Dissolving False Dichotomies

Review of
Imitating Christ: The Disputed Character of Christian Discipleship
By Luke Timothy Johnson
Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024
224 pages / $30.99 cloth

Reviewed by **Joseph Quinn Raab**

When the notable scripture scholar, historian and theologian Luke Timothy Johnson writes a book about the character of discipleship, what it means to follow Christ, and the blurbs and summaries on the book's jacket mention Thomas Merton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer as the models Johnson ultimately elevates, Merton readers might be, as I was, smitten before they even open it. But this is not a book about Thomas Merton. It is a thorough-going analysis of the biblical vision of discipleship and how historical and cultural contexts have challenged and shaped Christian understandings of that vision, i.e. what gets emphasized and why, relative to those shifting contexts. This book is definitely worth reading, and learning from, but Merton is by no means the focus; he simply serves as a solution to a false problem, because he shows us that the dichotomy the book exhaustively explores is actually a false one. Allow me to explain.

The book's origins emerge from a disconnect that Johnson increasingly felt between himself and his students regarding the character of discipleship. For him, it was primarily about "becoming a certain kind of person, a saint," which required prayer and ascetic practice, cultivating virtues and cooperating with grace not only for the sake of salvation from sin, but for sanctification, divinizing union with God (8). His students, on the other hand, having little knowledge of the history of Christian spirituality, thought primarily in terms of discipleship as responding to Christ's call to change "the oppressive systems of society." Both views were about transformation, but his emphasized the primacy of the personal, while theirs focused on the social. In their framing of discipleship, dedication to formalized liturgical prayer, self-denial and penitential piety seemed almost, if not completely, inessential. Yet, as he writes, "they lacked any sense that their default understanding of discipleship was both recent and superficial" (9). The book is Johnson's effort to understand when and how this "fissure" regarding discipleship arose, and how the socially focused view eclipsed the more traditional one.

The first three chapters engage in rich expositions of the traditional view, i.e. discipleship as "Transformation of the Self" (the title of chapter one). Then, by closely examining influential hortatory writings of the Christian spiritual tradition, Johnson convincingly shows that this personal emphasis is primary up to the Reformation (chapter 2) and in both Protestant and Catholic works

---

Joseph Quinn Raab is Professor of Philosophy, Religious Studies and Theology at Madonna University, Livonia, MI. He is the author of *Opening New Horizons: Seeds of a Theology of Religious Pluralism in Thomas Merton's Dialogue with D. T. Suzuki* (Pickwick, 2021) and a former co-editor of *The Merton Annual*.

in the wake of it (Chapter 3). Johnson ends the third chapter with the observation that "nowhere do we find in this literature the discussion of the church as a social body whose purpose was the amelioration of the society" or "any suggestion that discipleship consists in working toward and effecting political change" (83).

In chapter four, "Discipleship under Threat" Johnson locates the conditions that would lead to the weakening of the more traditional view and set the stage for a new emphasis to emerge in the paradigmatic cultural shift that begins in the seventeenth century but culminates in the eighteenth and nineteenth. Modernity brought with it deeper suspicion of civil and ecclesiastical authority, the increasing autonomy of science disenchanted nature and the deism of the enlightenment sequestered God to a pure transcendence without immanence. All of this, of course, challenged and undermined the authority of Scripture, the very foundation of the traditional view of discipleship. In Johnson's view, these factors forced a crisis in Christian discipleship, undermining its credibility and relevance, as Christians either accommodated to modernity by forcing their hermeneutics to be framed within its boundaries, or bracketed their Biblical faith and attempted to deny its challenge altogether.

In chapter five, "Shaping a New Vision" Johnson recounts how churches began to mobilize in the nineteenth century around social issues and were at the forefront of abolitionist, labor and temperance movements. In the twentieth century, some prominent Christian leaders were behind suffragette and civil rights movements. The emergence of Social Gospel hermeneutics, and then Latin American liberation theology, provided the theological underpinnings for the newer vision/version of discipleship as effecting social transformation. This helped to restore the relevance of discipleship in terms of its this-worldly utility – but, at least in Johnson's view, this came at the expense of the urgency to become a saint.

The first five chapters lay out the contrasting visions, three building up the traditional view, one chapter examining causes of its decline (84-108), and one chapter outlining the shape of the new view (109-34), which Johson begins to call "the social gospel/liberation model." Chapter six provides "A Critical Analysis of the Two Visions" in which Johnson explores how each model interprets the meaning of salvation, sin, anthropology and eschatology, and in his view there is a "dramatic break" evinced between the two. He does not see the emphasis on earthly liberation (horizontal) from abject poverty and from oppressive and sinful structures as a healthy corrective to an always emphasized heavenly salvation (vertical), from our personal sin, but as a misreading of scripture that stems from Marxist assumptions. Nonetheless, Johnson ends the chapter with a section on qualifications, warning against caricatures of either and wondering if each in isolation from the other is bound to be missing something.

Constructing such a stark contrast requires some oversimplifications. Johnson's default position strongly favors the traditional view and he is clearly suspicious of and uncomfortable with the "social gospel/liberation model," seeing it as "elitist" in its origins and alien to the ones it aims to liberate. It is elitist because the authors who developed and explicated it were trained in universities and were not themselves abjectly poor (132-34). I wonder, though, who among all of the authors of the hortatory literature he surveys throughout the centuries *were* uneducated and abjectly poor? Likewise, Johnson's assumption that Christians prior to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not see their faith as demanding societal reform and social change requires a strange reading of ecclesiastical history. The emphasis on social transformation may be absent in the hortatory

literature, but ecclesiastical authorities were ever engaged in exercising their apostolate in extra-ecclesial, social and political spheres, often in the name of justice, even if in lamentable ways. In other words, I was not sold on the stark contrast and the clear break.

The remainder of the book, chapters six through eight, builds up a more integrated synthesis of the two models, retaining the primacy of personal transformation but making that the basis for social criticism and engagement. In chapter eight, “Imitating Saints,” Merton, as well as Bonhoeffer, become the focus “because their (brief) lives demonstrate how an authentic Imitation of Christ demands personal transformation as well as – or even as the basis of – social engagement. In both figures we see how personal piety and radical social witness are not contradictory but complementary” (195). I suspect that avid Merton readers are not Johnson’s intended audience, because they know this already. I do wonder however, why Gustavo Gutiérrez, may he rest in peace, could not have been counted among them?