



The 2006–2007 Word & World Lecture

What Is a Christian? Answers from the Global South

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“**W**hat is a Christian?” We will look to the burgeoning churches of the Global South to bring that question into focus for North American Christians.

According to the Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako:

Every Christmas Day the Christians of Akropong in Ghana sing this hymn:

Jesus' birthday
Fills me with joy;
Jesus Christ is my savior.
If Jesus had not been born,
We would forever be lost;
Jesus Christ, I thank you.

They sing this hymn without any awareness that Christmas itself was originally a Christian substitute for a pre-Christian New Year religious festival in northern Europe. One may hope that they will one day sing it at the traditional New Year festival of Odwira to welcome and worship the One who achieved once and for all purification for their sins, their Great Ancestor, Iesu Kristo.¹

¹Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) 86. (The hymn is translated from the Akan language.)

To be a Christian is to recognize that Christian identity is centrifugal, outward looking; it is to be anchored in a particular community of word and sacrament; it is to reflect critically on one's own theology and practice. Western Christians can learn much about all these dimensions in conversation with the churches of the Global South.

Bediako's reflections raise some interesting theological questions. Why were Christians in Ghana taught to observe a holiday that started out as a pagan festival in Europe? Is there any theological reason for them to continue to do so? Odwira means *purification* in the Akan language. The festival of Odwira is a weeklong series of traditions and rituals to purify the community at the time of the new harvest. The festival affirms the community's dependence on the fruits of the earth and in particular on the community's staple crop, yams. What would a Christian holiday based on the festival of Odwira look like? Would it be appropriate for Christians who are not from West Africa to celebrate it?

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Bediako's comments likewise raise questions for the North American practice of Christmas. However essential Christmas is to the materialist industrial complex in our society, how essential is it to us as Christians? Christmas has not always been observed even by North American Christians. The New England Puritans, for example, rejected Christmas and Easter celebrations as nonbiblical accretions to the faith. How are we to regard our cherished Christmas liturgies, hymns, and carols? What are we to say theologically about our candles and wreaths and cookies? Many of our Christmas traditions have their roots in a northern European version of the Odwira yam festival. They are the fruits of some daring cultural translations and assimilations by our ancestors in the faith. How should we regard a Christian holiday so intimately tied to Western traditions and sensibilities? Is celebrating Christ's birth on December 25 integral to being a Christian?

These questions come up with special force because we are now in the midst of a profound shift in the Christian center of gravity. In 1800 well over ninety percent of the world's Christians lived in Europe or North America. But since then the Christian center of gravity has shifted southward. The current estimate is that today two-thirds of the world's Christians live in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Pacific, and their numbers are growing rapidly. Even in North America, recent immigration patterns have brought increasing numbers of Christians from the Global South into our communities. We are no longer the geographical heartland of the Christian faith, but some from the new Christian heartland are coming to live with us.

The story of Christianity is one of repeated creative interactions with new cultures and languages, with different communal traditions and patterns of thought. Christianity is an incarnational faith that keeps “taking on flesh” in new contexts. Missiologist Andrew Walls notes that there seems to be “some inherent fragility, some built-in vulnerability” implied in this interacting, incarnational faith. Christianity's expansion has generally been serial, not progressive. That is,

the Christian faith advances, but it also recedes. Think, for example, of churches in northern Africa, whose Greek- and Latin- and indigenous language-communities were for centuries the heartland of Christianity. There is barely a trace of them now. Think of all the magnificent cathedrals of Europe that now draw more tourists than worshipers. The Christian faith advances and recedes. Furthermore, Walls notes that “the recessions typically take place in the Christian heartlands, in the areas of greatest Christian strength and influence,...while the advances typically take place at or beyond its periphery.”² So this continuing process of crossing cultural boundaries has been important not only for the spread of Christianity but even for its historical survival.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY HAS A CENTRIFUGAL FORCE

What is a Christian? A first answer to our question is that Christian identity has a centrifugal force. It is not a private treasure to be guarded. Instead, as recent missional theologies of the church assert, Christian identity is inherently communicative. This communicative character is a matter of receiving as well as giving. As the quotation from Bediako points out, the faith’s boundary crossing requires more than simply the imposition of an established set of Christian practices from one culture into a new environment, though that is often where the process starts. Boundary crossing ultimately requires a creative retranslation in which both the receiving culture and the self-understanding of Christianity are changed through their interaction. Bediako encourages us to ask: How would the festival of Odwira be changed if Christians appropriated it theologically? And how would Christianity change if the celebration of this West African festival became part of Christian practice?

As Walls insists, “Christian faith must go on being translated, must continually enter into vernacular culture and interact with it, or it withers and fades.”³ This is not a recent phenomenon in the history of Christianity; it goes all the way back to the beginning. Even in the New Testament itself, the teachings of Jesus are transmitted in translated form. The contemporary shift in gravity toward the Global South points us to something that has always been true: Christianity is an essentially vernacular faith that can take root and flourish in many different contexts. The identity of Christian faith is inherently dynamic, not fixed by geography, language, or culture.

A CHRISTIAN IS ROOTED IN A COMMUNITY OF WORD AND SACRAMENT

What is a Christian? A second answer is that a Christian is one who is rooted in a worshipping community of word and sacrament.

²Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 29, 30.

³Ibid., 29.

1. *One who reads Scripture*

A Christian is one who reads Scripture. But here too the practices of our brothers and sisters in the new Christian heartlands are expanding our understandings of the Bible. The world of Scripture is not a closed, self-contained world. The Bible is a text in conversation with itself, an intricate tapestry of revisions, retellings, and reappropriations. It is also an interactive text, in conversation both with its contemporaneous neighbors and with centuries of readers. In Martin Luther's compelling words, "The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me."⁴ We can see this keenly when we look at what happens when the living word of Scripture crosses cultural boundaries. Texts of Scripture that are dormant in one cultural setting spring to life in another. Texts that are ensconced in particular theological traditions take on fresh meaning in new social contexts. Let us look at a couple examples from the Southern Hemisphere churches.

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The churches of the Global South are drawing deeply on the wisdom traditions of Scripture. Biblical books that many Western Christians have pushed to the back of the drawer, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, for example, are much more central for Southern Christians. One of the attractions of the biblical Wisdom literature is its ability to function in a deeply multifaith environment, which is the reality for most of the world's Christians. The guidance biblical Wisdom literature offers is not restricted to Israel but finds a hearing among many peoples; it borrows and echoes the insights of other cultures and traditions. The African theologian Mercy Ambe Oduyoye tells how she discovered this feature of the book of Proverbs while still a girl attending a Methodist boarding school in Kumasi, Ghana. "I remember clearly our morning ritual assembly for prayers and announcements. Each girl, in turn, was required to recite a biblical text. It was our tradition to quote from the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or the Sermon on the Mount; the book of Proverbs was our favourite." That was because proverbs were already part of their culture, and so in a pinch "we school girls could easily get away with converting Akan proverbs into King James language and then simply inventing chapter and verse numbers."⁵

Biblical texts that are familiar to Northern Hemisphere Christians also acquire fresh meaning when read with new eyes. For example, when a group of contemporary Latin American theologians reflects on the Great Commission text in Matt 28:19–20, what jumps out at them is the mandate to teach people to obey eve-

⁴Cited in Thomas S. Kepler, ed., *The Table Talk of Martin Luther* (New York: Dover, 2005) 197.

⁵Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 91.

rything that Jesus has commanded. This reading expands the Great Commission beyond an exclusive emphasis on personal conversion to the broader economic and social concerns that characterized much of Jesus' teaching.⁶ Christians are to proclaim God's gracious intentions for human communities, with all that means, as Jesus proclaims in Luke 4:18–19, for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed.

As Philip Jenkins reminds us, in many ways the world depicted in the Bible is much closer to the lives of Southern Christians than it is to us. For millions of these readers

the Bible is congenial because the world it describes is marked by such familiar pressing problems as famine and plague, poverty and exile, clientelism and corruption. A largely poor readership can readily identify with the New Testament society of peasants and small craftspeople dominated by powerful landlords and imperial forces, by networks of debt and credit. In such a context, the excruciating poverty of a Lazarus eating the crumbs beneath the rich man's table is not just an archaeological curiosity.⁷

What is a Christian? If the answer involves living close to the witness of Scripture, then we can learn much from our brothers and sisters of the Global South. It is always tempting for well-established churches to domesticate Scripture by tucking away parts of the canon we deem irrelevant and by finding comforting ways of interpreting discomfiting texts. Bible study in communities of the like-minded has its place. But it does not bear the same gracious promise of enriching our understandings and correcting our misunderstandings as studying the Bible in a diverse community of readers. Of course, all readings of Scripture are culturally inflected and therefore partial. But in their fresh readings of the Bible, Christians of the Global South give us new evidence that Scripture's ability to speak and run after and lay hold of us is never exhausted.

2. *One who participates in a sacramental community*

Along with reading Scripture, what is a Christian? Someone who participates in a sacramental community. Here too the practices of the Southern churches challenge us theologically. One example is the eucharistic practice and theology that has developed in the 1990s in eastern Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe. There is a group of churches in Zimbabwe called the AAEC: the Association of African Earth-keeping Churches. They are a group of African Independent Churches (that is, churches that have no ties to historically Western churches) that wanted to respond to the desperate ecological problems of Zimbabwe: drought, deforestation, misapportionment and misuse of land. They have responded ecologically on vari-

⁶C. René Padilla and Tetsunao Yamamori, eds., *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones Kairós, 2004).

⁷Philip Jenkins, "Liberating Word: The Power of the Bible in the Global South," *Christian Century* 123/14 (July 11, 2006) 22–23. See also Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

ous fronts, but one way has been the development of what is called “a eucharist of tree planting.”

The African Independent Churches in Zimbabwe were involved in the war of liberation in what was then Rhodesia. The Shona word for this war of liberation was *chimurenga*. After political independence had been achieved, these Christians decided that a new war of liberation was needed, a new *chimurenga*. But this time it would be the “war of the trees.” Their prophetic goal was to liberate the ravaged earth in their country by the planting of indigenous trees. (One of the problems in colonial Rhodesia was that the European settlers had planted foreign species of trees that needed too much water for that climate and had crowded out native species). Since the late 1980s when this Earthkeeping movement started, more than eight million trees have been planted.

“the African Earthkeeping churches see the church’s mission as being toward the whole creation, not only the human part”

This has been an ecumenical enterprise. Numerous churches join together for these eucharistic services. In addition, groups from the traditional religions who share ecological concerns are also invited to participate, in recognition that these ecological problems are too big for any one faith community to address on its own. The African Earthkeeping churches are largely charismatic churches who emphasize personal holiness and conversion. But they see the church’s mission as being toward the whole creation, not only the human part. The whole world has been called to communion, to share in the restoration promised by the redeeming work of Christ.

The Eucharist is held outside, under large tents. The eucharistic liturgy starts with digging holes for new seedlings and fencing in a new woodlot, called “the Lord’s Acre.” At the communion table, tree seedlings and sacramental elements stand side by side. The public confession of sins that precedes the Eucharist includes ecological sins, such as random tree-felling, practices that encourage soil erosion, and so on. Communicants then proceed to the communion table, seedling in hand, as if to draw creation symbolically into communion with Christ, the redeemer of all creation. Christ is praised as Earthkeeper, the One in whom all things hold together, and who promises healing for the whole cosmos. After partaking of the elements, they move from the communion table to “the Lord’s Acre,” where the communicants address the seedlings to be planted as their fellow creatures, saying:

You, tree, my brother...my sister
Today I plant you in this soil
I shall give water for your growth
Have good roots to keep the soil from eroding
Have many branches and leaves so that we can

Sit in your shade
Breathe fresh air
And find firewood.

The liturgy ends with a healing ceremony for afflicted Earthkeepers, including the laying-on of hands and sprinkling of holy water and prayers, all accompanied by song and dance. The communion service derives from and reenacts the healing ministry of Christ. It is proclamation of good news to all creation.⁸

Compared to these Zimbabwean celebrations, the typical Western celebration of the Eucharist can seem shrunken. In North American megachurches it is often reduced to a private moment of communion with Jesus. But even in more liturgical North American churches, a sense of communion rarely extends beyond the congregation to the whole body of Christians, much less to the whole human family or the whole created order. How would our sense of Eucharist—thanksgiving—be expanded if we celebrated communion in the presence of Christ the Earthkeeper?

Another notable feature of the African Earthkeeping Eucharist is that the responsibility for sacramental leadership is assumed by the laity. Instead of a single ordained leader presiding at the table of grace, the sacramental tree-planting actions belong to the whole church as they enact and proclaim Christ's presence in the world. The laity all function as priests mediating God's grace to the neglected and abused world. In most American churches the Lord's table is the place where the boundary between lay and ordained is drawn most clearly. How would our sense of the Lord's table change if the laity saw themselves as sacramental leaders toward the whole creation? To return to our larger question, "What is a Christian?" the African Earthkeeping churches show us that the answer involves a vibrant sense of the priesthood of all believers in our communion with each other and with God's whole creation.

"The whole history of the church belongs to the whole church." How do we live into that conviction today, when the maps of the church are changing so rapidly? Embracing the whole history of the church can be a rather unsettling prospect. A contemporary Christian theologian from Papua, John Kadiba, proclaims Jesus Christ as the Coconut of Life and suggests that kaukau, or sweet potato, take the place of bread at communion services in his community.¹⁰ But those adaptations seem minor compared to the "health and wealth" versions of the gospel attracting thousands upon thousands of believers in Latin America and Africa. With the bewildering and shifting array of Christian practices and beliefs in today's church, it is tempting to reject the idea that the whole history of the church belongs

⁸This account is based on Marthinus L. Daneel, *African Earthkeepers: Wholistic Interfaith Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001) 167–174.

⁹Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996) 145.

¹⁰John Kadiba, "In Search of a Melanesian Theology," in G. W. Trompf, *The Gospel Is Not Western: Black Theologies from the Southwest Pacific* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987) 145–146.

to the whole church and settle for a little bit of the history of the church for our little bit of the church. Or it may be tempting to daydream about a church that is less volatile, less alien to our established ecclesiological sensibilities. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that this is unhelpful, even dangerous, for the building up of the church: “Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.”¹¹

“Christians from other times and places have had reservations about the forms Christian faith takes when it crosses cultural boundaries”

It may also be helpful to remember that Christians from other times and places have had similar reservations about the forms Christian faith takes when it crosses cultural boundaries. Andrew Walls notes that the leaders in the cultured, well-organized Christian centers in fifth-century Italy and Gaul must have scratched their heads and clucked their tongues over their “barbarian” colleagues in the North. What did they make, Walls wonders, of a figure like Patrick of Ireland, with his bad Latin and shady past, his charismatic reliance on dreams as channels of God’s revelation, “his vivid description of his being transfixed by the devil descending like a great rock upon his chest”? It was clear that Patrick’s Christian faith was not patterned on the forms that had developed in the sophisticated literary civilizations of North Africa. It must have been difficult for educated, established Christians to curb feelings of disapproval and condescension toward uncouth new converts like Patrick. But as Walls notes, a millennium and a half later, when those north African communities were long gone, “missionaries from Patrick’s own land were to express reservations about the products of African and Pacific Christianity not unlike those raised about Patrick and his like.”¹²

Indeed, one of the things we confessional Protestants have to contribute in the midst of the global explosion of independent and Pentecostal churches is the sense of the importance of connection to the wider church. We consider ourselves part of the universal church of Jesus Christ, without making ourselves coincident with it, much less attempting to take over other churches. As the term “church” embraces an ever-widening variety of Christian communities, from African Independent to Greek Orthodox, from Roman Catholic to Pentecostal, this ecclesial splintering is a cause for deep concern. How can the communion essential for Christian identity flourish under these circumstances? How can we retain a deep sense of mutual accountability among Christians of all times and places, including those who will come after us? How can we avoid the temptations of isolation and

¹¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 5, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 36.

¹²Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 75.

indifference? This responsibility falls to both long-established Christian communities and to newer, rapidly growing ones. No part of Christ's body, past or present, can say to another, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor 12:21).

The problem is that this is precisely the message we confessional Protestants sometimes hear from Christians in the Global South. What use are your carefully articulated confessional distinctions between Presbyterianism and Anglicanism in the African context? Why do Christians in the South Pacific need to read John Wesley or Martin Luther? I suggest that we hear these blunt questions as a call to repentance. Repentance for the ways in which we have stifled Christian witness to the non-Western world because of our insular approach to denominational differences. Repentance for the ways we have assumed an asymmetrical relationship with our fellow Christians in the South, insisting that they needed our theological insight, but we did not need theirs. On this last point, the words of Kenyan theologian John Mbiti bear repeating:

Theologians from the new (or younger) churches have made their pilgrimages to the theological learning of the older churches. We had no alternative. We have eaten theology with you; we have drunk theology with you; we have dreamed theology with you. But it has all been one-sided; it has all been, in a sense, your theology....We know you theologically. The question is, do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically?¹³

As we from the older churches ponder what it means to be a Christian, our answer to the younger churches has to be yes, we would like to know you theologically. We need your witness to broaden our Christian self-understanding. As we demonstrate humble attentiveness to how the younger churches can enrich us, they may come to recognize that we too can enrich them. Not because we are older and richer but because we are, with them, part of this unlikely company of saints who have received and answered the same invitation from God.

That divine invitation is really the central answer to the question, What is a Christian? The most essential reality of our faith is that God has gathered us together as a people who by the power of the Spirit proclaim the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Rowan Williams insists, "the Church's life develops as we slowly and clumsily start working on the ways we recognize each other as called by the same God and Saviour." We hold to Scripture and sacraments as the essential common language God has given us. We see our brothers and sisters in the Global South as desired guests at the Lord's table. We see them as essential companions in the reading of Scripture. We will not be surprised if the responses to this divine call do not all look or feel the same. All of these communal manifestations of what it is to be a Christian are to be valued as "what happens when the invitation of Jesus is received and people recognize it in each other."¹⁴ What is a Christian? One

¹³Quoted in Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 155.

¹⁴Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, Presidential address, General Synod, York, England, 14 July 2003.

who lives in the communal space that God has cleared, surrounded by the bewildering array of people who are sharing this space by God's invitation, not ours.

We began by noting that Christian identity is centrifugal, always reaching across cultural boundaries, and that this has been crucial to Christianity's very survival. We affirmed, second, that to be a Christian is to be gathered in the worshipping community of word and sacrament. In these face-to-face communities Christians live into their particular confessional and cultural identities, which can often look surprisingly different from each other. But word and sacraments also provide the common language for all Christians. Christians are those who, across their many differences, affirm and recognize in each other the common call of God in Jesus Christ.

A CRITICAL DIMENSION

There is one more dimension of what it is to be a Christian that I want to lift up, and that is the critical dimension. Here Christians critically reflect on their common life and convictions, searching for coherence, but also alert for signs of corruption and neglect. They repent of what they have done, and what they have left undone. Traditional marks and images of the church that point toward its ultimate perfection and glorification—unity and holiness, for example—are claimed in hope and appraised in honest recognition of the church's present failings. In its critical dimension the church declares both its highest ideals and its openness to always being reformed in accordance with God's word by the Holy Spirit.

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This critical dimension would be much simpler to enact if God had seen fit to provide a perfect blueprint for Christian community, a complete set of operating instructions for the Christian life. Lacking that, we have to depend on each other for correction and guidance. As North American Protestants we have tended to frame our understanding of Christian identity around certain geographical, cultural, and confessional distinctives. It has been tempting to assume that these distinctives have a privileged status for answering the question, “What is a Christian?” That is, a privileged status not just for us, but for all Christians, in perpetuity. That illusion was possible to keep alive when our confessional traditions enjoyed a certain demographic and fiscal dominance in the world church. But with that dominance eroding we can more clearly recognize that our particular answers about Christian identity are part of a larger whole. Christians from the Global South are exploring areas where Western theology has no answers, because it has no questions.¹⁵ But as

¹⁵Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 146.

Western Christians like us hear the theological reflections of our brothers and sisters in the churches of the Global South, we too may start to ask new theological questions and find new answers.

I do not mean to imply that the answers we have developed in our Protestant confessional traditions are now outmoded or unimportant. Far from it. In some reflections on Reformed identity the theologian Eberhard Busch writes, “Despite their ‘defects and mistakes,’ Reformed Christians have a right to believe that they are not descended from bad parents.”¹⁶ The same goes for Lutheran, Methodist, and Mennonite Christians: whatever their failings, they have the right to believe that they are not descended from bad parents. They have reason to value their confessional heritage and its particular contribution to the global body of Christ. The challenge is to do it with grace and humility, devoid of the arrogance that would assume the right to moderate the entire Christian conversation.

Each member of Christ’s body has particular theological resources for exercising this critical dimension of Christian identity. I read somewhere that when Rowan Williams was asked what purpose the Protestant churches have, he replied, “To maintain the peccability of the church,” that is, the church’s proneness to sin. I can certainly affirm that answer for my own Reformed tradition of Protestantism. We have been standard bearers for the peccability of the church, and often dramatic illustrations of it as well. This conviction of the church’s peccability has helped Reformed Protestants remember that the Reformed church is not the end of the ways of God. It is rather a pilgrim community on the way to the ultimate redemption God intends, surrounded by a vast multitude of fellow travelers. As the body of Christ, it is a broken and diseased body, mirroring the ills and divisions of the larger society; yet by God’s grace it is gathered together for common praise and common confession of sins. The church hears the law both as an indictment of its shortcomings and as a gracious guide for a life pleasing to God. The community joyfully receives the Lord’s Supper, not as a celebration of its spiritual maturity, but as a snack in the wilderness for those still on the way to the great eschatological banquet God promises, where they will sit elbow to elbow with God’s elect from every tongue and tribe. This is a very brief sketch of how Reformed Christians might embrace this critical dimension of Christian identity.

However, I would like to conclude by mining a different vein of theological wisdom for manifesting this critical dimension of what it is to be a Christian, one that I hope will have particular resonance among Lutherans. To be a Christian in the midst of the southward shift in the Christian center of gravity is to reject an ecclesiology of glory and embrace an ecclesiology of the cross. What does an ecclesiology of glory look like? To paraphrase Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation*, an ecclesiology of glory looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things that the church has already achieved—our exegetical

¹⁶Eberhard Busch, “Reformed Strength in Its Denominational Weakness,” in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, ed. Wallace M. Alston and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 28.

traditions, our books of confession, our structures of ministerial formation. An ecclesiology of glory admits no shame or weakness; it trusts in its proud heritage, zealously defending it against all theological encroachments. An ecclesiology of glory prefers memories of North Atlantic strength and wealth to the weakness and poverty of the Southern churches today; it prefers the wisdom of Western isolation to the folly of global solidarity. It prefers nostalgia for its glory days to Christ's invitation to take up the cross today.

By contrast, an ecclesiology of the cross comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. Having been puffed up by demographic dominance and theological pride, an ecclesiology of the cross is willing to suffer the loss of both these goods to be Christ's disciple alongside the millions of others God has called. More important than being the heartland of Christianity is having the heart to rejoice in what Christ is doing today. As Bonhoeffer says, "with Christ and the forgiveness of sins to fall back on, the church is free to give up everything else."¹⁷ An ecclesiology of the cross calls the church what it really is, "that community of human beings which has been led by the grace of Christ to the recognition of guilt toward Christ,"¹⁸ and from there to the freedom of God's abundant forgiveness.

So what is a Christian? One who reflects critically on his or her theology and practice. One who is anchored in a particular community of word and sacrament. And one who rejoices in the centrifugal power of the gospel that now, more than in any other time in Christian history, has made us each a member of the "great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb," crying "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:9–10). ☩

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¹⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Nature of the Church," in Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, eds., *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995) 87.

¹⁸Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 135.