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Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth on the Christian life: similarity and differences

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Abstract

Aquinas and Barth both describe the Christian life in light of who God is and how God acts, rather than with a primary concern for morality or apologetics. They differ in that Aquinas describes a single, essentially monastic, and normative form of discipleship that, because it cannot be taken up by most Christians, issues in practice in a two-tier conception of the Christian life. By contrast, Barth's account of vocation individualises the call to each Christian so that it is possible for everyone to lead the Christian life equally well yet in very diverse ways. For this reason, and because our true relation to God is hidden, even to ourselves, we may conclude that it is dangerous to make negative judgement as to anyone's standing before God – and therefore their relative standing in the church, too – based upon a view of the normative form of the Christian life.

Keywords: David Kelsey, discipleship, judging ordinary Christians, *hoi ochloi*, monasticism, vocation

Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth have, of course, rather different things to say about the Christian life. I will go on to discuss some of those differences, but to begin, I consider how the two men locate their reflections on the Christian life within their respective theologies, which they do in a formally very similar way. That is, they both develop their account of God and how God acts towards us, as this is known in Jesus Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit, through the witness of scripture and the life of the church. Only when this is in place do they discuss the Christian life.[1] For both, it is clear that this approach is necessary because it is only in terms of such an account that one can properly discuss what it means to be a Christian.

This might seem the obvious way to proceed. However, as David Kelsey argues in his theological anthropology, *Eccentric Existence*, there are at least

[1] For Barth this is obvious. It should be for Thomas, too, but if not see e.g. my *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2003).

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two not uncommon alternatives.[2] Kelsey contends that theological inquiry is usually cast as an answer to one or more of three questions, each of which is concerned with a different 'logic' (*EE*, pp. 80–119). The first question asks about the logic of Christian belief about God, as I just described Thomas and Barth doing. Here the theologian attempts to describe 'who God is and how our God relates to us', as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so as 'to create us, to draw us to eschatological consummation, and, when we have alienated ourselves from God, to reconcile' (*EE*, p. 5).[3] A second question is rather different, and concerns the logic of how we come to believe. Here theology has an apologetic agenda: to show the reasonableness, meaningfulness and attractiveness of Christian belief and practice. Finally, a third question asks about the logic of the life of faith, about what we are to do as Christians, and so addresses morality, practices and the shape of the common life of the church.

Perhaps we might think the theology of the Christian life would be most appropriately treated in terms of the third logic, since Christian living involves not merely beliefs but, of necessity, particular actions and our formation by our enactment of church practices. But while that is true, it remains the case that Thomas and Barth's approaches are the better way, at least initially. For, as Kelsey goes on to argue, while each of these approaches is legitimate in itself, trouble can and often does ensue when two or more logics are treated together such that one is conflated within the other (*EE*, p. 113). In modern theology, as Barth frequently reminds us, an apologetic logic is sometimes allowed to control the logic of Christian belief so that the latter is distorted. Theologians may develop accounts of who God is and how God relates to us with the intention of moving us from unbelief to belief, rather than of unpacking what Christians already believe and find attractive but seek to understand more deeply. When the logic of belief is overly determined by this second logic, it can become, as Barth puts it, 'an answering of the question of the Word of God in that of Scripture and the proclaiming Church according to the measure of the rational, moral, or religious self-understanding of [humanity]'. The result is that 'the Word of God in Scripture and Church proclamation is that which is adapted to, or at any rate does not conflict with, the needs and possibilities and limitations of this understanding' (*CD* IV/3.1 p. 32).

[2] David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2009), e.g. p. 27. Cited henceforth as *EE*.

[3] Barth calls these 'the three main assertions of dogmatics' in *Church Dogmatics* [*CD*], 13 vols., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), III/4, p. 24.

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With regard to theological reflection upon the Christian life, both the second and third questions have at times dominated and arguably distorted theologians' treatment of the logic of faith (to say nothing of similar distortions of the church's preaching). If an account of the Christian life is overdetermined by the logic of coming to believe, the happiness, meaning and fulfilment that can be found in following Jesus Christ may be described in a way that is not sufficiently informed by the logic of belief. As a result, essential aspects of discipleship, such as the willingness to bear hardship for Christ's sake and thus for others' sakes, too, may be inadequately treated.

Likewise, in many churches the third logic, that of living the faith, has arguably become at times rather too dominant over the logic of faith, particularly since Kant. We find a tendency to treat the Christian life primarily in moral terms, perhaps by a form of Ritschlianism or by a heavy-handed emphasis upon the need for unquestioning obedience to a set of objective moral truths defined by the *magisterium*. While, to repeat, moral action is indeed vital for the Christian life, and must be in view from the beginning and throughout any theological reflection, it needs to be structured by, and be materially dependent upon, the logic of belief.[4] Otherwise our understanding of the Christian life may be distorted by moralism, as the term is defined by Oliver O'Donovan:

> the holding of moral convictions unevangelically, so that they are no longer part of the Christian good news, and can, therefore, have the effect only of qualifying it, whether as *praeparatio evangelica*, as a 'ministry of condemnation' ... or as a rule which is supposed to govern an area of life which Christ has not touched or transformed.[5]

Thus defined, a moralistic account of the Christian life is one that is insufficiently determined – formally and materially – by the logic of Christian belief.

That said, however, a single-minded focus upon the logic of faith is also not without its dangers. That logic may so dominate the minds of systematic theologians that it distorts their understanding of various aspects Christianity, including the Christian life. They may construe Christianity as if it were little more than a collection of beliefs formulated solely by the analysis of texts, rather than arising within the ongoing and variegated concrete life of the church's response to Jesus Christ. Christian beliefs may then appear

[4] As Barth put it, dogmatics must have 'the problem of ethics in view from the very first and cannot legitimately lose sight of it' (*CD* III/4, p. 3).

[5] Oliver O Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 1986), p. 11.

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to have little or no bearing on how we are to live except, perhaps, as a theoretical structure that we must somehow put into practice as a secondary move.[6]

More broadly, we might say that no theological reflection on the first logic can be adequate if it is not informed by and responds to the particular pastoral context within which it is composed. It need not do this explicitly, and it certainly should not do it by means of some correlational construct that conflates the logic of faith within an apologetic agenda. But while neither Barth nor Thomas spend much time talking about their respective pastoral situations, it is clear that both have in mind and respond to the challenges and opportunities of their day. Both have a marked concern for the quality of the church's proclamation, and are well aware of the typical forms of its contemporary distortion.

With this common approach in mind, then, we turn to consider some of the differences between Aquinas and Barth's accounts of the Christian life. Although there are other important reasons for the differences between their respective accounts, their diverse pastoral contexts are by no means irrelevant. I want to suggest that, while Thomas' account of the Christian life remains of abiding importance, Barth's position later in the Christian tradition enabled him to address some elements that are arguably missing in Thomas' work, and which may be of particular pastoral significance today.

Thomas

Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* is carefully structured.[7] It begins with an account of God, and then considers God's action outwards, as it were, in creation, and what we are as creatures. The remainder of the *Summa* describes what is involved in bringing reconciled and elevated humanity back to the Father in the Son by the Holy Spirit. Creation, then, is the initial gift that brings about and sustains what is other than God, and is the essential basis for the completion of God's plan, which is our eschatological consummation – obviously far more than merely a return 'back' to where we were. Consummation is God's gift in addition to creation, not exacted by it in any way, but freely and lovingly given. Because of our sinfulness, we also need the grace of reconciliation (*ST* 1/2 114.2). Our way to God, then, requires these two gracious actions – 'reconciliation' and 'redemption' in

[6] See e.g. David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), p. 95, and his discussion of practices in *EE*, pp. 193–201.

[7] *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1948). Hereafter cited as *ST* part question.article.

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Barth's terms – which are effected through Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, in the church. This overarching movement 'back' to God constitutes the theological location of the Christian life.

For Thomas, it follows from this that the present life should be oriented towards the next life. There is for him no real point in talking theologically about the present life as such, but only as the way to the next, for (with Augustine) we are not settled here, we are *in via*, on our way as pilgrims. As he turns to consider our response to God at the beginning of the *Prima Secundae*, Thomas emphasizes this point in his discussion, in the first few questions, of our final end (the goal of our lives) and what constitutes true happiness. God is our true and only goal, for God is our only true and complete happiness. Happiness is something we all desire; indeed, all our actions are oriented in one way or another to happiness, even if at times we can seek only to avoid greater unhappiness. The happiness we can have on this earth is never true or complete, and this is not only because of our sinfulness. Rather, the happiness for which we are created and to which we are brought by grace is the only true happiness, for it is the beatific vision, the sight of the eternally wondrous God: infinite beauty.

Unless we remember this and act accordingly, Thomas argues, we will seek passing, second-rate happiness, something which, of course, most of us do. We might seek success or power or riches (*ST* 1/2 1.7; 1/2 2.1–6). For Thomas, such this-worldly delights are at best little more than a waste of time and, if allowed to shape our lives, they will seriously distort them. For to live now is, or should be, to prepare for our life in heaven, for 'God alone constitutes [humanity's] happiness' (*ST* 1/2 2.8).

Our preparation requires considerable effort. The effort is not, in the first place, a possibility we have of ourselves. Thomas argues that it is the New Law written on our hearts – the grace of the Holy Spirit – that enables us to do the good, as well as informs us what the good is.[8] All we do, including our making an effort, is a product of grace operating preveniently and as primary cause. Yet that said, it *does* require effort; we are to work hard at it,

[8] Thomas's remarks on the New Law, the law of the Gospel, occur just before he starts his virtue-based account of morality in the second section of the same part, which they are clearly meant to inform. He distinguishes between the primary and secondary aspects of the New Law. The latter consists of the precepts and instruction we receive from the church. But this is given to us only in order to help us accept and respond to the primary aspect, which is the grace of the Holy Spirit at work in the heart of each Christian, and 'shown forth by faith that works through love' (*ST* 1/2 108.1). 'Added on to our nature by a gift of grace', and as such different from the natural law, the law of the Gospel is 'inscribed on our hearts', 'not only indicating to us what we should do, but also helping us to accomplish it' (*ST* 1/2 106.1 ad 2).

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intentionally so. To be sure, once you have acquired a virtue, you are likely to be disposed to act appropriately in that area more readily. But Thomas is clear that virtuous habits are only a help and certainly cannot be relied on. He took very seriously Jesus' warning that 'most people's love will grow cold'.[9] There can be no easing up of our efforts.

Effort is required because the gift of grace includes the surprising gift of our being enabled to merit our salvation (*ST* 1/2 114.3). This does not, of course, mean that by our works we have an alternative route to heaven that bypasses Jesus Christ and what he did for us *extra nos* and *pro nobis*. Without the action of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit nothing in relation to God is possible for us, even if we had not sinned (*ST* 1/2 114.2). Nor does it mean that it is in our performance of an effortful action that we are united with God.[10] Rather, given our redemption in him, and the grace that is the New Law, it is possible to act in ways that merit eternal life, Thomas believes. He makes a distinction between two kinds of meriting. One is a consequence of our free will enabled by grace, which he calls congruent merit or, we might say, analogous merit, reflecting the fact that our actions considered as such are incommensurate with the actions that would be required properly to merit our salvation. But then, remarkably, he goes on to say that, because our actions proceed from the Holy Spirit working within us, they do (though on that account alone!) merit in a condign way, in a way that *is* commensurate in value, because it is truly God who works in our actions (*ST* 1/2 114.3). In reasoning thus, Thomas has our incarnate Lord as the paradigm.

For Thomas, meriting is a necessary aspect of the Christian life well lived. In this he arguably reflects his pastoral situation, It was largely axiomatic in the Middle Ages that *facienti quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam*: to those who do what they can, God does not deny grace.[11] This may sound semi-Pelagian, but it is not at all, not least because Thomas, unlike later Neo-Scholasticism, does not work with a concept of pure nature, since he does not seem to think nature ever existed apart from grace (e.g. *ST* 1/2 114.2 ad 1). So when we do *quod in se est*, that of which we are capable, that very capacity as well as its actualization are both a gift of grace. The point, then, is that, in doing what we can with the help of grace, we receive further grace to enable us to do yet more, so growth in the Christian life is a real possibility. And if that is so, then it is obviously incumbent upon us to try hard to grow. Grace is always

[9] Thomas Aquinas, *Super Evangelium S. Matthaei Lectura*, 24.12, no. 1920.

[10] Ibid., 5.2, no. 412.

[11] See Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 52.

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necessary and always available, but it is never cheap or easy. The Christian life is indeed necessarily effortful.

In describing the kind of response he believes to be necessary, Thomas notes that 'the perfection of the Christian life consists radically in charity' (*ST* 2/2 184.1). The way to seek the perfection of charity is to live in the *status perfectionis*, which does not mean to live perfectly, but rather to live in a manner that is consistently ordered to the *quest* for perfection, even if this is never attained. The 'state of perfection' is thus a matter of 'binding oneself in perpetuity and with a certain solemnity to those things that pertain to perfection' (*ST* 2/2 184.4), It is, in other words, the life of the religious orders, for which the three vows of celibacy, poverty and obedience are required. Being married, acquiring means of one's own and figuring out one's own path in life are presented as distractions from the attempt to prepare for and merit the next life; they are not consistent with the *status perfectionis* (*ST* 2/2 184.3). It can therefore be said only of 'the religious state' that it 'is a school or exercise for the attainment of perfection' (*ST* 2/2 186.2). Again, the life of Jesus Christ is the paradigm, here as everywhere in Thomas's account: Jesus was celibate, had no possessions of his own and was perfectly obedient to the Father.

To be sure, Thomas is perfectly well aware that not everyone is or can be a religious, and that we must always have people around who work to keep things going and must devote much of their time and themselves to the present life. Secular priests and, especially, their bishops, cannot live in monastic poverty, so the latter must dispense themselves and their priests as necessary. But Thomas is clear that it would be much better if bishops *could* live in poverty and obedience as well as celibacy, and still do their work, even though he knows they cannot (e.g. *ST* 2/2 185.8). He dispenses kings from the *status perfectionis* for similar reasons, and also because they must produce kings for the next generation. Ordinary lay people, about whom he says next to nothing, live in a way that is usually far from the *status perfectionis*; they are to live as best they can in obedience to king and priest.

So Thomas provides us with what is and, according to his understanding, what must be, a *single* description of the Christian life. It can be realized fully only by special groups within the church's elite. He does not offer a genuine alternative for the non-elites, nor even for elites other than those in religious orders. He does not suggest there may be certain principles governing the Christian life that can be applied by devout people in all walks of life, so that they, too, may strive towards perfection, as someone like St Francis de Sales was later to argue. All conceivable alternatives to the religious life are unfortunate though practically necessary modifications of the one way. Thomas's description is based firmly on the monastic tradition

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that, it would seem, finds its paradigmatic form in the Dominican order.[12] It requires Christians to focus on the happiness of the next life, and demands single-minded and unremitting efforts now if we are to merit it.

Barth

In some contrast to Thomas, Barth argues that our salvation is not something dependent upon how we live, nor even upon us being Christians. For Barth, the eschatological consummation has in reality already been achieved, *extra nos* and *pro nobis*, although it is not yet actualized. 'What is true in itself has yet to become true' (*CD* IV/3 p. 917), so we must live in cheerful hope. Our hope is not an optimistic expectation that our investment in moral effort will generate the yield we plan for. Rather, our hope *is* Christ Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

But this hope cannot be cause for any smugness. Barth has no time for those who trust that, just because they are Christians, they each have their own secure place in heaven. Such people have an attitude that 'smacks of the sanctioning and cultivation of an egocentricity which is only too human for all its sanctity, of a self-seeking which in the light of what is at stake renders every other form of self-seeking quite innocuous'. He takes Calvinists particularly to task for their assumption that what God does is always '*pro me, pro me*', all about me, rather than the salvation of the whole world. Why, he asks, should 'this indescribably magnificent private good fortune' be thought of as ours alone? (*CD* IV/3, p. 567).

That is not to suggest, on the other hand, that we can adopt the doctrine of apocatastasis, the belief that everyone will eventually be saved. Barth rejects this because it fails to respect the fact that 'in Jesus Christ we have to do with the living and personal and therefore free will of God in relation to the world and to every person' (*CD* II/2, p. 422). But at the same time, and in light of the same divine freedom that inhibits speculation about the mind of God, 'we cannot venture the opposite statement that there cannot and will not be this final opening up and enlargement of the circle of election and calling' (*CD* II/2, p. 418). It is Christ Jesus alone who saves, and he saves not only us Christians, but the whole world. Consummation in Christ is not contingent upon whether individual Christians are worthy or not, nor even whether they are baptised members of the church. Rather, the object of eschatological consummation is humanity, the world whom the Father sent the Son to save.

[12] See *ST* 2/2 188.6 for the superiority of the preaching orders over the contemplative, while *ST* 2/2 188.7 is a relatively long article that rejects poverty as the primary form of perfection and is probably directed towards the Franciscans.

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With regard to the present, it follows that we who know all this should have no anxiety. We have no need for 'constant questioning, worrying, complaining, accusing and protesting against God and the world, [being] constantly upset about something' (*CD* IV/3, p. 243). Because we cannot be our 'own reconciler' (*CD* IV/3, p. 244), we are 'free to let [ourselves] go', and not try to take ourselves into our 'own hands again' (*CD* IV/3, p. 247). We live the Christian life not in order to gain the eternal life that is our hope, but in order to give thanks for the fact that already 'the new creation has taken place in the resurrection of Jesus Christ' (*CD* IV/3, p. 300). What constitutes our present task as Christians is to acknowledge our redemption in faith, love and hope, by our efforts – possible only by grace, of course – to correspond in our own actions to what has been done for us.

But again, it 'is not [our] faith which justifies us, but the One in whom [we] may believe as our righteousness. [Likewise it is not our] Christian love which sanctifies [us] but the One whom [we] may love as [our] holiness' (*CD* IV/3 pp. 914–15).[13] Neither, presumably, does our good use of the sacraments, nor our acquiring a Christian character, justify and sanctify us. On the contrary, the agent of both our redemption *and* our reconciliation is not we ourselves; we respond to what God does for us, but our response is not a part of that action, it is a possibility contingent upon and subsequent to it, and as such is the gift, given to each one of us, of Christian freedom.

Thus unlike Thomas, Barth's account of our eschatological consummation is to a significant degree distinct from his account of the Christian life, notwithstanding their mutual and proper interdependence in his thought. Eschatological consummation is God's action to save the world by the Father sending the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is God's gift to humanity as a whole, though not without our individual freedom to refuse, and God's freedom to refuse us, however unlikely either may seem. Barth treats the present life, by contrast, in terms of each individual Christian's relation to our Lord.

Of central concern here is Barth's theology of vocation, by means of which he addresses our freedom in Christ. In his extensive discussion of the term 'vocation', he rejects its usual meaning as referring to the decision everyone must make about the particular line of work they will do, and he adds some mildly negative comments about its association with 'the rather feverish modern over-estimation of work ... particularly at the climax of the nineteenth century' (*CD* III/4, p. 599). In Barth's theological usage, vocation refers to the fact that each of us has our own 'unique opportunity' (*CD* III/4, p. 565) to respond in freedom to God's call. This applies to non-Christians,

[13] Here as occasionally elsewhere I replace gender-exclusive pronouns.

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too – to everyone in fact, for in the discussion of vocation in his ethics of creation, Barth remarks that 'God does not want anything and everything from [each particular person]; He always wants this and that' (*CD* III/4, p. 595). The call to become a Christian is, therefore, not a call to all Christians *as such* (*CD* IV/3, p. 483), but a particular call to each Christian as a unique individual.

Thus we can say that our vocation individualises our relation to God, as agents and therefore as persons. Barth argues that it is our vocations that constitute God's ongoing relation with us: 'in accordance with the particularity and uniqueness of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the vocation of [each person] is a particular and unique event in God's encounter with humanity which is as such a history'. That history is not, of course, anything like a process, as, for instance, in the Pietist sense of an *ordo salutis*, an ordered and set sequence of acts and stages of spiritual development within the individual. Rather, each history is unique (*CD* IV/3, p. 505).

Although our Christian vocation – our Christian life – is God's gift of our freedom, it can never be enacted independently of an active life in the church. Indeed, the church has the responsibility for 'the production and existence of definite personal examples of Christian life and action' (*CD* IV/3, p. 887). But again, these are *personal* examples. We are not called to choose one among relatively few ecclesiastically established vocations. Nor, once our vocation is chosen, can we then settle down within it, as it were, for the rest of our lives. Vocation is ongoing: 'the event of our calling can never be behind us in such a way that it is not also before us' (*CD* IV/3, p. 493). We must be prepared to hear God's particular call at any time.

For Barth, then, the Christian life is necessarily diverse because its particular form depends upon the prophetic action of Christ who calls and continues to call each one of us to the unique vocation that constitutes our particular relation to God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. One consequence of this is that Barth cannot, and does not try to, offer a normative, detailed and comprehensive description of the shape of the Christian life, because it is always too determined by the particularity of the divine summons. Whatever must be said about the forms of the Christian life – and Barth, to be sure, has much to say – he must leave sufficient room and flexibility for these particularities. A comprehensive moral theology that presumes a single form of life, such as that favoured by Aquinas and some later forms of traditional Catholicism, may distort the Christian life. So, too, may other attempts along formally similar lines, in which the Christian life is described in terms of acquiring something such as 'the' Christian consciousness or 'the' Christian character, or some other 'christianocentric' and established form (*CD* IV/3, p. 498).

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As Nigel Biggar points out, although Barth's account of the Christian life replaces a set of rules with personal vocation, this shift does not lead to voluntarism, since it becomes even more obligatory to follow one's vocation than to follow moral rules, primarily because God commands more directly in calling each one of us.[14] Barth's account favours flexibility, but not for its own sake, and not to make it easier for us to think of ourselves as good Christians when, for example, our particular line of work is perceived (whether rightly or wrongly) by some other Christians to be necessarily orienting us away from God. Rather, his account must permit a diversity of response because each Christian life is lived in direct relationship to God, a relationship that is initiated and sustained not by ourselves, nor finally by who we are or what we do, but by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

So we might say that all Christians are called to make and keep something rather like a vow of obedience, not to a prior or a bishop, of course, but to God's command, to our vocation. This is arguably the equivalent of Thomas's insistence that our fundamental and absolute duty is to heed the internal prompting of the Holy Spirit, which is the primary aspect of the New Law. Obedience to one's call does not at all deny the need and usefulness of church law – Barth is clearly with Calvin in that regard. So in following our vocations, we should attempt to follow the ecclesiastical law that Thomas calls the secondary aspect of the New Law.

In *CD* IV/2, Barth makes some interesting remarks about monasticism, which he treats in a rather positive way. He notes that the religious life has as its 'desire and aim ... to achieve in its own and distinctive way a form of that discipleship of the Lord which is not only commanded generally in the Gospels but partially at least, and by way of illustration, more specifically outlined' (*CD* IV/2, p. 18). Monastic life in community is an attempt at a 'perfect representation of the *communio sanctorum* set there as an example to the Church and the world' and Barth acknowledges that at least some monks have been largely successful in living their vocation this way (*CD* IV/2, p. 17). So he does not rule out monasticism as a possible way of living in response to God's call. However, and as we would expect, he goes on to note his concern that such efforts may occlude 'the truth that the sinner is justified only for Jesus Christ's sake, by faith and not by the works of any law, not even a law taken from the Gospels, not even the law of love' (*CD* IV/2, p. 18).[15]

[14] Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), p. 134, see also pp. 44–5.

[15] Barth cites what he believed to be the last line of Benedict's Rule: *Facientibus haec regna patebunt superna* ('the heavenly kingdom will be opened up to those who follow this rule'). The argument has since been made that it was a somewhat later addition and does not

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Thomas might parry this criticism by noting that concern about the danger of self-justification is appropriate with regard to *any* attempt to live what is thought to be the best form of the Christian life, including discipleship in response to what one believes is one's particular vocation. Spiritual pride, the assumption one has a special status before God, and other indications of self-justification are far from limited to the monastic world as, of course, Barth was well aware.

A more general problem here may be that, in describing any form of the good Christian life, we usually assume it must require a significant amount of effort. To be sure, when God calls us, we should indeed respond properly, promptly and eagerly, and our response will likely not be painless: both Thomas and Barth rightly reject cheap grace (*CD* IV/2, p. 369). However, in the course of developing a description of the good Christian life, a theologian may adopt unexamined criteria for gauging the right kind and level of effort. The criteria may be generalized from my own particular vocation or from my church's untested assumptions about different kinds of Christian life. We may then describe the Christian life in such a way that it is the kind of effort that *we* have made that counts more than other kinds.

Thomas had the monastic ideal and a high regard for scholastic learning, against which any efforts by the illiterate laity looked very feeble. Barth occasionally reveals a preference for the kind of effort that results in one becoming a theologically sophisticated member of the clergy and a leader within the church. He notes that in the church at any one time 'there will be only a more or less feeble vanguard of hearers [of the true words of the Lord] which is persecuted by a large majority of non-hearers, and an apparently not inconsiderable rearguard of those who never seem to hear aright in this respect' (*CD* IV/3, p. 132). So the true disciple cannot be content simply to live among the crowds that follow Jesus at a distance, nor be merely the sheep Peter tends. Because those amongst the 'graceless' crowds were not disciples, they did not belong within the community (*CD* IV/2, p. 185). Accordingly, he is no democrat regarding church order. With Thomas, he contends there is a distinct group who are called to lead, and then the rest who are to follow. Barth has no romantic ideas about the theological productions of ordinary people, remarking that the laity's 'emergence has always been, or has always quickly become, a powerful element in the secularization of preaching, teaching, order and mission which threatens the Church as Church in correspondence with the achievement of autonomy by the secular sphere'. In brief: 'the laity as such were never the better Christians' (*CD* IV/3, p. 34).

reflect Benedict's own view. Nor does the line does appear in contemporary versions of the Rule on the Benedictine website: http://www.osb.org/rb/index.html#Latin

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Fair enough, perhaps; or not, depending in part on one's assessment of the general run of professional clerical theologians compared with ordinary lay Christians. But not all that much may turn on such remarks anyway, since Barth makes further moves that undermine their significance. To begin with, he refuses to separate out and assess the theological status of the various kinds of memberships within the church, and certainly not in terms of lay person and cleric or theologian: 'There is no cleavage of the community into qualified and unqualified members.' The reason for this is that '[w]e are *all* qualified and *all* unqualified' (*CD* IV/3, p. 784, my emphasis). The only distinction that counts is the one that reflects, not *our* work, but the work God does through some of us but not through others. But that work is largely hidden from us. Nor can it be reduced or abstracted so as to distinguish between an ideal and a real church, or between a visible and invisible one (*CD* IV/3, p. 783).

Barth characterises the distinction within the church as one, not between the elect and reprobate, the saved and the lost, nor even the good and the bad, but between 'Christians and non-Christians' (*CD* IV/1, p. 328). This, to repeat, is not a distinction that has to do directly with our salvation, nor does it reflect a difference between those who have or do not have a Christian consciousness, or a character properly formed by the practices of the church (*CD* IV/1, p. 623). Rather, the distinction turns simply on whether one responds to one's vocation or not. And since only God knows who truly responds, it is not, after all, a distinction we can make in the concrete. Furthermore, Barth remarks that, although this is a distinction that divides the church, it is not a settled distinction. It is not the case that within the *corpus permixtum* there simply *are* tares and wheat that will eventually be judged and exposed for what they have always been. Rather, the distinction is event, so 'this division has to be made continually'. 'Each new day we must cease to be non-Christians and begin to be Christians' (*CD* IV/1, p. 328). Within the church, then, there is always this ongoing mix and movement, as it were, but it is hidden from our sight.

It follows from this that we cannot assess our fellow Christians (*CD* IV/1, p. 611). We might possibly make a judgement about someone's actions (though there may sometimes be danger in doing that, too). But whether or not we should, for Barth it would be a significant error to confuse that kind of judgement with one about a person's standing before God and true membership in the body of Christ. Whether we are in fact Christian or not is decided by God alone and is, to repeat, a decision that is hidden from us (*CD* IV/1, p. 697).

But if this is so, Barth concludes, then we can also say that there is no reason why we should not believe that God may 'think much better and

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make much more of all those who as baptized and professing Christians are visibly members of his community like ourselves than we can ever imagine in our general or particular mistrust of supposed fellow-Christians'. And this applies to ourselves, too: 'we can only believe ourselves and others [to be the church's] holy members' (*CD* IV/1, p. 698). We may reasonably hope that we 'not only hear His Word but also ... repeat or accompany it', albeit often 'softly or clumsily' (*CD* IV/3, p. 366). Although our softness and clumsiness cannot be praised or condoned, we should not draw unwarranted conclusions from what we judge to be their appearance in others and in ourselves, because God is merciful and patient and works within and in spite of such failure.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let us see if we might take Barth a step or two further towards a yet more particularistic understanding of vocation. To begin, we should note that for Roman Catholics and not a few others within the church it is axiomatic – as it was for Thomas – that anyone who is baptised is a Christian and remains a Christian, however sinful they may be. Some of us cannot quite follow Barth in dividing the church into Christians and non-Christians, even in the way he has the division go through each and every one of us as event and God's judgement. The name 'Christian' reflects a lasting sacramental action.

Yet Barth is clearly right that some such distinction within the Christian life can be helpful, and one may be necessary. So let us try find another one. Barth might accept the possibility that responding well to one's particular vocation does not necessarily mean *always* making an effort. Some people, most or even all of the time, may be called to be more or less passively Christian, rather than active disciples. To be able to say something like this is necessary in order to address the status before God of young children, confused adolescents, the senile, those whose faith is barely ticking over as a result of some trauma within the church, and those with certain kinds of disabilities, addictions and other troubles. Such people are not called to be disciples in any usual sense, but they certainly have a vocation: they must if they are persons who are Christian. Accordingly, we might go a bit further and suggest that Christians who live ordinary lives with merely ordinary worries and activities, and with little or nothing more in terms of effortful discipleship – such people may well be truly responding to God's individualizing call, too.

If so, we could say that Christians may be called to live somewhere between two extremes: from the visibly striving, self-denying disciple to the passive, unresponsive recipient of God's love. A necessarily rough-and-ready distinction could then be made between vocations to

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discipleship and vocations to being 'ordinary Christians'. As with Barth's distinction, the vocation is not a settled one. The ordinary Christian may be called, whether frequently or even just once, to effortful discipleship, while erstwhile active disciples may find they need a time of rest and comfort in the Lord. This suggestion does not address the distinction between those who in fact do or do not respond to their particular vocation. But that is a quite different matter, for it is not a distinction for us to make. The initial point here, rather, is that, by broadening the diversity of what their particular vocation may require of each Christian, we avoid the implication that Barth's view requires us to maintain there must be, formally at least, only a single kind of Christian life, one of effortful, striving discipleship.

This may perhaps already move us rather far from Barth. Yet his own reading of the role of the crowds (*hoi ochloi*) in the gospel narratives may not be incompatible with this suggestion. In spite of the crowds' general failure to see who Jesus is, Barth notes that there is a 'true and deep and strong union and solidarity of Jesus with this people, and of this people with Jesus' (*CD* IV/2, p. 187). Jesus cares for them deeply. They have their own role to play in the narrative, not only before Pilate, but also on Palm Sunday. According to Matthew, they listen to Jesus' teaching the disciples on the Mount, and they comment perceptively that he teaches with authority. They are not called to be his disciples, and they get things very wrong sometimes. But the twelve who were called by Jesus himself frequently got things wrong, too, and sometimes acted even more directly against him. The crowds' and the disciples' responses to Jesus in the gospels were not always that different.

In my view, the significance of this distinction between someone called at this time to discipleship and someone called at this time to be an ordinary Christian is that it enables the church clearly to affirm the full value of ordinary Christians' lives as such and before God. Neither ordinary Christians nor discipleship Christians choose their vocation. God decides; God loves us all equally, and God's love is the ultimate source of our value as persons. We cannot say the Holy Spirit is somehow limited to working with discipleship Christians and so they are of more value. Ordinary Christians, as such, may truly respond to their vocation, so their equal value, not only before God, but within the church, too, should be fully acknowledged in the practices of the church.

To draw this suggestion from Barth is not at all to condone, let alone encourage, a lack of effort-filled response if indeed we are called to live as a dedicated disciple, or called on occasion to be more disciple-like. The production of disciples as living witnesses to the truth that is Jesus Christ remains a vital part of the church's life and task. Nor do I mean to undermine in any way the need for ongoing confession of, and contrition for, our sins

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and sinfulness. Rather, I have tried to argue that, by ruling out assessments of the quality of another person's or group's way of living the Christian life, Barth prescribes for the church – all its members: leaders, theologians and ordinary members – a second form of Christian witness in addition to visible discipleship: the practice of mutual charity, mercy and humility before God and one another.[16]

[16] An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper to the Karl Barth Society of North American meeting at Princeton, NJ, in June 2013. I am very grateful for the numerous comments and suggestions made there.

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