

# 2nd Opinion: Place Christ at the center of life

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I have spent much of the summer reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. The great German theologian emphasizes the need for Jesus Christ to be at the center, rather than the margins, of life. In fact, he is concerned about the enterprise of ethics, as traditionally understood, because he reads it as focusing unduly on tough quandaries that emerge at the borderlines of life.

Bonhoeffer says ethicists often are guilty of drawing people's attention to the rare moral crises of their lives and away from life's day-to-day experiences in which obedience to Christ must be lived out.

One might paraphrase Bonhoeffer to say authentic Christianity involves responding to all situations and people we encounter as if Jesus Christ were the central reality to be taken into account. A different way to say it would be that, for the serious Christian, Christ always stands at the center of life. All situations and people are therefore encountered in him, through him and for him.

Bonhoeffer anticipated today's focus on character ethics by describing ethics as formational rather than decisional.

Christians are those who invite Christ to take form in us. They open their lives to becoming Christ-shaped, or Christomorphic. A comprehensively Christ-shaped life is then prepared for responsible decision-making in both everyday situations and difficult borderline cases.

This vision of what really matters in Christian experience can be sharpened by contrasting it with a life in which Christ stands at the margins rather than the center. A person leading such a life turns to Christ in times of

existential crisis, but not in daily living.

When this person prays, she prays to Christ or through Christ. When he worships, he worships in a Christian church. But Christ does not serve as the organizing center of life, and Christ is not this person's central reality to be taken into account in relating to all people and situations.

This kind of marginal Christian existence ends up lacking the resources for dealing with those rare crises that do come along. Because in daily life, Christ has not taken form in such a person, there is no Christ-shaped life ready to meet the crisis when it hits. In the end, some other kind of organizing center to life is what actually functions. In some very sad cases, this kind of person has no organizing center whatsoever with which to meet such crises, and he or she is left to grasp at straws when a crisis comes.

I counseled a man who attended church irregularly but claimed to be a Christian; he had turned to me for some counsel with a difficult marriage. Beyond the interpersonal issues we discussed, I suggested now was a time in which he might want to consider turning more deeply to the resources provided by his Christian faith. I told him many committed Christians had found resources to endure a difficult season in marriage by going deeper with Christ. I thought I could suggest this because the man was indeed a self-identified Christian and was coming to me in my capacity as a Christian minister.

I was trying to say to this man something like what I am saying in this column: Consider moving Jesus Christ from the margins to the center of your life, and try to reinterpret and re-experience your reality through Christ. Sadly, when the crisis peaked, he did not move in this direction.

In a culture like ours—especially in places where some kind of Christian church can be found on every corner—a vague, residual, cultural Christianity still survives. Fully three-fourths of all Americans still say they

are Christians—with far fewer in church and far, far fewer living as if Christ were the center of their lives.

It is quite possible that the long, slow fade of Christianity in American culture will mean the Christianity that survives will be more robust. The gap between the self-identified Christian population and the Christ-centered Christian population will perhaps close. That would be a good thing, though it won't feel too good as pews get emptier and churches close down.

Bonhoeffer reminds us that whatever our brand of Christianity, our goal for ourselves and those we influence is a faith in which Christ stands at the center rather than the margins of life, with all situations encountered in him, through him and for him.

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