Faithfulness to Christ as Loyalty to Both Truth and Love—A Study in Charity and Public Discourse

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Abstract

This paper engages the problem of social polarization, specifically with regard to the theological challenge of how Matthew 5:38–48 applies to the Christian's role in contexts of social divisiveness. It begins with the problem of polarization both as experienced and contributed to by Christian communities. *Should* we be "turning the other cheek" when the world is antagonistic to Christian faith? The paper works through this difficulty by placing the ethos of Matthew 5 in conversation with Christ's prayer in John 17. Our reading of that prayer challenges the common "in the world but not of it" dictum, understanding it instead as a call to be fully present in the world, just as Christ was. Finally, the paper imagines this incarnational vocation specifically in terms of the divisive realm of public discourse. It proposes that the typical framing of public discourse around a polemic of "fact-vs-opinion" is itself part of the problem. It offers an alternate framing of "fact and analysis"— a reimagining that is concretized in the dispositions of intellectual charity, moral imagination, and moral humility. The paper presents a vision of discourse as informed by Christlike charity, offering concrete dispositions that help us better cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the fulfillment of Christ's difficult mandate to turn the other cheek, hand over one's cloak, and go a second mile.

Introduction: What To Do with Matthew 5 in Today's Climate?

The problem of polarized discourse presents a particular challenge for Christians, in addition to the commonly experienced distress it causes across communities and cultures in recent times. For Christians, who can be seen to be contributors to as well as recipients of the problem of polarization, a tension arises when self-protective instincts seem to stand sharply at odds with the practically paradigmatic biblical call in Matthew 5 to "turn the other cheek, go the second mile," etc. (vv.

38–48). On the one hand, the impulses toward self-protection and personal justice are natural and understandable; on the other hand, the mandates of Matthew 5 seem very clear. How is the Christian to best approach the problem of polarization, especially in terms of the radical, others-oriented vision of Christian life proposed by Matthew 5? This essay will consider how a close examination of Christ's magisterial prayer in John 17 can serve as a helpful lens through which to approach the problem of polarization and illumine the vision of being a Christ-follower found in Matthew 5. It will then apply this vision to the problem of public discourse, providing concrete help to Christians desiring to be better formed by Christlike charity.

The Problem of Polarization as Experienced by Christian Communities

Polarization has become a nearly ubiquitous feature of social life in North America. A 2022 Pew Research report on public experiences of political hostility in the US observes an increase in the personal orientation of such familiar polarization: "Increasingly, Republicans and Democrats view not just the opposing party but also the *people* in that party in a negative light. Growing shares in each party now describe those in the other party as more closed-minded, dishonest, immoral and unintelligent than other Americans."[1] A year later, Pew Research went on to note that such public division leaves a majority (65 percent) feeling self-reportedly "exhausted" when thinking about politics, and that the most frequent words employed by survey participants to describe politics were: divisive, corrupt, messy, chaos, and bad.[2] Lauren Swayne Barthold, philosopher of ethics at Emerson College, sees such oppositional orientation as grounded in fear, observing that "polarization occurs when fear of certain identity-based difference leads to avoidance, and avoidance leads to hostile stereotypes that result in 'us-versus-them' thinking."[3] Dutch ethicist Pieter Vos elaborates: "Driven by fears about losing what is regarded as valuable, one group begins to question the moral legitimacy of another group and even demonizes this group as the cause of imagined or real threats."[4] Vos explains that a reductive division of the world into the categories of "us" and "them" is the precursor to the more oppositional "us-vs-them."[5] That is, though we might be

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1 "As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (August 9, 2022).
2 "Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (September 19, 2023).
3 Lauren Swayne Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization in the Public Sphere: Civic Dialogue* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 3.
4 Pieter H. Vos, "Introduction," in *The Calling of the Church in Times of Polarization*, ed. Heleen E. Zorgdrager and Pieter H. Vos, vol. 46 of Studies in Reformational Philosophy, series ed. Eddy Van der Borght, 1–21 (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 1.
5 Vos, "Introduction," 4–5.

aware of and try to avoid us-vs-them thinking, we perhaps are missing the more fundamental task of addressing how we understand the distinction to begin with.

The division and polarization that is unfortunately so characteristic of our cultural and political landscapes in North America is perhaps nowhere more clearly seen than in the arena of discourse—both public and interpersonal. Many of us would like to think that we are more than willing to engage in healthy discussion, even with people who disagree with us. In spite of this sincerely held value, however, people often can find themselves devolving into those us-vs-them divisions and circling their wagons in camps of like-minded people.[6]

While such a state of affairs is regrettable in itself, of particular concern is the manner in which Christians navigate the problem. Hovering in the air of many Christian communities is an apparent conviction that the origins of incivility lie primarily within "the world," where they understand people's lives to be animated by a combination of ill will and agenda.[7] By contrast, so the thinking seems to hold, they as the people of God are in general reliably motivated by Christlike charity and biblical truth. What's more, Christians in recent years seem to have become more comfortable justifying an antagonistic stance on their part toward other viewpoints by claiming that those others have not shown basic respect for their own views. "Why should I respect their view—they don't respect mine!" has been a response one can hear more and more in Christian circles.[8] Rev. Dr. Clay Stauffer, of the Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy, observes: "Christianity has contributed to the polarization of our nation. Without a doubt,

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6   On social media algorithms and their contribute to polarization, see: Ermelinda Rodilosso, "Filter Bubbles and the Unfeeling: How AI for Social Media Can Foster Extremism and Polarization," *Philosophy and Technology* 37, no. 2 (June 2024): article 71, 1–21.

7   For the notion of the world (cosmos) as the natural realm that is antithetical to God, see H. Sasse, "*kósmos*," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, abridged in one volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 459–465 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 464. Drawing from locations in the gospel of John, Sasse states "In such references the cosmos is as it were a collective person represented by its prince. Christ and the cosmos are thus opponents.… Salvation history is a struggle between Christ and the cosmos, or the evil one who rules it" (464). *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* observes: "'the world' can also refer to the subclass of indifferent and hostile people who reject God and his ways." See: Carl Bridges, Jr., "world," *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996).

8   Najib George Awad, of Hartford Seminary, observes: "Many Christian intellectuals and authors, from the earth's four corners and from every background imaginable, relate that the Christian church [has] lost ground in the public life of the World." He goes on to assert: "Christians, like any other religious people dealing with a challenge to their beliefs, tend to respond to changes toward the church … by leaning toward self-victimization: the church is the victim of the world's unjust persecuting and blame-shifting mentality that makes it often punish Christianity for evil for which it is not responsible." Najib George Awad, "'They Are *in* the World, but Not *of* the World': Biblical and Contextual Reflections on Church, Alterity and Self-Otherizing," Ch. 16 in *The Calling of the Church in Times of Polarization*, ed. Heleen E. Zorgdrager and Pieter H. Vos, vol. 46 of Studies in Reformational Philosophy, series ed. Eddy Van der Borght, 325–43 (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 325, 326.

Christians have participated in the name calling, demonizing and divisive rhetoric that has divided our country. This has been true on both the right and the left."[9]

The Problem of Matthew 5 for Christian Individuals and Communities

While the experiences prompting these attitudes and stances by Christians are real, it is hard not to notice a contrast between such responses and the vision of gospel charity so magisterially articulated by Christ in Matthew 5:

> You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:38–45, NIV, 2011)

The problems raised by this text are complex, despite its beautiful clarity and dramatic call to not return evil for evil. We can notice immediately that, though oft-quoted, this is *not* the common narrative about living as Christians in the world today. A moment's pause likely can call to mind salient examples of things that people of faith express outrage about, or rights and freedoms that they feel justified in standing up for specifically *as* people of faith. However, the language of the text seems to suggest an almost verbatim counternarrative to the "But they're not being respectful to me or my faith!" justification for positioning ourselves apart from, or even in opposition to, those unlike us. *Should* we really be "turning the other cheek" when the world is antagonistic to Christian faith?[10] We should note

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9   Clay Stauffer, "When Polarization Hits the Pews," *The Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy*, Vanderbilt University, February 22, 2021.

10 Melanie A. Howard considers how this text might be received by Christian immigrants, containing as it does "directives urging nonresistance to abuse and love of one's enemies" (Melanie A. Howard, "Turning Cheeks at Checkpoints: Matthew 5:38–48 as a Text of Terror or Expression of Encouragement for Immigrant Audiences?" *Preaching in/and the* Borderlands, ed. J. Dwayne Howell and Charles L. Aaron Jr., 79–91 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 80. Howard suggests that for some readers the text may be a "text of terror," while for others "this text may suggest that if one's identity is ultimately founded on the basis of a relationship to the divine, then human governments that threaten deportation may seem to pose less of a threat" (82, 89). Howard also engages possible rhetorical framings of Matthew 5, again in terms of modern immigrant audiences, in "Paradigm of Peace, Silly Satire, Text of Terror: Perspectives on Matthew 5:38–48 for Immigrant Populations," *Soundings* 101, no. 2 (2018): 110–46.

that, clearly, we are not to read this text as invalidating social justice efforts or as suggesting that oppressors should be simply bowed to. The problems raised by this text are complex indeed.

Modern readers looking for a fresh engagement with this text might find help in Thomas Aquinas's collation of ancient commentary on the gospels, his *Catena aurea*, which shows that the overall sense of the text was taken to be in contrast with the human tendency to *over* retaliate for a harm. Hence, when the Old Testament law declares "an eye for an eye" (e.g., Exodus 21:23–25, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21), the point was not so much to promote retributive violence as it was to prevent disproportionate responses based on rage. The law, Augustine says, was designed to *limit* acts of retribution, not to promote them: "[The Law] is not to encourage but to check rage, for it does not rekindle what was extinguished, but hinders the flames already kindled from further spread."[11] Similarly, Aquinas shows Pseudo-Chrysostom observing the practical wisdom of moderating even one's legal right to retribution: "Has your return blow at all restrained him from striking you again? It has rather roused him to another blow. For anger is not checked by meeting anger, but is only more irritated."[12]

These interpretations seem helpful to a point, and align with biblical calls to patience, self-control, and practical wisdom, but they do not yet fully explain the radical mandates of Matthew 5—i.e., seemingly to exact no justice at all.[13] Augustine goes on to set the stage for upending the scales of justice altogether, though here still for the practical reason of avoiding excess: "That which the Law sought to do, namely, to put an end to unequal revenge, is more safely secured when there is no revenge at all."[14] Jerome identifies escalation of harm explicitly as sin (and, interestingly, the predominant thing to be avoided), stating: "Thus our Lord by doing away all retaliation, cuts of the beginnings of sin. So the Law corrects faults, the Gospel removes their occasion."[15] Augustine, ever pastoral, highlights the spiritual motive undergirding Christ's call to not return evil for evil, adding: "Whence the Lord judges that others' weakness should rather be borne with compassion, than that our own should be soothed by others' pain."[16]

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11 Aquinas, *Catena aurea in Matthaeum*, 5.20. Ref.: Thomas Aquinas. *Catena aurea in Matthaeum*. Latin text based on the 1953 Marietti edition. Published, with English translation, as: *Catena aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: Vol. 1 St. Matthew Part 1*, trans. John Henry Parker, J.G.F., J. Rivington, and Joseph Kenny (Oxford, 1841). Thomas's reference to Augustine from *contra Faustus* 19.25.

12 Aquinas, *Catena aurea Matt.* 5.20. Thomas does not provide a specific location for Pseudo-Chrysostom's reference.

13 On the presence of hyperbole in Matthew 5, see Charles Cruise, "A Methodology for Detecting and Mitigating Hyperbole in Matthew 5:38–42," *JETS* 6, no. 1 (2018): 83–103.

14 Aquinas, *Catena aurea Matt.* 5.20. Thomas's reference to Augustine from *contra Faustus* 19.25.

15 Aquinas, *Catena aurea Matt.* 5.20. Thomas does not provide a specific location for Jerome's reference.

16 Aquinas, *Catena aurea Matt.* 5.20. Thomas's reference to Augustine: *Sermo in monte* 1.20.

Better to be harmed oneself than to contribute to the human problem of escalating violence.[17] Chrysostom, recognizing that Matthew 5 presents a veritable spiritual exercise in Christlikeness, sketches out the ascending steps specifically with regard to suffering offense:

> Note through what steps we have now ascended hither, and how He has set us on the very pinnacle of virtue. The first step is, not to begin to do wrong to any, the second, that in avenging a wrong done to us we be content with retaliating equal; the third, to return nothing of what we have suffered; the fourth, to offer one's self to the endurance of evil, the fifth, to be ready to suffer even more evil than the oppressor desires to inflict; the sixth, not to hate him of whom we suffer such things; the seventh, to love him; the eighth, to do him good; the ninth, to pray for him. And because the command is great, the reward proposed is also great, namely to be made like unto God.[18]

These readings emphasize the spiritual significance of concrete, human interactions. Prompted by these readings, we can understand in Christ's words a serious call to be willing to be harmed rather than to do harm, and the promise that such a difficult vocation aligns us with the very heart and mind of God, making us his children indeed.[19]

By contrast, the problem of polarization for Christian communities seems to indicate a marked resistance in the modern mind, or at least desensitization, to this portion of Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1–7:29). In addition to the cultural, social, and moral difficulties this resistance contributes to, such comfortability with a polarizing orientation seems to have implications for a Christian community's spiritual identity and formation. This is sobering. What might be the reason that contemporary Christians are unable, or unwilling, to live according to the gospel mandates of Matthew 5?

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17 On the theme of mimetic violence and its relation to Christ's redemptive mission, see the work of René Girard: *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), and *The One by Whom Scandal Comes,* trans. M.B. DeBevouise, Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture, series ed. William A. Johnson (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2014).

18 Aquinas, *Catena aurea Matt.* 5.21. Thomas does not provide a specific location for Chrysostom's reference.

19 The Greek term used in verse 45 of John 17 is not "child" but "son" (*huios*/υἱός)—i.e., "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." However, the focus of the idiom here is not on attaining the relationship (becoming a child of God), but rather on being the kind of person who shares the characteristics of God himself—a frequent meaning of the Semitic idiom "son of." See the entry for "son of" in Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O'Connor, *An introduction to biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 9.5.3.b. See also Eugene A. Nida and J.P. Louw, *Lexical Semantics of the Greek New Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), 58.26.

Responses to Threatened Identity: Fear and Theological Loyalty

A number of scholars have engaged the issue of social polarization in varying parts of the world through the lens of threatened community identity. Considering cases of Christian communities struggling to relate to their own societal contexts, they point to the role of fear in cases of dramatic alienation—an intuition we saw earlier raised in the work of Barthold and Vos. Viktória Kóczián, in a study on the theological challenges at work in the European migration crisis, highlights the problem of Christians fearing for the safety of their identities as faith communities: "As societies and churches accept refugees and migrants, they struggle with fear partly related to the possibility of a cultural change and loss of identity as a consequence of the socio-cultural differences between the European population and the newcomers."[20] Najib George Awad, addressing the "traumatic, polarized and dangerous" situation of the Syrian Christian church, notes the fear-based problem of what he calls "lethal alterity"—i.e., a toxic defense response to an antagonistic environment by which one negatively frames their identity in contradistinction to the others one is threatened by.[21] Though we can hardly fault communities for employing "'Not-Me' dis-identification," as he calls it, in such fraught circumstances, Awad cautions that such identity-through-alienation is ultimately self-destructive.[22]

These cases illumine in dramatic fashion the dangers of the social polarization experienced by Christian communities in North America, by showing advanced cases of the same pathology. It is not to be imagined, however, that many people in Western churches would describe *themselves* as acting in fear. We might, however, address the impulse in terms of what we might call "theological loyalty."[23] A person feels that their faith-based values and way of life are marginalized, even threatened, by society, and that "worldly" ways of life are given privileged footing. They may feel compelled to stand up for or defend the Christian perspective, emphasizing their distinctness and differentness from their surroundings. Certainly, scriptures such as Matthew 10:34 would seem to be strong support for such thinking: "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (NIV, 2011), and so on.[24] Further, such a person may double down on affirming and safeguarding the "rights" that, as a person of faith, they are entitled to. The impulse is understandable,

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20 Viktória Kóczián, "Theology of Migration in the Discourse of the World Council of Churches and the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary (2015–2019), ch. 17 in *The Calling of the Church in Times of Polarization*, ed. Heleen E. Zorgdrager and Pieter H. Vos, vol. 46 of Studies in Reformational Philosophy, series ed. Eddy Van der Borght, 344–66 (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 363–64.
21 Najib George Awad, "They Are *in* the World, but Not *of* the World," 334–35.
22 Awad, "They Are *in* the World, but Not *of* the World," 338.
23 Alternatively, "theological tribalism." See Tremper Longman III, "Avoid Theological Tribalism: Read Broadly," *Didaktikos* 4 (2020): 42.
24 See: N. Clayton Croy, "Sword Handling: The Early Christian Reception of Matthew 10:34," *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* 6, no. 1 (2019): 135–62.

but, with its clear connection to us-vs-them thinking, the questions become: Is it good? Is such a person justified in *not* applying Matthew 5 to a socially divisive situation, on theological grounds?

A Possible Corrective: John 17 as an Interpretive Lens for Modern Readers of Matthew 5

Awad's analysis of polarization in defense of a community's identity, and the lethal alterity that can result, puts before his reader a possible corrective for such thinking. He suggests an alternate reading of Christ's prayer for his disciples in John 17, where Christ speaks about their being "in the world" and at the same time "not of the world":

> I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. (John 17:13–18, NIV, 2011)

Let us first consider Christ's prayer in its entirety, i.e., the whole of John chapter 17. We will then return to Awad's reading of what being in the world but not of it might entail, and what it might suggest for the problem of polarization in North America.

John chapter 17 forms the end of the "Last Supper/Farewell" discourse between Christ and the disciples, begun with the foot washing of chapter 13.[25] Just prior to this chapter, the discourse properly speaking ends with Christ's words: "I have told you these things so that you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world." (16:33). Christ then turns his attention toward heaven, and this chapter is a record of his prayer. The audience of his prayer is, clearly, both the heavenly Father and the disciples sitting around him—and generations of later believers, whom he mentions in his prayer. The prayer is theologically rich, and quite different in tone from the personal prayer of agony that Christ will utter in the coming hours in Gethsemane (we do not see this

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25 The apparent "ending" of the event that occurs at 14:31 ("Come now; let us leave.") can be understood as indicative of an earlier framing of the narrative, in which the events of chapter 14 continue directly into the passion account. In this view, chapters 15 through 17 were added in by an editor at a later time. See, for example, J. Martin C. Scott "John," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, 1161–212 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 1198.

prayer in John, but Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22 record it).[26] Indeed, the prayer is an interesting case study of what prayer *is*. Much of it is of a declarative, or even expository, nature—affirming the nature of Christ's relationship with the Father and articulating reasons for and effects of his earthly mission, particularly in terms of the disciples. We can notice a number of "so that" phrases illumining just these sorts of explanations (e.g., vv. 2, 11, 13, 21, 22, 23, 26). He states what he has done and why. How interesting it is that he does this in the form of a prayer to the Father. Why might this be? What kind of a prayer is this?

We might understand the nature of Christ's prayer as an extension, or an active demonstration, of a theme central throughout his ministry: Christ does what he does as obedience to the will of the Father. This is a theme that is particularly present in the Gospel of John.[27] In this prayer, we see Christ positioning himself as sent by the Father (e.g., vv. 3, 8, 17, 21, 23, 25), and as fully obedient to the mission the Father entrusted him with (vv. 4, 6, 8, 12, 14, 19, 26). We see him establishing his full unity with the Father (vv. 5, 11, 21, 22, 26), and that all that Christ has both comes from and is shared with the Father (vv. 7, 8, 10, 11, 24, 26). It may be that Christ is here, in his farewell address, taking the opportunity to emphasize in close detail what it means to be Son of God.

Given this reading of John 17 as Christ demonstrating to his disciples his own relationship with the Father, we might further read his prayer as an act of what medieval theologians called "manuduction"—i.e., Christ leading humanity "by the hand" to restored relationship with the Father.[28] The church has historically understood this ministry of Christ to humanity as an invitation into the very inner life of the Godhead—an invitation to share the love and joy that the Father, the

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26 A basic outline of theological themes in John 17 could include: 1–5, Christ's status as the eternal Son, and as sent by the Father; 6–8, Christ's revelatory relation with the disciples, establishing them in communion with the Father; 9–12, Christ's earthly relationship with the disciples drawing to a close, and how that will affect the disciples; 13–19, the coming transition to the disciples' gospel mission in the world; 20–24, the unity of the Son and the Father, and the subsequent unity of believers in Christ, both with one another and with God; 25–26, the revelatory nature of Christ's mission to the world, both during his earthly ministry and ongoing.

27 See, for example, John 4:34, John 6:38, John 12:49–50, John 14:31, and particularly John 5:19–20a, and 30: "Jesus gave them this answer: 'Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.… By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.'" (NIV, 2011) A notable exception is the Gethsemane prayer, found in Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22, but not in John.

28 E.g., Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa theologiae* 2–2.82.3 ad 2 observes: "Yet such is the weakness of the human mind that it needs a guiding hand, not only to the knowledge, but also to the love of Divine things by means of certain sensible objects known to us. Chief among these is the humanity of Christ, according to the words of the Preface [Preface for Christmastide], 'that through knowing God visibly, we may be caught up to the love of things invisible.' Wherefore matters relating to Christ's humanity are the chief incentive to devotion, leading us thither as a guiding hand." (Ref: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae,* Latin text based on the Leonine Edition, 1888–1906; English translation by Laurence Shapcote of the English Dominican Province.

Son, and the Spirit have together.[29] Christ's prayer in John 17 can be read as an act of this very introduction of his disciples into the intimate shared life of the Godhead (vv. 2, 6, 9, 11, 13, 14, 21–24, 26). In sum, on this reading John 17 can therefore be seen as providing for us both an illumining of and a generous introduction into the life of being a Christ-follower.

Returning to Awad's analysis of John 17, specifically verses 13–18, we start by observing that typically Christ's words are read as indicating a desire for his disciples that "though they are in the world, they would be not of the world." Awad's analysis reminds us, however, that the phrases, so often paired together, appear in separate verses (vv. 14, 16, and 18)—we should, therefore, exercise caution about how we articulate their relation. On Awad's reading, Christ's concern in the text can be better understood as "even though, as Christ followers, they are not naturally of the world, they should, *because* they are Christ followers, be actively and intentionally present in the world," just as Christ was.[30] Awad reads Christ's prayer as actually expressing concern on behalf of the world. Indeed, he claims, Christ worries *for* the world, with regard to the potential of harm *from* the disciples: "Jesus believes that mirroring his love to the world requires being *of* the world, not just being present *in* it: one must be willing to lay down one's religious alterity for the sake of the world, not to allow this alterity to place the world in polarity with God.… If the disciples would not do that, Jesus fears for the world from them."[31]

Using this analysis of John 17:13–18 as a lens for understanding the problem of polarization, Awad considers with concern the flawed manner in which Christians often view alienization as a predictable entailment, or even evidence, of faithful Christ-following. In reality, he claims, "[such] alterity is not an expression of loyalty to Christ, but a sign of polarizing Christ and the world upon belief in self-righteous, self-protectionist exteriority."[32] In other words, accepting polarization—or, even worse: contributing to it—does *not* belong in the life of a Christ-follower.

By contrast, Christ's prayer in the whole of John 17 illumines the vocation of

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29 E.g., Augustine, *De trinitate* 15.19.37; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 3.23.2 and 1 and ad 3; John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1.1; *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 12; John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, ch. 13.

Dutch philosopher Rudi te Velde characterizes this wonder: "At the centre of Christian faith stands the conviction that the inaccessible mystery of God has opened itself for us, that we somehow, through his incarnate Son, are called to share the divine life" (ref.: Rudi A. te Velde, "The Divine Person(s): Trinity, Person, and Analogous Naming," Ch. 26 in *The Oxford Handbook of The Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 359–70, at 360).

30 Awad, "They Are *in* the World, but Not *of* the World," 328–329. The suggested articulation of Christ's intent in John 17:14–18 is mine, based upon Awad's analysis.

31 Awad, "They Are *in* the World, but Not *of* the World," 330.

32 Awad, "They Are *in* the World, but Not *of* the World," 330–31.

the Christ-follower. Having been reconciled to God through Christ, we are called into the inner life of shared love among the Father, Son, and Spirit—and, as a result, also called into Christ's mission into the world on behalf of divine love. Theologically, Christian tradition teaches us that taking up the incarnational mission of Christ, including embracing the risks to oneself from such an others-oriented way of life, is made possible by the divine gift of charity.[33] Charity, provided to us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, allows us to operate "as if it is natural and normal for us to know, feel, love, and act as God does."[34] Charity dismantles alienation between us and God; by extension, it also dismantles alienation between us and the people in the world around us.

This vocation to a life of charity on behalf of the world, our study presses us to remember, entails being ready to suffer harm rather than inflict it. We return to the radical mandate of Matthew 5 to turn the other cheek, to go a second mile—which, in our times, can translate to checking personal outrage when we encounter being misunderstood, misrepresented, mistreated in social contexts, when our perspective as Christians is not given the basic respect we feel all persons deserve. It translates to resisting the modern tendency to identify "standing up for the gospel" with "standing up for our rights as people of faith," especially understood in opposition to the world.[35] It is precisely because we *are* Christ-followers that we should be willing to resist taking up self-protective postures toward those who are antagonistic toward us—and even more to refuse initiating antagonism ourselves.[36] We often hear people insist that reasonable people *ought* to be able to absorb a certain amount of negativity, and to act in pro-social ways even when we disagree. This, as our times make abundantly clear, is a surprisingly difficult posture to maintain in practice. Christ's prayer in John 17 provides the theological groundwork for Matthew 5's vision of human life. It both calls and enables us to actually bring about the humanly impossible: being like Christ.

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33 See, for example, the work of Thomas Aquinas on the divine gifts, which allow us to be moved by God, and which make us connatural with the divine. Ref.: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1–2, questions 68–70; 2–2, questions 23–27.

34 Thomas Ryan, "Revisiting Affective Knowing and Connaturality in Aquinas," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 49–68, at 60. Ref.: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.1.5 ad 2; 1–2.27.2 ad 2.
       Similarly, the Dominican theologian Jean-Pierre Torrell observes that to gain a vision of how we should act in the world, we should look at how God does. See: Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Vol. 2: Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 73.

35 It is noteworthy that such a self-protective mindset seems to take the shape of its identity as a person of faith from the politically-generated freedom of religion, over and above the theologically-generated vocation to self-emptying.

36 We can think of the Apostle Paul's declaration that "we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:12, NIV, 2011). Harry P. Nasuti examines the rights that Paul willingly lays down, and connects these to the list in 2 Corinthians 6:3–4 where Paul articulates the things he would suffer rather than present an obstacle to the gospel. See: Harry P. Nasuti, "The Woes of the Prophets and the Rights of the Apostle: The Internal Dynamics of 1 Corinthians 9," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 246–64. See also Philippians 2:5–8.

We are now ready to go on to examine how, in concrete terms, such a way of life might respond to the modern problem of social polarization and public discourse.

Reimagined Discourse: An Alternative to the Harm of Us-vs-Them Polarization

In this section, we will frame a vision of Christ-following that directly responds to the problem of polarized discourse with which the paper opened. We take our starting point from the radical, difficult call to others-centered living articulated in Matthew 5, which we saw illumined and animated by Christ's prayer in John 17. We come to this section prepared to consider how a Christ-follower can participate in public discourse with a mindset of going a second mile, turning the other cheek, of being harmed rather than inflicting harm. We will consider what it means, in the technical terms of discourse, to be fully present *in* the world as Christ was. What follows is, first, a proposal for resisting polarization through reimagining the logic of how we act within human discourse. We will then go on to identify dispositions that operate in support of such a transformation of discourse by Christlike charity.

It seems to me that, in general, people understand how we talk about the world in terms of two main categories: fact and opinion. These are understood to be the two kinds of statements people can make when speaking about the world and what happens in it, and we are often encouraged to "think critically" by separating fact from opinion.[37]

Difficulties emerge almost immediately as we consider this framing, especially insofar as fact and opinion are spoken of as the main, or even the only, two options. These are the two buckets that we separate statements into as we encounter them—something is either fact or opinion.[38] We often hear facts identified as data-driven, something that can be observed, measured, confirmed, proven, etc. Opinions are most generally identified simply as *not* fact. Paradigmatically, we think of facts in terms of science, and the scientific method, but we also use the term more informally to get at how well, or poorly, a person's view of the world is grounded in or reflects "reality." We could say that people understand facts as bits of reality, or at least grasps on reality, and opinions are essentially things that exist in, or are generated

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37 See, for example, "Distinguishing Between Factual and Opinion Statements in the News," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (June 18, 2018); "Critical Reading 1: Sorting Out Fact and Opinion," Communications Student Support Center, Valencia College, Orlando, Florida; "Critical Literacy III—Strategy: Fact versus opinion," Lori-beth Larson, Minnesota Libraries Publishing Project.

38 See, for a historical example of the long-standing cultural contradistinction of fact and opinion, this advice from a 1928 psychology column: "Seek always to distinguish between facts and opinions.… The good student will do well to cultivate the habit of trying to disentangle mere opinions from established facts. The capacity to do this is greatly needed in present-day life." See: Guy M. Whipple, "Fact vs. Opinion," *The Science News-Letter* 13, no. 374 (June 1928): 366.

from, a person's own thoughts. We are to be discouraged from expecting others to take seriously those things that make sense mainly in our own private universe.

On this framing, we can quickly see that if a person believes they are saying something of substance, which they are likely to associate with "fact," and someone disagrees with them, then the natural conclusion is that the other person must be either denying facts or explicitly operating in "opinion"—a form of thought typically valued so lowly as to be often paired with the adjective "*just* opinion."[39] A person knows *they* are basing their own perspective on fact (given those two options), so it must be that the other person is not. The first person might go so far as to say they respect the other's right to their own opinion, but in giving that technical respect they are clearly classifying the other's view as just that: opinion. Given the low estimation of opinion's worth and relevance, when we identify another person's view in this way we are implicitly giving ourselves permission to not have to take it seriously, to not be accountable to it as possible truth.[40] Finally, we should notice in the above scenario how neatly and uncomplicatedly we tend to associate our own perspectives with fact. This is a problem we will return to, but for now it is worth noting that we tend to overestimate the fact-basis of the things we hold to be true about the world, and, by consequence, underestimate the presence of such facts in the views of those who disagree with us.[41]

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39 Galen Barry examines the problematic fact-vs-opinion distinction in terms of ethics, noting the problem of identifying moral claims as "just opinion." Barry suggests replacing the fact/opinion distinction with a distinction between "merely descriptive" claims and those that are "evaluative." See: Galen Barry, "Facts vs. Opinions: Helping Students Overcome the Distinction," *Teaching Philosophy* 45, no. 3 (September, 2022): 267–77, at 269.

40 Barry depicts the fact-vs-opinion distinction generally in terms of the logical-conceptual obstacle it presents to moral/philosophical debate (in the sense of productive discourse), but the subtext of his examination is an interpersonal disinterest, even division, that results. See: Barry, 274.

41 Michael Dimock, president of the Pew Research Center, observed in 2020: "while Americans put a good deal of faith in their own ability to recognize inaccurate or misleading information, they are less sure about others' ability to discern it." See: Michael Dimmock, "How Americans View Trust, Facts, and Democracy Today," *Pew Trust Magazine* (February 19, 2020): 1. Note the related psychological phenomenon of the Dunning-Kruger effect, by which individuals overestimate their ability, knowledge, skills, etc. See: David Dunning, "Chapter Five – The Dunning-Kruger Effect: On Being Ignorant of One's Own Ignorance," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 44 (2011): 247–96. See also: David Dunning, Kerri Johnson, Joyce Ehrlinger, and Justin Kruger, "Why People Fail to Recognize Their Own Incompetence," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12, no. 3 (2003): 83–87.

I'd like to suggest that this fact-vs-opinion framing is itself a part of the us-vs-them problem, and to offer an alternative. Instead of fact-vs-opinion, I'd like to suggest that the two categories of statements could be better identified as *fact* and *analysis*. In this framing, both kinds of statements would be understood as responding to some aspect of reality, and both are understood as capable, or even deserving, of being taken seriously.[42] In this framing, the term opinion would be used mainly for those informal statements we make that we don't intend or expect to be viewed seriously, or don't offer support for—such as preferences, casual observations, lighthearted speculation, etc.

In my view, both fact and analysis are aiming to articulate truth about some evidence in the world around us. Facts are, in principle, those statements about the world that are able to be (and expected to be) essentially the same no matter who you ask.[43] Their stability, and transferability among multiple people, makes them of clear value in human thought and discourse. The qualities mentioned earlier— can be observed, confirmed, proven, etc.—in some ways miss the point. Those are how we *discover* facts; the truth of the matter with regard to fact would be just as true even if no one ever thought about it.[44] Examples of fact statements might include: the current composition of a government body, the boiling temperature of water, and the distance between point A and point B. In practical discourse, facts are the things that most people would feel are unreasonable to deny.[45] By contrast, statements of analysis add something *about* the evidence, some bit of interpretation, such that the truth of the matter will be different depending on who you ask. Notice that, in my proposed framing, analysis statements can be varying as to content but still be capable of meaningfully contributing true narratives about the world. Examples of analysis statements, corresponding to the above examples of fact, might address the cause of X conflict in Congress/Parliament and what should be done about it, what temperature of water is best for steeping different kinds of tea, and whether the distance between point A and point B is too great for Y purpose. Statements of analysis can be described as nuanced, responsive, "human" statements—we should *expect* such subjective statements in discourse,

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42 Rita Astuti identifies taking people seriously as a basic impulse and fundamental task of ethnography and anthropology. See: Rita Astuti, "Taking People Seriously," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 105–22.

43 This is not to suggest that common affirmation of a claim is identical with its truth value. Barry notes the error of conflating "a contentious claim" (i.e., one that people can disagree with) with "opinion." See: Barry, 272. Rather, the point of this observation is that facts are understood not to "belong" to any specific perspective. See: Barry, 268.

44 Similarly, Barry notes that "whether a claim is true/false" is a very different matter from "whether the claim is testable/provable/justified." See: Barry, 267–68.

45 Godulla, Seibert, and Klute provide an analysis of "denialism" in terms of a rejection of "fact-based consensus." See: Alexander Godulla, Daniel Seibert, and Tim Klute, "What Is Denialism? An Examination and Classification of Definitional Approaches and Relevant Actors," *Journalism and Media* 5 (2024): 135–47, at 135.

even value them.[46] Analysis statements aren't "failed" fact claims—they indicate that we are encountering human beings and their views of the world. Note that we can remove the "vs" in this framing—we can say "fact *and* analysis," as the two are not oppositional to each other, in the way that fact and opinion are often taken to be.

What does this framing do for us? What are the implications? First, I think there is benefit to admitting that fewer of our statements are simple facts than we would sometimes like to think.[47] Very little that we say is simple and straightforward enough to actually merit the label of "indisputable." As soon as a human being speaks about the world, there will be layers of analysis, layers of perspective, things that someone could reasonably disagree with. Along the same lines, I think there is benefit to recognizing that such analysis, even when in support of views we disagree strongly with, is on some level responding to reality. Of course, there are many times when we might be instrumental in clarifying or challenging someone's representation of how things stand in the world. But in many cases, perhaps more than we'd enjoy admitting, the other person's view is in reality not entire nonsense. On the contrary, to treat another person's view of the world as "unintelligible" is to be complicit in the problem of polarization, and to betray our calling as Christ-followers to be in and of the world.[48]

The technical framing proposed in this section prompts us to encounter other people in a spirit of shared space and experience. The great gain of this framing is to cause us to see the people of the world as indeed our neighbors—another way that Christ views what it means to be in the world, as he makes clear in his parable of Luke 10:25–37. How, then, do we move from this technical reimagining of discourse to practical engagements with the people around us? How do we animate this logical framing with the spirit of Christlike charity? That is our final task, to which we now turn.

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46 Charles Taylor observes: "Each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed from outside, by society, or the previous generation or religious or political authority." See: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2007), 475.

47 Barry points out that "while the fact-opinion distinction is *believed* to be mutually exclusive, it faces easy counterexamples." See: Barry, 270. That is, it is easy to find instances of claims we hold to be fact-based but which are not *pure* fact, i.e., without admixture of elements of personal perspective and belief.

48 "A *violent* response to something we don't understand … sees such an object as flawed—if it is not understood, it must in some way be unintelligible, either in itself or in relation to the viewer (i.e., either irrational/nonrational, or radically 'other')." See: M. Giordano, "Gratitude in Thomas Aquinas: A Spiritual Exercise of Alignment with the Good," in *Gestures of Grace: Essays in Honour of Robert Sweetman*, ed. Joshua Lee Harris and Héctor A. Acero Ferrer, 40–67 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023), at 54.

Gilles Mongeau succinctly depicts such epistemological alienation in his observation that "what is opposed to friendship is not the enemy … but the stranger." See: Gilles Mongeau, *Embracing Wisdom: The Summa theologiae as Spiritual Pedagogy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2015), 193.

The Final Piece: Dispositions That Animate Discourse with Charity

The question before us is: how would we proceed differently, given this framing of discourse as fact and analysis, rather than fact-vs-opinion? I'd like to propose three ways that we can apply this framing to concrete interactions with others—three dispositions toward others in the world that help us get a purchase on the calls in Matthew 5 to turn the other cheek, etc. and in John 17 to be present in and of the world precisely as Christ-followers.[49]

Intellectual Charity

In discoursing with someone whose view is different, we might start by reminding ourselves that we are mainly encountering *analysis*. We don't hold their statements to the standard of fact—we are hearing what the person wants to say about the world. We should approach their discourse graciously because we too, of course, are engaged in the same analysis-based task of trying to make sense of the world. The Christ-follower is called to, with the help of the Holy Spirit, try to see the other person's view fairly. We should aim to be able to articulate their view in words they themselves might use, or at least agree with. Our aim should be that we could represent their view in such a way that they could respond with, "Yes, that *is* what I think." In terms of our vocation to counter polarization, this stance toward a conversation partner can be understood as "intellectual charity"—and we can recall that the gift of charity produces connectivity between people even quite dissimilar, and makes friendship possible where there is genuine alterity.[50] The disposition of intellectual charity can have the felicitous effect of helping people feel seen, heard, and respected on their own terms, which is an important first step in tearing down barriers and building bridges in their place.

Moral Imagination

Of course, sometimes such a charitable view of the other requires some stretching on our part first. Too often, when we encounter someone quite at odds with our own view, we are more than content to leave them there in their status of unfamiliar difference. We might stop ourselves short of wishing them ill, but we are willing to indulge our profound disinterest in their view of the world. Such a practice can all too easily short-circuit attempts to develop intellectual charity.

Therefore, we can understand the effect of charity in some cases as prompting

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49 Levine reflects on the transformative nature of the call in the Sermon on the Mount: "The Sermon on the Mount resembles, in part, a theological pep talk. Good pep talks, or revivals, don't just make us feel better about ourselves. They inspire us not just to feel better but to do better: try harder, dig more deeply, find the resources needed for living the life to which God is calling us." (Levine, ix–xx).

50 (Ref.: n34) Thomas Ryan, "Revisiting Affective Knowing and Connaturality in Aquinas," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 49–68, at 60. Ref.: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.1.5 ad 2; 1–2.27.2 ad 2.

us (again, with the help of the Holy Spirit) to be basically *curious* about the other person and their view of the world. What exactly is it that they see? Can we stretch ourselves to charitably imagine *why* they might feel the way they do? Of key importance here is the assumption that they *are* in some way responding to reality, the reality of the world we share with them. This is precisely the act of intentionally making someone a neighbor (i.e., as per Luke 10:25–37). Even more charitably still, once we have worked to imagine the life of a person that might produce such a view of the world, we might press ourselves yet further to ask: can I envision it with them?[51]

This practice, this personal discipline, has the tremendous benefit of placing the two people within the same conversational space—they are not aliens calling to each other from different worlds and in different languages.[52] They become, wonder of wonders, neighbors. We can call this disposition "moral imagination."

Moral Humility

Finally, when we are engaging another's view with our own, it's a good idea to remember that in our analysis, we too are *building on* facts—we are not simply *stating* facts, nor do we own them exclusively.[53] We can hope to bring our hearer along with us as we sketch out the path of our logic, values, and priorities, but that invitation into our perspective will be all the more compelling if we remind ourselves that it is just that—our perspective, not revelation. This stance requires of us a great deal of what we might think of as "moral humility." We are accustomed to thinking of truth as belonging properly to God, and by extension to his children. There is merit to that confidence, as it is indeed a distinctive ministry of the Holy Spirit to lead Christ-followers into all truth (ref.: John 16). There is, however, nothing special about Christians that makes them more likely to recognize and correctly

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51 Andrew Pinsent describes the psychological phenomenon of "joint attention," by which a person attends to something in the world around them specifically *with* another person—a phenomenon which makes the person's experience of that thing qualitatively different. Pinsent compares this phenomenon with the effects of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, by which a person is made able to be moved by the things of God—and, by extension, to attend closely to the human beings that God cares for. See Andrew Pinsent, "The Gifts and Fruits of the Holy Spirit," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, edited by Brian Davies and Eleanore Stump, 475–88 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 478–79, and Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas's Ethics: Virtues and Gifts*, Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory 17 (New York: Routledge, 2012), 34–35, 41–43.

52 David I. Smith and Barbara Carvell, discuss the specific example of learning a foreign language as a context for shared humanity, grounded in what they refer to as "xenophilic hospitality" (i.e., arising from "xenophilia," love for the stranger)." See David I. Smith and Barbara Carvell, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 86, and n. 24.

53 Barry reminds us that specific perspectives do not, properly speaking, own the facts that undergird their intellectual commitments: "Facts and opinions are just metaphysically different kinds of things: parts of the world belonging to nobody vs. representations of the world belonging to specific people." See Barry, 268.

articulate facts. Nor is the power of insightful analysis exclusively the purview of Christians. A person "of the world" is just as capable and, all things being equal, likely to have a grasp of the relevant facts and to offer meaningful analysis as the child of God.[54] On occasion even more so. Our distinctive feature as Christians is *not* that we see things more correctly than others. It is that, as Christ-followers, we are bound to charitably view others and take their perspectives seriously, especially when we feel they are not doing the same for us. This is a tough pill to swallow, but the vocations of Matthew 5 and John 17 call us to embrace this challenge. The disposition of moral humility presses us to recognize that we are likely not as gracious and good as we think we are, and the people in the world around us are not necessarily unreasonable and agenda-laden just because their views differ from ours.

Conclusion: Faithfulness to Christ as Loyalty to Both Truth *and* Love

In this study, we have examined how the gospel mandates of Matthew 5 and John 17 can shape our understanding of the Christian's role in public discourse, particularly with an eye for resisting the social polarization that is such a distressing feature of modern daily life. We have seen that it is paradigmatic of being a Christ-follower to embrace laying down one's rights to be treated fairly, to be understood equally. We have seen that Christians are called to be less attentive to tallying up offenses against themselves than they are to ensuring they do not give offense to others—even, or perhaps especially, with regard to people "of the world." We have seen that to be a Christ-follower carries with it a call to be genuinely in and of the world, to have our ways of being informed and marked by the charity and mission of Christ, and to open our hearts and minds to the people around us as neighbors—tasks that are aided by the dispositions of intellectual charity, moral imagination, and moral humility.

With these observations, we return to the issue of "theological loyalty"—the notion that we saw can, unfortunately and unnecessarily, function as an obstacle to the Christians taking seriously the mandates of Matthew 5 and John 17. Faithfulness to Christ need not, and even should not, entail alienating ourselves from the people of the world. Rather, we saw that the narratives of Matthew 5 and John 17 give Christians "permission," counterintuitive as it may seem, to be less concerned about being distinguished from the people of the world than about establishing and nurturing connectedness with them.

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54 A contrary view on this point asserts: "For atheism, talk of truth and goodness is nonsense. For the atheist, everything is permitted because, in the misery of solitude, no one is a 'duty'—in Latin *munus*—for anyone." See: Stanislaw Grygiel (Pontifical Lateran University, Rome), "Spiritual Discernment in a Secular Age," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 29, no. 1–2 (2017): 149–58, at 151.

What does this tell us about the shape and nature of faithfulness to Christ? It tells us that faithfulness to Christ and to his gospel means loyalty to love as much as it does loyalty to truth.[55] Loyalty to truth is sometimes easier to understand and to execute than loyalty to love. We can understand how to stand firm for a statement of belief. Less clear, sometimes, is understanding how to go about loving someone quite unlike us. This, however, is what Christ does, and what the presence and help of the Holy Spirit enables us to do as well. Indeed, Matthew 5 shows us that such a stance toward others is precisely how we fulfill our identity as children of God:

> You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.… Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5: 43–45, 48, NIV, 2011)

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55 For further reading on this theme, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, "We often demonize the opposition and rationalize our lack of love because those on the other side are, of course, the enemies and are undermining god's truth and opposing his kingdom. Our defense of the truth, however, must never leave love behind. It is not an either-or dichotomy but a bond-and proposition. It is possible both to stand firmly for the truth of God's Word and to have genuine love for those with whom we differ." See: Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Excellence: The Character of God and the Pursuit of Scholarly Virtue* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 229.