

The Character of Christian Influence

Why Public Witness Cannot Outrun Private Holiness

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Abstract

Christian influence is commonly measured by reach, access, authority, or institutional success. Scripture subjects it to a more demanding judgment. Jesus places authority beneath the cross, the pastoral epistles test leadership through observable character, and the fruit of the Spirit reveals whether public witness has been formed by grace. Drawing on John Wesley's theology of holy love and the means of grace, together with the Salvationist union of inward holiness and outward service, this essay treats influence as a stewardship rather than a spiritual credential. It argues that Christian influence remains trustworthy only when it is governed by disciplined communion with God, truthful community, accountable structures, and active love of neighbor. Public witness carries Christian authority when the life, practices, and institutions behind it can bear the moral weight of the message they proclaim.

Keywords: Christian influence; holiness; John Wesley; public witness; sanctification; accountability

Scripture quotations and references use the English Standard Version (ESV).

The Hunger for Influence

The Church has never been absent from public life. Christians preach, teach, vote, organize, publish, protest, serve, build institutions, and speak into the moral questions of their age. None of this is inherently suspect. The gospel is public truth, and love of neighbor inevitably takes public form. The real question is whether Christian influence has been shaped by the character of Christ or merely decorated with Christian language.

Influence becomes spiritually dangerous when the Church mistakes a description of reach for a verdict on faithfulness. Attendance counts bodies in a room. Analytics measure the distance a message travels. Political access identifies who will return a call. Each may be useful, but none can reveal whether power is being exercised truthfully, whether leaders are becoming teachable, or whether vulnerable people are safe. Reach tells us how far a voice travels. It does not tell us what kind of life carries it.

This concern has also appeared in recent critiques of Christianity's transformation into digital content and public performance. Daniel J. Grace has described one expression of this problem: Christian content can multiply without producing deeper Christians. That diagnosis opens a further ecclesial question. What practices and structures keep influence subordinate to Christ after attention, authority, or success

arrives? A warning can expose vanity, but it cannot form a people. The Church also needs a positive account of the character and accountability capable of carrying influence without being consumed by it.¹

Christian influence is best understood as stewardship. Attention, authority, expertise, relationships, and institutional reach are entrusted goods. "It is required of stewards that they be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2), and greater responsibility brings greater accountability (Luke 12:48). Influence creates opportunities to serve; it never functions as proof of God's approval. Christian authority is therefore measured by fidelity to the One who entrusted it, not merely by the results it can display.

The Measure Jesus Gives

Jesus does not leave power morally undefined. When James and John seek positions of honor, he contrasts rulers who "lord it over" others with the pattern required among his disciples. Greatness in his kingdom takes the form of service because the Son of Man came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45). Jesus does more than recommend humility as a leadership technique. He places Christian authority beneath the cross.

John 13 makes the same claim with a towel and basin. Jesus knows who he is, where he has come from, and where he is going. That security allows him to kneel. His service does not arise from uncertainty about his authority; it reveals what divine authority is like. Christian influence becomes credible when people with responsibility use it to tell the truth, bear burdens, protect the vulnerable, and create room for others to flourish.

Scripture also directs attention toward the unobserved life. In Matthew 6, Jesus warns against religious acts performed to be seen. Generosity, prayer, and fasting can retain their outward form while their inward purpose bends toward applause. Visibility does not manufacture hypocrisy, but it can reward the appearance of virtues that have not yet become settled character. Public competence can conceal spiritual disorder for a surprisingly long time.

Jesus therefore points his hearers to fruit (Matthew 7:15-20). In context, the image warns against deceptive religious teachers. Fruit is not a vague test of likability. It is the patient evidence that teaching and teacher arise from a life ordered toward God. Gift, eloquence, orthodoxy, and courage remain important, but none can replace love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Influence may attract attention. Character determines whether that attention can be trusted.

¹Daniel J. Grace, "When Christianity Becomes Content," Daniel J. Grace, July 16, 2026, <https://www.danieljamesgrace.com/p/when-christianity-becomes-content-07d>.

Character Before Office

The New Testament's qualifications for leadership are strikingly ordinary. First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 emphasize self-control, marital and household faithfulness, hospitality, gentleness, sound judgment, doctrinal reliability, and a good reputation. Teaching ability is present, but the lists give sustained attention to the kind of life from which teaching proceeds. The Church is instructed to examine character already visible in ordinary relationships.

That standard is demanding without requiring a manufactured image of flawlessness. Christian character includes repentance, teachability, and the willingness to bring failure into the light. James warns that teachers will be judged more strictly (James 3:1). Peter instructs elders to reject domination and lead by example (1 Peter 5:1-4). Authority increases the need for correction because influence magnifies both wisdom and disorder.

Recovery communities often understand this with unusual clarity. Sincerity matters, but sincere intention alone does not make change durable. A person may mean every word of a promise and still need honest inventory, confession, restitution, daily practices, and people who can recognize an old pattern before it becomes another collapse. Christian leaders need the same kind of truthful community. Good intentions are a beginning. They are not a substitute for formation.

Churches sometimes answer moral failure by strengthening public relations while leaving the culture that enabled the failure untouched. The institution protects the platform, manages the language, and waits for attention to move elsewhere. A faithful response asks harder questions. Who could speak honestly without retaliation? What warning signs were excused because the ministry appeared successful? Were harmed people protected? Did the leader have relationships in which titles and achievements carried no weight?

Christian forgiveness and restored authority must also be distinguished. Forgiveness belongs to the gospel; return to office is never owed. Repentance receives mercy without bargaining for a position, and an institution may rightly conclude that trust cannot be restored in the same form. Grace neither abandons the fallen nor rushes wounded people past truth. Titus 2:11-12 describes grace as a teacher that trains believers to renounce ungodliness. Any appeal to grace that shields influence from consequences has detached mercy from the holy life grace intends to produce.

Sanctifying Grace and the Hidden Life

The title of this essay intentionally recalls John Wesley's *The Character of a Methodist*. Wesley was not cataloging denominational peculiarities or presenting a religious celebrity. He described a Christian whose heart is filled with love for God and whose life consequently bears gratitude, prayer, mercy,

purity of intention, and love of neighbor. He placed Paul's admission, "Not as though I had already attained," over the portrait. The character he described was a grace-enabled calling, not a spiritual resume.²

This Wesleyan account protects holiness from two distortions. One turns holiness into personal achievement and produces a polished self with little patience for weak people. The other treats holiness as an unreachable aspiration and expects no substantial change. Sanctifying grace answers both. God takes the initiative, the Holy Spirit works within the believer, and the believer responds through obedient faith. Randy L. Maddox names this the "co-operant character of salvation": grace creates and empowers the response it requires without turning human participation into merit. Holiness is God's gift and God's work, yet it becomes visible in a life increasingly governed by love.³

Entire sanctification does not make a Christian infallible, unttemptable, or beyond correction. Wesley explicitly denied that Christian perfection removes ignorance, mistake, infirmity, or the possibility of growth. It names love of God and neighbor governing the heart and life. That distinction is vital wherever Christians hold influence. A claim to holiness should deepen humility and teachability. If it produces immunity from examination, the claim has contradicted its own content.⁴

The unobserved life with God is essential to this formation. Wesley called prayer, searching the Scriptures, and other appointed practices "means of grace," ordinary channels through which God conveys preventing, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Their value does not lie in religious effort earning divine favor. Through them, believers attend and respond to the God who acts first. Prayer exposes our need of the Father. Scripture searches motives that praise may conceal. Fasting reveals disordered appetite. Service interrupts self-importance. Rest confronts the fantasy that everything depends on us.⁵

Private holiness, as used here, must never be confused with private religion. It names the integrity cultivated before public performance begins. A Christian who speaks about humility must practice it at home, in staff meetings, in traffic, in disagreement, and in the unrecorded treatment of people who cannot advance a career. Public pressure eventually draws upon whatever has been formed there. Resentment, vanity, fear, and ambition do not become holy when given a microphone.

²John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist," University of Oregon, accessed August 5, 2026, <https://pages.uoregon.edu/sshoemak/323/texts/Wesley%20Character.htm>.

³Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 147-51.

⁴John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley Center Online, accessed August 5, 2026, secs. 12 and 19, <https://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/a-plain-account-of-christian-perfection/>.

⁵John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," sermon 16, Wesley Center Online, accessed August 5, 2026, sec. II.1, <https://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-16-the-means-of-grace/>.

Holiness Becomes Social

Wesley insisted that Christianity is "essentially a social religion" and that turning it into a solitary faith destroys it. He was not dismissing solitude. In the same sermon, he commended regular withdrawal for communion with God. His point was that meekness, mercy, peacemaking, patience, and love require other people. Holiness formed in prayer must survive contact with a neighbor. Stanley Hauerwas extends the point into Christian social ethics: the Church's first public task is to become a community capable of hearing the scriptural story and living faithfully within it. Christian witness is therefore not merely a position announced to the world. It is a way of life made visible before the world.⁶⁷

That claim has direct consequences for Christian influence. A holy public witness cannot be assessed only by doctrinal precision or rhetorical courage. Its human consequences also belong to the evidence. Does truth-telling preserve the neighbor's humanity? Does conviction remain free of contempt? Does ministry remain near suffering after the photograph is taken and the story is posted? Christian character is tested by what power makes possible and by what it refuses to do.

Ministry among people navigating addiction, homelessness, incarceration, poverty, or social rejection makes the test concrete. Human beings must never become illustrations collected for someone else's platform. Service that requires gratitude, agreement, or publicity is still negotiating for a return. Christian love stays when progress is slow, listens when a story becomes inconvenient, maintains appropriate boundaries, and refuses to reduce a person to the worst chapter of his or her life.

Salvationist theologian Phil Needham presses the same claim against an overly individual account of sanctification. Holiness nurtures community, but community also nurtures holiness; the New Testament does not permit the saint to be separated from the saints. A church cannot commend accountability publicly while arranging its common life so that status outranks truth. Institutional habits are not secondary to holy character. They help form it or deform it.⁸

The Salvation Army's Soldier's Covenant joins inward formation to visible integrity. It calls soldiers to respond to the Holy Spirit, grow in grace through worship, prayer, service, and Scripture, and uphold Christian integrity in thought, word, and deed. Its reflection on holy living connects this covenant with continued obedient faith, entire sanctification, and the fruit of the Spirit. Grace forms character, character becomes conduct, and love of God moves outward in service to the world God loves.⁹

⁶Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 1.

⁷John Wesley, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse Four," sermon 24, Wesley Center Online, accessed August 5, 2026, sec. I.1, <https://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-24-upon-our-lords-sermon-on-the-mount-discourse-four/>.

⁸Phil Needham, "Integrating Holiness and Community: The Task of an Evolving Salvation Army," *Word & Deed* 3, no. 1 (November 2000): 7-8, 14-15.

⁹The Salvation Army, *Living by Faith Today*, 1, 8-9, 15-16.

Four Tests of Christian Influence

Four tests can help Christians examine influence without despising it.

Response to correction. Criticism often reaches places applause cannot. Some criticism is malicious, mistaken, or abusive, and faithful leaders are not required to submit to every accusation. They do need people and processes capable of discerning criticism without treating discomfort as disloyalty. Gentleness is not surrender, and self-control is not weakness. A Christian witness sacrifices moral clarity when every challenge is answered with contempt.

Treatment without advantage. Jesus repeatedly attends to those who could not improve his status. He welcomes children, touches people considered unclean, eats with the rejected, and calls his followers to invite those unable to repay them (Luke 14:12-14). The treatment of assistants, strangers, struggling families, people in recovery, and those outside one's preferred circle reveals more than staged generosity. Influence becomes Christian when power is spent for people who cannot return the favor.

Truth that can travel upward. An organization may speak often about accountability while ensuring that its most powerful person remains unreachable. Galatians 2:11-14 records Paul confronting Peter publicly when Peter's conduct contradicted the truth of the gospel. Apostolic standing did not create immunity. Churches and ministries need clear, safe ways to raise concerns, independent judgment when allegations are serious, and leadership structures that do not depend entirely on the accused person's willingness to listen.

Fruit in the influenced community. Attendance, subscriptions, votes, donations, and media reach can show activity. The New Testament's vision of ministry asks whether the body is growing toward maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16). Are people becoming more truthful, merciful, courageous, patient, and free? Can they disagree without cruelty, repent without spectacle, and serve without applause? Influence that produces dependence on a personality may be impressive while leaving discipleship dangerously thin.

These tests also guard against the opposite mistake. Smallness does not prove holiness. Obscurity can shelter pride as easily as visibility can feed it. Christians should not romanticize ineffectiveness or retreat from public responsibility. The calling is faithful influence whose scale remains accountable to the character, community, and love required to sustain it.

A More Credible Christian Presence

Christian credibility will not be recovered through volume alone. It grows when leaders receive correction before scandal forces it, when institutions protect people before reputation, and when

ministries refuse to make one personality the load-bearing wall of the Church. These choices rarely generate the excitement of expansion. They create something more durable: communities in which truth can be told and grace can complete its work.

Such formation cannot be manufactured during a public crisis. It develops through prayer without performance, Scripture obeyed before it is quoted, apologies that name the wrong, restitution that costs something, service given without publicity, and relationships strong enough to carry unwelcome truth. These practices can look small beside the machinery of modern influence. They are how a life becomes capable of bearing spiritual weight.

The Church should use every honorable means available to communicate the gospel and serve the common good. It should write, teach, advocate, create, lead, and enter public life with courage. Every form of Christian influence, however, remains answerable to the character of Jesus and accountable to the people affected by its use. A hearing is only the beginning. The life behind the message will either clarify the gospel or make its claims harder to trust.

Public witness cannot safely outrun private holiness because influence amplifies what formation has already made habitual. Sanctifying grace offers more than image management. It forms people whose authority can kneel, whose convictions can withstand correction, whose repentance accepts consequences, whose holiness moves toward the neighbor, and whose influence directs attention beyond themselves to Christ.

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About the Author

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