Surfing with the Spirit or sinking into the sea? Elements enabling Christian character formation in a post-Christendom culture

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Abstract

This essay focuses on that dimension of sharing in the *missio Dei* individually and corporately which involves the formation of Christian character. In particular what should be our first considerations when seeking character formation for participation in the *missio Dei*? This article will suggest that our attention initially should be focused elsewhere than behaviour or direct attempts to change character. Further, while Aristotelian approaches are particularly popular in the contemporary (especially secular) literature, this essay considers the significance of dimensions of *Christian* character formation which are often

underplayed by such approaches, not least loving attachment relationship to the divine and accountability-in-community. While space precludes an exhaustive account of influences on Christian character development, the essay considers aspects of experiencing Christ-centred community in shaping Christian character, utilizing recent insights from the field of neuroscience. It concludes with an example taken from an Anglo-catholic setting of how eucharistic worship can contribute to the formation of Christian character and thus of sharing in the *missio Dei.*

Keywords: Christian character formation; Christian spirituality; Church; Eucharist; *Missio Dei*; Neuroscience

Introduction

The New Testament is full of descriptions and injunctions relating to Christian character formation (such as Mt. 5-7, Gal. 5, Eph. 4, Phil. 4, Col. 3) stating the telos in various (related) ways, be it "following Christ", "putting on Christ", being "conformed to the image of his Son" or through other expressions. Such formation is about sharing in the person and way of Jesus Christ and being caught up in the movement of God in Jesus Christ towards the world – and thus it is about participating in the *missio Dei.* As such one significant dimension of individuals and Christian communities being caught up in the *missio Dei* is *through* genuine Christian character formation. Attention will be paid in this paper to how engagement in the *missio Dei* through Christian character formation is realized through experiencing community centred on Christ, utilizing in particular recent insights from neuroscience.

To define terms here: "character" here is understood to be that "settled pattern of will, thought, feeling and bodily actions that reflect what we have become as a result of how we have habitually lived our lives" (Copan, 2016: 207). "Formation" is about shaping our wills, thoughts, feelings and bodily actions in particular and regularly habitual ways. *Missio Dei* is understood as a sharing in God's purposes in the world as embodied by Jesus Christ in his teaching, life, death and resurrection. This "sharing" or participation includes, yet goes beyond, that participation by which we continually receive our being from God in a manner appropriate to our humanity. It also means (following Davison, 2019: 35) a realization of Christlikeness insofar as we receive this aright – a receiving which is God's gift giving us capacity and receptivity so to do. Consequently our sharing in the *missio Dei* includes developing Christlike

character, that settled pattern of will, thought, feeling and bodily actions reflecting that which is perfectly embodied in Christ.

The wider conversation around character formation has been informed by recent high-profile moral derelictions of duty. For example, in England, organizations such as the Police have underlined how mere instruction in moral values or institutional norms fails to deliver the moral behaviour required of those in positions of authority. Small wonder then that initiatives such as the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at Birmingham University and the Oxford Character Project have sprung up to research and enable character development in different professional fields.

These and other recent initiatives are strongly influenced by Aristotelian approaches. They emphasis attractions including human telos as "happiness", human flourishing with virtue as its own reward and human agency in forming character. They incorporate a sense of how virtues are caught, taught and sought, virtues as dispositional clusters involving perception, motivation, behaviour, desire and emotion, practical wisdom's significance in virtuous behaviour, the non-necessity of any religious belief system and the influence of affect, situational variables and community.

Yet curiously Hauerwas (1995: xiv), Arthur (2021: 3) and others note a lack of progress in this Aristotelian approach to character formation. Perhaps the lack of progress relates to hesitancy about "imposing" values threatening such sacred cows as "autonomy" and "freedom". Or perhaps there is little consensus on what is human good. Freedom or happiness are popular candidates but both provide little moral content or practical guidance for the shaping of our characters. Our post-Kantian Western world has arguably reduced our sense of self to one whose only action is to "choose" and who at core has no telos, virtues, vices, practices, communities, emotions, story, authority *or* character; indeed unrecognizable to our ancestors.

One can also see potential issues with Aristotelian approaches from a Christian perspective. These issues include the stress on self-sufficiency, self-development and self-mastery. Further issues revolve around a neglect of virtues like humility, compassion and justice for the poor; the absence of the Christian virtues of faith and hope and love, along with the absence of divine activity or its inspiration. Intellectual capacity and human agency are elevated above all other capacities. There is evidence of problematic views on women and slavery and eudaimonia, with related concepts like flourishing and fruitfulness easily sliding into cultural ideals of success and the presumed "objective" universality of core virtues.

Aquinas and other theologians have built judiciously on Aristotle's approach, understanding Christian virtue to be not so much what humans achieve but what God grows within us. However while human will-power and determination are engaged rather than bypassed, nevertheless this approach depends on the transforming power of God's grace, God being virtue's prime agent, exemplar and end.[1] In contrast to secular notions of making our own character the account here more readily speaks of being formed in relation to God in Christ in such a way that God's character in Christ comes through (e.g. Gal. 2.20).

Recent work in the field of positive psychology and human flourishing also connects with character development. In the field of neuroscience McGilchrist (2019) points out how the right hemisphere of the brain operates faster than the left hemisphere and is responsible for producing reactions to circumstances *before* we have a chance to consider how to react. Hence the right hemisphere is a leading source of our character, in that our reactions reveal the "natural", "settled" or "characteristic" way of being and responding. Thus character formation involves the challenge of accessing the right hemisphere, through for example the body, imagination and affective relationships. Such insights suggest ways of going beyond Hauerwas and others in considering how Christian practices access the right brain's character settings and thus shape Christlike character in ways enabling participation in the *missio Dei*.

Christianity in its scriptures and ecclesial life has consistently underlined the significance of character formation in following Jesus' way and teaching. Furthermore there are a number of areas essential to Christian character formation including encountering God in Christ, experiencing community centred on Christ and individual and corporate following of Jesus' teaching and way. Hence this paper will utilize recent insights from neuroscience to examine how engagement in the *missio Dei* through Christian character formation can be realized through experiencing community centred on Christ.

Encountering God in Christ

Foundational to character formation are our loving attachments, a truth attested to by theologians and neuroscientists alike. Examples such as the Life

1 See e.g. Herdt, 2008: 89 and passim for a perceptive discussion of Aquinas' infused virtues.

Model (Friesan et al., 1999) offer a relational theological foundation promoting attachment with God and human persons as a key component of spiritual and psychological change. Contemporary neurobiological models support loving attachment as the mechanism for maturity development and healthy interpersonal skills (Schore, 1994). Such attachment has a significant research base in terms of its importance in childhood development adult relationships and indeed attachment with God (see Wilder, Garzon & Johnson, 2020 for an overview). Fundamental to Jesus Christ's character is his relation with his Father, that loving attachment affirmed at baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration and elsewhere in the New Testament. Thus participating in the *missio Dei* as defined above includes growing this loving attachment. Benner (2003: 88) writes that "meditating on God's love has done more to increase my love than decades of effort to try to be more loving" and effecting changes Benner had given up hope of realizing. This is unsurprising from the perspective of neuroscience. Jennings (2013: 234) observed that

> meditating specifically on God's love increases growth in the prefrontal cortex (where we make judgements and experience Godlike love) and thus increased compassion, empathy, altruism AND also increased sharp thinking and memory – ie it stimulates the brain to heal and grow itself as we worship a God of love.

However as any seasoned preacher or pastor knows it is not enough simply to assert God's love for us in a propositional way. Such propositional statements are not necessarily *appropriated*. Indeed it is not apparent that there is always an abiding awareness of God's deep love even among Christian leaders. Gerald May calls the sort of knowing of love that is essential for transformation "contemplative knowing". This knowing of love results from meeting God in a contemplative state (May, 1982: 135). Benner (2003: 76) in a more Ignatian key writes:

> It comes from sitting at the feet of Jesus, gazing into his face and listening to his assurances of love for me. It comes from letting God's love wash over me, not simply trying to believe it. It comes from soaking in the scriptural assurances of such love, not simply reading them and trying to remember or believe them. It comes from spending time with God, observing how He looks at me. It comes from watching his watchfulness over me and listening to his protestations of love for me.

In a different vein Maggie Ross ponders the *creatio continua* in a way designed to deepen awareness. She gratefully receives these wonders as loving, personal gifts (Ross, 2018: 119).

What Ross, May and Benner are describing here are ways of deepening an attachment relationship of love with God, conscious of how such relationships are critical to shaping behaviour and transformation. Such insights are not new. Khouri (2021: 67-8) suggests that how we attach to God and others has more influence over the formation of character than anything else. Khouri notes that the brain first receives information via that part of our brain that focuses on attachment before continuing to our emotional and identity centres. This means that who and what we are most closely attached to shapes how we process and respond to sensory information (Khouri, 2021: 157). After leaving our attachment centres, the sensory information passes to our alarm and emotional centres (generating awareness of dangers and feelings about incoming data) and thence to our identity centre. This helps us work out how to respond, consistent with "who I am" and "who my people are". All of which takes just one sixth of a second and happens faster than most conscious thought. (Only then do we find the region of our brain responsible for logic and reason employed.)

These connections between neuroscience and emotional processing underline that a crucial dimension of character formation is a loving attachment relationship with God. Critical to this is grasping, heart and soul, God's loving attachment to us. Wilder, Khouri and others understand such attachment as beginning with grace. Grace is not simply the accurate but dry description of "unmerited favour" but, more affectively, "the God-given gift of intended, unearned relationship with him as his special and favourite son or daughter" (Khouri, 2021: 12).[2] Fostering this attachment requires imagination and affect as much as cognition, a growing awareness that one is "'the sparkle of joy in God's eye" for example.

A homely example comes from Marlena Graves whose three-year-old child caught Marlena looking at her admiringly and with great affection and so asked "Mommy, why looking at me like that?" Marlena replied "Because I love you and delight in you." Marlena then added "God looks at you that way too." Her curiosity piqued, the three year old said "You mean God looks happy at me?" "Yes" said Marlena, "God always looks happy at you!" The three-year-old

2 Favourite here does not imply exclusivity or superiority here as God's relational grace is not competitive.

paused and then replied "Then I look happy at God, at you, at Daddy, at sisters" (Graves, 2020: 75).

More widely, research on character formation shows benevolent loving service being rooted primarily in grasping God's love personally. Lee et al. (2013: 21) revealed that "our single most important finding is the extent to which experiences of divine love are related to a life of benevolent service". Such research accords with Aristotle's view that affect and emotion influence the shaping of virtuous character. The research also accords with Wesley's view that encountering God's pardoning love personally creates the possibility of a responsive heart delighting to love God and our neighbour with peace and joy.

If developing loving attachments is critical for character formation how do we foster such loving attachments in ecclesial community? Preaching and teaching is certainly part of it, but there are plenty of people who have received teaching on God's love without personally appropriating it. The neuroscientist and psychiatrist Curt Thompson (2021) suggests that, analogous to a child's growing loving attachments, all persons need four elements in place to grow loving attachment to God – being safe, seen, soothed and secure.

Space precludes a description of each of these elements but closer examination of being seen provides a helpful example. The process of being seen, emphasizing the benign and compassionate gaze of the divine through liturgy, prayer and daily life can help hugely. Thompson suggests *face-to-face* meditation where one appreciates the face of God shining upon you communicating "You are my son/daughter whom I love. I am so pleased with you that you are on earth." All the while one is invited to sense God's eyes looking directly, to not look away as you imagine God speaking these words. This is followed by remaining emotionally and imaginatively still for a few minutes, reflecting on one's feelings and God's feelings. Thompson (2010: 143-4) argues that over a period of weeks, with consistency and repetition, this will change the practitioner's neural networks, echoing similar experiences in scripture.

Among other practices there is also the apophatic and contemplative dimension of attentiveness which fosters attachment relationship with God. This attentiveness is not about doing or having but being before God, renouncing the idolatry of human agency, refusing that clinging and grasping rooted often in egoic fear and that presumption we can manipulate God by method. The paradox of intention is to the fore here. We shape character by relinquishing the activity of so doing and by simply attending in the presence of God. Writing of this paradox, Shaw (1988: 202) says, "Something else acts, and I am to be attentive. My action thus participates in a larger vitality in which my life is embedded … life is embedded in a larger sustaining whole, and yieldedness to

this, participation within it, is the fulfilment of human existence." Ross (2014: 35) argues that such meditative practice (alongside other practices) enables access to character settings in the brain, what she refers to as "deep mind", "and intent is supremely important in this process, for meditation accesses the deep mind and the attention of the deep mind is influenced by intention".

Specifically in terms of character formation, the time of silence and stillness is not itself primarily understood theologically as our work or activity. Nevertheless the framing of such practice as intentionally seeking to be in the presence of the self-giving love of the Trinity (unlike vipassana for instance), basking like sunbathers in the love of God, being irradiated with the light of God's love (as Ross puts it elsewhere) can contribute to the shaping of Christian character.

Tell me the old, old story

The story that the ecclesial community is living and communicating is also critical for character formation. Hauerwas (1981: 116) points out that the development of character happens in the context of a community shaped by a narrative. Or as MacIntyre (1981: 216) observed, it is only possible to "answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" The difficulty with Hauerwas' position is, however, as Gill (1999: 14) points out, is that Hauerwas' later work so distinguishes Christian communities from worldly secularity as not to notice the overlaps and influences of Christian and "secular" narratives. This makes for an unhelpful idealizing of churches which Fergusson (1998: 66) sharply observes exists nowhere else.

Nevertheless the Christian narrative has plenty of examples of revelation involving realization of being part of quite a different story from the one you thought you were in. Examples include the Road to Emmaus, Peter's recommissioning and the conversion of Paul. What triggers the change in story here is often an experience whose intensity, clarity and significance gives an overarching authority to aspects of the gospel story, transforming character. Part of the contemporary challenge is that it is not about exchanging a single story for a second single story in seemingly Hauerwasian mode but that

> for many of us, our work life, church life and family neighborhood life participate in fundamentally *different* narratives and are oriented toward different horizons … most of us remain divided

> between competing narratives. In fact, this is one of the singular features of our pluralist, post-modern society: the loss of the meta-narrative. Each community and each person must construct meaning and identity as he or she sees fit. (Hagley, 2013)

What is needed is for the Christian narrative to have such authoritative influence on our patterns of will, thought and feeling that it brings a *coherence* to the multi-faceted narratives, practices and commitments by which we live and thus shapes Christian character.

'My people'

A key driver of such coherence is the strength of attachment to a particular people shaped by a specific narrative. Who "my people" are and how "my people" understand themselves narratively is highly significant in shaping character, making some ways of being and acting entirely straightforward and others beyond the pale. In his popular work *Atomic Habits* James Clear (2018: 116) points out that there are three groups of people whose habits we imitate – those close to us (our "tribe"), the many (the "crowd") and the powerful.

The influence of "my people" can be extraordinary. For example consider the twenty-one Christians led out to a Libyan beach by ISIS militants in 2015 who were then beheaded for being Christian. Western media focused on the horror of such savage and cold-blooded murder but not on the extraordinary fact that these twenty-one had not been passive but had audibly professed their faith in Jesus Christ just before and even during their decapitation.

Mosebach (2019) researched these men, twenty of whom were from the Egyptian Coptic Church. Villagers where the men's families lived told Mosebach that the men were not especially different from any other Christians in the village. The Coptic Church is a Church of martyrs and any of them in the village would rather die than betray the faith. The villagers added that their deaths didn't intimidate those left but gave Christians courage because the martyrs spending their last few moments alive in prayer proved the strength of their faith. There was no call for revenge from anyone, not only because Jesus' teaching was the primary authority here but also because the martyrs' witness simply outshone such darkness. The characters of those Coptic martyrs had been deeply shaped by the community to which they belonged, resulting in sacrifices that appeared largely unintelligible to Western media. Such witnesses'

brave witness to their faith embodied Christlike character unto death and thus is a startling participation in the *missio Dei* as defined above.

Who "my people" are can be deeply impactful in societies where there is persecution, segregation and ancestral continuity. In contrast, cultures that devalue the past and promote individualism invite a shallowness about "my people" that is less impactful on character. Wilder underlines the significance of "my people", arguing that "character is housed and remembered in the fast-track structures". For Wilder (2020: 42), the part of the brain which runs faster than conscious speed is managed by the right brain. Wilder points out that identity is a rather protected brain function and that access to establish or change identity and character is limited to those who are attached to us significantly; "the fast track only allows 'my people' access to the character settings" (Wilder, 2020: 43).

Accountability

Ecclesiologically this begs the question of how we might better enable Christian community to be about "'my people" shaping character. Recent decades have seen the development of ecclesial groups with different charisms. Examples like Neocatechumenate, Focolare, Sant'Egidio and some forms of New Monasticism have been more intentional about formation of "my people" together. The history of the Church shows that renewal has sometimes come through these initiatives, such as Wesley's Methodist class meeting and bands in eighteenth-century England. Relatedly, Wilder (2018: 23) notes churches in the West nowadays rarely see character transformation because of six specific reasons: they lose a group identity; focus on beliefs over relationships; misuse the power of shame and emotions; accept self-justifications; hide weakness; do not love enemies. The ecclesial initiatives just mentioned address such themes to lesser or greater extents.

There are no doubt dangers with developing an *ecclesiola in ecclesia* – the little church within the Church. These dangers include fracturing the Church, creating "levels" of discipleship and with it separation, splitting and sectarianism. Yet Jesus' own pedagogy with his disciples was that of a small group who travelled, ate and prayed together as a relationally close cohort and presumably Jesus was intentional about doing so to create the conditions for formation and (accountable) apprenticeship. Without accountability and a readiness to face the truth about ourselves through personal relationships we are vulnerable to self-delusion rather than transfiguration. Worse, we may be disregarding God's movement towards us and our participation in the *missio Dei*. The accountability

is in part about being freed by the gospel from the hell of Sisyphus-like labours of self-justification. We open ourselves together to God's healing as we exist in truthfulness, freedom and fearlessness which is able to be with others without rivalry, refusing to judge and calling ourselves to account.

Role models

Of particular significance among "my people" for character formation are those examples of Christian living whose way of being makes us (at our better moments) think "gosh, human beings can be like that in Christ, that is how I would like to be". Indeed, the Jubilee Centre for Character Development asserts that in an educational setting the single most important "tool" to impact a student's character is the teacher's own character (Arthur et al., 2017: 16). Role models deepen our understanding of Christian character, showing its promise, strangeness and attractiveness. Paas (2019: 193) points out that "the idea that everyone should have his or her unique high-quality experience of God is a product of modern consumer society rather than an authentic Christian thought". Rather God demonstrates Godself to the community of the Church and gives more light to some than others, for example "saints", Bible writers, apostles. This is why faith is and needs to be communal, so that individuals' experiences ensure communal upbuilding. As such "the first response to the giftings and testimony of others must not be envy or scepticism … but wonder: what is it God wants to tell us through this testimony?" (Paas, 2019: 194). And how are we being formed by it? Of course the idea of "exemplars" can invite a sense of hierarchy, superiority and self-regard. We need to care for ourselves and others to appreciate that genuine Christian exemplars are individuals who are ever more profoundly grasping the depth of their need for God, each with their own vulnerability to projections and delusions.

Brain skills, emotion and embodied cognition

Related to role models and exemplars and also foundational for character formation are what Coursey, Wilder and others describe as "brain skills". (This is a misnomer in some ways as such skills involve cognition, emotions and the body (including the brain) in their realization). "Brain skills" are relational skills that "equip us to effectively respond to the onslaught of shifting, moment-by-moment circumstances in the most efficient manner" (Coursey, 2016: 3). Such

skills shape our character as the skills become dispositions. An example is the skill of appreciation which leads to a grateful disposition. We learn brain skills as we grow, most particularly as infants. Gaps in brain skills can be transmitted through the generations. Acquiring skills requires interaction with more skilful brains, but only those with whom one has a positive emotional attachments. These skills will not spread without bonded relationships (and here joy is important as providing a bond). Once acquired, these skills need repeated practice to become ingrained habits. To develop these skills requires attachment love, a sense of "my people" and knowing how "my people" would act under conditions we experience. How "my people" act is the reference for our first reaction. These skills are not learned through reading but through repeated observation of those we are positively attached to who embody such skills. There are all sorts of such skills and Coursey counts nineteen brain skills which he argues build joyful community. While not specifically virtues these brain skills are essential to virtuous living and provide a good example of indirect but practical ways of taking forward character formation.

Take for example the skill of "returning to joy," which offers assurance that even when things go wrong, we are not abandoned and left in our upset. Returning to joy comes from strong attachments to others and a deep sense of who we are that will not get lost when we are in pain. This skill provides an emotional capacity enabling consistency and resilience under stress, enabling for example the love of enemies, patience, kindness. Consider for example six basic, unpleasant emotions of sadness, anger, disgust, shame, fear and despair. When we realize such emotions, are we able to return to joy straightforwardly? People who nurse their anger for days, weeks or even years, are clearly not. The longer it takes us to return to joy, the more emotionally exhausted we become. Parents who have not learned this skill cannot show their children how to properly manage and quiet big feelings. So a parent who cannot manage disgust for instance is changing a baby's nappy and receives the gift of some streaming diarrhoea. If the response is disgust then the baby's lip will begin to quiver, shame is initiated and crying follows. But a skilled parent stays connected, with interactive smiles and 'glad to be together' sounds, helping the baby learn "returning to joy" in relation to disgust. Staying connected when intense negative emotions kick in is critical and such connection enables the return to joy. For each of us there are particular emotions we need help with. We need to locate people who have the skill to return to joyful relationship from that emotion. We could also ask friends who have this skill to tell us stories about how they returned to joy.

This returning to joy involves a gratitude that is expressed in the midst of difficulties. Jesus in the midst of the apparent failure of people/towns hearing

his message actually gives thanks (Mt. 11.28-30). Again Jesus gives thanks at the last supper when facing abandonment by disciples and crucifixion. Or again, Jesus gives thanks to the Father in the sorrowful context of Lazarus' death before reviving him.

These skills are but one example of the wider field of embodied cognition and embodied emotion and how cognition, emotion and behaviour are intricately related to one another. Particularly relevant for our purposes is how the right brain, which as we have seen is the seat of character settings, makes possible "empathic connection, as well as understanding how others feel, what they mean not only by what they say in context … but by their facial expressions, their 'body language' and tone of voice" (McGilchrist, 2009: 66). Research continues to underline the significance of embodied cognition (Beilock, 2017). As Bourdieu (1990) says, "the body takes metaphors seriously" and our bodies are students even when we don't realize it. Recent studies go beyond Damasio (1994) and show the importance of emotion in understanding and working with behaviour. For example Johnson (2017) suggests all aspects of cognition are mediated, influenced or even initiated by emotion. The importance of emotion and its embodiment in understanding and working with cognition underlines the earlier points about the significance of loving attachments in shaping that settled pattern of will, thought, feeling and bodily actions that form character.

Thus Christian character formation through ecclesial community and conforming to Christ's teaching and way, which is a dimension of participation in the *missio Dei*, must pay attention to embodied cognition and enactive emotions. By and large, it seems we don't know and then act. Rather we know by acting, and our bodily habits affect what we do.

Examples: character formation in ecclesial community

The foregoing discussion suggests that the *first* questions we should be asking in regard to character formation for participation in the *missio Dei* are not so much "How do I improve my behaviour?" or "How do I change my character?" but rather "How am I practising my belovedness?", "Who are my people?" "To whom am I accountable?", "What is my/our story?", "To what am I paying attention?", "What (brain) skill needs attention?", "How am I forming character through bodily gestures and movements?" and "What is my body teaching me?"

Bodies matter and are places of formation and worship of one kind or another. While space precludes detailed consideration, one example is that of

liturgical formation, in which acts of sitting, kneeling or standing, whether it is eating bread and wine, crossing ourselves or waving palm branches occur through our bodies. Another example is Benson's Christ's pieces, an intentional Christian community in Brisbane, Australia, which takes the bodily processes of habit formation seriously and registers the interrelatedness of the cognitive and the affective, leveraging the senses to capture the imagination and re-orient desires via a litany of practices rooted in mundane activities such as showering (Benson, 2019). Jesus points out the significance of the physical. He calls for discipleship of the eye and notes the danger of being entrapped by the evil one when we swear oaths, of being showy in prayer and fasting. Jesus sums these up on in terms of a physical, affective and cognitive *doing* of what he says in Mt. 7. Other collective practices include the intricate connections of the physical, affective and cognitive in the Christian community. Gratitude, respect and honouring can be transformative and are worthy of serious consideration.

To approach Christian praxis through the lens of character formation invites a particular way of engaging with the Christian habitus. As Gill points out much recent Anglican theology understands worship to be central to both ethics and theology. Hence as an Anglican author let me end with an example from worship, in particular the Eucharist. This is also for practical reasons, given it is more straightforward to shape already existing practices rather than introduce different practices in a world often complaining of initiative-fatigue. Having said this, we should remember the non-instrumental nature of worship and of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not some instrumental tool for achieving some "higher" purpose such as character formation. Rather character formation is simply part of what happens when Eucharistic worship is undertaken in the Spirit of Christ and "the Eucharist is the core of the missional identity of the Church … of its openness to Christ who builds community out of strangers by sharing himself with them" (Paas, 2019: 199).

Very briefly consider the Eucharist undertaken in an Anglo-catholic church setting, Holy Trinity, Eltham, where I was sometime vicar. As part of the preparation for confirmation, one Sunday Eucharist was accompanied by a commentary explaining why we did what we did. Even before the service the physical action of honouring the Lord's presence, whether bowing to the altar, the cross or genuflecting at the tabernacle is already enabling the body to practise the presence of God and offering due regard to the Lord. Through the service gestures of sitting, kneeling, standing, crossing oneself and singing further enable the body to contribute to the formation of worshipful character. *Registering the love of God* through the Eucharist is fundamental – whether in the initiating love of the Father who not only gathers us but gifts us with the

very fabric of our being, the liberating forgiveness of the Son who absolves us or in the creative power of the Spirit who draws us into union with our Lord. The Good News of Jesus Christ and the story of which we are a part is rehearsed as we listen to scriptures and the sermon, appreciating that with this God we are safe, seen, soothed and secure come what may. The giftedness of life and creation is distilled in the bread and wine. The personal nature of this giftedness is distilled in Jesus, the language of "given for you" indicating representation and even substitution, all evoking praise, gratitude for the one who does all the trusting, obeying, suffering and dying for us. We participate in hope and anticipation, picturing the eating and drinking in the Kingdom of God.

The gradual sororal and fraternal relocation of those with whom we receive strengthens that sense of "my people". This communal sense is further enhanced as we rehearse our identity in the Eucharistic prayer as a *community centred on Christ*. Hence we are a people who seek to love our enemies and bless those who curse us, who know we are weak and help each other to grow where we are weak, who see what God is building in others and who create belonging (Wilder, 2018: 233).

Finally we seek to *embody Christ's way* in relation to those around us as Jesus' words "do this" soak into our bodies and minds personally. While the Eucharist helps relocate others in Christ we slip from this relocation between Eucharists. Thus at every Eucharist we are led to consider what habits, practices and skills can reshape our desires and sharpen our eucharistic living outside of the formal liturgy. We submit our relationships, agendas, meals and all that is involved in the liturgy after the liturgy to Jesus' presence and activity. Thus the Eucharist shifts from being a pious remembrance for personal encouragement to a social reality of Christ present among us. The sacrament shifts from being a performance of a redemption achieved in the past to being an inbreaking of the future Kingdom of God in the present, which inbreaking pervades our lives more and more (Cavanaugh, 1998: 222).

The evidence that character is shaped through such eucharistic worship (among other things!) is inevitably anecdotal. However my experience at Holy Trinity, Eltham suggested there was a gratitude embodied by members of the congregation which in comparing notes with neighbouring ministers (of various traditions) was not the case. This generosity was embodied in paying rising parish costs and some significant examples of "good deaths" rooted in a felt awareness of being recipients of a generosity beyond merit or expectation. Such dispositions suggested to this vicar some settled patterns of will, thought, feeling and bodily actions were being re-formed in people as a result of how they had habitually lived their lives, not least as devout members of eucharistic community.

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