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Travel Guide for Home – Aspects of Living the Protestant Spirituality in Everyday Life

Abstract.

This study reflects on changing everyday habits from a protestant theological perspective. Our faith grows not only in celebration or on Sunday, but also in everyday actions and habits from Monday through Saturday. The study deals with questions such as: Despite our good intentions, why is it so hard to achieve long-term changes in our lives? In what ways should we change in relation to our bad habits? How can God's justification and sanctification play a role in our spiritual development?

Keywords: spirituality, habits, protestant theology

*“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”
(Proverbs 4,23)*

“We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life”²

The search for the soul is and was an ongoing attempt throughout the history of our Christian faith. To lift up our soul through music and singing are as important channels to reach God, as through prayer and other rites of life. In

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² MERTON, Thomas: *Contemplative Prayer*. Doubleday, New York, 1969. 37.

this article we take a close look at everyday action, weather during our common days we could find harmony with God as we do in Sunday service with organ music and on other special days of our lives.

1. Introduction

“Everyone wants a revolution. No one wants to do the dishes.”³ This sentence is also true in spiritual life. Sometimes we would love to experience revolution in our own life or in other people’s lives. But what happens in everyday life? What if some changes come through daily practice in our ordinary days?

In our congregations we often take action for change and help each other in the community for our pious routines: we fast for 40 days together, we read a devotional book together for two months, we pray together for 90 days, or read the Bible in three years. In my experience, the revolutionary actions may work in the short- or mid-term, but after a few weeks it could happen that we cannot live up to our hopes and dreams and disappointment remains instead.

K. James Smith writes that we may look for God’s work more frequently in the extraordinary than in the ordinary.⁴ God promised His presence every day, so in ordinary days as well. What does that mean in our faith practices from Monday through Saturday?

In this study I try to make an attempt to investigate how we can produce habits from a protestant theological understanding. The study deals with questions such as: Despite our good intentions, why is it so hard to achieve long-term changes in our lives? In what ways should we change in relation to our bad habits? How can God’s justification and sanctification play a role in our spiritual development?

³ WARREN, Tish Harrison: *Liturgy of the Ordinary*. IVP Books, Downers Grove, 2016. 35.

⁴ SMITH, James K. A.: *You Are What You Love – The Spiritual Power of Habit*. Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2016. 67.

2. “Open his eyes, so that he may see!”

In the Second Book of Kings, we can read a story about the Syrian king’s revenge against Elisha, because the prophet warned the Israeli king about where the enemy was expected and so the Syrian attack on the country failed. As revenge, the Syrian army surrounded the city of Dothan so that they could catch the prophet there. Elisha’s servant became anxious when he saw the army, but Elisha prayed that the servant would see God’s reality: “When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” the servant asked. “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” (2 Kings 6:15-17)

This story shows the motif, what we call in Christian tradition “seeing in faith.” In everyday reality, God appears as the One who holds the events in His hands. Although the sky is not always open, as in the above story, the believer has a definite “knowledge” that the events of earthly life have a spiritual dimension that can be interpreted from the point of view of a God-man relationship.

In the New Testament we meet many times with the aspect of faith that Paul summarizes: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). In faith, besides the aspect of repentance, there is an important element of the “change of mind.” With conversion, a process of sanctification begins along with a new chain of thoughts and deeds develop in the life of the believer. For those who went through conversion in a dramatic way, old habits are overwritten by those rooted in Christian faith.⁵ However, even in the case of sudden conversions, the personal formation

⁵ MCGRATH, Alister E.: *Mere Discipleship – Growing in Wisdom and Hope*. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2018. 36.

of the Christian “world and life” is a process. It takes time to form a real life concept and a real life practice from the recognition of God’s reality in our lives. For others, who become a Christian through a longer process, it is also a crucial element of faith that they understand and interpret their life experiences through the lens of their relationship with Christ.

Augustine also emphasizes the importance of developing a hermeneutical skill for a Christian understanding of life: “Our whole business in this life is to heal the eye of the heart in order that God may be seen. It is for this reason that the holy mysteries are celebrated and the word of God is preached, and it is towards this goal that the moral exhortations of the church are directed.”⁶ Charles Gerkin likewise sees the importance of transformed understanding: “The central purpose of ministry practice is best fulfilled in assisting individuals, families, and communities in the transformation of life by means of the transformation and interpretation of their core stories. Such transformations, if they are to be seen as taking place within the ongoing Christian community and its tradition, should rightly be grounded in dialogical interaction with the primary images and themes of the biblical and Christian story of the Creator God and God’s human family, the people of God.”⁷

God is not present in our lives only in single events, but in the way we interpret these events and in the way we understand the world. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is not only in that they give different explanations for the same phenomena, but that there is a difference in the perceiving itself. Along with many other things, the Christian world view is a system of clues and norms that influence our later experiences. I interpret the events of my life from the point of view of my faith. The hermeneutical role of religion lies in the particular processing of experiences, and it helps us to interpret our

⁶ ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO: *Sermons On Selected Lessons of The New Testament*, Jazzybee Verlag, North Charleston, 2017. Sermon 88, 156.

⁷ GERKIN, Charles V.: *Prophetic Pastoral Practice - A Christian Vision of Life Together*. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1991. 59.

lives from a special point of view which considers God as an existing reality with whom we can converse and who influences not individual life only, but the wider community or the whole world. From a hermeneutical point of view, two things happen simultaneously. Partly, I rewrite my life from a new perspective, in relation with God, and partly my life becomes involved in the common story of God and man. I interpret or reinterpret the events of my life as a sinful but redeemed child of God. Religion thus transcends life by interpreting it from its end, and by integrating it into a community.⁸

From the Christian point of view the center of history is the earthly life of Jesus Christ, of which the main characteristic is that it is completed by our own stories, for Jesus remained with his disciples even after the ascension, as he promised: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Practically everything that happens before that in the Christian meta-story prepares for this event, and everything that happens after “does not add anything to the history of salvation,” but it is the time of the work of the Holy Spirit and of waiting for Christ’s return. What it means to be a Christian is most evident in Jesus’ stories. We have to follow Him with the help of his Spirit.⁹ Remembrance and collective memory do not only reconstruct an old story, but they organize the experiences of the present and the future: “Our task is to go on writing the story of Jesus by adding our own stories, by seeing and living our small stories, stumbling imitation Christi in the light of the story of Jesus and God.”¹⁰ That means that the story of the individual is a continuous part of the

⁸ ASSMANN, Jan: *A kulturális emlékezet - Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban*. Atlantisz, Budapest, 1999. 131.; NASSEHI, A.: *Religion und Biographie - Zum Bezugsproblem religiöser Kommunikation in der Moderne*. In: WOHLRAB-SAHR, M. (Hg.): *Biographie und Religion - Zwischen Ritual und Selbstsuche*. Campus, Frankfurt am Main, 1995. 103-127. 104.

⁹ KLEIN, Stefanie: *Theologie und empirische Biographieforschung - Methodische Zugänge zur Lebens- und Glaubensgeschichte und ihre Bedeutung für eine erfahrungsbezogene Theologie*. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1994. 20.

¹⁰ ARENS, E.: *Wer kann die großen Taten des Herrn erzählen? - Erzählstruktur christlichen Glaubens*. In: systematischer Perspektive, in ZERFAß, R. (Hg.): *Erzählter Glaube - Erzählende Kirche*. Herder, Freiburg, 1988. 13-27, 22.

common story of God and man. On the other hand, every individual life is embedded into the collective human story. Every Christian life story amplifies the collective narrative of Christianity. Every single believer is a “carrier of meaning.” “In every interpretation of life, tradition leaves its imprints; thus, with every single life story even the elements of the traditions are written further, and tradition lives on.”¹¹ The center of this collective narrative is God, who is present in every moment of life, who is with us but can see our lives from above. The main characteristic of this Christian world view is to see the world as the stage of God’s judgment and work. This knowledge we obtain about life orients our actions.

The first step in faith is trust, then comes the change of thoughts, seeing God’s presence in our everyday lives. As a consequence of trust and the new way of seeing life, there comes a further step, which is converting our thought into action.

3. Bridging the gap between knowledge and action?

As a Christian, gaining a new approach to life should also mean the development of new habits.

Many attempts have been made to help bridge the gap between thought and action through church history. At certain times Christians created fraternal community in order to help lead life according to Christian principles: “From the first centuries of the Church, men and women have felt called to imitate the Incarnate Word who took on the condition of a servant. Eastern monasticism gives pride of place to conversion, self-renunciation and compunction of heart, the quest for *hesychia* or interior peace, ceaseless prayer, fasting and vigils, spiritual combat and silence, Paschal joy in the presence of the Lord and the expectation of his definitive coming, and the oblation of self and personal possessions,

¹¹ DRECHSEL, Wolfgang: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten: Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher/Chr. Kaiser, 2002, 41.

lived in the holy communion of the monastery or in the solitude of the hermitage. The West too from the first centuries of the Church has practiced the monastic life and has experienced a great variety of expressions of it, both coenobitic and eremitical.”¹²

The Reformation was polemic to the monastic way of life and drew attention to the fact that ordinary people and also, in secular professions can live with God and we do not need external boundaries and rules. As Calvin states: God has made us lords of all things and has so subjected them to us that we may use them all for our own benefit. Consequently, if we yield ourselves in bondage to external things (which ought to be of help to us), there is no reason we should expect it to be a service acceptable to God. I say this because some try to win praise for humility through ensnaring themselves in many observances, from which God has with good reason willed us to be free and exempt.¹³

Although the Churches of the Reformation have also developed pious habits over the centuries, Protestants have retained suspicions about any set of rules or prescribed habits of Christian practices: “Protestants do not usually go for the habitual when it comes to spirituality. For some reason we grow up with the bias that spiritual practice is “real” only if it is spontaneous. Habits (whether garments worn or behaviors cultivated) and read prayers often strike us as a fake spirituality... It is strange that we take the advice of our dentist and floss regularly to maintain healthy gums or follow doctor’s orders to exercise on schedule to enhance our physical well-being, while often spurn the counsel of spiritual physicians and trainers to develop habits that will maintain and enhance our spiritual life. It’s not a bad thing to wake up every morning reciting the Psalmist’s words “Open my lips, O Lord” as if it was a second nature, any more than it is a bad thing to go through a morning ritual of showering, shaving, and brushing teeth.”¹⁴

¹² II. John Paul: *Vita Consecrata*. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html

¹³ CALVIN, John: *Institutes of Christian Religion, Volume 2*, MCNEILL, John T. (ed.) Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2006. 4.13.10, 1264. cf.: OKHOLM, Dennis: *Monk Habits for Everyday People – Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants*. Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2007. 122.

¹⁴ OKHOLM: *Monk Habits for Everyday People*. 21-22.

We also need to learn the right way of life and it takes effort to take the religious rituals and everyday habits of the Christian community into our practice of faith, as Rowan Williams puts it: “the particularities of experience are brought slowly into interconnection with the communally-confessed truth of God’s nature and activity.”¹⁵

Seeing life in a different Christian way, does not only mean having thoughts, but also the acceptance of God who affects the whole personality.

The question is how understanding (vision) and insight (personal interpretation) will be practiced in our daily life? In festive moments, worship, and receiving the sacraments, we experience the drama of repentance and forgiveness of sin. But can it be that, in a cycle-like manner, we come again and again to receive God’s grace, without visible change of our sins, our bad habits, our old innervations in our everyday practices?¹⁶

It takes three steps, as to how one can grow spiritual discipline in his/her life:

1. The first is that we accept God’s revelation as true and relevant to our lives.
2. Second, to find the link between our life and God’s revelation.
3. The third is that we act / live in the light of that revealed understanding.

The difficulty of regarding the third point is that in everyday life we find ourselves not in a special space (e.g.: church sanctuary) and time (holiday), but we live in an ordinary environment where we should be connected to the surrounding people, but we should live up to other norms than they do.¹⁷

Living in the world, but not of the world (John 15:19) is a common call to all Christians both on an individual and a community level. Being at the same time “in the world” and “in Christ” is not always tension-free. Not only in

¹⁵ WILLIAMS, Rowan: *Teaching the Truth*. In: JEFFREY John (ed.): *Living Tradition - Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church*, Longman & Todd, London, 1991. 41.

¹⁶ BORG, Marcus J.: *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time – The Historical Jesus & The Heart of Contemporary Faith*, New York, Harper, 1994. 130.

¹⁷ MCGRATH: *Mere Discipleship*. 42.

communication with the outer world, but within ourselves. Christian principles should be put into practice also at an emotional level and also at the less conscious levels of our personality.

We can also read about this tension in the Scriptures. As Matthew says: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41), or what Paul writes about: “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Romans 7:14-15).

Sin is originally part of our human nature and it is also human how we fight against it, as Foster puts it: “frontal attack.”¹⁸ We are fighting with our total willpower against sins and bad habits, but when we do not manage to overcome them, then at first we are desperate, and if we get used to failure, we might still have a sense of shame. Could we not get used to the proclaimed grace and is it not too easy to get back into the old path of our lives? As Protestants, we do not believe that there would be a “heavenly ladder” that we could climb upwards day by day through sanctification. However should not the disciple change through living in a personal relationship with Christ, even if we stay beginners in the faith in many ways?

4. Some rules of overwriting habits

When we deal with the topic of everyday life and personal piety, the question may be raised as to whether it is appropriate to compare our spiritual life with the results of social science and neurobiological research. As we Protestants see it, we get guidance through the Scriptures, so why should we care about natural science? There is no unequivocal answer to these questions.

¹⁸ FOSTER, Richard J.: *Celebration of Disciple – The Path to Spiritual Growth*. Special Anniversary Edition, HarperOne, San Francisco, 2018. 4.

On the one hand, the vocabulary and language that Christian theological and spiritual literature has created and used in the past two thousand years may be sufficient for us. As the Scriptures and the followers of Christ before us can enrich us with many aspects to interpret the events and hopes of our lives.

On the other hand, Jesus did not want to take his disciples out of the world and the new discoveries, – or old discoveries in a new framework – are present in the worldview of today's person, and social science shapes our own understanding of ourselves and the world around us.¹⁹ Therefore we can get aspects of reflection from the most recent research findings, even on habits.

Most of our habits are the result of a minor decision, which we then repeat.

For example, if someone visits a library on a regular basis and finds a place on the first day where one spend a pleasant and useful time, then she will have a positive memory of this place. At the next visit she will not spend time deliberately finding the best place, but rather looking for the place where she once felt good. If she regularly goes to that library and there is no disturbing circumstance, then a process starts all over again. She develops a habit of sitting at a certain place in the library. The decision that was conscious for the first time, becomes “automatic” in the long run. There are a number of habits in our daily lives that we may not be aware of such as brushing our teeth, coffee making, driving a car, etc. Many daily routines could become subconscious. Our system of habits not only affects the level of our everyday action, but also affects deeper layers of our personality and plays a fundamental role in how we live our day-to-day lives.²⁰

Charles Duhigg in his book “The Power of Habit” makes a number of statements that we may possibly consider in terms of the Christian spiritual life:

- For real change, we need to take our habits seriously and examine them. Duhigg claims that about 40% of our daily activities are guided by our habits.²¹

¹⁹ FOSTER: *Celebration of Disciple*. 3.

²⁰ DAMASIO, Antonio R.: *Descartes' Error – Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Avon Books, New York, 1994. 252.

²¹ DUHIGG, Charles: *The Power of Habit – Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. Random House, New York, 2014.

- These habits are not conscious. Our nervous system wants to save energy and requires less mental effort to perform automatic routines: “When a habit emerges, the brain stops fully participating in decision making. It stops working so hard, or diverts focus on other tasks. So unless you deliberately fight a habit – unless you find new routines – the pattern will unfold automatically.”²²
- According to the basic scenario of habits, there is a sign that triggers the operation of the routine and this process is associated with a reward. The trigger signal and the action-closing reward will result the next time when the signal reappears, the automatic action will start all over again.²³
- Habits are fragile, so if there were any change in the circumstances, the automatic process would not function.
- Most habits are not simply replaceable, but can be overridden by new habits.²⁴ In order to develop new habits, we need to understand our inner motivations, which our habits were born in response to. We can generate new habits in between the cycle of the trigger of our old habit and the original reward. (e.g.: exchanging chips for fruit)
- We have key habits. If we changed at least one of our key habits, it could affect our entire personality and other habits as well.
- Faith plays a crucial role in change: “Belief itself that made a difference. Once people learned how to believe in something, that skill started spilling over to other parts of their lives, until they started believing they could change. Belief was the ingredient that made a reworked habit loop into a permanent behavior.”²⁵
- Small step changes and small “victories” can lead to the transformation of the entire system.
- Willpower is a skill that can be developed.

²² DUHIGG: *The Power of Habit*. 20.

²³ DUHIGG: *The Power of Habit*. 19.

²⁴ DUHIGG: *The Power of Habit*. 62.

²⁵ DUHIGG: *The Power of Habit*. 85.

- We need a community of support for change: “Change occurs among other people... It seems real when we can see it in other peoples’ eyes.”²⁶
- It’s easier to get on the road to change if the new habit is similar to what we have known and loved.²⁷

In his book, Duhigg – along with many everyday examples – also presents Rick Warren’s church-development model. The Saddleback Church builds on a new way of habitualizing Christian customs. The leader of the congregation, Rick Warren, has developed a series of training materials for the various groups and home groups of the congregation, aimed for developing new habits for the participants.²⁸ – With great success. – Warren writes about this approach in one of his training materials: “Sometimes God will work on one area of your life for several weeks or even months. It takes time to change ingrained character traits, habits, and attitudes. New habits and ways of thinking are not set in one day.”²⁹

Regarding the methods, however it is important to keep in mind the inner motivations behind the deeds. Otherwise, it would be only cheap pragmatism, to pay attention to the development of habits, just because they work effectively. I agree with K. James Smith’s warning that we should avoid the “Jesufied liturgies.”³⁰ In the church, we should be careful about adopting on business sales and marketing techniques without any reflection. Paul’s guideline may be true in this case as well: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

On the surface, it may appear similar to develop a spiritual life practice to develop a new eating habit or sports routine, but the approach must be quite different. Since the order of cause and effect is the opposite in the spiritual life.

²⁶ DUHIGG: *The Power of Habit*. 88.

²⁷ DUHIGG: *The Power of Habit*. 211.

²⁸ DUHIGG: *The Power of Habit*. 238.

²⁹ WARREN, Rick: *Rick Warren’s Bible Study Methods - Twelve Ways You Can Unlock God’s Word*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2006. 37. see also: WARREN, Rick: *The Purpose of Christmas*, Howard Books, New York, 2008. 56.

³⁰ SMITH: *You Are What You Love*. 79.

In faith matters we should not “put the chariot in front of the horse.”³¹ I will not have a relationship with God because I am looking for God, but God has already sought me and transformed me. Living in the loving presence of God, I need to realize this relationship and open myself to the change that has already happened.

Tom Schwanda casts light upon a very important theological difference between what we do in order to achieve God and what we perceive to be more and more in God’s presence: “Sometimes people make statements such as “God really showed up in worship today.” Or, when God appears to be absent, “If we pray harder, maybe the Holy Spirit will show up.” I think I know what they mean, but I am concerned that this communicates an unhealthy theology. This language fails to grasp the central truth of God’s omnipresence. It more resembles Elijah’s experience on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal. After their initial failed efforts, including shouting to Baal, “Elijah began to taunt them. ‘Shout louder!’ he said. ‘Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened’ (1 Kings 18:27). This unbiblical view is too common among many believers today. God’s presence is not something we create by our efforts. It is always God’s gift to us totally independent of what we do. For, in reality, God is already present; it is we who need to be awakened to God’s presence. The biblical truth and resulting comfort that we must remember is that God is always with us.”³²

5. God’s call and human response

According to Calvin, believers receive “double grace” by faith. Christ purifies the believers in two ways: by justification and by sanctification.³³ The declaration of righteousness has already been made for the merit of Christ, and sanctification is a

³¹ STREIB, Heinz: *Hermeneutics of Metaphor - Symbol and Narrative in Faith Development Theory*. Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 1991. 23.

³² SCHWANDA, Tom: *Cultivating Attentiveness to God’s Presence*. In: *Knowing & Doing*, C. S. Lewis Institute, 2019. 1-20. 3.

³³ CALVIN, John: *Institutes of Christian Religion, Volume 1*, MCNEILL, John T. (ed.) Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2006. 3.11.1. 725.

process in the life of the believer.³⁴ Justification includes the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life, therefore it is central to Christian teaching. Justification is the soil from which the Christian way of life (sanctification), grows as a consequence.³⁵ The believer does not have to worry, because one has been declared right, and so one is freed to live a life of gratitude and to live for the glory of God. The famous sentence of Augustine: “Love God and do what you want!” wins meaning in the light of divine grace.³⁶ If I want to stay in God’s grace as much as possible, I strive to live a life wherein I do not set myself apart from the love of the One whom I love.

In the life of the believer, change begins with a desire: is there a desire in me to associate my personal story with God’s presence in the world?³⁷ The desire and vision of this is reflected in Lewis’ poetic image: “One’s mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun.”³⁸ God awakens in us the desire to seek Him. In this sense, our action is a responsive action we use as an answer to God’s grace and call.³⁹ Becoming aware of an already existing relationship, we have the opportunity to become more conscious disciples in following Christ. In such an approach, we have the opportunity to create a space for the Holy Spirit to inspire us and others in our daily lives.⁴⁰

³⁴ BEEKE, Joel R.: *Calvin on Piety*, In: MCKIM, Donald K. (ed.): *Calvin's Work – Part II.*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009. 125-152.

³⁵ CALVIN, John: *Institutes of Christian Religion, Volume 1*. 3.15.2., 545.

³⁶ SAINT AUGUSTINE (of Hippo): *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*. New York City Press, 2008, VII/8. 110.

³⁷ SMITH: *You Are What You Love*. 65-68.; BORG, Marcus J.: *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. 133.

³⁸ LEWIS, C. S.: *Letters to Malcolm – Chiefly on Prayer*. Harcourt, New York, 1992. 89–90.

³⁹ SMITH: *You Are What You Love*. 71.

⁴⁰ “A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain.” FOSTER: *Celebration of Disciple*. 7.

6. Travel guide instead of prescribed rules

The real change in our spiritual life depends mostly on what we are looking at. A biblical example for focus finding and losing is the story of Peter walking on water: “Tell me to come to you on the water.” “Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:28-33). In this story, there are three main aspects of Christian spirituality, since following Jesus Christ has relational, transforming, and vocational aspects.⁴¹ These three can be the key to our change, because the vision of the calling can give us direction both in personal transformation and communal relationships. Engaging in the Christian meta-story can give us direction in our daily decisions and lifestyle: “The Christian community, through the centuries, has sustained its identity through the appropriation and reappropriation of the images, themes, and metaphors of that biblical narrative. For Christians it contains a normative vision of what life is and should be. To say that the biblical and Christian narrative contains of normative vision of what love is and should be is to suggest that there is a certain aesthetic ethic – an aesthetic vision of the good, the true, and the beautiful – that has powerfully operative in the Christian community’s self-understanding. [...] Wisdom about human affairs was to be guided by the wisdom found in the biblical narratives and teachings.”⁴²

Humility, service, and love are the guidelines of following Jesus. The values of these should be present in any spiritual practice. These guidelines may

⁴¹ SCORGIE, Glen G.: *Overview on Christian Spirituality*. In: SCORGIE, Glen G. – CHAN, Simon – SMITH, Gordon T. – SMITH, James D. (ed.): *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2011. 27-33. 29-30.

⁴² GERKIN: *Prophetic Pastoral Practice*. 16-17.

appear in many forms, without setting certain rules for everybody.⁴³ There are at least two reasons for using guidelines instead of rules:

One reason is that God is always greater than we imagine (*Deus semper maior*), and the other reason comes from our human diversity.

1. According to the *Deus semper maior* principle:

God is always greater than we imagine. Throughout our lives, the way we understand God could change many times. C. S. Lewis writes: “Images of the Holy easily become holy images – sacrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is a great iconoclast.”⁴⁴

2. For the cause of human diversity:

The fact that every human being has different qualities and talents means freedom as to when and how she prays. Since it is not about performance but about living in Christ.⁴⁵ If we are in Christ, then the following sentence applies: “pray as you can, not as you cannot!”⁴⁶

Let me give two examples to illustrate this statement:

- One of my Protestant missionary acquaintances shared with me that he is most likely to be silent before God and make his personal devotion in a particular chair and at a specific time of the day. Of course he can pray any

⁴³ DYKSTRA, Craig: *Growing in the Life of Faith*. 2nd ed., Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2005. 63.

⁴⁴ LEWIS, C. S.: *A Grief Observed*, HarperCollins, New York, 1994. 55-56. see also: ROOT, Jerry: *C. S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil – An Investigation of a Pervasive Theme*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series 96, Pickwick Publications, Princeton, 2009. 93-94.

⁴⁵ „What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it in the fact that he knows me... All my knowledge of him depends on his sustained initiative in knowing me. I know him, because he first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when his eye is off me, or his attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when his care falters.” In: PACKER, James I.: *Knowing God*. IVP, Downers Grove, 1993. 41– 42.

⁴⁶ A quote from John Chapman. see: LAWRENCE, Philip: *An Abbot's Notebook*. New Sinai Press, 2013. 78.

other times and in any other places, but this certain habit helps him to calm down and be more present to God and himself. This practice is far from spontaneity, but the question is why could it not be that the frameworks and rules we choose, might lead to freedom rather than to bondage?

- During a conversation, a theological professor told me that during a spiritual formation course, many forms of prayer were introduced to the students. The students were free to choose any of these prayer forms that they would follow till the end of the semester. They received instructions and not prescriptions for the personal discovery of their spiritual path.

Matthew Boulton writes about the spiritual practices of Calvin: “For Calvin, the church is a gymnasium, a training ground, a school, and community of preparation and practice enrolled (we hope and pray) in God’s sanctifying, transformative *paideia*.”⁴⁷

If we follow Calvin’s metaphor, the church can be a ‘gym’ where not only a single workout plan exists. Besides the common warm-up exercises, we get help to have our own workout plan as well.⁴⁸

The divine ‘iconoclast’ and the freedom of human diversity are simultaneously present in following Christ. Tom Schwanda offers two simple reflection questions that involve these two aspects to shape our own spiritual habits: “Cultivating an attentiveness to God closes the gap between recognizing that God is present and experiencing God in that moment. This exercise is based on two questions: (1) Where have I met Jesus (or God or the Holy Spirit) today? (2) Where have I missed Jesus (or God or the Holy Spirit) today? Ask these questions throughout each day and week, and you’ll be surprised how much more you recognize God’s presence with you.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ BOULTON, Matthew Myers: *Life in God – John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the Future of Protestant Theology*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2011. 229-230.

⁴⁸ Luther writes in one of his letters: “I shall tell you as well as I know how what I myself do when I pray. May our Lord God help you and others to do it better.” LUTHER, M.: *To Peter Beskendorf*, in THEODORE, G. (ed. and trans.): *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*. Westminster, Philadelphia, 1955. 124-130, 125.

⁴⁹ SCWANDA: *Cultivating Attentiveness to God’s Presence*. 12.

7. Final words

From Monday to Saturday, during the weekdays following the usual routines, we do not perceive growth day by day. Our faith however does not change only at celebrative occasions or unexpected events.

The study focused on less spectacular moments of life, which are also essential in spiritual growth. This dynamic is nicely painted in the metaphorical work of S. C. Lewis' Narnia Chronicles:

“Aslan” said Lucy “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ LEWIS, C. S.: *Prince Caspian - The Return to Narnia*, HarperCollins, New York, 1951. 141.

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