

Christ Calls Us to the Future

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Acts 8:26–40, Psalm 66, 1 John 3:11-24, John 14:15-21

In the German film, *The Wall*, a woman goes to visit a cabin for the weekend but ends up being stuck behind some kind of invisible barrier that encloses the cabin, the surrounding farm, and the forest beyond. Suddenly she must adapt to a new life that is closed to any outside influence. It would seem that an invisible barrier separates us within a purely natural world and much of our contemporary life is cut off from grasping any reality beyond our five senses and our minds.

The French Canadian Philosopher, Charles Taylor suggests that we live within an immanent frame.¹ By this he means that we live in a world where the predominant framework that shapes our culture is one that denies any reality beyond the natural world. This is not something people specifically think about or choose. Rather, it shapes every aspect of our engagement with the culture.

In past ages, people lived within the families and communities that were immersed in a world and natural and supernatural powers. Angels, demons, fairies, elves, and all sorts of other beings were seen as having real influence in the lives of the people. People didn't think of themselves in dominantly individualistic ways, but rather as part of an extended community.

Now we are private individuals with a few intimate friends and family members, and we discount the influence of otherworldly powers in our lives. This naturalistic way of viewing the world is dominant within the sciences, the arts, the media, and even the church. Religion becomes an experience of our interior lives. People choose churches based on personal experiences or personal beliefs. Mysticism or mystical experience is a highly individualized experience. Even prayer focuses heavily upon mental processes.

This is not all bad, but it is reductionist. Everywhere we turn we are reinforced with the sense that there is nothing beyond this natural world and our own private experience of this world. This is some of what Taylor means by an immanent frame. Louis Dupre puts it this way, "Culture itself has become the real religion of our time, and it has absorbed all other religion as a subordinate part of itself. It even offers some of the emotional benefits of religion, without exacting the high price faith demands. We have all become atheists, not in the hostile, antireligious sense of an earlier age, but in the sense that God no longer matters absolutely in our closed world, if God matters at all."²

We regularly hear about youth who grow up in the church walking away from the faith. Or worse, popular Christian speakers and singers who turn away from the faith and become X-Christian apologists. Within a popular culture that is turned exclusively toward the individual, the rational, and the five senses, Christian faith can be seen as restricting personal development

¹ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular City*, Harvard University Press, December 20, 2007 (pp. 539-593). Also see, James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, Eerdmans, 2014 (p. 62).

² Louis Dupre, "Seeking Christian Interiority: An Interview with Louis Dupre," <<https://www.religion-online.org/article/seeking-christian-interiority-an-interview-with-louis-dupre/>>

and limiting personal choice. What if the Christianity our culture rejects, is a reductionist Christianity that we reject as well?

Joseph Ratzinger once wrote an essay responding to the accusation that Christian mission deformed or degraded the natural cultures that existed before the Gospel came. Ratzinger responds to this accusation by asking what if Christianity actually opens the culture and raises it to true potential?

There are all sorts of ways both religious and non-religious ideas can reduce us and make us less ourselves and even less human. In several of his letters, Paul is warning the young Christian communities to avoid falling back into the trap of spiritual competition, false asceticism that only serves to exalt the self over others, empty ritualism that substitutes human efforts for God's grace.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ does not reduce us but raises us up to fullness of life in communion with God and others. Christ calls us to the future. Just as parents call their children to the future. They are always modeling a way of life. Children learn everything from speaking to walking to table manners to what it means to be an adult from their parents.

Jesus called the Apostles to Himself. He also modeled a way of life: of speaking, serving, teaching, praying, and loving. He calls the disciples to grow up into this life but he also calls them to a glory beyond what they can grasp: a glory that breaks forth beyond the confines of this life.

Our Gospel reading today, opens with the following words:

¹⁵“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. (John 14:15–17).

To be clear, Jesus is not laying down a condition. If you do this, I'll do this. He is describing a life of faith. By the time Jesus makes this statement, He has already called them, discipled them, poured His life into them. He is soon to go away to the cross and after the resurrection, He will ascend to the Father. Jesus is telling them to continue living out the reality of this communion of love that you have shared with me. He tells them that the Spirit will come and the world around them won't understand. That's still true today.

The Holy Spirit will dwell with them, will tabernacle with them, will fill them in such a way that their little community will become a Temple made of living stones. The Holy Spirit will continue to make Jesus present to them.

Jesus assures them, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” (Jn 14:18). Here is one of the great promises of Christ that we would all do well to memorize. In spite of his physical absence, the disciples will not be left as orphans. In spite of living a world that shaped by an immanent frame, we are not alone. He will not leave us orphans.

The Holy Spirit penetrates this invisible barrier that reduces our life to the natural alone, and he opens us to a hope beyond this created world. He opens us to the Risen Lord who calls us forward into a new path. The disciples had one idea about what their obedience to Christ would look like and they discover an altogether different path that is filled with wonder and glory but is not triumphalist. They simply bear witness to what the Spirit helps them to remember about Christ and the grace of God works in and through them.

Their faith will take shapes and grow in living relationships. They will grow up in Christ by the Spirit in the difficulty and beauty of a living communion of fellow disciples.

Jesus is not simply calling them to a deepening of private devotional reflection that is confined to our minds. While this is part of the walk of faith, our contemporary secular culture tends to reduce faith to a completely privatized experience.

Jesus is not simply calling them to pass on information about Him. This living faith is not simply about mind, about emotion, about personal experience. It is about growing up into the fullness of love, about eating together, sharing life together, serving and caring for the needy in our communities. This faith in Christ will take shape in our bodies, in our words, and even in our deaths.

Isaac reminded us last week that the response of the disciples to Jesus' call did not start with attempts to change the structures of society, or trying to share life together. He said that we "tend to put the action ahead of the faith." It might be easy to read today's Gospel and put the action ahead of the faith. We might spend our days and nights debating atheists or agnostics that the natural world is not all there is. But actually we do not start there.

It begins with simply trusting the one who has taken hold of us. The Spirit opens our eyes and hearts to Jesus and we believe. We trust. We come to know his love. From this place of encountering His love, we follow His Spirit with our whole lives not just our minds. We follow with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength. We live out our faith in a worshipping community and in our families and in our schools and workplaces. Our faith becomes embodied in word and deed.

Then in verse 21, Jesus calls them to something beyond the confines of this life. He promises to manifest himself to them as they continue obey in the days ahead. He will reveal Himself as the Resurrected One but He will also reveal Himself by the Spirit and through the loving communion of Father, Son and Spirit. If we continue to read this final discourse, we come to the great prayer of John chapter 17, where Jesus opens up this idea of manifesting Himself to them.

Jesus prays that they will behold the loving glory that the Father has given Christ before the foundation of the world. This vision of God, this Beatific Vision of the love between the Father, Son and Spirit is focal point of the life of faith. As Paul says, we are walking from glory to glory. As we behold His glory, we are changed. Step by Step. Faith by Faith. Our world in opening up glory by glory into the heights and depths of God's love.

This longing to behold the beauty of the Lord, the glory of the Lord has shaped the practiced faith of God's community across the ages. We are called to a living community here and now even as we long to behold our Lord in the fullness of glory.

As we walk out into this world and into the lives of the people around us, we simultaneously keep our eyes and hearts upon Jesus. We serve the world around in and through Christ. We walk in Christ: rooted and built up in Him. We walk toward Christ, seeking things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of the Father. Even as we follow with our hearts and mind, we are living, walking, longing, hoping toward Christ who promises not to leave us as orphans but to raise us up with Him in glory where we will behold Him as He is and we will be changed into glory.