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Alpha and Omega – and Everything in Between

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The questions we are asking in this consultation are not addressed by the Bible in the forms we have posed them. The authors of the NT devoted a lot of energy to questions about the consequences of being followers of Jesus, the Messiah, and how his advent shaped their relationship to the people of Israel and the Gentile world. In many ways questions such as, What does it mean to be Israel; to be Jewish; to be Jewish-born followers of Jesus; or to be Gentile-born disciples? are implicit or explicit in most books of the NT. While the NT guild has dealt with such questions at length, it has less frequently paid attention to their possible ramifications: what might it mean to be human? Is one who faithfully observes Torah a good Jew, or a flourishing human being, or both? What about one who follows Jesus of Nazareth, who, according to Matthew invites people to find their rest in him, and according to John came that they might have life to the full (10:10)? What vision of human life do such passages imply?

Still, one wonders whether the NT will always prove to be an angular discourse partner whose even implicit answers to the questions of human flourishing will run counter to contemporary consumer and therapeutically oriented discourse. For if Jesus is the touchstone of human flourishing, then we must reckon with one who taught and called for and lived out a thoroughgoing dependence upon God to the point of submitting himself to a hideous death at the hands of the reigning empire and who called his followers to deny themselves and take up their own cross and follow him. In a culture that commends self-crafting, self-realization, and
self-direction, Jesus’ call and example may sound unhealthy, unpalatable and uninteresting, designed to lead not to flourishing but to the evisceration or effacement of the self.

The questions we are asking—whether and how Jesus is the model or paradigm of human flourishing, what his life reveals about the sort of creatures we are to be, and how we ought to characterize the relationship of life in Christ to the “natural ends of human flourishing”—depend in part for their answers on the prior question, Who is Jesus Christ? Who is Jesus Christ that we should even imagine that his life ought to be paradigmatic for human flourishing? There are a number of ways to frame the answer to this question. First, the NT bears witness to the breadth and depth of Christ’s relationship to the world and to humankind: from beginning to end, Christ is the source of all that is, including every human being; Christ is also the end, the telos, of all that is. Thus the witness of the Scriptures is that the “natural ends of human flourishing” are in fact always related to Christ, who is Alpha and Omega.

But, second, the NT simultaneously speaks of Jesus’ historical particularity, including his identity as a first-century Galilean Jew, his messianic vocation, his interpretation of Torah in dialogue with Pharisees, and his death on a Roman instrument of torture and execution. One could be forgiven for asking why any such historically situated individual could or should be the criterion of human flourishing. The question pertains both to proposing any particular human being as the criterion for all human flourishing, and to the embodied shape or course of Jesus’ life. Can it be said that life was “going well” for this Jesus? Given the outcome of his life, and by many modern standards, the answer might well be no. Yet Jesus calls his disciples to follow in his footsteps, because in following him there is peace, rest, joy, and life. Hence, the shape of Jesus’ own life presses the question, in what way is he the criterion of human flourishing?
Finally, the NT also speaks of being in Christ: what one receives and how one lives when one shares in his death and resurrection and participates in the community bound to him through faith. Here the authors of the NT speak of such benefits received as reconciliation with God and others, the experiences of peace, joy, and hope. At the same time, these texts call for ways of living that are marked by giving, hospitality, gratitude, kindness, patience, and even suffering: in short, ways of living that orient oneself to another—be that other God or neighbor. Human flourishing in Christ entails practices and dispositions that are learned from Christ and the pattern of his life, and cultivated with those who live in communion with Christ.

This paper will be divided into three uneven parts, treating respectively creation through Christ, the life of Christ, and what it means to be “in Christ,” considering how each might shape and define human flourishing. Unless there is some connection between Christ as the cosmic alpha and omega and his historically particular existence and what it means to be “in Christ,” then it seems perilous to talk about Christ as the criterion of human flourishing. We shall endeavor to explore, then, the ways in which discourse about being created through Christ and living in fellowship with the risen Christ are embodied in and drawn from the life of Christ.

“All Things Were Created Through Him”

In talking about the significance of Jesus Christ, various NT formulations begin where the Scriptures begin: “in the beginning.” Here they draw not only on the Scriptural portrayal of God as the creator of all things, but on subsequent Jewish monotheistic rhetoric that wedded belief in one God with God’s universal sovereignty as creator and ruler over all.\(^1\) Note that

“creator,” “universal sovereignty” and “monotheistic rhetoric” cohere. The one God is not only the source of all that is, but superintends the workings of creation as well. The (particular) God of Israel is the “living God,” who made all that is and who is sovereign over all that has been made.²

In the Psalms, we find the assertion that God created the world by his word (Ps 33:6); in Proverbs, wisdom fulfill such a role (Prov 7:22-31); in Sirach 24, it is Torah.³ In the NT, the word that mediates creation is Christ. As the one through whom the world was made, Christ (or the Logos, or the Son) now provides the “blueprint” for creation. Nothing comes into creation apart from or without Christ: “All things were made through [the Word] and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16).⁴ This means that God’s purposes in Christ are not antithetical to those embedded in creation: the creational intent of God can be known in Christ and, to turn it around, the purposes of God in Christ have been embedded in creation. Indeed, Christ is the image of God, “the exact imprint” of God’s very being, in which human beings are created (Gen 1:27; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15, 3:10). According to the NT, the “image of God” in which humankind is created (Gen 1:27) is Christ himself. Human flourishing “in Christ” will thus embody what it means for human beings to flourish as created beings, part of God’s created order.

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²Deut 5:26; Josh 3:10; 1 Sam 17:26, 36; 2 Kgs 19:4, 16; Ps 42:2, 84:2; Isa 40:18-20; 41:21-24; 44:9-20, 24; 45:16-22; 46:5-7; Jer 10:8-10, 23:36.

³These texts become particularly important in early Christological discussions, where wisdom is understood to be the pre-existent Christ (or, sometimes, the Spirit).

⁴In Hellenistic Judaism, all characterizes the scope of God’s powers: “Creator of all things” (2 Macc 1:24; cf Sir 18:1); Philo (Her. 206); Creator and Maker (Spec. 2.30; Somn. 1.76; Mut. 29; Decal. 61); planter of the world (Conf. 196); “cause of all things” (Somn. 1.67); and fountain of life (Fug. 198); Josephus (J. W. 2.131; Ag. Ap. 2.190-192).
The biblical witness to God as sovereign over all creation includes, in the NT, the mediating role of Christ in sustaining the world: Christ is the one “in whom all things hold together” (Col 1:17), the one who upholds all things (panta; Heb 1:3) Other authors put the point differently: the Son is the one to whom the Father has entrusted all authority (Matt 28:18); all things (John 3:35; 13:3, 16:15) and all people (John 17:2). If Christ is the agent of creation and of upholding the universe, then Christ also mediates the end, both in its telic and chronological senses, of human life: not only were all things created through him, but all things were created for him (Col 1:16). The world’s ends —what it is made for, and where its true destiny lies —can be found in Christ.

These “ends” are regularly described in ways that reflect the two-fold work of God in creating (or giving life) and superintending or governing the world. Thus there are a number of ways in which the NT talks about the “ends” of human life that relate those ends the origins of life: new creation; new birth; new life; life; eternal life; and renewal in the image of the creator. All these realities come about through and in Christ. Human flourishing in Christ thus draws into itself and brings to fruition, even while surpassing, the intent for human flourishing in creation. Similarly, the NT envisions the reality in which human beings participate when God brings his rule to fruition: they enter the kingdom of God, and enjoy the benefits of the everlasting reign of God, when death, sin and evil are finally overcome, and God is “all in all.”

In brief, then, God is the (creational) Alpha and (eschatological) Omega (Rev 1:8; 21:6) whose purposes are worked out through and in Christ, so that Jesus Christ, as the means by which those purposes are brought to fruition, is himself Alpha and Omega (Rev 22:13). This means that the past, present and future of humankind belong to God in Christ. Every human
being who walks the face of the earth already belongs to Jesus Christ because each human being is created and sustained through him quite apart from whether they have any knowledge of him or make any response to him. It is not faith that brings human beings into “relationship” with God, or with Christ: it is creation. Rooting any account of human flourishing in God’s creational purposes invites us to pursue the question of the paradigmatic significance of Jesus Christ for human flourishing and to assume it will, in some way, be related to, even derived from that creational intent, even if not fully realized in that intent. Here we discover why human beings who claim no religious affiliation or do not acknowledge the existence of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ may nevertheless exhibit those characteristics of human flourishing that are particularly held up in the Scriptures: they are created in the image of God, that is Jesus Christ, and they live in a world that is sustained by Christ.  

To take our bearings from the beginning, then, from the account of the creation of humankind in Genesis, we may single out the following as aspects of human flourishing or of the contexts in which it occurs. Humankind is created to belong to a world that “is very good,” and participates in the care of God’s good and fruitful earth. God’s creation is trustworthy in that it can sustain human life: but it is not without dangers that have the potential to undermine and destroy human life, let alone human flourishing. The danger posed by the serpent to Adam and Eve is the invitation to live not by the words that proceed from the mouth of God, but from bread

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5One could lodge here as well the role of God’s Spirit: God’s Spirit hovers over the chaos; God “breathes” into the man of dust so that he becomes “a living being;” God’s spirit revivifies the dry bones of Israel so that they live again: God’s spirit is the spirit of life. In the NT, of course, this is clearly visible in Jesus’ promise of the Spirit as the agency of new birth, of entry into the kingdom of God; of Paul’s description of the Spirit as the “Spirit of life” (Rom 8:2, 6, 10, etc). Human beings come into existence and life in a world infused with life by God’s spirit. See especially the work of John R. Levison at this point, Filled with the Spirit (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).
(or apricots, or whatever grew on that tree!) alone, or to live by one’s own wits and wisdom alone. Human beings are portrayed as living in a world in which God is present, walking among them: the world (or garden) is therefore holy ground. But in this garden, not only do human beings belong to God, they belong to each other: “it is not good for Man (Adam) to be alone” (Gen 2:18). From the beginning, human beings were meant to live interdependently; to live in relationships of trust with each other. When, for whatever reasons, human interdependence is severed or threatened, or the world becomes not a home but a threat, or when God’s sanctifying presence (that is, God’s holy spirit) cannot be discerned or has departed, then either life will not be “going well” and/or it will be more difficult to discern how one ought to live it well. Human beings were created to enjoy, thrive on, and cultivate the fullness of the world; they were created to be together, not alone; and they were created to live with God’s presence among them or, to turn it around, to live in the presence of God.

If we were to take our bearings from the book of Revelation, we would see a new world, recreated, a holy city coming down out of heaven from God. Here the world is good and fruitful: now the river of life that runs through the city nourishes the trees whose leaves are for “the healing of the nations” (Rev 22:2). This new creation, the new heavens and earth, is entirely trustworthy: nothing threatens to undermine or destroy human flourishing. For here the tribes of the earth are gathered together, worshiping around the throne of God and the Lamb. There is no more warfare, slavery, oppression or idolatry; there are no tears; there is no death. God reigns forever and ever, without rival; God’s dwelling is (again) with human kind; God has sanctified time and space, so that there is no need for a temple. This world is holy ground. It is not only good: it is the goodness of creation recreated, remade, renewed. It is a city of light.
In the present, human life is lived in a world stretched between creation and new creation, created in Christ, for Christ, and upheld by Christ. When the NT describes these realities, it especially emphasizes not only the totality but the fullness of creation and new creation in Christ:

- All things were created in Christ;
- In Christ we have “all things” (1 Cor 3:21);
- We anticipate a time when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28);
- In Christ “all the fullness of God dwells” (1:19; 2:9, “bodily”).
- Christ is the “fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23);
- From the fullness of Christ, himself full of grace and truth “we have all received” (John 1:14, 16).
- Human beings come to “fullness of life” in Christ (Col 2:10)
- To know the love of Christ is to be “filled with all the fulness of God” (Eph 3:19).

These emphases develop the descriptions found in the OT of God’s present and future gifts to the world:

- The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness therefore (Ps 24:1; Deut 33:13: “the earth and its fulness;” Ps 104:24).
- In the Lord’s presence there is fulness of joy (Psa 16:11).
- The earth is either full of or will be filled with: the glory of the Lord (Isa 6:3; Num 14:21); the knowledge of the Lord (Isa 11:9; Hab 2:14); the steadfast love of the Lord (Ps 33:5; 119:64); an abundance of food (Isa 25:6; Joel 2:23-26; Psa 104:28, 144:13; Pr 3:10); and the praise of the Lord (Hab 3:3).  

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*Note: Napthali is full of the Lord’s blessing (Deut 33:23); Joshua is “full of “the spirit of wisdom” (Deut 34:9); David died “in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honor” (1 Chr*
Human life going well and lived well draws on and participates in the fullness that God has put into the earth and that God in Christ embodies. Yet there is always an “eschatological reserve”—that which is held over until the time when God’s plans for all the earth are brought to their ultimate fruition and life is lived in all its fullness in the presence of God. At the intersection of the fullness of created life and the surpassing fullness of eternal life lies the abundant life: the abundant life is the fullness of life as lived in the circumstances of this world not yet redeemed from its bondage to decay and from its groaning, a world in which the power of sin and death have been broken but the new world has not yet been created. In the NT, one stands at these crossroads in Christ; one enjoys the fullness of creation and anticipates its fruition in Christ. Thus, human life going well and lived well draws on and participates in the fullness of creation, while anticipating and experiencing, if only partially, that final (eschatological) fullness to come.

This is the big picture. In it the role of Christ is articulated with relationship to the entirety of creation, both past and future. But this ‘cosmic Christ’ is the one who is known by the human name, Jesus, who was ultimately crucified on a Roman cross. He not only has a name; he is identified with respect to a place: Jesus of Nazareth, that situates him historically in time and space. Even the designation “Christ” — christos, messiah — locates him in a particular historical context and narrative, and relates him to a particular historical set of hopes owned by a particular people.

Thus the telescope that looks at the heavens and gazes upon the all-powerful cosmic

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7One could here note that in John, from whence the phrase “the abundant life” is taken (John 10:10), “life” and “eternal life” are, in some way, lived and enjoyed in the present, even while anticipating the resurrection to life with God (which is both a forward and upward looking anticipation or hope).
Christ now swivels to bring into view the first century Jewish prophet who walked the hills and paths of Galilee and Judea, the one who is "of one substance with ourselves." One may well ask: how do these two portraits relate? Is the portrait of the cosmic Christ a canvas done in pointillist style, where almost shapeless individual dots and dabs of historical color contribute ultimately to make up a glorious work of art, but where the whole is far greater and even other than the sum of its parts? After all, there seems to be little correlation between the cosmic Christ, for whom and in whom all things are created, and Jesus of Nazareth, a first century Jewish prophet, teacher, messianic claimant, whose particular human life would be known, above all, for the death he died. Or is the picture of the cosmic Christ more like a fractal, where the individual units that comprise the whole are themselves scaled down versions of the final product, so that in some way the whole is always visible in its constituent parts? In other words, does the whole efface the parts, the "cosmic Christ" dominate the "particular" Jesus of Nazareth? Or does one see in the particular the universal, and vice versa? How does an account of Jesus’ life comport with picture just sketched?

"Follow Me"

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus utters this call: “Follow me.” He speaks it to potential disciples on the shore of the sea of Galilee at the outset of his ministry (Mark 1:17-18) and after the resurrection (John 21:19, 22). It brackets and defines the life of discipleship. But what, exactly, does the call entail? For Jesus’ immediate disciples, the call entailed a physical “following,” being and walking with him. Jesus calls them to “come after me” (deute opisō) and

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9 For an eloquent discussion of the problem of particularity, see Leander Keck, *Who is Jesus? Jesus in Perfect Tense* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 200)
they “follow” (from ἀκολουθεῖον) him. But why? To what ends? By “following” him they would become hearers of the word of the kingdom, hearers of his instruction, hearers of his promises. Not surprisingly, what Jesus teaches—about God, the kingdom, the law, how to live with each other as his followers—constitutes a large part of the Gospel narratives. Those who “follow Jesus” accept his teaching, his authority, call him teacher, master (lord), and Messiah.

But to follow him meant also simply to be with him. There are hints in the pages of the Gospels of what the disciples learned in such a way: to pray, to forgive, and to trust. At least on one occasion they asked him, “teach us to pray”—presumably because they had seen him at prayer. Perhaps because they had seen him forgive sin they asked how many times they must do the same. They learn that he lived as he taught, and they were called to follow in imitation and obedience. Ultimately, they learn that to follow Jesus meant to walk a perilous pathway that led ultimately to death. That pattern impresses itself upon the pages of the Gospels, upon Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom, his promises to his disciples, and how he calls them to live as his followers: even as he took up his cross, they are to follow him and take up their crosses. But of course the story of the Gospels does not end there, either for Jesus or for the disciples; and the hope inherent in the accounts of Jesus’ life is crucial to understanding human flourishing.

Finally, to follow Jesus meant to participate in and receive the encroaching kingdom of which Jesus spoke, which he manifested in challenges to all powers—disease, demons, death—to the wholeness of human beings, as well as in his stance against the powers that be. The disciples were witnesses and recipients of the coming and present kingdom; they too proclaimed and healed by the power of the kingdom with them. They became part of a community taught to love and forgive, and presumably ate at table with sinners and tax collectors.
as Jesus did. They learned to live the life of the kingdom by following and imitating Jesus.

In sum, then, to follow Jesus is to be with him in order to learn from his own example and to hear his words. Jesus calls his disciples to live in certain ways: but he does not ask of them what he has not tried in his own experience, or what he is not prepared to do himself. He is thus not only a teacher and prophet but also the model of faithful living before God. To follow Jesus is to live in trust (faith), hope, and love. To follow Jesus is throw one’s lot in with him, to trust him, and so to trust the God whom he trusts; to love the God whom he loves; to have hope in the God in whom he has hope. It is to trace the course of Jesus’ own pilgrimage through death to life. It is to see this pathway and his promises as the way to enter into the kingdom of God, into the joy of the master.

To investigate these matters more closely, we begin with Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom of God. In proclaiming the “kingdom of God” Jesus promised the saving presence of God and called his disciples to live in it and orient their entire lives around it. In the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, everything depends on having eyes to see and ears to hear Jesus’ word of promise about the kingdom. We shall turn, next, to Jesus’ interpretation of the Torah in terms of the two-fold command to love God and neighbor. Here Jesus articulates the call to single-minded devotion to God, and the love of the other that follows from that initial commitment. The rest of the discussion will then flesh out how such commitments shaped Jesus’ own way of living in the world, and how he expected those same commitments to shape the life of his followers.

“Fear not little flock: It is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”

In Jesus’ announcement of the in-breaking “kingdom of God,” he proclaimed that while God is and has always been “king” over all the world, that rule is now encroaching in a manifest
and visible way. The concretization of God’s sovereign rule is nothing else than bringing to fruition God’s creational intent, because God’s kingdom comes with judgment on all that would destroy or degrade the good purposes of God for humankind and all creation. But the kingdom does not return the world to what it once was; it brings God’s creational intent to fruition by excluding or expelling all that threatens the fullness of human life: disease and illnesses of various sorts; demonic forces of darkness; earthly powers or human authorities that oppress, perpetrate injustice, and use human beings and power for their own ends; the isolating effects and power of sin; and the very power of death itself.

Jesus promises that this is what God works in the world, what God generously gives, and what God will ultimately accomplish. This kingdom is a gift (Luke 12:32), a surpassing treasure, received with thanksgiving and entered into with joy (Matt 13:20, 44; 25:21, 23; Luke 2:10, 15:7, 10; John 16:20-24; 17:13). The God in the Kingdom is a generous father who gives good gifts to those who ask (Matt 7:11) and rain and sun to all alike (5:45). In turn, those who follow Jesus are to imitate this gracious God: they are generous and giving; they are merciful and forgiving (Luke 6:36-38; Matt 18:23-33; 17:15-18). They are also characterized by gratitude as was the Samaritan healed from leprosy (Luke 17:15-18). This way of receptivity, gratitude, and generosity is the way of joy. And so the Gospels show Jesus speaking of the joy of completing the work of God, and of Jesus’ “rejoicing in the Holy Spirit” when the disciples report the results of their own mission (Luke 10:21). His disciples celebrate like guests at a wedding: they cannot fast, for the bridegroom is among them (Mark 1.19 pars.; John 3.28-29). Jesus promises such joy to his disciples in the future, but they also experience it in following him. In following Jesus, in living as he calls them to live, the disciples are recipients of the fullness of all things
that God can give: they are given the kingdom; they inherit the earth. They enter into the joy of
their master (Matt 13:20, 44; 25:21, 23). That joy is experienced in the present, in the company
of Jesus, and anticipated in fullness when the kingdom comes in all its fullness.¹⁰

One can see this illustrated clearly in the parable of the prodigal: the older son,
begrudging the father’s generous welcome of his returned miscreant brother, cannot enter into
the celebration that welcomes him home. The older brother expresses grim rejection of his
father’s generosity because he has not gotten what is owed to him, while the younger son
received far more than was his due. The older brother knows neither gratitude nor mercy: he has
no joy. Similarly, in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, when everyone is paid the same
amount at the end of the day, those who have worked longest and hardest grumble because the
landowner was far too generous to those hired at the eleventh hour. They experience no joy,
because they cannot celebrate generosity; they do not know, or have forgotten, what it means to
receive, to be thankful. They can only count the hours the others did not work.

The kingdom of which Jesus speaks comes with the power of God’s holy (or sanctifying)
Spirit. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as someone who experiences the power of the
Spirit upon him, a power that drives or constrains him (Mark 1:12, 3:27; Luke 4:17; cf. Luke
12:50). He did not merely talk about the Spirit and the kingdom: the Spirit and the kingdom were
the powers that impelled him and that were experienced by those who participated in Jesus’
mission, heard his teaching, imitated his example. When Jesus, the “holy one of God,”
encounters persons who are labeled “unclean” including lepers (Luke 17:12-14) and the demon
possessed (Mark 3:18, 5:1-113; Matt 12:28), he drives out the unclean spirits from them. Those

¹⁰Note also the joy that accompanies Jesus birth (Matt 2:10; Luke 1:14, 44, 2:10) and the
discovery that he had risen (Matt 28:8; Luke 24:41, 52).
rendered clean are able to enter into the presence of the holy: into the temple, into the holy community. One could understand this, in light of Genesis, as a realization of the Edenic picture of human beings living in the presence of God. But it is perhaps better to see Jesus’ actions in light of embodying, even if only partially, the renewed heavens and earth where all barriers to divine-human fellowship are torn down, and where human life flourishes. Jesus disciples were witnesses to and recipients of such cleansing, healing power.

And so Jesus urges his disciples to seek first this kingdom of God (Matt 6:33; Luke 12:31). The demands of the kingdom are ultimate: one must renounce everything (Matt 10:34-38; Luke 14:25-33) because no one can serve two masters (Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13). “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” The rich young ruler is called to sell all that he had (Mark 10:21): it is possible to store up treasure for oneself but not be rich towards God (Luke 12:21). People who want to follow Jesus are warned not to look back (Luke 9:59-62). This is not an easy way: the gate to life is narrow, and the way is hard, because it is counter-intuitive. So much of human life, from birth to death, is about getting, attaining, building, securing: but Jesus speaks of a way of life that is about letting go, losing, about trusting and relinquishing what one has and what one is to God. This is “storing up treasure” for oneself whether “neither moth nor rust consumes” (Matt 6:20).

And yet, paradoxically and simultaneously, Jesus promises that those who come to him will find an easy yoke, and rest for their souls (11:29): for here is the end of striving. In seeking God’s kingdom, the disciples find that God has already promised them all things. They will

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11 Jesus’ “exclusively one-way mission” was to push the boundaries of holiness further and further into the realm of the profane, and to eliminate pollution in order to expand the realm of purity. See Markus Bockmuehl, "Keeping it Holy," in "I am the Lord your God": Christian Reflections on the Ten Commandments,” p. 104.

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receive the kingdom (of God, or of heaven; Matt 5:3, 10); inherit the earth (5:5); be filled (Matt 5:6); receive mercy (5:7); see God or be in God’s presence (5:8); and belong to God as children (5:9). When Jesus urges them to seek the kingdom, he does not exhort them to discover that which is hidden or unattainable: the kingdom comes to them as a gift, a pearl of great price, a hidden treasure discovered in a field; it comes as the cleansing power of holiness, the Spirit of restoration and life at work. In finding the kingdom, the disciples discover not so much that their deepest desires are met, but that those very desires are reshaped, redefined. Finding the kingdom is discovering the fullness that God gives; the response to that gift is gratitude and joy.

“You shall love the Lord your God”

The renewed Torah shapes life in this kingdom. When Jesus crystallizes the Torah, the blueprint of creation, with the two-fold command to love God and neighbor, he re-centers the Torah (Matt 22:34-40). Nothing that Jesus says is new, but in making these two commands the heart of Torah (“all the commandments hang on these two words;” Matt 22:40) he offers a way of interpreting Torah that directs his hearers back to God’s purposes not only for Israel but ultimately for humankind. To put it in other terms, for Israel to be truly Israel means that they will not only fulfill the law but fulfill God’s purposes for humankind in creation.

Jesus answers the question regarding the greatest commandment in the law with the two-fold command to love God and neighbor: all other commandments depend on it. While the command has often been understood to make love central, and to pit law against love, in fact Jesus says that the greatest command in the Torah makes God central. To be sure, the relationship to God is spoken of in terms of love—rather than, say, obedience—but even so Jesus is here citing the Torah to interpret the Torah. And love of God stands at its heart and center.
Jesus exhorts his disciples to act as God acts: to hear the law as Jesus does is to be directed
towards the other because one is oriented to God. The second command, then, is to love one’s
neighbor.

These commands are explicated and illustrated by appeal to the mercy of God and the
mercy that one is to show one’s neighbor in ways that embody God’s original intent in the
creation of humankind. Because the Sabbath was made for human beings (Mark 2:23-28), it is
appropriate to restore human life, to heal a crippled woman, or a man’s withered hand, on the
Sabbath day. One cannot dishonor the law if one honors the original purposes of creation. The
day that is commanded to be kept as holy in the Torah is a day in which creation is restored and
healed. On this day, one may feed those who hunger with the holy food of the holy temple (Mark
2:23-28), because doing so expresses God’s call to mercy (Hos 6:6; Matt 12:7). Holy things are
meant for the sustenance not just of the priests, but of humankind. Divorce, even though allowed
by Moses in the law, runs counter to the intent found “from the beginning of crea-
tion” that man
and woman should become “one flesh” (Mark 10:6-9). The Torah, read rightly, honors God’s
purposes for the world.

Thus to fulfill or live out the law means to hear and do it as inculcating compassion and
mercy, in keeping with God’s own character as compassionate and merciful (Luke 10:25-28;
would have been to see him welcome a woman who weeps at his feet, to eat with tax collectors,
heal the sick, raise the dead, extend forgiveness, and to refuse to call down judgment on the
Samaritans or to take up the sword against the soldiers who arrest him. The Jesus who taught his
disciples to ask for forgiveness (Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4) and to forgive each other (Matt 6:14-15;
Matt 18:22, 35; Luke 17:3-4), to seek reconciliation with a brother or sister (Matt 5:25; 18:15-17), petitioned God to forgive his executioners (Luke 23:34). He spoke in parables about sharing meals with the lost, taking the last seat at a table, and going out to the highways and byways to find people to feast at a banquet. He himself also did all these things, welcoming sinners to his table, and journeying into Gentile territory in order to seek out “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24) and encountering there Jews and Gentiles alike in need of a healing touch. He asserted that justice, mercy and faith were far more important than tithing mint and dill and cumin (Matt 23:23). He overturned the tables in the temple, speaking against the exploitative use to which the holy house of God had been put. Would anything that Jesus taught the disciples have struck them as out of sync with his character, the way he lived, or God or God’s kingdom? Whether or not they realized it, in following Jesus the disciples would have been imitating him, participating in his work, imbibing his practices. No wonder, perhaps, that when they return from the mission on which they had been sent, they returned “with joy” (Luke 10:17).

“He trusts in God”

In being with Jesus, the disciples would have encountered a man with a passion for the kingdom, a passion for God, whose life demonstrated the self-giving surrender to which he called his followers. While Christian faith typically speaks of Jesus as the object of faith or trust, the NT also presents him, implicitly and explicitly, as one who exercises trust in God. When Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, to walk the path he walks, he calls them to trust the God that he trusts, to follow him on a narrow path that leads to life. The cost of such discipleship was steep. According to Matthew, as Jesus hung on the cross, bystanders taunted him with the words,
“He trusts in God! Let God deliver him now!” (Mt 27:43). This is, ultimately, where Jesus’ commitment, his trust, led him. But it has been demonstrated throughout the Gospels.

Jesus exemplifies what such trust looks like when he refuses to turn stones to bread to satisfy his own hunger for “one does not live by bread alone” (Matt 4:4); to manipulate God for his own ends, for “you shall not tempt the Lord your God” (Matt 4:5-7); or to seek any glory or honor for himself, for “you shall worship the Lord you God and him only shall you serve” (4:8-10). In turn, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray “give us this day our daily bread” and calls them to trust the God who feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies with exquisite beauty, and who generously provides for all people from the fullness of the earth: the rain falls, and the sun shines, on just and unjust alike (Matt 6:25-34). Later Jesus tells a parable in which the hungry were fed through the hands and deeds of those who saw Jesus in the poor and needy (Matt. 25:31-46). Apparently, this, too is part of how God feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and takes care of the imprisoned and poor, of how the generosity of God is given to his world. Those have learned to receive from the fullness of God’s earth now feed and clothe for the poor and hungry. The fullness that they take in is a fullness that they give out.

Prayer expresses trust and, in some way, dependence – even if the prayer be a lament. There are a few places in the Gospels that Jesus is shown at prayer, although he is often said to pray (especially in Luke). In urging his disciples to pray, Jesus describes a God who is a generous father who delights to give good gifts to those who ask him and so urges his disciples to come with their petitions to God (Matt 7:7-11; 18:19; 21:22; John 14:14-16; 15:16; 16:23-24). Except for the prayer of agony in Gethsemane, when Jesus prays he is typically shown giving thanks, and these actions are remembered in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper:

12The book of Hebrews perhaps most clearly presents Jesus as both object and subject of faith.
• “He took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them . . .” (Matt 15:36; Mark 8:6; John 6:11, 23).
• “Having given thanks, he took the cup ... he took the bread and broke it” (Matt 26:27; Mark 14:23; Luke 22:17, 19; 1 Cor 11:24).
• When the disciples returned from their work “with joy,” Jesus himself “rejoiced in the Spirit” and gave thanks to God for God’s gracious will (Luke 10:17-21).
• He gives thanks that God hears his requests (John 11:41).
• He tells a parable where only one of the ten lepers who were healed returned to Jesus to give him thanks and to praise God (Luke 17:16).

Gratitude expresses trust; it enables joy.

Because Jesus trusted God, he would not turn stones to bread or seek a sign, some tangible, confirmatory evidence of his own identity as “Son of God” or to manipulate God for his own ends; neither will he give a sign to authenticate his identity or the source of his power (Mark 8:12). There are no signs for unbelief—or for faith either. The one who is “Son of God” calls those who are “children of God [the heavenly father]” to live with the kind of faith by which he lives.¹³ But the disciples are people of little faith (Matt 8:26; 14:31); others demonstrate the kind of faith that Jesus commends, seeks, and himself models (Matt 8:10, 9:29, 17:20, 21:21).

Recognizing that Jesus lives by the kind of faith that he commends to them, the disciples appeal to him “increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5).

Where does this trust in God lead? Jesus steadfastly walks the narrow path of “obedience

¹³In the Synoptic Gospels, the words for Jesus as “son” and for others as “children” of God are both huios; even given the differences in role, there is comparability in the ways that all God’s “children” depend upon their heavenly Father. In John, Jesus is called huios while others are called children (tekna).
unto death,” ultimately facing his own death believing that the God who raises the dead will indeed raise him to life on the third day. While he tells his disciples that he will suffer, be crucified, and raised to life, it is not inappropriate to speak of that promise as the hope and faith with which Jesus goes to the cross. He had no “divine advantage;”

He died without a single sign from the God whose kingly rule he sought to effectuate in advance. His death was no less ambiguous than his life had been, though it was consistent: the God whose fidelity cannot be calculated on the basis of [human] attainments lifted not a finger on behalf of the one who trusted him utterly. By sundown, all three men on their crosses were equally dead. The God who, according to Jesus, sends sun and rain on just and unjust alike did not give Jesus preferential treatment either. Jesus died without a word or a wink from God to reassure him that, whatever the gawking crowd might think, he knew that Jesus was not only innocent but valid where it mattered. 14

When Jesus invites his disciples to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow” him, it is evident that Jesus speaks of a way of living that entails surrender, self-giving, and even loss. This is not first a giving of oneself to others, but a giving of oneself to God. The rich young ruler is not told simply to sell everything in order to give it to others, but to sell everything and follow Jesus; the rich man who builds bigger barns has made himself “rich in things but poor in soul.” The God whom he ignored can demand his life at any time. Jesus’ stark calls to follow him to death, or to surrender oneself, are calls to turn to the God who gives and to live out of the fullness that God gives, rather than out of the counterfeit fullness that earthly goods purport to

offer. Jesus calls his followers to live with God as their “heart, soul and mind,” and to turn away from those things that distract them from the “one thing” that they should seek after (Ps 27:4).

In the gospel of John, the call to “follow me” is the first and last command that Jesus gives his disciples. But at the end of the Gospel, the call is preceded by three questions to Simon Peter: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” When Peter answers three times that he does love Jesus, Jesus tells him to extend his own care and provision to his disciples to the sheep of Jesus’ flock. Peter’s service will be rendered out of love for Jesus. To be sure: Jesus tells his disciples that to love him is to keep his commands; but this can never reduce love to commandment keeping. The parable of the prodigal makes that point: the son who slaves in the field does not yet understand the father’s words: “all that is mine is yours.” He has no gratitude; no joy; no love. The Gospel of John further develops the relationship between Jesus and the Father, between the Father and the disciples, Jesus and the disciple, and the disciples to each other in terms of love. Love is the bond between each of these pairs. Following Jesus leads to love: for him, and for the other. Yes, the cost of such following is high indeed. At the end of the Gospel, Peter is told to expect that he will indeed, quite literally, “follow” Jesus—to his own death. But what matters first is that Peter express his love for Jesus. Love empowers such faithfulness, trust, and following. Duty cannot, or, if it can, it may well do so at the expense of joy. But Jesus also promises his disciples that, in him, they will have peace (14:27; 16:33; 20:19, 21, 26), and the fullness of joy, the very joy that he has (John 15:11; 16:20-24; 17:13). In following him, in entering into the bonds of love that connect Father and Son, both with believers, and believers with each other, Jesus’ disciples also enter into joy. In following Jesus, living in faith, loving one another, and receiving Jesus’ peace and joy, they live the abundant life that he promises (10:10).
Even if Jesus’ pathway manifests the will of the good and gracious creator, who provides generously from the abundance of the earth, who wills life for his creation and all people, and whose holy spirit doggedly combats all those forces that degrade human existence, Jesus does not hold his destiny in his own hands; this is nowhere more evident than in his prayer of agony in Gethsemane. Jesus’ life is not self-determined, but rather his course is set and his life oriented to the God in whose mysterious will he rejoices (Luke 10:21), even though it simultaneously lays a constraint upon him (Luke 12:50). If Jesus is the model of life lived well, then he is a model that such life will be found not in self-determination but in receptivity, gratitude, trust, and self-giving, all with God as their ultimate referent. This is what it means to love God with all one’s heart, soul, strength, and mind.

Jesus demonstrates and calls for life centered in God and impelled towards the other in love, compassion, and mercy. Jesus lodges his teaching in the character of a holy and merciful God, God’s purposes in creation as these are embodied in the Torah, and the expectation of a new world, the kingdom of God, that remakes the world. This is also what Jesus lived and died for: the coming kingdom of God that brings to fruition God’s purposes for the world. This is story of the kingdom of God that Jesus both implicitly narrates and lives out. It is a narrative that calls for hope, because it is not yet finished, and its end lies in the hands of God. As Jesus said, “No one knows the hour, except the Father.” Hence, this narrative also calls for trust in the God who holds all things in his hands. And it calls for love: one cannot trust a God one does not love, whose very being is characterized as love. Living within this story, knowing one’s place in this grand narrative, gives peace and joy.

These are the same realities and the same postures that Paul attributes to living in Christ,
that is, to having one’s renewed by and centered in the living Lord, to living by the power of the Spirit of the risen Christ. Following the trajectories that have been plotted already, we turn, then, to a very brief consideration of the witness of Paul to what life “in Christ” entails.

“In Christ”

The letter to the Colossians asserts that “all the fullness of God dwells” in Jesus (1:19; 2:9), who is the image of the invisible God. It is through this one that the world, in all its fullness, is created. Human beings live in this “fullness” of the world because they are created through Christ. But Colossians, like other Pauline letters, also uses the language of being “in Christ” to characterize those who, through faith and through baptism into his death and resurrection, are joined to him and are thus “being renewed in knowledge according to the image of” their creator (Col 3:10). This is the fullness that Christ brings into the world in the form of restoration and recreation, and in which those in Christ participate.

What does such participation entail? There are numbers of clusters of words that suggest what it means to live in Christ: the first three fruits of the Spirit bestowed on those who are “in Christ” are “love, joy and peace” (Gal 5:22; cf. Rom 14:17); numerous benedictions promise grace and peace (Rom 1:7; 2 Cor 1:3, etc.), joy and peace (Rom 15:13), or peace and mercy (Gal 6:16). These gifts come from the fullness of God, from God’s Spirit; they are embodied in practices or manifested in dispositions by which one lives. So, those on whom the love of God has been poured out are to love (Rom 5:5; 1 Cor 13:13); those in whom the Spirit works joy are to rejoice (Phil 4:4-7); those who have received grace and mercy are gracious and merciful. So Paul exhorts his churches to faith, hope, and love, to rejoice, and to live at peace with one another (Col 3:13-15). He also calls on them to give thanks and to pray constantly (1 Thess
5:16-18). As God’s “holy and beloved” people, they are to “clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col 3:12). They are to forgive as they have been forgiven (Col 3:13); letting the peace of Christ and the Word of God indwell them (Col 3:15-16). They are to do “good to one another and to all” (1 Thess 5:15). Not all of these words are Jesus’ own words: but the (s/S)pirit that breathes through and in them is the same as the one we hear in the Gospels: living in and out the fullness that God gives, whether that be fullness be construed as the kingdom, of God’s holy Spirit, or Christ himself, calls for trust (faith); impels love; elicits joy and gratitude; promises peace.

Participation in the fullness that God bestows creates hope. Throughout the Scriptures, but especially in the New Testament, hope orients one to the future, to the expectation of a time when all shall be well. In the present, it is easy enough to paint the human condition in the bleak colors of loss, disappointments, fear, sin, alienation, and death. To live in hope is to live out of the fullness of God, but this not entail sentimentally or ignorantly papering over the realities of this world, nor is it simply a way coping. To live out of the fullness of God’s “all” is to live in this story without letting the often oppressive and perplexing conditions of the world or the course of life lead to despair or apathy. To live in hope is to know that we who live the story are not also the end(s) of the story: there is a greater presence, a transcendence, some power that sustains the world and the life not lived by bread alone, and that this power is the power of love, joy, peace: it is the power of life.

Paradoxically, Paul has such hope in the midst of death because he has already died: he has already suffered the loss of all things. He has been joined to Christ in death; but he has also been raised with Christ to new life. If Jesus called his followers to take up their cross and follow
him on the narrow path, then in his union with Christ, Paul experienced both death and new life; both loss and infinite gain; suffering and affliction, but the promise of an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure (2 Cor 4:17). Paul’s sufferings were neither infinite nor total: they were the way in which the life of Christ was being lived out in him (2 Cor 4:8-11). His life was not his own: “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14:8). Paul had learned to be content in whatever state he found himself, because his contentment did not depend on his circumstances: rather, his eyes were set forward and upward (Phil 3:13-14) to Christ who renews all things (3:21); and in focusing his eyes on Christ, rather than what he had or did not have, in being joined to Christ, Paul found strength and joy (Phil 4:4, 10-13).

For Paul, being in Christ is to live in faith, hope and love: “and the greatest of these is love.” When all else fails, or passes away, love remains. Paul speaks of love poured out into our hearts (Rom 5:5); love that constrains (2 Cor 5:14); love that cannot fail (Rom 8:35-39; 1 Cor 13:13). Love binds everything together (Col 3:14); love sustains all. Love lies behind, in and ahead of the “abundant life.” One could, perhaps, summarize the source of all human flourishing in the words of the Gospel of John: “God so loved the world, that he gave,” followed up by the testimony “from his fullness, we have all received” (John 3:16; 1:16). The abundant life is both demonstrated by and received in the love of God for the world, embodied in the good shepherd who gave up his life for his sheep, and in those who love God and love one another.

While God utters his decisive yes through Christ, this ultimate “yes” reaches beyond any individual human life, beyond the story of the world that God created. There is no closure in the Bible to the story of the Israel, the nations, or creation: indeed, the biblical account, in its substance and form, remains radically unfinished, anticipating in faith and hope the new creation.
Theologically speaking, the biblical narrative leaves the resolution of “all things” to the one who also made all things; even the Son leaves the hour to the Father. Undoubtedly human yearnings for a good life, a better life, and a good and better world, are rooted in our longings for a new Eden: but creation and new creation are the prerogatives of God who is Alpha and Omega. In the meantime, whatever it means for human beings to flourish must take into account the unfinished, open-ended, narrative in which we live, that finds it beginning, middle, and ending in the good purposes of God in Christ.