the center of Christian worship alongside the proclamation of the Word of God. There is no doubt much to protest and much to struggle against in the church and in society, in one’s own life and in the life of the body politic. As Calvin and other theologians of the Christian life have emphasized, cross-bearing is a signature of growth in grace. Nevertheless, in the midst of struggle and cross-bearing, we grow as we continue to give thanks. We show ourselves to be maturing Christians as our capacity for thanksgiving, praise, and joy goes hand in hand with our readiness for costly discipleship.

6. A final mark of growth in Christian life is maturing in hope. Christian life is a pilgrimage. It is life on the way to the fulfillment of God’s purposes for us and for the world. Christians seek “a homeland,” a “better country,” the “city” that God is preparing (Heb. 11:13-16). Mature hope does not give up on this world, for it is God’s world. Nor does mature hope rest on our ability to build the reign of God on earth, for only God can do that. Mature Christians hope, pray, and work for the coming of God’s reign and the doing of God’s will, but they also know how to wait on God.

Calvin offers a beautiful summary of the conviction that animates mature Christian life in its many aspects: “We are not our own; we are God’s.”

The Christian Life: Vocation

Christian life is life in movement toward a goal. God not only justifies and sanctifies human life in the power of the Spirit but also gives it a particular vocation and a great hope. When this aspect of God’s work of liberation and reconciliation is neglected, a certain narrowness and even narcissism creeps into the life of faith and the work of theology.

The themes of election and vocation are deeply embedded in the biblical witness. God calls Abraham, chooses the people of Israel, summons the prophets, sends Jesus of Nazareth, and commissions the followers of Jesus for service in the world. Indeed, Scripture speaks of the election of the people of God in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). But in spite of the pervasive presence of the themes of election and vocation in the Bible, they are virtually forgotten or unintelligible doctrines for many Christians today.

God freely elects creatures to be partners in the mending of creation. Election is a call not to privilege, but to service. Israel is chosen by God to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:2-3). The servant of God is to be a light to the nations (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). Jesus Christ is the chosen Son of God, who obediently does the work of God and calls others to take part in this work (John 4:54; 15:16). Human beings are called to be co-workers with God in the mission of liberation and reconciliation. They receive new dignity and purpose when they are given this task. Every gift of the Spirit of God includes a responsibility. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it, the grace of God is freely given, but it is not cheap. We have been called and commissioned to costly service.

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The vocation of a Christian is not to be confused with having a job by which one earns one’s livelihood. Whatever one’s job or profession, Christians have a calling. They are called to be partners in God’s mission in the world. Christian life involves inward growth and renewal, but it does not turn in on itself as does so much contemporary literature on the importance of self. Christian life is in movement outward to others and forward to the future of the completion of God’s redemptive activity. The Christian calling or vocation is the ministry of liberative reconciliation, the call to invite all into a new community where justice is cherished and where freedom and love flourish, a community that is grounded in Christ, empowered by the Spirit, and destined for participation in the eternal communion of the triune God. Universal participation in the love of the triune God made known in Christ and effectively at work in the activity of the Holy Spirit is the goal of Christian mission.

Christians live by the promise of God and thus in creative hope. There is work to be done, a message to be proclaimed, forgiveness to be offered and practiced, service to be rendered, hostility to be overcome, injustice to be rectified. Guided by the Word and Spirit of God, Christians take up these tasks in confidence and hope in the final fulfillment of God’s promise of a new humanity in a new heaven and a new earth. Christian life is more than acceptance of the forgiveness of sins and more than personal transformation, even if it can never be without these. Christian life is also the vocation to participate in the preparation of all creation for the coming reign of God marked by God’s justice, freedom, and peace. It is the highest of callings and is empowered by “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:13).

For Further Reading