

Faith Statementⁱ

by Derek Elkins

I believe in God, Creator and Source of all things seen and unseen.ⁱⁱ

Experience is primary for our knowledge of God, self and world.ⁱⁱⁱ

Because the capacities of humanity are finite, and persons habitually turn inward,
human wisdom and benevolence are limited, resulting in human fault.^{iiia}

To that end, human experience leads to the revelation of grace.^{iiib}

I believe in Jesus the Christ, Son and image of God.^{iv}

In Christ, God has given humanity a model for holy living.^{iva}

In Christ's death, God has given human life a meaningful end.^{ivb}

In Christ's resurrection, God has conquered fear.^{ivc}

I believe in the Holy Spirit, who unites the hearts of humanity with their Source and Creator.^v

As God's Creation, all people are within the fold of God.^{via}

The Christian scriptures are true documents, written by faithful people,
inspired by their experience of God, self and world.^{vib}

The Christian church is comprised of faithful people who honor God by following Christ.^{vic}

The ministry of the Christian church embodies its recognition of and commitment to
God's work in the world.^{vid}

The primary ministry of the Christian church is the embodiment of grace.^{vie}

i. Organization

My statement of faith is organized into five sections: *God, Experience, Christ, Holy Spirit* and *Church*. I begin with a section on God, Source and Creator, because I believe the other elements are contingent on the nature and existence of God. Therefore, once I have stated that God is and of what sort God is, I am prepared to make statements about those things contingent on God. I have placed the *Experience* section next because I recognize the fact the humanity understands God and God's relation to Creation through the lens of personal and social context. I present my beliefs about Jesus the Christ third because Christ is the primary revelation of God and the divine will and activity within the Christian faith. The work of the Holy Spirit is to unite the hearts of humanity with God, and therefore one of the central works of the Holy Spirit is to guide and empower the ministry of the Christian church. For this reason I spoke of the Holy Spirit immediately preceding the Christian church and after the *Christ* section because Christ is the primary object of the faith of the Christian church.

The organization of my statement, in at least one way, is reminiscent of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Like Calvin, I have intimately connected the knowledge of God with humanity's knowledge of self and world. Also similar to Calvin, I wish to say that one cannot have knowledge of self without an experience of God,¹ albeit a different kind, which I will discuss more fully in another section. Indeed, I have begun my statement by talking about God instead of human knowledge and experience because God is the Source of everything that is, and without God I would have no experience to speak of. By beginning with God, my statement follows a rich tradition of creeds typified by the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, which also begin with similar statements about God. Other confessions and catechisms begin with statements about Scripture, like the Westminster Confession and the Second Helvetic Confession. While helpful, doing so emphasizes the means by which God is revealed to humanity, and I wish to begin with a statement about God and then move towards the revelation of God.

Like both the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, I begin with a statement of belief in order to emphasize the personal nature of this statement. While others may share any one or part of these

¹ Calvin, 35-38.

beliefs, the statements made here are not meant to represent the beliefs of the whole Christian church, any single denomination or even one particular congregation. Further, I have begun the sections *God*, *Christ* and *Holy Spirit* with a statement of belief to emphasize the importance of faith in relation to the claims made about these three. Regardless of the statement, faith is required when commenting on the nature of God and God's activity in the world through Christ and the Holy Spirit.

ii. God

Humans employ a variety of names and images in an effort to understand God's relationship with Creation. The two images I find particularly helpful are *Creator* and *Source*. By calling God "Creator" I mean to say that God is the One with the ability to create something from nothing. Saint Thomas Aquinas said God is the only one with the power for *creatio ex nihilo*, "from nothing to being." Creation, endowed with many abilities, may produce thoughts and materials that reflect the Creator and are indeed splendid; however, Creation is not endowed with the ability to create something from nothing.

In regards to God as Source, I am moved by the fact that, in God, there is an endless bounty of goodness, power, beauty, truth, and still even more in which Creation participates. As put by Saint Thomas Aquinas, "Everything that is at all real is from God."² Saint Thomas informs us that our existence, indeed all things' existence, is a direct participation in God's power of being.³ Not only is God the very essence of our being, God is also the Perfection towards which all Creation strives. "Each and every creature stretches out to its completion, which is a resemblance of the divine fullness and excellence."⁴

Imaging God as Source has to do with God's continual sustaining work among Creation. I believe God has created the world to reflect infinite goodness and sustains Creation towards that end. James Gustafson says, "Life is sustained through ordering as well as through creative powers and

² Douglas F. Ottati, Union-PSCE Theology 101, Lecture 19, 10.26.05.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

capacities.”⁵ Not only is God sustaining that which is necessary for Creation’s survival, God enriches Creation with beauty, truth and meaning. In short, human life is sustained and enriched by an ordering of powers and forces that are beyond our control and not of our own creation. As a result, humanity is sustained by this ordering, the Source of which, I believe, is God.

iii. Experience

Human experience is a series of responses to “others” that enlightens human reflection and action. James Gustafson has presented a theology through the lens of human experience, for the sake of making God central in theology. I also wish to talk about human experience, not for the sake of making God relative, but acknowledging the fact that my understanding of God, self and world is limited and subject to the fact that I am a human being living under the influence of certain social, historical and genetic circumstances, among others. By acknowledging my own finitude and particularity, I hope to develop a right perspective and to respond to these “others” in a way that honors God, the ultimate “Other.”

iiia. Human Finitude & Fault

John Calvin says that one cannot have knowledge of self without knowledge of God. According to Calvin, God has endowed humanity with gifts and abilities, especially in the arts and sciences. Calvin says, “For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves... Then, by these benefits shed like dew from heaven upon us, we are led... to the spring itself.”⁶ Humanity’s ultimate dilemma is its inability to judge its own capacities correctly. Calvin says, “For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy—this pride is innate in all of us.”⁷ Calvin’s ultimate conclusion, then, is that humans cannot know themselves truly without knowing the superiority of God. I agree with Calvin that correct knowledge of self and world begins with a correct knowledge of God.

⁵ Gustafson, 239.

⁶ Calvin, 35-36.

⁷ Calvin, 37.

However, I do not wish to say, as Calvin does, that the *natural* inclination of humanity is to turn away from God and to intentionally regard itself as more capable than it is.

According to Gustafson, one's perspective is limited by one's circumstances, and because of this finitude humanity tends to regard itself and its relations with "others" wrongly. Augustine says that all things are "good" in that God is the source of all being and all things that exist participate in God. However, persons are at fault when we willfully move away from the Creator. Humans habitually make evil out of good things by substituting them for God. We perceive goodness in the world, but we pursue it wrongly when we seek goodness for ourselves, rather than the goodness God has ordained. In this way, persons turn inward and consider their own will before the will of God. Human fault, therefore, is misdirected will or behavior.

Advancing Calvin and Augustine, James Gustafson outlines four facets of the human fault: idolatry, wrongly ordered love, corrupt rationality and disobedience.⁸ In short, persons trust in objects that cannot sustain them adequately and finite persons wrongly determine the nature of reality and are consciously and unconsciously disobedient in their moral duties. Persons find themselves in an inescapable situation of finitude and fault. The human fault is a seemingly impossible barrier between persons and their Creator. Gustafson says that the facets of human fault prohibit persons from proper knowledge of the divine glory and limit proper piety. Incapable of correcting their own finitude and able to recognize some of the evidence of human fault, persons recognize a need for divine mercy and divine assistance.

iiib. Grace

One experience that is central to Gustafson's theology and helps rightly order human knowledge of God, self and world is humanity's radical dependence on the rest of Creation. As persons find themselves in relations of interdependence with the rest of Creation, persons ought to respond in a way that acknowledges and respects the rest of Creation, without assuming too central a position in Creation. This respect for the order of Creation is ultimately a display of gratitude for God's benefits. Evident in

⁸ Gustafson, 294-303

the divine benefits are both the mercy and assistance humans seek, so persons often refer to God's relations with the world as *grace*.

Grace is a multifaceted concept. First, grace is extended to Creation by God and is neither earned nor requested. Again to draw from Gustafson, that sense of being sustained and enriched that develops in a person when that one recognizes the vast dependence that one has on the rest of Creation is the recognition of grace. In sustaining and enriching Creation, God extends grace to us. Indeed, there are many moments when the events of history seem less than gracious, still a right relation to God reveals the fact that, in ordering and sustaining the world in such a way as to support human life, God has extended grace to every person even before the start of each one's life on Earth. Further, humanity is not the only element of Creation receiving grace.

Grace also involves a response by the one who is receiving that grace. Indeed, a correct response to grace ought to be the reordering of one's wrong relations to others into relations that regard the Creator and Source with honor and respect all of Creation with value and dignity. This process of redirecting one's will and behavior has commonly been called *sanctification*. However, classical theologians have wished to speak of *justification* before speaking of sanctification, and I will do the same.

Justification has long been thought of as the process by which persons are made acceptable before God. According to Calvin, justification is afforded to humanity by the cross of Christ. In Christ's atoning death, the sin and unrighteousness of humanity are hidden from God. Through faith, enacted in the heart by the Holy Spirit, God no longer sees human sin, but the righteousness of Christ. For Calvin, justification is purely the work of God. Before creation, God elected those who were to be justified, and enacts that justification through the production of faith in the hearts of the elect. God's justification is by no means merited, and is extended to the elect purely out of great mercy.⁹

Friedrich Schleiermacher also proposes a theory for the justification and conversion of humanity. However, Schleiermacher is quick to point out that his is a "mystical" justification that takes place both in unseen, eternal events and in this earthly history. Justification is effective in persons by the redemptive

⁹ Calvin, 725-727

“God-consciousness” of Christ, and God has elected all persons for justification.¹⁰ Much like Calvin, persons have the “seed of religion” within them, and that seed will become saving faith upon the activation of faith by the Holy Spirit at the time appointed by God.¹¹ At that time, persons will be brought into the church, the only place where salvation is truly effective, according to Schleiermacher.

I agree with various elements of both Calvin and Schleiermacher’s theories of justification. I agree with Calvin that justification is solely the work of a merciful God. With mercy and compassion greater than any earthly parent’s, God looks on humanity not with judgment or wrath, but with a desire for cooperation. Indeed, human fault makes right relations with God difficult, and at times, impossible, in much the same way that it deters human relations. However, I do not believe that God’s righteousness needs to be appeased in order for God to enter into relationship with humanity. In fact, we see that God is in relationship with all of Creation by the very nature of our existence. In this way, I agree with Schleiermacher that justification before God is offered to all of humanity, and indeed all of Creation.¹² This is also like Augustine, in that everything that *is* exists because of participation in the Source. Not only that, everything that exists is *good* because of participation in the ultimate Good.

Because of human finitude and the realization of human fault, persons become aware of their utter inferiority compared to the capacities and benevolence of God. Because of our experiences with other limited persons, we imagine that we are estranged from God because we fall short in our relations to God and Creation. However, God does not relate to the world in the way that creatures do, and we need not imagine that God requires human apology.

On the other hand, persons who do not acknowledge their own finitude and fault rarely perceive a need to better their will and behavior. There are persons who go through life blindly ignoring the evidence of their own finitude. However, these persons are few, and usually so entrenched in the tangles of human fault that they can scarcely shift their focus from the demands of their own isolation.

¹⁰ Schleiermacher, §100-101

¹¹ Schleiermacher, §117

¹² Schleiermacher, 427

I believe that God has ordered the universe in a way that sustains and enriches humanity, and also in a way that reveals human finitude and fault. Here, we refer, again, to James Gustafson. Because the world of creatures is so interdependent, persons most often recognize the limitedness of their own capacities. The further persons examine their need of others, the more fully the Creator is revealed. Further, when persons realize their dependence on the ordering enacted by the Creator, and their dependence on the participation in that order by others, they realize their own negligence in the divine order of Creation. Persons realize their tendency to selfishly satisfy their own desires with little regard for the widespread consequences of such behavior.

Schleiermacher says that persons first recognize the grace extended to them by God, and then recognize their own fault. In addition, he says that persons only receive justification in community.¹³ I agree. The more fully persons recognize their dependence on the Creator's order, the more persons recognize the Source of grace from which they draw. Further, the more fully persons recognize their need of others, and others' need of them, the more clearly they realize their negligence in the divine order of Creation. This recognition of divine grace leads to a realization of dependence and negligence and is how I conceive of justification. Again, persons are not *actually* made more acceptable to God upon this realization. However, justification opens the door to the correction of will and behavior that are appropriate responses to grace.

As noted before, sanctification is the redirection of one's will and behavior towards cooperation in the divine order. With these definitions, it is conceivable that a person could be justified and never sanctified. This one might become so mired in the dread of the realization of their own dependence and negligence that the one becomes paralyzed with fear and regret. However, this is a wrong response to the great mercy of God. Upon justification, one ought to be awe-struck, but never terror-struck. However, because of this potential roadblock, there is another grace extended in justification and sanctification. Namely, both are ongoing processes. Because justification is simply the realization of God's grace and human finitude and fault, we need not imagine that persons receive the whole of this realization all at

¹³ Schleiermacher, §108

once. Rather, persons continually realize the interdependence of Creation and their obligation to participate in the divine order. Sanctification, then, is also a process. As persons become aware of new levels of dependence and new opportunities for cooperation, they ought to act accordingly, thus continuing the process of sanctification.

Still, sanctification can seem a daunting task to the soul that aims to undertake it alone. In fact, persons were never intended to sanctify themselves. In the same way that the whole order of Creation reveals the infinite grace of God, so the whole order of Creation cooperates in the sanctification process. Persons simply need to open themselves to the possibility of partnership in the divine order. Through the interdependence of Creation, the Creator and Source continually reveals opportunities for persons to become more fully involved in the order of Creation. Still, persons, finite and faulty, often resist these opportunities to engage in cooperation with God's work in the world. For this reason, persons seek a mediator, or a guide, who can demonstrate the sort of "God-consciousness" necessary for justification and sanctification to become fully effective in persons.

iv. Christ

Because humanity realizes its own finitude and struggles to honor God and others rightly, humans tend to identify persons who exemplify right relations with God and others to serve as guides for the rest of humanity. For Christians, Jesus the Christ is the one whom we identify and imitate in our pursuit of right relations with God and Creation. While Jesus was certainly a historical figure with great significance in his own time and place, Christians recognize the transcending influence of Jesus' life and ministry across the bounds of time and space, and thereby consider Christ a living presence still among us.

I call Jesus the Christ partly as an acknowledgment of his own Jewish tradition and also as a way of honoring his ongoing guidance in my own life and the lives of Christians. For many centuries, Jewish people have awaited a messiah who would serve a variety of purposes for them as a people. The followers of Jesus, initially all Jewish, identified Jesus as the "Christ" or messiah and saw in Jesus the

image and leadership of God. To this day, the followers of Jesus acknowledge him as the Christ and believe that Jesus is the supreme revelation of God's will in and for Creation.

I identify Jesus the Christ as the Son and image of God. Firstly, Jesus is a Son of God. In this I mean to say that Jesus was fully human and, as one cooperating in the divine order of Creation, he drew from God the abundant benefits of grace. I also call Jesus Son of God, then, because he was male and related to God as a male. In this sense, a woman is a Daughter of God, and certainly there may be other categories with which we might describe the relationships of the rest of Creation to God.

Second, Jesus is the image of God. By this I acknowledge the transcendent nature of Christ's presence in the world. John Calvin says, "Knowledge of God shines forth in the fashioning of the universe and the continuing government of it."¹⁴ In the same way that Creation reflects the glory of God, the lasting memory of Jesus' life and ministry reveal the glory of God across time and space.

iva. Christ – a model for holy living.

In the gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, Christians find the model for living that will orient them towards right relations with God, self and world. Further, Christians are invited to respond to the spirit of Christ that calls persons to defend the oppressed, provide for the poor, accompany the lonely and challenge the oppressor. I begin my Christology with the earthly work of Jesus because I believe that God has extended salvation to humanity that is immediately effective in the struggles and perils of this life.

Walter Rauschenbush says, "To us who regard [Jesus the Christ] as the unique revelation of God, the unfolding of the divine life under human forms, he is the ultimate standard of moral and spiritual life, the perfect expression of the will of God for humanity..."¹⁵ So, then, Christians look to Christ as our mediator in the process of sanctification. The spirit of Christ and the legacy of his life as recorded in Scripture serve as perfect examples of cooperation in the divine order.

¹⁴ Calvin, 51.

¹⁵ Wogaman and Strong, 239.

Schleiermacher says that Jesus is sufficient as a guide for humanity because of his “God-consciousness.”¹⁶ For Schleiermacher, Christ’s attention and obedience to the divine will were so perfect that they “[were] a veritable existence of God in Him.”¹⁷ For Schleiermacher, Christ was surrounded by sin, and yet no sin existed within him. In this way, he was “one” with God. I do not imagine that Jesus of Nazareth was a sinless person. However, the spirit of Christ and the recorded history of his life reveal no error. For this reason, Christ, known through revelation and scripture, is now a perfect mediator for human persons as we seek to cooperate in the will and activity of God.

ivb. Christ – a meaningful end.

Certain events in history remind humanity of its capacity to go tragically wrong in its relation to God, self and world. Indeed, every person recalls events and decisions in their own life that were harmful and destructive. Just as the life of Christ demonstrates the great potential of humanity to live in right relations to others, the death of Jesus reminds humanity of its tremendous potential for destructive and horrific treatment of others. In Jesus’ death, humanity is reminded of the suffering of every innocent person and called to be reoriented in a way that will serve the purposes of God and the good of all Creation.¹⁸

I do not conceive of Christ’s death as atoning in the sense that Christ’s death has justified humanity before God. However, I do believe that Christ’s death is ultimately corrective and one of the strongest elements of the grace that reveals human fault. The memory of Christ’s death and commemoration of Christ’s death are essential means by which humans are brought to a justifying realization of human dependence and negligence. For this reason, the death of Christ cannot be discarded as an unnecessary element of the Christian faith. Rather, it should be mourned and memorialized regularly enough to prevent a similar fate for the suffering innocent still among us.

Jesus’ death also gives humanity a sense of hope about the physical death each one of us will encounter. In Christ, we can be confident of the fact that, even after our physical presence is gone,

¹⁶ Schleiermacher, §93-94

¹⁷ Schleiermacher 385.

¹⁸ Ottati, 77-78.

through participation in the eternal Creator and Source of all that is, the spirit of our lives will persist. Some struggle to hope for anything beyond the physical manifestation of life. However, in Christ, we see that, even for those closest to God, death is a natural part of the order on which Creation depends. To wish to extend life is instinctual, but to deny the persistence of personal presence beyond the physical life is to deny Christ and all those whose memory and presence guide us long after their bodies are gone.

ivc. Christ – conqueror of fear.

The resurrection of Christ is a sign to which all persons can look for the promise of life after death. By the power of Christ's presence in the world, long after the end of his physical life, humanity is gifted with the hope of eternal life. Regardless of the nature of existence beyond this life, humans can be confident of the fact that their presence will persist in Creation eternally. Through participation in the divine order, all Creation is eternally bound together. Gustafson speaks of the interrelatedness of Creation and we must not imagine that this connection is terminated at death. Indeed, the flowers of the field grow and blossom, then wither and die, but their presence is ever with us in the fertile soil and the flowers produced by their seed.¹⁹

Here, I follow Schleiermacher in saying that Christ's resurrection need not be a resuscitation of his physical body.²⁰ After his death, those who followed Jesus the Christ felt his enduring presence burn within them to such a degree that it was as though he were still physically present. Like those disciples, Christians can recognize the value and integrity of Jesus and his ministry without the notion of a physical resurrection. So, we look to the resurrection of Christ not as an event to be verified, but rather as a sign of the enduring presence of persons in the lives of others after their bodies are gone.

v. Holy Spirit

I do not suppose the Holy Spirit is a separate entity from the one God, though it might be helpful to think of the Holy Spirit in that way. I believe the Holy Spirit is Creation's experience of God's work in the world. I call the Holy Spirit that synergy experienced by Creation, which seems to unite the

¹⁹ Matthew 6:28-30.

²⁰ Schleiermacher, §99

parts of Creation into an integral whole and causes Creation to recognize the Source of Creation's order. As noted before, James Gustafson has observed the fact that, through a variety of experiences, humans find themselves interrelated with other persons, objects, systems and creatures. As a result of this interrelatedness, humans have a sense of dependence on that which is greater than any one person or even the whole of humanity.

As I have already said, Creation is so ordered to reveal the grace of God. However, grace is not simply empirical. The Holy Spirit is active in persons revealing the grace extended to them. In fact, the primary work of the Holy Spirit is to inspire gratitude in persons that will initiate and perpetuate the processes of justification and sanctification. John Calvin says, "Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts by the Holy Spirit."²¹ For Calvin too, the primary work of the Holy Spirit is to inspire gratitude towards God that results in faith.

The Holy Spirit is also active in the guidance of Christians. When I speak of the "spirit of Christ," I am speaking, in part, of the Holy Spirit. When persons look to Christ as a guide, it is the Holy Spirit that reveals the call of Christ in every place and time. When we read the testimony of Christ's life in the gospels, the Holy Spirit assists us as we discern the trajectory of Christ's ministry for our own context. I believe the Holy Spirit is active in the justification and sanctification of all persons. However, the Holy Spirit works through the various elements of religious tradition and persons are especially receptive to the work of the Holy Spirit when they are active in a meaningful faith community.

via. Fold of God

As those created by God and continually drawing from the Source all that sustains and enriches life, every person is a part of the fold of God. In some way, this is similar to John Calvin's belief that

²¹ Calvin, 551.

“God has sown a seed of religion in all [people].”²² Calvin believes that God has been revealed to all people through the beauty and governing of creation. James Gustafson speaks of the order of creation similarly to say that every creature has *some* experience of the “Other.” However, those who do not recognize the majesty and beauty of the divine order of Creation will forego life’s greatest revelation, the grace of God. These ones will most likely be lost to “the twilight of the gods”—all those pursuits that do not end in the praise and glorification of God.

vib. Christian Scriptures

Not all people recognize the Source of their existence and thereby relate to God wrongly. Still, many people from many faiths recognize their Creator and Source and strive to honor God and cooperate in the divine order. Such people wrote the Christian scriptures. Indeed, people of the Jewish faith wrote the majority of the Christian scriptures; even within that tradition a variety of beliefs are represented. Therefore, the Christian scriptures are rich documents, representing the experiences of many persons in a multitude of settings, all striving to relate to the one God rightly. Because of human finitude, the Christian scriptures must be interpreted and applied continually, so as to recognize the specificity of each author’s circumstances and in order to discern the richness of these documents in each time and place.

Here, I follow Schleiermacher in my belief that a “special” belief about the nature of the revelation of Scripture is not necessary for persons to find significant value in the message and lessons found therein. “But where the need of redemption is really felt, the faith that makes alive may spring even from a message about Christ which is in no way bound up with the conviction that the books of Scripture possess a special character, but may rest on any other sort of witness that is accompanied by real perception of Christ’s spiritual power.”²³ This is an important point because we need not imagine that a purely divine origin is necessary for Scripture to retain its authority.

Here, we distinguish between the *truth* contained in Scripture and the *verity* of the historical claims therein. Schleiermacher says of the scriptures, “they also contained much in detail that had been

²² Calvin, 47.

²³ Schleiermacher, 592.

misinterpreted, or inaccurately grasped, or set in a wrong light owing to confusions of memory.”²⁴ While the scriptural stories may contain information that is not scientifically or historically accurate, Scripture contains the true stories of God’s relation to the world, as experienced by faithful people. The stories and texts of Scripture are true and authoritative, then, in that they are the record of the ways faithful people interpret and relate to the world in light of their God-consciousness. The scriptures are a permanent guide and example for persons seeking an example of faithful relations to God and the world.

vic. Christian church

The Christian church is an institution comprised of persons who strive to relate to God and others rightly by following the example of Christ. Members of the Christian church experience the interrelatedness of Creation and acknowledge God as the Creator and Source of those systems that sustain and enrich human life. The Christian church is a diverse community, and because of the finitude of those diverse persons, the Christian church is a limited community, not exempt from critique by persons with differing circumstances.²⁵ In short, the Christian church is a finite institution that honors God by following Christ and is inspired to do so by the work of the Holy Spirit.

For these reasons, I draw no distinction between the visible and invisible qualities of the church as Schleiermacher does. I do not imagine that there exists a universal, invisible church that is somehow separate from the influence of the world and thereby infallible.²⁶ Just as the processes of justification and sanctification are ongoing in persons, they are ongoing in the Christian church. For this reason, persons within the church must discern the call of Christ in every time and place. So, the Christian church is a visible community of persons, influenced by and responding to a variety of circumstances in the world.

The Christian church is constantly caught between its paradoxical nature as a *community* of *individuals*. The Christian church exists only so long as there are persons in the world who are committed to the call of Christ in their own time and place. Some of these persons will choose not to associate with a local Christian community. Persons who follow Christ, but are not involved in a local Christian

²⁴ Schleiermacher, 593.

²⁵ Ottati, 69.

²⁶ Schleiermacher, §148

community are still a part of the Christian church universal. However, these persons are not held accountable to the beliefs and practices of the church, and often their sanctification is delayed because the Holy Spirit works so mightily through the elements of religious tradition. Further, there will be local communities of renegade Christians who obscure and damage the gospel message and reputation of the Christian church by acting in ways that do not embody the life sustaining and enriching grace of God. For this reason, the church is continually engaged in a ministry of discerning and pronouncing the call of Christ to Christians and the world for the sake of inviting persons into deeper cooperation in the divine order.

vid. Ministry of the Christian church

As a sign of our devotion to God and Christ, the church commits to consciously act in ways that will evidence our commitment to right relations with God and others. These actions take a variety of forms including benevolence, worship and study, among others. Baptism and Eucharist are the primary expressions of the Christian church's ministry of worship and serve as important symbols and signs of grace that is mediated to us continually through God's relation to the world. So, for example, grace is no more mediated through the Eucharist than it is any other meal. However, these expressions serve important purposes for memorializing the life of Christ and revealing the grace of God.

Baptism serves as the initiating rite into the Christian church and is a public sign of a person's acknowledgment of the grace of God and commitment to follow the example of Christ. Generally, it can be assumed that a person has already come to a justifying knowledge of God's grace before that one is baptized. For this reason, I believe that baptism is most appropriately performed on persons who have begun to comprehend the significance of the commitment entailed in baptism. Since all persons receive God's grace, and grace is not mediated more fully to baptized persons, baptism serves as a clear distinguishing mark between those who have committed their lives to following the example of Christ and those who have not.

Where baptism is the initiating rite of the Christian church and the individual's initial public sign of a commitment to follow Christ, the Eucharist is the ongoing rite that signifies a person's commitment

to follow Christ. The Eucharist is commonly served in the form of bread and wine, as Jesus served it at the Last Supper, but it need not be exclusively served this way. Since the purpose of the Eucharistic meal is to memorialize the life, death and resurrection of Christ, it is acceptable for Christian communities to use Eucharistic elements that best serve this function. Not only does the Eucharistic meal memorialize the life, death and resurrection of Christ, it anticipates the promised time when grace will be complete.

vi. Embodiment of Grace

The fundamental ministry of the Christian church is to embody and announce the grace extended to Creation by the Creator and Source. The church does this in a variety of ways. The rites of worship are among the church's primary expressions of grace. Through the rites of worship, the church honors God's very nature and activity in the world. In worship, the church acknowledges the struggles of human life and proclaims God's will for peace and justice. Christian worship takes its cue from the first account of creation in the book of Genesis where all the elements of Creation culminate in the final symphony of rest before God on the seventh day.

Not only does the church proclaim God's will for peace and justice, the church is called to be actively involved in processes to bring justice, peace and equality to every person. In this way, the church is called to embody grace in the midst of the political, economic and educational systems of society, among others. Since grace is those benefits that sustain and enrich life among all of Creation, the church is to discern the call of Christ in its own time and place regarding its role in these social systems.

The church embodies grace now because grace is not fully recognized in Creation. There are still those who partake of grace, but do not acknowledge God as the Creator and Source of those benefits. Further, there are persons and systems operating in the world to deny other persons and creatures full access to the grace extended them. These systems are intricate and deeply engrained in persons and society. They often seem insurmountable. However, God ultimately wills a time when every person will acknowledge the Source of the grace that sustains and enriches Creation. Further, God desires to see Creation reach a balance and cooperation in the divine order that will bring peace, justice and equity to the relations between creatures.

We cannot expect this perfect realization of grace in this life. Rather, the grace extended to us in this life foreshadows the complete grace of the next life. While we cannot expect complete grace in this life, in the next we look to a perfect balance of relations between all that is. In the next life, we await the perfect fruition of the will of God in all that is, and an open and glorious acknowledgement by all of the grace that springs from God to sustain and enrich.

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