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## Christian Spiritual Formation towards Holiness

### Abstract

Freedom is one of the most fervently fought for values and, at the same time, the very idea of freedom belongs to concepts that are essentially contested. This situation is a part of human brokenness, and in Christian formation, it has to be seriously dealt with. According to the popular view, 'holiness' is a life-negating and judgmental attitude towards everything 'normal.' In biblical usage, it connotes belonging to God as a gift in Christ. Spiritual formation begins with a biblical explanation of freedom and holiness. A Christian worldview has to be the background to Christian formation, functioning as a correction of the commonly-accepted naturalistic worldview. A personal experiential relationship with God is the key to successful growth towards realistic and practical holiness in daily life. 'Dos and don'ts' that usually arise at the beginning of religious education shall be experienced as liberating instructions, if they are offered as guidance to a fully persuaded mind and a devotedly loving heart.

### Keywords

religious education, spiritual formation, brokenness, sin, liberty, holiness

## 1. Introduction

The authors of this paper follow steps borrowed from Thomas Manton, a 17<sup>th</sup> century English Puritan author. In his exposition of Psalm 119 he writes: “Knowledge, persuasion, affection, practice, these follow one another, where the faculties of the soul are rightly governed, and kept in a due subordination.”<sup>1</sup> His terminology will be adjusted in the following way: (1) ‘Knowledge’ will be replaced by ‘correcting definitions,’ (2) ‘persuasion’ will be replaced by ‘certainty of faith,’ (3) ‘affection’ will be replaced by ‘emotional attachment,’ and (4) ‘practice’ will be replaced by ‘commitment to action.’ These are used as subtitles and names of the steps in the formation towards holiness.

### 1.1. The Concept of Freedom

The concept of freedom has a long tradition in the history of philosophy. Many notions related to this concept are open for misinterpretation related to the notion of freedom and holiness that are a part of human brokenness. Religious education students will, most probably, be influenced by a simplified utilitarian understanding of freedom as described by J. S. Mill as “...the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”<sup>2</sup> Although this understanding of freedom does not mean people are free from responsibilities, it permits actions that are contrary to a Christian understanding of holiness. For example, it allows various types of self-harming behaviour, or to hold and express any philosophical or religious views, as long as they do not involve force or harm applied against others.

On the deeper, philosophical level, liberty is explained as *autonomy*. The word comes from two Greek words: *autos*, meaning ‘self’ and *nomos*, meaning ‘law.’ Absolute human self-governing entails non-existence of any divine being. In Marx’ words, “The more man puts into God, the less he retains within himself.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Th. Manton, *Psalm 119, Vol. 1*. Edinburgh 1990, The Banner of Truth Trust, p. 325.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, New Haven 2003, Yale University Press, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> K. Marx, *Early Writings*, Transl. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, London 1992, Penguin Books, p. 324.

In theology, it is hardly possible to find a more counter-intuitive notion than the New Testament concept of *freedom in Christ*. While a common understanding of freedom is *autonomy* or self-government independent from the law of God,<sup>4</sup> in the New Testament such an autonomous attitude is defined as ‘sin.’<sup>5</sup> But if “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (Jn 8:34), the autonomous idea of freedom must be enslaving. On the other hand, in the Bible, those who are freed from sin are made *slaves* of righteousness (Rom. 6:18). Apostle Paul often refers to himself as ‘a slave of Christ’ and although a slave is a freedman of the Lord, the free person is a slave of Christ (1 Cor. 7:22).<sup>6</sup>

How can something that is called ‘slavery’ be called ‘freedom’ at the same time? Does it not sound like some kind of Orwellian doubletalk? It is possible to avoid the problem by pointing out that the word ‘slavery’ here is used as a metaphor. That objection is true to the extent that the marks of this spiritual condition are very different from what is commonly referred to by that word. But even if it is a rhetorical device that thrives on ambiguity,<sup>7</sup> if the metaphor is to make sense, one attribute of its literal part will have to be inevitably transferred: the submission to an outward authority.

How can that which has been called “humanity’s highest good”<sup>8</sup> be called ‘slavery’ at the same time? There are other words describing the relationship of believers with Christ. They are called ‘friends’ (Jn 15:15), the ‘Bride of the Lamb’ (Rev. 19:7), ‘children’ (Heb. 2:13), ‘brothers’ (Heb. 2:11) or ‘sheep’ (Jn 10). In the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus expressly says he is not calling his disciples ‘slaves’ but ‘friends.’ Christ loves his disciples, and they are expected to love him with all their being. The notion of ‘slavery to love’ (*servitium amoris*) can be found in ancient literature.<sup>9</sup> Although in Greek and Latin

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<sup>4</sup> A philosophical description of autonomy can go like this: “I wish to be able to subject my motives, principles, and habits to critical examination, so that nothing moves me to action without my agreeing to it.” Th. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, New York 1989, Oxford University Press, p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> ...sin is lawlessness (1 Jn 3:4).

<sup>6</sup> M.J. Harris, *Slave of Christ*, Downers Grove 1999, IVP Academic.

<sup>7</sup> It is for us to choose what to transfer from the literal to the nonliteral part of it. D.H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery*, Leiden 2001, Brill, 1.

<sup>8</sup> O. Höffe, *Critique of Freedom*, Transl. Nils F. Schott, Chicago 2020, The University of Chicago Press, ix.

<sup>9</sup> R. O. A. M. Lyne, *Servitium Amoris*, “The Classical Quarterly, New Series” 29/1 (1979), pp. 117–130.

poetry, the ‘love-slave’ is usually a romantic lover who is enslaved by his passion and may be degraded by it<sup>10</sup>; nevertheless, the imagery can be cautiously used as an example of the power of love. The teacher can refer students to the biblical *Song of Songs* or maybe to C. S. Lewis’ *The Four Loves*<sup>11</sup> in order to point out the differences between various types of loving attachment. Freedom in Christ is a free and complete loving submission to the Saviour.

## 1.2. The idea of holiness

The idea of holiness is, if possible, even more misunderstood than the idea of freedom. In the popular mind, it is almost always identified with prohibitions of all joys and good things that make life worth living. And it must be admitted that “[c]ulturally, holiness has sometimes gone hand in hand with arrogance or elitism.”<sup>12</sup>

In spiritual formation, a lot must be done to correct these popular sentiments, if holiness is to become genuinely desired as a life goal. Add to it the power of entertainment culture,<sup>13</sup> the looming problem of digital dementia<sup>14</sup> and the general atheisation of science and the task to make holiness desirable will seem next to impossible.

Despite all difficulties, guiding one’s students towards holiness is a non-negotiable task. Scripture states that humans have to strive for holiness, without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). This ‘striving’ is not an effort to achieve salvation by works. That is freely given in Christ who is the believer’s sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30). As Calvin says, “When we hear mention of our union with God, let us remember that holiness must be its bond; not because we come into communion with him by virtue of our holiness! Rather, we ought first to cleave unto him so that, infused with his holiness, we may follow whither he calls.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 183 A.

<sup>11</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, New York 1960, Harcourt, Brace and Company.

<sup>12</sup> M. Allen, *Sanctification*, Grand Rapids 2017, Zondervan, p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> What Neil Postman says of television can be asserted of all media: “The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining...” N. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, London 1986, Penguin Books, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> M. Spitzer, *Digitale Demenz*, München 2012, Droemer Verlag.

<sup>15</sup> J. Calvin, *J. Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Louisville 2006, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 686.

The starting point for the teaching and proper theological understanding of holiness is the holiness of God. Whether to begin with a simple definition of a concise theological dictionary, or with a more complex discussion of the topic in biblical languages and in systematic theology, it is advisable to point out and stress the dimension of its mystery. Humans cannot approach God as an object among other objects of knowledge. Rudolf Otto in the classic *The Idea of the Holy*, quotes German religious writer Gerhard Tersteegen who said “a God comprehended is no God.”<sup>16</sup> The holiness of God is much more than just moral excellence or human goodness augmented to infinity in a human sense.<sup>17</sup> First of all, ‘holiness’ is an attribute of God’s ontological *otherness* denoting the metaphysical gap between creature and Creator that both terrifies and fascinates us, it is both *mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*, as described by Otto.

In the Bible, the readers are faced with the demand, “Be holy because I am holy” (Lev. 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:16). This commandment concerns not ontological but ethical holiness, and historical reactions to it have oscillated from legalism to antinomianism and from perfectionism to libertinism. An explanation of these deviations may be crucial to help religious education students; but it also can lead to fruitless scholastic dissection of theological theories. It is much more practical and more productive to stress the relational dimension of holiness that is hidden in the theological notion of the ‘union with Christ.’ It means that Christ “...lives and works in us, not speculatively but really, with presence and with power.”<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Rational certainty of faith

Liberty of thought and certainty in religious matters, without doubt, seem incompatible.<sup>19</sup> ‘Free thought,’ in a similar way as freedom, has been defined as *autonomous* thinking, or “...as the refusal to be controlled by any authority

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<sup>16</sup> R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, London 1952, Oxford University Press, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford 2007, Oxford University Press, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> M. Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, 1535. Quoted in: J.V. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin*, Göttingen 2012, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> A good introduction to the problematics is: H. Bavinck, *Certainty of Faith*. St., Catharines, 1980, Paideia Press.

but its own.”<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, religious certainty is too often based on authority that censors any dissent, or on a lack of critical thinking directed against the social ties that are its source.

Humanity’s quest for certainty has produced a bewildering number of religions, philosophies, and scientific theories. One result is scepticism, according to which the wise person refuses to commit oneself to any of these as the truth. Into this world of uncertainty, the words of Jesus sound “...you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (Jn8:32) promising freedom from sin (Jn 8:34) based on knowledge of truth. How can such differences be reconciled?

In dealing with this problem, one must be careful not to deny religious education students the liberty of doubt and questioning. It is important to mention that absolute certainty for a finite mind is impossible. Paradoxically, it does not mean that religious certainty is impossible. It only means it is not based on rationally observed facts *only*. As Luther (quoted above) said, it is not just arguments but the *work* of the resurrected Christ that has to inwardly confirm the facts Christians provide in their teaching. Calvin states: “...we cannot possess the good things of our Lord Jesus Christ to take any profit from them, unless we first enjoy him. ...he [Christ] says, I am yours, possess ye me.”<sup>21</sup> In more modern terms, Emil Brunner says: “...in faith I do not think, but God leads me to think, he does not communicate ‘something’ to me, but ‘himself.’”<sup>22</sup>

Despite the limited possibilities of reason, and despite the fact that religious certainty is based on a spiritual encounter, in spiritual formation teachers cannot leave out the development of the Christian mind. This will be conducive to avoiding the development of fundamentalist narrow-minded views in matters that the Reformers referred to as ‘adiaphora’ or things that are ‘indifferent.’<sup>23</sup>

In our opinion, there are four theories and attitudes that hinder believers from developing a sound certainty of Christian faith. They are (1) scientism, (2) monism, (3) selfism, (4) evolutionism. These theories/attitudes choke enjoyment out of Christian liberty and obstruct growth towards practical holiness.

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<sup>20</sup> J.B. Bury, *A History of Freedom of Thought*, New York 1913, Henry Holt and Company, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> J. Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Ephesians*, Edinburgh 1987, The Banner of Truth Trust, pp. 403-404.

<sup>22</sup> E. Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, Philadelphia 1963, The Westminster Press, p. 114.

<sup>23</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion I*, 2006, 3.19.16, p. 849.

Fighting these *negative* influences must be done with the *positive* picture of the Christian mind in the foreground.

### 2.1. Scientism and monism vs. freedom

‘Scientism’ is a derogatory word that describes an inordinate belief in the possibilities of science. An undisputed fact is that science (or rather scientists) did, and does, wonders by manipulating nature exploiting the so-called ‘natural laws.’ Although the heyday of belief in the bright future ushered by scientific discoveries is long over, solutions for this troubled world are still expected to be brought about by better science and certainly not by better ethics or religion.

Since the 17th century, the successes of science have greatly strengthened the doctrine of determinism, which despite the developments in modern physics (quantum theory, chaos theory), still hold the imagination of the popular mind. Determinism says that the universe can be explained, by laws of cause and effect.<sup>24</sup>

If this is the case, it obviously creates a problem for the idea of human freedom. It means that the ‘I’ of making free and independent rational decisions is just an illusion and human personality is effectively eradicated. Of course, this is a disputed theory (that, by the way, contradicts selfism). But teachers must not underestimate its damaging effects in situations where the student needs either *self-confidence* in relying on his/her individual free conscience, or has to take *responsibility* for his/her knowingly wrongful *free* action.

Scientism goes hand-in-hand with the worldview called ‘monism.’ There are several types of monism,<sup>25</sup> but for the purpose of this article, it is only important to see how the core idea of monism (that there is just one type of reality) excludes spirituality and the divine from the realm of being. The hope of monistic theory is that one super-science will swallow up all other sciences in its universal theory of everything.

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<sup>24</sup> Philosophies based on this idea offer impressive intricately thought-through systems. The problem is that they lose human freedom on the way. This is why F. H. Jacobi (in 1785) responded to Spinozism saying: “Every avenue of demonstration ends up in fatalism.” F.H. Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, Montreal 1994, McGill-Queen’s University Press, p. 234.

<sup>25</sup> D. Bielfeldt, *Monism*, in: W van Huyssteen (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, New York 2003, Macmillan Reference USA, p. 582.

In the biblical worldview, there is a hierarchy of beings which is a key idea of worship. For the lack of a better word, I will use the term ‘dualism’, however, it must be stressed it is an asymmetrical dualism that does not jeopardize the unity of all existence under the sovereignty of God. The Biblical picture of the world suggests to us first of all, the ontological duality of uncreated and created beings (God and creation); secondly, the duality of spiritual and physical type of existence (humans being part of both); and thirdly, the ethical dualism of good and evil. The hierarchy of being provides the clue how to use human freedom: *worship* towards the uncreated being, *respect* towards created spiritual beings, *dominion* over the physical realm. Complexities of these relationships are treated in systematic theology. But it should be clear that scientific determinism does not apply in the spiritual and uncreated form of being.

## 2.2. Selfism and evolutionism vs. holiness

The next issue is the connection between selfism and holiness. The word ‘self’ may have several meanings. In pastoral care ‘the self’ has been used as a term denoting “the individual human being.”<sup>26</sup> In modern times it has become one of the central themes of philosophy, psychology and popular culture, where it has supplanted religion. Despite the scientific uncertainty “...whether such a thing as self even exists...”<sup>27</sup> bookstores are full of books with the word ‘self’ in their title. The word ‘selfism’ is often used as a synonym for ‘narcissism’ or ‘self-worship’. Its main manifestations are consumerism and pop-psychologies<sup>28</sup> offering all kinds of self-help and self-improvement guides. Self-consciousness, self-determination, self-expression, self-improvement, self-love, self-care, self-confidence etc. have become buzzwords of the ‘therapeutic culture.’<sup>29</sup> A good illustration of how self can be manipulated by media is a BBC documentary series *The Century of the Self* that Adam Curtis, released in 2002.

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<sup>26</sup> E.L. Johnson, *God and the Soul Care*, Downers Grove 2017, InterVarsity Press, p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> S. Gallagher, *Introduction, A Diversity of Selves, The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, Oxford 2011, Oxford University Press, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> I.E. Catt, *Rhetoric and narcissism: A critique of ideological selfism*, “Western Journal of Speech Communication” 50/3 (1986), p. 242–253.

<sup>29</sup> “The therapeutic culture is defined as one in which the central moral question is individual fulfilment.” D.F. Piar, *A Welfare State of Civil Rights: The Triumph of the Therapeutic in American Constitutional Law* 2008, <http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/wmborj/vol16/iss3/2>.



All of this has serious consequences for the proper understanding of holiness. We have seen that Christian holiness is *relational*. In the Bible, holy things were offered to God and could not be utilized for any other purpose than the prescribed sacred purpose. A similar rule applied to Old Testament priests (though only temporarily for the performance of their priestly duties). In the New Testament, all believers are referred to as the 'holy priesthood' (1 Pet. 2:5). In spiritual formation, this idea of *belonging* to God and *exclusive use* in his service<sup>30</sup> must be thoroughly grasped and deeply owned if the onslaughts of selfism through secular education and media is to be successfully resisted.

There is hardly a more acerbic worldview debate than between evolutionists and creationists. This is probably because it is being fought not on purely religious grounds, but on the grounds of *science*. Evolutionism permeates all scientifically accepted thinking about life and ascribes god-like attributes of creativity to nature. There are various views of evolution<sup>31</sup>, some too complicated for certain levels of instruction. But the teachers can provide the student with some very basic ideas that demonstrate the contradictory nature of evolutionism.<sup>32</sup> In a nutshell, it is a belief that outcomes of all processes (natural, mental, social) are subject to the laws of evolution, which means they are governed as if 'from below' by properties inherent in the matter. These laws are general, a-moral, unavoidable, and their outcome is the 'survival of the fittest.' In spiritual formation, teachers have to view the world as governed from above. Although natural laws are the work of the Creator, his moral and spiritual laws must have precedence over them in the sense given in Christ's answer to the devil "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mat. 4:4).

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<sup>30</sup> "We are not our own; therefore, as much as possible, let us forget ourselves and our own interests. Rather, we are God's. Therefore, let us live and die to Him." J. Calvin, *A Little Book on the Christian Life*, Orlando 2017: Reformation Trust Publishing, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. theistic evolution, evolutionary creationism etc.

<sup>32</sup> For example, C. S. Lewis' argument that we can "...never find the laws of Nature causing anything." C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, Grand Rapids 1970, Eerdmans, p. 77. He also quotes Professor Haldane saying: "If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true." C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, Glasgow 1990, William Collins Sons & Co., p. 19.

Apologetics does not make saints out of humans, but it provides the mind with a viable alternative to the secular worldview. The mind has to be used to the full<sup>33</sup> if humans are to attain the goal set before us in Scripture.

### 3. Emotional attachment to the son of God

Christian formation cannot stop at cognitive certitude, but must go on from rational persuasion to spiritual communion with Jesus. Bonaventure, a medieval mystic, warns us that humans should not believe that, "...reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy, work without piety, knowledge without love, understanding without humility endeavour without divine grace, reflection as a mirror without divinely inspired wisdom."<sup>34</sup> Bonaventure is referring to what is called spirituality today. But there are many different spiritualities on the market, many of them non-Christian, even atheistic.<sup>35</sup> Even in a Christian understanding of spirituality, there are differences: focus may be on spiritual disciplines, on ecstatic experiences, on its therapeutic effects, on the efficacy of the sacraments, on mystical perceptions etc. In the Reformed tradition, spirituality may be defined in the following way, "Spirituality is a human capacity for a relationship with God as revealed in Jesus Christ through the Spirit."<sup>36</sup> The key words are *relationship* and *God, Jesus, [the Holy] Spirit*. It is a Trinitarian definition that is focused on the revelation of God in Jesus and the realisation of a relationship with him through the Holy Spirit. Students need to 'know with their heart'<sup>37</sup> that "Jesus Christ is the object of everything, and the centre to which everything tends.

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<sup>33</sup> "...we have been endowed with reason and understanding so that, by leading a holy and upright life, we may press on to the appointed goal of blessed immortality." J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion I*, 2006, p. 242.

<sup>34</sup> Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, New York 1978, Paulist Press, pp. 55–56.

<sup>35</sup> For example: S. Antinoff, *Spiritual Atheism*, Berkeley 2009, Counterpoint.

<sup>36</sup> B. Johnson, *Spiritual Direction in the Reformed Tradition*, in: G.W. Moon and D.G. Benner, *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices*, Downers Grove 2004, InterVarsity Press, p. 97.

<sup>37</sup> We know the truth not only by means of the reason but also by means of the heart.\* It is through the heart that we know the first principles, and reason which has no part in this knowledge vainly tries to contest them. B. Pascal, *Pensées*, Oxford 1995, Oxford University Press, p. 35.

Whoever knows him knows the reason for everything.”<sup>38</sup> Calvin gives us a list of what we have in Christ, “...salvation, ...gifts of the Spirit, ...strength, ...purity, ...gentleness, ...redemption, ...acquittal, ...remission of the curse, ...satisfaction, ...purification, ...reconciliation, ...mortification of the flesh, ...newness of life, ...immortality, ...inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, ...protection, ...security, ...abundant supply of all blessings, ...untroubled expectation of judgment, ...In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other.”<sup>39</sup>

These good things belong to humans both in a legal, forensic way and in an experiential, spiritual way. These two sides of the work of Christ have to be finely balanced according to the mental leanings of individual students. The first is the *status* given to Christians by Christ’s merits the other is a *process* that applies Christ’s powers to Christians’ personality.

### 3.1. The Son of God – Liberator

Jesus, in his speech in the synagogue in Nazareth, quoted the words of Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim ... liberty to the captives” (Lk. 4:18). Personal spiritual liberation always begins by dealing with sin (Jn 8:34). Guilt, as a consequence of sin, is an all-pervasive problem of humanity. A psychologist writes, “I do not believe we can fully understand the dynamics of any psychological maladjustment or problem in emotional living apart from the influence of the guilt emotion.”<sup>40</sup> Although it is important to distinguish between real and false guilt<sup>41</sup> both kinds cause deep unhappiness that needs to be dealt with before God. From social judgment that is the source of false guilt “[w]e become independent in proportion as we depend on God.”<sup>42</sup> To bring students to experience liberation from real guilt, we have to explain the Gospel and rely upon the work of the Holy Spirit. Any accusation, whether justified or unjustified, can be presented to Jesus. He becomes their personal and

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<sup>38</sup> P. Pascal, *Pensées*, 1995, p. 171.

<sup>39</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion I*, 2006, pp. 527–528.

<sup>40</sup> B. Narramore, *Guilt: Its Universal Hidden Presence*, “Journal of Psychology and Theology” 2 (1974), p. 105.

<sup>41</sup> False guilt “...is not based on God’s view of things but on a distorted self-understanding, related to damaging social experiences.” E.L. Johnson, *God and the Soul Care*, 2017, p. 470.

<sup>42</sup> P. Tournier, *Guilt & Grace*, Crowborough 1986, Highland Books, p. 70.

ongoing liberator. In 2 Corinthians 5:14<sup>43</sup> they will see “...that every one that truly considers and ponders that wonderful love, which Christ has manifested towards us by his death, becomes, as it were, bound to him, and *constrained* by the closest tie, and devotes himself wholly to his service.”<sup>44</sup>

### 3.2. The Son of God – Hero

Hero-worship is not a biblical idea. To avoid pagan heroic attitudes towards the supernatural abilities of Jesus, religious educators usually stress the down-to-earth facts of Jesus’ life and ministry. We focus on his acts of mercy, his human attributes, and his teaching. On the other hand, concentrating on Jesus as a wonder-worker may lead to mythological views of Jesus that were popular with the detractors of the Gospel right from the beginning. This is a topic in comparative mythology and it must be seriously discussed before it is dismissed as erroneous.<sup>45</sup>

Admiration of Jesus that leads to holiness must approach him through his resurrection. To admire Jesus’ glory requires the heart of a believer<sup>46</sup> who in the freedom of the Spirit beholds the glory of the Lord and is transformed by it (2 Cor. 3:17–18). Christian faith as a historical religion is firmly bound to *historical* Jesus but man’s communion with him is *spiritual*. Calvin comments on 2 Cor. 5:16: “...we acknowledge Christ as man, and as brother of people in his flesh – not in a fleshly manner; because we rest solely in the consideration of his spiritual gifts.”<sup>47</sup>

The spiritual relationship with Jesus will take some careful theological study of his person and work. On the negative side, it is advisable to warn students about the heresies related to this topic. I think no censorship should be involved,

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<sup>43</sup> For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died.

<sup>44</sup> J. Calvin, *Commentary of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians II.*, Edinburgh 1899, Calvin Translation Society, p. 230.

<sup>45</sup> Today we find this approach in books like: D.R. MacDonald, *Mythologizing Jesus*, Lanham 2015, Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>46</sup> “Where the subject (the soul) is not previously seasoned with grace and faith, it is not capable of glory or vision. Nay, persons not disposed hereby unto it cannot desire it, whatever they pretend: they only deceive their own souls in supposing that so they do.” J. Owen, *Works*, Vol. I., London 1850, Johnstone and Hunter, p. 288.

<sup>47</sup> J. Calvin, *Commentary of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians II*, 1899, p. 233.

but rather a clear explanation of the problems. In theology, the so-called 'quest for historical Jesus' is still popular today, despite its failure, as described in a book by the famous Albert Schweitzer in 1906.<sup>48</sup>

In spiritual formation, teachers should always remember that "...in the person and work of Christ we are concerned with comfort for the frightened conscience."<sup>49</sup> That leads us to the most important subject of all: the cross of Christ. Jesus often called himself 'the Son of man.' That title points to Dan. 7:13ff where "...the Son of man is a being of heavenly origin, one who will bring in God's kingdom."<sup>50</sup> This idea of glory is joined with Jesus' humble status of a servant. As the Bible states in Philippians 2:8–11 that "...he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Christ on the cross is not to be pitied as a martyr, but worshiped as Christ Victorious.<sup>51</sup>

Christ's achievements on the cross are to be cherished and admired. It will mould the students' understanding of the Gospel, their Christian experience, and their understanding of modern thought.<sup>52</sup>

#### 4. Commitment to action: discipleship

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The grace of God that does not transform the life of the believer has been dubbed 'cheap grace.' The problem of 'cheap grace' is "...the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner."<sup>53</sup> In reality, trying to make Christian life easy, comes at the cost of making it an uncomfortable burden. "Only the man who follows the command of Jesus single-mindedly, and unresistingly lets his yoke rest upon him, finds his burden easy, and under its gentle pressure receives

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<sup>48</sup> A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, New York 2005, Dover Publications.

<sup>49</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, Grand Rapids 1954, Eerdmans, p. 103.

<sup>50</sup> L. Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids 1999, Eerdmans, p. 31.

<sup>51</sup> G. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, London 1975, SPCK.

<sup>52</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, London 1909, Hodder and Stoughton, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, New York 1979, Macmillan Publishing Co., p. 46.

the power to persevere in the right way.”<sup>54</sup> Sometimes, faith is not very certain of itself, but it can grow only if it is put into practice. “Acquiring knowledge presupposes that what is learnt is used in the service of fellow human beings and the community.”<sup>55</sup> Jesus lived in the bustle of daily life, meeting all sorts of people, helping them and also confronting them. His followers should not shun human society in order to be ‘holy.’

#### 4.1. Discipleship in community

The popular slogan “Jesus yes, Church no!” may be an expression of modern Western individualism, but it does not lead to discipleship of covenantal love and relationships among the organs of the Body of Christ. The twin commandments of love (love of God and love of neighbour Mk 12:28–31) connect these relations inseparably together.

Liberty in Christ demands that students learn willing submission to the authorities put over us by God. The modern view of authority as a threat to personal autonomy, will be replaced by regarding it as a gift for training us in godliness. Christians are all too familiar with the problems of irresponsible leadership, but rebellion is not a Christian solution. Submitting to Church authority and mutual submission among Church members is possible without tension if Christians genuinely learn in humility to count others more significant than ourselves (Phil. 2:3).

Family is an area that is under sustained attack in contemporary society.<sup>56</sup> Some of religious education students may have had traumatic experiences of divorce or abuse in their family. Still, if they desire to live a life of Christ’s disciple, they need to hold family and marriage in honour (Heb 13:4). “The history of the human race begins with a wedding”<sup>57</sup>. The Christian takes high view of his/her family role and seeks to fulfil its potential. On the other hand, family ties must not interfere with the higher priority of Jesus’ call to follow him (Mt. 8:18–22).

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<sup>54</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1979, p. 40.

<sup>55</sup> A. de Muynck, H. Vermeulen, B. Kunz, *The Essence of Christian Teaching*, Gouda 2018, Driestar Christian University, p. 52.

<sup>56</sup> The problems of family and gender roles are two complicated to even touch on them in a short article like this. It will be up to the teacher to introduce the problematics and recommend the suitable literature.

<sup>57</sup> H. Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, Grand Rapids 2012, Christian’s Library, p. 7.

Such decisions are not easy but are an inevitable part of living in the inimical world of unbelievers.

Living in Western democracies, Christians have a paradoxical role, which includes both participating and critiquing political powers. Although obedient to the authority of the state (Rom. 13), the Christian is not an unthinking performer of the state's will.<sup>58</sup> The political and cultural scene is very sensitive to Christian intervention and may easily react with some form of persecution. Therefore, it is extremely important to make sure that the positions of the religious education teacher is based on solid and demonstrable arguments.

#### 4.2. Discipleship and private life

Christ calls his disciples to spend time alone with the Father “who is in secret” (Mt. 6:6). On the emotional side, isolation and freedom are closely related.<sup>59</sup> It means that temporary spiritual aloneness is an application of spiritual liberty that brings with itself necessity of self-discipline. Historically, spiritual disciplines like solitude, prayer, fasting, service focused on practices, meant for special class of ‘the religious’ who were surrogates for the secular laypersons. The Reformers rejected such a division of religious roles and stressed equal spiritual value of all ways of life. Recent resurgence of interest in spiritual disciplines in Protestant circles comes with what has been called ‘the desecularization of the world.’<sup>60</sup> The stress is on how the outward practices and habits can lead to deeper spiritual experience of the presence of God.

In introducing religious education students to spiritual disciplines<sup>61</sup> the teacher has to select those suitable to the individual personal needs of the students. Perhaps, the best way is to study spiritual practice in the lives of historic

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<sup>58</sup> “Our obedience to Magistrates ought to be such, that the obedience which we owe to the King of kings shall remain entire and unimpaired.” W. Pringle, *One Hundred Aphorisms*, in: J. Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Transl. Henry Beveridge, Peabody 2009, Hedrickson Publishers, p. 1001.

<sup>59</sup> “Freedom brings isolation from others, and lack of freedom brings belonging...” K.T. Strongman, *The Psychology of Emotion*, Chichester 2003, John Wiley & Sons, p. 148.

<sup>60</sup> P. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World*, Washington 1999, Ethics and Public Policy Center.

<sup>61</sup> A.A. Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Downer Grove 2015, InterVarsity Press.

Christian personalities. The two basic disciplines of Bible reading and prayer are well illustrated in the life and theology of Jonathan Edwards.<sup>62</sup>

#### 4.3. Discipleship and the call of God

“Train up a child in the way he should go...” (Prov. 22:6) is saying that we should teach a child ‘in his way.’<sup>63</sup> The possessive suffix attached to the word ‘way’ in Hebrew suggests that the instructions should be adjusted to the individuality of the child<sup>64</sup> “...according to the physical and mental abilities of the developing youth.”<sup>65</sup> This makes demands on the teacher’s knowledge of the personalities of the pupils. If we describe personality development along the following three lines: “(1) from infant temperament to the articulation of adult personality traits ... (2) from childhood intentionality to the development of life goals and values ... (3) from the emergence of episodic memory in childhood to the construction of narrative identity”<sup>66</sup> it should be clear that teacher/spiritual director has to be an acute observer and guide during the construction of an identity that will agree with the call of God for the young person.

In spiritual formation towards holiness, personality theories and personality traits<sup>67</sup> have to be applied in the light of theological anthropology<sup>68</sup> and biblical ethics. In this way, it will be possible to relate personality traits described in psychology (and observed in religious education students) to the New Testament call of God to repentance and the life of following Jesus. Ethically ‘neutral’ personality traits that are dominant in an individual student can

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<sup>62</sup> D.C. Ortland, *Edwards on the Christian Life*, Wheaton 2014, Crossway.

<sup>63</sup> New Jerusalem Bible translation is: “Give a lad a training suitable to his character.”

<sup>64</sup> “The training prescribed is lit. ‘according to his (the child’s) way’, implying, it seems, respect for his individuality and vocation, though not for his selfwill...” D. Kidner, *The Proverbs*, London 1973, Inter-Varsity Press, p. 147.

<sup>65</sup> B.K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15:30–31:31*, Grand Rapids 2005, Eerdmans, p. 205.

<sup>66</sup> D.P. McAdams, R.L. Shiner, J.L. Tackett (eds.), *Handbook of Personality Development*, New York 2019, The Guilford Press, p. 16.

<sup>67</sup> B. Engler, *Personality Theories*, Belmont 2014, Wadsworth, p. 263.

<sup>68</sup> M.A. Hinsdale, S. Okey (eds.), *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, London 2021, T&T Clark.



then be developed or modified in light of biblical ethics<sup>69</sup> in the direction of the perceived call of God.

#### 4.4. Discipleship: inward and outward tensions

It has never been easy, yet in this era of self-gratification, it is especially hard to set oneself a goal of pursuing holiness. Liberty of action presupposes the liberty of the mind, but it is the mind that is constantly bombarded by images of self-indulgence as seen in *Century of the Self* documentary. The constant exposure to media (especially visual) very much exasperates the basic spiritual conflict described in the Letter to the Romans, Chapter 7, that is, the division between the desires of the mind and the desires of the flesh.<sup>70</sup> A subtle form of persecution of Christians in the West is implemented by relegating religious faith to the sphere of "...a private preference, a spare-time hobby, a leisure pursuit."<sup>71</sup> In a politically correct environment, such privatisation of faith is viewed as an inalienable right of all humans and it is most improper to cast doubt upon it by witnessing to the truth of Christianity. To even think that unbelievers are "...in an infinitely miserable condition..."<sup>72</sup> amounts to the violation of their human dignity and the right of free thinking. Nevertheless, following Christ without confessing him publicly is impossible (Mk 8:38).

Liberty in self-denial and self-control may sound like an oxymoron, but it is possible if the disciple can be motivated by meditation on the future life.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Principles of biblical theological ethics can be found in: H. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, Grand Rapids 2019, Baker Academic. For introduction to contemporary Christian ethical thought consult: S. Hauerwas, S. Wells (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, Chichester 2011, Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>70</sup> Several types of this conflict are treated in the 20th century classic: M. Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression, its Causes and Cure*, Grand Rapids 2003, Eerdmans.

<sup>71</sup> O. Guinness, *The Gravedigger File*. London 1983, Hodder and Stoughton, p. 74.

<sup>72</sup> J. Edwards, *Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England*, New York 1735, American Tract Society, p. 245.

<sup>73</sup> J. Calvin, *A Little Book on the Christian Life*, 2017, pp. 83–104.

## 5. Conclusion

The formation towards spiritual maturity and holiness has to be realized in the midst of many disturbing problems of modernity: wars, ecological disasters, economic injustice, racial hatred, egotism etc.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, Christians are not called to get out of the world but to be sanctified in the world (Jn 17:15).

In teaching, definition of terms is the first condition of understanding. In the Bible, the notions of 'liberty' and 'holiness' differ markedly from the common 'dictionary' definition of these words. A clear understanding has to precede practical instruction.

In order to attain certainty in the minds of students, we must deal with the ideas and attitudes that secularism puts in the way of the Christian mind. In our analysis of contemporary Western culture, they are scientism, monism, selfism, and evolutionism. These systems of thought have become 'second nature' methods of approach to all problems in life.

Although certainty of faith is crucially important for successful Christian living, it is the love for Christ that is the ultimately decisive factor in the spiritual formation towards holiness. One of the definitions of 'holy' is 'that what belongs to God.' For human beings to belong to God means to love him, and it is by loving emotional attachment to Christ that Christians become his 'love-slaves'.

Inward change naturally leads to change in behaviour. Formation of habits that support the spiritual life, has to be realized both in the Church community and privacy of personal life. As spiritual guides, teachers should respect individual personality traits in their students. In this way, a balanced training in various subjects can also become a preparation for the individual call of God.

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<sup>74</sup> J.J. Davis, *Evangelical Ethics, Issues Facing the Church Today*, Phillipsburg 2015, Presbyterian and Reformed.

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