



The Shift of Christianity to the Global South and the Need for Discipleship and Church Health

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Religious studies scholars and historians have been discussing the shift of Christianity from the Global North to the Global South since the 1950s. In the 1970s in particular, a number of Western scholars such as Edward Norman, Andrew Walls, and Walbert Bühlmann recognized this phenomenon and described the inevitability of Christianity “going south.” With his phenomenal book, *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins also asserted, “The emerging Christian world will be anchored in the southern continents.”¹ Scholars such as Dana Robert, Lamin Sanneh, David Martin, and others also joined the conversation and attempted to shift the attention of academic institutions and scholars to this new and emerging phenomenon, which they described as the “rebirth of Christianity.”²

¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 20. Jenkins’s book was named one of the top religious books of 2002 by *USA Today*.

² For more details on the shift of Christianity to the Global South, see also Dana L. Robert, “Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945,” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24, no. 2 (April 2000): 50–58; Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Robert Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches* (Oakland:

Certainly the unprecedented growth of Christianity in the Global South is the major development in modern Christianity. But this growth comes with growing pains, as the remarkable gains of the twentieth century must be solidified among these new Christians by means of intensive discipleship and an emphasis on developing healthy, sustainable churches.

What caught the attention of these and other scholars was how fast this phenomenon has been happening in the last seventy years. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were 600 million Christians in the world, and a little over 70 percent of Christians lived in the Global North. At this time, Europe still served as the center of Christian thought and expression. However, in the decades following the Second World War, the European and Euro-American churches have consistently declined in numbers, while churches in the Global South have experienced phenomenal growth and expansion. At present, over 60 percent, or two-thirds, of the Christian population lives in the Global South.³ As the Australian scholar Mark Hutchinson described, in the 1960s what many considered the death of the church through secularization turned out to be a “relocation and rebirth [of it] into the rest of the world.”⁴

According to these scholars, this phenomenon has its own implications for the development of Christian theology and global Christian practices. Andrew Walls, for example, indicated twenty-five years ago that, because of the shift of Christianity to this part of the world, “Third World theology is [more] likely to be the representative Christian theology.”⁵ According to Walls, African Christianity is “the standard Christianity of the present age, a demonstration model of its character.”⁶ He further predicted that the “future general reader of Church history is more likely to be concerned with Latin American and African, and perhaps some Asian, theology” than with the European and/or American.⁷ In addition, in 2002, he argued as follows: “The signs suggest that what Christianity of the twenty-first century will be like, in its theology, its worship, its effect on society, its penetration of new areas, whether geographically or culturally, will depend on what happens in Africa, in Latin America, and in some parts of Asia.”⁸

These scholars’ conclusions were based mainly on numerical-growth hermeneutics. In the last few decades, however, there have been discussions as to whether or not numerical-growth hermeneutics should lead to such conclusions.⁹ This article argues that for Global South Christians to take the lead in shaping the future of global Christianity, they will need to shift their focus from numerical growth (quantity) to a more holistic understanding of discipleship and church health (quality of their service). Based on a holistic approach to discipleship drawn

University of California Press, 2009); and Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009).

³ Bryant Myers, *Engaging Globalization: The Poor, Christian Mission, and Our Hyperconnected World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 197. The primary data source for this analysis is the World Christian Database, an exhaustive repository of demographic and institutional indicators on world religions by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

⁴ Quoted in Elijah Kim, *The Rise of the Global South: The Decline of Western Christendom and the Rise of Majority World Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), xiii.

⁵ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 10.

⁶ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 119.

⁷ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 10.

⁸ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 32.

⁹ Frans Wijsen and Robert Screiter, eds. *Global Christianity: Contested Claims* (New York: Rodopi, 2007).

from the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, the article proposes a more comprehensive approach to Christian ministry in the Global South.

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THE SHIFT OF CHRISTIANITY TO THE GLOBAL SOUTH

As the Swiss scholar Walbert Bühlmann rightly indicated, we are at a time when we are witnessing “the coming of the Third Church.” For Bühlmann, Christian church history can be divided into three parts: the first thousand years under the domain of the Eastern church, the era beginning with the Second Millennium, when the West became the center of Christian faith, and the present time—“the Third Millennium [which began under] the leadership of the Third Church, the Southern Church.”¹⁰ He further emphasizes that “the most important drives and inspirations for the whole church in the future will come from the Third Church.”¹¹ As Walls also indicated, “the study of Christian history and theology will increasingly need to operate from the position where most Christians are, and that will increasingly be the lands and islands of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific.”¹²

The twentieth century, however, began with the Western world being the center of Christianity, and no missionaries or scholars could have predicted that the end of the century would be any different. When the Edinburgh Missionary Council (EMC) took place in 1910, Europe was 90 percent Christian, and only 9.4 percent of Africans were Christians.¹³ What one can understand from the conversations among missionaries at the EMC was that they had given up on Africa. Even though Asia was about 2.4 percent Christian, missionaries had little hope that Asians might open their doors to the Christian faith. Most missionaries predicted that Islam would take over most parts of Africa and that the remaining parts would rather hold on to their traditional religions than embrace Christianity.¹⁴ The end of the century, however, was a surprise not only for missionaries who predicted the opposite, but also for historians and other scholars who later would

¹⁰ Walbert Bühlmann, *The Church of the Future: A Model for the Year 2001* (Markynoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 6.

¹¹ Bühlmann, *The Church of the Future*, 6.

¹² Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 47.

¹³ Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, eds. *Atlas of Global Christianity: 1910–2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Scott Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century: The Reversal and Transformation of Global Christianity, 1900–2000* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), xvi.

witness the shift of the majority of Christians from the Northern Atlantic to the Southern Hemisphere and Asia.

The twenty-first century began with 48 percent of Africans identifying themselves as Christians, and 9 percent of Asians. Christianity in Europe, however, began to decline steadily with less than 84 percent identifying themselves as Christians.¹⁵ In 2014, Latin America surpassed Europe and became the continent with the largest number of Christians. A few years later, Africa surpassed Latin America. In 2018, 599 million Christians lived in Africa, while 597 million lived in Latin America. As Jenkins predicted in 2002, the number of Christians in Europe continued to decline by 20 percent.¹⁶ Europe now has the third-largest Christian population, with 550 million Christians. At the present time, roughly two of every three Christians live in the Global South, with Africa and Latin America having the largest Christian presence.¹⁷ According to Jenkins, by 2050, “only about one-fifth of the world’s three billion Christians will be non-Hispanic whites.”¹⁸

According to the current statistics by the Pew Research Center, the United States and Germany are the only Global North countries listed among the top ten with the highest number of self-identifying Christians. Brazil, Mexico, Russia, the Philippines, Nigeria, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ethiopia fill the rest of the table.¹⁹ If one were to consider active Christians as opposed to self-identifying Christians, the number would be even more different. It is not that difficult to observe that a larger number of people is attending church in Africa and Asia than in Europe. Indeed, there is a larger number of people attending church in Addis Ababa, Dar es Salaam, and Seoul than in Rome, Wittenberg, or Geneva. Looking at these numbers, one can easily see that the center of gravity is moving away from a European Christian core to the Global South.

What prompted such a numerical growth of Christians in the Global South? Two of the main factors are the missional nature of the congregations and the population growth in the Global South. What I mean by the missional nature of congregations is the commitment of Christians in these congregations to proclaim the gospel. Generally, members of congregations in the Global South take the Great Commission very seriously, so that they actively participate in reaching out to unreached communities.²⁰

The second main factor is population growth. Christianity is presently growing only in those parts of the world where the population itself is growing. In 1900, 25 percent of the world’s population was European, 60 percent Asian, and only 7 percent African. By 2000, this figure had changed dramatically: only 14 percent

¹⁵ Johnson and Ross, *Atlas of Global Christianity*.

¹⁶ This was also Jenkins’ prediction in 2002. See Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 3.

¹⁷ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 3.

¹⁸ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 3.

¹⁹ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2011), 11.

²⁰ Samuel Deressa, *Leadership Formation in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (PhD diss., Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, 2017).

were European (including Russia), but 54 percent were Asian and 10 percent, African. Today, 59.5 percent of the world's population is Asian, and 17.2 percent is African. Europeans comprise only 9.6 percent of world's population. By 2050, that figure is projected to be only 6 percent of the world's population, while Africa will be up to almost 22 percent.²¹ The growth of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America is therefore the result of both population growth and the Christianization of those continents. Likewise, the decline in the number of Christians in Europe is the result of both a decline in the European population and a de-Christianization of Europe.

What should we make of these numbers? With regard to the projections about the future of Christianity, it is important to note that all of these are merely estimates based on the statistics. As Jenkins himself has emphasized, statistics and projections related to matters of religious beliefs are notoriously unreliable.²² The only fact that we can learn from the statistics is that the Global South has more Christians than the Global North, which for many scholars simply means that Western Christianity is no longer the defining center of the religion.²³ However, can the statistics indicate anything more than the numerical shift of Christianity?

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For Jenkins, this shift of Christianity to the Global South has major implications for the future of Christianity. What is expected next, according to Jenkins, is “a period of mutual discovery” among Christians from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, which will result in an “overarching *unity* and focus of loyalty transcending mere kingdoms.”²⁴ With this unity, they will establish a new axis that represents a realignment of the center of Christian culture and tradition from the Global North to the Global South. According to Jenkins, “once that axis is established, we really would be speaking of a new Christendom, based in the Southern Hemisphere.”²⁵

However, looking at the strategies and the focus of Christian churches in the Global South, I would say that Jenkins's prediction is unlikely to happen any time soon. Without adopting a deliberate strategy that emphasizes discipleship

²¹ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 3.

²² Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 85–89.

²³ See Arland Jacobson and James Aageson eds. *The Future of Lutheranism in a Global Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 12ff.

²⁴ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 14. Emphasis mine.

²⁵ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 16.

and church health, it is unlikely that Christian churches in the Global South will form a strong Christian culture that will lead to developing a centralized authority that might transition into a “new Christendom.” Numerical growth is important. However, as Christian Schwarz rightly states, “numerical growth seems to be just a side issue—albeit an important one—of church development. It is not a strategic goal, but one of many natural consequences of a church’s health to experience growth.”²⁶

For most churches in the Global South, a numerical approach is the essence of the church’s mission, and evangelism, as reaching out to the unreached communities, has been a primary goal.²⁷ But there is interest in numbers only because numbers represent people who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. The mission of the church involves both evangelism and discipleship (Matt 28:19). The church is called and sent into the world to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to experience the power of the gospel, which shapes human life into the likeness of Christ and shapes growth into being disciples. Only when the church understands the inseparability of these two missions—evangelism and nurturing people’s discipleship—can it experience healthy growth.

It is important to note that numbers measure the *breadth* of church expansion. What this approach neglects is the *depth* of impact that the Christian witness is having on the society at large, particularly as it relates to nurturing the faith of the Christian community and helping people grow into being Christ’s disciples. In other words, focusing on numerical growth alone ignores leadership development and the cultivation or enriching of the spiritual life of members.

Numerical growth must not be taken as an indication of maturity or well-being, which are two qualities required for discipleship and global leadership. For the church in the Global South to take the lead in shaping the future of Christianity, it must redirect its focus from numerical growth to the quality of service it provides and to its theological vitality. Below, based on the holistic approach to discipleship in the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, I will argue that the focus on disciple-making ministry rather than on numerical growth will help the church in the Global South to play an important role in the twenty-first century.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO DISCIPLESHIP IN LUKE AND ACTS

Discipleship is about forming and equipping people for God’s mission through shared life, embodying the purpose and direction of the triune God. The life of discipleship is modeled in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and demonstrated in

²⁶ Christian A. Schwarz. *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resource, 1996), 8–9.

²⁷ Samuel Deressa, “Church and State in Ethiopia: The Contribution of the Lutheran Understanding of the Community of Grace,” in *Word & World* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2017); see also Ezekiel Gebissa, “The EECMY between Indigeneity and Globalism: Re-Measuring Growth, Re-Visioning Mission, Recasting Leadership,” in *Theological Praxis: Journal of Gudina Tumsa Theological Forum*, vol. 2, ed. Samuel Deressa (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012).

the post-Pentecost community. The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts emphatically speak to the significance of discipleship for Christian ministry. Compared to the Gospel of Mark, where disciples are presented as objects of persistent criticism, Luke and Acts present discipleship as a model of what it means to be a true follower of Jesus. In addition, Acts presents an account of healthy growth in terms both of people and of the broader influence of the gospel.

In Luke's Gospel, central to the ministry of Jesus is his intention to form a Christian community that would later be called a "church." It demonstrates how Jesus impacted and equipped his disciples. For Luke, discipleship is not just about becoming a follower of Jesus, but rather a desire to "be with" Jesus, which involves allowing oneself to be restored by his message.²⁸ We find Jesus calling and taking time with twelve disciples to teach, form, and empower them in their ministries to the world. Teaching by example, in both words and deeds, is evident in his entire ministry as a teacher-leader (Luke 24:19). His disciples learned from him by listening to his teaching, observing the way he interacted with people without any distinction, and working under their Lord's supervision.²⁹ Jesus not only engaged his disciples on a one-to-one basis; he also nurtured their faith as a community. For him, it was vital for them to be in fellowship with him, as well as with one another. The disciples were called to be like Jesus, as leaders with good vision (Luke 6:39–40).

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In Acts, these disciples followed Jesus's example and formed communities to empower ministry. Luke provides a living example of how the disciples followed Jesus's model in forming and empowering missional communities to be demonstrations of God's reign in the midst of the world. In fact, as Darrell Guder emphasizes, "the Scriptures' collective purpose was the continuing formation of already-missional communities for faithful and obedient witness."³⁰

²⁸ Isac du Pessis, "Discipleship according to Luke's Gospel," *R and T* 2, no. 1 (1995): 58–71; A. McFadyen, "Truth as Mission: The Christian Claim to Universal Truth in a Pluralist Public World," in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46, no.1: 437–56.

²⁹ Eddie Gibbs, *LeadershipNext: Changing Leaders in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 17.

³⁰ Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 66.

In Acts, the expression of Jesus's teaching in the life and ministry of the disciples is shown. Acts begins with a story about how the twelve apostles of Jesus had a change of status "from being . . . followers to becoming the leaders of a Christian community."³¹ This story is followed by how others also transitioned from simply being the followers of Jesus to making disciples through mutual care and companionship.

In Acts there are also many references to numerical growth.³² However, in addition to numerical growth, Luke describes growth in terms of the broader influence of the gospel. These influences are described with a three-dimensional ministry of the disciples: evangelistic, fellowship (communion), and prophetic. The evangelistic aspect of the church's ministry is vividly expressed in Acts, where the disciples are described as those committed to *teaching and preaching*—"the word of God" (Acts 6:2) and the ministry of "prayer and . . . serving the word" (Acts 6:4). In Acts, Luke emphasizes the story of the actual lives of the apostles as they focus on teaching amid the ongoing life of the Christian community. In Ephesus, Paul taught continually for two years (Acts 19:10). Apollos, having been instructed by Priscilla and Aquila, was also engaged in teaching the word of God (Acts 18:24–28). These and similar stories about the commitment of the apostles to teach and instruct the church show Luke's intention to illustrate that making disciples is essential to the nourishment and guidance of the believing community.

The social ministry of the church is described in Acts within the *fellowship and communion* shared among believers. One of the areas on which Luke focuses while describing the life and ministry of the apostles in Acts is that they devoted themselves to fellowship, the breaking of bread, and helping the needy (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37). They had "all things in common" to the extent that they were "one heart and soul" (Acts 2:44; 4:32).³³ This expression of fellowship in Acts is reinforced by the observation that the communal life of believers carries on the pattern of Jesus's fellowship with his disciples, "sinners," and social outcasts. In the Gospel of Luke, this fellowship is expressed in relation to the coming of the kingdom of God, in that the kind of fellowship Jesus and his disciples share with others is an expression of the anticipation of the fellowship of the new age.³⁴

The socioeconomic and transformational ministry of the church, which others describe as the *prophetic role* the church plays among the community it serves, is demonstrated in the life and ministry of the apostles of Jesus Christ, since the mission for which they are being commissioned is the same as that attributed to

³¹ Nelson P. Estrada, *From Followers to Leaders: The Apostles in the Ritual of Status Transformation in Acts 1–2* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 7.

³² See Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 11:21; 13:48–49; 14:1; and others.

³³ For further reading on this particular aspect of the ministry of the church, see David Lyon Bartlett, *Ministry in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 134–145.

³⁴ See Jesus's parable in Luke 16:9. Jesus's last meal with his disciples can also be considered as a celebration of the new age—where the "sinners" and the social outcasts are welcomed into the fellowship of God (Luke 5:33–39; 15:1–32).

Jesus: healing the sick, casting out demons, and preaching the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:11; and 11:20).

CONSIDERING HOLISTIC DISCIPLESHIP FOR CHURCHES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

One of the main reasons churches in the Global South are growing is their emphasis on evangelism, which is the proclamation of the gospel by all Christians to all people. This proclamation is in response to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ as stated in Matthew 28:18–20. What I have come to experience after having lived in the United States for the last nine years, and having visited European countries also, is that the sense of the proclamation of the gospel is not strong among Western Christians. Non-Western Christians, on the other hand, are committed to engaging their community with the gospel. Women in particular play a major role in creating social networks and small prayer and Bible study groups through which they bear witness to Christ to people in their communities. The other strength of churches in the Global South is their emphasis on lay ministry. Because they are good at utilizing the gift of the laity respectfully, they are able to reach multitudes and grow in large numbers. Men and women, lay and ordained, youth and children are all given the opportunity to serve and to be witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ in their communities.

What is lacking, however, is the broader influence of the church in the community it serves. This problem is associated with the church's focus on the numerical growth of church membership at the expense of discipleship ministry and the impact of the church on society. The emphasis on numerical growth is based on an understanding of the primary task of mission as evangelism and incorporating new believers into the body of Christ. Other tasks of the church—such as developing disciples, social responsibilities, and the church's role in development—are taken as either secondary roles or unimportant.³⁵

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³⁵ Samuel Deressa, "Church and Development in Ethiopia: The Contribution of Gudina Tumsa's Holistic Theology," in *Lutheran Mission Matters* 25, no. 1 (Issue 50; May 2017), 150–66.

When looking at the New Testament, as Lawrence O. Richards and others have rightly described, growth is described both numerically and “also of maturity and consolation of the community in Christ from which good works naturally grow.”³⁶ We learn from the life of the disciples in Luke and Acts that Christian leaders and ministers are called both to engage their context with the gospel and to lead the community in being formed into the likeness of Jesus Christ in becoming disciples. The formation of missional churches was founded on the focus of disciples on changing people’s lives in the power of the word of God and on their commitment to following the leadership of the Spirit. As Roxburgh describes, we learn from the ministry of the disciples that “leadership [in the Christian church] is a calling that both engages the context with the gospel and leads in the formation of a disciplined community [called disciples].”³⁷

In order for the church in the Global South to become strong in its internal and global leadership, and to have major impact on the communities it serves, it needs to reassess its matrix of numerical growth by supplementing measures that take account of the church’s capacity to teach, lead, and help its members experience spiritual growth and maturity. As healthy growth is displayed in its multiple forms in Acts, it should also be true for churches in our present context.

In Luke and Acts, the emergence of the disciples and others appointed as leaders happened within the communal setting, where mutual care and responsibility were exercised. All members of the community devoted themselves to fellowship, prayer, and studying the word of God. Each participated in the leadership, for everyone had the gift of the Spirit. This communal practice of discipleship is integral to the believing community’s participation in God’s mission. It is within this relational context of the common experience of faith that spiritual growth takes place. This is what churches in the Global South need to focus on, namely, nurturing the faith of the believing community and helping Christians grow into mature leaders who can effect change in their communities.

Churches in the Global South should also shift their focus to how they can be theologically equipped to live up to their prophetic task—how they can maintain their true biblical image as prophetic churches. To use Gary Simpson’s term in *Critical Social Theory*, they should be enabled to step into their role as “prophetic companions” in the public sphere.³⁸ This is what we observe in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus was holistic in his ministry. He came to this world to restore his people through the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:16–21). This restoration is to be manifested in the lives of the poor and the oppressed as compassion and justice prevail. Not only did Jesus engage the disciples with spoken words, but Christ,

³⁶ Larry Richards and Clyde Hoeldtke, *A Theology of Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 45.

³⁷ Alan J. Roxburgh, “Missional Leadership: Equipping God’s People for Mission,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 212.

³⁸ Gary Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

God's gift to humanity, also came as a servant and shared his own self, laying down his life for all.

For the church in the Global South to take the lead in shaping the future of global Christianity, it must shift its focus from numerical growth to a more holistic approach of disciple-making ministry. Making this shift invites leaders and theologians of the church to assess systematically why they are unprepared to assume the global leadership that their size warrants, and to prepare for the future.

Most churches in the Global South measure the essence of the church in relation to numerical growth. However, as I have tried to show in this article, churches should be active in making disciples of Jesus and in ministries that have meaningful impact on the believing community and the larger society. As Luther emphasized, Christians are able to make a meaningful impact on others when they “‘humble themselves’ . . . , take on ‘the form of a servant,’ ‘be made in human form and found in human vesture,’ and serve, help, and do everything for their neighbor, just as they see God has done and does with them through Christ.”³⁹ ☩

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³⁹ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian 1520: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, trans. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), § 97.