what Bargár calls "presence-in-non-presence."²⁵

The proclamation of the gospel is not only for individuals who go out and make disciples; it's also about forming a community of Christ's followers. The disciple community holds the indigenizing and pilgrim principles in a healthy, dynamic tension. The church's being and mission are not separate; as disciples, the church is always pilgrim, and as a community, the church is always indigenous. In his article, "Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," Andrew Walls affirms that all churches are indigenous to culture. Yet, throughout church history, God is at work to transform his people towards his desired end. Along with the legitimate aspect of making the church a place to be at home, the indigenizing principle, the church community inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to the Christian that we have "no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society"²⁶ The indigenizing principle means that each culture or people approaches Scripture wearing "cultural blinkers" with assumptions determined by their location in place and time,

²³ Eberhard Bethge and Victoria Barnett, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times ; a Biography*, Rev. ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 305.

²⁴ Helland and Hjalmarson, *Missional Spirituality: Embodying God's Love from the inside Out*, 77.

²⁵ Bargár, "The Phenomenon of 'F-Word Pseudoreligion' as a Challenge in Mission in Central and Eastern Europe," 48.

²⁶ Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture: Is There a 'Historic Christian Faith'?: Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity," in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY, 2009), 138–39.

which has led to multiple crises in the history of the Church.²⁷ However, it also ensures that each community recognizes in Scripture that God is speaking to its own situation.

A Community of Memory and Hope

When shaping the contours of the disciple community for today, it's vital to point out that God has chosen a people rather than isolated individuals (1 Thess. 1:6). Consequently, the church is neither the result of a social contract between persons nor the result of a consumer choice. Although one may enter as a seeker, one enters into the communion of fellowship through a confession of faith and subsequently follows Jesus Christ. God forms a covenantal people, so the church is not made up of people we have chosen, which can cause discomfort but also encourage growth in love towards maturity in Christ.

James Thompson's two-fold construct for the Church according to Paul is the absence of politicization and power; and the Church as a community where everyone participates.²⁸ Thompson emphasizes that Paul establishes a community of memory and hope.²⁹ Looking back to its entrance into God's new creation and forward to its ultimate destination distinguishes the community as a disciple community. The disciple community has a different memory and a hope that is anchored in Jesus whose kingdom is not of this world. In its present reality, it is the community that is being transformed into the image of Christ, so we cannot idealize community. Thompson emphasizes that Paul challenges the church to be a counterculture wherever it exists because he envisions the church as the foretaste of ultimate redemption. His emphasis on "foretaste" bears similarities to Lesslie Newbigin's assertion that the Gospel is credible when it is lived out in Christian community, so he calls the local congregation the basic unit of a new society and "the only hermeneutic of the gospel."³⁰ Therefore, the disciple community in its very being cannot be isolationist and uninvolved in mission to the broader society.

As we catch a glimpse of the early disciple communities through Paul's epistles, we can see that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same risen Lord Jesus who adopts the disciple community into ancient Israel with a common inheritance and eternal hope. In addition to not being an enclave unto itself, the church that participates in Israel's narrative, now centered around Christ, resists becoming a consumer commodity that meets popular demands. Under the guise of identifying with the people, populism tends to play off popular demands, even though the demands may be frothed up by the same people who hope to meet the demands in their own way.

Like the people of Israel, the church as a disciple community also experiences disappointment. It's important to establish that a disciple community within a particular community goes through many of the same challenges and disappointments that people

²⁷ Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," 142.

²⁸ James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 21–22.

²⁹ Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, chap. 4.

³⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Geneva [SZ]: W.B. Eerdmans ; WCC Publications, 1989), 227.

who are outside of the church experience. Yet, the disciple community witnesses to the reality of Jesus Christ that helps people suffer in hope, peace, and even joy. A community that is centered around its belief that Jesus rose from the dead is a community of hope not only in contrast to the surrounding culture, but also as witnesses within the surrounding culture (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

Grounded in this redemptive story, the disciple community lives fully in a particular society, yet it does not feed on the same fears or uncritically identify with national interests or political causes. Like in the Pauline churches, the disciple community's confession that Jesus is Lord transcends other loyalties. Paul assumes their transformed lives will make an impression on the surrounding society (1 Thess. 4:12). Perhaps we can see this in Paul's praise of the Thessalonian church's "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope" (1 Thess. 1:3). In summation, we all live between memory and hope. In our collective formation within community, whether local or national, we interpret our past and imagine a future. Followers of Jesus are a people of difference who enter into a new story with a hope that is eternal and unwavering. While proclaiming and living out this new reality, the disciple community witnesses to the surrounding society.

Discipleship Pathways Inclusive of Public Witness

When the *telos* of loving communion with God and neighbor shapes the disciple community's identity and mission, churches can engage biblical resources and traditions to serve social realities in ways that bring hope, reconciliation, and healing. When people are born again by the Spirit, they enter into union with Jesus Christ. We cannot separate imitation of Jesus from intimacy with him, so means of grace through which we commune with God are vital to the life of the disciple community wherein leaders help to establish new followers of Jesus in the practices of prayer, repentance, Bible reading, partaking of the Eucharist, and worship in communion with others.

Like Paul, church leaders in CEE can model cruciform servanthood in contrast to the culture's expectations and tendency to emphasize power and status by emphasizing how discipleship engages culture and people with the *telos* of love for God and their neighbor. To become a disciple community, the church needs a clear pathway, so leaders must catalyze this intentionality. Scott Boren presents rhythms of missional communion with God, missional relating as a group, and missional engagement with the neighborhood that can be embodied through small-group discipleship.³¹ Since communion with the triune God relates to his kenotic presence and sending, then mission is implicit in these rhythms. Although they are not necessarily sequential, I simplify the rhythm or pathway as communion, community, and commission.

Paul exhorts the church to shine as a community in contrast, a community on mission that does not lash out in fear, but ministers reconciliation and embraces the

³¹ M. Scott Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2010), 63.

other. In *Practicing the Preaching Life*, Dave Ward presents virtues that need to be formed in the preacher within the context of community for the sake of the world. He calls one of these virtues “courageous justice” and describes it, in part, as countering “the natural human tendency toward self-preservation in order to embody love in the arena of inter-group relations and societal structures.”³² By humbly engaging with the stories of others, the preacher or leader’s self-promoting ideologies can be challenged. Entering the social realities around us can lead to empathy, which will help leaders to embrace the experiences of others with deep concern to alleviate their suffering and enable their good.³³

Mentoring may be a foreign concept in much of CEE, but apprenticeship is an old practice. Paul modeled a new servant-cruciform way of relating to others and being on mission. Mutual sacrificial service should be visible in the rhythms of church discipleship. Trust is difficult to form in many CEE cultures, so how can churches facilitate such relationships?³⁴ People need safe places, a grace-giving environment, where self-disclosure can increase as trust grows.³⁵ In Ukraine and Poland, I have seen churches form accountable relationships for growth as disciples who disciple others, but only when the leadership models such transparent and humble relationships, when churches clarify and encourage a discipleship pathway, and when no one is in a hurry to process people along a conveyor belt of production.

Keith Anderson and Randy Reese define spiritual mentoring as “a triadic relationship between mentor, mentoree, and the Holy Spirit, where the mentoree can discover, through the already present action of God, intimacy with God, ultimate identity as a child of God, and a unique voice for kingdom responsibility.”³⁶ In Ukraine and Poland where I served, three or four people tended to function better relationally in discipleship than one on one as it seemed to relax the power distance between leader and follower.

In addition to communion with God and kingdom responsibility that implies mission, identity as a child of God is formed in community. With the Holy Spirit as the *parakletos*, the discipling partners are instruments of the Holy Spirit that “affirm all that is special in another as God releases us to be his unique creations.”³⁷ This way of discipleship is not only counter-cultural to the phenomenon of Christian nationalism, but also counter-cultural to the legalism that can turn people away from Christian institutions. Phil Meadows beautifully paints a picture of:

communities of disciples whose fellowship with God is embodied in hospitable, reconciling, and peaceable relationships; whose holiness is embodied in a

³² David Ward, *Practicing the Preaching Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 72.

³³ Ward, *Practicing the Preaching Life*, 74.

³⁴ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, Revised and expanded (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2016), 55.

³⁵ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 154–55.

³⁶ Keith Anderson and Randy D. Reese, *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 12.

³⁷ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 124–25.

disciplined life of piety and mercy whose vision of God is embodied by an imaginative participation in the *missio Dei* and whose witness is embodied by a fellowship of holiness that makes the eschatological kingdom both visible and tangible as a living invitation to the World.”³⁸

In CEE, kenotic presence through discipleship that emphasizes communion, community, and commission demonstrates a commitment to the well-being of others through the greatest treasure of Christian tradition, the gospel itself. Without such rich relationships that touch every aspect of public life, embrace the complexities in society, and seek to heal the wounds, public witness through the church as a disciple community may not take root in CEE.

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Публічне свідчення через Церкву як спільноту учнів у контексті християнського націоналізму

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Анотація: У Центральній та Східній Європі деякі гілки Церкви утворили альянси з націоналістичною політикою, що характеризується фундаменталізмом і фанатизмом. Для позначення цього явища чеський богослов Томаш Галік ввів термін «псевдорелігія на літеру "F"». Павол Баргар вважає, що такий підхід до своєї віри і публічного свідчення є одним з найсерйозніших викликів, з якими доводиться стикатися церковній місії в ЦСЄ. По-перше, інакомислення має тенденцію розглядатися як загроза, а не як дорогоцінний дар. По-друге, його прихильники можуть стати жертвами ідеалізованого традиціоналізму, замість того, щоб черпати зі скарбів християнської традиції, самого Євангелія. Після визначення християнського націоналізму я зосереджуся на країнах Вишеградської четвірки: Польщі, Угорщині та Словаччині. У відповідь на цей місіонерський виклик я доводжу необхідність публічного свідчення через Церкву як спільноту учнів. Учні́вство як учні́вство в Ісусі не полягає у приналежності до усталеної церкви, яка представляє певну національну ідентичність. Такий ідеалізований традиціоналізм, знайде-

ний в усталених релігійних формах, можна назвати храмовою духовністю. Апостол Павло не зосереджувався на храмовій духовності чи заснуванні церков; він плекав учнівські спільноти на шляху до зрілості у Христі. У той час як бібліцизм, хрестоцентризм, навернення та активізм визначають певний тип євангельської побожності, церква як спільнота учнів є одночасно і паломницькою, і місцевою. Коли телос люблячої спільноти з Богом і ближнім формує ідентичність і місію учнівської спільноти, церкви можуть залучати біблійні ресурси і традиції для служіння соціальним реаліям у спосіб, що приносить надію, примирення і зцілення.

Ключові слова: націоналізм, місійна еклезіологія, учнівство, публічне богослов'я, публічна місіологія, євангелізація, місія.

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