

# 6

## Christian Life

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This chapter focuses on *Christian identity formation*—what it is to be a Christian, who a Christian is, and how a Christian should live. In a narrower sense, Christian identity formation may be called the “Christian life.” But what does it mean to say that Christians are to live the *Christian life*? Broadly, the Christian life can be viewed as the purpose of Christian theology. Theological discussions and doctrines ought to consummate in the type of life that Christ’s followers live—a life that is deeply conditioned by Christian doctrines such as divine revelation, Scripture, the Trinity, sin, salvation, and eschatological hope. This is the primary reason

I have made the “Christian life” the last chapter of this two-volume book. Construing the Christian life in this way disrupts the common perception of it as a non-theological spiritual exercise. Also, it questions the assumption that “theology” is a dry and boring intellectual exercise that hinders Christians from truly living a Christlike life. This, of course, does not mean that theology, when wrongly conceived and appropriated, cannot hinder the spiritual growth of Christians.

I recall on several occasions during my undergraduate days in a theological seminary in Nigeria when some of my Pentecostal friends told me to beware of the danger that theology posed to the practice of the Christian life. Those well-meaning friends were concerned that my preoccupation with rigorous theological thinking would prevent me from “walking the walk”—living in the manner Jesus expects of his followers. They were quick to point out to me that some of our brilliant theology professors used theological skills to justify their “non-Christian” lifestyles. What I was not truly convinced of then was the possibility of knowing what Jesus really expects of his disciples without engaging in some theological reflection. Put another way, I was not entirely convinced that it was possible to conceptualize and practice the Christian life without ever engaging in theological thinking and also making some theological judgments. Over the years through my study of theology, I have learned that it is not only impossible to successfully imagine the Christian life in isolation from some theological reflection but also, and more importantly, that all Christian theological reflections about God, humans, the world, and so on ought to culminate in the Christian life. A theology that does not shape the *life* (manner of thinking, living, believing, behaving, hoping, etc.) of followers of Christ may be irrelevant to Christians in their journey to live a life of obedience to the Triune God.

The Christian life deals with the manner of living of Christians. It is a manner of living that focuses on the life of Jesus Christ. The Christian life, therefore, is a form of living that is molded after the life of Jesus Christ. But to say that the *Christian life* is a “manner of living” evokes three important issues. First, the Christian life is a daily *form of existing*: it is a way of life. Second, the Christian life requires *formation* of character. Third, the Christian life is *directed toward some ends*: to resist the power of sin, to glorify the Triune God, and to transform the fallen world. These three issues will serve as guides to my discussion in the remainder of this chapter.

### Imagining the Christian Life

Five conceptions of the Christian life, which are not mutually exclusive, are discussed below. They are Christian life as *putting off the old self*, Christian life as *spiritual exercise*, Christian life as *thanksgiving*, Christian life as *sanc-tification*, and Christian life as *moving toward glorification*. These should be viewed as partial descriptions of the phenomenon of the Christian life.

#### Christian Life as Putting Off the “Old Self”

Jesus calls his disciples to “take up the cross and follow” him (Mark 8:34). What does Jesus really mean? Certainly, his words cannot be taken literally in this context. Here, Jesus summons his disciples to undertake a life of self-denial: not *living for self* (that is, glorifying their selfish desires) but *living for him* (that is, being transformed into a life of obedience to God as Jesus exemplifies through his actions). Jesus’ words invoke mortification: we must deliberately and continually “put to death the old nature and its evil desires” and embrace resurrection, which “leads to a new life of righteousness in fellowship with God.”<sup>1</sup> Inward spirituality involves two related actions: living actively and living contemplatively. The Orthodox Church theologian Kallistos Ware describes these two actions in the following way. The “active life” (or living actively) requires repentance and exercise of the power of the will with God’s help to escape from enslavement to ungodly passionate impulses. Living for Christ entails attaining the purity of heart and also involves growing in awareness of God’s desire for humanity as embodied by Christ. The second action—living contemplatively—involves two inter-related stages. In the first stage, as Christians live the life of contemplation, they will sharpen their perception of God’s presence in and around them. In the second, they will begin to experience God not only through the “intermediary of conscience or created things” but also by meeting God “face to face in an unmediated union of love.”<sup>2</sup>

Being a Christian does not merely entail learning about Christianity’s teachings. Being a Christian requires crucifying the “old self”—a metaphor for the power of sin within human nature. “You were taught,” Paul wrote “to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires” (Eph 4:22 NIV; see also Col 3:5–17). Dealing with the “old self” entails, to use the words of Sinclair Ferguson, “crucifying sin” that is within us. For Ferguson, being united with Christ does not mean that “sin has died” permanently

1. Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 280.

2. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 106.

in the life of believers. On the contrary, what has changed is the believers' relationship to sin. Believers are no longer slaves to sin. This means that believers can engage in the daily struggle against sin, the struggle to crucify or put to death sin, from "a perspective of victory," which is won for them by Christ.<sup>3</sup> In practical terms, according to Ferguson, crucifying sin is "the constant battle against sin which we fight daily—the refusal to allow the eye to wander, the mind to contemplate, the affections to run after anything which will draw us from Christ. It is the deliberate rejection of any sinful thought, suggestion, desire, aspiration, deed, circumstances or provocation at the moment we become aware of its existence."<sup>4</sup>

### Christian Life as Spiritual Exercise

The Christian life is not formed *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). To be a Christian is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. A good disciple is like an apprentice who learns from his or her teacher. Jesus required his disciples to "follow" him, which implied heeding his voice, accepting God's chastisement or spiritual pruning, and welcoming God's forgiveness (John 10:27–30; 15:1–5; Matt 6:9–15). Following Jesus Christ is a daily practice of taking upon oneself Jesus' *way of life*—his manner of living, behaving, thinking, hoping, and relating to God, human beings, and the entire creation. Spiritual exercises are designed to help Christians develop the stamina for redirecting their desires: from pleasing self to pleasing God. The Spanish monk Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) wrote that spiritual exercises can help Christians gain "deeper knowledge" of their sins and acquire "a greater understanding of and sorrow for sins."<sup>5</sup>

One example of the conception of the Christian life as a spiritual exercise can be found in Christian monasticism. Christian monks understood the Christian life as a form of life modeled by Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and practiced through contemplation, asceticism (exercise in self-discipline and self-denial), prayer, and manual work. In some early Christian communities, monks typically followed either a hermit lifestyle (*eremitic monasticism*) or a communal lifestyle (*coenobitic monasticism*). Eremitic monks such as the Egyptian Anthony the Great (ca. 251–356 CE) lived mostly solitary lives in exclusion in the desert. However, some of them, like Anthony the Great, occasionally left their solitude to minister among

3. Ferguson, *Know Your Christian Life*, 138.

4. *Ibid.*, 143.

5. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, 44.

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people in the towns and cities around them for a period of time.<sup>6</sup> Coenobitic monks, unlike the eremitic monks, lived a communal lifestyle, with well-defined structures governing the pattern of life and leadership of each community. The Italian monk St. Benedict of Nursia (480–547) is celebrated as one of the primal leaders of coenobitic monasticism. He wrote a handbook (known as the *Rule of St. Benedict*) to govern the pattern of living of the monks in the monastery he founded at Monte Cassino, Italy.<sup>7</sup> Benedictine monastic life emphasized moderation between physical labor and study, personal contemplation and communal worship.<sup>8</sup> Christian monasticism exerted a great influence on Christianity and the world at large from the fifth to the ninth century CE. For example, monks devoted large amounts of time to copying manuscripts and writing commentaries on religious and secular texts.<sup>9</sup>

The Orthodox Churches and Roman Catholic Church have preserved Christian monasticism to the present era, albeit with significant modifications (as can be seen in different monastic orders such as the Franciscan order). The emphases on “sacred reading, manual work, and liturgical prayer” have remained central to the lifestyles of Christian monastic communities.<sup>10</sup> The Protestant Churches have also joined in this tradition as can be seen in what is called “new monasticism.” This form of monasticism is labelled “new” because it moves away from some of the restrictions of the “old” form of monasticism such as “celibacy” and “taking lifelong vows.”<sup>11</sup> People who follow the path of “new monasticism,” like the traditional monks, “choose to live in a Christian community with a focus on service, especially with the poor and marginalized.”<sup>12</sup> What all forms of Christian monasticism share is a commitment to live out in practical ways the life of Christ, which is a form of spiritual exercise aimed at living obediently to God. Writing about Ethiopian Orthodox monasticism and how it can inspire Christians to live responsibly in preserving the ecosystem, Joachim Persoon notes that the monks of Mahbere Selassie’s choice of life of poverty and prohibition against owning private property “is a sign of embracing asceticism and calling the wider population to repentance.” Persoon goes on to argue that the monks’ lifestyle is a prophetic address to all Christians “to

6. Ward, “Anthony the Great,” 1.

7. Backman, *Cultures of the West*, 278.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Cummings, *Monastic Practices*, 7.

11. Heath and Duggins, *Missional, Monastic, Mainline*, 33.

12. Ibid.

practice voluntary self-divestiture, recalling the great saints and asceticism of early Christianity. This could be described as a need for eco-asceticism, voluntary self-denial, freeing from the technologies that destroy God's good earth."<sup>13</sup>

### Christian Life as Thanksgiving

The Christian life is an expression of thanksgiving to the Triune God for acting to redeem fallen humanity. The Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* summoned all those "baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit" to remember that they have been consecrated by God "to be a spiritual house, a holy priesthood," that they may "offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the perfection of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:4–10)."<sup>14</sup> Christians are to live their daily lives as an act of thanksgiving to God for saving them and bringing them into fellowship.

The act of thanksgiving provides dual services to the practice of the Christian life, namely, "motivation" for Christian living and "deterrence" from living in a manner that does not conform to the life of Christ. Almost every human culture cherishes "thanksgiving" as a good virtue. Unthankful people are considered in many cultures as irresponsible people. Luke narrates a story that shows Jesus values thankfulness and expects his followers to be thankful to God (Luke 17:11–19). If not being thankful to God is a sinful act, then thanksgiving can serve as a form of "deterrence" from not living the Christian life. The desire to be thankful to God can push us toward Christ and also can empower us to conform to his life, as the one who models for us what it is to be *human* in the manner God expects of us. Living the Christian life as an act of thanksgiving to God is an acknowledgment that God is the center of our life and existence.

Living the Christian life as an act of thanksgiving to God also amplifies the role of prayer in Christian living. What is important here is not the right practice or method of Christian prayer. Instead, when prayer is correlated with thanksgiving in the context of the Christian life, we see more clearly how having a relationship with the Triune God is the foundation of Christian living. Like thanksgiving, prayer entails living before the *presence* of God. Prayer should not be seen primarily as an activity a Christian pauses to engage in for a period of time. On the contrary, prayer is a way of living that

13. Persoon, "Towards an Ethiopian Eco-Theology," 223.

14. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* 10, in Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 360–631.

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entails a deep commitment to a relationship with God. Prayer, as Lawrence Cunningham and Keith Egan note, signals “communication with an Other and, simultaneously says, in effect, that a person is not totally self-sufficient and does not regard himself or herself as totally autonomous or alone.”<sup>15</sup> Karl Barth stretches the concept of prayer further by imagining it as Christians’ vocative response to God’s command “call upon me” (Psalm 50:15). This response to God’s command, for Barth, is the heart of the Christian life. He writes: “we regard invocation according to this command [“call upon me”] as the basic meaning of all human obedience. What God permits man, what he expects, wills, and requires of him, is a life of calling upon him. This life of calling upon God will be a person’s Christian life: his life in freedom, conversion, faith, gratitude, and faithfulness.”<sup>16</sup>

Prayer, broadly speaking, means living before the presence of God. When understood in this way, prayer is a form of living that requires making daily and momentary decisions such as decisions about how to use our resources, about telling the truth, and so on. When we live the life of prayer as a form of a life of thanksgiving to God, we will become more aware that God’s presence is not something we should dread as if God is looking over our shoulders waiting to punish us when we sin. On the contrary, God’s presence should bring us comfort even in our darkest moment. Of course, God’s comfort may come through divine correction and discipline. This is the wisdom of Ps 23:4, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (NIV). In the Christian life, therefore, Christians should not *run away from* God when they sin. Conversely, they should *run toward* God for the forgiveness of their sins and to draw encouragement to continue in their struggles to live faithfully to God with thanksgiving for their salvation.

### Christian Life as Sanctification

The word sanctification signifies a state of “being holy” or to “make holy.” It can be associated with God, human beings, and objects. Sanctification (from the Hebrew root *qds* and the Greek root *hágios*) denotes sacredness, holiness, and awe. In theological terms, when the Greek word *hágios* or the Hebrew *qds* is applied to God, holiness is construed as the nature of God (Isa 6:3; John 17:11; Rev 6:10).<sup>17</sup> In this sense, holiness signifies the “otherness”

15. Cunningham and Egan, *Christian Spirituality*, 67.

16. Barth, *Christian Life*, 44.

17. Procksch, “Hágios,” 1:100–101.

of God. In other words, holiness, as an essential nature of God highlights God's majesty, distinctiveness, uniqueness, and apartness. God is distinct from human beings (Hos 11:9) and all other creatures of God. But holiness also sometimes refers to God's moral rectitude (Ps 145:17; 1 Pet 1:13–16). The biblical writers used the word "holiness" in this sense to express the belief that God is morally pure, perfect, and "free from the pollution of sin."<sup>18</sup> In Christian theology, the moral rectitude of God is the ground for speaking of human sanctification. Since God is holy, the people of God are called to be holy. The Apostle Peter makes this clear when he says, "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do" (1 Pet 1:15 NIV). For Paul, the church is holy and set apart by God to become "a holy temple" and to "do good works, which God has prepared in advance for" its members (Eph 2:10, 21–22). Also, the members of the church are to offer their bodies as "living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God," for this is their "spiritual act of worship" (Rom 12:1 NIV).

Theologians, especially those belonging to the Protestant camp, sometimes speak of "positional sanctification" and "progressive sanctification" when describing the purity of human beings in relation to God. In the *positional* (or definitive) sense, Christians are sanctified by God because they are in Christ. By virtue of being in Christ, God sets believers apart. Those who are *in Christ* are justified by God, declaring and making them saints (Rom 1:7). In the positional sense, sanctification has nothing to do with human moral improvement: it is not the result of the righteous works of Christians. On the contrary, it is God's act of seeing those who are in Christ as "holy" on the basis of Christ's work. As Michael Horton notes, "All that is found in Christ is holy, because it is in Christ. He is our sanctification—'the LORD is our righteousness' (1 Cor 1:30; 6:11), our Holy Place."<sup>19</sup> Before God, the status of a believer in Christ has changed from that of "unholy" to "holy."

*Progressive* sanctification refers to the "work" of being holy to which God has called those who have been justified. Admittedly, the power to live a holy life that is pleasing to God comes from God: it is a gift from the Triune God. The responsibility of Christians is to seek the gift of empowerment for Christian living. As Thomas Merton notes, "If we are called by God to holiness of life, and if holiness is beyond our natural power to achieve (which it certainly is) then it follows that God himself must give us the light, the strength, and the courage to fulfill the task he requires of us. He will

18. Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 342.

19. Horton, *Christian Faith*, 652.



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certainly give us the grace we need. If we do not become saints it is because we do not avail ourselves of his gift.”<sup>20</sup>

### Christian Life as Moving toward Glorification

In the chapter on salvation (see chapter 2), I discussed the Eastern Orthodox Church’s theology of *theosis* or deification. I will not repeat what was said in that chapter in this section. I will focus my attention on the importance of the doctrine of deification in the Orthodox Church’s views on Christian living or spirituality. The Lebanese theologian Bradley Nassif has written extensively on the spirituality of the Eastern Orthodox Church. For him, the idea of spirituality in the Orthodox Church is “less taught than caught. It is a whole way of life, not a list of regimens for developing the spiritual life.” Spirituality is grounded in a loving relationship with the Triune God who calls humans to participate in the divine life. The excerpt below is taken from one of Nassif’s works on spirituality.

The definition and destiny of the human person is to become divine. Communion with God is the goal of creation and salvation. The church calls this goal christification or, more commonly, deification (from the Greek *theosis*). Deification is the goal that integrates all Eastern Orthodox theology and spirituality. While acknowledging the term has Greek philosophical origins, it is nevertheless thoroughly biblical. The Gospel of John and the Epistles of Paul clearly speak of a mystical union between Christ and the believer and a personal dwelling of the Holy Spirit. The church fathers and ecumenical councils . . . base their understanding of deification on the reality of the incarnation. By participating in Christ, who united our humanity with his divinity, believers “participate” in the very life of God himself. It is by such intimate union that we “are being transformed into the same image [of the Lord] from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18 ESV). The best biblical term that is equivalent to the Greek *theosis* or deification is probably glorification.

The goal of glorification is seen in the creation account in Genesis 1–2. Orthodox Christians believe that at creation Adam and Eve were fashioned after a Trinitarian likeness. . . . *Theosis* includes growth in the characteristics of God, such as love, compassion, and mercy. But it also includes the idea of growing in communion with God, resulting in a continued state of immortality. Accordingly, the fall into sin was not a drastic withdrawal from a perfected

20. Merton, *Life and Holiness*, 17.

state. Instead, it was a failure to achieve the original purpose God had set for humanity. It was a departure from the path of deification.<sup>21</sup>

**Question:** What does this text say about the nature and purpose of Christian spirituality as understood in the Orthodox Church?

## Forming the Christian Life

Any Christian who seeks to live like Jesus Christ will soon discover that it is extremely difficult to say no to a manner of living that pulls people away from the way of Christ. The manner of life Jesus lived sometimes goes against our “natural” way of responding to things and people that threaten our interests. For example, it is not natural to love those who hate us. Our “natural” response to those who hate us is to hate them even more. It is “natural” to exact revenge on those who have done harm to us rather than to forgive them. Like the Apostle Paul, many Christians discover through the practice of the Christian life that what they want to do in order to please Christ they rarely do; instead, they find themselves doing what they do not desire to do (Rom 17:15–20). The Christian life requires making a decision: choosing between satisfying our “natural” desires and pleasing God by following the life Jesus exemplifies for his disciples (Rom 8:1–15). Christians, as Nigel Cameron writes, should move from “the passive idea of ‘discerning guidance’ to the active one of ‘making Christian decisions.’”<sup>22</sup> Making such decisions, however, is an ongoing spiritual struggle—a struggle we *gradually* overcome by drawing insights and empowerment from the Triune God, from the Scriptures, and from the church.

**FOCUS QUESTION:**  
Who and what is involved in the formation of the Christian life?

## The Triune God’s Role in the Christian Life

In Gal 2:20, the Apostle Paul tells his readers, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (ESV). What exactly did Paul mean by “Christ who

21. Nassif, “Orthodox Spirituality,” 53–54.

22. Cameron, *Are Christians Human?*, 57.

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lives in me” and “I live by faith in the Son of God”? Is Paul suggesting that his role in the practice of spirituality or Christian living is passive and that Jesus is the principal actor who produces Christlike qualities in him? One of the passages that may come to mind as one ponders these words of Paul is John 15, in which Jesus tells his disciples, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4–5 ESV). Could Paul have heard these words of Jesus through oral tradition (the epistles were most probably written before the Gospel of John)? There is no need to be delayed by the historical connections between Jesus’ words and the Apostle Paul’s words. What is of paramount importance is how to understand Jesus’ role (and by extension the role of God the Father and the Holy Spirit) in Christian living.

Returning to Paul’s words to Galatian Christians highlighted earlier, three major theological lessons that can impact Christian living are noteworthy. First, Christian living is a “new life” that requires putting the “old self” to death. For Paul, those whom God has justified should no longer live their lives to satisfy their selfish interests or desires. Second, the “new life” is made possible by God’s justification of a sinner on the account of Christ’s righteousness. Those who are justified by God have been crucified and also raised from the dead (metaphorically speaking) along with Christ. In other words, the “new life” they have received is grounded in their identification with the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup> Third, the Christian life requires living *for* God. But how is this possible? Paul attributes his ability to live for God to the indwelling Christ. In his words, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20 ESV).

How can Christians apply these three lessons from Paul’s discussion on Christian living? Unsurprisingly, Christians have understood and moved Paul’s words in different directions. For some, Paul’s words indicate that perfectionism is attainable in this life. Others, on the contrary, argue that perfectionism is foreign to Paul’s theologies. Yet for some other theologians, Christian living or spirituality ought to be understood as communion between the Triune God and humans, a life of communion that requires Christians to continually draw the strength for Christian living from the Triune God. For these theologians, Christians must avoid the danger of reducing spiritual life “to a set of emphases and practices each believer is to follow.”<sup>24</sup>

23. George, *Galatians*, 199.

24. Nassif, “Orthodox Spirituality,” 28.

The Triune God makes the Christian life possible. In Christian soteriology (doctrine of salvation), the Triune God is believed to be responsible for restoring human beings into divine fellowship. God the Father through the work of the Holy Spirit brings people into union with Christ. This union (in theological terms, the “mystical union”) is the foundation (a) for entering into fellowship with the Triune God and (b) for living the Christian life. The mystical union changes people’s (positional) status from being an “old creation” to being a “new creation.” In 2 Cor 5:17, the Apostle Paul writes, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (NIV). Those who are united with Christ should, in Paul’s language, “fulfill the law of Christ,” which includes carrying the burdens of other believers (Gal 6:2). They should also “live by the Spirit,” which entails not gratifying sinful desires (Gal 5:16–18). The mystical union, therefore, can be described as the foundation of the Christian life and the fountain from which Christians draw power and encouragement for Christian living. When understood in this way, Jesus Christ is not merely a model of moral living that his followers can imitate (like imitating a movie star). Rather, the Christian life, in so far as it is ground in the mystical union, is the Triune God’s work *within* Christians that produces *outward* lifestyles—what Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). John Calvin imagined the implication of one’s union with Christ for Christian living in this way: “We ought not to separate Christ from ourselves or ourselves from him. Rather we ought to hold fast bravely with both hands to that fellowship by which he has bound himself to us. So the Apostle teaches us: ‘Now your body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit of Christ which dwells in you is life because of righteousness’ (Rom 8:10).”<sup>25</sup> The Christian life necessitates a “visible act of obedience” to Christ.<sup>26</sup> In his typical dialectical and christocentric fashion, Karl Barth sees the Christian life or what he calls “special ethics” as concerning itself with God’s *goodness*, which demands *human good action* as exemplified by Jesus Christ. He writes,

In God’s Word, then, we are dealing both with God and with man: with God acting in relation to man and with man acting in relation to God; or, to put it in terms of the ethical problem, with the sure and certain goodness of the divine action and the problematical goodness of human action. At every point in true church proclamation it must and will be a matter of both. And the Word of God is the command of God to the extent that in it the sure and certain goodness of God’s goodness confronts the

25. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.2.24.

26. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 209.

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problematic goodness of man's as its standard, requirement, and direction.

At issue is the relation of human action to *God's* command. God himself, God alone is good, and he decides what human action may be called good or not good.

Who the commanding God is and who the responsible man is—God in the mystery of his commanding and man in the mystery of his obedience or disobedience—is not hidden from us but is revealed and may be known in the one Jesus Christ: God and man, if not in their essence, at least in their work and therefore in their manner; God and man, accessible to human apprehension, if not expressible in human words, at least describable and attestable.<sup>27</sup>

Barth's point is that the Christian life does not primarily refer to personal piety but rather to what makes Christians "Christian"—namely, their relation to Jesus Christ and the "obligation and commitment that derives from this relation."<sup>28</sup> While Barth is typically christocentric in his theological reflections, he is also deeply Trinitarian. Christians' obedience to God, for Barth, entails recognizing that God is the Father of Jesus Christ, which they are able to do by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Those who are received into divine fellowship through faith are to live faithfully. They are to continuously "crucify" the gratification of self in order to live a new life in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The life of Christians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "is marked by a daily dying in the war of the flesh and the spirit, and in the mortal agony the devil inflicts" upon them daily.<sup>30</sup> In Rom 8:15–17, Paul told his readers that people become children of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is also the same Spirit of God, Jesus told his disciples, that would bring people to him, convicting them of their sins (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit is so central to the Christian life that Paul reminded his readers to rely on the Holy Spirit who would help them in their weakness and intercede for them "in accordance with the will of God" (Rom 8:26). It is not only in spiritual things that the Holy Spirit aids Christians. Even in mundane things such as standing before a magistrate, Christians are to depend on the Holy Spirit for the ability to speak in a manner pleasing to God (Mark 13:11). Kendra Hotz and Matthew Mathews argue that the Holy Spirit "enlivens" the church through the process of purifying and illuminating the lives of the members of the church. To them,

27. Barth, *Christian Life*, 3, 4, 5.

28. *Ibid.*, 49.

29. *Ibid.*, 52.

30. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 273.

the Holy Spirit's *purification* (the Spirit's act of empowering Christians to crucify sin in their lives) and *illumination* (the Spirit's act of empowering Christians to live as new creatures in Christ) are central to the Christian life. The daily Christian movement of dying to sin and rising as new creatures in Christ are brought about by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup>

The paramount issue in discussing the role of the Triune God in the Christian life is not merely the issue of *character formation* (John 14:15–25). While the transformation of character is an essential part of the Christian life, enjoying a fellowship with the Triune God is the focal issue of the Christian life. Samuel Powell puts it this way: the Christian life “is not equivalent to a life of moral development. It is not simply equivalent to a life of self-discipline and spiritual exertion, although self-discipline and exertion are required. It is, in addition to these things, a life in God, not a life that springs spontaneously out of human nature.”<sup>32</sup>

### The Scriptures' Role in the Christian Life

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship* writes that Christians hear the call, which the risen and living Lord addresses to them, through “the testimony of the Scriptures.”<sup>33</sup> Bonhoeffer goes on to note that one's encounter with Christ through the Scriptures occurs in the church: “The preaching of the Church and the administration of the sacraments is the place where Jesus is present.”<sup>34</sup> The role of the Bible (or the Scriptures) in the formation of the Christian life may appear obvious to merit discussions; after all, it is the sacred text that guides what Christians believe and how they live. But at a closer look, the role of the Bible in Christian living is a much more complex issue. To highlight the complexity, one may ask *which* Bible? As I discussed in chapter 3 of volume 1 of *Introducing Christian Theologies*, Christians use different canons—lists of books considered sacred and authoritative. Since some of these canons contain competing texts and teaching, it is to be expected that the role of the Bible in Christian living is not an easy issue to address. Another question that can be raised is, *how much influence* should the Bible have on the formation of Christian living? Even if we answer the question about the difference in the biblical canon by saying “to each Christian community in their own choice of a biblical canon,” this answer does not really take us very far. This is because Christian communities also need

31. Hotz and Matthews, *Shaping the Christian Life*, 50–51.

32. Powell, *Theology of Spirituality*, 66–67.

33. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 201.

34. Ibid.

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to deal with the issue of *hermeneutics* (how to interpret) and the issue of *appropriation* (how to make theirs the meaning they arrive at after interpreting a biblical text). Since Christians within the same denomination (especially within the Protestant churches) rarely agree on their interpretations of several biblical passages, we ought to expect more difficult discussions on the Bible's role in Christian living.

Notwithstanding the differences in Christian understandings of biblical hermeneutics and the ways the Scriptures can be used to define Christian beliefs, many Christians read the Bible with the expectation to hear how they are to live as those whom God has called in Christ and are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit. If they are reading diligently and attentively, they will hear of God's grace, judgment, and forgiveness. They will hear that repentance is required of them. They will hear that they are required to journey in a "continuing transformation of life" concretized in the "practice of love of God and love of neighbor."<sup>35</sup> In the Scriptures, they will also hear about the struggles of the earliest Christians to live in conformity to the life of Christ and also about their determination to please Christ even when doing so meant risking their lives. In sum, the practice and conceptualization of the *Christian* life cannot be successfully imagined in isolation from the teaching of the Scriptures. Rejecting the Scriptures as an indispensable resource that should inform and shape the Christian life is tantamount to rejecting the Scriptures' primary purpose as texts that are "able to make [people] wise for salvation" and are "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (1 Tim 3:15–16 NIV).

Two theological reasons can be given in support of the claim that Christians cannot successfully imagine the practice of the Christian life in isolation from the Scriptures. First, the Scriptures are to be read by a Christian community as *the community's* sacred writings. By association, becoming a Christian and a member of a local church entails accepting the Scriptures as the written texts that inspire, govern, and empower Christians' beliefs and practices. Second, by accepting the Scriptures as sacred texts, a Christian community can maintain and accentuate the *continuity* of all Christian communities. The church is a work in progress: the Triune God is building, assembling, and purifying the diverse local communities that make up the church. Each local community should shoulder the responsibility of showing that it belongs to the "single" history of the church. Two related ways the community can accomplish this task are through its acceptance of the *normative status* of the Scriptures in the formation of the Christian life and through its interpretation of the Scriptures in dialogue

35. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 241–42.



with other Christian communities. When Christian communities interpret the Scriptures, as Rowan Williams notes, they are invited to identify themselves in the story being completed, to re-appropriate who they “are now and shall or can be, in terms of the story.”<sup>36</sup>

### Church’s Role in the Christian Life

In the preceding section, it is argued that reading the Bible as a community’s text is essential for understanding the role it plays (or its function) in the formation of the Christian life. In this section, I focus on the church’s role or function in the lives of its members as they seek to practice the Christian life. As we shall see below, the Scriptures provide a model for the church that can help each individual member live the Christian life. Christians cannot successfully live the Christian life in isolation from the Triune God, from the Scriptures, and from the community of Christ’s followers (the Church). In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when a person is united with Christ he or she loses the world but gains a new community—the visible church. This means that Christians are to “live in the visible community of Christ.”<sup>37</sup> But how exactly can the church help each Christian to live the Christian life? This is a broad question that can be answered in a number of ways. I will limit my discussion to three concrete ways the church can come to the aid of each member as he or she negotiates, struggles, and pursues the Christian life. The three ways are teaching, correcting, and sharing.

*Church’s teaching role:* One of the major tasks of the church is to produce leaders who are equipped to expound the word of God, to declare the whole counsel of God, and to help the members of the church on how they are to act and live. Paul’s advice to pastor Timothy to “correctly handle the word of truth” should encourage Christian leaders to devote themselves to the study of the Scriptures and sound doctrines.

I have encountered some leaders in Pentecostal churches and African Indigenous Churches (AICs) who do not take theological and biblical studies seriously because they believe the Holy Spirit will teach them all things. For these leaders, pastors (and all Christians) should read the Bible devotionally and also rely on the Holy Spirit to direct them on what they are to say to the church. For them, Christians should rely on the prophetic words of the Holy Spirit given to their church through prophets and prophetesses. But we can ask: Do theological and biblical studies inhibit one from hearing from the Holy Spirit? One of the perennial issues that arises each time spontaneous

36. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 50.

37. Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 209.



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prophetic utterances are heard by the church through a prophet or prophetess is how to determine when a given prophetic utterance is truly inspired by the Holy Spirit. What is at stake here is not simply *how* to know when the Holy Spirit is speaking spontaneously to the church but also the *criterion* of theological judgment or discernment. A church that is devoid of sound teaching, which is ironed out through deep theological reflections, will have no form of reference to judge the truthfulness or falsehood of a prophetic utterance. Anyone who reads the Scriptures closely will know that some of the texts are not easy to understand. The Apostle Peter, for example, writes that some of Paul's words are "hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Pet 3:16 NIV). Kevin Vanhoozer correctly notes that true Christian doctrine supplies "true knowledge" and encourages "sound habits" that are necessary to keep Christians *spiritually fit*.<sup>38</sup>

*Church's correcting role:* Another important role the church plays in the practice of Christian living is that of correcting sinning Christians with the purpose of nudging them back into the path of righteousness (Matt 18:15). Churches deal with the issue of sinning members differently, depending on the nature of the sins and their ecclesiastical traditions. The ministry of correcting a sinning member of the church can sometimes take the form of church discipline or excommunication. There is no need to assume, as some of the medieval church leaders had assumed, that excommunicating a sinning member from the church amounts to the loss of the person's salvation. As argued in chapter 2, salvation is a divine prerogative and the church has no power to make a decision on people's salvation. Excommunicating a sinning member from the fellowship of the church (Matt 18:15–17; 1 Cor 5) should be driven by the desire to bring the sinner back to fellowship.

A sinning member of the church can render two *positive* services to the church. Of course, I am not suggesting that churches *necessarily* need sinning members, but rather that the presence of a sinning member can become helpful to the church in two ways. First, a sinning member puts the church on its toes against becoming complicit in sinful acts. Paul scolded the members of the church of Corinth for their complicity in the sin of sexual immorality (most probably incestuous sexual acts between a man and his stepmother).<sup>39</sup> The church of Corinth failed to deal decisively with the sin. Paul was astonished at the behavior of the church: "Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of fellowship the man who did this?" The church, as a community, has the responsibility to stand

38. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 376.

39. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, 48.

up against sinners irrespective of the position of the sinner in the church. The second positive service a sinning member can render to the church is to test its exercise of grace. The goal of disciplining or excommunicating sinning members is not to destroy them but rather to correct them. The church should work relentlessly to help them repent of their sins and return to fellowship. In Gal 6:1 Paul wrote: “If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.”

*Church’s sharing role:* Paul instructed Christians living in the region of Galatia to “carry each other’s burdens,” for in doing so they would “fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:1). The church is to share in the burdens (spiritual, physical, social, material, and so on) of its members. This act of sharing involves *empathizing* with the suffering of each member. Deserting a sinning member does more harm than good, both to the sinner and to the whole church. Loneliness can provide fertile ground for a sinning Christian to go on sinning. The church that abandons a straying member is irresponsible: it has failed to perform its job of nurturing. The church should be like a good shepherd that does not give up on the strayed sheep but works relentlessly until he finds it (Luke 15:4–7). Sharing also includes *giving resources* to help the members that are in need. When a member is burdened by sin or need, the other members are to identify with the suffering, pathos, and pain of that member. We may not search for a long time in our nearby churches to encounter people who have engaged in sinful acts because they are struggling to feed themselves and their families. James made it clear that it was not enough to wish a person in need well without being willing to give sacrificially to help the person (Jas 2:15). John was even more direct in his rebuke of Christians whose faith lacked right practice: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17–18 NIV). Sharing the burdens of other Christians also involves *accountability*. Christians need each other to become aware of the threat or presence of sin. Our spiritual blind spots, which are conditioned by our cultures and personal experiences, may prevent us from seeing a potential circumstance in which we may be led to sin. Christians owe it to each other to be watchful of such circumstances and to point them out to those who may be unaware of them. In this sense, Christians are to be a light to each other’s path.

## The Christian Life and Christian Communities' Relation to the World

In this section, I focus on *how* Christian communities are to act “Christianly” in the public space, that is, in the world. Some Christians live in a predominantly “secular” society, while others live in a predominantly “religious” society. I use the word “secular” in this context along the lines of Charles Taylor’s definition: a society in which belief in God is no longer “unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic.” Belief in God in a secular society is understood as “one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”<sup>40</sup> North America and Europe are the best candidates for being examples of a secular society. A predominantly “religious” society is the opposite of secular society. It is a society, to reverse the order of Taylor’s description of a secular age, in which belief in God is rarely critically introduced into daily conversations and also where belief in God is the easiest option to take. Examples of a “religious” society in this sense can be found in Africa and the Middle East.

Successfully bringing the Christian life—way of thinking, living, and behaving—into the public sphere will largely depend on whether the society is “secular” or “religious.” I have come into contact with several people who shared with me how difficult it has been for them to live the Christian life in North America and Western Europe. On closer examination, I learned that such people were expressing how the contexts of North America or Western Europe negatively impact their practice of the Christian faith. For example, those who prayed daily for their meals when they were living in Africa increasingly found it difficult to pray to God to provide their daily meals in societies where food is not scarce. In Africa, the issue may be how to survive diseases that are caused by hunger and malnutrition. In North America, the issue may be how to survive the diseases that are caused by the consumption of too much food, especially junk food, which is readily available. But it will be utterly naïve to assume that living in a “religious” society does not pose any difficulty to the Christian life. Sometimes people living in a religious society fail to critically examine their religious commitments; they may do bizarre things because their pastors tell them to do so. For example, some members of a church in South Africa ate grass, as if they were animals, after their pastor, Lesego Daniel, asked them to do so. Daniel also asked his members to drink petrol (gasoline) after claiming that it would be turned miraculously into pineapple juice—and some members trustingly drank it.<sup>41</sup>

40. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 3.

41. Martinez, “After South African Pastor Makes Church Members Eat Grass.”

The issue of how Christians should relate to the world is unsurprisingly complex. Christians must clarify what they mean when they confess that they are called to be the “salt of the earth, and the light of the world” (Matt 5:13–16) as a way of expressing the church’s relation to the world. Throughout the history of the church, Christians have tried to imagine the church-world relation without colluding with uncritical attitude towards the world, on the one hand, and without compromising the church’s religious identity, on the other hand. One way of sorting the complex web of Christians’ understandings of the church’s relation to the world is through the use of “models” to classify the *mode of operation* and the *nature of the church’s mission* to the world. I will categorize Christians’ understandings of the church’s relation to the world into three major models: the antithetical model, the empire model, and the dialectical model. Within each of these three broad models, I will highlight different, albeit related, views. Also, note that in practice some of these models intersect.

### Antithetical Model

*Description:* Some Christians see “Christian identity” as being at war with other competing identities (such as “national identity” and “political identity”) and as such treat them with hostility. Such Christians’ attitudes fit the antithetical model, which sees the Christian life as living in opposition to or in direct confrontation with the world. For some of these Christians, the church must be ready to choose martyrdom when it is confronted by the forces of the world.

*Example of the Antithetical Model:* We can distinguish two trends in the antithetical model, namely, the strict type and the moderate type. Christian monasticism represents the *strict version* of the antithetical model. Some early Christian monks left the cities and moved to the desert to live in solitary or to form a community—a move that signaled their rejection of the ways of the world. As H. Richard Niebuhr has noted, many monks withdrew from the “institutions and societies of civilization, from family and state, from school and socially established church, from trade and industry.”<sup>42</sup> The *moderate version* of the antithetical model differs from the *strict version* primarily because of its rejection of the idea of withdrawing physically from the society and living in a sort of Christian enclave. For theologians whose views of the church’s relation to the world fit the *moderate version*, the church should not withdraw from society but rather should steer away from the “way” of the world—that of violence,

42. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 56.

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war, and coercive power. The name of the African American civil rights activist and American Baptist minister Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–68) comes to mind as an exemplar of nonviolent protest. Outside of the Christian religion, the Indian Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) remains one of the preeminent figures involved in nonviolent movements. I will use the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder (1927–97) as an example to illustrate the moderate version of the antithetical model. For Yoder, Jesus Christ and his earliest disciples radically resisted the violent and coercive structures of their day through nonviolent means. Yoder insists that the way of Jesus—a radical nonviolent resistance of coercive powers—should be the foundation of Christian social ethics. To him, when the cross-event is understood in the context of its relation to “enmity and power,” what comes to light is that “servanthood replaces dominion, forgiveness absolves hostility.”<sup>43</sup> Like Christ, Christians are to voluntarily submit to violent oppressive structures and should do so without resentment.<sup>44</sup> Below is a collection of passages taken from *The Politics of Jesus*.

It is . . . a fundamental error to conceive of the position of the church in the New Testament in the face of social issues as a “withdrawal,” or to see this position as motivated by the Christians’ weakness, by their numerical insignificance or low social class, or by fear of persecution, or by scrupulous concern to remain uncontaminated by the world. What can be called the “otherness of the church” is an attitude rooted in strength and not in weakness. It consists in being a herald of liberation and not a community of slaves. It is not a detour or a waiting period, looking forward to better days which one hopes might come a few centuries later; it was rather a victory when the church rejected the temptations of Zealot and Maccabean patriotism and Herodian collaboration. The church accepted as a gift being the “new humanity” created by the cross and not by the sword.

The liberation of the Christian from “the way things are,” which has been brought about by the gospel of Christ, who freely took upon himself the bondages of history in our place, is so thorough and novel as to make evident to the believer that the givenness of our subjection to the enslaving or alienating powers of this world is broken. It is natural to feel Christ’s liberation reaching

43. Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 131

44. *Ibid.*, 185.

into every kind of bondage, and to want to act in accordance with that radical shift.

[Jesus'] motto of revolutionary subordination, of willing servanthood in the face of domination, enables the person in a subordinate position in society to accept and live within that status without resentment, at the same time that it calls upon the person in the superordinate position to forsake or renounce all domineering use of that status.<sup>45</sup>

*Assessing the Antithetical Model:* Living in seclusion may be helpful for protecting some Christians from the circumstances that can tempt them to sin. In other words, living in a Christian “enclave” can be beneficial to some Christians’ personal growth. But should the Christian life be reduced to a personal piety? How can Christians understand and help tackle the needs of the world if they withdraw from the world? Christians who adopt the *strict version* of the antithetical model are in danger of seeing themselves as mere “outsiders” in the world and consequently may never be open to learning from non-Christian communities and cultures of their societies. Former president of Tanzania Julius Nyerere argues that the church must side with the victims of poverty and oppression, which for him entails active “involvement and leadership in constructive protest against” their condition. He goes on to state that “the Church has to help men rebel against their slums; it has to help them to do this in the most effective way it can be done.” Without fearing the consequences, Nyerere continues, churches must fight all “institutions and power groups which contribute to the existence and maintenance of the physical and spiritual slums.”<sup>46</sup>

Against the *moderate version* of the antithetical model it can be argued that it disempowers the oppressed from fighting back in a manner necessary to prevent or contain the evil actions of oppressive governments, groups, individuals, and institutions. In our present world, without the use of any sort of violence or coercive power (such as bombing a terrorist cell), evil actions may never be prevented or contained. Calling on people in superordinate positions to abandon their acts of domination without taking a well-regulated violent action against them may amount to an empty rhetoric that does not deter people from carrying out massive and sustained evil acts in the world. Some critics of pacifism (such as Oliver O’Donovan) argue that pacifism rules out the possibility that God providentially may act through a powerful and legally constituted authority to deter evil or bring

45. Ibid., 148, 149, 185–86.

46. Nyerere, “Christian Rebellion,” 83–84.

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penetrators of evil to justice with the use of force or violent means such as war. Pacifism appears to be “morally overambitious and impracticable” in *this* violent world.<sup>47</sup>

### Empire Model

*Description:* The empire model sees the church as God’s co-regent in the world and seeks to introduce Christianity as the predominant religion that should shape people’s pattern of life both in the church and in the world at large. Christian values are infused with a government’s political power and military agenda to control the economy, social life, and vision of the state. To put it another way, empire is justified through Christian theological means, such as by invoking the idea of God’s *mediated* providence in the world through human instruments, especially Christian institutions.<sup>48</sup>

*Example of the Empire Model:* The empire model gradually became prominent in the Roman Empire during the latter stage of the reign of the Emperor Constantine the Great (r. 306–37 CE). During the medieval era, Christendom provided the impetus for the Crusades—the so-called Holy Wars. From the sixteenth century to the twentieth century, during the European exploration and missionary expeditions, Christian mission and theology were largely constructed after the likeness of what may be described as “Christian imperialism.” The missionaries saw it as the duty of their powerful nations to Christianize and “civilize” other nations.<sup>49</sup> A neo-Constantinian imperial mindset has appeared in the writings of some American Christian theologians in the twenty-first century. I will highlight the work of Stephen Webb.

Jesus commands his followers not to stand back from history but to change it. Christianity was animated from the beginning by a universal impulse. Only when the whole world is filled with God’s Word will the biblical story of history come to its rightful conclusion. Given this command, the most pressing task of a theology of providence today clearly is to interpret the connection between globalism and Christianity, especially as America mediates that connection.

47. For more on this critique of pacifism, see O’Donovan, *Just War Revisited*, 7–12.

48. See Avram, *Anxious about Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities*.

49. Oikotree, “Mission in the Context of Empire: Putting Justice at the Heart of Faith.” Oikotree is a group that seeks “to live faithfully in the midst of economic injustice and ecological destruction.” See <http://www.oikotree.org/about-us/>.

Providence asks Christians to get off the sidelines and into the game of history. It does not ask Christians to be uncritical in their expressions of national loyalty. *American Providence* is intentionally not entitled *Providential America*, because keeping the focus on providence as the constant and America as the variable is important. I do not mean to say that America is uniquely providential, nor that the doctrine of providence should be reconsidered only in the light of American history. Nevertheless, I do mean to take the risk of reflecting on what God might be doing through America today. God's providence is, no doubt, universal but all theology is concrete.

American Christians have a significant measure of responsibility not only for America but also for the fate of democracy worldwide. Modern democracy is, to a large extent, a product of Christian ideals and values, so that Christians of any nationality have a stake in America's attempt to support the growth of democracy abroad.

American providence is an interpretation of American history set in a global, indeed cosmic, context. In the end, American providence is not really about America. America's heart is so often in the right place because the American government was designed as a safe harbor for the Christian faith. If America were to stop providing the safe harbor, the providence would cease being, in any sense of the term, American.<sup>50</sup>

*Assessing the Empire Model:* The church will enjoy freedom of worship and policies that favor Christianity if it exists in a context where the empire model is implemented. The empire model, however, appears to do enormous harm both to Christians and people who do not share the Christian faith. During the time of Constantine's reign and the period immediately following, when Christianity gradually became the official religion of the Roman Empire, many Christians lost the zeal for morality and commitment to live the life of obedience to Christ. The church became powerful, had wealth, and enjoyed freedom but lacked moral power. The immoral church became the impetus for people to join the monastic movement as a way of escaping the worldly church.

When the church enjoys an imperial romance, its leaders tend to support the imperial power and become less critical of its colonial projects. Two examples can be used to buttress this claim. First, in the case of the experience of American Indians in the 1500s, as Clara Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George "Tink" Tinker have argued, some European Christian missionaries sometimes participated, implicitly or explicitly, in "oppression and cultural

50. Webb, *American Providence*, 6, 10, 168.



genocide.”<sup>51</sup> Kidwell, Noley, and “Tink” Tinker are also critical of the christological expression “Jesus is Lord” because it was used in a way that had a devastating effect on the Native American people. For them, some European missionaries used it as justification for their colonization of American Indians. The church of the empire colonizes and erases difference rather than embodying Jesus Christ as God’s good news to the world. The second example can be drawn from the experiences of many sub-Saharan African communities during the period of Western missionaries’ expeditions in the 1800s and 1900s. African Instituted (or Independent) Churches (AICs) were birthed in the 1800s as some African church leaders rose up to the challenge posed by imperial Western Christianity and also by the *foreignness* of Western Christianity to the sensibilities of many African Christian converts. Western missionaries’ Christianity—with its distinctive Western theologies, modes of worship, rituals, costumes, and unsympathetic attitudes toward many indigenous religious beliefs and practices—threw into an intriguing light the need to contextualize Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>52</sup> Some African leaders such as the Nigerian James Johnson (1840–1901), the Liberian William Wade Harris (ca. 1860–1929), and the Malawian Yesaya Zerenji Mwasi (ca. 1869–1955), to name a few, resisted what they considered the tyrannical forms of leadership of Western missionaries. They resolved to establish local churches that attended to the social, spiritual, and theological needs of Africans and at the same time remained critical of imperialism and colonialism that ruined the image of Christianity in Africa.<sup>53</sup> The empire model is usually accompanied by the mindset of invasion, aggression, and colonization of non-Christian communities.

The empire model fails to account properly for the presence of non-Christian religions and their place in God’s providential work in human history. Also, the version of providential imperialism proposed by Stephen Webb assumes that democracy is a neutral form of governance and assumes that it is the ideal, or should be made the ideal, form of governance in all societies. J. Akin Omoyajowo, who favors the use of Christian values to unify or control cultures, warns that “The Church that will help to integrate a developing nation cannot identify itself with a particular social class, prefer a particular political philosophy and party.”<sup>54</sup> Webb’s concept of “American providence” is in the end more about *American* political and economic val-

51. Kidwell et al., *Native American Theology*, 65.

52. For a concise historical account of the rise of indigenous African churches, see Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 130–72.

53. See Mwasi, *My Essential and Paramount Reasons for Working Independently*.

54. Omoyajowo, “Christianity as a Unifying Factor,” 97.

ues and agendas than about God's providence. As one reviewer of Webb's *American Providence* has noted: "Apart from justifying and guaranteeing American dominance, God is surprisingly absent from the book. . . . He proclaims faith in the trinity of Christianity, Democracy, and Capitalism, not the Father, Son, and Holy [Spirit]."55

## Dialectical Model

*Description:* This model rejects both the empire and antithetical models. For theologians that adopt the dialectical model, the church is commissioned by Christ to be "in the world" but not "of the world." Rather than seeing Christians as those who are to escape from the world (the antithetical model) or as those who are to control all aspects of the world (the empire model), the dialectical model forces Christians to negotiate their existence in a movement of yes and no as they dialogue with other communities and cultures.

*Examples of the Dialectical Model:* Two examples of the dialectical model can be seen in the concepts of the church as *missional* and the church as God's *healing balm*. The shift in Christians' understandings of "mission" as one of the tasks of the church (what the church *does*) to the idea that mission is the church's heartbeat (what the church *is*) has changed the landscape of ecclesiology (doctrine of the church). The idea of the church as an assembly *sent* by God into the world to embody God's gospel is central to the notion of a *missional* church. The emphasis is on God's *sending* of the church as "Apostle" to the world. I will highlight the work of a team of scholars and church leaders (Lois Barrett, Inagrace T. Dietterich, George R. Hunsberger, Alan J. Roxburgh, Craig Van Gelder, and Darrell L. Guder) who have produced a helpful text on the concept of the missional church. For them, the church's role is not to control the world but rather to engage it with the intention to embody a life characteristic of God's kingdom or reign. The passage below is taken from their book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*.

The Bible sometimes describes the missional church as being in the world but not of the world. That is, the church is in the midst of the world, both geographically and culturally, but it is not of the world. It does not have the same values as the world, the same behaviors, or the same allegiances. The missional church differs from the world because it looks for its cues from the One who has sent it out, rather than from the powers that appear to run the world.

55. Beach-Verhey, review of *American Providence*.

The church always lives in and among a culture or group of cultures. The vast majority of the church's particular communities share with their neighbors a primary culture or cultures, which include their language, food, perhaps styles of dress, and other customs. But they are called to point beyond that culture to the culture of God's new community.

This does not mean that the church or the gospel it preaches is somehow outside of culture. There is no cultureless gospel. Jesus himself preached, taught, and healed within a specific cultural context. Nor is it the case that the gospel can be reduced to a set of cultureless principles. . . . One of the tasks of the church is to translate the gospel so that the surrounding culture can understand it, yet help those believers who have been in that culture move toward living according to the behaviors and communal identity of God's missional people—in the language of the New Testament, God's *ethnos* (1 Pet 2:9).

The church's particular communities live in the context of the surrounding culture, engage with the culture, but are not controlled by the culture. The faithful church critiques its cultural environment, particularly the dominant culture; affirms those aspects of culture that do not contradict the gospel; speaks the language of the surrounding cultures and of the gospel; [and] constantly tries to communicate the gospel in the surrounding culture. . . .<sup>56</sup>

The dialectical model is also exemplified in the view of the church as God's *healing balm* in the world. Abigail Evans has argued that the church's "healing ministry" should not be relegated to a subset of the church's mission to the world but rather seen as what "should permeate every part of its mission."<sup>57</sup> For Evans, the scriptural concept of salvation entails *healing*—restoration of the well-being of God's creation. She argues that the miraculous healings of Jesus and as well as the early Christians' emphasis on overcoming principalities and powers (Eph 6:12) point the church's responsibility and concern toward the health of God's creation.<sup>58</sup> Christians, however, must trace the need of healing God's creation back to God's own work in the world. "Where there is healing," Evans writes, "there is God; God is the source of all healing."<sup>59</sup> Christians must also expect that God's healing work in the world may not fit their categories. Again she writes, "God is not limited to our understanding of how God works. God uses a variety of

56. Barrett, "Missional Witness," 110, 114–15.

57. Evans, *Healing Church*, 1.

58. *Ibid.*, 2–7.

59. *Ibid.*, 51.

means to heal including faith as testified by Christ's healing miracles."<sup>60</sup> For Evans, *conventional medicine*, which must pass double-blind and placebo-controlled studies, should not rule out the possibility of *faith healing* or deter Christians from seeking *faith healing*. Theology, in Evans' judgment, has something relevant to offer to the project of health, of healing God's creation.<sup>61</sup>

The Indian Preparatory Group that participated in the discourse on Asian spirituality organized by Asian scholars, which met in Suanbo, South Korea, in 1989, under the auspices of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), emphasized the role of Christians in bringing healing to their societies. Writing specifically about social problems in India, the Indian Preparatory Group argues that Christian spirituality requires healing the wounds of Indian societies caused by social inequality and injustice.

Spiritual is all that the Spirit of God originates, gives, guides, and accompanies; all that the Spirit can bless, accept, and work with. It is all that can contribute to the balance and blossoming, the healing and wholeness of India, of the human race, the earth, the cosmos. It may be described as the *Godwardness* of life, the experience of seeing God in all things and all things in God; or, as a sustained search for meaning, depth, transcendence, and comradeship, overcoming mental and social inertia and determinisms in order to grow in freedom and to be able to relate to reality.

History is contemplated to discern the signs of the times, what God is doing in our days, and to what collaboration God is summoning us. Contemplation may, in fact it must, deepen into probing and analysis of social reality with a view to a finer response.

It goes without saying that the response must be relevant. If it does not correspond to the need at hand, to the cry of the situation, to the call of God that comes through the people, it is no response at all. In the Samaritan story [Luke], what the two religious men did is no response, even if they hurried to the temple to pray for the man who was broken and left on the roadside.<sup>62</sup>

Healing the world requires hearing the questions the world addresses to Christianity and to the church in particular. The church should not *teach* the "world" (in this context, used broadly to include people, religions, political and social communities that are not grounded in the life and teaching of

60. Ibid., 51.

61. Ibid., 53–62.

62. Indian Preparatory Group, "Indian Search for a Spirituality of Liberation," 76–77.

## Introducing Christian Theologies

Jesus Christ) without being willing to *listen* to the world, that is, to what the “world” is saying about the church. To become a Christian is to commit to the “way of Christ”: to see the world, to relate to people, and to understand oneself in the light of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. The Christian life has consequences for how Christians are to act responsibly in their societies.

*Criticism of the Dialectical Model:* The dialectical model should be applauded for preserving the complexity of the Christian vision of the living “in the world but not of the world.” But while the dialectical model may sound nice on paper, how it is implemented in the face of any specific context will largely determine how exactly it is to be judged. For example, some theologians who favor *healing* a society through the use a violent revolution may be criticized by Christian pacifists for using an evil strategy to accomplish a good deed.

## Concluding Remarks on the Christian Life

I conclude this chapter by highlighting three dimensions of the Christian life: the worldview dimension, relational dimension, and ethical dimension. Regarding the *worldview dimension*, the Christian life can be construed as a “way of seeing” that involves interpreting the meaning of life, events that happen in the world, humans’ place and responsibility in the world, and the *telos* (ends, goal, and fulfillment) of the world. In Ephesians 4:17 Paul writes, “I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking” (NIV). The Christian life is a particular *way of seeing*, which has its own distinctive features. The central question here is: What does it mean to “see” the world the Christian way? This is a very difficult question to answer given the different forms Christianity has taken in different contexts around the world. This difficulty is glaring in the face of competing understandings of Christianity that are represented in the disparate forms of expressions Christianity takes as it encounters new and different peoples and cultures. There are no easy solutions to these difficulties.

Two observations are in order in the context of this difficulty. First, the Christian “way of seeing” must be grounded in the life, experience, and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth as expressed and interpreted in the Scriptures. The worldview dimension of the Christian life, therefore, can be summarized as *seeing* and *living* in the world through the perspective of Jesus of Nazareth as represented and interpreted in the Scriptures. As an “intellectual” exercise, the Christian life must be measured against Jesus’ life, experience, and teaching. Jesus is the *content* of the Christian life: to live a Christian life is

to be “crucified with Christ” and to no longer live for *self* but rather to allow Jesus Christ to live through and transform *self* (Gal 2:20). The person being transformed, a process governed by the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:5–25), should seek to embody Jesus’ vision of how to relate to God, to fellow humans, and to the entire creation. Second, the content of our understandings of the life, experience, and teaching of Jesus Christ must be rooted in communal reflections. This means that no single individual can on his or her own decide on what constitutes the content of Jesus’ life, experience, and teaching. But more importantly, the communal reflection should also become an exercise in ecumenical conversations. No single Christian community can on its own know, grasp, and appreciate “how wide and long and deep is the love of Christ” (Eph 3:18–19) and his significance for the Christian understanding of God and God’s relationship with the world. Christian communities should enter into dialogic communication with each other with the aim of discovering in common what it means to *see* the world in the *Christian way*. The Christian life is a form of living that is governed by the “mind” of Christ—that is, his way of thinking, pattern of behavior, and understanding of God’s relationship to God’s creation.

The Christian life also has a *relational dimension*. The Christian life flows from the Triune God’s reception of human beings into divine fellowship. Here, it should be noted that the governing factor of this relationship is “love.” The relational view of the Trinity makes clear that love is central to the perichoretic (i.e., interpenetrative and mutually giving) life of the persons of the Trinity. The God who is love (1 John 4:8, 16) pursues a relationship with God’s creation (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9–10). The communities of God’s people also are to live a life governed by love, however inadequate it may be compared to the type of love exemplified by the Triune God. The relational dimension of the Christian life, therefore, requires that Christians live a life of fellowship governed by love with both God and their fellow humans. As the Apostle John writes, “This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:10 NIV; see also 1 John 4:7–21). Living the Christian life is not merely a matter of ticking boxes, nor is it adhering to a list of dos and don’ts. It is a *life*, which means that the Christian life is negotiated in dialogical relationship with both God and our fellow humans. This sort of relationship is perhaps part of what Isa 1:18 aims to communicate: “Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (NIV).

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The *ethical dimension* of the Christian life focuses on practice—the daily act of living out the life of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. This dimension of the Christian life includes both motives and actions. Samuel Powell writes that the Christian life requires “embodied practices.” Samuel’s aim is to show that the Christian life opposes any dichotomy between “right intentions” and “faithful practice.” Christians’ good or right intentions must be embodied in their actions. The Christian life, therefore, is not an abstraction but what is continually lived out through concrete actions.<sup>63</sup> It is a gradual process that continues throughout a Christian’s lifetime. On the one hand, the doctrine of the Christian life should remind Christians that they are always in need of God’s “repeated forgiveness and of final transformation in the resurrection.”<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, the Christian life should remind Christians they are not to “go on sinning” so that God’s grace for them may increase (Rom 6:1).

### Exercise 6.1

Topic: The church and preventable infectious diseases

Question: Does the church have a *responsibility* to address preventable infectious diseases? Discuss your answer to this question along with the theological reasons for your answer. Give some practical examples of how people can implement your answer.

## Glossary

**Asceticism:** Term used to describe “spiritual exercise”—a form of spiritual training (from the Greek word *askesis*) that is rooted in denying one’s self of worldly desires that hinder people from devoting themselves completely to God.

**Monasticism:** Christian monasticism refers to the movements that focus on the practice of the Christian life (either in solitude or community), involving rejection of worldly affairs (such as accumulation of wealth), spiritual exercises (such as asceticism), service to the poor, manual labor, and worship.

63. Powell, *Theology of Christian Spirituality*, 26–31.

64. Gunton, *Christian Faith*, 142.

**Pacifism:** Term used to describe the position of people who reject violent acts as a means to deter, contain, or solve any form of conflict or a threat to one's life.

**Sanctification:** Term used by some theologians to describe a life of holiness that is grounded in the Triune God's renewal of the life of sinners in which God makes them holy. Sanctification also involves Christians' constant repentance and crucifying of sinful desires.

## Review Questions

1. What does the term "Christian life" mean in Christian theology? Describe different ways Christians understand the Christian life.
2. How should Christians live out the Christian life in the world? Discuss different ways Christian theologians have answered this question.
3. What roles do the persons of the Trinity play in the formation of the Christian life? What is the church's responsibility in the formation and practice of the Christian life?

## Suggestions for Further Reading

- Fabella, Virginia, et al. *Asian Christian Spirituality: Reclaiming Traditions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.
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