

The ministry of the risen Lord

The one who puts all things under his feet is doing something in the world.

by [Christopher Holmes](#) in the [September 19, 2012](#) issue



The feet of the The Christus, Salt Lake City. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Travis S.](#)

For years I have heard it said by Christians of quite different stripes that we are to be Jesus' hands and feet. Closely related to this notion is the idea that the Christian community is to "incarnate" Jesus through its words and deeds, that it is to bring Jesus to people.

This approach makes me nervous. My reservations have to do with how such an approach domesticates the creedal affirmation, “And on the third day he rose again.” If Jesus is risen and ascended, then he cannot be conceived of as an artifact from the past whom one is called to emulate—to put into practice, as it were. This is because he is present. As one present, he has a ministry, and one of the forms of that ministry is the raising up of witnesses to his incarnation, death, resurrection and coming again. Through the Word and Spirit, he is at work, creating hearers ex nihilo.

If this be true, then the Christian life is not a project that I (or we) take up; it is not something I (or we) embark upon. Rather, its beginning and end, its supreme content, is Jesus Christ. Being a Christian is a manner of responding in word and deed to the call of one who always remains ahead of us, one who wills that we be conformed to his work of putting “all things under his feet” (Eph. 1:22).

What such seemingly innocent language about being Jesus’ hands and feet suggests is that Jesus Christ is an exemplar of sorts. He is a person who represents a commendable way of being and so must somehow be rendered relevant to a day and an age that is indifferent to him. In short, the problem with reducing the Christian life to that of incarnating him is that it treats Jesus as if he were confined to the past. Such an understanding induces, I suspect, a deep sense of tiredness and an ethical Arminianism: it’s up to us.

The late Hans Frei of Yale Divinity School argued that Christ’s presence is a function of his identity—that is, his presence with and for us is derivative of who he is. Frei was right: to appreciate who Christ is means to confess him as one who, as present, continues to gather, uphold and send forth a people to witness to his redeeming ways and works.

Accordingly, when we read the Gospel narratives of Christ’s ministry, of his passion and death and of his resurrection, we are not reading of one whose ministry is confined to the dustbin of history and must be dragged into the present. Quite the opposite: we are confronted, when we hear with ears given by the Spirit, with reality. We are encountered by a person who never takes a sabbatical from his work, a person who with his Father “is still working” (John 5:17).

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer stresses in his *Ethics*, Christ is “reality”; reality is first and foremost a description of who Christ is. If Bonhoeffer is correct, then being a Christian is a matter of being subject to the workings of the risen and ascended

Jesus. He is at work even now, rendering persons, by the power of his Word and Spirit, transparent to himself. This means that in his risen person he relativizes the distance between the first century and the 21st century. He is our contemporary, you might say, actively making us into persons who are able to listen to his voice.

This means that when a pastor goes about the work of caring for souls, he or she is engaged in the ministry of recontextualization. Pastoral care, whether it be in a crisis setting or a time of celebration and joy, involves narrating people's situations in the light of the gospel, of what the God of the gospel is confessed to be doing. The pastor promotes attention to the real world as given in our baptism, thereby helping people see afresh that the one into whom they are baptized is, through the Word and Spirit, enabling them to become what they already are in him.

The difference this makes is profound. It means that Christian ministry is first and foremost proper to Christ. It does not involve a formula, a secret or a set of principles; likewise, it is not a matter of activism or quietism. It is about being in Jesus Christ, of being made into his covenant partner. This is an "active passivity" generated by him through the Spirit, as one of my seminary professors once put it.

Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, describes a secular age as "radically horizontal." It is an age that has recourse to nothing beyond itself; it inhabits a world that is flat. A secular age is, furthermore, deeply directionless. The church often participates in this directionlessness. What, the church asks, is Jesus Christ—the one who ostensibly lies at the church's center—doing?

Well, what he is doing now is what he is described as doing in the Gospels. First, he speaks. The message of the in-breaking kingdom of God he proclaimed then and there has come about in him also here and now. He not only announces the kingdom but actually brings it into being through his cross and resurrection. By his Holy Spirit, he creates hearers of his proclamation, then and now.

Ministry is derivative of this activity insofar as it is one of hearing and of prayer. This is the vision behind ministry. Hearing involves steady, disciplined silence. Also, it involves a summons not to copy or simply repeat what Christ has said in scripture. The summons is to listen and to be alert to the word that enlightens our darkness, bringing life and light eternal. Indeed, through prayer and scriptural meditation, the minister is able to position herself in such a way that she listens to what is being said. Her words in the sermon function as a witness, among the people she serves,

to the triune God's determination to be our God and we God's people.

The second activity of Christ is that of interceding on his people's—indeed, on his world's—behalf. He believes and prays in our place. He is our substitute and representative, meaning that our prayers and faith (or lack thereof) are taken up by him into his unceasing intercession. To be “in Christ” is to be in his life, his death, his resurrection and his heavenly session; it is to be in his prayer. To be in him is to be bound up with his high priestly ministry, to exist in the one who is our high priest. By virtue of his priesthood we Christians can actually be who we are declared in him to be: the new creation. Christ's annihilation of sin and death through his cross becomes real in us.

Christ is not only speaking and interceding; he is also reigning. This too offers serious encouragement. For what is taking place is that the world—despite its protestations to the contrary—is being subjected to the rule of the one who has crucified sin and death. This is astonishing news. He is raising up a people who are taken captive by his rule, who are transformed by it. The Christian is simply the woman or man who confesses this to be true—often in light of much apparent evidence to the contrary. The Christian community exists in light of one who reigns and who in reigning actively humanizes the world.

The late Paul Lehmann of Union Theological Seminary in New York once wrote that “the Christian *koinonia* is the foretaste and the sign in the world that God has always been and is contemporaneously doing what it takes to make and to keep human life human” (*Ethics in a Christian Context*). What differentiates the Christian community from the “world” is simply that the Christian community confesses that this humanizing is taking place.

God's making and keeping of truly human life in Christ has a particular shape. This shape is threefold. First, Jesus is gathering a people to himself, and he does so through the written word. This is why the church reads and, with the Spirit's help, seeks to hear scripture. Second, the people he gathers he in turn upholds. This is his priestly ministry: he upholds a people in his faith, in his obedience, in their baptism into his life and death. Third, he is sending a people forth to testify in word and deed that he does actually reign. Such a people are indeed learning to understand that there is one word that they must hear and obey in life and in death.

Into the deep-seated weariness and directionlessness of much contemporary church life springs wonderful news that Christ is reality. This reality is not something we can achieve or bring about; neither is it something or someone whom we can incarnate or make present. Reality is a living person who breathes upon his beloved people the Spirit he eternally receives from the Father. By breathing the Spirit, he creates a people who testify that “there is no part of the world, no matter how lost, no matter how godless, that has not been . . . reconciled to God” (Bonhoeffer).

This reality defines Christian ethics and the shape of Christian existence. Decisions about what we should do need to take into account what is being done by God in Christ through the Spirit. If reconciliation is what is really real, then ethics is not so much a matter of trying to figure out what to do but a matter of hearing about “a reality that wills to become real ever anew in what exists and against what exists,” and then of our being drawn to participate in that reality (Bonhoeffer).

What difference does this make? Consider the act of preaching. Many people wonder if preaching is useful anymore. Some in the Anglican Church in my neck of the woods wonder whether we should not consider moving “beyond the monologue.” But the body of Christ can rejoice in the fact that God has given it a word that enables men and women to live before God. Without the proclaimed word being heard and sealed by the sacrament, we are left to wallow in our subjective sense of how things ought to be. We are left bereft of that word whereby God turns us from our wicked ways to the way of Christ that is truly life.

Such an approach lifts acts of obedience such as preaching and prayer out of the church’s hands and sees them as being first and foremost acts of the risen Christ himself. If Jesus is not only proclaimed by the church but also the one who proclaims himself through his witnesses—if he cares for the souls of his own people by calling men and women to participate in his own work of shepherding—then Christian ministry becomes a joyful task. Ministry, freed from the tyranny of having to prescribe the exact shape of life before God, lets God’s commandment do the work of allowing human beings to be human before God. Christian ministry is simply a matter of being grasped by the Word, of standing firmly, with the Spirit’s help, on the ground that is Christ.

The command to live before God is addressed to all facets of our lives—church, family, work and government. What legitimizes marriage, for example, is not one’s subjective disposition toward it but the authority that comes to it from above.

I refer to marriage because, as with so many contemporary issues, it is often discussed in a vacuum. It is reduced to a series of principles or formulas that attempt to define its true shape. But what if marriage, as with work or family, were dependent upon a christological center for its meaning? One would not then get so lost in speculation about what is right or wrong. Indeed, Christian ethics is the creaturely yes to the yes that Jesus' Father pronounces in raising him from the dead. This yes is the ground of reality, and this yes never tires of raising up human witnesses to attest itself in all facets of human existence. Ethical action is then not a matter of making the right decision but of being shaped by the commandment of God that "becomes the daily guidance of our lives" (Bonhoeffer).

In sum, Jesus is doing something. Through his Spirit, he continues to minister the new covenant of which he is the center. He does so by speaking through scripture, believing and interceding on our behalf, and by reigning in such a way as to put the sin that he has defeated under his feet once and for all. This work of his is real and is becoming real through the Holy Spirit, who aligns the Christian community to its baptism in him. In the name of the Father, he gathers, upholds and sends forth a people who follow him. In following him, they learn that his ministry continues and that the "gates of hell" will not prevail against it and those called to participate in it.