

The Diversity of the Integral Gospel

Repurposing Diversity
to *Re-image* the Global Church

T. Dave Matsuo

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Contact:

www.4X12.org

tdavematsuo@4X12.org

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Chapter 1

Calling All of God's People

**“Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me...
Hear, O my people, and I will speak.”**

Psalm 50:5,7 ¹

It's been twenty years since 9/11 amplified the war between Christian nationalists and Muslim nationalists; this battle between Christians and Muslims originated in the first millennium of the church's inception. What initially united the U.S, in the common cause rising from the destruction of 9/11 devolved into simplistic measures and actions used to resolve complex matters—for example, the war on Iraq and in Afghanistan, and the collateral damage still incurred today. Such oversimplification of what is due to the human condition has generated biases, which have exerted tension and conflict on the semblance of unity. The twenty years since 9/11 and the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic sadly evidence the disunity among us—including notably among Christians and churches, and between them even in the same church. This diverse approach to Christian faith in divisive times has to cause dissonance that, at some point, Christians and churches have to address and account for. However, as long as consonance is maintained in the context of “like-mindedness,” and as “confirmation bias” (selective use of information, including Scripture, to support one's views) is the feedback process used, then any dissonance will not be sufficient to pay attention to, much less resolve.

Recently, the U.N. Secretary General António Guterres issued a dire warning that the world is moving in the wrong direction and faces “a pivotal moment” that could lead to a breakdown of global order and a future of perpetual crisis. The current “enormous stress” he describes demonstrates the failure of nations to come together and make joint decisions to help all people in the face of global life-threatening emergency: beyond COVID-19, failure to solve the climate crisis, the inequality undermining the cohesion of societies, containing technology advances, rising poverty, hunger and gender inequality, “while conspiracy theories and lies fuel deep divisions within societies.” He proposes a “breakthrough scenario”—countering global decision making fixed on immediate gain, ignoring long-term consequences, and correcting “a major blind spot in how we measure progress and prosperity—which “calls for new metrics that value the life and well-being of the many over short-term profit for the few.”²

The words of Guterres could echo words from God that all Christians and churches need to hear, listen to and take to heart. The above scenarios and their historical

¹ All Bible references are from the NRSV, unless different versions are indicated; any italics in the Scripture quoted throughout this study signify emphasis or expanded meaning of the original terms.

² Reported by Edith M. Lederer, Los Angeles Times, 9/12/21, A3.

roots come to bear on all of God's people; and they render the diversity of Christians and churches to be responsible and account for our disunity, and then take responsibility and be accountable for the breakthrough. So, we need to examine where we are today, who and what we are, where we come from and why we are here, because God is gathering "to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me" in order for us to listen and respond as "I will speak."

Breaking down or Breaking through

Guterres is hopeful for a new chapter in the life of the U.N. He appears to have no illusions about how this narrative will unfold, because it is contingent on the global community changing its worldview and working mindset. Yet, he seems to think that such basic changes are, on the one hand, the same for everyone, and, on the other hand, that the thinking of global diversity will result in the same outcome for everyone. This is the wrong assumption to make for the global community and to base one's hope for basic change to unfold this narrative in the existential lives composing the global diversity—notably in the midst of existential breakdowns both collectively and individually. Here is where God gathers his global family to listen to deeper words without assumptions.

In Psalm 50, the psalmist reveals the pivotal narrative of God gathering his covenant family, not to celebrate but in order to communicate directly the essential feedback necessary to pay attention to the subtle breakdowns in their faith. Since God's feedback could not be used to confirm their bias, God readily exposes the breakdown not necessarily in their theology but existing in their practice in everyday life. Most revealing in God's feedback, which dispels confirmation bias, is the existential reality of their ongoing portrayal of God: "you thought I was altogether like you" (Ps 50:21). Portraying God in our diverse images is a subtle breakdown prevalent among Christians, which often precludes God's feedback by the selective use of Scripture for confirmation bias. God is calling together the diverse global Christian community to listen to the feedback essential for the urgent change required to truly progress from breakdown to breakthrough.

If we have paid any kind of attention beyond our like-minded contexts, there will be a stirring of dissonance. Given the diverse views and actions Christians have expressed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and continue to do so, non-Christian observers must wonder how contradictory the Christian God could be in leading Christians in such diverse and divisive ways. In other words (including those from God), Christians must always realize that our everyday practice is always an existential witness of God, our specific God, whether intentional or not; and our practice sends others a message of how our God leads us. Theology notwithstanding, this is where subtle breakdowns are evolving globally in the diverse Christian community.

Therefore, all Christians and churches need to understand that the culture(s) embodied in our everyday life practice is inseparable from our religion, and thus reflects what our religion is along with its God. This integral view of culture and religion is the norm for religion in general globally and in specific diverse forms of religion locally/regionally.³ Accordingly, any change necessary in our diverse Christian practice must also address the influence of our culture(s), that is, if we are to understand the change contingent for having the breakthrough that turns us around from our breakdowns in diverse practice even while subscribing to similar or identical theology.

Perhaps Christians and churches have assumed God's affirmation of the diversity of their practice because "These things you have done and I have been silent" (50:21). That silence now reverberates as God's call to his family increasingly resounds: "Hear, O my people, and I will. I will testify against you" (v.7); "I will accuse you to your face" (v.21, NIV, cf. Isa 57:16). Our assumptions are on trial now!

Getting Beyond Our History

Depending on one's history, most people form the basis of their identity in that history. That's why it's important to know where we came from, and to understand who and what we are today unfolding from our existential heritage—not always synonymous with narratives from recorded history.

My personal Christian journey began many years ago. I grew up in Chicago, IL, in what would be considered a Christian environment. Yet, I didn't become a Christian until I was almost twenty. Why not 'til then? Because I had concluded up to that time that my life was more satisfying than what my Christian friends experienced. My life revolved around sports, and as I developed into a star athlete I embraced its benefits—though I didn't get absorbed into its subculture since academics mattered to me. In spite of my success—for example, I played American football for an all-male high school of almost 7,000 students, purposely attending there to play at the highest level—I was always aware that my reputation was based on my success on the field and not related to my person. As a person of color, I always knew I was "other" in the midst of my white friends and culture; and that my popularity was unrelated to my person but based on identifying with white culture. Though I didn't recognize it at the time, this caused dissonance that eventually was the key to recognizing my dissatisfaction in life. This, then, led to a breakthrough to approach Jesus one pivotal day to form an intimate relationship that exceeded what I witnessed in other Christians.

³ For further discussion of this view, see William A. Dyrness, *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016).

Nevertheless, after my initial journey in intimate relationship together with Jesus, I was exposed to prevailing traditions in Christian practice that I assumed would advance my Christian life. This included undertaking formal theological study, all of which stimulated my mind as never before in the worldview from the Enlightenment and a Western mindset. In spite of the success of succeeding years, the heart of my person reemerged from being constrained by my modern Western mind. The dissonance I was feeling pointed me to the pervading bias of my theological and church contexts, which shaped Christianity and its God in a culture of whiteness. In the midst of subtle breakdowns in my Christian practice, once again the lingering dissonance in my person challenged the *other* of my identity evolving from where I came from and where I was going. By going beyond the above biased history, I was led to embrace my identity of color. After absorbing my minority identity for all of its worth and significance, however, there reemerged a dissonance in my heart. Why this time? My identity was no longer shaped by whiteness; I no longer considered myself other. Yet, in promoting the diversity of the Christian community, the dissonance in my heart was now communicating that my *whole* person still had not discovered the roots of where I came from, the depths of who and what I am, and why fully I am here for. By remaining where I was in the basic changes I made breaking through white Christianity, I was reinforcing diverse breakdowns in my practice—breakdowns which further prevented the deepest breakthrough still eluding me. The dissonance from my breakdowns and my complicity (perhaps even enabling) of the diverse breakdowns of others eventually was convicting:

I needed to go beyond my history and break through to the radical depths where the true roots of God's family emerge to reveal the diverse branches integral for Christians and churches to be in the image and likeness of the Trinity.

Going Down to Our Roots

Since all of us live in a sociocultural setting, it is essential to understand the influence our surrounding context has on our everyday life. This influence does not merely contribute to our daily lifestyle but readily becomes determinative in our identity formation; and it can be controlling if we do not assert significant alternatives to its determination.

Breakdowns in Christian practice range from overt moral failure to less obvious contradictions of faith and to subtle redefining of sin and discipleship. The narrative history of Jesus' early disciples illustrates this spectrum of breakdowns, which is vital for us to understand and learn from in order to experience breakthroughs in the status quo of

Christian diversity.⁴ The breakdowns in the early disciples' discipleship frustrated Jesus and pained him relationally (e.g. Mk 8:14-21; Mt 16:21-23; Jn 14:8-9). Jesus ongoingly clarified, countered and corrected the disciples' bias and misinformation, so that their discipleship would be based on his irreducible and nonnegotiable terms rather than their divergent tendencies. In other words, he planted their persons in the roots of the *embodied* Word in order for their branches of discipleship to germinate in the wholeness of intimate relationship together as God's family (see Jn 15). When Christian branches are not intimately connected to his intimately distinguished roots, whatever emerges (even in his name) in practice is not and cannot be directly determined by Jesus, along with the Father and the Spirit (see Mt 7:22-23, cf. Lk 13:26-27).

The lack or absence of intimate relational connection with the embodied Word (not just the literary Word) has always been the primary cause of dissonance in my existential journey. Some breakdowns in my discipleship always reflected this relational disconnection, in spite of the intensity with which I served Christ in my daily ministry. When I paid attention to my dissonance, I was directed back to my roots: the depth of my roots not just as a follower of Jesus but integrally as a whole person created from inner out in the image and likeness of God.

When our heritage, individually and collectively, is limited to our sociocultural history, we do not account for broader influences in our surrounding context. This then fails to understand deeper workings that fragment persons and relationships, which underlies the fragmentation of peoples, tribes and nations. When we make the conscious choice to dig deeper into our roots, we can have a breakthrough to discover who we are totally and where we came from fully. For Christians and churches, this directly connects back to the gospel embodied by Jesus, not merely authored by the Word. Then, we arrive at the defining base for why we are here: the irreducible and nonnegotiable relational purpose that Jesus embodied for his church family in the primary identity and function integrally in likeness of the Trinity (as Jesus prayed in Jn 17).

Warning: Any breakthrough to these defining roots is a humbling process that requires our persons to be vulnerable from inner out; to proceed may cause anxiety and shame!

The roots of the gospel embodied by Jesus go back to the pivotal juncture when God established covenant relationship with those who would compose his kingdom family (Gen 17:1-5; Rom 4:16-17). Why was this gospel needed, and why is God's grace necessary for it to unfold? To understand this fully, we have to dig deeper into the roots at creation; and this is where our vulnerability is challenged or threatened. It is only at

⁴ Some of my other studies can be helpful for this learning-growth process. See *The Disciples of Whole Theology and Practice: Following the Diversity of Reformation or the Wholeness of Transformation* (Discipleship Study: 2017), *The Person in Complete Context: The Whole of Theological Anthropology Distinguished* (Theological Anthropology Study, 2014), *The Global Church Engaging the Nature of Sin and the Human Condition: Reflecting, Reinforcing, Sustaining or Transforming* (Global Church Study, 2016), all online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

creation that the human person emerges whole from inner out in the ontological image of God—that is, as persons whose image and function are just like the trinitarian persons (Gen 1:26), and whose whole persons live in ongoing equalized intimate relationships together in relational likeness of the Trinity (Gen 1:27; 2:18,25; cf. Jn 17:21-23). These creation roots go beyond history that merely informs us. Getting to their full significance, these deeper roots bring forth **the existential reality** of the human person and persons together in the primacy of relationship to define the integral identity and function of all humanity in all of its diversity—the wholeness of which is defined from inner out in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity. This existential reality is both challenging and threatening, because the competing reality after creation became **the normative reality** for the person and relationship together, and revolves around a quantitative basis from outer in (from Gen 2:25 to 3:7). In contrast and conflict to the latter, the existential reality at creation forms the juncture of persons and relationships that the diversity of the global community converges in for their mutual identity engaged in its shared function; this composes the encompassing created reality of all human diversity, the divergence from which constitutes the human condition, our normative (or new normal) condition.

This normative reality continues to compete, explicitly or implicitly, among the diversity of Christians and churches. As I came face to face with this hard reality, the dissonance in my life reverberated over my working theological anthropology (TA), my reduced TA that defined persons from outer in to function accordingly in relationships. Moreover, most Christians and churches utilize a TA that defines and determines persons and relationships on such a quantitative outer-in basis; this pervasive rendering counters the inner out of creation and fragments God’s creative wholeness for all persons and relationships. This, consequently, implements the most basic breakdown in Christian theology and practice.

This reconstituted reduction of the human person and relationships also is rooted in the primordial garden, with the emergence of sin (Gen 3:1-10). All humanity pivoted at this juncture to form the inescapable human condition, from which has evolved diverse breakdowns in persons and relationships from all peoples, tribes and nations to render them in fragmentary identity and function—with no recourse for their reductionism. From the roots of this inescapable reality humanity has evolved in variable breakdowns of diverse formation, with its branches needing to be redeemed in order to be reconciled and restored to their creation roots. For this outcome to unfold existentially and not merely theologically, however, required the breakthrough of the gospel to turn around the human condition, our human condition, in all its diversity.

The variable branches of the human condition, notably including the human condition of Christians, are rooted in *sin*. This is where Christians are challenged and threatened in their working theology and existential practice. Just acknowledging the

reality of sin is insufficient, and affirming the gospel of being forgiven and saved *from* sin is inadequate. That is, our view of sin determines whether our practice is based on the roots of sin from the primordial garden, or a variation that evolved from there *because of* the subtle workings of sin. The emergence of sin's subtle workings in the primordial garden turned around the human persons of creation and set into motion their reduction from inner out to outer in.⁵

This breakdown of persons and relationships goes deeper than simply disobedience of God's directives and moral failure in observing the divine Rule of Law. Human persons were/are reduced from their created wholeness, which determines the reduced function of their relationships to variable fragmentation of wholeness together: "Then the *outer-in lens* of both were opened *to the world of reductionism*, and they knew that they were naked; and they *acted to no longer be vulnerable with their whole persons in redefined relationship together*" (Gen 3:7).

The reduction of persons and relationships is the determinative root of sin entrenching the human condition in all its variableness, thus entrenching the diversity of humanity in this inescapable condition. Therefore, this existential reality for the global community in general and the Christian community in particular prevails until the breakthrough is made by its persons and relationships. For the Christian community, this breakthrough has been problematic, primarily because of critical underlying theological issues. Failure to recognize, account for and resolve these issues have rendered the Christian community ongoingly to variable practice—even in the name of Christ, for the gospel and its mission.

Unavoidable Theological Issues Needing Resolve in Global Christianity

When the Christian church first emerged, its Jewish majority constituency imposed their religious culture on Gentile converts. Aside from fighting theological heresy among Christians, subsequent dominant groups in the church have imposed their particular Christian practice on the others in the church throughout its history. Christendom evolved, with colonial Christianity notably imposing its culture on the expansion of Christianity in different parts of the world. The recent expansion of Christianity has reconfigured the Christian majority from its Western roots in the global North (or Minority World) to now be occupied by those rooted in the global South (or Majority World). Increasingly, a diverse segment of global Christianity is evolving in post-colonial Christianity, which then is asserting its will to impose the diversity of cultures on their practice.⁶

⁵ To further grasp what unfolded in the primordial garden narrative and better understand what emerged as sin, see my studies noted earlier.

⁶ For more information about these developments, see a number of studies listed in the bibliography.

When the details of these historical developments are examined, a common thread can be located that has been a recurring theme through church history. Besides the gospel and its mission, what consistently has characterized Christians and churches in their practice is directly contingent on two underlying theological issues:

1. Their defining view of sin.
2. Their working (not ideal) theological anthropology (TA) that is the basis for defining the identity and determining the function of persons and relationships in everyday life.

Christianity rises from its view of sin. Christianity grows and develops from its TA at work. We cannot underestimate how contingent these two theological issues are for Christianity; nor can we overestimate the repercussions and consequences from not recognizing, accounting for and resolving these issues, which will be incurred on the well-being of Christians and churches. For example, if our view of sin doesn't encompass the scope of reductionism, there will be created aspects of persons and relationships that will be transposed to outer in; this oft-subtle process always results in breakdown for such persons and relationships in their function by reduced variations—that is, by sin.⁷ The subtle fragmentation of persons and relationships from their created wholeness generates a human bias, which when neither understood nor corrected then becomes the interpretive lens that composes the working TA of any diversity of Christians and churches. Such a TA both redefines the primary identity of persons and relegates their function and relationships to variable reductions of the wholeness from creation.⁸

It was, is and will be for this clarifying-&-correcting purpose that God summonses his family together for reducing God in their theology and practice down to the size and shape “just like yourself” (Ps 50:21). Without exception, the diverse cultural biases in Christian practice witness to the size and shape of their God. Furthermore, any skewed witness of God also distorts the gospel, which inevitably imposes this bias on its significance and its mission. I, myself, have not been circumcised physically; how do you think the first church would have seen me and with this bias expected from me?

When our view of sin is narrowed down and thus doesn't encompass the workings of reductionism, then this incomplete lens is a **weak view of sin** that distorts both what sin is and what we are forgiven for. When our TA is transposed from creation, it redefines the identity of the human person and thereby reduces our created significance and function in relationships—the consequence from the genius of Satan's reductionist workings (as in Gen 3:4-5). This, then, is a **reduced theological anthropology** that composes persons and relationships in a fragmentary condition lacking wholeness. A

⁷ For a fuller understanding of sin in global Christianity, see my study *The Global Church Engaging the Nature of Sin and the Human Condition*, noted previously.

⁸ See my study on TA for an expanded discussion to understand the breadth and depth of this issue.

weak view of sin and reduced TA have evolved together to mirror the human condition in narratives that have been complicit with aspects of the human condition, reinforcing and enabling it, and thus even sustaining it to make the human condition undeniably *our human condition* as Christians and churches. So, at this stage in your variation of Christian practice, how would you assess your view of sin and TA?

Contextualizing from Top-down or Bottom-up, by Outsiders or Insiders

Here we are in the third millennium of the church, and God needs to summons his family together more than ever before—that is, if Jesus’ formative prayer for his family is going to become the existential reality for the church (see Jn 17). Perhaps the current COVID-19 pandemic provides a good barometer of where Christians and churches are today. The diverse approaches to the pandemic make evident not the diversity of the Christian community but its divergence. What our divergent practices speak to is the influence of context to shape, define and determine our existing reality of everyday practice. Whether the contextual influence is sociocultural or religious—likely the interaction of both, including political and economic—understanding this influence is contingent on understanding the context, the surrounding context in which we all participate directly or indirectly, actively or passively, consciously or subconsciously.

In promoting the gospel and advancing its mission, contextualizing the gospel has become important in its mission to others in different contexts.⁹ A major assumption has dominated this process: the contextualization is determined more by those extending the gospel rather than by those receiving it. This imposes (intentionally or inadvertently) the biased lens of workers on the recipients to skew their context. One major consequence of contextualization by so-called “outsiders” is to shape the others (or “insiders”) according to the former’s context at the expense of the latter’s. This skewed contextualization, fortunately, has been shifting to give more determination to the receiving context, such that increasingly on its own terms the global South (Majority World) has promoted the gospel and advanced its mission according to its own context. Though this contextualizing shift has moved away from outsiders to insiders, a lingering question remains whether contextualizing is enacted from top-down or bottom-up—that is, from leaders and those with the most influence, or from the average constituent representing the majority in that local context. Whether by outsiders or insiders, from top-down or bottom-up, the overriding issue revolves on the essential significance of the context in question, as well as centers on the issue raised by God whether or not that context “thinks that I was one just like yourself.”

⁹ For a major discussion of contextualization in missions, see A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualizing the Faith: A Holistic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

On the one hand, the diversity of global Christianity affirms the gospel for all peoples, tribes and nations that are constituted in God's family. On the other hand, the contextualizing of Christian faith for the diversity of Christian practice must be both responsible for who does the contextualizing and accountable for what unfolds from that contextualizing. Before God summons his family, it is critical to understand that contextualizing by insiders from bottom-up is insufficient to guarantee or warrant God's confirmation of our diversity; furthermore, it is inadequate to assume God's affirmation of our diverse Christian practice. At this point, it is essential to redefine outsider and to reconstitute top-down in the contextualizing process.

When God initiated by his unmerited grace the covenant relationship to constitute God's family, this definitive essential relationship was unmistakable and thus, without negotiation, (1) unequivocally distinguished from top-down, and (2) irreversibly established only on God's irreducible and nonnegotiable relational terms as the Outsider. As the Outsider from top-down, however, God does not function as human outsiders from top-down have—that is, as if to imply “that I was one just like yourself.” Still, as the Outsider, God established reciprocal relationship with insiders and not unilateral relationship, which typically would be imposed on others from top-down. At the same time, God is the only basis for defining the terms for reciprocal relationship, which others have a choice to accept or not from the Ruler of this kingdom family. In other words, insiders alone decide to enter into covenant relationship with God in order to belong to God's family solely on the basis of the Outsider's top-down relational terms. Moreover, the relational outcome of covenant relationship together is distinguished from top-down for those belonging as also being outsiders while living in the context of insiders.

In his formative family prayer, Jesus made unequivocal that “*my followers* do not belong to the world just as I do not belong to the world” (Jn 17:16). Critically defining for his family is the *context* that determines where they *belong*. That is to say, where Christians belong and whom they belong to are distinguished by their existential context. Belonging is contextually problematic because of the diversity of global contexts in which Christians live. Jesus qualified his top-down contextualizing as the Outsider when he prayed to the Father: “I am not asking you to take them out of *their human contexts*, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one's *counter-workings of reductionism*” (v.15). In other words, rather than assuming otherworldly lifestyles his followers need to be contextualized as outsiders while participating as insiders in their surrounding context, which requires them to clearly distinguish *where* they belong and *whom* they belong to. Peter further distinguished the contextualization of the church family as outsiders from top-down: “as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your practice” (1 Pet 1:15); “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the *gospel as outsiders distinguished from top-down to all insiders from bottom-up*” (2:9).

In the diversity of their contexts, Christians and churches have had pervasive breakdowns in being clearly distinguished as Jesus prayed and Peter contextualized. The ongoing issue we all face involves a two-fold dynamic: (1) how our view of sin perceives the existential condition of *holy*, and (2) how our theological anthropology understands and embodies the relational process of *belonging* for persons. When these are contextualized in our surrounding contexts as insiders, whether top-down or bottom-up, the result will only be diverse renderings that neither understand nor embody the primary identity of where God's family truly belongs and whom God's people truly belong to. In Christian diversity today, however, many Christians and churches claim to be innocent of sin, because they have claimed the gospel and been forgiven—not because they view sin as reductionism.

All Christians and churches, in all contexts, need to account for what it means to be existentially holy and live holy in everyday life. Then we need to be responsible for being distinguished ongoingly as outsiders in every context we exist in as insiders. The Word embodied the relational context and process of God's summons for his family to be accountable and responsible for solely on his terms—the Outsider from top-down.

Questions Facing Us Requiring Answers

In God's summons of his family, God raised questions now to our face (Ps 50:13,16,21). These questions appear rhetorical or not applicable specifically to us. But, the reality is that God holds all of his people accountable to answer what these questions imply or relate to; and God demands all of us to take responsibility for our answers.

In the diversity of global Christianity, our specific Christian practice invariably raises questions both from and regarding other Christians. Who belongs and who is merely “other” have been ongoing issues, whether explicitly or implicitly expressed, directly or indirectly applied, or simply just implied. As a further face-to-face extension of God's gathering together his covenant family, the embodied Word intrudes on the diversity of his followers to respond definitively to such issues. On the one hand, the line between who belongs and the other could appear ambiguous, so the Word clarified this for his followers (Mk 9:38-41). Christian perception of who is “for us” or “against us” is often clouded with bias—especially in partisan contexts like the U.S. On the other hand, such bias also distorts the integrity of our own practice as those who belong. Therefore, the Word unequivocally corrects the error in those followers' thinking (Mt 7:21-23). The contrast in these two statements by the Word delineate a contradistinction among his followers, the narratives of which play out in what amount to antithetical Christian practice by those claiming to belong.

The playbooks composing diversity tend to blur what the Word delineates with the subtle workings of confirmation bias, which exposes assumptions based more on the surrounding culture than the Word. Here again, the interaction between culture and religion emerges in an undeniable symbiotic relation, with culture typically becoming the key determinant in the diversity of Christian practice. The resulting fragmentation from such symbiosis was counteracted by Paul for the church, who definitively made imperative the Word embodying the essential purpose of the church's wholeness together (Col 3:15). Paul's imperative by necessity was exclusive, because this symbiosis is often unrecognized or ignored, with many Christians and churches reinforcing its effects. This certainly was one of my breakdowns in my early Christian journey, the effects of which didn't turn around easily for the breakthrough in my practice made imperative with the Word to embody.

The workings of reductionism complicate the critical process facing all Christians and churches; and our TA compounds the critical parameters at stake here, which will determine the breadth and depth of how we address what's facing us. Basically, the following reality is unavoidable:

What and *how* we learn is culturally conditioned (1) to determine *who* our God is (as in shape) and (2) to be the key to forming the existential significance of our faith.

Culture provides the organizing principle for Christian religion to render relative significance to its practice, while Christianity provides the organizing framework for culture to ascribe its legitimacy to the agency of culture—thereby legitimating culture as a primary basis for Christian practice. In this symbiotic interaction, the educational process reconfigures, for example, outcomes to “teach me your paths” (Ps 25:4), and it even can displace the Spirit to speak for the Word (Jn 16:13), both of which are evident in theological education. This symbiosis is not unique to Christian education and learning. How most religions are practiced is inseparable from culture, because the existential significance of diverse faith is dependent less on what is believed and more on how that faith impacts their everyday life (both individually and collectively).

What I experienced both before and after I became a Christian was rooted in the influence of Westernized white culture. Centered in and on this culture made me feel *less* as a person of color (the diminished other), and thus I ongoingly embraced white culture in order to be *more* (the enhanced self). Subsequently, I pivoted to embrace my culture of color, which only enhanced my self with *more* having little further significance to satisfy my person. Unfortunately, I didn't realize the questions facing me that God raised to turn me around. This realization didn't happen until I started to make myself vulnerable with my whole person to face my breakdowns and then risk the outcomes of breakthroughs.

For this to unfold in the global Christian community, the following questions are brought to the forefront in order to illuminate what's facing us, so that we can vulnerably both address what we are accountable for and enact what we are responsible for.

Questions to Account for:

These questions overlap and are interrelated, and any response to one question is inseparable from responses to the others.

1. What is the source of the gospel you claim? And what does that gospel presume about who and how your God is?

The gospel that many Christians proclaim often does not coincide with the gospel they've claimed. The lack of congruence either emerges from their theology or unfolds in their practice, or due to both their theology and practice. The typical proclamation of the gospel focuses on salvation and the forgiveness of sin. What salvation means and forgiveness involves, however, are composed directly from the source of that gospel claimed and proclaimed. No doubt, Jesus is central to the gospel for Christians in any diversity. Yet, the centrality of Jesus can be limited to the events and/or subject matter of Jesus, without actually embracing his whole person as the source. Jesus not only brought the gospel but most significantly his *whole person embodied* the gospel. This distinction is critical, because there are essential differences in the reality of the gospel claimed and proclaimed from each distinction as the source.

For example, as discussed earlier about our view of sin, what we are forgiven for in the gospel we've claimed may not include the breadth and depth of sin that Jesus both defined theologically (as in Mt 5:21ff) and ongoingly exposed throughout his embodied life. A gospel of limited source not only distorts forgiveness but it also skews salvation. That is, while that gospel may partially define our salvation *from* sin (with qualification), it does not include what we are saved *to* other than life after death. The failure to encompass what we are saved to, which is integral to what we are saved from, fragments the gospel and truncates its salvation (a truncated soteriology). Jesus' whole person embodied the integral gospel for the complete salvation of persons, peoples, tribes and nations.

We are accountable for his integral gospel, his terms of which are irreducible and nonnegotiable. When we account for this as the source of our gospel, then this unavoidably leads to our responsibility for what he saves us *to* (discussed below).

If not apparent yet, the source of your gospel correlates directly to our perceptions of who and how your God is. This could be a perplexing connection to make, and the correlation being mutually directed may complicate it. Yet, we all have to account for our

witness because it always communicates to others who and how our God is. And our most basic witness revolves around our gospel either claimed or proclaimed. Modern biblical criticism notwithstanding, “the Word was God...became flesh and lived among us” (Jn1:1,14). Unequivocally, Jesus embodied God! Now the question facing us is: Is our God merely referenced in the historical narratives of Jesus, or is our God embodied by Jesus’ whole person? The Word unfolding in our theology either is composed by *that* reference, or by the whole person *who* embodied the Word. The *that* or the *who* have direct implications for the working TA underlying our practice. What unfolds or evolves has essential outcomes or consequences for what we are saved *to*.

2. How would you assess the lens you use to interpret the Word (your hermeneutic lens)? And what assumptions do you make in your practice that you can attribute to your interpretations? To what extent can you recognize the assumptions in your practice that emerge from your bias formed from either your interpretations or your culture?

We are always interpreting in our everyday life because our lens doesn’t shut down with our mind on pause; even when we go to sleep, our lens stays awake wired in our brains. That doesn’t mean our interpretive lens stays focused with clarity since our bias constantly imposes its limits on what we see, how we see it, and thus invariably influences our interpretations accordingly. We all have bias(es) that form from the influence our surrounding contexts exert on us, notably from culture. For Christians, this bias can be very subtle and operate implicitly to define and determine our explicit thinking and overt practice; and no prominent source for this bias functions more than culture.

The dominant influence from our surrounding contexts comes from culture. And most cultures operate under the subtle workings of reductionism, which then is consequential for Christian interpretation that easily could be in contrast to or conflict with the Word. For example, the palpable Word intruded on Peter to clarify and correct his interpretation (Acts 10:9-16). What was the reason that Peter wouldn’t eat? In his condition, can you locate the source of his biased lens?

Likewise, the Word has embodied the theology and practice for us to embody in our discipleship. Yet, in the hermeneutic history of the church, diverse interpretative lenses have either disembodied his theology and practice, or rendered them with variations in contrast to or conflict with the Word—just as Peter did in declaring his version of the gospel to lead the early church.¹⁰ Therefore, this question is crucial for all of us to account for, no matter how confident we feel about our theology and practice.

¹⁰ An expanded discussion for understanding hermeneutics is found in my study, *Interpretation Integrated in ‘the Whole-ly Way’: The Integral Education and Learning of Knowing and Understanding God* (Bible Hermeneutics Study: 2019). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

3. Do you know the difference between the truth and a lie, recognize what's true from what's false, and then understand what your existential beliefs are based on for your everyday life?

One of the earliest beliefs that I embraced in my life was “I was not good enough in who I was and what I did.” This **life-lie** was formative for how I lived, and it lingered even after I became a Christian. As a Christian, I believed in God’s grace for my very salvation, but my practice still functioned with this lingering life-lie. How do you think, for example, this affected my interpretation of the Word (as in Ps 62:12; Rom 2:6; 2 Cor 3:8)? While my theology composed the truth of justification by faith, my practice believed the life of justification by works.

The distinction between the truth and a lie is readily blurred by an interpretive lens based on a weak view of sin. The diverse interpretations from this lens—which is significantly biased by surrounding culture—renders the basic perception of persons and relationships in a TA reduced. With the subtle workings of reductionism, can you be unequivocal that the gospel you claim is based totally on the truth without any presence of a lie, and that the gospel you proclaim is indeed the Good News and not shaped by some fake news? Peter struggled in his blurred interpretive lens, which reduced his practice to function in conflict with “the truth of the gospel” (as Paul exposed in Gal 2:11-14). In the current divisive climate of partisanship, evangelical Christians notably have engaged in fake news over the truth, conspiracy theories over the facts. How do you explain this?

The Word embodied the experiential truth and relational reality of the gospel, which distinguishes the wholeness of God (the Trinity) from the variable-relative truths and virtual realities that widely exist in theology and practice. Who and how our God is continues to be on display in the beliefs we demonstrate in our everyday life. Therefore, it is critical for all Christians and churches to acknowledge how theology and practice have evolved since the embodied Word, not unfolded from him.

Inherent in all evolution is *adaptation*, the constituting dynamic by which the evolutionary process advances. Accordingly, it is vital for us to understand how our theology and practice have adapted or been adapted to form our existential belief system. Such adaptations have to be accounted for, because the embodied Word holds his church family accountable for nothing less and no substitutes for his experiential truth and relational reality—the integral gospel constituted by the relational context, relational terms and relational process of the wholeness of God.

4. Christians throughout history have adapted in their specific situations and circumstances, and in the surrounding contexts. The focus of these adaptations center on what is either primary or secondary to God and for the Christian life. Can you identify what is indeed *primary* to God and otherwise only *secondary*, and thus recognize where your life is centered, what it revolves on, and how it has adapted?

After constituting the primacy of relationship together for his creation, God composed the Rule of Law to guide them in the primary. The *primary* distinguished in God's commandments goes further and deeper than a mere code of ethics. Contrary to a code and in contrast to what is only *secondary* for God, the Rule of Law revealed to Moses made definitive God's **whole relational terms** for covenant relationship together. The primacy of God's relational terms are irreducible and nonnegotiable, even by turning to secondary aspects and matters of the Law. Nevertheless, God's people adapted in their covenant responsibility, whereby they shifted the focus from God's primary relational terms to the secondary. This evolved into the outward performance of the Law at the expense of the primary relational involvement of the covenant. Belonging to God's people revolved on having the outward identity markers evolved from adherence to the secondary aspects of the Law, which became the basis for their religious culture—as witnessed to by Peter.

Most of the early disciples labored under the influence of this religious culture. As Peter consistently embodied in his discipleship (including at his footwashing, Jn 13:6-8), the embodied Word ongoingly clarified and corrected his disciples about what's primary. Their embedded practice in the secondary had deep relational consequences in their discipleship, which culminated in Jesus' pain "Don't you know *my person*, even after I have been *involved with* you such a long time" (Jn 14:9, NIV). With our lens, we wouldn't consider Jesus' ministry of three years "such a long time"; but the Word embodied the qualitative as primary over the secondary nature of the quantitative—as in the inner out over the outer in (cf. Mk 7:6-8).

The evolution of the quantitative over the qualitative was amplified by the Enlightenment. Notably with the Industrial Revolution, modern humanity adapted to become irreversibly entrenched in secondary matters at the expense of what's primary not only to God but also to all of creation. The repercussions on persons and relationships continue to prevail in the evolving human condition. The use of technology has compounded this human condition, and the sum of its qualitative relational consequences prevail in all human contexts. Christians and churches have not been immune to these evolving consequences, far from it. Indeed, this defining and determining surrounding influence has duplicated and reinforced such adaptation in their practice. Perhaps 'devolve' may be more descriptive than 'evolve', and thus more exposing of its consequences. Now the question facing all of us in the global Christian community

focuses on each diverse segment needing to account for the specific adaptations that have evolved/devolved in their own context and culture.

The Word embodied without equivocation “the *qualitative-relational* Way, the *experiential* Truth and the *whole* Life” (Jn 14:6) to constitute what’s primary for his church family. The unspoken feeling among many Christians is the interpretation that renders the Word to an inconvenient truth, a threatening way, and an unrealistic life. Regardless, any type of variation among his followers, even with the best of intentions, is only secondary at the most, variations which are not open to negotiations by the Word. At the least, such adaptations can only be fragmentary and thus always lack the wholeness of the integral gospel embodied by the Word.

5. The next question, the pivotal question, becomes the integrating theme for all that Christians and churches have to both account and be responsible for: How do you define discipleship? On this basis, how has this defined your faith and determined your practice in daily life? And what is the discipleship you see reflected and experienced in your church?

Did you know that the only imperative stated in the Great Commission from the embodied Word is “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19)? The overriding issue facing us is all about discipleship. If the early disciples adapted their discipleship, it doesn’t seem unreasonable for Christian diversity to adapt also. Well, yes and no. How we define discipleship will determine the discipleship we practice, which may or may not be congruent with the embodied Word—even though it may have compatibility with the Word disembodied.

Yes, to the extent that diverse discipleship is not contrary to or in conflict with what’s primary to the embodied Word. That is to say, diverse adaptations in the practice of discipleship that are simply secondary—for example, choice of worship music, communication mode—and do not compromise, distort or reconstitute the primary, these secondary expressions are integrated into the *whole* significance of discipleship constituted by, in and for the primary. Yet, “yes” is always qualified by contingencies that are required by the embodied Word to “follow me” (e.g. Jn 6:52-60). Since these contingencies are also irreducible and nonnegotiable to wider variations (as in Mt 7:13-14), our adaptations are critical to examine because “no” is more pervasive than realized in the diversity of global Christianity.

Throughout his earthly life, Jesus unmistakably vetted all who followed him. Some were shocked with his assessments because of their Christian involvement and service (e.g. Mt 7:21-23; Lk 13:26-27). The assessed value of followers typically varies among Christians, yet that value is consequential whenever vetting is absent or inadequate. The inescapable reality embodied by the Word is that the Christian life rises or falls on the basis of its discipleship.

It is unavoidable, therefore, for Christian diversity to account for its discipleship, because each constituent of diversity is held equally responsible by the embodied Word's vetting as the Outsider from top-down. And, thus, exemptions cannot be claimed, for example, due to hardships or other extenuating circumstances. Certainly, in the global community different contexts pose variable frameworks, and surrounding cultures exert variable influence, both of which challenge or even threaten those following the embodied Word. Nevertheless, from its inception the Christian community rose under and despite the Greco-Roman limits and constraints on its discipleship.¹¹ In principle, any existing Christian community cannot claim to be under limits and constraints negating their will to make primary their discipleship.

Along with each Christian's accountability and responsibility for their ongoing discipleship, the rise of the early church in their surrounding limits and constraints directs our attention pointedly at existing churches today for their accountability and responsibility in discipleship: their primary involvement in the reciprocating process of growing qualitative disciples (not the quantity of members), nurturing disciples and making disciples of all persons, peoples, tribes and nations. If the discipleship of each church is vetted by the embodied Word, what would be its assessed value?

Questions to Be Responsible for:

With question 5 above as the pivotal question, it also serves as question 1 here, again with all the questions above and below overlapping and interrelated, with response to any question inseparable from responses to the others.

- 2. How do you define the church? How does your ecclesiology compose your functional reality of the church for the existential lives of those gathered together? Can you identify the influence that the surrounding culture(s) has on your church?**

The bottom line issue facing all of us in global Christianity is pointed directly at the church. What the church *is* has been and continues to be problematic. Recorded church history and the church's existential narrative-history are not the same, though the former has qualified the latter accurately in some respects. Yet, assumptions are made by church historians about what the church *is* and is supposed to be, which make it difficult to understand (1) what is essential for the church, (2) how the church has adapted in and from that, and (3) what is critical for the church not to repeat its past dysfunctions. The

¹¹ For an overview of the early church's developmental history, see Donald Fairbairn, *The Global Church—The First Eight Centuries: From Pentecost through the Rise of Islam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021).

church's existential history provides that understanding, and our first accounts of this history recount the palpable Word's critique (together with the Spirit) of early churches (Rev 2-3, discussed further in coming chapters). What emerged from those diverse churches continues to be duplicated today, which reveals not having learned from past church adaptations.

The church serves as the bottom line in Christian practice by integrally forming the primary identity for Christians (prevailing amidst secondary identities), as well as establishing their belonging in the primacy of family together embodied by the whole Word for the whole gospel. The church, therefore, is foundational for the existential life of Christians to enact their discipleship. Accordingly, the underlying basis for our ecclesiology is essential for determining without ambiguity: the church's foundation to function as the church family embodied by the Word, rather than a foundation adapted from Christian practice; the church's theology and practice need to be integrated integrally. This foundational process of Christian theology and practice is summarized by the embodied Word in his manifesto for his followers' discipleship (embodied in the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 7:24-27).

Contrary to diverse Christian adaptations, our responsibility is focused less on being responsible *for* the church but more so centers on *being* the church. To be his church family is constituted by the embodied Word on the basis of the nothing-less-and-no-substitutes being in the image and likeness of the Trinity (as Jesus prayed, Jn 17:20-23).

3. How do you define the image of God? And what does that image determine in your Christian practice as well as in your church?

In Christian diversity, likely the most overlooked or misrepresented dimension in theology and practice involves the image and likeness of God. This dimension constitutes humanity in all its diversity and, likely most overlooked, also the image and likeness definitively revealed in the embodied Word and by his existential practice on earth (Col 1:15,19). Where and whenever acknowledged, that image and likeness typically have quantitative limits and constraints. When practiced, that image and likeness is often only a reference point rather than the constituting basis for Christian identity and function.

What, then, is the image and likeness of God that all Christians and churches are—without reduction or negotiation—responsible integrally to embody as the Word's church family and to enact in their discipleship? This image and likeness are essential for constituting our identity and function with nothing less and no substitutes, in order to have claim and rightly proclaim the integral gospel of the embodied Word. Thus, this all underscores inseparably, first, the distinguishing depth that all churches in global Christianity must account for, and, secondly, the embodying wholeness that they must also be responsible for to constitute the global church's "one as we [the Trinity] are one" (Jn17:22).

The Relational Purpose and Outcome Unfold

The above seven interrelated questions and their integrally interacting issues form the outline of what unfolds in the following pages of this study. Yet, what follows will truly unfold only in the irreducible and nonnegotiable relational purpose of following the embodied Word. Furthermore, this study will only experience the reality of its relational outcome just in Christians and churches embodying this integral relational purpose in their existential practice. Whether or not we witness this relational purpose and outcome unfold at the study's conclusion will be the ongoing question that only each Christian and church can answer. If those answers are to directly involve the embodied Word, then the relational purpose cannot be relative—especially to their diversity; nor can the relational outcome be arbitrary, as unique as it may appear in their diversity.

“The Lord make his face to shine upon you *to illuminate your whole person*; the Lord turn *face to face with you for the relational purpose that gives you the breakthrough change for the relational outcome distinguished only by the primacy of relationship together in wholeness*” (Nu 6:25-26)—the wholeness that the embodied Word enacted and vulnerably fulfilled to “give his followers,” contrary to any peace the global community gives (Jn 14:27).

Chapter 2 **Humanity Emerges, Human Condition Evolves**

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us *all*?

Malachi 2:10

The Lord saw that the *sin* of humankind was great in the *global community*.

Genesis 6:5

The creation of humanity was the unilateral work of Creator God. Humanity's development has been the integral reciprocal effort of both God and humans. The human condition evolved from the unilateral actions of humans, whose collective acts caused relational consequences with God that "grieved him to his heart" (Gen 6:6). The relational nature and process inherent to humanity's emergence as well as to the human condition's evolution are at the heart of *who* emerges and *what* evolves. Global Christianity needs to understand this relational nature and process, or else the *who* and *what* become less distinct and thus readily ambiguous to either misrepresent or mistake one for the other.

The current COVID-19 pandemic is a useful narrative to help us initially examine some of the issues involved in order to gain needed understanding. The global response to the pandemic, on the one hand, reveals the humanity that emerged at creation, while, on the other hand, it exposes the human condition further evolving. Thankfully, many persons have taken loving action to care for others during this pandemic, and their responses (however measured) reveal both their humanity and the others' perceived humanity. Sadly, the divisive actions from many, including Christians and churches, to the pandemic exposes their self-oriented concerns and interests that simply reflect, reinforce or even sustain the human condition. These narratives help make personal the issues involved, from which humanity emerges and the human condition evolves.

We need to examine closely (and still personally) the origins of humanity's emergence and the evolution of the human condition; and we need to more fully understand the relational nature and process of each in order to examine the *who* and the *what* operating in our theology and practice.

The Emergence of Humanity

For many Christians, the typical scenario taken from the creation narrative is that God created humans as male and female, and that Adam and Eve married to start the

human family. From these humans and their family emerged humanity, without much further detail ascribed to humanity that has significance for humanity's identity (or ontology) and function. Such a lens of Christian interpretation has rendered God's creation to limits and constraints, the myopic prevalence of which has opened the door for human diversity to define humanity relative to its diverse contexts. These diverse views make the *who* of humanity emerging problematic for each particular context to apply to its constituents. Moreover, such views are consequential for the global community to experience being together as a unified humanity.

The creation narrative (Gen 1-2) can be viewed as history or as allegory, but either view does not change what is seen or alter who emerged. God did not just create humans but *persons*. This *who* that created persons are is contingent integrally on both *what* and *how* persons are as God created. The essential identity (ontology) of who persons are is constituted in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27), which do not distinguish persons just by having God's trademark stamped on them. Persons are essential in their created identity when their what and how function integrally in the image and likeness of God. Yet, this identity and function are irreducible and nonnegotiable for any person to be and enact. Therefore, in spite of persons created in their diversity, for example, as female and male, the identity and function of persons emerge as created only when their who, what and how are enacted with nothing less and no substitutes for God's image and likeness. Likewise, humanity emerged as these persons emerged collectively in relationship together. Thus, humanity emerged in creation, not in evolution, with no other constitution.

Certainly, then, the identity of both persons and humanity depends on their created function, and this integral constitution cannot evolve with adaptation. Without this identity and function, any use of the term humanity becomes only a label lacking viability. This, of course, is the default mode for humanity; and many will still argue on behalf of such humanity, yet merely fall into sophism.

The creation narrative is emphatic that God's image and likeness cannot be rendered to a trademark, nor be relegated to a brand merely to affirm the person and humanity. First of all, God's creative action was decisive but that didn't by necessity preclude the evolutionary process in the biological formation of the human body. Yet, this points to the limits and constraints that subtly, inadvertently or intentionally get imposed on creation.

We cannot limit the dynamic process of creation, either by the limits of our epistemic field or by the constraints of a biased hermeneutic lens, which applies to both science and theology in the realms of physics and metaphysics. In the creation narrative, the person is distinguished by the direct creative action of the Creator and not indirectly through an evolutionary process that strains for continuity and lacks significant purpose

and meaning. At a specified, yet unknown, point in the creation process, the Creator explicitly acted on the developed physical body (the quantitative outer) to constitute the innermost (“breath of life,” *neshamah hay*) with the qualitative inner (“living being,” *nephesh*, Gen 2:7). The relational outcome was the whole person from inner out (the inseparably integrated qualitative and quantitative) distinguished irreducibly in the image and likeness of the Creator (Gen 1:26-27).

The qualitative inner of *nephesh* is problematic for the person in either of two ways. Either *nephesh* (Gen 1:30) is reduced when primacy is given to the quantitative and thus to the outer in; this appears to be the *nephesh* signified by supervenience in nonreductive physicality that is linked to large brain development and function.¹ All animals have *nephesh* but without the qualitative inner that distinguishes only the person (Gen 1:30). Or, *nephesh* is problematic when it is fragmented from the body, for example, as the soul, the substance of which does not distinguish the whole person even though it identifies the qualitative uniqueness of humans. The referential language that typically composes the soul does not get to the depth of the qualitative inner of the person in God’s context (cf. Job in Job 10:1; 27:2), because the inner was constituted by God in relational terms for whole ontology and function. The ancient poet even refers to *nephesh* as soul but further illuminates *qereb* as “all that is within me” (Ps 103:1), as “all my innermost being” (NIV) to signify the center, interior, the heart of a person’s whole being (cf. human *ruah* and *qereb* in Zec 12:1). This distinction gets us to the integral depth of the qualitative inner that rendering *nephesh* as soul does not. The reduction or fragmentation of *nephesh* is critical to whether the person in God’s context is wholly distinguished or merely referenced in some uniqueness.

The qualitative inner of the person can be considered as the inner person. This identity implies an outer person, which certainly would employ a dualism if inner and outer are perceived as separate substances as in some frameworks of Greek philosophy (material and immaterial, physical and spiritual). In Hebrew thinking, the inner (center) and outer (peripheral) aspects of the person function together dynamically to define the whole person and to constitute the integral person’s whole ontology and function (cf. Rom 2:28-29). One functional aspect would not be seen apart from the other, nor would either be neglected, at least in theory; but this was problematic throughout Israel’s history as the covenant people in God’s context (e.g. Dt 10:16; Isa 29:13).

In Hebrew terminology of the OT, the *nephesh* that God implanted of the whole of God into the human person is signified in ongoing function by the heart (*leb*). The function of the qualitative heart is critical for the whole person and holding together the person in the innermost. The biblical proverbs speak of the heart in the following terms:

¹ Supervenience involves a higher level human function (notably the mind) having determining effect (if not cause) upon lower level human function (the body); this assumed quality in humans is distinct from the body, yet is inseparable from and interdependent with bodily function (namely the brain).

identified as “the wellspring” (starting point, *tosa’ot*) of the ongoing function of the human person (Prov 4:23, NIV); using the analogy to a mirror, the heart also functions as what gives definition to the person (Prov 27:19); and, when not reduced or fragmented (“at peace,” i.e. wholeness), as giving life to “the body” (*basar*, referring to the outer aspect of the person, Prov 14:30, NIV), which describes the heart’s integrating function for the whole person (inner and outer together).

Without the function of the heart, the whole person from inner out created by God is reduced to function from outer in, thus distant or separated from the heart. This oft-subtle functional condition was ongoingly critiqued by God and responded to for the inner-out change necessary to be whole (e.g. Gen 6:5-6; Dt 10:16; 30:6; 1 Sam 16:7; Isa 29:13; Jer 12:2; Eze 11:19; 18:31; 33:31; Joel 2:12-13). Later in God’s strategic disclosure, Jesus vulnerably made unmistakable that the openness of the heart (“in spirit and truth”) is what the Father requires in reciprocal relationship together (Jn 4:23-24).

In spite of what constitutes the ontology of the human person, the whole person from inner out distinguished at creation was still insufficient to constitute humanity. A dimension still lacked that God completed in the creation narrative to make integrally functional the image and likeness of God. When God acknowledged “It is not good that *the human person* should be alone” (Gen 2:18), he constituted the relational nature and process that distinguishes all the diverse persons of humanity in God’s image and likeness.

“Good” (*tob*) can be situational, a moral condition, about happiness or being righteous; compare how good is perceived from human observation (Gen 3:6). When attached to “to be alone,” “not good” can easily be interpreted with all of the above, perhaps with difficulty about being righteous. Yet, in this creation context the Creator constituted the created order, whose design, meaning and purpose are both definitive and conclusive for the narrative of human being and being human, that is, for all humanity. Though the creation narrative is usually rendered “to be alone,” the Hebrew term (*bad*) can also be rendered “to be apart.” The latter rendering composes a deeper sense of relationship and not being connected to someone else—that is, deeper than merely an individual having someone to associate with. This nuance is significant to pay attention to because it takes the human narrative beyond situations and deeper than the heterosexual relations of marriage. “To be apart” is not just a situational condition but most definitively a relational condition distinguished only by the primacy of the created order. In the human narrative, a person may be alone in a situation but indeed also feel lonely (pointing to consciousness of one’s person) in the company of others, at church, even in a family or marriage because of relational distance, that is, “being apart,” which the Creator defines as “not good.”

In the design, meaning and purpose of the created order, humanity's narrative is composed conjointly, integrally and irreducibly as follows:

1. For human being "to be part" of the interrelated structural condition and contextual process with the Creator.
2. For the function of being human "to be part" of the relationship together necessary to be whole as constituted by and thus in the whole ontology and function of their Creator.

"Good" (*tob*), then, in the creation context is only about being righteous—not about a moral condition but the function of an ontological condition. Thus, good signifies the Creator's whole ontology and function, which constitutes the righteousness of God (the whole of who, what and how God is) further and deeper than just moral perfection.

In the creation narrative, the human male and female came before each other "naked and were not ashamed" (Gen 2:25). Well, what's so significant about this? From an evolutionary biology context animals have done this for millions of years; and such a natural outcome would be expected for *Homo sapiens*, so "what else is new," that is, unique emerging? Well, nothing significant is if we remain within the limits of the physicalist's composition of the human narrative that explains human changes from evolutionary adaptation. The reality, however, emerging along with and inseparable from the physical context cannot be ignored. Naked, yes, but not simply without any outer clothes, as the Hebrew term (*'arom*) denotes. A physicalist-materialist's lens pays attention to human being from outer in and likely limits this male and female coming together to natural sex without shame. What such a lens (including some non-materialists and dualists) overlooks or even ignores is human being from inner out and the presence, for example, of human masks worn both to shield the whole person's human being and to prevent being human from the depth level of connection necessary to distinguish their wholeness in relationship together. Contrary to such an opaque human identity, the innermost of human being is indispensable and irreplaceable to distinguish the person and persons together whole-ly from inner out.

For this male and female to be naked and without shame involved a composition of humanity's narrative beyond the fragmenting terms of the body and marital sex between husband and wife. The Hebrew term for shame (*bosh*) involves confusion, disappointment, embarrassment or even dismay when things do not turn out as expected. What did they expect and what was their experience? Think about this male and female meeting on these terms for the first time and examining each other from the outer in. Obviously, our lens for beauty, femininity as well as masculinity shaped by culture would occupy our thoughts; likewise, perhaps, the competitive and survival needs from evolution could have shaped their lens. On what basis would there be no shame, confusion, disappointment, embarrassment or dismay?

If what they saw of themselves was all there was and all they would get, it would not be difficult to imagine such feelings rising. In deeper yet interrelated function, however, the lens of this male and female was not constrained to the outer in, and thus was not even limited to gender. Their connection emerged from the deep **person-consciousness** of human being from the inner out, the innermost of which can neither be adequately explained in physical terms nor even be sufficiently distinguished on the spiritual level. What we need to pay close attention to is the emergence of this human consciousness to compose the integral narrative for humanity's whole of human being and being human. Most notably, the process of person-consciousness emerged to present the whole of human being without any masks or barriers (e.g. even the distinction of gender) in order to be involved with each other at the depth level necessary to distinguish their being human in created humanity. In other words, the context of person-consciousness composes humanity's narrative in 'naked and without shame'—the whole ontology and function necessary to distinguish the human person of all humanity.

Therefore, the persons God created from inner out connect in relationships without shame and disappointment only on the basis of inner out also. This essential relational process constitutes the relational involvement of **intimacy**: persons who make their hearts vulnerable to each other, whereby they come together in relationship in the primary involvement of inner out, without the limits and constraints from outer in. When relationships are engaged with intimacy, then persons experience the relational reality of no longer "to be apart." What is "not good," however, is when adaptations in relationship together redefine intimacy, which is what evolves in human diversity. Consider how you define intimacy in your surrounding context, and where and when you experience intimacy as a relational reality. Inseparably related to the issue of intimacy, examine further how shame is perceived in diverse cultures, and on what basis satisfaction is fulfilled in those contexts.

The ontology (or identity) and function of persons cannot diminish their created relational nature and function, or else they will relinquish their created humanity that is "not good to be apart." The global community needs to recognize the relational mode of when and where humanity emerges. This recognition is problematic unless its diversity knows *how* humanity emerges in the created relational process of intimacy. All Christians and churches in global Christianity are accountable for the created *how* of the Creator in their persons and relationships. With this accounting, they will distinguish in their identity and function the relational reality of "not good to be apart," whereby they will be responsible for embodying *how* in their surrounding diversity for humanity to emerge as the existential reality for all creation.

Until Christians and churches account for their created roots and fulfill their created responsibility in, by and with the image and likeness of God, their persons and relationships will strain for their created humanity. And rather than the *who* of humanity

emerging as God created irreducibly and nonnegotiable, the *what* of the human condition evolves. This becomes evident when the roots for Christians remains primarily centered on their surrounding culture and/or their family-tribal heritage.

The Human Condition Evolves

This summary context from the beginning composes the essential narrative for humanity with the ontology and function of human being and being human: For human beings, who are distinguished as persons, “to be apart is not ‘being who, what and how they are in their whole ontology and function that is constituted in the very likeness of the Creator’.” In human breakdowns, “To be apart” signifies the human condition that prevails in the human narrative evolving from the creation narrative—an adapted (or conflated) narrative counter to created humanity. This pivotal condition must be accounted for in our deliberation of human being, and it is also critical to account for in the human consciousness we use, in the methodology we employ and in the epistemic field we engage during the course of our function of being human.

In human consciousness (both self-consciousness and person-consciousness) no human (and few animals) wants “to be apart”, that is, assuming we don’t ignore it and pay attention. Yet, the matter of “to be apart” includes anything less and any substitutes of the whole distinguished in God’s being and created by God in human being. This raises the question of how definitive and conclusive is this whole for human being and being human; and how can this whole be distinguished from any human shaping or construction? These are urgent questions needing to be addressed for qualifying the complete context from the beginning—which includes the primordial garden and its pivotal dynamic—that is requisite to compose humanity’s narrative of human beings in wholeness. If nothing less and no substitutes but this whole has no basis of significance, then anything less and any substitutes will be sufficient in our deliberation, even in the absence of mutual agreement (any level of consensus) or personal satisfaction.

In the cultural contexts of human diversity, what “ought to be” in daily life and function has been defined and determined in such diverse ways such that it can be confusing, conflicting or convincing for Christian practice. When diverse influences cause Christian practice to adapt, what evolves is in contrast to or conflict with the who, what and how created by God is essential to emerge. This pivotal dynamic originated in the primordial garden (Gen 3:1-13), which must be revisited to understand the *what* that evolved to compose the human condition.

The typical Christian account of the events in the primordial garden is that Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command not to eat the fruit of a specific tree, which is the origin of sin that became the inherent condition for all humans. From this lens of original sin, the history of the human condition has been observed within its limits and constraints

to redact that history, and thus to obscure the evolution of the human condition. This Christian account effectively renders Christians' own condition to a theological fog, which has simply overshadowed the evolving adaptations in Christian practice. When the *what* from the primordial garden is understood without this biased lens, recognizing many of these adaptations in Christian practice will help illuminate their participation in what actually reflects, reinforces or sustains the human condition. This makes Christians enablers of the human condition, even in the practice of their faith.

Until Christians can account for their true human condition, there will always be limits and constraints that overtly or subtly impede our humanity from emerging. Moreover, since many of these limits and constraints come disguised as human upgrades (e.g. from technology), the line is blurred between the human condition evolving and humanity's emergence progressing. Is this course what Jesus anticipated in the Sermon on the Mount for his followers (Mt 7:13-14)?

At this point, a broader grasp of contextual issues will deepen our understanding. The contexts from both the creation context introduced above and the well-established context of evolutionary biology point to a cosmological context. The cosmological question about 'in the beginning' revolves around whether humanity's narrative is composed merely by physics or also beyond physicality, even beyond common notions of metaphysics. The idea of truth and what can be accepted as true have been formed by the knowledge of what exists in the universe in general and in human life in particular, though this epistemological engagement and related conclusions historically have been also shaped by a limited worldview (interpretive framework), cultural constraints (interpretive lens) and even by individual agenda (e.g. a growing problem in the scientific community demonstrated by those seeking stature).² Supposedly, then, a valid definition of truth is determined only by what *is*. Yet, given the contextual issues that influence the formation and shape of what is true—as demonstrated by the use of misinformation—the rhetorical question that Pilate raised to Jesus warrants further attention in our cosmological context and demands qualifying response for theological anthropology: “What is truth?” (Jn 18:38)

Our level of confidence in the knowledge we possess and use—interrelated knowledge for the universe and human life—is by its nature and must be in its practice contingent on two irreplaceable issues:

1. The source of our knowledge that both defines its significance and determines its scope beyond the limits and constraints of a narrowed-down epistemic field shaped by what is only self-referencing.³

² See Thomas Kuhn's discussion on the non-scientific influences shaping scientific theories, models and conclusions in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

³ During his attempt to develop a “grand unified theory” (GUT), noted physicist Stephen Hawking gave up his quest for such a complete comprehensive theory for knowing the world in its innermost parts, because

2. A complete epistemic process—provisional in its knowledge and heuristic in its development—engaged by a non-fragmented interpretive framework and non-fragmenting interpretive lens that can address any fragmentation in order that any pieces/parts can be put together (*syniemi*, cf. Mk 8:17-21), not in sum total but in integral relationship together, whereby this epistemic process illuminates the whole necessary for our knowledge and understanding to have integrated significance to distinguish it beyond mere self-referencing, that is, that context of reductionism constrained to human shaping and construction (even of God, Ps 50:21).

All affirmations, assertions and definitive statements of knowledge must give account of their source and, equally important, must account for how they relate to this source in the epistemic process. Clearly, we cannot and should not expect to experience resulting knowledge and to form conclusions of what is true beyond what our source, interpretive framework and lens allow. This necessarily applies to any theological engagement and any aspect of the theological task in anthropology, not as an obligatory methodology (e.g. for certainty or to be spiritually correct) but due to the pervasive and prevailing context of the epistemological, hermeneutical, ontological and relational influences of reductionism. In this context of reductionism, the reality of what *is* that determines the definition of truth becomes composed by epistemological illusion and ontological simulation for what “ought to be” in human life and function.

You’ve probably heard of, or even used, the term reductionism in various ways, mainly as a concept. How significant this term is, however, will not be understood merely as a concept. That understanding can only be attained with a full account of the existential dynamic evolving in the primordial garden.

Underlying the success of evolutionary adaptation is self-centered human action for the preservation of self, which has evolved by what is considered “the selfish gene.”⁴

If selfish genes have dominated human development from the beginning, there is no other composition to humanity’s narrative. I contend, however, this does not compose the human condition, nor can natural selection account for the whole in human development. Human development and progress in human achievement have to be differentiated, since the former is qualitatively oriented while the latter is quantitatively oriented. Consequently, what each lens pays attention to or ignores is different, with different and even conflicting results. For example, social media has greatly expanded the quantity of human connections and, in the progress, reduced the quality of human

he concluded that this wasn’t possible with the limited framework of science—that a physical theory can only be self-referencing and therefore can only be either inconsistent or incomplete. Discussed in Hans Küng, *The Beginning of All Things: Science and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 15-24.

⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

communication and relationships, along with the persons so engaged.⁵ This modern reduction pervades further as the new normal demonstrates by hookup relationships dominating youth-young adult culture in the U.S.

What unfolds here emerges from redefining the human person in quantitative terms from outer in (mainly preoccupied with the secondary over the primary). This reduces the person to one's parts (notably in multi-tasking or insignificant connections) and results in fragmenting both the whole person in ontology and function as well as persons' relationships together. Such results cannot be confused with human development, yet human achievement is often mistaken for it and such so-called progress becomes a prevalent substitute for it. Moreover, if such results occur from natural selection, physical determinism certainly has a dark forecast for human life that perhaps warrants fatalism. At the same time, for theological anthropology to shed light on humanity's narrative, it must clearly illuminate the human condition from the beginning in order to illuminate the ontology and function distinguishing the whole person—whose whole ontology and function are needed to emerge, develop and survive to expose, confront and make whole the human condition.

The fragmentation of the whole person from inner out to outer in evolved from the beginning—not in an evolutionary process of simple *objects* but in a qualitative relational process of complex *subjects*. This distinction between human objects and human subjects is problematic in human diversity, and an ongoing issue that has been consequential for humanity. In the creation narrative, a critical dynamic took place in the primordial garden that has been oversimplified (e.g. by spiritualizing it) or lacking in understanding (e.g. not understanding its repercussions on the whole person). As introduced earlier, wholeness is the irreducible and nonnegotiable created ontology and function constituted integrally by the qualitative and relational. Anything less and any substitutes for the human person and persons in relationship together are simply reductions of creation; this condition is what unfolds in the primordial garden (Gen 3:1-13).

This critical dynamic unfolding in the primordial garden underlies and ongoingly contends for the reduction of persons to compose the human condition. What we need to understand fully is about both what Satan does and what the persons do, with the latter usually oversimplified in Christian perception because of the workings of the former. In the female person's perceptual field (with her brain fully engaged), the fruit she saw evoked feelings of delight, feelings which cannot be reduced to mere sensory matter (as neuroscience observes⁶). She desired it as a means for gaining knowledge and wisdom in referential terms (a prevailing practice today, Gen 3:6), even though she already had whole knowledge and understanding in relational terms (an overlooked practice today,

⁵ The effects of technology on the quality of human life are discussed by Sherry Turkle in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

⁶ For example, see neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010).

Gen 1:27-28; 2:25). Whether she thought about the fruit as an alternative means prior to this pivotal moment is unknown, but she appeared clearly satisfied with her created condition in whole ontology and function integrated in the whole relationship together of intimacy (implied in *bosh*, “without disappointment or dismay” about both persons being “embodied whole from inner out,” 2:25); and thus she also appeared satisfied with the Creator in relational terms. Additionally, along with the Creator’s creative action from inner out being satisfying, the Creator’s communicative action directly (not indirectly or implicitly) in relationship with them was not displeasing (“but God said,” 3:3). This all changed when a sweeping assumption was framed as a fact: “You will not surely *be reduced*” (3:4, NIV). In today’s climate, we can easily relate to misinformation being mistaken for fact.

In the reality of relational terms, however, the feelings evoked by the fruit should also have evoked feelings of insecurity, perhaps even pain—as neuroscientist Cacioppo identified in the social brain⁷— about losing intimately whole relationship together with the Creator and with the other person. Why the feelings about the fruit had more influence than the feelings about whole relationship involved the above assumption, and therefore also this person’s perceptual-interpretive framework and lens making the following pivotal shift in function:

The shift from inner out to outer in (focused on bodily nakedness), from the qualitative to the quantitative (focused on fruit), from the relational to the referential (of knowledge and wisdom), therefore from what is primary to secondary things (“good for food...a delight to the eyes...desired to make one wise”) that preoccupied human function accordingly.

This pivotal shift involved a higher level human function, which reveals the absence of supervenience assumed by nonreductive physicalism⁸. Rather, what is unfolding is the encompassing reality of the reductionist dynamic of the human condition. What evolved is ongoingly evidenced both in the pervading human effort for self-determination—which could also be described as selfish genes—and in the prominent human shaping of relationships on self-conscious terms (“coverings” and “hiding”). This shift makes evident when self-consciousness (“naked and fragmented”) evolved to displace person-consciousness (“naked and whole”). What fully accounts for this pivotal shift from wholeness and its resulting fragmentary actions is **reductionism** (insufficiently defined as disobedience) and its ongoing counter-relational presence and influence: that which counters the whole in creation and conflicts with the whole of the

⁷ John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

⁸ A view discussed by Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy and H. Newton Malony, eds., *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998).

Creator, thereby elevating the quantitative as primary over the qualitative and substituting referential terms for relational terms to renegotiate the primacy of relationship together.

The shift from wholeness, simply stated, is the shift to anything less and any substitutes, all of which compose the human condition. The importance of this knowledge and understanding of this pivotal shift cannot be overstated. Nor can it be understated that anything less and any substitutes will be reductions, since they render us by default to the human condition. We make sweeping assumptions that our knowledge and understanding are not reductions when they are framed as facts or sound theories. The misinformation, condition and function of anything less and any substitutes have prevailed in the evolving human narrative and have even been presented as whole for human life—all counter to the reality that nothing less and no substitutes constitute the whole of created humanity. The sum consequence, even by default, on human being and being human—and who and what can emerge or develop—is the human condition, evolving from the beginning by the seemingly reasonable assumption “we will not be reduced,” especially if our knowledge and understanding have some basis in the probability framework of fact.

Therefore, the inescapable reality of the human condition is sin. But, and this is a critical “but”, sin without reductionism does not comprise the breadth and depth of the human condition that evolved in the primordial garden. Without understanding reductionism as intrinsic to inherent sin, Christian practice has been susceptible to the subtle and seductive counter-relational workings of reductionism in the daily application of their existential faith. This susceptibility is notable in Christian diversity and evident in the diverse adaptations made in global Christianity.⁹ Thus, all Christians and churches need to examine their view of sin and account for reductionism in their theology and practice.

The Reformation has been pivotal in amplifying diverse adaptations in Christian theology and practice.¹⁰ With the theological framework of justification by faith, Christian freedom has been exercised such that it unavoidably has been consequential for fragmenting (intentionally or unintentionally) the church locally, regionally, and globally. Theologically, this makes equivocal what Jesus saves us *from* and inaccessible what he saves us *to*—the makings of theological fog. This opens the door for reductionism’s counter-relational workings to define Christian identity and determine Christian function in existential practice—still under the assumption of justification by faith and notably assuming that such variations “make one wise” as evolved in the primordial garden. This door remains open today and continues to enable and sustain the human condition evolving, the effects of which simply keep enhancing the *what* of the human condition so that the *who* of humanity is further impeded from emerging. What, then, is the gospel claimed and proclaimed by Christians and churches in their adaptations?

⁹ For one formative view of this history, see Jehu J. Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).

¹⁰ For a people’s overview of this history, see Denis R. Janz, *A People’s History of Christianity: From the Reformation to the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

Based further on the summons of God's family, the unavoidable reality ongoingly facing all Christians and churches today is integrally both accountability for their current condition, and their responsibility to turn around the what of the human condition and to enact the who of humanity. This is unequivocal accountability and responsibility for nothing less and no substitutes, or else reductionism remains at work to define theology (as in "be like God") and determine practice (as in "know good and evil" and "not be reduced").

The Mode of Christian Development

In the history of human development, the prevailing mode for survival centered on development as either hunters or gatherers. Changes in situations and circumstances have required ongoing adaptations in order to develop in surrounding contexts. Yet, what appear as anachronistic to modern approaches to human development, in reality continue to prevail in global contexts today; and these modes also pervade Christian development either for its retardation or for its maturation.

With the development of Christianity shifting in prominence from the Minority World (or global North) to the Majority World (or global South), the question arises and perhaps begged by some: Is this global development a maturation of Christianity or really its retardation? The answer depends on the mode for development engaged.

Without recognizing and enforcing sin as reductionism in its theology and practice, Christianity from its inception has struggled by adapting in its surrounding contexts. Survival became the primary focus of concern, although other faith-related interests remained on the agenda as a less urgent priority. Consider, for example, how the Western mindset has shaped what to pursue (i.e. hunt) for survival and success; and how this lens determines the results as either satisfaction or shame. With this biased lens, examine how this skews what is necessary to gain (gather) for growth and flourishing. Hereby are the hunters and gatherers composing Christianity. While postcolonial shifts are moving away from Western Christianity, the question remains about the mode of Christian development used in those diverse contexts.¹¹ Sin as reductionism is not a framework of Western limits and constraints; rather its workings envelop the *what* of the human condition existing in its total global diversity. Therefore, Christians and churches in the Majority World cannot assume that their development embodies and enacts the *who* of humanity.

In Luke's Gospel, his strong concern for the gospel to be inclusive of all peoples emerges in his recording of the outcast tax collector Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10). Jesus'

¹¹ For example, I question the approach taken by Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha and L. Daniel Hawk, eds., *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).

relational involvement with so-called others was uncommon for a Jew, as well as for those who discriminated against others. What the Word embodied uncommonly is clearly distinguished: “the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (v.10). In other words, the Word embodied the relational involvement of a hunter. Furthermore, when the Word’s mode of Christian development was accused of being false, he made definitive “the finger of God” as the mode by which “the kingdom-*family* of God has come to you” (Lk 11:14-23). In this confrontation, the embodied Word made conclusive that he was also the gatherer: So, “whoever is not *relationally involved* with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me *on my relational terms* scatters.”

According to the embodied Word, then, the mode of Christian development involves integrally the relational action of hunters and gatherers. The Word’s relational action, however, embodies hunters and gatherers not for the purpose of survival—the subtle prevailing purpose for Christian development as evolved from the primordial garden. Rather, the Word’s essential purpose embodies the development of following his person only on his relational terms, that is, the primary purpose of discipleship developed in reciprocal relationship together: “where I am, there will my *disciple* be also” (Jn 12:26); “whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Lk 11:23). “**With me**” embodies “follow me,” and this enactment is developed only with the ongoing relational involvement of our whole person in reciprocal relationship with Jesus’ whole person (not merely his teachings).

The mode for Jesus’ followers is narrowed down to just his relational mode for his relational purpose with his relational outcome. Foremost, his relational mode embodies “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15, cf. 2 Cor 4:4), which distinguishes what is primary in Christian development: the whole-ly life as persons in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity. Therefore, to “follow me” on his relational terms develops not by serving him (a common misguiding assumption) but by the relational mode (as uncommon as it is) of heart-level involvement with his person—namely, by the inner-out person as created in the ontological identity and function of humanity. This is irreducible and nonnegotiable for Christian development, just as Peter learned the hard way in his struggling discipleship (as in Mt 16:22-23; Jn 13:6-8; 21:17-22; Gal 2:11-14).

In global Christianity there is diverse development of discipleship due to a diversity of modes, which subtly become divergent from nothing less and no substitutes of the Word. Thus, the prevailing reality is undeniable: Without distinguishing the *who* of humanity from the *what* of the human condition in their practice, Christians and churches readily fall into practice as scatterers instead of as gatherers—the relational consequence of not having ongoing heart-level relational involvement “with me”; accordingly, they become the hunted (pursued) rather than hunters—just as God gathered his family with his summons face to face to hold them accountable and responsible for nothing less and no substitutes (Ps 50:5,21).

The survival mode of hunters and gatherers raises critical questions about Christian development as hunters and gatherers today. In the diversity of global Christianity, these questions need to be directed first to the global North and then to the global South.

Successful Results or Relational Outcomes

When you play sports, it should be a given that learning the fundamentals of the sport is basic to player development. Success in sports, however, is often not based on fundamentals—as evident notably in professional baseball and basketball, where successful individuals and teams have lacked in fundamentals. Likewise, development in the Christian life should be based on fundamentals, that is, the fundamentals embodied by the Word. Yet, what is deemed a success in the diversity of global Christianity is often not based on the Word’s fundamentals, but rather by what its surrounding context(s) renders as successful (cf. the church in Sardis, Rev 3:1-2).

The created humanity of persons in the primordial garden sought to advance their human development. Their pursuit of an apparent laudable goal (“gaining wisdom”), however, came at the expense of the nonnegotiable fundamentals of their created humanity. Under the influence of their surrounding context, they sought successful results in their development rather than the created relational outcomes for their humanity. Such results have evolved to confuse all persons ever since for the outcomes of humanity, which shouldn’t be surprising but expected from the counter-relational workings of reductionism. So, with the expansion of global Christianity, the unavoidable question for Christians and churches urgently becomes: Is humanity emerging as created by God, or is the human condition evolving even more subtly (as in “gaining wisdom”) from the primordial garden?

Christians and churches have struggled with the disparity between successful results and relational outcomes from the initial development of Christianity. As referenced earlier, Peter’s working model of the successful messiah was contrary to the outcome revealed by Jesus the Messiah (Mt 16:21). The Word’s revelation “must never happen to you” as the results for Peter’s messiah, who was shaped by Peter’s religious culture even after he correctly confessed “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). In the early church, further successful results prevented relational outcomes, which resulted in relational consequences for the following churches:

1. The church in Laodicea (Rev 3:14-20) acquired successful results based on the wealthy economy of its surrounding context. Its accumulated resources gave them a false sense of security, which made the church complacent—an opaque condition that diluted their discipleship in lukewarm Christian practice. Rather

- than simply dismissing this church for its scattered identity and function, the palpable Word (together with the Spirit) pursues (hunts) them with direct relational involvement to make face-to-face connection for the relational outcome to gather them together in the primacy fundamentally as his family; this is the relational significance embodying the traditional notion of “I stand at the door and knock...” (v.20).
2. The church at Sardis (Rev 3:1-3) was the early counterpart to mega-churches today. Based on the definition and/or perception of success assumed from its surrounding context, this church enjoyed having “a reputation of being alive.” Its brand (*onoma*), however, was merely a substitute for the persons and relationships constituting their created humanity, for which it lacked clarity. Consequently, the Word pursued them with a “Wake-up” call because “I have not found your *practice* complete [*pleroo*, whole] in the *perceptual-interpretive lens* of my God.” Their development will never result in the wholeness created by God, no matter how successful, until they turn from seeking such successful results and restore God’s relational mode for the relational outcomes distinguished only by the embodied Word’s relational terms. “Wake up and follow my whole person!”
 3. The church in Ephesus (Rev 2:1-5) existed in a tense context that subjected them to trials and tribulations—similar to what diverse churches experience in global Christianity. Through it all this church maintained a theological integrity of orthodoxy and a rigorous practice that was successful in meeting the challenges of their surrounding context. As impressive as this may appear, the Word pursues them with the surprising critique: “I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.” How so? They served the Lord with the intensity that few churches can claim. Here we witness the subtlety of reductionism’s counter-relational workings, which clouded their perceptions for a lack of clarity in their biblical theology and practice. In spite of their theological orthodoxy and rigorous practice, the primacy of relationship together constituting “Follow me” was subordinated by what amounts to secondary matters (however important, like serving), thereby substituting the Word’s relational terms primary for discipleship with diverse terms for Christian practice—terms which evidence a reduced theological anthropology with a weak view of sin. This always has the relational consequence of effectively (though perhaps unintentionally) “abandoning the relational involvement of God’s love constituting the fundamental primacy of relationship together in wholeness.”

When Christians and churches lack the relational mode and outcome fundamental to both discipleship and created humanity as embodied by the Word, their development will always lack wholeness and incur relational consequences. This is the unavoidable reality regardless of their successful results. We need to fully understand the depth of

significance that the fundamentals of Christian development require in daily practice, in order for Christian identity to be defined and Christian function to be determined as integrally constituted in creation and restored by the new creation (as in 2 Cor 5:16-17).

The Fundamentals of Humanity

Christians readily claim from the gospel that they are “a new creation.” What typically is assumed in this claim, however, is that the old (original) creation is now subordinated or replaced by the new. This is contrary to the Word, who embodied “the image of the living God” in order to unequivocally distinguish the who, what and how fundamental to creation both original and new. Paul also provides definitive clarity that this fundamental depth is contrary to “a human point of view” (2 Cor 5:16)—a view which is opaque and thus subject to diversified rendering (cf. 2 Cor 3:14-18). The condition of having clarity or being opaque is a basic issue for understanding the fundamentals of who and what are essential and how their function is determined.

Observers of Christian witness must be confused or skeptical about what’s the “how” in Christians and churches, and rightly so given “what and who” the diversity of Christianity demonstrate existentially. Moreover, rightly so given how diversely and divisively it’s demonstrated. From the earliest stages of the church, Christianity was always diverse and did not emerge from a singular cultural framework or race. Thus, the diversity of contemporary churches in global Christianity is not new but an extension of the early church’s history. Similarly, what many contemporary churches demonstrate today duplicates the early churches in Laodicea, Sardis and Ephesus. As contemporary churches repeat what the Word critiqued in those early churches for, churches today demonstrate lacking clarity of the who, what and how fundamental to creation (original and new). Therefore, the feedback from observers of Christian witness notwithstanding, we need to examine who and what are existentially essential in global Christianity today, and how their functions is determined by its diversity.

This examination could be made by outsiders or insiders, from top-down or bottom-up. What *could be*, however, would be insufficient to explain the how, even by insiders; and it would also be inadequate to explain the who and what, because even insiders from bottom-up are limited and constrained by their bias. I, myself, am a limited insider, with constraints assumed from top-down. Thus, I defer to the embodied Word and count on him (together with the Spirit) to unfold this examination as the integral Outsider definitively from top-down.

As a person of color, my person lacked clarity in my early life; even after I became a Christian my person remained opaque. My culture of origin was certainly

instrumental in being opaque. Yet, even more so, my surrounding context and religious culture reinforced and sustained my opaqueness. The diversity of Christians and churches need to understand these influences that, on the one hand, cloud their clarity while, on the other hand, substitute alternatives that are simply opaque. Consider how the person in general and your person in particular is defined and depicted in your specific context. What clarity does this provide you for the person God created and the Word embodied as “the image of the living God”? And how opaque would you say your person may be compared to the person of the Word?

Fundamental for the persons at creation is having the clarity of the person created from inner out. That is, though their outer bodies were naked, their persons functioned clearly from inner out; thus, they “were not ashamed” of their whole persons from inner out. This is most significant, because we’re not witnessing a mere blind eye to the human body. As noted earlier, the Hebrew term for shame (*bosh*) involves confusion, disappointment, embarrassment or even dismay when things do not turn out as expected. The basis for their having no shame, confusion, disappointment, embarrassment or dismay is fundamental for their persons to be whole from inner out and not be fragmented in some alternative way from outer in. Since the lens of this male and female was not constrained to the outer in, and thus was not even limited to the dominant distinction of gender, their intimate relational connection emerged from the deep consciousness of their whole person from the inner out. The emergence of this unique human consciousness is integral for the created ontology and function of all persons, regardless of whatever distinctions they have from outer in. The process of person-consciousness emerged on this clear basis to present the person without any masks or barriers (e.g. even the distinction of gender) in order to be involved with each other at the depth level necessary to distinguish the clarity of their whole person. This is fundamental for any and all persons to be “naked and without shame” and thus essential in order that their development not to fall into the opaque condition of “naked and covering up.”

Therefore, the most essential fundamental for created humanity is the person-consciousness that is focused clearly on the whole person starting from, but not limited to, the inner out. There is clarity when the person’s inner is not consciously either overlooked or quantified, for example by the brain or mind (as evident in neuroscience¹²). The inner person was created qualitatively in the image of God, yet not without the quantitative dimension of the outer person. Different cultures define and emphasize the inner person on a diverse spectrum, which each context must examine for its clarity. The emergence of God’s people in their created humanity unfolded qualitatively—though they stagnated when they struggled in the quantitative—only by the person-consciousness of **the heart** as the primary function of the who in their humanity. To review what was defined above in the emergence of humanity:

¹² This is evident in the studies noted earlier in this chapter.

The *nephesh* that God implanted of the whole of God into the human person is signified in ongoing function by the heart (*leb*). The biblical proverbs describe the heart with terms identified as “the wellspring” (starting point, *tosa’ot*) of the ongoing function of the human person (Prov 4:23); using the analogy to a mirror, the heart also functions as what gives definition to the person (Prov 27:19); and, when not reduced or fragmented (“at peace,” i.e. wholeness), as giving life to “the body” (*basar*, referring to the outer aspect of the person, Prov 14:30, NIV), which describes the heart’s integrating function for the whole person (inner and outer together).

The qualitative heart is fundamental to who, what and how the person *is* in created ontology and function. This essential fundamental is irreplaceable for the person created totally in the qualitative image of who, what and how God is. Moreover, this fundamental is imperative for persons to be connected and involved in relationship with God by the relational likeness of God. At the same time, this fundamental imperative is nonnegotiable with God, which the embodied Word revealed strategically: For relationship together, “the Father seeks *persons*...who worship him...in spirit and truth”—that is, the qualitative heart of the whole person in reciprocal response to “God is *heart*” (Jn 4:20-24). Christians, however, must not merely spiritualize the “spirit,” nor constrain the heart to the inner person (as in a dualistic soul). This fragments the whole person whom God created integrally inner and outer. The heart is fundamental for the person’s integral inner-and-outer function, and the separation of the inner person from the outer (or the converse) in any diversity is fragmentary.

In the diversity of contemporary worship, for example, in your specific context what is the diverse style of worship that reverberates in churches you’re familiar with? And can you distinguish persons resonating from inner out with the clarity of their whole person, or is the Word’s critique applicable (Mk 7:6-7)? The separation of the person from inner to outer, even from outer to inner, imposes limits and constraints on persons to have clarity of their identity and function. Such limits and constraints become the norm in church traditions, and their practice is normalized whenever and wherever churches gather to compose this new normal in opaque contrast to creation (original and new).

The fragmentation of the person in either direction reduces the person from his/her created humanity. Regardless of the degree of reduction, such a person loses clarity of the who of humanity. This leaves the person in a susceptible condition both to redefine the created identity (ontology) of all persons and to substitute a diverse function divergent from creation. The existing reality of this issue is fundamental for Christian diversity. Christians, for example, cannot proclaim the equality of humanity merely because all persons are created equal by God, while in the reality of their existential practice they haven’t claimed their created identity and function as whole persons from inner out. Such existential practice makes human distinctions that effectively become exclusionary of some human differences. The *we* of humanity is inclusive of all persons,

thus the explicit or implicit exclusion of any *person* by default renders the *we* fragmentary. This exclusionary dynamic is critical to understand.

Any person lacking clarity of the who, what and how constituting all persons created by God thereby falls into a transposed human consciousness from inner out to outer in. This involves the dissonant transition from person-consciousness to **self-consciousness**, which was evidenced originally in the primordial garden (Gen 3:7). The human self evolved and continues to evolve always resulting in the immeasurable cost of losing consciousness of the person; this loss is the oft-subtle consequence of reductionism in all its diversity. The workings of reductionism offer, promise or seduce the person with “your eyes will be opened and you will be like God” (Gen 3:5). **How much in the theology and practice of Christian diversity makes a similar claim?** But, the assumed successful result evolved into opaque lenses without clarity: “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, *because they made the dissonant transition from person-consciousness to self-consciousness to transpose their whole persons from inner out to a fragmentary outer-in condition with diverse distinctions*” (3:7).

The self in human identity and function is described in variable ways. The self of human biology, of course, evolves as the selfish gene promoting self-preservation. Whatever the variation, the self is oriented foremost around self, thus it’s primarily centered on self. This reduces the self’s perceptual-interpretive lens to an opacity that prevents clarity of the person, which then results in a consciousness mainly of self without any significant person-consciousness. Two critical issues come to the forefront that are fundamental for Christians and churches. Both issues interact to either illuminate and intensify the emergence of humanity, or darken and counter it from emerging further:

1. Either Christians and churches have clarity of the person’s created identity and function, or are opaque about who, what and how they are from inner out.
2. Then, Christians and churches engage in Christian practice and development in the primary mode of either person-consciousness or self-consciousness.

What is fundamental for created humanity to function in Christians and churches is not open to negotiation. The embodied Word makes axiomatic what’s at stake here, and thus what Christians and churches can expect regardless of the basis for their hope. His axiom unfolds in “the measure you give *or use* will be the measure you get” (Mk 4:24). Therefore, all Christians and churches take note:

- 1a. The clarity of the person you use in your development and give in your practice, is the only person you get.
- 1b. The opaque lens you use in your development and give in your practice, is the self you get.

- 2a. The person-conscious mode you use in your development and give in your practice, is the created humanity you get.
- 2b. The self-conscious mode you use in your development and give in your practice, is the simulations and illusions of humanity you get.

The fundamentals of humanity constituted by the whole person's clarity in person-consciousness are ongoingly subjected to the counter-relational workings of reductionism. This results in substitutes with the opaque self in self-consciousness that generate **ontological simulations** and compose **functional illusions** about the who, what and how all persons are in created humanity. Christians need to be honest about the reality that we are all self-conscious at times one way or another. And the inescapable reality we need to realize is that self-consciousness is our default mode—whether in our created humanity or our new creation—whenever we are not explicitly engaged in person-consciousness. Thus, even when we are serving God, our default mode evolves in subtle ontological simulations and functional illusions to make our persons opaque. Therefore, Christians and churches need to honestly account for these simulations and illusions in the diversity of their theology and practice, and thereby take responsibility for anything less and any substitutes that have evolved.

Ontological Simulations and Functional Illusions

Human ontology and function are not static conditions, though they are certainly created whole in a definitive qualitative and relational condition that is not subject to a relative process of determination or emergence. Human ontology and function were created whole in the beginning. The issue from the beginning, however, is whether this ontology and function will continue existentially to be whole by living whole.

To continue to be whole is a qualitative function of person-consciousness that focuses on the person from inner out, that is, on nothing less than the whole person. Yet, the whole person is not a simple object operating within the parameters of a predetermined condition or behavioral pattern. Rather, contrary to some theories of the person, the whole person is a complex subject whose function includes human agency composed by the will that further distinguishes the person's uniqueness created by God.

The complex human subject is manifested in different outward forms, all of which cannot be explained. For example, any lack of physical capacity does not relegate a person to reduced ontology and function, though variable ontology and function is still possible for such a person. Each of these different forms, however, should not be perceived in the inevitable comparative process of prevailing human distinctions that compose a deficit model identifying those differences as *less*—just as I experienced as a person of color. This has obvious relational implications for those cultures and traditions

that have favored certain persons (e.g. by race) and thereby discriminated against others (e.g. by class, gender, age). Such practice is not only ethically and morally unacceptable for the global church, but most important it exposes the sin as reductionism of persons embodying the church in reduced ontology and function.

What is definitive of the complex human subject in any form is this reality: “It is not good to be apart” from the wholeness that God created for all human ontology and function in the qualitative image and relational likeness of God, and therefore any human subject can be affirmed and needs to live in whole ontology and function—even if conditions, situations and circumstances appear to the contrary, as it does for the persons discussed above. This challenges both our assumptions about persons who are different, and how we perceive/define them and thereby engage them in relationship. Any differences from our perceptual-interpretive lens that we impose on them reflect our reduced ontology and function, not theirs.

When those in the primordial garden saw their selves from outer in, “they made *opaque* coverings for their selves” (Gen 3:7, NIV). This set in motion the evolution of the prevailing human dynamic: **The presentation of self** to displace the involvement of the person in everyday life.¹³ The self has evolved in this presentation as the opaque covering in contrast to and in conflict with the involvement of the whole person from inner out. In the evolving diversity of presentations of self, this self-oriented dynamic adapts into a self-centered mode that gives birth to simulations of one’s human ontology (identity) and propagates illusions of human function—ontological simulations and functional illusions in the divergent condition to created humanity.

In the diversity of global Christianity, every context must examine any adaptations made in the presentation of self. All Christians and churches must take to heart the Word’s axiom that “the adaptations you use is the self you get.” For any of their adaptations in diverse contexts, the assumption cannot be claimed, even by insiders from bottom-up: Because they have *faith*, they are *justified*—whereby the bias of ‘justification by faith’ becomes misleading theologically and misguiding in practice. Since the Reformation in particular, Christians and churches have been misled theologically and misguided in practice to evolve into a diversity that strains to be reconciled in what’s primary to God. Preoccupation with the secondary, however, has reinforced and sustained the global church to be fragmentary, which is our pervasive condition disguised by ontological simulations and functional illusions.

Yet, evolving well before the Reformation, God’s people adapted soon after covenant relationship was established to further evolve the presentation of self contrary to God’s terms for relationship together (summarized in Isa 29:13-16, and exposed by the Word, Mk 7:6-13). This dynamic also pervaded Jesus’ first disciples, who seemed nearly obsessed with presenting their self as “the greatest” in discipleship (Mt 18:1; Mk 9:33-34;

¹³ For a general description of this dynamic in social contexts, see Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959).

Lk 9:46; 22:24). Not surprisingly, they weren't transparent about this with Jesus since any self presented is always opaque, keeping their person constrained in relational distance (consequential to Jn 14:9). Opacity was demonstrated in Peter's presentation of self, who maintained subtle relational distance with Jesus in spite of how outspoken and assertive he was in discipleship. His ongoing self presented to Jesus is the underlying issue that precipitates Jesus' seemingly odd query of his most intense disciple: "do you love me" (Jn 21:15-17), that is, "is your whole person vulnerably involved with my person in the intimacy of relationship together, thus without relational distance" as Peter demonstrated at his footwashing (Jn 13:6-8). Peter's involvement as a person was compromised by his presentation of self, and this provoked the embodied Word's challenge of Peter's preoccupation with the secondary (e.g. Jn 21:20-22) over what's primary for the Word. Ironically, Peter's adaptations of presenting his self in his successful ministry proclaiming the gospel had this result: his opaque self engaged in mere role-playing (*hypokrisis*) that wasn't congruent "with the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:11-14).

Any and all presentation of self make opaque the person underlying the identity and function presented. For this opaque dynamic to have a successful result, it must be able to present convincing substitutes, both as simulations of the person's ontology and illusions of the person's function created by God and restored by the Word in the new creation. Such simulations and illusions are possible in global Christianity only when misled by reduced theological anthropology and misguided in practice by a weak view of sin lacking reductionism. On this basis, the person becomes indistinguishable from the self presented, whereby (1) human ontology is composed quantitatively from outer in over qualitatively from inner out and (2) human function is engaged in the secondary over the primary while maintaining relational distance. These simulations and illusions are the genius of reductionism's counter-relational workings, with the diversity of Christian churches most susceptible to substitute their identity and function in order to have successful results in their diverse contexts. For this pervasive condition in the global church, the Word's critique resounds so that "all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts *of the whole person from inner out*" (Rev 2:23).

The opaque condition of self prevails in Christian practice, which functions incongruently with "the truth of the gospel" just as Peter did. Of course, Paul's exposure of Peter's opacity is based on the whole gospel embodied by the Word, and not fragments of the gospel that bias Christian practice with limits and constraints. The latter simply prevents the experiential truth and relational reality of the gospel's new creation person from emerging.

Likely, the most pervasive practice of these simulations and illusions is evident in worship gatherings. For example, the opaque self may reverberate from outer in while worshipping, but the limits and constraints of that self prevent the person from resonating from inner out. This is commonly witnessed in worship. The heart of the person doesn't function until the opaque coverings (or veil) adapted by the self is removed, whereby the person is freed to resonate from inner out. The person's heart and wholeness ("spirit and truth") are what the Father seeks in reciprocal relational response of worship, nothing less and no substitutes for the person. However, this inner-out relational response infrequently resonates in worshippers, because the person is displaced by the self's simulations and illusions reverberating quantitatively from outer in—which is the amplified new normal of contemporary worship. Regardless of the style of diverse church worship gatherings, it should be evident how vulnerable or how opaque participants are, whether self-consciousness is the norm or person-consciousness is the exception, thus whether what the Father seeks is relationally engaged or merely given lip service.

The new creation constituted by the embodied Word emerged functionally to reconstitute the existential context of worship gatherings. On the cross when "Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (Mt 27:50-51). How does this usher in the new creation?

1. It makes functional what the Father seeks from the person in reciprocal relationship together and establishes the face-to-face relational process for intimate relational connection with the whole person (as defined in Heb 10:19-22).
2. It constitutes the redemptive process for the person to be freed from the limits and constraints imposed by the opaque self, all of which converge in the symbolic **veil** (or masks) used by self to cover up the inner-out person.
3. The integral redemptive process intensifies into the transformation of the person to restore the wholeness from inner out in the image and likeness of the Trinity—made definitive by Paul (2 Cor 3:16-18).

This irreplaceable fundamental process of redemptive transformation constitutes the experiential truth and relational reality of the gospel's new creation. And this is the only existential relational outcome of the whole gospel embodied by the Word in the ontology and function of the Trinity. Anything less and any substitutes are a different gospel from a different God, whose diversity never constitutes the emergence of created humanity (original and new) but merely further evolves the human condition.

The human condition of reduced ontology and function evolves in distinctions of ontology and differences in function. These distinctions and differences have readily become normative in diverse contexts, the diversity of which has evolved also in the global church. The reality of our human condition needs to be a wake-up call because “the Word has not found your practice whole in the sight of God” (Rev 3:2). Thus, we must never underestimate the counter-relational workings of reductionism to propagate ontological simulations and functional illusions in Christian practice (see 2 Cor 11:14-15). Likewise, we should not overestimate the results achieved in Christian practice, no matter how successful. “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us all?” (Mal 2:10) Or, do we still think “I was altogether like you” (Ps 50:21)?

Therefore, in all our diversity, Christians and churches need to honestly examine our gospel and what outcome they experience existentially from it. Then, we need to understand who actually makes up our gatherings and on what basis we gather. Regarding worship, we need to discover whether the reality of how we worship relationally gathers intimately behind the curtain where God is, or still gathers in front of the curtain at a relational distance. In all this, does our created humanity emerge, or our human condition evolve?

Chapter 3 Persons, Peoples, Tribes and Nations —Their Identity and Belonging

God said to *the first humans*, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.”

Genesis 1:28

So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth.

Genesis 11:8

I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

Genesis 17:5

Have you seen recent news coverage of U.S. Border Patrol agents on horseback whipping and rounding up Haitian refugees, as if they were cattle? Haiti bears the opaque identity as “poorest nation in the Western hemisphere.” While Haitians certainly struggle economically, they have suffered more from the hands of autocratic leadership that has devolved from their origins—leaders supported by the U.S. Thus, this identity is opaque because it covers Haiti’s decisive history accounting for its redemptive fight, which successfully ended the slavery of its people to gain independence from foreign domination. This redemptive history unfolded at the turn of the 19th century to establish Haitian identity in freedom from bondage and in racial equality for all. Toussaint Louverture, Haiti’s most important revolutionary leader, explained his armies’ success: “We are fighting that liberty—the most precious of all earthly possessions—may not perish.”¹ Indeed, Haiti was instrumental in amplifying liberty for the rise of the West and the early expansion of the U.S.—a debt that should be paid rather than incurred by this “poorest nation in the Western hemisphere.”

This illustrates the complex process of identity formation for persons, peoples, tribes and nations. This complex process easily gets convoluted, causing human identity to diverge from its origins. The history of global diversity assumes a richness in the identities of diverse narratives, yet the identity formation of these persons, peoples, tribes and nations has not necessarily illuminated their origins. This is not surprising but to be expected, since this complex process is variably defined and determined notably by culture and ideology. These critical sources of influence, though not limited to these two, relegate identity to a relative formation that (1) makes uncertain who a person, a people, a tribe or a nation really are, and that (2) makes elusive what their identity signifies both to them and to others.

¹ Quote and background taken from Howard W. French, “The West owes a centuries-old debt to Haiti,” OP-ED, *Los Angeles Times*, 10/10/21.

The ambiguity of identity in human life raises serious issues that need to concern all Christians and churches especially, because our identity formation readily mirrors our surrounding contexts to make our identity less distinguishable from its origins. Moreover, when anyone's identity lacks the significance of its essential composition, there are consequential prolonged repercussions revolving on where they *belong* existentially and whom they belong to relationally.

Comparative Issues in Identity Formation

Human identity serves the key purpose that informs us about who and what we are, and thus how to function. While identity is certainly not a singular composition, there is a primary identity that mainly defines who and what we present to others, including determining how we live existentially in that context. No moment in time, not one situation or association adequately defines an identity, as Haitians would testify. Thus, identity formation is an ongoing process of trial and error, change, development and maturation. This is evident from the beginning of creation, and we have to understand defining pivotal issues in identity formation evolving since.

The primary identity of the first humans was defined as persons from inner out in the image and likeness of the Creator. Their identity was also formed with the secondary distinctions of gender. These persons were given the essential purpose to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28). “Fill” (*malé*) signifies to complete what the Creator started with their persons. What God created was the qualitative person from inner out, not the quantitative self from outer in. Thus, “fruitful and multiply” is a qualitative function distinguishing the identity of qualitative persons, whose identity and function are to “fill the earth” foremost on the primary basis of the qualitative from inner out—with all the secondary subordinate to the primary.

Perhaps serious issues are rising in your thinking, and they rightly should. What has evolved globally ever since is not the unfolding of this initial identity formation. Rather the essential identity of those persons shifted in formation from inner out to outer in, thus from the primary to the secondary, making the quantitative more urgent than the qualitative as well as more accessible and easier to fulfill. This set into motion the dynamics of identity formation that have been consequential for who and what compose the global diversity of persons, peoples, tribes and nations filling the earth. God originally designed created diversity (notably gender) to fill the earth, so this diversity is not the issue. The problem with human diversity evolves when the created identity becomes indistinguishable due to an opaque-causing process in the divergence of identity formation.

This problem should not be confused as a situation merely to manage, that is, manage with any and all secondary measures available (as in Gen 3:7). Christians and

churches need to understand the problem and resolve to solve it first in the diversity of the global church and then in the global community.

When human identity shifted from inner out to outer in, this inevitably evolved into an explicit or implicit **comparative system**, the basis of which was structured primarily by the quantitative. As evolved subtly from the primordial garden, identity formation engages the comparative system on a distinct hierarchical scale that gets formalized in surrounding contexts, whereby all identity is measured as *better* or *worse*, *more* or *less*. And the only way for that identity to rise on the scale is to have more and to be better, always primarily in quantitative terms. Haiti's identity is measured on this quantitative comparative scale and thus is relegated to the bottom in the Western hemisphere.

In the comparative system, the quantitative outer in doesn't outshine the qualitative inner out, it simply overshadows the latter with opacity in identity formation. Accordingly, once the shift is made to make primary human ontology from the outer in over inner out, the human distinctions both created by God (like gender) and those evolved in human contexts, all these distinctions become the central focus for human perceptual-interpretive lenses. This forms an intrinsic bias by which identity is seen, developed, assessed and advanced existentially. That quantifies such distinctions—not only for human identity but for God's identity also (as in Ps 50:21)—to be measured by what evolved from the primordial garden: the inevitable comparative process (“you will be like God,” Gen 3:5). Therefore, in any comparative system participants must **conform** to quantitative parameters for their identity formation to be relevant in that context. **Conformity-for-relevance** should not be confused for significance of human identity, yet, such relevance evolves inherently in primacy given to the outer in.

Conformity to be relevant in a comparative system that evolves locally, regionally or globally has been a defining concern for identity formation both in the general human context and in the context of God's people throughout history. This concern revolves effectively on survival, which evolves in a comparative system by being fit or becoming the fittest. It was this concern that became defining for the identity formation of God's people, because they wanted to conform to the parameters of the comparative system in their surrounding context. After God established covenant relationship only on God's relational terms, God's people shifted to outer in for determining their practice of the covenant. This pivotal shift reduced their practice to quantitative comparisons in observing God's Law, and then entrenched them in the comparative system of their surrounding context. With this biased lens, they saw their identity as relative only to God and thus as irrelevant in the surrounding comparative system. Specifically, all other peoples, tribes and nations were identified by the rule of a formal king, whereas the rule of God's people didn't measure up by comparison. Rather than affirm the unique and essential quality of God's rule, they demanded a king from God in order for their assumed survival to be fit like all the others (1 Sam 8:4-9, 19-20).

This pivotal comparative shift, of course, was critical for its relational consequences in their identity formation as God's people: foremost, "they have rejected me from being king over them" (v.7). Nevertheless, conformity-for-relevance in the surrounding context was their priority, and thus they became entrenched in the comparative system ongoingly measuring their identity accordingly. This was further consequential relationally with the reconstitution of their belonging, making ambiguous where they belonged and obscuring whom they belonged to. Christians and churches cannot ignore such ambiguity or underestimate its impact on the diversity of their witness.

Earlier in the context of the human narrative, a variation of conformity was attempted in what amounts to a grand experiment of false hope in the survival of human identity. The diversity of humanity was scattering over the earth, which would populate the whole earth (Gen 9:19). A people in this early context had one language with the same meaning for all. On this basis, they made the critical choice to construct a common context for conformity in their identity formation in order to negate or neutralize created distinctions, which naturally God designed to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." Contrary to God's purpose, this people resolved for created diversity not to "be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen 11:1-4). On the one hand, they correctly assumed that human distinctions should not be defining for human identity. But, on the other hand, human constructed distinctions biased their lens from seeing the purpose of God's created distinctions. Their biased lens evolved from the workings of reductionism underlying human identity formation. Therefore, God took counter action to dispel the false hope composing their ontological simulation and functional illusion (Gen 11:5-9).

The model constructed at Babel has evolved and effectively been replicated for survival by diverse peoples, tribes and nations. Each of them has exerted diverse means (including coercion) to achieve the conformity of constituents, much of which have been consequential for their experience of belonging in their so-called identity. To be certain, in observations of this global narrative, what's witnessed is not a mere phenomenon but the existential reality of the global human condition evolving. Most important for our immediate purpose, what's witnessed is also the evolving condition of diverse Christians and churches composing global Christianity. Thus, without exception, all Christians and churches must examine the basis for their identity formation and understand how conformity in a comparative system operates for their fitness in faith practice.

Identity formation in any comparative system creates a nexus between conformity and **competition**—the unavoidable competition to climb up the human scale measured by that comparative system. Competition is the unspoken rule in the comparative process that elevates certain ascribed or achieved distinctions while diminishing other distinctions in their value. Consequently, this ladder of success is fragmenting for persons and relationships, as well as in their collective gatherings, because the formation of identity gets skewed and the identity formed is distorted when competition (explicitly or

implicitly) pervades the comparative process. Yet, competition is the accepted or deferred-to practice that is participated in either by choice (even preference) or by default—which includes unspoken participation by Christians and churches. This competition prevailed among Jesus’ disciples, who actively pursued the elevated distinction as “the greatest” (as discussed earlier), with no awareness or understanding that their competition fragments their persons and relationships.

This existential reality is unavoidable and thus undeniable for all Christians and churches: The dynamic of competition is the prevailing human function inherent in the human condition, which is implanted in the identity formation of persons, peoples, tribes and nations that are “scattered over the whole earth.” The diversity of global Christianity competing, as well as conforming, scatters distinctions all over the world, contrary to the primary relational purpose to “fill the earth,” thereby fragmenting persons and relationships, individually and collectively. The roots of the competing comparative process evolving from the primordial garden scattered quickly as Cain competed with Abel (Gen 4:1-12). Soon thereafter, we witness this evolving with the survival concerns of God’s early covenant people, which evolved more diversely in the initial tribes comprising the people of God.

This competitive dynamic invariably had consequential relational results, the variable condition of which continues to evolve globally over the modern world. This consequential competition reverberates in the pervasive and intrusive dynamic of globalization²; and this is amplified exponentially on the internet by intense fragmentary engagement in social media.³ Moreover, the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) is casting a dark cloud over the future of the world⁴; in modernity, the competitive comparative process has become analogous to a generic code, using algorithms to solve survival issues by making virtual the ontological simulations and functional illusions intrinsic to the comparative process.

The normative global reality that has evolved with the competitive dynamic is this:

Identity becomes the most viable only when it is formed in, by and for the comparative process; all other identities are relegated to a secondary measured value or are rendered simply irrelevant.

² Vinoth Ramachandra puts globalization in a bigger picture for Christians in *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

³ Andy Crouch challenges Christians to repurpose this technology in *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017).

⁴ For a discussion of AI’s progress, see Jason Thacker, *The Age of AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Thrive, 2020).

The urgent priority in this process, then, even for Christians and churches, is conformity-for-relevance. And what keeps evolving in the global community is this reflexive dynamic:

Conformity enables competition while competition reinforces conforming, and the fragmenting effects of all this repeatedly sustains the global human condition.

The roots of this identity formation have repercussions on belonging, impacting *where* one belongs and *who* one belongs to. This existential condition underlies global diversity, from its beginning to the present. Thus, to emphasize again, this is not about global situations merely to manage, but a prevailing global problem needing to be solved principally by Christians and churches in their primary identity rooted in God's creation (both original and new).

Alternative Roots for Identity Formation

The diverse identities of person, peoples, tribes and nations composing the global context are unlikely a version of the diversity that was ordained to "fill the earth." As "fruitful" as many appear and however they "multiply," the diversity that God created goes deeper than evident in these diverse identities. Furthermore, the diversity of God's people is not clearly distinguished in global Christianity, because the identity of "a multitude of nations" constituted by the covenant relationship ordained by God (Gen 17:1-5) has become opaque. The opacity of identity formation rooted in the comparative process will not be cleared out until the deepest roots of identity are made transparent, and thereby become the primary alternative by choice.

Jesus made definitive this choice facing his followers: "Unless your righteousness—that is, the whole of who, what and how you are in relationship with God—exceeds that of *the evolved diversity of God's people*, you will *not belong to God's family*" (Mt 5:20). He made this unequivocally clear in order to distinguish the deepest roots of their identity for the primary alternative to the opaque identity prevailing in their faith context. This choice now intrusively challenges Christians and churches in their diversity of choice.

For a new and whole identity formation to unfold involves the necessary functional convergence of identity with righteousness and human ontology in a dynamic process based on God's grace. This is a necessary fundamental in order to go beyond the reductionism exposed (deconstructed) by Jesus to be whole contrary to fragmentary practice in opaque simulations and illusions of righteousness. This integral process, summarized in the Sermon on the Mount, is composed by the following:

To go beyond reductionism (Mt 5:20), our righteousness necessitates an identity of clarity and depth (5:13-16), which requires the ontology of the whole person; and, in reflexive action, the significance of this process necessitates righteousness to make it functional, which further needs wholeness of identity for our righteousness ongoingly to go beyond the simulations and illusions from reductionism; therefore, this must by nature involve the human ontology created in the image and likeness of the whole of God—all of which are constituted by the whole of God’s relational work of grace, functionally signifying the relational basis of whose we are.

This process of integrally interrelated function is crucial for our understanding and practice, which Jesus illuminated in the beatitudes to establish his followers in his call to be redefined, transformed and made whole.

Our identity serves the key defining purpose that highlights who and what we are, and thus how to function. Just as the early disciples struggled with their identity—vacillating between what they were in the broader collective context and who they were as Jesus’ followers—the formation of our identity is critical for following Jesus in order both to establish qualitative distinction from common function and to distinguish who, what and how we are with others in any broader context.

Despite pervasive identity crises that seem to be a routine part of identity formation, Jesus focused on two major issues making our identity problematic (Mt 5:13-16). These directly interrelate to what has been discussed in this chapter. The two major issues are:

1. The first issue is *ambiguity* in not presenting our persons in our true identity as “light” (5:14-15). Identity becomes ambiguous when what we present of ourselves is different from what and who we truly are. Or this ambiguity occurs when what we present is a variable mixture of two or more competing identities—a hybrid common among Christians. Light may vary in its intensity but there is no ambiguity about its presence. Identity is problematic when it does not have this functional distinction or clarity in relational involvement with others in the surrounding context (v.16). Instead, this identity becomes opaque in the presentation of self, which interrelates to the second major issue.
2. The second issue is *shallowness* in our identity. This identity, for example, may have the correct appearance in our presentation but not the substantive qualitative significance—just like the salt without its substantive quality (v.13). This lack of depth is both an ontological issue and a functional issue. Salt is always salt; unlike dimming a light, salt cannot be reduced in its saline property and still be salt. Merely the correct appearance of an identity neither signifies the qualitative function nor constitutes the ontological inner-out depth of the person presented.

Shallowness is guaranteed when we define ourselves by an outer-in approach as opposed to an inner-out process; subtle examples of this approach include defining ourselves merely by the roles we perform, the titles we have, even by the spiritual gifts we have and/or exercise, whether as church leaders or in a supportive role.

Christian identity, namely as Jesus' followers, must have both *clarity* and *depth*: first, to establish qualitative distinction from prevailing common function (notably from reductionism) in surrounding contexts, and, secondly, to distinguish the qualitative significance of our whole person (what, who and how we are) in relationship with others. These two identity issues of ambiguity and shallowness, therefore, need our honest attention and have to be addressed in our ongoing practice, if our righteousness is going to function beyond reductionism.

In these metaphors of the light and the salt, Jesus was unequivocal about the identity of his followers: "You are..." (*eimi*, the verb of existence), and thus all his followers are accountable *to be* (not merely to do) "the light of the world" and "the salt of the earth." Other than as a preservative in the ancient world, it is not clear what specific function the salt metaphor serves—perhaps as peace (cf. Mk 9:50). But as a seasoning ("becomes tasteless," *moraine*, v.13, cf. Col 4:6), this metaphor better suggests simply the distinct identity of Jesus' followers that cannot be reduced and still be "salt"; and, in further distinction, who cannot be uninvolved with others (e.g. keeping relational distance) and still qualitatively both reflect the vulnerable involvement of Jesus as the Truth and Life and illuminate the relational Way as "light." This is not an optional identity, and perhaps not an identity of choice, but it is unmistakably the identity that comes with the reciprocal relationship with Jesus and the function as his followers.

Yet, in existential function identity formation can either become ambiguous or have clarity, can remain shallow or have depth. The identity formation from following a popular Jesus, for example, becomes ambiguous because the Christology lacks the qualitative significance of the whole of God and also lacks the qualitative depth uniquely distinguished from common function. Consequently, the Christian subculture this generates becomes shallow, without the depth of the whole person in the image of the whole of God nor the primacy of intimate relationships together in likeness of the Trinity; this is not only a functional issue but affects human ontology at its roots.

The integrity of identity as Jesus' followers is a relationship-specific process engaged in the practice of the contrary culture clearly distinguished from prevailing cultures (including popular Christian subcultures), which Jesus embodied definitively in his sanctified life and practice and outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. Clarity and depth of his followers' identity is rooted integrally in (1) *what* we are in the progression of functional reciprocal relationship with Jesus, and thus (2) *who* we become intimately connected with the Father in his family together, as we cooperatively work with the Spirit

in (3) *how* we ongoingly function—all on the basis of the Trinity’s irreducible and nonnegotiable relational terms.

The clarity of the light and the depth of the salt are the relational outcome of this ongoing intimate relationship with the Trinity. Any identity formed while maintaining distance from this relationship (which happens even in church) or while competing with this relationship (which happens even in Christian subcultures) diminishes both the fundamental identity of being the whole of God’s very own (“the light”), as well as deteriorates its qualitative substance (“the salt”) to make belonging elusive. Certainly, then, the integrity of who and what is presented to others is crucial to the identity of Jesus’ followers. This core issue makes evident the importance of Jesus interrelating identity with righteousness in conjoint function for the integral relational outcome. While identity gives us the outline of who, what and how we are, righteousness is the functional process that existentially practices what, who and how we are. Identity and righteousness are conjoined to present a whole person in congruence (ontologically and functionally) to what, who and how that person is—not only in Christ but in the whole of God, the Trinity. Righteousness is necessary so that his followers can be counted on to be those authentic persons—nothing less and no substitutes, and thus without opacity.

In the beginning of human creation, the Word was present and actively involved, so that “All *humans* came into being through him, and without him not one *human* came into being” (Jn 1:1-3). This is the Word who embodied “the image of the living God” (Col 1:15) to restore human ontology and function to the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity (the whole of God). Therefore, the embodied Word solely distinguished the fundamental roots for human identity formation to be constituted in the Trinity’s image and likeness, which he made definitive for any and all who truly “follow *me*, my whole person embodied from inner out.” The Word’s fundamental roots are outlined in his manifesto for discipleship (the intro to his Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5:1-12).

Identity Formation Rooted in the Word

For the wholeness of his followers, Jesus made definitive the process of identity composition necessary for the clarity and depth of our identity to emerge, grow and mature. The identity of the Word’s embodied new creation and function of new wine (signifying whole ontology and function, cf. Lk 5:33-39)—of persons redefined in who they are and transformed in what they are and how they function—involves a process of identity formation that distinguishes this identity from common incomplete and fragmentary identities in human context, even shaped by the human brain. The outline of this process was clearly distinguished in the beginning of Jesus’ major discourse for his

followers. It is vital to keep in mind that the context for his major discourse always remains in his integral call to “follow me” and *be* whole, thus must be maintained within his call for whole understanding (*synesis*). We need to see this outline, therefore, distinguished further and deeper than how we commonly interpret the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12).

When our identity adequately distinguishes who, what and how we are, there is opportunity to experience wholeness and the satisfaction to be whole—which Jesus points to in the beatitudes with “blessed” (*makarios*, fully satisfied). The problem, however, with most identities in general and Christian identities in particular is that these identities only inform us of who and what we *should* be, and thus how we should act. This merely defines what we need to do in order to be associated with that identity without defining our integral ontology. The process then becomes trying to measure up to that identity so that we can achieve definition for our self—an ongoing effort to erase any identity deficit (i.e. from a comparative process). The theological and functional implications of such a process for Christian identity are twofold: First, it counters and hereby nullifies God’s relational work of grace, and then in its place, it substitutes constructing human ontology from self-determination, even with good intentions of serving Christ.

As we discuss identity formation, it seems necessary to distinguish identity formation of the new creation/wine (signifying whole ontology and function) from identity *construction*. Identity construction describes the human process of quantifying an identity for a measure of uniformity or conformity to some standard or template in the surrounding context (cf. Gen 11:1-4). New wine identity formation involves a qualitative growth and maturation in a reciprocal relational process with God for wholeness (cf. Gen 17:1-2), which Jesus made vulnerably distinct from the surrounding context (Lk 5:33-39). It is problematic if any identity constructions substitute for or are imposed on this identity formation. Therefore, since the ontology of the whole person is a vital necessity for the identity of Jesus’ followers as the new wine, it may require identity deconstruction of many Christian identities to get to this ontology—a necessary process of redemptive change composing Jesus’ call. While any identity deconstruction would not be on the basis of postmodernist assumptions, it has a similar purpose to discredit ontological simulation and functional illusion. Yet, this would not be merely to expose reductionism but to go beyond it for the relational whole of God distinguishing new ontology and function—the necessary process of transformation composing Jesus’ call. The interrelated process describes Jesus’ major relational discourse with his disciples and the whole context of the Sermon on the Mount.

The full context of the Word’s outline of identity formation must always be maintained, because Christian identity without righteousness is problematic, rendered by Jesus as insignificant and useless (5:13). Yet, righteousness without wholeness of identity is equally problematic, which Jesus made a necessity to go beyond reductionism (6:1).

The latter often is an issue unknowingly or inadvertently by how “the light” and “the salt” are interpreted. “You are the salt...the light” tend to be perceived merely as missional statements from Jesus of what to do. While this has certainly challenged many Christians historically to serve in missions, it has promoted practices and an identity which do not go beyond the ontological simulations and functional illusions of reductionism. By taking Jesus’ words out of the context of the fundamental whole of his major discourse, they fail to grasp the significance of Jesus’ call to his followers—the extent and depth of which Jesus summarized in this major discourse and increasingly made evident in his whole and uncommon life and practice.

The seriousness of the issues of clarity and depth in our life and practice cannot be overstated. The alternative common in Christian practices of making opaque our identity as “the light” is a critical issue directly related to Jesus’ warning to be acutely aware of functioning with the perceptual-interpretive framework of the reductionists (Lk 12:1, cf. Mt 16:6). This approach (alternative *didache*, Mt 16:12) involved presenting a performance of a role (*viz. hypokrisis*), that is, essentially the process of taking on an identity lacking clarity of who, what and how one truly is—which in his discourse Jesus addressed, for example, in the practice of the law and relationships with others (5:21-48; 7:1-5). Yet, as noted earlier of Peter’s *hypokrisis*, this practice does not preclude the subtlety of a process that could be engaged with good intentions, even inadvertently. Dual identities (e.g., one for different contexts at church and at work) and composite identities (subordinating “the light”) are commonly accepted Christian practices which demonstrate the mindset of reductionism.

Moreover, any identity rooted only in the practice of propositional truth and the moral-ethical content of the law, without being relationally connected with the Truth (cf. “the vine and the branches”) and without ongoing intimate involvement with his whole person (“remain in me,” Jn 15), also does not have the identity integrity of Jesus’ followers. Such disembodied (or de-relationalized) identity lacks depth, despite correct appearances. Any identity of “the salt” without its substantive quality is directly interrelated to another critical issue of persons basically undergoing only limited change in the practice of their faith (*viz. metaschematizo*, outward change), which was addressed by Jesus (e.g. in Mt 6:1-18) and continues to be a current problem for conversion-sanctification issues. No amount of effort in this outer-in approach to what and who we are will be formative of the qualitative change from inner out (i.e. *metamorphoo*, transformation) of the whole person, because that is the nature of *metaschematizo* and a shallow identity. This distinction of *metamorphoo* from *metaschematizo* is vital for identity formation (cf. Rom 12:2). Where reductionism prevails, there is no depth of identity and relationship with God, despite even considerable identification and involvement with his truth, law and gospel, all of which have been disembodied and de-relationalized.

This reductionism further involves functionally substituting for the whole person, which has crucial consequences for the ontology of the person. Whenever the perceived ontology of the human person (created in the image of God) is functionally different qualitatively from the whole of God (whose image the person supposedly bears), there is reductionism of the human ontology. This reduced ontology is made evident when the person functions relationally apart (or at some distance) from others (even when serving them), without the primacy of intimate relationships necessary to be whole, thus reflecting a person disembodied from the relational nature of God and from God's whole as signified in the Trinity. In other words, who, what and how this person is never goes beyond reductionism—remaining within the limits of its ontological simulation and functional illusion.

Jesus' declarative statements about the clarity of the light and the depth of the salt are definitive for our identity. Yet, they are not a challenge about what to do; such a challenge would not help us go beyond reductionism but further embed us in it. His definitive statements of our identity are an ontological call about *what* and *who* to be; that is, the call to be redefined, transformed and made whole in the ontology of the person created in the image of the whole of God, thus also belonging as *whose* we are. Conjointly, his definitive statements are a functional call about *how* to be, that is, called as whole persons to function together in the relationships necessary to be whole in likeness of the Trinity.

The beatitudes taken together establish the whole identity of his followers. I affirm that rather than each beatitude understood independently, they constitute interdependent functional characteristics of the fundamental new identity for what, who and how his followers are. Joined together in dynamic function, the beatitudes form the outline of the integral process composing the whole identity formation distinguishing those he called out (*ek*) of the common's human contextualization (as he prayed, Jn 17:14-16). Not surprisingly, Jesus began the process by focusing immediately on the ontology of the person and giving us no basis to define our person by what we do or have. Person-consciousness is the only lens that he makes definitive.

Though Jesus was not explicit in the beginning of his discourse about the irreducible importance of the heart, the function of the heart underlies everything he said and all that we engage in (e.g. Mt 5:28; 6:21). The innermost person, signified by the heart, constitutes the qualitative distinguishing the person, such that we cannot assess what and who a person is based merely on aspects from the outer-in self—notably what we do and have in self-consciousness (cf. Mt 15:10-20). Yet, since the latter perception is a prevailing perceptual-interpretive framework and lens for human ontology, whole Christian identity is composed essentially by beginning with the process of redefinition of the person from the inner out. When we functionally address redefining our own person from the inner out, however, we encounter a major difficulty. Once we get past any

resistance to a vulnerable look at ourselves from inner out, what is it that we honestly see of our person as we look inside? This can become an issue we may rather dance around.

In the first three beatitudes (Mt 5:3-5) Jesus provides us with the irreplaceable steps in the process composing our identity as the new wine, that is, to functionally establish his followers in his call to be redefined, transformed and made whole, and therefore be clearly distinguished from reductionism. Anything less and any substitutes for these steps will result in a contrary identity (e.g. a hybrid) and likely lead to an identity crisis.

First Beatitude: When we honestly look inside at our person, Jesus said the natural effect would be realization of the condition signified by “poor in spirit” (v.3). This condition is deeper than an identity deficit from a comparative process—for example, feeling bad or less about our self. “Poor” (*ptochos*) denotes abject poverty and utter helplessness; therefore this person’s only recourse is to beg. Just to be poor (*penes*) is a different condition from *ptochos* because this person can still, for example, go out to work for food. *Penes* may have little but *ptochos* has nothing at all. *Ptochos*, Jesus immediately identifies, is the true condition of our evolved humanity, which precludes self-determination and justification generated from a false optimism about our self (Gen 3:4-6). This is human ontology after the primal garden, yet not the full ontology of the whole person that still includes the viable image of God. Without the latter, *ptochos* would be a worthless person, and this is not Jesus’ focus on the ontology of the person. Nevertheless, *ptochos* does prevail in human ontology, which is inescapable with false optimism and clearly makes evident the need for God’s relational work of grace. This juxtaposition is what we need to accept both about our person and from God—not only theologically but functionally because anything less than *ptochos* counters God’s grace, for example, by efforts to measure up, succeed or advance in a comparative process on the basis of self-determination shaped by what we do and/or have. By necessity, however, the *ptochos* person ongoingly appropriates God’s relational work of grace to relationally belong to the whole of God’s family, as Jesus said, “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Yet, *ptochos* only begins the process of forming this new identity.

This irreplaceable beatitude forms the basis for answering God’s penetrating question “Where are you as a person?”—a response from our innermost, without deflection to or enhancement by secondary identity markers. Those markers keep our innermost unexposed in an opaque identity maintaining relational distance, just as the persons in the primordial garden—“I hid *and kept relational distance from you; the situation and she made me do it*” (Gen 3:10,12). Most of us are resistant to operate with any self-definition of *ptochos*, especially if we define ourselves by what we do or have and depend on these secondary markers for our primary identity. We may be able to accept this “spiritually” in an isolated identity but for practical everyday function in the real world, to live with this self-definition is problematic. While any alternatives and

substitutes masking our true condition may make us feel less vulnerable, we will never be able to dance completely around the truth of our condition and this reality of human ontology—despite any facts we can present to reinforce these illusions and simulations.

In this first critical step in the formation of the new identity distinguishing his followers, Jesus provided no place or option for self-determination. Who and what we are as his followers is determined only by the function of reciprocal relationship with him as whose we are; and how we are in relationship together is only on his whole relational terms, which constitutes the relationship and thus our identity in God's grace. By this, Jesus discloses unmistakably that God's grace demands the vulnerability of nothing less than the *ptochos* existing in our person (the honesty of heart without opacity) for ongoing relationship together to be whole—the same honesty of heart he strategically disclosed vulnerably to the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:23-24). Without this innermost vulnerability our person does not open and extend our heart to make intimate relational connection with the heart of God to belong to God's family (“kingdom of God is theirs”), which reflects the self-definition and relational error by the rich young ruler (Mk 10:17-22). Therefore, no substitutes for *ptochos*—regardless of how acceptable in Christian practice—can serve as a basis for identity formation rooted in the Word.

Second Beatitude: Since the ontology of the person (from inner out) is never static, Jesus extends its dynamic function fundamentally in this next irreplaceable step. When we are indeed *ptochos*, our honest response to our true condition is to “mourn” (*pentheo*, lament, grieve, deep sadness, v.4). If we accept our condition as *ptochos*—and not merely perceive it as *penes*, that is, a deficit needing to be overcome—then mourning would be the natural response of our heart. Yet, too often we insulate ourselves from such experience, though unknowingly we may get depressed. The tension involves issues of self-worth, which revolve around *ptochos* in terms of how we see and feel about ourselves. We tend not to recognize this matter because our heart is unaware of experiencing *pentheo*, likely only feeling insecure of how others perceive us. Of course, we can ignore or reject others' perceptions by our overestimated self-assessment, which renders these beatitudes inapplicable to our identity.

In this second critical step in the process of identity formation, the person is taken further and deeper toward being redefined, transformed and made whole. This necessitates the functional ontology of the whole person, contrary to a reductionist practice that insulates the heart or keeps it at a distance of diminished involvement. The dynamic necessary is to open our heart and expose the *pentheo* by fully acknowledging, admitting and confessing our *ptochos*—which may not only be about one's own condition but also the evolved condition of humanity in general. The extent of this vulnerability can not only depress but also create despair, that is, if left in this condition.

The ironic influence of reductionism on human ontology is the simulation and illusion to be strong, self-determined, self-sufficient, and accordingly not in need of redefinition and transformation. This prevailing condition also subtly pervades Christian contexts, which then evolves in diverse adaptations in order to “survive” as fit or fittest. In contrast and conflict, persons who *pentheo* address reality without reducing the person, yet not in self-pity but by vulnerably opening their whole person to God and not just a fragmented spirit (as in only the soul). In this vulnerable relational process, their whole person is presented to God for comfort, healing, cleansing, forgiveness, and deeper involvement, so they can experience God’s intimate response—as Jesus assured “they will be comforted” (*parakaleo*, term used for every kind of call to a person that is intended to produce a particular effect).

As Jesus further relationally disclosed ongoingly in his sanctified uncommon identity, the whole of God is relationally vulnerable to our humanity, and we must (*dei*) relationally reciprocate in likeness with what and who we are in our innermost. Functional intimacy in relationship by its created nature involves hearts open to each other and coming together. Intimacy with God, therefore, necessitates by nature that our heart functions in its true humanity (as “in spirit and truth,” Jn 4:24)—nothing less and no substitutes. The process from the first beatitude to the second engages this qualitative relational involvement that Jesus calls us to experience *parakaleo* in intimate relationship together. And these two irreplaceable steps involve the relational moments we extend our person to God the most openly and hereby give him the best opportunity to be with us—*parakaleo* not from outer in but for our ontology inner out as the only relational outcome.

Since identity is rooted in whose we are (e.g. culturally or socially), its formation is contingent on the ongoing function of this vulnerable intimate relationship. Belonging to God involves an irreducible and nonnegotiable relationship for our identity’s further and deeper growth. While *pentheo* defines only a degree of experience relative to each person—no set quantity of sackcloth and ashes—God does not let us remain in a state of gloom and perhaps fall into depression or despair. God’s thematic relational action never unilaterally allows for human ontology to remain in reductionism but only functions to make us whole. As Jesus did with tax collectors, a prostitute and others lacking wholeness, he extends God’s relational work of grace to us in our helplessness, pursues us vulnerably in the poverty of our humanity, redeems us (the *parakaleo* mainly from the common’s enslavement of reductionism) back to his family (on the relational terms of the Uncommon), therefore transforms our whole person for intimate relationship with the Father, and formally by covenant (through adoption) constitutes us as his very own children permanently belonging to the whole of God’s family (“theirs is the kingdom of heaven”). This relational process defines God’s thematic relational response only as **family love**—the vulnerable process of relational involvement based on the whole of God’s relational work of grace. The relational outcome of the Word’s vulnerable relational process continues as the basis for God’s new creation family to experience now

even further and deeper in whole relationship together as the church until eschatological completion of God's whole. This operationalizes the relational progression constituted by Jesus in his tactical shift of direct face-to-face relational connection for the primacy of relationship together, the ongoing function of which he summarized in this major discourse to compose the new identity of the persons in his call.

Third Beatitude: The experiential truth of this relational reality is not usually functional in a linear process as it is reflexive (back and forth). God's thematic relational response and ongoing vulnerable involvement with our created humanity and evolved condition, most vulnerably disclosed in the incarnation, illuminate the experiential truth to demonstrate this relational reality: the faithfulness and righteousness of the whole of God whom we can count on to trust intimately in reciprocal relational process—the primary relational work (singular) of trusting him whom God has sent (Jn 6:29). As we go up and down, in and out in our *ptochos* and *pentheo*, the initial relational experiences of God's family love rightfully conclude with only one understanding of our person. This understanding forms the core function of the redefined self, the new identity of those persons transformed in Christ.

In the interrelated critical steps involved in this process of self-understanding, Jesus defined the core function forming the identity of his followers: “the meek” (*praus*, v.5). While the sense of meekness should not be separated from *ptochos*, *praus* (*prautes*, noun) denotes to be gentle—that is, not hard or resistant to live as one truly is. *Praus* involves heart function conjoined with overt behavior to demonstrate what and who one is from inner out. Contrary to most perceptions of “meek,” this function is not timid weakness but humble strength and truth of character based on one's true condition. How this specifically would be demonstrated or expressed can be defined best by the various behaviors of Jesus with others. Whatever its form in a particular situation, the most significant issue is that there is no lie or illusion about one's person in being meek (including being humble).

Yet, meekness is not simply a characteristic of the Christian person by which to be defined and thus to behave, for example, as an identity marker. Though commonly seen and practiced in this way, this only simulates humility from outer in. Rather, most importantly for the whole person, it is a function of relationship both with God and with others. Being meek is a core function in relationship with God for two reasons: (1) with no illusions about self-determination and justification (*ptochos*) and with response to one's *pentheo*, the only basis and ongoing functional base for the person's life and practice is the whole of God's relational work of grace—the depth of relational significance composing *sola gratio*; and (2) on this basis, relationship together is only on God's terms, hence irreducible and nonnegotiable by human persons. God does not work

by any human agenda, notably for self-determination and justification. Being meek is this core function involving the relational process of turning away from the falsehood in self-autonomy and entrusting one's whole person to the grace of God—the depth of relational significance composing *sola fide*. This is basic not only for conversion but for ongoing sanctification, though never on the basis of unilateral relationship controlled by God but only for reciprocal relationship.

Furthermore, who and what this meek-humble person is and how this person functions also must by nature be involved in relationship with others in two qualitatively distinguished ways: (1) With God's grace as the basis for the person, there is no basis for comparison with others, for climbing any human ladder or one-upmanship in competition, and accordingly no basis for stratified relationships that reduce the whole person to fragmentary distinctions, but rather a qualitative loving involvement with others (without employing reductionist distinctions) in the relationships necessary for wholeness; and (2) therefore this relational involvement allows no basis for the function of individualism, which gives priority to the individual agenda and reduces the primacy of the intimate relationships necessary to be God's whole. *Praus* then is a clear integral function only of ontological humility, relational humility as well as epistemic humility (cf. Paul's critique of the church, 1 Cor 4:7; 8:1-2).

Meekness is the direct relational outcome of the first two irreplaceable steps (beatitudes) fundamentally signifying the above functions of relationships. There is no theological or functional basis for any other self-assessment, regardless of how much one does, has or accomplishes. Yet, we encounter difficulty when lies (e.g. alternative facts) or illusions (e.g. alternative or virtual realities) keep us from facing our *ptochos* or experiencing our *pentheo*. In strong contrast, being meek also signifies a functional admission of one's enslavement—that is, not being free from some form of self-sufficiency (even in a collective context), self-determination (even with a theology of grace), or self-centeredness (even in acts of service), all composing self-consciousness—and one's need for redemption.

Jesus said the meek “will inherit the earth.” This is not a result of what they do but only a relational outcome constituted in relationship with Jesus and by his relational work of grace with the relational outcome of belonging to God's family. These beatitudes have roots in the promise from the OT covenant, yet Jesus was not taking us back into that context but extending and fulfilling God's thematic relational action. The meek's inheritance is not the earth per se (or land, cf. Ps 37:11), with a sense of redistribution for the poor and dispossessed. This inheritance is not about a place, situations or circumstances. This is about the distinguished context of God's whole and dwelling, the relational context in which their inheritance is the whole of God for relationship—just as it was for the OT priests and Levites (Nu 18:20, Dt 10:9).

The meek (as the poor in spirit, and so forth) are “blessed” (*makarioi*), that is, fully satisfied, because God is vulnerably present and intimately involved in their life—the relational outcome of God’s definitive blessing (Num 6:24-26). Therefore, this is about well-being and wholeness experienced as the relational outcome of God’s covenant love and faithfulness, of the embodied Word’s vulnerable grace and truth (Jn 1:14), that is, as with the Trinity who is intimately involved together in their “spirit and truth”—nothing less and no substitutes.

Thus, this blessed relational condition cannot be reduced merely to happiness about one’s situation and circumstances; everyday life is not reduced to our situations and circumstances. In this redefinition of self, the irreducible importance of our whole person (from inner out) and the nonnegotiable priority of intimate relationship together become the perceptual-interpretive framework for what we pay attention to. And the full relational significance of being *makarioi* is the ongoing relational outcome of these and the rest of the beatitudes in the integral process of new wine identity formation as the new creation.

These initial alternative roots formative for identity formation are in contrast to and conflict with the comparative process prevailing for identity formation. To counter this reductive human condition requires the resolve of a whole theological anthropology and the ongoing functional vulnerability of a strong view of sin, both of which are essential to expose the opacity of ontological simulations and functional illusions. This requires identity to be rooted in what is **uncommon** from what **common**-ly prevails, in order for “your righteousness to exceed that of the evolved diversity.” This essential distinction makes this uncommon identity to be distinguished as the *minority* in any and all surrounding human contexts—even for white Christians in the global North. Obviously, in a comparative system, such an identity would always be measured as less, whose value can never rise under those parameters. To live in such a common context is consequential for the existential reality of belonging, defining where one belongs and determining who one belongs to. This illuminates that the where and who of belonging is inseparable from identity, and that they always interact symbiotically to be the determinative key for persons and relationships. What emerges or evolves from this interaction is contingent on its context.

Forming Identity’s and Belonging’s Integral Context

Belonging can be a social and/or relational reality, and its existential condition depends on its surrounding context. Belonging, however, in that context must have a depth of qualitative significance in order to be satisfying for the whole person in relationship together—that is, unless persons defer and just conform to that context. Since

we all live in a sociocultural context, it is important to understand which side exerts the formative influence or determinative control over the other—our context or ourselves. The direction of influence and control is an ongoing problem for global Christianity to be distinguished from human diversity. And no matter the nature of the surrounding context, Christian diversity is accountable for the volitional choice that each diverse segment is responsible to exercise.

There is another reality in life that all of us encounter: When you are exposed to something long enough, it tends to be accepted as true even though originally it may not have been, or at least its validity was initially in question.⁵ Likewise, when Christians have heard a variation of the Good News long enough, it often becomes their accepted gospel even though the variation was, in effect, an alternative reality—perhaps fake news based on alternative facts. The reality we are faced with here is **the commonizing influence of human life** and its specific commonization of the gospel and its outcome of fragmenting disciples and their discipleship. In other words, the common existing in human life in general and in our surrounding context in particular has become the prevailing determinant shaping our practice if not our theology

There is a growing trend in theology today that affirms the diversity of biblical views in the global church. For example, this affirmation is highlighted in a recent issue of Fuller Theological Seminary's magazine, which the then provost, dean and biblical scholar Joel Green introduced with the following: "we bring ourselves, with all of the textures and hues and flourishes of our humanity, to the Bible. We inhabit Scripture in different ways. Scripture challenges us and encourages us in different ways." Green embraces this diversity with the conclusion: "Taken together, though—by the church across time and around the globe—we are drawn closer to hearing and understanding the big picture of what God is saying and doing through his Word."⁶

One of the theological benefits of listening to global voices is the chastening effect it has on Western theology, and the corrective efforts made on the West's imperialism in Christian theology and practice throughout the global church. On the other hand, there is a clarification and correction also needed for this diversity in order not to reflect, reinforce and repeat the same epistemological, hermeneutic, ontological and relational shortcomings that commonly compose Western theology and practice, both past and present. Before we can celebrate diversity in the global church, we must **(1)** be accountable for the biased influence we all exert from our particular surrounding contexts that has shaped us in the process of contextualization—**the contextualized bias**. Then,

⁵ See, for example, a recent study (working paper) from Yale University by Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone Cannon and David Rand, "Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News". Online: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2958246.

⁶ Joel B. Green, "Our Culturally Shaped Lenses" in *Fuller Magazine*, Issue #8, 2017, 3.

we must deeper still **(2)** be redeemed from the biased influence we all demonstrate from the common's reductionism composing the human context, which has had the subtle primacy to define our ontology and determine our function in the process of commonization—the **commonized bias**. The process of contextualization has been misunderstood in our theology and practice, and the process of commonization has been ignored or simply resigned to or accepted as an assumed reality. The consequence has been continued distortions rendered by our contextualized and commonized biases, the diverse views of which we cannot assume to be acceptable or appropriate different angles of God's big picture.

In the early contextualized history of God's people, divergent views already were evolving. On the one hand, God's people experienced trials and tribulations in their surrounding context, which formed a subtle contextualized bias because, for example, "outsiders defiled the dwelling place of your Name" (Ps 74:7, NIV). With their bias, on the other hand, they failed to perceive how their faith practice also essentially defiled God's dwelling place (as in Isa 29:13). "Defile" (*halal*) desecrates the holy distinctly by making it common, whereby the uncommon is not distinguished existentially. In their biased perceptual-interpretive lens, they didn't understand how they became commonized to bias their lens even more profoundly (e.g. Eze 5:11). Can you imagine how this commonized bias has evolved in the diversity of global Christianity?

In order to affirm any interpretation of Scripture emerging from a particular context, we must account for its contextualized bias and ensure that that bias has not gained primacy over God's relational context, and thereby gained hermeneutic (interpretive) control over the relational terms and process of God's Word. In God's communicative action disclosed by the embodied Word, the text of the Bible was never composed apart from God's relational context; and the nonnegotiable primacy of God's context always renders interpretation of the text contingent not on the diversity of readers but on the whole relational terms of God's relational process to engage us in relationship together. The presumed primacy given to any form of our contextualized bias prevents this relational connection with God to understand *what* and *who* God discloses in the human context, and *how* God is involved both with us and in the big picture—namely, the whole who, what and how of God constituting his righteousness. Most important, our commonized bias either limits or prevents us from seeing the full profile of God's face, and from experiencing the vulnerable presence and relational involvement of God face to face. How, then, can there be the relational outcome rather than a relational consequence?

Contrary to Green's assumption above, understanding God's big picture—the integrating process of *syniemi* (cf. Mk 8:17-21)—does not emerge from the global quantity of diverse interpretations; nor is this understanding gained from the sum of global diversity, a sum without the synergy of God's big picture. In his above introduction, Green uses Justo Gonzalez's metaphor of looking at a landscape for reading the Bible. Since we all see the landscape differently, seeing only parts of it without seeing

the whole landscape, Green insists on the need to take all the views together for the big picture. Yet, I assert that a landscape is an incongruent metaphor both for the face of God who is present and involved, and for what is necessary to have the full profile of God's face that composes the integral news of the whole gospel. The full profile of God's face in the big picture consists of neither various portraits nor a collection of snapshots that could be taken from the Bible. All of us see the same face if we indeed see God without the control of our bias; we may not all emphasize or like the same features of the Face but we still see the same Face. As with viewing any person, if we don't see the same Face we are in effect viewing another God—whom we cannot count on to be “the same yesterday and today and forever *for all of us in the faith*” (Heb 13:8).

We all certainly are not alike and have distinct differences either created or evolved. This diverse condition nevertheless still involves only secondary aspects of our identity, aspects which are typically expressed by what signify **‘the veil’ of our identity**—the prevailing opaque identity of human life. To be involved, however, in relationship together with the Face in the primacy of face to face requires the veil of all our secondary differences to be removed, so that “all of us with unveiled faces...are being transformed into the same image *and likeness of the Trinity for face-to-face relationship together*” (as Paul made definitive, 2 Cor 3:18). As long as the veil of our differences remains, we do not have the relational connection to know and understand the full profile of the Trinity's presence and involvement, nor are we in our persons, relationships and churches transformed into the Trinity's image and likeness. And, in spite of any avoidance or denial of the existing reality of the veil, the inescapable relational consequences are fragmentary theology and practice in the condition of reduced ontology and function. Even then, these consequences are likely engaged in ontological simulations and functional illusions that are presumed to be correct and significant but are not on the same relational path as the embodied Word, and thus that in effect reflect, reinforce and sustain the human relational condition.

In other words, therefore, we cannot affirm any interpretation of Scripture until this clarification and correction are made by the whole relational terms and process of the Word, whose ongoing relational outcome puts the process of contextualization into its primary context and exposes the process of commonization for its transformation to wholeness. What integrally unfolds to negate the bias *for* (as in affirming) the common is the distinguished bias *against* the common—that is, **the distinguishing bias** with-in *the uncommon*.

The bias for the common is most evident in an underlying theological anthropology that subtly defines our persons and determines our relationships by reduced ontology and function. Reduced ontology and function is the common condition prevailing in all human contexts, without exception, and this inclusiveness is seductive or at least susceptible to being accepted as the norm even among Christians throughout the global church. This bias has been able to be sustained because underlying our reduced

theological anthropology is a weak view of sin that does not encompass what Jesus saved us *from*. This inadequate view, which is the same lens underlying common views of diversity in the church, does not acknowledge or cannot recognize the full scope of sin in its evolving counter-relational workings of reductionism. Therefore, this bias commonizes our ontology and function to the existing comparative measures of our human contexts.

Thus, the perception of global Christianity's diversity must recognize this existential reality encompassing all contexts. Each diverse context has its own secondary variation of this reduced condition, but all contexts have in common this underlying reduced ontology and function that define their persons and determine their relationships in the common's fragmentary terms contrary to the uncommon's whole terms. There is no basis for affirmation of diversity in the global church as long as this bias for the common exists; and there will be no celebration of the global church until this commonized bias has been transformed to the distinguishing bias *with* and *in* the Uncommon.

Forming the Uncommon Context

God declared, not to inform us but to clarify, correct and challenge us: "You thought that I was one just like yourself" (Ps 50:21). God exposed this alternative or virtual reality among his people, which continues to exist today, not explicitly in our theology but implicitly in our practice. The essential reality is that "I am holy" (*qādôsh*, Lev 11:44), who is separate from what is common and thus distinctly set apart from the common. Therefore, God is vulnerably present only as uncommon and is relationally involved only by God's wholeness. Anything less and any substitutes from human shaping make the whole-ly (contraction of whole and holy) God's presence and involvement indistinguishable. Forming God's identity in our common images has unavoidable relational consequences, notably experiencing the relational reality and outcome of God's definitive blessing for his family (Num 6:24-26). The whole profile of God's holy face is distinguished by nothing less and no substitutes.

The prevailing alternative reality reconstructs this essential reality with what is common, thereby reversing the basis for the reality of God and his people in effect with alternative facts (as in Ps 50:9-13). That is, the issue in this effort is not necessarily to "be like God" (as in the primordial garden, Gen 3:5) but rather this two-fold dynamic: (1) Shape God and relationship together subtly in our terms (perhaps in our image), and (2) determine our person as Jesus' disciples and our life in discipleship indirectly through the bias of our terms. The insurmountable difference that God magnifies is that God is whole and uncommon (whole-ly) in ontology and function, while the terms of our ontology and function are fragmentary and common.

The whole-ly God's presence and involvement are distinguished only by the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes. Our terms subtly engage in **the reverse dynamic of anything less and any substitutes**, which is assumed by our underlying bias influenced by the common. This commonized bias, for example, was evident when Samuel picked out the successor to lead God's kingdom; but the LORD clarified and corrected him with the essential reality that "*whole-ly God does not see as humans see and give priority accordingly*" (1 Sam 16:6-7). In technical terms, our bias presumes that God sees and thinks analogously to a human algorithm, which we then can duplicate by our individual and/or collective efforts. This bias emerged from the beginning of human history and set into motion the reverse dynamic of anything less and any substitutes for God's whole (Gen 3:5-7). Our terms today are merely modern substitutes, which at best can only simulate God's dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes with illusions in our theology and practice. The difference in these opposing dynamics was clearly demonstrated between Mary and the other disciples, and this also clarifies, corrects and challenges the reality of our identity as disciples in our discipleship (see Jn 12:1-8; Mk 14:3-9).

Therefore, God unmistakably distinguished the uncommon as incompatible with the common and thus as incongruent in the common. On this basis, it is imperative that we "*be uncommon for I am uncommon*" (Lev 11:44)—set apart from the common by being distinguished with-in the Uncommon. This clarification and correction critically composes the distinguishing bias *with* and *in* the Uncommon, who challenges the identity of who, what and how we are in order to be incompatible with the common and incongruent in the common—rather than an identity "just like yourself."

To be compatible *with* the Uncommon and congruent *in* the uncommon of God is determined only by the whole relational terms of God's relational process. This means that to be uncommon (or holy) is not about *perfection*—as in spiritually, morally, ethically, and thereby to misunderstand sanctification—but *connection*, that is, relational connection that is compatible with the Uncommon because it is congruent in the uncommon of God. When perfection is integrated with being sanctified, it then has an integral place in our practice to be holy and also whole (inseparably whole-ly); but its theology must not be composed with a commonized bias of idealized notions, which includes such notions about righteousness.

The book of Hebrews discipleship manifesto clarifies that the relational progression of Jesus' relational work has sanctified us in the uncommon (Heb 10:10); and the relational outcome of this relational progression is to "make perfect" (*teleioo*) "those who are being made *uncommon*" (Heb 10:14, NIV). *Teleioo* means to complete the relational purpose of Jesus' relational work, which is fulfilled by wholeness in relationship together. The whole-ly relational process is the only way, truth and means to this relational outcome of *teleioo*. In his manifesto for discipleship, Jesus made

imperative for our practice the relational work to “be *complete, mature [teleios]*” in likeness of how our whole-ly Father is present and involved in uncommon love (Mt 5:45-48). His relational imperative, then, for all disciples is to be whole and uncommon in our relational involvement of family love just as our Father is, in order to distinguish our identity as his daughters and sons belonging in family together. Therefore, perfection is always secondary to the primacy of relational connection with the Uncommon. Yet, this relational connection only happens with-in the Uncommon, which composes the primacy of relationship together distinguished only by the integral relational terms, language, context and process of the whole-ly God.

When Christians are not misguided by misunderstanding perfection, there typically is a common assumption Christians make about relationship with God: Because of God’s grace there is room for our imperfection, and thus there is space to exercise our personal interests, desires and other related terms; likewise, since God is loving and forgiving, there is flexibility in relationship together—if not presuming the relationship is negotiable. Jesus had a contrary approach to such differences. To Peter, Jesus said that he functioned as Satan, because he focused on the common at the expense of the uncommon (Mt 16:23). Jesus added later that Peter had no direct involvement in their relationship together, because Peter gave primacy to the common (as in titles and roles) over the uncommon (Jesus’ vulnerable relational involvement, Jn 13:8).

God’s relational response of grace and relational involvement of love distinguished the uncommon in order for us to be transformed from the common to the whole-ly. Without this relational outcome the influence of the common will pervade and prevail in our persons, relationships and churches—even if by default veiled in our good intentions. The Good News of God’s whole-ly presence and involvement is only for this whole-ly relational outcome (Heb 2:11; 10:10,14), and any variations of this news is not the gospel (as Paul exposed, Gal 1:6-7). Therefore, the Hebrews manifesto makes this relational imperative for discipleship: “Pursue *wholeness in your function* with everyone, and the *uncommon* without which no one will see the Lord *face to face without the veil in intimate relationship together*” (Heb 12:14, cf. 10:20-22).

Hebrews illuminates for all of Jesus’ followers the holy partition in relationship with the whole-ly God, who is inaccessible to anyone or anything common. The holy partition signifies the pivotal juncture in relationship with God. If we haven’t progressed past the holy partition, our relationship with God is influenced, shaped and occupied by the common, and thus subtly engaged in the reverse dynamic of anything less and any substitutes. Claiming the cross does not give us access to face-to-face relationship with the whole-ly God without embracing Jesus’ relational work tearing down the holy partition. Any opaque identity, for example, expressed in worship while celebrating the cross, is an expression made only in front of the holy partition at a relational distance (as

Jesus exposed, Mk 7:6-8). Since claiming the cross of the gospel apparently is the prevailing condition among Christians, the commonized bias still in effect has normalized what's acceptable practice to define disciples and determine their discipleship. This relational condition is unacceptable in the Hebrews manifesto, not to mention exposed, clarified and corrected in Jesus' manifesto definitive for all his followers (Mt 5-7).

Hopefully, the whole-ly relational outcome of the gospel clarifies, corrects and challenges us to change any common assumptions we have about relationship with God and being Jesus' disciples. This, however, requires a distinguishing bias that does not defer to the common's influence. As has been necessary for God's whole-ly family, "You are to distinguish between the holy and the common" (Lev 10:10, cf. Eze 22:26), with which Peter struggled to come eventually to this relational outcome (1 Pet 1:14-16; 2:9-10).

What is essential to follow whole-ly Jesus is for all disciples to openly have and ongoingly exercise in their discipleship the distinguishing bias emerging from face-to-face relationship *with* the Uncommon and unfolding unambiguously apart from the common and thus *in* the uncommon—the **distinguishing bias *with-in* the Uncommon**, which does not defer to the common's influence but integrally exposes any existing bias *for* the common, and acts *against* it for transformation to the whole-ly.

It is only in the integral context of the uncommon that Jesus' followers experience the relational reality of belonging to his whole-ly family. The Word's irreducible experiential truth and nonnegotiable relational reality must not be confused with just a propositional truth and a mere social reality. Moreover, the Word's belonging is the experiential reality of his followers' belonging only when it is inseparable from the identity formed by the Word. Therefore, Jesus completes his process of identity formation in order for their identity to be constituted whole and distinguished uncommon, so that where they belong and who they belong to are indeed where and who he *is*.

The Whole-ly Identity Essential for Belonging

The identity formation that Jesus makes definitive for his followers is not a one-time singular process but a reflexive process throughout their life. Though there are ups and downs experienced, this identity forms in a distinct relational progression that integrally secures belonging in its qualitative depth and ensures its satisfaction for the whole person in relationship together. Nothing less and no substitutes for identity formation can have this relational outcome. This exclusive process disqualifies anything less and any substitutes from the diversity of global Christianity.

Thus, Jesus unfolds the exclusive process of identity formation in the remaining beatitudes to complete the wholeness of identity in the function of his followers:

Fourth Beatitude: Identity formation is an ongoing process of growth and maturation, which is implied in this beatitude. The relational progression for Jesus' followers implicit in the beatitudes leads us to the next identity function for growing the new wine: "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt 5:6). The experience of the first three beatitudes, which establishes vulnerable involvement with Jesus who takes us to the Father to become a part of his very own family, provides the integral relational process and context of family to understand the fourth beatitude.

In contrast and conflict with reductionism, righteousness is not a mere conformity of actions to a given set of legal and ethical standards (or a template) but about the relational responsibility that is in keeping with reciprocal relationship between God and his people (his family). This relational responsibility is fulfilled only by the whole of who, what and how followers *are* and thus can be counted on in relationship—that is, the meaning of righteousness. Going beyond reductionism necessitates the shift in righteousness from merely exhibiting character traits and practicing an ethic of right and wrong—our common notions about integrity and being upright—to the distinctly deeper qualitative involvement of what, who and how to be in relationships, both with God and with others. New identity formation of Jesus' followers necessitates this same shift and becomes inexorably integrated with the process to righteousness for the clarity and depth of their identity. Therefore, this fourth identity function is not a pursuit about ourselves, though it certainly further and more deeply constitutes our ontology and function as his family in an essential process of transformation (the 2nd process composing his call).

Our definitive and functional understanding of righteousness comes from the righteous God's action in the context and process of relationship. Righteousness is no static attribute or quality of God but always a dynamic relational function. Righteousness is the immanent relational function of God that all other persons can invariably count on from and with God. By the nature of being righteous, this distinguished involvement is the only way God acts in relationship; moreover, by the nature of being righteous, this ongoing relational involvement is the only way God functions. That is, righteousness is intrinsic to the ontology of what, who and how God is.

"Hunger and thirst" represent the primary acts to sustain life and to help it grow, which is a metaphor for this basic pursuit. To pursue righteousness is to pursue how God is, and accordingly to pursue what and who God is—that is, the ontology of God. In other words, this ongoing pursuit of righteousness is the basic relational process of pursuing God and of becoming like God in relational function, not in ontology (e.g. by some deification). This involves the process of transformation (cf. Eph 4:24) of our whole person (from inner out) to the image of the Son (*metamorphoo*, 2 Cor 3:18, cf. Rom 8:29;

12:2), who is the image of the whole of God (cf. 2 Cor 4:4). The relational outcome of this process further constitutes our ontology in God's qualitative image in relational likeness of the Trinity, the function of which in relationship together with no veil makes us whole. The functional purpose of this process of ongoing transformation is only relational: first, for deeper reciprocal relationship together with the whole of God as family, and further, for more deeply representing the Father to extend and to build his family with family love (the immediate relational responsibilities of those adopted by the Father, Eph 1:5, cf. Rom 8:15). This defines the relational significance of the new wine identity and clearly distinguishes that identity formation must include this process of transformation in order to be whole as the new creation.

As these beatitudes interrelate, therefore, pursuing the righteousness that goes beyond reductionism involves not seeking character traits or ethical behavior but vulnerably pursuing the very qualitative and relational innermost of God and compatibly reciprocating to be intimately involved further and deeper in the whole of God's life (cf. Mt 6:33). Without this qualitative relational significance of righteousness, our identity will merely exhibit shallowness or ambiguity in who, what and how we are in relationships. For those who "hunger and thirst" for the relational righteousness of God, Jesus asserted "they will be filled" (*chortazo*, to be filled to satisfaction) because their whole persons will experience deeper intimate relationship with the whole of God as family together with no veil making their identity opaque. This is **the growth function** of identity formation denoted by the fourth beatitude.

Whole understanding and experience of God's grace emerge in Face-to-face-to-Face relationship, with the relational outcome constituted *by* mercy (compassion) from God and on this relational basis constituted *with* mercy for others. This ongoing reciprocal relational process, distinguishing the relational outcome of the new wine, further engages the integral process of the new wine identity formation in the remaining beatitudes.

Fifth Beatitude: Jesus' call to his followers to be redefined, transformed and made whole is increasingly realized by ongoing vulnerable involvement in the whole of God's relational context of family and the experience of his distinguished relational process of family love. The relational reality of this experience is essential for belonging, which is inseparable from identity. This vulnerable involvement and experience reconstitute how his followers function, not just reform them. Thus, the whole outcome of being the relational recipient of the Trinity's loving involvement and of experiencing further intimate relationship together cannot remain a private (even within a group) or solely individual matter. If this relational outcome is confined to a private context (personal or collective), it will become ingrown, self-serving, and ambiguous or even shallow, and

thus fragmentary. If this outcome is reduced to an individual focus, it will become enslaving, not redeeming and transforming, and consequently incomplete. Therefore, as the relational outcome of life together in wholeness, Jesus necessarily extends the process of identity formation to relationships with others to accentuate the relationally-gathering function of the new creation family. Individualism only scatters in contrast.

With the relational outcome emerging from the previous beatitudes, this next function of identity formation (Mt 5:7) is more than a restatement regarding Levi and Hosea 6:6 (Mt 9:9-13), and of the lawyer and the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). This function is not merely about mission or fulfilling what is rightfully expected of us. It is integrally focused on the ontology of what persons (his followers) have become (in the relational progression) and on the emerging identity of who they are and whose they are, and thus how they function in relationship—not only with God, not only among themselves, but now also with others.

Mercy (*eleos*, compassion) denotes action out of compassion for others that responds to their distress, suffering or misery. Yet, such acts can be performed merely out of missional service or Christian duty (*opheilo*)—perhaps with paternalism, intentional or inadvertent—without the relational involvement of a person who essentially has been in their position (the reflexive reality of the first three beatitudes). With the mercy experienced from God’s relational response of grace, Jesus’ whole followers from inner out become more than good servants but first and foremost become intimate personal recipients (as adopted children) of compassion (Gal 4:4-5; Eph 2:4-5). Accordingly, in reciprocity from this redeemed and transformed ontology, this person functions to extend that compassion in likeness of relational involvement with others—notably with those lacking wholeness (or value) and suffering the relational condition “to be apart” from the whole.

Reductionism would define this beatitude to subtly promote the act and benefits of mercy, not the relational involvement of persons with other persons; consequently, its practice of mercy would signify either paternalism, even with sacrifice, or a quid pro quo in human relations. Jesus, however, leads the process of identity formation deeper in contrast and conflict to go beyond such reductionism. The relational outcome of vulnerably following Jesus in the relational progression constitutes the ontology of the whole person and the relationships necessary to be whole. It naturally follows then: Being compassionate (*eleemon*) is a given fundamental function in identity formation, not an option; and those persons are blessed (*makarios*, fully satisfied) because they are relationally functioning with others in qualitative involvement for wholeness and fulfilling God’s relational desires in the innermost for his creation. In the process these persons ongoingly experience deeper compassion themselves, not suggesting their own future problems but the further relational outcome indicated in the next beatitude.

Sixth Beatitude: The deeper compassion the compassionate also experience always involves the relational work of God's grace. These persons, who are being further redeemed and transformed, are engaged in the process of becoming whole by vulnerable involvement necessarily both from their whole person and in the relationships together constituting the wholeness of God's creation and the gospel's new creation. These next two beatitudes outline what is involved in this process to wholeness, and therefore the maturation of our identity (Mt 5:8-9).

The tendency in a context pervaded by reductionism, even though not enslaved by it, is to pay more attention inadvertently to the behavioral/activity aspects of our life and practice. We readily make assumptions about the qualitative presence and involvement of our person in that behavior or activity. A relational context and process, however, make deeper demands on our person; namely, the whole of God's relational context and process hold us accountable for nothing less and no substitutes than our whole person—the demands of grace. Accordingly, we should never assume the ongoing condition of our heart nor the state of our relationship with the whole of God. Wholeness is contingent on their qualitative function in vulnerable relational terms, which descriptive referential terms cannot account for with relational distance.

A shallow identity lacks depth. A shallow person lacks the presence and involvement of heart (cf. Mt 15:8). Persons lacking heart in function (even inadvertently) lack wholeness. Intimate involvement with the whole of God (i.e. who is unreduced) necessitates an ongoing process of our hearts vulnerably open and coming together—God's nonnegotiable terms. As discussed previously about the significance of holy, the Uncommon and the common are incompatible for relationship, further necessitating our ongoing transformation to "the pure in heart" (*katharos*, clean, clear, without opacity, Mt 5:8) to be compatible. This *katharos* is not a static condition we can merely assume from God's redemption and forgiveness. God's relational acts of grace are always for reciprocal relationship, thus "pure in heart" is a dynamic function for deeper relationship to be whole together. This involves a heart functioning *clear* of any relational barriers or distance, functioning *clean* of Satan's reductionist lies, substitutes and illusions—signifying *the catharsis of the old* to be constituted in the whole of the new. Yet, any subsequent turn from the heart interjects gray matter, making our function ambiguous in an opaque identity.

An ambiguous identity lacks clarity. An ambiguous person lacks clarity of one's ontology. Christians lacking ontological clarity lack the qualitative distinguishing them from the common's function in the surrounding context, notably from reductionism. Being distinguished includes from the mindset, cultural practices and other established ways prevailing in our contexts, which we assume are compatible with God but effectively shift relationship with the holy God to our common terms (cf. Rom 8:5-6).

When the identity and ontology of the Uncommon cannot be clearly distinguished from this common function (even in a Christian subculture), this generates ambiguity in our identity and counteracts wholeness for our ontology—which increasingly becomes life and practice determined in a new normal without the whole person and without the primacy of intimate relationships necessary to be whole (cf. Col 3:15). The theological implication is that the Uncommon and common can neither coexist in functional harmony nor can their functions be combined in a hybrid. The functional implication is that the tension between them must by nature always be of conflict, the nature of which is ongoing and, contrary to some thinking, irremediable. Therefore, “pure in heart” also signifies *catharsis of the common* to be constituted in the whole of the Uncommon.

The function of the depth of this person’s heart will have the relational outcome to more deeply “see God.” The significance of “see” (*horao*) implies more than the mere act of seeing but involves more intensively to experience, partake of, or share in something, be in the presence of something and be affected by it. This depth of significance in “seeing” God in the substantive quality of relationship is the intimate process of hearts functionally vulnerable to each other and further coming together in deeper involvement to be whole—the purpose of Jesus’ sanctified life and practice and formative family prayer (Jn 17:19-26). When our ongoing experience (not necessarily continuous) with God is not *horao*, we need to examine honestly where our heart is and address any assumptions. If, for example, we don’t dance around our *ptochos* and *pentheo*, our heart will respond with greater functional trust and vulnerable intimacy—the relational posture of submission to God’s whole relational terms signified by meekness. It is only when we presume to enact or ignore this inner-out aspect of our person that we essentially keep relational distance from God, hereby impeding the process to be whole and the relational outcome of the new wine signifying the whole ontology and function of the new creation. Unfortunately, presuming and ignoring readily become our default condition, which is always consequential for the heart.

The early disciples’ struggles were essentially with heart issues, and consequently they had difficulty seeing (*horao*) God even in Jesus’ vulnerable presence (Jn 14:7-9). Without a clean and clear heart there will be shallowness in our identity formation and ambiguity in the ontology and function of our person (both individually and together) in ongoing relationship with the whole of God. The catharsis of both the old and common make the sixth beatitude pivotal as **the contingency function** in the process to be whole and for the maturation of our identity as the new creation persons composed in Jesus’ call.

Yet, wholeness is never about only the individual person, nor about just the person with God. The next beatitude extends the process.

Seventh Beatitude: While this beatitude (Mt 5:9) integrated with the sixth outlines the process to wholeness, it is also conjoined with the fifth beatitude for the person made whole to function in the relationships necessary to be whole. As the process of the new wine identity formation engages others in relationship, there emerges a distinguished presence and involvement that is neither ambiguous nor shallow. Yet this beatitude is often not fully understood or integrally enacted.

Peace is generally perceived without its qualitative significance and with a limited understanding of the relational involvement constituting it. As noted previously about Jesus approaching Jerusalem in his triumphant entry, he agonized over its condition: “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace” (Lk 19:41-42). “The things that make for peace” is a core issue focused on *what belongs to peace*, and thus by necessity involves the persons who bring this peace, not just the work of peace.

In the classical Greek sense peace is perceived as the opposite of war. The NT, however, does not take its meaning of peace from this source; its concept of peace is an extension from the OT and of the Hebrew *shalom*. The opposite of *shalom* is any disturbance to the well-being of the community. That is, the Word’s peace is not defined in negative referential terms by the *absence* of any conflict but in positive relational terms by the *presence* of a specific condition of ontology and function. Throughout the Bible the primary concept of peace is well-being and wholeness. Peace is a general well-being that has both an individual dimension and a corporate/collective dimension. This wholeness extends to all aspects of human life and by necessity included salvation and the end times but it certainly is insufficient to limit it to the latter. Going beyond the mere absence of negative activity, all of this involves what must be present for peace; this is what belongs to peace, which typically is more than commonly understood or even wanted (discussed further in Chap. 4).

The whole gospel is clearly affirmed by this peace (cf. Acts 10:36; Eph 6:15). This is the peace in which Jesus constituted his followers, and distinguished from conventional peace prevailing in the common’s contexts (Jn 14:27). It is thus insufficient to signify the gospel of peace with a truncated soteriology (only what Jesus saved us *from*) without the relational outcome of what he saved us *to*. The whole gospel’s salvation necessitates the relationships together of the whole of God’s family in which Jesus constituted his followers to be whole as the new creation. Wholeness is intrinsic to this peace, and to be whole is a necessary relational condition for those who bring this peace. Who then are the peacemakers?

Their identity is clearly defined by Jesus as the sons and daughters of God (v.9), not God’s servants but the Father’s very own children (cf. v.44-45). This tells us not only who and what they are but whose they are and how they are as peacemakers.

The adopted children of God have been made whole in God's family and partake of the new wine communion together with the whole-ly God without the veil. As whole persons receiving the whole-ly God's relational work of grace, it is insufficient for God's children merely to share mercy (compassion) with others. It is also insufficient for them merely to engage in the mission (however dedicated) to reduce violence, stop war or create the absence of conflict. On the basis of the ontology of who they are and whose they are, how they function to clearly reflect the depth of their wholeness—thus the relational responsibility to represent the Father and to continue to extend his family—this integrally involves a deeper level of relational involvement. "Peacemakers" (*eirenopoios*) denotes reconcilers, those who seek the well-being and wholeness of others, just as they experience (cf. 2 Cor 5:17-18). The reciprocal nature of the process of peacemaking is both a necessary and sufficient condition for peacemakers. This means not only to address conflict but to restore relationships in the human condition to wholeness, just as God's thematic relational action and the relational work of the Trinity engage. Such involvement can only be vulnerable by the whole person from inner out, and thereby renders any participation in peacemaking with relational distance to be (perhaps arguably) insufficient, inadequate and even contrary to peace.

In these seven beatitudes Jesus defined *the natural relational flow* from repentance to redemption to reconciliation to wholeness. Jesus functioned vulnerably in this relational flow and ongoingly engaged the relational work necessary for its relational progression to be whole. While peace describes interpersonal relationships only in a corollary sense, the condition of wholeness and well-being is the new relational order of the new creation as the whole of God's family (as Paul made definitive, Eph 2:14-22; Col 3:15). Peace, therefore, is a necessary condition for the relational outcome of the new wine. Moreover, each emerging act of reconciliation and peacemaking must function in the same natural relational flow to become whole. This will further the relational process to wholeness for others and will deepen the wholeness of those so engaged, and therefore the maturation of the distinguished clarity and depth of their identity.

Having stated this unequivocally, the experiential truth and relational reality of this wholeness is also intrusive to others, which is unavoidable for those following Jesus' relational path. And though it may seem counterintuitive, engaging in his peacemaking will evoke negative reactions from others in surrounding contexts and even in Christian contexts, thus the eighth beatitude.

Eighth Beatitude: The existential reality for human life and practice is that reductionism prevails; and not everyone is seeking resolution to the human relational condition "to be apart" from the whole. Consequently, in this last function of their whole-ly identity Jesus made clear to his followers the repercussions of being composed in his call to be redefined, transformed and made whole: the function of this new ontology in relational involvement with others will encounter strong negative reaction "for

righteousness' sake...on my account" (vv.10,11). Identity formation of his followers remains incomplete until they experience this consequence of their ontology and function in the world, which may include some Christian subcultures. That is to say, the relational outcome of the new wine includes this repercussion in human contexts, because by its essential nature it is intrusive to the human shaping of persons and relationships together.

Along with the benefits and responsibilities of belonging to his family as one of the Father's very own, this consequence is another given unavoidable function in their identity. These repercussions are not the result of being doctrinaire, condescending or otherwise relationally uninvolved, though Christians certainly have experienced reactions for these reasons, justifiably or not. Nor are these reactions against only certain servants of God—for example, a frequent reduced perception of prophets (v.12). These are the relational reactions from others to God's children who are functioning whole in their reciprocal relational responsibility ("for righteousness' sake") as the Father's very own to extend the whole of God's family ("theirs is the kingdom") to others in the relational righteousness of family love vulnerably constituted by Jesus ("on my account"). This reaction comes with the intrusive significance of being the new wine, which will emerge in his call to be whole, live whole, and to make whole.

This last beatitude is the consequence of both the qualitative distinguishing the ontology of God's people and the relational involvement of their function, both of which intrude in the human context. Just as the prophets and Jesus experienced, this is the relational outworking of the identity of being in God's family and intimately involved with the whole and holy God (the Uncommon). This may be a difficult identity function to embrace, and so in our thinking we may tend to limit it to unique situations for only a minority of Christians. Yet, the relational reality is inescapable that not only is the qualitative distinguishing the Uncommon incompatible with the common function but in conflict with it also; anything less reduces the ontology of the Uncommon and those who have become uncommon. And relational reactions from the common function will come in all forms and varying degrees (even within Christian diversity) as long as the uncommon relationally extend themselves to the common with a critique of hope for change.

To avoid those reactions is to reduce our ontology and function to a level more ambiguous and shallow, likely more practical and acceptable in surrounding contexts. To function as a peacemaker, for example, merely by being irenic, consensus building and unity forming is insufficient, and tends to become the ontological simulations and functional illusions of reductionism shaped in a hybrid theology. This beatitude's last function integral in identity formation completes the process of being whole, both individually and together as family, in the human context suffering the relational condition "to be apart" from the wholeness of God's creation. The repercussions are an

integral part of the new wine fellowship, which Paul was blessed to participate in with Jesus and desired to grow in further and deeper (Col 1:24; Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 1:5; 4:10; Phil 3:10). Nothing less and no substitutes for this whole define the new wine identity and determine its relational outcome as the whole-ly God's new creation family. Anything less and any substitutes for wholeness of our identity lack the clarity and depth for our righteousness to go beyond the reductionism that Jesus made imperative for his followers in this major discourse (Mt 5:20). The resulting ambiguity and shallowness will neither be fully satisfying (*makarios*, "blessed"), nor be taken seriously in the world.

As **the consequential function** of the new wine identity, this beatitude must not be taken lightly or be lost in our identity formation; to do so is integrally consequential for the relational outcome of the new wine, which will not emerge within the limits and constraints of old wineskins.

The above eight beatitudes are the interdependent functions that together formulate our whole identity in who, what and how we are as Jesus' followers and whose we become in the relational progression as his family—therefore distinguishing the ontology of the person and the whole. The beatitudes taken separately are problematic for *makarios* (fully satisfied, beyond being merely happy), since some beatitudes seem individually strain to be defined as blessedness. Moreover, any beatitude by itself does not yield the relational outcome connected to it. Blessedness is synonymous with wholeness, and to be fully satisfied emerges only from vulnerable involvement in the whole-ly God's life, who tore open the holy partition and has removed the veil for intimate relationship together.

The beatitudes together, however, are only the outline of the integral process of identity formation. Functionally, this process immediately addresses the whole person by opening our heart to be redefined. In the relational process, Jesus (in conjoint function with the Spirit) redeems us from the old (and the common) and transforms us to the new (and the uncommon) to be made whole in relationship together with the whole-ly God, whereby to function whole in likeness of the Trinity, including making whole in human contexts. The beatitudes' integral process, therefore, is ongoing and its outline is not just linear but reflexive in our identity's growth and maturation. As identity issues of ambiguity and shallowness become resolved, our identity as Jesus' followers takes on a distinguished qualitative presence with others in the world. This is the basis for Jesus' definitive declaration immediately following the beatitudes that *we are the light and the salt*, in which the ontology of *we* is the whole understanding of the light and the salt that integrally distinguishes the relational outcome of the new wine flowing integrally in the new creation church family.

The Relational Outcome of the Gospel's Belonging

Persons, peoples, tribes and nations around the world experience diversely the social reality of belonging. Any limited experience they may have of belonging's relational reality is always constrained by the counter-relational workings of reductionism—the prevailing reality dominating the human condition. Sadly, the constraints on belonging's relational reality are also widely experienced by Christians and churches in global Christianity. This condition cannot be turned around by a virtual reality of the gospel, nor by any misinformation about the Good News.

If the gospel claimed by global Christianity is from the God whose identity is formed in the image of humans, then the results from that gospel are not a relational outcome but something quantitatively comparable to what forms common human identity and function. Any such result is the only claim that can be made from an effectively partial or fragmentary gospel. Anything less and any substitutes for the unequivocal relational outcome that the Word embodied to constitute the *whole* gospel always counter the relational outcome intrinsic to his gospel. Furthermore, what commonly results from any other gospel is contrary to the relational reality of belonging that the Word vulnerably embodied for the face-to-face involvement necessary in uncommon relationship together.

The prevalent reality is that such common results keep evolving in Christian contexts, and thereby increasingly become the norm for Christian practice. This evolving condition makes evident a commonized bias that distorts what is acceptable for the gospel, and thus what is agreeable to claim from and proclaim about it. In other words, a Christian lens that is commonized is partial (implicitly biased) to what is simply practical in a surrounding context. A practical faith and gospel, then, affirms the diverse Christian identity and function evolving from the reverse dynamic of anything less and any substitutes. And the where and who of belonging become divergent accordingly.

The contextualized bias evident in Christian diversity must always account for the underlying influence of commonized bias. The contrast and conflict between the common and the uncommon cannot be overstated. The relational consequences of the former always evolve in diverse claims from an assumed gospel, which always have repercussions in the diversity of belonging experienced by persons, peoples, tribes and nations throughout global Christianity. These relational consequences and repercussions disproportionately affect the marginalized hoping for a better life, but who are either forced to compete or coerced to conform in order to have claim to some gospel and assume they belong. This existential condition has been endemic in global Christianity both North and South; and the assumption of belonging keeps evolving in ontological simulations and functional illusions that are insignificant to the vulnerable presence and relational involvement of the Word and his whole-ly gospel.

Therefore, Christians and churches must not underestimate the relational outcome of belonging that emerges integrally only from the whole-ly gospel embodied by the Word. And make no assumption to the contrary, we are ongoingly challenged, confronted and corrected by the whole-ly Word and gospel.

Chapter 4 Scrutinizing Christian Diversity

“Nothing beyond what is written *in the Word*,” so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you?

1 Corinthians 4:6-7

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.

Romans 12:3

My wife and I like many different genres of music. We also enjoy diverse styles of how different music is expressed. What is challenging in listening to diverse styles of different genres is this ongoing issue: Discerning between what commonly reverberates from what deeply resonates. It is common, for example, for diverse styles of pop music to quantitatively reverberate but not have the qualitative depth to resonate in the hearts of listeners; the same can be said of contemporary Christian music. Human brains are certainly wired to get stirred up by reverberating music. Nevertheless, this must not be confused with resonating in the heart. If you want to be satisfied or deeply moved by the latter, then you have to scrutinize the diverse styles and different genres in order to distinguish their qualitative integrity and the significance they have.

My wife and I have learned that without being able to distinguish the qualitative integrity and significance in music, people readily default to what they are partial to in terms of styles and genres. Their partiality then forms biases that impose favor and disfavor on the existing diversity. While there is some tolerance of diversity, a real consequence evolving from this diversity is varying degrees of tension, with conflict and divisiveness most likely to evolve between the distinctions. An example of this consequence was experienced in church gatherings, where conflicts and divisions had descended over what genre and style of worship music to use. The residue from what precipitated a worship battle still remains today, even under a veil of tolerance and perhaps in the compromise of blended worship.

The diversity equation for music is a microcosm of what evolves on the macro level of global diversity. The conflict and divisive consequences of human diversity have evolved most in the democratic context of the U.S. In a recent Pew Research Center survey of people in seventeen countries in Europe, Asia and North America, the U.S. reported the most division along partisan, racial, ethnic and religious lines—notably with

their high levels of conflict combining to render democracy's integrity without significance and threaten its future. What overlaps with the current condition of the U.S. is the condition of the church; and included in what underlies the U.S.'s conflict and divisiveness is the diverse participation of its unscrutinized Christian diversity, which is reflected in the consequences evolved and still evolving in the church.

Whether on the local, national, regional or global level, diversity needs to be scrutinized to determine the qualitative integrity and significance each different composition has. The diversity of Christians and churches need to account for this, or they will be responsible for the consequences of their partiality and biases. Further consequential for diversity at any human and church level is the inevitable inequality among distinctions that evolve from our partiality (prejudices) and biases, which create unavoidable inequity between distinctions as a favored one disfavors the other.

Therefore, as many Christians diverge and more churches diversify, it is imperative that Christian diversity be scrutinized, because "God, who knows the human heart...has made no distinction between them and us (Acts 15:8-9).

What's Dissonant to You?

Listening to any particular music creates dissonance for some listeners and consonance for others. Assuming the music is in tune, it's not the music itself that produces dissonance or consonance but the ear of the listener. That is, our partiality to our likes predisposes our ear to hear consonance in that music while hearing dissonance in music disliked. The strength of this predisposition determines the extent of the bias we have and thereby impose favor or disfavor on other distinctions.

In the existing reality of human diversity, how we *see* (perhaps even hear) human distinctions shaped more by our eye and revolves less on the distinction. The eye of the beholder is the basic perceptual-interpretive lens that is not an objective instrument—that many presume it to be—which is free from bias and thus objective about what it sees. Therefore, the distinctions composing human diversity are always seen through a biased lens—a lens, of course, whose unavoidable bias inevitably imposes dissonance or consonance on those distinctions.

This is the existential reality of global diversity, which is propagated overtly or covertly by some distinctions and is experienced explicitly or implicitly by many other distinctions. The favored distinctions are consonant for and among them, while the disfavored distinctions are dissonant in relation to them. So, what distinctions have dissonance for you? And have you ever experienced dissonance about your own distinction, personal or collective?

Human diversity is composed with distinctions that are either created by God or human constructions. Race, for example, is a prominent distinction not of God's creation but of human construction; God didn't create race, humans did. Gender is a created distinction, whose value is measured also by human construction. The critical issue for diversity that needs scrutiny centers on the human constructs biasing the perceptual-interpretive lens for seeing, assessing, and stereotyping distinctions. Christians and churches have been and continue to be susceptible to and/or complicit in human constructs, the prevalent influence of which biases their perceptual-interpretive lens accordingly. The distinctions composing Christian diversity that evolve from such lenses are problematic and consequential; and they will continue to be the default condition without scrutiny.

Yet, Christians and churches make assumptions about their lenses, most notably presuming that they're biblical, and thus not requiring scrutiny in spite of related problematic situations and consequential circumstances. The assumption of being biblical—thereby to be acceptable, right or even ordained—is a prevalent position in Christian diversity that is based on this antecedent assumption: The interpretive lens used to read the Bible is without bias, therefore whatever views unfold from this lens are deemed biblical. The diversity of interpretations (e.g. of the gospel and discipleship), however, unfolding from presumed unbiased lenses makes evident a predisposition in their perceptual-interpretive mindset. Their scrutiny counters such an assumption and critiques those interpretations with the qualitative relational framework of the whole-ly Word (as in 1 Cor 4:6).¹

In the diversity presumed to be biblical by the early church, Paul confronted this problem and the consequences for making distinctions in their theology and using them in their practice. Paul raised the penetrating question that serves as the wake-up call to Christian diversity: “Who sees anything different in you?” (1 Cor 4:7) The construction of distinctions was clearly evident in the church at Corinth, and their diversity was divisive (1 Cor 1:11-12; 3:3-4). On the one hand, by asking “who sees,” Paul exposes the bias in their perceptual-interpretive lens. On the other hand, however, Paul illuminates the fundamental lens lacking among them, which is fundamental for Christian theology and practice. “See” (*diakrino*) for the fundamental lens is to recognize, discern and distinguish what intrinsically really underlies the existing reality of distinctions. With the fundamental lens all such distinctions have no essential significance and are only secondary at best.

When human constructs prevail, however, those distinctions evolve to become primary over “what is written *in the Word*” (as Paul made primary, 1 Cor 1:19,31; 3:19-20)—making them biblically contrary to the Word. This shift often goes beyond the

¹ For a full discussion on the issues of biblical interpretation, see my study *Interpretation Integrated in 'the Whole-ly Way': The Integral Education and Learning of Knowing and Understanding God* (Bible Hermeneutics Study, 2019). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

awareness of a biased perceptual-interpretive lens, especially when the assumption of being biblical prevails. In the above account of the early church, who would have thought that identifying with and belonging to Christ, Peter, Apollos or Paul was unbiblical (1 Cor 1:12)? Yet, even with the likely prevalence of good intentions, these distinctions went “beyond what is written in the Word,” and thereby became dissonant for the church (i.e. the church constituted by the embodied Word). Human constructs create inevitable dissonance with others’ distinctions, because these differences fall unavoidably into a comparative process that generates competition (as Paul exposed, 2 Cor 11:12-13). Under the guise of diversity, the existential dissonance would result inescapably in “divisions among you” (1 Cor 1:10-11).

Is this the state of diversity in the global church today? And does the dissonance about distinctions you’ve experienced locally and regionally apply to global Christianity?

The Illusion of Consonance

Unless your ear is fine-tuned melodically, you can be listening to your favored music and not notice when there is dissonance. Your ear just assumes the music’s consonance, just as it presumes dissonance for your disfavored music. Here again, it’s not your ear that’s the real problem but your bias predisposing you one way or the other. Thus, there is an illusion of consonance that makes us comfortable even when we should feel uneasy or discomfort in the presence of dissonance.

The interaction between consonance and dissonance is an either-or dynamic that distinguishes one from the other. Yet, the two distinctions get conflated when a biased lens assumes consonance for what is really dissonance. This illusion of consonance is maintained in the presence of dissonance by the formation of a **hybrid distinction**: A distinction claiming to be correct, right or significant on the basis of diffusing a dissonant distinction, so that some elements of that distinction could be absorbed into what can now be identified as consonance. Whenever a favored distinction is composed with any disfavored elements, the either-or dynamic is breached to make the two different distinctions ambiguous. Many evangelical Christians in the U.S., for example, demonstrate such a hybrid by embracing populism, which is the practice of allegiance to the majority’s concerns and actions even if dissonant (such as white supremacy) to the Word.

This hybrid distinction creates illusions about what is consonant that in effect promote a new normal for consonance. Therefore, such consonance evolves from biased perceptual-interpretive lenses, whereby presumed consonance is confirmed (as in confirmation bias) to enable and sustain the illusion of a favored distinction as consonant. This is the underlying dynamic for all human distinctions that needs to be scrutinized.

The above either-or dynamic operating in human distinctions is scrutinized by the Word for the existential reality of illusions in everyday life, notably evolving subtly in hybrid distinctions. In Jesus' definitive manifesto for his followers (outlined in the Sermon on the Mount), he continues to put into juxtaposition the either-or condition engaged in everyday life. This either-or process should not be confused with a Hegelian dialectic because the two conditions cannot be synthesized for a whole outcome.

A critical either-or is between a good tree and a bad tree, which will determine the outcome in everyday life (Mt 7:15-20). This critical disjunction is the basic either-or of good-bad, a distinction which became ambiguous in the primordial garden with the illusion of "good and evil" and the deluded hope of "knowing good and evil to be like God" (Gen 3:5). From this basic good-bad disjunction are the either-or extensions of right-wrong, fair-unfair, just-unjust, each of which may have variable definitions relative to their root source or authority base. Jesus' metaphor of a tree makes unequivocal that a tree's fruit depends on its roots. Bad roots yield only bad fruit and cannot be expected to yield good fruit, though good fruit is not always distinguished from bad fruit. This is where the disjunction with a good tree becomes unclear, because it could be made ambiguous with variable alternatives from a bad tree constructing illusions and cultivating delusions of good fruit.

Jesus clarified and corrected the disjunction between the trees and the outcomes their roots determine. Critical to the outcome are those "trees" who augment or hybridize the "fruit" to create illusions about reality, such as false prophets who whitewash the reality of peace (as in Eze 13:10) and promote false hopes for justice (as in Jer 23:16-17). These false narratives (or ones lacking justice) continue to be advocated today by Christians operating under illusions, a condition which grieved Jesus about God's people in the past and still today (Lk 19:41-42). After over two millennia since the Word embodied the gospel of peace (as in Jn 14:27, cf. Eph 6:15), here we are still apparently lacking his gospel's relational-language composition for our theology and practice—even when the gospel *appears* referentially right in our theology or practice. This faces us with the uneasy reality of Jesus' "hard road" and his gospel's "narrow gate."

Whenever we live explicitly or implicitly with subtle illusions, we are in a critical condition needing urgent care. Unknowingly living in and promoting such illusions could be shocking feedback for those working diligently for peace and justice. Hopefully it is uprooting feedback, since the issue here goes down to the roots and the potential delusion of either evolving from bad (false, variable or incomplete) roots under the assumption of being good, or thinking a hybrid of roots is a good basis to work from. How can we know the specific roots of the tree from which we are working in our distinction in particular and in Christian diversity in general?

If we are willing to suspend our assumptions and biases, we can exercise a *hermeneutic of suspicion* (an honest examination of our views and actions) about the so-called fruits of our discipleship with peace and justice in order to get to the roots of their

tree. Namely, does our discipleship embody the whole-ly peace given by Jesus, and thereby integrally enact the justice that the embodied Word was sent to “proclaim justice to *human diversity*...until he brings justice to victory” (Mt 12:18-21? And given the Word’s essential purpose of justice, how do his followers address the inequality and inequity in Christian diversity that evolve from the distinctions in the global church (cf. Jer 9:23-24)?

This is the indispensable purpose and outcome for Jesus putting into juxtaposition the either-or disjunction composing the reality of everyday life and related illusions and delusions. Central to his relational process to distinguish his whole-ly followers, Jesus dispels such illusions and exposes any delusion composing a new normal by getting to the heart of our identity and function.

The “New” Normal

Who, what and how we are emerge from and unfold with the state of our righteousness. Righteousness is not an attribute, which is how Christians usually think of it. Rather righteousness is the constituting root that bears the fruit of our identity (ontology) and function, determining the reality of who, what and how our person is in everyday life that can be counted on in relationships—the ontology and function in likeness to the God of righteousness. Thus, righteousness is integral for the integrity of our person and our involvement in relationships—just as it is for God’s presence and involvement—which produce the underlying root basis for justice and its outcome of peace. Accordingly, the state of our righteousness is crucial, and any illusion about its roots or its fruit is deeply consequential for the nature and extent of justice and peace we can engage in. This is the basis for the psalmist declaring for the LORD that “righteousness composes the wholeness of his presence and involvement” because “righteousness and peace kiss” (Ps 85:10,13) and “righteousness and justice are the foundation for your authority and rule of law” (Ps 89:14, cf. Isa 11:3-5).

Righteousness, however, has been one of the key terms whose understanding has eluded much theology and practice, with direct consequences for peace and justice. The central either-or disjunction around which Jesus’ manifesto for his followers revolves is this:

“Unless your righteousness exceeds [goes beyond to be full] *the so-called righteousness of the reductionists*, you will never *be whole* in God’s kingdom, *be right with God’s authority and just by his rule of law*” (Mt 5:20).

The reductionists (diverse segments of Judaism) simply constructed a *new normal* for righteousness, which reduced the wholeness of God’s authority and fragmented the justice of God’s rule of law. This “new” normal righteousness emerged from a reduced

theological anthropology that objectified persons to the outer in by fragmenting the law to simplified identity markers, by which they quantified their practice in secondary matters for their self-determined function in what amounted to self-justification (sound familiar?). The relational terms for the primacy of covenant relationship together in wholeness (as in Gen 17:1; Ps 119:1) no longer were the basis for righteousness as defined by God (as in Gen 15:6; Rom 4:1-3). Notable in this reconstruction of righteousness to the “new” normal were the administrators of God’s law (priests, Levites), who lived in and promoted their selective bias shaping the rule of law in human terms for peace and justice—all contrary to and in conflict with Levi (Mal 2:5-9). YHWH dispelled their illusion and exposed their delusion, subsequently replacing them with the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (king of Peace) to constitute the true righteousness of the new covenant relationship together (Isa 11:3-5; Heb 6:19-20).

Yet, a “new” normal for the identity and function of who, what and how we are subtly prevails in Christian diversity today—quantified by the internet and amplified by social media—and perhaps is more embedded with our illusions and entrenched in our delusions of peace and justice. Along with its adaptation by technology, this so-called new normal evolves in one way or another by the selective bias (1) expressed in reverence of status and prestige, (2) exercised with idolization of power and influence, and (3) demonstrated by the glorification of wealth and resources. In all their forms at all levels of human life, this composition of an assumed new normal has reflected, reinforced and sustained our human condition and has interfered with its redemptive change—shortchanging or retarding the basic outcome of the embodied Word’s whole gospel by enabling anything less and any substitutes.

Illusions and delusions from the “new” normal have seduced Christians and preoccupied us with the secondary over the primary in our everyday priorities (as Jesus outlines, Mt 6:19-32). But, Jesus counters any “new” normal for righteousness, peace and justice with “seek first and foremost his kingdom and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33). That is, not to “strive” (as in NRSV) for an attribute called righteousness but “pursue” (*zeteo*) the whole presence and involvement of who, what and how God is and can be counted on to function in relationship together. If God’s integrity is not accountable in relationship, what significance does “his righteousness” warrant to pursue? Likewise, in this primacy of reciprocal relationship composed by God’s authority and rule of law, the who, what and how we are can also function in likeness to God’s righteousness; and in this mutual accountability, the relational outcome will include the secondary necessary for wholeness of life in its created justice. Those who pursue his righteousness “will be filled with satisfaction” (*chortazo*, Mt 5:6)—not necessarily happy in their outer-in secondary matters but satisfied with the whole integrity of their person from inner out, enacted integrally in the primacy of relationship.

This is the only righteousness that distinguishes the whole ontology and function of who, what and how we are as his followers—the diversity of those who belong

relationally (not referential members) in his family and thus “I know you.” Furthermore, contrary to common priests of the “new” normal, from this High Priest also emerges “a holy [uncommon] priesthood” to constitute the whole identity of all our diverse distinctions in his likeness to function as “a royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:5,9) in order to be *right* as his whole-ly sentinels of human life. This is the uncommon righteous priesthood of followers who administer justice only by the nonnegotiable relational terms of God’s rule of law and thereby who make the irreducible peace of wholeness.

Christian diversity is always problematic when it evolves as a consequence of a biased perceptual-interpretive lens and then adapts in new normals under the illusion of consonance. This diversity evolves notably when tradition (religious and/or cultural) assumes priority over the Word to bias its interpretation. Thus, the identity and function signified diversely in theology and practice need to be scrutinized further by a litmus test.

The Litmus Test

In the digital age, the diversity of human identity and function has evolved on social media with adaptations that are acceptable and thus appropriate for that context, but which could be inappropriate and relatively unacceptable in non-virtual real life—although new normals are an evolving reality in everyday life. The diversity of Christian identity and function is analogous to this social reality, only the dynamic can be reflexive. Accordingly, Christian identity and function evolve diversely based on presumed interpretations of the Word that are deemed acceptable and thus appropriate variations for global Christianity, but which are inappropriate and unacceptable to the whole-ly Word and gospel’s irreducible and nonnegotiable existential life. Therefore, the diversity of global Christianity must scrutinize the social-media like influence on its biblical interpretations and return to the whole-ly identity and function of the qualitative relational Word, or else adapt to new normals in theology and practice.

Thus, when Paul stated the imperative “nothing beyond what is written in the Word” in response to the diversity in the church at Corinth, he applied the litmus test essential to scrutinize the distinctions basic to their diverse identity and function. Paul applied this litmus test directly to Apollos and himself “for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the *litmus test*” (1 Cor 4:6). The key factor in this test is not the Word by itself but “**nothing beyond** the Word.” Historically, going beyond God’s Word has been a hermeneutic problem for God’s people, so this test is essential to get to the hermeneutical roots of the problem. Because assumptions are made about the words uttered from God’s mouth, the interpretive lenses used for the Word conclude diversely such that “everyone’s own word becomes his oracle and so you distort the words of the living God, the Lord Almighty, our God” (Jer 23:36, NIV).

Making God's Word into one's personal oracle by distorting its composition can be a subtle process that many Christians would be unaware of. The initial critical issue to scrutinize in this process is the essential function of language. As you stand in the hermeneutical position 'in front of' the Bible seeking to know and understand God, you likely have been susceptible to want to get into a secondary hermeneutical position 'behind this text' in order to gain this presumptive basic level in your learning and education.² You are not alone. Many have pursued this path, guided by historical criticism and linguistics. Theological as well as political studies have been influenced by a linguistic focus; and such a linguistic turn also has become central in the writing of social history.³ What emerges in this process is the centrality of language and how it is used to construct information, discourse and even thought. Those engaged with the Bible also have to enter into a central focus on language, yet by taking only a qualified (if not chastened) turn to linguistics.

Obviously, in order for individuals or groups to have any mutual exchange and further interaction, they must share the same language. This shared language can be verbal and/or nonverbal (as in body language), yet with expressions and signs common to each other in order to have that exchange and interaction. On the other hand, even persons or groups who share the same language can have difficulty exchanging, interacting and being on the same level of understanding.

In the Bible we can observe similar difficulty and challenges with language, as well as give testimony of our similar personal experiences with the Word. Perhaps, not surprisingly, you may feel that you and the Word don't share the same language, and there may be more truth to that than is apparent. To highlight this reality, consider that the Jewish Jesus said directly to Jewish believers, "Why is my language not clear to you?" (Jn 8:43, NIV) Certainly his words were not foreign to them, but the meaning of his language was *uncommon* to them. In other words, though they shared the same language expressions, they didn't share the same language signs. And what is underlying this difficulty is the factual reality that essentially they didn't have the same language as the Word to "know the Truth" (Jn 8:32). This paradoxical linguistic contrast led to their interpretation conflict in misunderstanding the Word (8:33-41), not to mention their diverse interpretations contrary to the qualitative relational integrity composing God's Word. Critical to this process, what underlies interpretation conflicts with the Word are language barriers generated, erected and sustained by reductionism (8:42-47).

² Discussions of these interpretive positions in hermeneutics are found in Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene and Karl Moller, eds., *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), and in Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephen Evans, Mary Healy and Murray Rae, eds., *"Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

³ A discussion of the relative composition of social history is found in Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990).

The Underlying Nature of Language

Jesus used parables to express various ideas, yet his thoughts and meaning behind them unfolded only in the nature of his language. This was problematic for those who heard him, even for his disciples. When the disciples asked him what a particular parable meant, he told them to their surprise: “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that *in spite of* ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand’” (Lk 8:9-10). Jesus’ words didn’t guarantee that the disciples understood him; on the contrary, they frequently didn’t understand the words from Jesus. For example, after his imperative to “Let these words sink into your ears,” he revealed vulnerably what was to happen to him. “But they did not understand *his words*; its meaning was concealed from them, so they could not perceive it” (Lk 9:44-45). Given how Jesus distinguished the perception of his disciples moments earlier, in contrast to others’ lack, how do we explain the disciples lack and thus loss?

The Word’s language is not readily apparent from these interactions. The clarity of the Word is illuminated when the Word’s original language is distinguished “In the beginning” (Jn 1:1; Gen 1:1), which isn’t the context paid attention to commonly in biblical interpretations. John’s Gospel is crucial for defining the Word’s horizon (main context) in complete context, so that the gospel is whole and neither reduced nor fragmented by a Word out of context.

In the beginning the Creator constituted the persons (no matter the gender) in the primordial garden with an irreducible ontology, an irreplaceable epistemology and a nonnegotiable relationship, the function of which distinguished the image and likeness of the whole of God (integrally incorporating the Word and the Spirit). Those defining words from the Creator (Gen 1:28-30; 2:16-17), expressed in an historical or allegorical context, were either given to human persons to inform them of the parameters of their human function; or they were shared with those persons to communicate distinctly the terms for the relationship between them and the Creator. If the words communicated the terms for relationship together, then these relational terms could only be distinguished when composed in **relational language**. Anything less than relational language would be ambiguous, elusive, and simply open to variable interpretation of those relational terms; the consequence would be to substitute the Word’s relational terms with other (notably human) terms to define the relationship, as observed in Christian diversity. The terms for most relationships are open for negotiation, at least in theory. The Word’s relational terms, however, are nonnegotiable, and this truth has been ignored, denied or simply not understood by God’s people since this beginning—with Christians having assumed the most negotiating posture in their divergent practices of faith, though not overtly as if composing a new normal Rule of Faith yet in fact following one.

This consequence evolved in the primordial garden from the beginning when the question was raised “Did God really say *that*?” (Gen 3:1) What needs to be understood in this encounter is the linguistic dynamic that on the surface innocently challenged God’s relational language. But then, what evolved is the substitution of an apparently reasonable **alternate language** to be definitive instead of relational language. How so?

First of all, the nature of the language expressing God’s words was changed from the relational language originally used *to communicate* to an alternate language used merely *to inform* (Gen 3:4-5). The common shift to an alternative primary focus on transmitting information over communicating relationship then opened the door to two major linguistic shifts of the words from God:

1. A selective process of omitting, neglecting, disregarding, or denying God’s words, albeit in a manner that seems reasonable and not irrational, or even merely benign (just as is acceptable and appropriate in social media).
2. The deconstruction of the words from God and their reinterpretation in an alternate language speaking “like God,” which both informs (read misinforms) and serves the self-interests/concerns of the interpreter (as in 3:6).

These major shifts transposed ‘the words *from* God in relational language’ to ‘the words *of* God in **referential language**’, and thereby altered the nature of the Word’s original language. The consequence for this beginning that still prevails today is:

The use of referential language that is unable to compose relational terms in order to communicate but is limited only to inform—the narrow transmission of information—therefore a language that cannot understand the composition of the words *from* the Word no matter the wealth of information (even about “good and evil”) processing the words *of* God it can transmit to speak for God (as if “like God”).

Indeed, “Why is my language not clear to you?” must be answered by Christian diversity more deeply than with referential language, no matter how acceptable and appropriate biblically.

The genius of reductionism is its reasonable appearance in questioning the words from God. After all, don’t we read the Bible because we want to know if God said ‘that’? In reductionism’s subtle challenge, however, its linguistic shift moves from what God said to what God really meant by ‘that’. And it would be a serious mistake for our engagement with the Bible to defer (perhaps bow) to the seeming innocence of this shift. By focusing solely on *God’s intention*, the actual words from God were only used for reference, whereby the real meaning of God’s words was opened to conjecture, to the bias of assumptions, even to scholarly speculation—as pervades the academy and

preoccupies its education. In other words, the hermeneutic door was opened to diversity of interpretation, creating a Biblepedia of information, based on an epistemic realm reduced from the original language of the words *from* God to a fragmentary language only referring to the words *of* God.

Substituting referential language for relational language has changed the nature of language, which then also alters the purpose of language. This is the linguistic condition from the beginning that composes the narrative of the human condition, which encompasses the diverse condition of Christians and churches. Sadly, yet not surprising, we seem to be unaware of or appear to not understand the different natures of the language that God uses and the language that we use instead—the purpose and goal of reductionism since the beginning. That’s why Jesus clarified his question with the definitive response: “Because you are unable to hear *the language* I speak *and the relational words* I say. You *identify with the father of reductionism* and you *defer to its desires*” (Jn 8:44, NIV).

Challenging Interpretations

Persons, groups, peoples and nations turn to the Bible for various reasons and purposes. What results from their engagement are interpretations even more diverse than the diversity of those engaged. Diversity in itself creates challenges to different interpretations, with an implied competition to have the right or best interpretation; this has been the presumed position taken by Western Christians over the global South. In this challenging climate, more and more persons in the global church (perhaps some groups and fewer peoples) are seeing diversity as vital and thus as necessary for theology and practice to progress—notably to advance beyond Western Christian dominance. Most important, however, whether in the global South or North, biblical interpretations need to be challenged, but not in order to see who has the right or best interpretations of the words of God in referential language. Rather, challenges are necessary to determine if interpretations have both the integrity and the significance of the words from God in relational language, thereby supporting the nature of God’s language and fulfilling its purpose.

John’s Gospel includes two narratives that (1) illuminate the need for challenging interpretations and (2) highlight the interpretive issues with the nature and purpose of the Word’s relational language—with both narratives exposing the interpretive engagement of an alternate perceptual-interpretive mindset.

In the first narrative, Jesus challenged the interpretations of those intensely searching the Scriptures, who thought their interpretations resulted in knowing God and having eternal life (Jn 5:39-40). What had evolved from their interpretations was indeed a large quantity of information about God, yet information composed only by the words of God in referential language. What did not result from their perceptual-interpretive

mindset was an unbiased interpretation of the words from God embodied before them face to face. *Who* they saw before them was determined by *how* they saw him with their mindset. So, that unbiased result wasn't possible with the language barrier they had with the Word's relational language. By challenging their interpretations, Jesus exposed (1) the nature of their referential language, (2) the bias imposed on their interpretations by their alternate mindset formed by referential language, and (3) the barrier erected to prevent entering the Word's qualitative realm of relational connection. The consequence was not having the experiential truth and relational reality of eternal life but merely the epistemological illusion and ontological simulation of it. Therefore, given how diverse Christians claim eternal life from a fragmentary gospel, does this first narrative intensify the need to challenge the interpretations of many Christians today throughout the global church and academy?

The second narrative amplifies the need to challenge diverse interpretations, including apparently favorable interpretations. This narrative began with the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000 (Jn 6:14), which extended from his other previous miracles. Many interpreted his miracle as the true fulfillment of the prophet promised to them in the OT (Dt 18:15,18). Yet, this favorable interpretation didn't emerge from the Book of Love (the relational language constituting the Book of Law) composed by God's relational love language, so Jesus challenged their interpretation to expose their bias: "I tell you the truth, you are *following* me, not because you saw miraculous signs" (6:26, NIV). The language sign for miracle (*semeion*) goes beyond just the act itself (unique as it is) to distinguish who and what it indicates. Thus, they were not following the person Jesus revealed by *semeion*. Consequently, their interpretation had to be challenged, which included exposing their bias centered on self-interest/concern: "but because you ate the loaves and had your *desires* filled." Yet, the challenge process didn't stop here since the need was urgent. The Word continued to clarify his relational language and correct their referential language, seeking to change their perceptual-interpretive mindset (6:27-34). As they indicated an initial openness to change, the Word then disclosed his whole person in the nature and purpose of relational language; and he also defined the relational terms for the involvement necessary for relationship together (6:35-58). Sadly, "when many of his disciples heard *the Word's relational language and terms*, they said, 'This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?'" (6:60). So, their initial openness to change was closed by their rigid mindset formed by the reductionist workings of referential language, which selectively interpreted parts of the Word it could accept in referential terms. This is the nature and purpose of referential language with the primary focus on the quantitative from outer in; and the Word goes on to distinguish the whole-ly God's relational language composing the qualitative from inner out that contrasts and conflicts with its reduction (6:61-64).

This points us back to the vital relational message that Jesus communicated in his

questions above: his message centered on their/our person, how he sees them/us and how they/we see themselves/ourselves. The need for challenging our interpretations is heightened when we don't make a crucial distinction in "how you listen" (the Word's distinction, Lk 8:18). This distinction defines the ontology (or identity) of our person and determines our function in the following manner:

- When we listen *for* the words of God with the human brain, which includes using the human mind, we quantify our identity and function as a person merely from the outer in, and nothing more of significance is considered primary and accounted for, though not necessarily to the exclusion of anything secondary.
- When we listen *to* the words from God with the human heart, which includes using the brain and mind to integrate the whole person, we define our ontology and function in the primary significance of qualitative-relational terms from the inner out, though not to the exclusion of the quantitative secondary but always in this order of priority.

The embodied Word always requires us to be vulnerable to our whole person, and scrutinizing our interpretations of the Word is often more vulnerable than we would like to be. Hence, it's easier and more comfortable to stay within the limits and constraints of our brains.

The Basis for Challenging Interpretations

The words from God converge in the Bible, and its text unfolds in a historical narrative that frames the real story (neither fictional nor virtual) of God's actions in the universe and involvement with created life. Thus, interpreting the Bible must take into account this history. As Murray Rae states: "The Bible does not present us with a set of timeless or universal truths that can be abstracted from history but directs our attention to the God who makes himself known precisely through the particularities of history."⁴ At the same time, this historical account must be interpreted theologically—contrary to historical criticism—in order to fully account for God's vulnerable action and relational involvement in the human context, not to overlook accounting for the whole-ly God's ontology. The lack or absence of such accounting has allowed the reductionism of God, of the trajectory of God's presence, and of the path of God's involvement, all to human terms, shaping or construction—that is, reduced to the *common* of life prevailing in the human context, including its history. Thus, while historical input refines interpretation, along with form and literary input, it is neither the main nor the most significant basis for challenging interpretations.

⁴ Murray Rae, "Theological Interpretation and Historical Criticism," in Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas, eds., *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 96.

Moreover, interpreting the Bible isn't just about exegesis of texts, no matter how accurate that information may be. Exegesis alone does not give us whole understanding (*synesis*, as in Col 2:2-4) of God's presence and involvement, even though it may yield greater quantity of knowledge detailing that. Without minimizing its value, exegetical interpretations must be qualified by hermeneutics and integrated together. Hermeneutics is needed for that understanding to emerge; yet, the hermeneutic process also needs to be qualified in order to understand God as revealed in Scripture.⁵

Whole understanding emerges based on how God is revealed in Scripture—that is, based on God's communication for the integral purpose of self-disclosure distinguished by the relational words from God, rather than based on surrogates just transmitting information about God using the referential words of God. This distinction of how God is integrally revealed in and by the Word is essential for defining the primary basis to challenge interpretations, so that understanding can truly be determined. Making this distinction, however, has been ambiguous, ignored or simply not understood by most who engage the Bible, thereby rendering interpretations diverse, and understanding elusive.

It is unequivocal that the Bible as the text of God's words is polyphonic. That is to say, various different voices (human as well as heavenly) have been instrumental in echoing the voice of God. While these voices lend their particular nuance (e.g. contextual setting or horizon) to the text, each voice is only secondary to the primary of God's voice for composing the textual messages (i.e. the revelations of God's presence and involvement). Therefore, while it is important to recognize and account for these different voices, they (individually or collectively) neither define nor determine the relational communication of the words from God. When this essential distinction is understood without partiality, the Word is emphatically distinguished:

God speaks for himself; and whenever primacy is given to other voices in the text—as well as voices of methods of interpretation either 'behind the text' or 'in front of the text'—they subtly end up speaking for God instead of only echoing God's voice; thus, they speak for God merely with reference to the words *of* God rather than echoing the relational messages communicated by the words *from* God.

However, when the polyphonic sources are given their proper place in the Bible, the Word is echoed and highlighted such that the whole-ly God's vulnerable presence and involvement are fully interpreted in their relational significance—for example, as the evangelist John did in his Gospel. On this basis, these secondary biblical voices then also serve to help us interpret the primacy of the relational words from God communicated directly to us in relationship for the sole relational purpose to experience in relationship

⁵ For a discussion integrating hermeneutics and exegesis, see Matthew R. Malcolm, *From Hermeneutics to Exegesis: The Trajectory of Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2018).

together in our current context.⁶ Assuming Moses' voice in the Pentateuch, he teaches us not to focus on the information in the words of God but concentrate on the words from God communicated in relationship, that is, the primacy of face-to-face relationship (Ex 33:11-20, NIV). For Moses, the information of referential language wasn't sufficient for his faith, nor to base his theology and practice on such interpretations. The relational significance of God's voice could only be distinguished in relational language, so Moses held God accountable for God's presence and involvement in only relational terms: "If your presence *is not relationally involved* with us.... Now show me your glory *face to face*"; therefore later God would illuminate his relational involvement with Moses, which God then clearly distinguished in correcting others questioning Moses' interpretations (Num 12:6-8). This clarifies the primary basis by which interpretations need to be challenged for correction, just as Aaron and Miriam's were. Likewise for our clarification and correction, when Moses asked above "Teach me" (Ex 33:13) the primary of God's relational language, he clearly demonstrates for us the primary basis for interpreting the words from God—a relational teaching moment that should not be overlooked or ignored.

Without the primary basis for interpreting the Bible, our interpretations evolve with adaptations to our surrounding contexts somewhat analogous to "the survival of the fittest." This self-centering evolution is not surprising since it has been the normative dynamic from the beginning. In this adaptive evolution, the interpretations of God's words have been influenced by the surrounding context and shaped by human thinking, self-interest and concern ever since the primordial garden. Not understanding and accounting for this human bias in our hermeneutics has resulted in the existing diversity and multiplicity of interpretations—a consequential process distinguished even in ancient times (Eccl 1:18; 5:1-3,7; 12:9-12) and witnessed by the Word on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:17,25-27).

The Pivotal Challenge of Incarnated Interpretation

By the counter-relational workings of reductionism, referential language has evolved today to adapt much engagement of the Bible in what essentially amounts to **digitized interpretations**: interpretation that is quantified without the significance of qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness. What is seen in the Bible emerges from how it is seen by a digitally influenced and shaped perceptual-interpretive mindset lacking a real sense of qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness, even though it may reference the qualitative and relational in its thinking and information about the words of God. The resulting digital information has amassed in existing theology and practice to

⁶ David I. Starling discusses how the biblical authors themselves help us learn how best to interpret the Bible, in *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship: How the Bible Shapes Our Interpretative Habits and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

compose them effectively as “Now both thinner and lighter” (as declared by Moses in a cartoon depicting him coming down from the mountain with the Law tablets raised above his head)⁷—which is contrary to how Moses depended directly on God to “teach me.” This condition, and its antecedent outworkings, will continue and further evolve unless it is challenged by what I call **incarnated interpretation**. This challenge is pivotal for theology and practice today, pivotal both in its basis and for the need it addresses.

As the definitive text written in cursive (i.e. all connected), the Bible goes further and deeper than composing simply one story or single drama unified throughout. From its beginning the Word communicated the words from God on the whole basis in wholeness, which takes biblical theology further in understanding and deeper in biblical practice. And central to the Word is the incarnation that constitutes the pivot for the integral basis of the words from God, including communicated in the OT. Yet, for this relational process to unfold, the incarnation has to go beyond merely an historical event that gets formalized in doctrine for our theology and practice.

Throughout the incarnation the embodied Word challenged the theology and practice of Judaism that were based on the Hebrew text rather than the *original* language. Without the original language of the Word, the OT is fragmented from its whole basis in wholeness, and thus reduced to referential information about the words of God that are no longer written in cursive. This critical difference is observed in interpreting Deuteronomy as either the Book of Law or the Book of Love (noted previously). The Word embodied the latter in the qualitative relational significance pivotal for (1) God’s presence and involvement “In the beginning” and since, for (2) the whole basis in wholeness distinguishing the words from God through the OT and NT, and for (3) challenging interpretations of anything less and any substitutes, which currently compose much theology and practice. Therefore, both the validity and reliability of the Bible, biblical interpretations, and the theology and practice formed thereby, all pivot on the incarnation as well as rise in likeness on the basis of the **incarnated dynamic** of nothing less and no substitutes. If they are not incarnated accordingly, then they are not based on the Word’s whole basis in wholeness, and consequently are always subject to the incarnation’s pivotal challenge.

So, what does it mean to be incarnated? First of all, let’s be clear that this does not mean mere embodiment, which historically has undergone environmental changes—perhaps analogous to the environmental changes incurred by planet Earth.

The interpretation of the incarnation was the central issue challenged first by different persons in the NT, next in the early church, and then throughout church history. Basic to this issue is *who* and *what* distinguish the incarnation, which leads to the *how* of the incarnation’s significance. We need to examine our own interpretations of the incarnation in light of this critical challenge—a challenge frequently rehearsed in referential language that doesn’t get to the full meaning of incarnated.

⁷ From *Parade Magazine*, “Cartoon Parade,” 12/8/2015.

The incarnation was not merely a body that came to us—though Christmas tradition has centered on that—the embodiment of which was the topic of major theological debate in the early church. Yet, embodiment focused on the object embodied in contrast to the incarnated subject-person who was embodied. The *who* Jesus embodied was the whole of God, neither just the title nor name of God nor merely attributes of God. The fact of the *who* was challenged in the NT and denied, distorted, or simply rendered the *who* to a fact; and even as fact, the nature of the *who* continued to be debated in early church history, with nuances about the *who* as object that diminished or obscured the *who* as subject embodied only as the whole person. This overlaps into the next dimensions of the incarnation, which are integral to be incarnated.

Less central to this challenge and basic in this debate has been the *what* that Jesus embodied and enacted, along with the *how*. As the incarnation established the *who* of Jesus, he made imperative for those believing the *who* to “Follow me,” that is, follow the *what* of his whole person as *subject* constituted by whole ontology and function, not merely the *who* rendered to an *object* of belief. For the incarnated Jesus, the *who* is inseparable from the *what*, and to separate them would fragment his whole person and thereby reduce the whole of God constituted by the whole ontology and function of the Trinity. Yet, this separation is the most common interpretation of the incarnation by Christians, whereby the significance of being incarnated has been obscured or lost in their theology and practice. Furthermore, in this integral process to be incarnated, the *what* of the *who* is constituted solely by the *how*: Enacting whole ontology and function by the nonnegotiable relational terms of the whole of God’s vulnerable presence and relational involvement that distinguish the Trinity’s irreducible relational purpose and process of reciprocal relationship together in wholeness.

The incarnated Jesus, therefore, didn’t come to us merely with the embodiment of a physical body, but most basically and essentially he came as the subject-person who incarnated **the who, the what and the how of his whole person**, his Trinitarian person. Accordingly, the Word incarnated also the image and likeness of the Trinity for us to be incarnated in the image and likeness of God’s whole ontology and function.⁸ Neither one dimensional nor two dimensional, the incarnated Jesus integrates these three dimensions of Jesus’ whole person (in 3-D) on the Word’s whole basis in wholeness. Therefore, the incarnation is incarnated only when this whole person is the *who*, *what* and *how* Jesus embodied and enacted; and the *who* cannot be distinguished without the *what*, and only the *how* distinguishes the *what* of the *who*. The incarnated Jesus fully embodied nothing less than the *who* and *what*, and vulnerably enacted no substitutes for the *how*.

Accordingly and unmistakably, this incarnated dynamic constitutes integrally the *who*, *what* and *how* of the gospel on the Word’s whole basis in wholeness, whereby the good news offers the *who*, *what* and *how* for us to follow irreducibly and nonnegotiablely

⁸ I have expanded discussion of the Trinity in relational language in *The Face of the Trinity: The Trinitarian Essential for the Whole of God and Life* (Trinity Study, 2016). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

on the Word's basis. Not only, then, does this incarnated understanding challenge our interpretations of the incarnation, but it also challenges our interpretations of both the gospel and discipleship. So, is incarnated interpretation becoming too challenging for you?

The Word ongoingly clarifies and corrects any reductionism of the words from God in relational language, which then by necessity includes clarifying and correcting anything less and any substitutes of the whole of God and God's uncommon wholeness. When the LORD corrected faithful Samuel's lens defining how he saw to determine what he saw, God's lens was revealed to illuminate for all of us *how* God sees differently: "God does not see as humans see; they see from the outer in, thus partially and fragmented, but God sees from the inner out, thus integrally and whole" (1 Sam 16:7, paraphrasing God's qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness).

The words from God always illuminate God's whole basis in wholeness. And what is magnified in the communication of God's whole and wholeness is the experiential truth and relational reality that this is not only incarnated whole but also distinguished *uncommon*—thus distinguished from the *common* defining the human context and determining human life. The truth and reality are: The uncommon nature of the words from God unequivocally conflicts with the common, such that "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it *in its original relational language?*" (Jn 6:60) Indeed, it is much more palatable in referential language, even at the communion table as commonly practiced. That is also the existential truth of the presence and influence of reductionism in our theology, as well as the pervading reality of reductionism's counter-relational workings in our practice.

Incarnated interpretation, therefore, is not only a discomforting challenge for our theology and practice, but also a threatening confrontation of our identity and function that are contextualized by the common's culture. Thus, for this scrutinizing purpose, Paul made imperative the litmus test of "nothing beyond the who, what, how embodied by the relational Word, in order that his gospel is not fragmented with anything less, so that his followers' identity and function do not become fragmentary by any substitutes."

Perceiving Outsiders and Insiders

Throughout history, the identity of indigenous people has been relegated to darkness, making those insiders obscure to outsiders. Moreover, this identity even makes insiders ambivalent about who they are. Indigenous peoples have experienced this inequality from Western Christians through most of their missionary history, in which insiders suffered the inequity of being colonized by outsiders. On the other hand, Western Christians have experienced ambivalence about their identity as insiders in their own countries, which evolves from Christian ambiguity about who they are.

Any cloudy view of Christian identity descends from the perception of who are insiders and who are outsiders. As a person of color, I usually saw myself as an outsider. When you are asked by whites “Where are you from?” or told that “you speak English very well,” their perception of me would be only an outsider. Even as a Christian among Christian insiders, I also experienced these perceptions as an outsider.

This common experience makes evident that Christian perception of insiders and outsiders is typically not based on the whole-ly Word but rather based on a perceptual-interpretive lens influenced by the surrounding context. The contextual influence on Christians renders them in a theological fog, which makes ambiguous or obscure the relational reality of God’s response of grace constituting the whole gospel that makes no distinctions between contextual insiders and outsiders. Therefore, to counter the influence of surrounding contexts that Christians conform to, based on God’s relational response of grace Paul made imperative for Christians:

Be transformed from conformity to your surrounding contexts, so that “everyone among you will not think of yourself more highly as an insider than you ought to think, even if that’s acceptable and thus appropriate in your surrounding context” (Rom 12:2-3).

According to the Word, without the transformation constituted from the whole gospel, the surrounding context will prevail and Christian identity and function will readily conform to it as acceptable or appropriate. What, then, evolves is a biased perceptual-interpretive lens of who are insiders and outsiders, the diversity of which is critical to scrutinize for the significance of Christian identity and the integrity of Christian function.

The horizons (contextual field) of the human context and God’s context are mutually exclusive, with a single exception: if One penetrates into the horizon of the other unilaterally, thereby entering into the other’s context on the basis of One’s own terms. This reality illuminates both God’s context and the human context, both of which need to be further known and better understood. Christians need to examine their own horizon to know and understand their surrounding context’s shaping influence on their function, general thinking, and specific interpretations as Christians—and not assume that the horizon of God’s context has converged with theirs.

Contextualization has been a pivotal issue facing God’s people throughout human evolution. In Scripture, notably from the beginning of the OT, the people of God were exposed to a different context, which was distinctly contrasting and in conflict with God’s context, God’s whole and uncommon (whole-ly) context. This narrative, from the primordial garden through Israel’s history to the emergence of the church, describes the issues and consequences that evolved from this contextual encounter in everyday life with the surrounding contexts of the common’s world. Understanding these issues and

consequences of contextualization, including their significance for the identity and function of God's people, is basic for interpreting the Bible and a hermeneutic key for knowing and understanding God. Moreover, all of this that underlies contextualized humans both challenges as well as confronts Christian education in general and theological education in particular, calling into question what we are really learning about God. And the existing contextualization of Christians raises urgent concern for what is central to our education and the basis of our learning, whereby their causal source is determined.

Jeremiah was told to echo God's words communicated to his people, which illuminated their contextual shift evolving from the primordial garden: "For in the *beginning from my context*, I did not *communicate* to them or command them concerning sacrifices and other such secondary things to do" (Jer 7:22). Yet, throughout its ancient history, "sacrifices" was one of the main identity markers for the nation of Israel, which is even highlighted in the NT. So, how does this reflect the contextualized humans that evolved in and ever since the primordial garden? Two further ways.

First, being the holy nation of God's people was not enough to constitute Israel's identity. As noted earlier, when Samuel grew old and needed to be replaced, the elders of Israel implored Samuel to appoint a king over them instead, much to Samuel's alarm. He tried to change their minds, but they refused to listen because they were embedded in defining their identity as a nation-state just "like all the other nations" in Israel's surrounding context (1 Sam 8:4-10, 19-20, NIV). Their desire to be like those in the surrounding context made evident their evolution as contextualized humans.

Secondly, Jeremiah was told to repeat to them the relational words from God: "But this *relational imperative* I gave them, '*Relationally respond to my voice and I will be your God and you shall be my people; and be relationally involved in the primacy of relationship together only in the way of my relational terms*'" (Jer 7:23). They assumed that God's context had converged with their religious context and thereby were identified as God's people. But, they had shifted from the primary constituting God's context and became preoccupied with the secondary composing the surrounding human context; consequently, they had their identity shaped and their function reduced to the outer in—and how they transposed the Book of Love to the Book of Law. In this subtle shift, what was not apparent to them was obvious to God: They were contextualized humans "to be apart" from God's whole-ly context.

What is primary in human life has undergone fundamental changes; and the primacy now determining what's primary often differs from one surrounding context to another. What is primary for defining our identity and determining our daily function is the primacy given to the main surrounding context prevailing in our person and life together. The subtly or implicit primary used for this outcome is often not understood unless the determining primacy shaping this process is known. Contextualized humans don't evolve from a mere concept or from merely a theory abstracted from concepts. The

determining primacy we give our context shapes the primary used by all contextualized humans for their identity and function, evolving from the ways that particular context works out the life and practice within it and the significance given to those ways. This goes beyond merely a system of beliefs and values; even though such a system may have influence, that influence tends to be virtual by promoting ideals, which alone would be insufficient to contextualize humans. What does contextualize humans, and often irresistibly in key ways, is a specific culture of that surrounding context. Therefore, this culture composes the determining primacy we need to know, and signifies the primary determinant we need to understand, in order to scrutinize the extent of influence our surrounding contexts could be having on our identity and function, and thereby on how we see what we see in the Word for our theology and practice.

Contextualized by and in Culture

In everyday life, culture is not something we think about; we just assume it or take it for granted, if we even know it's there. Culture is present in every human context, however culture is defined and whatever shape a human context takes. Culture also has a particular identity, and, depending on your definition of culture, culture promotes an identity for the participants (active or passive) in that context, either by belonging to it or by association. When culture generates the identity of its participants, this becomes an ongoing issue of identity formation and maintenance—particularly as contexts intersect, which is the norm in human life and practice as well as the reality for Christians.

I define culture as inseparable from identity and function, and use the following working definition in our discussion:

Culture is the life and practice (in its various expressions) of a collective group (formal or informal, large or small) of persons, the distinction of which relatively both defines who and what they are and determines how they function, thereby being a primary source of their identity and determinant of their function—all of which can operate explicitly or implicitly in a subtle process. Culture is not about an individual person but a social dynamic of persons who belong and/or identify in a context together.

Since we all participate in some type of collective group, we are all part of a particular culture that defines our person and determines how we function—relatively speaking, of course. To this extent we are never free of culture and always apply our culture to our activities, even in biblical interpretation. Therefore, as the main determinant in our everyday lives, culture works overtly or covertly to encompass how we see what we see, how we do what we do, thus basically has primary say over how we

live what we live. The consequence of all this is: Culture is the contextualizing agent in that context, and intentionally or unintentionally we are contextualized by and in that culture, knowingly or not.

Examine this existing reality evolving exponentially in today's context, and tune in more carefully to what you see. In this high-tech world, "who" is the most common companion you see persons interacting with, wherever they are, whether in a crowd or alone, whether dining in public or at the family dinner table, or even while driving? That's right, the companion is a smartphone or similar digital device that preoccupies the primary interaction of many persons today. This is not just a modern phenomenon but the existential reality of contextualized persons living in and by the culture of their surrounding context—a culture that ongoingly shapes, constructs and reconstructs their identity while dominating their daily function, even when going to the bathroom. The culture of the high-tech world has only recently been recognized for its impact on persons, including rewiring their brains from as early as the formative years of childhood. Yet, it is not technology to blame here but its culture contextualizing persons accordingly.

From this micro level let's zoom out to the macro level to observe the growing systemic context of globalization. The rising tide of globalization is causing a flood of changes in modern societies, which has raised speculation about the sovereignty and autonomy of modern states.⁹ Globalization is having a pivotal impact both economically (positive and negative) and politically (responsive or reactionary); and its expanding efforts in general¹⁰ and for U.S. politico-economic policy more specifically¹¹ need to be recognized and understood. Whether we are aware of it or not, and no matter what we think about it, we all are being contextualized into globalization—contextualized by and in this fragmentary global culture. Despite any good intentions of human achievement for the purpose of so-called human progress, the engulfing reality of global culture is that it is not *whole* and thus will not contextualize humans in wholeness—just as observed in the efforts to build the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9). Having said that, globalization itself (like technology) is not the culprit here but its culture formed by those propagating it.

Whether at the macro level or the micro level, and the spectrum in-between, the culture contextualizing humans in those contexts is neither neutral nor inconsequential. Therefore, as the definitive determinant for human identity and function, culture needs to be understood, addressed, and changed accordingly in order for contextualized humans

⁹ This analysis of the process of globalization is undertaken by David Helm, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transitions: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). See also Peter Heslam, ed., *Globalization and the Good* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁰ Vinoth Ramachandra engages this discussion in *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

¹¹ A discussion of U.S. empire building and the role of evangelicalism is undertaken in Bruce Ellis and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, eds., *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008).

not to live in reduced human identity and by reduced human function—so that whole ontology and function can emerge. And Christians and churches are found in the middle of this formative process. One notable example, in the U.S. we are contextualized currently in a culture war that is amplifying a partisan divide, which has formed Christian identity and function according to its divisive distinctions. These divisive distinctions have fragmented Christians into insiders and outsiders among ourselves—an unavoidable consequence of diversity culturally contextualized.

Christians need to take to heart the definitive paradigm made axiomatic by Jesus (Mk 4:24), and tune in carefully to the culture in their surrounding context: The measure of culture you use will be the perceptual-interpretive mindset you get for the identity and function for both your person and others, either as insiders or outsiders. Whether we zoom out or zoom in, the common measure of culture has contextualized humans in a reduced measure of anthropology in general, and in the specific reduced measures first and foremost of gender (as witnessed in the primordial garden),¹² then of race, ethnicity, class, age, ableness, and other human characteristics and distinctions. Consequently, this is not only a contextual issue but a systemic problem, both of which Christians need to address.

The Culture of Contextualized Christians

Ever since the human context evolved from the primordial garden, the cultures formed in the surrounding contexts of humanity have never been neutral or inconsequential. Intrinsic to the composition of all cultures is the language of sin as reductionism, which underlies composing how culture functions in what it practices. Cultures interpret the language of sin in diverse ways, yet mostly in language without reductionism, even with acceptable revisions of sin as reductionism that appear to be favorable or at least neutral and inconsequential. Nevertheless, the language of sin as reductionism still underlies the composition of any and all cultures. This is the intractable condition of the human context that has evolved from the primordial garden, and that has been diversely adapted by and in the cultures of all surrounding human contexts thereafter.

Certainly, Christians have not been immune from being contextualized, and thus immune from having their perceptual-interpretive mindset shaped by the contextualizing culture. The explicit and subtle influence of a culture contextualizing Christians then shapes how we see what we see, how we do what we do, how we live what we live—which certainly has permeated how we learn what we learn and how we teach what we teach,

¹² This discussion of gender is made integrally by Kary A. Kambara, *The Gender Equation in Human Identity and Function: Examining Our Theology and Practice, and Their Essential Equation* (Gender Study: 2018). Online at <https://www.4X12.org>.

thus how our education is what Christian education is. Indeed, culture is neither neutral nor inconsequential; and as Christians participate in their surrounding contexts, we must never assume that we have not been or are not being reduced in our ontology and function by our contexts' cultures.

Likewise, therefore, the cultures of human contextualization cannot and should not be considered as vital parts of the diversity composing the common good integral to humanity. Yet, this misinformed and misguided perceptual-interpretive mindset of contextualization increasingly prevails in Christian thinking, theology and practice, and further pervades higher theological education and learning. For example, contextualization has become the present-day paradigm for missions and proclaiming the gospel, as if to say "the end justifies the use of any means." In theological studies, there is a growing movement to incorporate diverse contextualized views of theology, as if to assume that all these parts will contribute and add up to the whole understanding (as in *synesis*) necessary to know and understand God—not to mention as an antidote to Western theological hegemony. The results, however, have been composing merely hybrid theology and practice on a fragmentary basis, contrary to God's whole basis in wholeness—results emerging from naïve acceptance or unexamined tolerance of the surrounding cultural context (as the church in Thyatira, (Rev 2:18-20).

In most Christian thinking (whatever the level), assimilation into the surrounding context is arguably a given, since the common alternative of separation and/or isolation from the human context is considered either unrealistic or unreasonable for their theology and practice. Yet, assimilation into the surrounding cultural context comes at a price, which can only be paid by taking on that context's culture for one's identity and function (at least in its main aspects). Thus Christians seem to routinely embrace a prevailing culture, or at least readily take on elements of it, to define their identity and determine their function in key ways. But even paying that price comes with a further cost that includes the underpinning for cultures in the surrounding contexts of human life.

From the beginning, the condition prevailing in the human context is reduced ontology and function. This is the common's inescapable human condition that underpins the diverse cultures of our surrounding contexts, without exception in everyday life even though cultural theories may appear to be exceptions. Accordingly, this common condition is what human contextualization shapes, constructs and sustains unavoidably for those not clearly distinguished from the contextualized persons contextualized by and in that culture. In other words, the further cost for taking on that culture in our surrounding context is also to be reduced in ontology and function—perhaps with variations that simulate appearing unreduced. This subtle process evolves even inadvertently, even with good intentions for assimilating; nevertheless, the consequence is unmistakable:

Reduced ontology and function from God’s whole basis in wholeness, which for all Christians then becomes our default mode whenever we don’t consciously exercise our free will as subject-persons to choose to be different in identity and function from the contextualizing culture—that is, distinguished differently only in the image and likeness of whole-ly God.

So, the pivotal reality facing Christians in all contexts is the choice between these:

Either fall into the default mode of reduced ontology and function formed by the contextualizing culture of our surrounding context, or choose to counter that culture (not ideologically or merely pragmatically) in order to be distinguished both from that reducing culture and in whole ontology and function—because, unequivocally, the measure of culture we use will be the measure we get for our ontology and function, nothing more in our existential life and practice.

How we perceive insiders and outsiders is an ongoing consequential problem challenging for Christian diversity, the divergence of which effectively (1) widens the *gate* of the gospel and thus for claiming it, and (2) makes the *way* of following Jesus much easier—therefore, rendering the gospel’s integrity and discipleship’s significance contrary to the embodied Word (Mt 7:13-14). And the contextualized lens used for this comparative perception and value-measured interpretation is unremittingly confronted by the whole-ly Word. Further scrutinizing makes changing the nature of diversity essential, that is, the redemptive change of transformation, which will require a fundamental paradigm shift in theology and practice diversely contextualized.

Paradigm Shift in Theology and Practice

When diversely contextualized theology and practice are scrutinized, it makes Christians and churches vulnerable in their surrounding contexts because scrutiny leads to changing how the surrounding culture is engaged. In the culture of God’s people, the Word is unequivocal: “I will appoint Peace as your overseer [*pequddah*, to bring change] and Righteousness your taskmaster” (Isa 60:17, cf. Ps 85:10), therefore, “I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line (Isa 28:17, NIV, cf. Ps 89:14), *in order for my people to be distinguished in the surrounding context so that you will not be contextualized by its culture.*”

Allowing culture to be the main determinant for Christians at whatever level contradicts what Paul made imperative for Christians to be the only determinant in our life, both individually and collectively: “Let the *uncommon* peace of Christ rule in your *persons from inner out*, since as *whole persons* of one *church* body you were called to

wholeness” (Col 3:15). This was nonnegotiable for Paul: “Rule” (*brabeuo* in the imperative) means to judge and arbitrate, thus rule as the only determinant for our persons and life together—that is, the Word’s whole basis in wholeness (the Word’s uncommon peace of Jn 14:27) as the sole (“the One and Only,” Jn 1:18) determinant for the new creation persons of God’s whole-ly church family.

Furthermore, Christians allowing culture to assume primacy for operating as their main determinant in any way also conflicts with following Jesus not merely in our theology but notably in our practice—following where he is in the surrounding context. The relational path of Jesus is intrusive, intruding deeper into the surrounding human contexts, the contexts of the common, while integrally neither being contextualized by it nor tolerating it. By following Jesus, the first aspect of the prevailing (common’s) function that all his followers encounter while following him into these surrounding contexts is culture. Jesus’ intrusive relational path intersects with the pervasive workings of culture, and its influence emerges as the pivotal issues of Jesus’ engagement with culture.

What Jesus ongoingly exposed by his intrusive engagement and consistently made imperative for all his followers is this: The critical need for **the cultural shift** that he embodied and enacted in order to incarnate being distinguished from that culture while in its context. He summarized this critical cultural shift in his intersection with the surrounding context of Judaism and its prevailing culture contextualizing the identity of God’s people in reduced ontology and function:

“Unless your righteousness—that is, the relational term for distinguishing the whole-integrity of who, what and how you are in your person and relationships—*goes deeper than the prevailing righteousness of the leaders of that context, and thus is not distinguished from those practitioners of reductionism commonly associated with God, then you are not relationally involved in my realm of connection to enter the relational context of the kingdom of heaven*” (Mt 5:20).

The perceptual-interpretive mindset for this critical cultural shift does not emerge as long as its primary determinant subtly remains the culture of a surrounding context. So, how did Jesus embody and enact the cultural shift critical for us to incarnate being distinguished as his followers?

How Jesus engaged a culture in a particular context was always first with his own culture. Put in relational terms, Jesus always looked at culture theologically because that was his identity: the whole of who, what and how he was in the relational context and process of the whole-ly God. On the one hand, this was not unusual since engaging another culture from one’s own culture is an assumption by which all persons engage a different culture. Yet, on the other hand, Jesus only engaged a culture on his whole basis in wholeness; and we should never assume that his ongoing engagement was not so and

thus with anything less at times. More specifically, the Jewish Jesus engaged the Jewish culture but he was not assimilated in that culture. His whole identity was uncommon even to Jewish culture. Therefore, these are assumptions of our own that we have to understand and account for, even as we seek to further understand and more deeply follow Jesus, along with his culture.

The significance of all this for both our theology and practice is that Jesus integrally (1) embodied the whole-ly theological trajectory of God vulnerably into the human context, and (2) enacted his uncommon relational path in surrounding contexts only on his whole basis in wholeness. What he embodied cannot be separated from what he enacted; and *what* he embodied and enacted are distinguished only by *how* he embodied and enacted his identity and function in surrounding contexts in order to be whole-ly incarnated. Any separation causes fragmentation of wholeness, which Christian diversity is responsible for healing.

As Jesus embodied God's communicative action in the contexts of the world, he always enacted God's relational language with the language of love. Therefore, Jesus did not engage culture "to condemn" (*krino*, to discriminate between good and evil) the identity it generates, "but *to make whole*" (*sozo*, Jn 3:17) its life and practice influenced by reductionism. By the nature of its source, reductionism has always functioned against the whole since creation in the primordial garden. The reductionism intrinsic in culture specifically involved the ontology of the whole person created in the image of the whole-ly God for the relationships together created in likeness of the relational ontology of the Trinity, thus which are necessary in conjoint function to be whole.

Along with his identity as the light, Jesus' full humanity as the Son of man also fully affirms this creation. By the earthly human life made evident in Jesus' whole person, human life is sanctified (made whole-ly) in a qualitatively distinct relational practice that is imperative for all his followers to live and experience to be whole as God's family (as he prayed, Jn 17:19). Here again we see the importance of the cultural shift to the uncommon. Furthermore, their whole-ly life and practice is necessary to be able to live whole in the surrounding cultural context for the world to "believe" (trust) and "know" (experience) that the whole-ly God is extended to them in the relational language of love in order to be part of, and thus no longer "to be apart" from (as he further prayed, Jn 17:21-23). Only the uncommon intrusion of this ontology and function distinguishes God's whole family in the world, and it would only be uncommon on the basis of whole ontology and function.

The whole of Jesus, therefore, functioned to engage culture intrusively in the surrounding context for the following purpose: (1) redefine its influence from reductionism, (2) transform its counter-relational work of reductionism, and (3) make whole the human relational condition "to be apart" from God's whole. His purpose, however, could not be fulfilled if he assimilated into the surrounding culture, but only if he **accommodated** (not adapted or isolated) his identity and function in that cultural

context without letting it have determining primacy. Being accommodated and not assimilated in our identity and function as his followers is a critical distinction for the cultural shift to be a relational reality in any surrounding context.

Jesus' Integral Approach

Jesus' engagement of culture for his purpose to be, live and make whole involved an irreducible relational process; integrally, this whole relational process was specific to the uncommon relational context of his identity/ontology and function in the whole-ly God. The dynamic involvement of this integral relational process cannot be categorized by typologies of the relation of Jesus and culture. The classic typology of Richard Niebuhr, for example, is of initial interest, yet this is a static framework insufficient to account for Jesus' intrusion on culture.¹³ This includes variations or refinements of his typology.¹⁴ The dynamic relational involvement of Jesus in the surrounding contexts of the world was an ongoing process of engaging culture both to be whole and to make whole, which also required being vulnerable with his person and intrusive in his relationships in order to make qualitative relational connection with those contextualized by culture.

A different framework is needed to account for the multifaceted nature of this process and to understand the whole of Jesus' various actions engaging culture, which then also points to the need for a new perceptual-interpretive mindset. This involves three issues that Jesus ongoingly addressed to help us define why and how he engaged culture and aspects of it. Basic to his approach, Jesus vulnerably involved his whole person in the life and practice of a culture to function for the invariable and thus nonnegotiable purpose to be whole and to make whole. Therefore, the integrating theme "to be whole" defined his actions engaging culture, which were contingent on one or more of **three qualifying issues** involving a culture's life and practice:

1. *Compatibility, or congruence*, "to be whole"—thus, there is no tension or conflict with the life and practice of a culture, and in this consonance further relational involvement is for deeper development of the whole.
2. *Partial overlapping areas* "to be whole"—some areas and/or practices in a culture are affirmed as part of God's general revelation and common grace, and what is basic to humanity as God's creation; thus this acceptance allows room for flexibility in some secondary differences to cultivate and nurture the whole, but other areas and practices are in tension or conflict "to be whole" and, nonnegotiable, still need to be redefined, transformed and made whole.

¹³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* 50th-anniversary ed. (N.Y.: Harper San Francisco, 2001).

¹⁴ See, for example, Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager, John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), and also Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, (Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 93-110.

3. *Incompatibility* “to be whole”—thus, there is conflict, not merely tension, with no room for flexibility in dissonant differences; therefore, this dissonant situation/condition is nonnegotiable and needs to be redeemed to be made whole.

All cultures involve more than one of these qualifying issues, and engaging various aspects of a culture’s life and practice usually involves an interaction of these qualifying issues. Culture then cannot be responded to in its surrounding context with a predetermined set of behavioral responses—which tends to seek merely the conformity of others—but rather only by being predisposed with the relational involvement to be whole and to make whole. This is how Jesus engaged culture and why.

In the process of cultural engagement, Jesus in full identity appears to transcend culture (cf. Niebuhr’s categories, “Christ against culture”), yet while always relationally involved in the surrounding cultural context (cf. “Christ in paradox” or “Christ of culture”) with what amounts to his minority identity (cf. “Christ above culture”) to make it whole (cf. “Christ the transformer of culture”). The relational interaction of his full identity with his minority identity (signifying his whole-ly identity) integrally constitutes the qualitative distinction necessary to be distinguished whole in the surrounding cultural context, which is indistinguishable without also being uncommon (cf. Lev 10:10). Without Jesus’ uncommon whole basis in uncommon wholeness, there is neither basis to make whole culture’s life and practice, nor the significance to be compelling for the diversity of the human condition.

The ongoing process of engaging culture both to be whole and to make whole involves this integral process of vulnerable and intrusive relational involvement unique to Jesus’ relational path into the surrounding contexts. Yet, even the term ‘relational’ is insufficient for *what* Jesus embodied and *how* he enacted his identity and function. Relational has become a more visible adjective (perhaps buzzword) used today for theology and practice, but the word’s increasing usage is not because of the critical cultural shift essential to be relational in *how* Jesus was and continues to be with his whole-ly person.

The depth of his relational involvement is most evident in how he was engaged to counter the reductionism composing culture in the human context from the beginning, and to neutralize and transform culture’s determinant influence. The embodied Word ongoingly communicates to us clarification and correction in his relational language of love in order to be together intimately in his realm of connection. Yet, whenever his relational love language is transposed to referential language, it loses the relational significance of how the Word speaks of love and enacts it. Furthermore, be alerted: When he speaks for himself rather than others speaking for him, he speaks in tough-love relational language, thus neither idealized nor romanticized. Therefore, it is imperative for all of us to “consider carefully how you listen” (Lk 8:18), and “pay attention closely to what you hear” (Mk 4:24).

We cannot be followers of Jesus without following his whole-ly person on his intrusive relational path into our contexts and engaging those cultures as he embodied and enacted—nothing less and no substitutes for his uncommon whole basis in wholeness. Therefore, the critical cultural shift is not optional for us but, simply, essential to “Follow me” because to follow him is always on his relational terms and never revised by our terms, even with good intentions.

Jesus never assimilated into a surrounding context by and in its culture. He always accommodated his identity and function in that cultural context without compromise. Thereby, Jesus’ engagement of culture in the surrounding context was always in congruence with, and thus the definitive extension of, the whole-ly God’s thematic relational response of love to the human condition to make whole his creation. This is the irreducible and nonnegotiable function of the whole-ly God’s relational work of grace only for new covenant relationship together in love, which extends *into* the diversity of his church family on his intrusive relational path.

Therefore, this relational outcome will extend into the diversity of Christians and churches that make no assumptions about the culture of their surrounding context, and thus function in relation to that culture by the three qualifying issues. When the conscious resolve of this ongoing relational process does not clearly distinguish the minority (uncommon) identity of Christian and church ontology and function, Christians and churches by default become co-opted by prevailing cultures and thereby seduced in their theology and practice to follow an incomplete (fragmentary, not whole) Jesus on a different path—the pivotal issue facing Peter at his footwashing and his post-resurrection interaction with Jesus about the language of love.

Critically then, “Amend your ways and your doings *from inner out* and let me *be involved* with you in this *surrounding context*.... For if you truly *undergo the critical cultural shift*, then I will *be relationally involved* with you in this *context together*” (Jer 7:3-7).

The Culture of Our Theology and Practice

It is imperative that Christians discover their perceptual-interpretive culture, so they can understand the mindset used to identify who they are and also whose they are. The same perceptual-interpretive culture is the main determinant for their theology and practice, which overlaps with and interacts variably with diverse traditions (cf. Mk 7:8).

Christian theology and practice have long been dominated by Western culture and related traditions. The main determinant for this still-existing condition is culture, not merely Western interpretations of theology. This prevailing culture certainly has not been neutral and has been obviously consequential for global Christianity—just as all cultures are neither neutral nor inconsequential. Whether in the global North or global South,

regional and local contexts' cultures have the same effect on theology and practice, even though a southern context may compete with the West to be the main determinant. Regardless of where, the pivotal issue is: Whose culture determines our theology and practice, and thereby, does our theology and practice call for the critical cultural shift embodied and enacted by Jesus?

Christians outside the global North would rightfully say “Yes, indeed!” Yet, those Christians cannot substitute their own culture as recourse for their theology and practice, that is, without also hearing Jesus rightfully and emphatically say “Yes, indeed!” in calling for the correct cultural shift.

The subtle consequence of any and all perceptual-interpretive cultures in the surrounding context is to displace followers of Jesus to a different path than Jesus' relational path—just like those on the road to Emmaus (cf. Mt 7:13). To be on a different path than Jesus has major consequences. In contrast to what Jesus embodied in his whole person and enacted in how he functioned whole-ly, persons are reshaped from inner out to outer in, and relationships are reconstructed accordingly with secondary matter to substitute for what is primary; and on this reduced basis, church practice also is established and extended in the academy. We cannot ignore the role culture plays in these consequences because its seductive influence is far-reaching on shaping our person, our relationships, and our churches and academy.

Consider further, it is vital for us to examine church practice of worship and what determines its shape, including contemporary worship and music—as the popular church in Sardis had to be awakened to (Rev 3:1-2). How congruent is this worship with who and what the Father seeks in those worshipping him (Jn 4:23-24)? And how much does our worship correlate to what Jesus critiqued of worship on his whole basis in wholeness (Mt 15:8-9)? We cannot assume that the seductive influence of culture is not present, has not diminished our worship,¹⁵ and has not co-opted us from the primary, the primacy of reciprocal relationship together without the veil, and indeed has not removed us from the intrusive relational path of Jesus. Such an assumption mirrors the assumption from the primordial garden that “you will not surely *be reduced*.”

Besides the global church, this also raises a serious challenge to the multicultural church today—wherever it might exist or be considered as *the* church model—and whether the basis for its composition needs the critical cultural shift. More urgently, what prevails in your theology and practice, the secondary or the primary?

The palpable Word with the Spirit corrected the church in Thyatira to expose the reality that “you tolerate *at best and assimilate at worst the surrounding cultural context and form a subtle hybrid in your theology and practice, notably with epistemological illusions of the Word and ontological simulations of his identity and function*” (Rev 2:20).

¹⁵ To better understand the shaping influence of culture on worship, see Kary A. Kambara, *A Theology of Worship: 'Singing' a New Song to the Lord* (2011). Online at <http://4X12.org>. See also *Hermeneutic of Worship Language: Understanding Communion with the Whole of God* (Worship Language Study, 2013). Online at <http://4X12.org>.

Then the Word's perceptual-interpretive lens was clarified: "All the churches (*including the academy*) need to know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will respond to each of you *accordingly*" (Rev 2:23).

Whenever and wherever Christian diversity is contextualized in a surrounding context, its identity and function mirror that culture. Accordingly, whatever the distinctions of Christian diversity, they also mirror the inequality and inequities of the surrounding context to compromise the integrity of Christian theology and practice. Therefore, indeed, the Word makes "justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line" for the diversity of our theology and practice in order to distinguish their consonance from dissonance, whereby they integrally with the Word "will proclaim justice to *human diversity*...until he brings justice to victory" (Mt 12:18,20). And the gospel we claim and proclaim must be composed on this irreducible and nonnegotiable basis.

Yet, the good news of the gospel has been reported in various ways, with selective facts, and with nuances of its truth. In this historical process, the gospel has even become variable good news composed by alternative facts and virtual news that have augmented the gospel outside the boundaries of its theological trajectory and relational path (as in Mt 7:13-14). For example, popular today is the good news composing forms of a prosperity gospel. What is rarely reported in these contexts, however, is the bad news of the gospel. Obviously, no one wants to hear bad news, especially if we have good news to focus on. As a counter-alternative to such a selective gospel, some would consider a social gospel as reporting the difficult part of this news. Yet, the bias of a social gospel also has distorted or fragmented the whole gospel in a similar way with its typically reduced theological anthropology and weak view of sin, such that it too is not on the same theological trajectory and relational path as Jesus (cf. Mt 7:21-23).

The conflation of the gospel with variations in one way or another has either rendered the primary significance of the gospel to a secondary significance (by inflating or reducing it), or has revised the truth (embodied Truth) of the gospel to a fragmentary reality. Either consequence lacks the *whole* theological trajectory and the *uncommon* relational path of Jesus' gospel of peace, which are irreducible and nonnegotiable (Num 6:26; Jn 14:27; 16:33; Eph 6:14-17).

It is within this historical process that our traditions have formed as they evolve with culture. Thus, the traditions of God's people have been variable in significance, the state of which should be neither routinely accepted nor rejected using a bias. The critical issue for tradition has been to blur the distinction between God's relational language and human referential language—the former only for communication in relationship by Subject God and the latter merely to transmit information about Object God (the object of faith). Referential language is composed by the information formed (not necessarily created) from defining efforts of self-determination, which transposes God's relational terms for relationship together (i.e. God's rule of law) to an end in itself (e.g. Mk 7:1-4).

This quantified information then loses its relational purpose and process by (1) being reduced to doctrine with assumptions about God’s authority, and (2) being observed (or conformed to) under the protective image, illusion or delusion as God’s rule of law, with a variable bias composing its related Rule of Faith (as in Isa 29:13; Mk 7:5-9,13).

In the manifesto summarizing his teaching that distinguishes his followers (Mt 5-7), Jesus definitively clarifies his relational language and corrects the referentialization of God’s rule of law (5:17-48) and the *object*-ifying of their Rule of Faith (Mt 6-7). His teaching in relational language and his face-to-face interactions enacted the gospel also in this bad news. For Jesus’ gospel, the good news emerges with **the bad news**, and the good doesn’t unfold without taking to heart the bad. Simeon, who embraced the whole gospel as the Spirit revealed to him, clearly distinguished the gospel’s good and bad news, and he anticipated its impact on those in the tradition of God’s people:

“This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in *God’s kingdom*, and to be *the significance* that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Lk 2:25-35).

Indeed, the relational path of Jesus’ gospel intruded on the traditions of God’s people, “and his own people did not accept him” (Jn 1:10). Even though their traditions included enough similarity to accept Jesus, their theology and practice were incompatible with Jesus. The incompatibility of prevailing religious tradition was ironic but not surprising, and should alert us to existing traditions today. The gospel Jesus embodied was *right* for the heart of human life, and he enacted integrally the bad and good news to make *right* the human condition. His gospel is incompatible with injustice, and their tradition (and those today in likeness) lacked justice as defined by the relational terms of God’s authority and rule of law—regardless of their conformity in referential terms. Therefore, their Rule of Faith could not embrace the whole gospel enacted by Jesus, which exposed the injustice of their tradition. In his gospel, accordingly, Jesus clarified any misconceptions and corrected any illusions with the undeniable paradox:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring *common* peace, but a sword....” (Mt 10:34-36)

The bad news of the gospel not only antecedes the good news but necessarily qualifies what the good news is that is essential for *whole* justice and *uncommon* peace—the whole-ly relational outcome of Jesus’ gospel.¹⁶

¹⁶ The issues for justice and peace are fully discussed in my study *Jesus’ Gospel of Essential Justice: The Human Order from Creation through Complete Salvation* (Justice Study, 2018). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

The status quo in many sociocultural contexts is maintained by an honor-shame code of behavior that controls persons to function mainly by avoiding shame. Traditionally, however, the shame in an honor-shame framework has primarily an outer-in focus and thus revolves around secondary matters. Though this focus assumes it has primary consequences of being considered bad, wrong, unfair or unjust, it is insufficient shame to get to the roots of the human condition. The depth of shame (*bosh*) from the primordial garden is what has composed and will always compose the status quo of human life at all levels of its human condition. *Bosh* signifies the primary consequence from reductionism that is intrinsic to the common denominator of injustice. This depth is the shame of the status-*ing* in quo that the bad news of the gospel exposes in the status quo's oft-subtle lack of **just-nection**. Only just-nection constitutes the *right* order of relationship together created by Subject God for subject persons having the *right* relational connection in the Trinity's likeness—the relational connection required for justice of the human order.

The status quo represents the existing state of the human relational condition in general and our human relational condition in particular. In our surrounding contexts, there emerges a conventional thinking (wisdom) that establishes (formally or informally) a collection of normative values and practices, which explicitly or implicitly maintain the existing state of our human relational condition with this collective conscience. These norms define the parameters for how to think, see human life, and act daily. Since they are based on limited knowledge or biased information, however, status-*ing* in quo limits how we think, distorts how we see, and constrains how we act. (Recall my experience with a Western gospel.) Depending on the surrounding context, that particular status quo enforces human rights to the extent that its normative framework allows.

The shame of the status quo emerges when God's created rights are denied and those privileged rights are prevented—in spite of the extent of permitted rights in surrounding contexts—which is consequential for persons fulfilling their inherent human need, including even being seduced by illusions of virtual fulfillment (as in Gen 3:6). This variable condition is the consequence whenever God's rights are reduced and/or those privileged rights are renegotiated—both of which evolve from persons in reduced ontology and function, those comprising the status quo. Whatever the variant state of this existing condition, the status quo consists of the (our) human condition needing to be made *right* and thus of persons (individually and collectively) needing to be transformed at all levels of human life.

The good news of the gospel alone is insufficient to address the status quo. The reality is that the proclamation of the good news has made little change (if any) on status-*ing* in quo—likely because an existing cultural-political bias doesn't perceive the status quo as needing change. Only the bad news of the gospel exposes the shame of the status quo and its need to be changed at its core. This integrated news is the whole gospel that

targets the common denominator of injustice to raise up the just-nection required to fulfill the inherent human need. The gospel's relational outcome enforces the God-vested and privileged rights of all persons, all of which elude the status-*ing* in quo in practice if not also in theology.

This was Nicodemus' awakening when he pursued the gospel as a key member of the status quo (Jn 3:1-15). His affirmation of God's authority and rule of law was composed by referential language, so he was shocked by Jesus' relational language that he needed to be transformed in order to be *right* under God's rule. Yet, his normative framework limited how he thought and distorted how he saw Jesus' imperative for him to be transformed, making the gospel incredulous for him: "How can these things be?" Jesus shook up the status quo with the bad news to expose his shame: "You are a teacher of *the status quo* and yet you do not understand these things?" The bad news opened Nicodemus to his shame so that he could receive the good news to make *right* his human condition and be transformed to the whole justice and uncommon peace of the new creation.

The status quo involves the most subtle extension of the original shame of the inaugural persons in creation. They shifted from the primacy of their whole persons in relationship together in likeness of Subject God ("both naked and were not ashamed," Gen 2:25) to the secondary of their persons from outer in, which thereby reduced them to human distinctions in fragmenting comparative relations ("they were naked and *covered the primary with the secondary in order to hide their shame*," Gen 3:7,10). This shame breaks the just-nection created in God's likeness and thereby disables persons from fulfilling their inherent human need. Any yearning for its fulfillment or dissatisfaction from being unfulfilled is readily distracted or suspended by the preoccupation with normative values and practices of the status quo—ongoingly rendering persons and relationships in virtual illusions.

In Christian diversity, the shame of the status quo is subtle and rarely acknowledged, because its normative framework is advocated, supported or sustained with complicity by the majority (notably a moral majority). Yet, the prevailing shame of persons in reduced ontology and function, who lack justice in the human order of relationships, is always consequential for denying or squandering the vested and privileged rights of God's rule of law. And the bad news of Jesus' gospel always holds the status-*ing* in quo accountable and intrusively exposes its shame of broken just-nection, so that the good news of the whole of justice can emerge and its uncommon peace will unfold—with nothing less and no substitutes in our theology and practice as the sentinels of human life.

The reality of the status quo facing us, and hopefully the reality challenging us to change, is the normative framework shaping or even composing our theology and practice. For example, what forms the identity of persons and their function in daily life (not just at church), and where do we get our model for everyday relationships?

Conventional sources for these shape how we see and think about right-wrong, good-bad, fair-unfair, and just-unjust. The reality unavoidably facing us and challenging us is this: How we live everyday either falls within the normative framework of the status quo or claims the embodied Word's whole-ly gospel—the latter then countering the status-*ing* in quo of the former, which Nicodemus would testify shakes up the status quo at the core of its theology and practice. In other words, we cannot claim the whole-ly gospel without the bad news, and to only assume we have claimed the good news is to live within the status quo of our theology and practice—which can be the status-*ing* in quo in the spectrum encompassing both conservatives and liberals in the global North and South.

The Word's gospel distinguishes the depth of just-nection and, conversely, just-nection distinguishes the heart of Jesus' gospel. This just-nection was constituted by the Word in the beginning, and the Word embodied and enacted the integrated gospel in relational response to the common denominator of injustice to transform its shame to just-nection (Jn 1:1-3,14). Those of the status quo, however, could not claim the good news because they wouldn't receive the bad news (Jn 1:4-5, 10-11). Again and again, status-*ing* in quo involves the subtle ongoing extension of the recurring shame from the primordial garden.

Therefore, Jesus' gospel challenges how we think and see in our life, and it requires us to have the mindset to interpret daily life and the perceptual lens to see everyday life in its true context. This mindset and lens involve having the following understanding of the human person and the sin of reductionism that emerged from the primordial garden and evolves today in the status quo:

Human persons and their reductionism extend from the primordial garden in a **pseudo-dialectic** that constructs the normative thinking, perception and action composing the status quo, which unfolds in three steps.

1. The pivotal juncture when persons in just-nection become disconnected from their primacy in *right* relationship together as whole persons from inner out (as in Gen 2:18,25; 3:7).
2. The point of disjunction when persons take an opposite (contrary, counter or conflict) recourse in simulating relationship merely by *association* rather than depth of relational involvement, whereby they substitute virtual connections to blunt or divert the shame of relational disconnection (extending Gen 3:7-10).
3. This pseudo-dialectic, however, doesn't reconcile the first two steps in a new synthesis but results in a different human order from creation, a mutating variant difference in which (1) persons are reduced from the inner-out primary to the outer-in secondary of life and (2) relationships are fragmented by persons' outer-in distinctions and stratified according to the order's inescapable comparative process that consigns persons to a scale of better-less, desirable-undesirable,

good-bad—all of which converge to form the normative values and practices framing the status quo in human inequality with human inequity.

The normative framework of the status quo—which pervades (if not prevails in) our theology and practice—biases our mindset to interpret daily life and distorts our lens to see everyday life in the existential reality of its existing context, so that it keeps us from the true context of human life and its essential order integrally (1) created by the Word, (2) embodied by the Word in relational response to the (our) human condition, and (3) enacted by the Word with the bad news-good news gospel to reconcile persons to the primacy of just-nection. Just-nection is the only relational outcome from the intrusive relational path of Jesus' integrated gospel, without which is a different gospel having no significance except for the status quo (cf. Gal 1:6-7).

The consequences of Christian diversity are unavoidable and will continue to evolve, notably with cultural traditions still assumed as the primary determinant for Christian identity and function over the whole-ly Word, which is relegated to a secondary source for their practice. Until we willfully and humbly shift in our perceptual-interpretive mindset and thereby vulnerably change the diversely contextualized theology and practice, the status quo will persist to render the gospel fragmentary and transpose its new creation into Christian identity distinctions of the *old*.

The Secondary or the Primary

The Jewish Christians of the early church perceived themselves to be insiders and Gentiles as outsiders. There were obvious differences between them such as ethnicity and language (e.g. Aramaic or Greek), but these were only secondary distinctions. Nevertheless, Jewish Christians considered their distinctions primary, whereby they imposed their cultural-religious practice on Gentile converts, to which they had to conform in order to belong as Christians. This became the pivotal issue in the early church, which the early church leaders needed to resolve or their diversity would be divisive and thus divergent from the embodied Word (Acts 15).

Whenever the primary is not distinguished from the secondary, then what's primary to God gets conflated with what's secondary for humans. This displaces what's primary for God's people with the comparative distinctions prevailing in surrounding contexts. Human distinctions were the critical issue underlying the problems in the church that Paul faced, fought against, and worked for transformation. As discussed earlier, Paul confronted Peter face to face for distinction-making in the church that disabled the measuring line of justice in the church; the consequences (1) enabled Christians to practice injustice such as inequality and inequity, and thereby (2) counter the bad news and contradict the good news of the whole gospel.

On the essential basis of the Word's rule of law for human life and its order—embodied in the narrow Way, the qualitative-relational Truth and the whole-ly Life—God made no distinctions in the ontology and function of persons in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity. This is the only basis that distinguishes the church in its whole identity and function, the existential reality of which is fulfilled just in the primacy of relationship together vulnerably equalized without distinctions (as in Acts 15:9). Christian leaders who practice anything less and promote any substitutes—even while assuming those alternatives are biblical—serve effectively as shepherds functioning as disablers of the justice created by God and, at the same time, as enablers of injustice composing the common norms of everyday life, thus as shepherds who scatter rather than gather (Mt 12:30). The prevailing reality of life in all human contexts is this evolving condition:

Human distinction-making has always been the underlying issue at the roots of injustice and a prime symptom indicating that the bad news in surrounding contexts is being absorbed as acceptable, appropriate and thus normative.

Therefore, Christian leaders notably need to recognize the presence of such disparate counter-productive workings in their theology and practice, or be subject to subtly falling into becoming shepherds and enablers of injustice—those who are disablers of justice even with their good intentions, as Peter demonstrated.

Just as social media users become readily preoccupied and then easily entrenched in the secondary, Christians and churches become occupied, preoccupied and entrenched in the secondary, both in their theology and practice—I, myself, frequently get distracted by the secondary. This secondary focus and bias are evident most in the distinctions Christians and churches make in, among and between themselves, just as the early disciples appeared obsessed with having the distinction as “the greatest.”

Whatever the distinctions used by Christians and churches to compose their identity, how those distinctions function can only be secondary at best. Since God makes no distinctions between us and the relational outcome of the whole gospel equalizes distinctions (as Paul made conclusive, Gal 3:26-28; Col 3:10-11, cf. 2 Cor 5:16), then we are all faced with the crucial question urgently needing our response: In the existential diversity of global Christianity, what do our distinctions actually mean for our theology and practice? And as we vulnerably respond to this question, we come to a crossroads that faces us with the pivotal question imperative for us to answer: What do we do with all the distinctions diversely composing Christian diversity?¹⁷

¹⁷ Jarvis J. Williams has a limited answer to this question in *Redemptive Kingdom Diversity: A Biblical Theology of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021).

Chapter 5

Repurposing Diversity

“Believe me, the hour is coming when *your people* will worship the Father neither *in your diverse way* nor in *their diverse way*.” “But the hour is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth *beyond diversity*.”

John 4:21,23

“My peace be with you. As the Father has sent me *into the world*, so I send you *into the world*.”

John 20:21

Righteousness will go before him and will make *the way* for his steps.

Psalm 85:13

When Peter rejected what the embodied Word vulnerably revealed to him about the Messiah, he steadfastly claimed the primacy of his interpretive lens that was biased by his religious culture (Mt 16:21-23). When Peter denied the embodied Word from vulnerably washing his feet for intimate relational connection, he rigidly held onto the customs of his sociocultural context—the contextualized bias of which prevented him from seeing Jesus’ whole person and thus from being relationally involved with Jesus in a new way (Jn 13:6-8). When Peter refused to be exposed to and partake of anything he perceived to be divergent, Peter strongly opposed the Word’s imperative because of both his contextualized and commonized bias that avoided contact with the practice of human diversity (Acts 10:9-15).

How would you assess Peter’s biases? How prevalent do you think that the source of these biases also influences Christian theology and practice today—either to avoid diversity like Peter or to promote diversity?

By changing Peter’s perceptual-interpretive framework and lens—a struggling process for Peter—the Word was also integrally repurposing Peter’s own diversity and his practice regarding others’ diversity.

Transposing Diversity

The core of human diversity (both created and evolved) is composed of different ethnicities, languages, domestic contexts and experiences in life (cf. Gen 10:5,20, 31-32).

But at the heart of that life are persons and relationships that should not be defined and determined by their different distinctions. Yet, God never eliminates the diversity associated with persons and relationships. From the beginning, God’s covenant people was designed and enacted to be composed with this diversity; the pivotal change of Abram to Abraham clearly distinguished God’s people as composed by “a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:1-7) God made this relational imperative for Abraham to enact: “Walk before me and be blameless” (*tamiym*), that is, be whole in your person and relationships, without fragmenting distinctions.¹ Abraham’s whole person enacted this relational imperative with his relational response of trusting God (the relational significance of *believing*), which distinguished Abraham’s righteousness (Gen 15:6, cf. Rom 4:1-3).

This pivotal change, however, has not been enacted in the essential purpose that God constituted for the diversity of God’s global people to be one covenant family together. Therefore, the existential purpose of diversity that has evolved necessitates transposing diversity to God’s essential purpose. As was necessary for Peter, the initial change requires transposing the contextualized and commonized biases influenced by tradition (both cultural and religious). This initial change of transposing tradition is essential in order to fulfill God’s imperative purpose for the diversity of global Christianity, so that it constitutes the whole-ly integrity of God’s covenant family—not the notions of the global church that pervade theology and practice.

God strategically took action to fulfill the covenant promise to Abraham as “the father of a multitude of nations,” the action which was fulfilled by the embodied Word. God’s strategic action is summarized in a key interaction that revealed God’s strategic movement in human diversity. In a simple moment of everyday life, Jesus made uncommon connection with a common *other* in the surrounding context (Jn 4:4-27). This Samaritan woman was likely also marginalized by her own ethnic cohorts, because she was married five times and currently living with another man. Jewish cultural and religious tradition made obvious that Jesus’ action was counter to prevailing theology and practice—as evident by his disciples’ reaction (v.27)—which deferred to ethnic and gender distinctions at the priceless expense of the qualitative heart of persons and relationships in their created primacy. Jesus’ strategic action, however, continued to reveal vulnerably *who* he was and *what* he embodied, and thereby his relational purpose:

1. To repurpose the existing diversity, notably with transposing the diversity defined and determined by cultural and religious tradition.
2. To restore persons and relationships to the primacy of their heart in wholeness without distinctions that reduce and fragment them at the core of how God created them.

¹ J. Daniel Hays discusses the distinction of race that evolved in the diversity of God’s people in *From every People and Nation: A biblical theology of race* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, IVP: 2003).

Therefore, the embodied Word connected face to face with this outlier with the relational imperative to “trust me relationally” to repurpose the divergent distinctions as practiced in your diverse tribe, so that you can fully embrace the heart and wholeness (“spirit and truth”) of who you are and whose you are, belonging to as an integral member of God’s family: “Trust me...*your people* will worship the Father neither *in your diverse way* nor in *their diverse way*”; thus, the time for turn-around change “is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in *heart and wholeness, without the fragmentation from diversity*.” In this strategic narrative, her ethnicity, gender and language were not negated but transposed from the outer in to the inner out, so that those distinctions were repurposed from the primary to the secondary for defining her identity and determining her function. On this transposed basis of her diversity, her repurposed person trusted the Word for this relational outcome, whereby she vulnerably shared the whole gospel with her repurposed tribe (4:28-30, 39-42).

In the relational embodying of God’s strategic action, the Word transposed prevailing cultural and religious traditions, whereby he repurposed their distinctions for identity and function to, at best, a secondary significance that would neither reduce nor fragment persons and relationships from the primacy of their qualitative heart and wholeness from inner out—the primary that the Father seeks for the relational involvement from persons, peoples, tribes and nations composing the diversity of God’s covenant family. The embodied Word fulfilled God’s covenant promise and constituted the relational reality of its relational outcome for “a multitude of nations,” whose diverse distinctions would no longer define their identity and determine their function because “God, who knows the human heart...has made no distinction between them and us” (Acts 15:8-9).

This strategic narrative embodying the gospel and the tactical narrative of the early church (in Acts 15) are transforming for the diversity composing God’s people—the covenant family of a multitude of persons, peoples, tribes and nations. The pivotal changes in these narratives transposing tradition and repurposing distinctions integrally center on the diversity issues in worship and who is given the Holy Spirit. If the Word embodied changes in what is fundamental to worship and the work of the Holy Spirit, then what other diversity issues could you think of that should not be transposed and their distinctions repurposed? So, for example, if you are privileged to have a dominant identity as Christian Jews in the 1st century, or if you bear a marginalized identity as the Samaritan woman, then what changes would the Word make essential for your distinctions and related matters of diversity?

The early disciples demonstrated the need for change, which is evident in the limits and constraints of their perceptual-interpretive lens due to a contextualized bias. In this narrative, their bias continued to reduce Jesus’ person to the outer in (extending from

v.27), who needed to “eat something” (4:31). But, Jesus transposed their distinction-making and made it imperative for their lens to *look beyond* their bias (the significance of *eparate*, v.35), in order for them to repurpose their diversity according to the interdependence of key distinctions that serve to bring together diverse persons, peoples, tribes and nations in the wholeness of one family constituted by the Word (4:32-38). In this latter section of the strategic narrative, Jesus shifts to tactical action for the relational purpose to make whole both his followers and the discipleship in their theology and practice.

Therefore, indeed, “the time is now here” for turn-around changes in Christian diversity in order to entrust our person’s identity and function to the whole-ly Word and Spirit, so that our persons and relationships will be distinguished whole-ly by embodying the Word’s gospel in likeness.

Diversity’s Purpose for Following Jesus

Persons follow Jesus for different reasons, and this diversity entails why it is necessary for the core process of repurposing Christian diversity. Even though discipleship could be stated in its theology, the actual practice of discipleship is typically omitted, ignored, understated or misapplied in Christian diversity. These practices are not by accident, rather they are the default practice of followers who don’t actually follow the embodied Word. Even when their theology may include the Word, the purpose of discipleship is either misunderstood or a malpractice because, in existential reality, it doesn’t truly follow the whole-ly Word. Whether in the global North or South, we all need to examine our purpose in following Jesus.

We are at a critical stage in our practice of discipleship. To use the analogy between pop music and a pop quiz, each has a different meaning for “pop” that serves a different purpose, which cannot be conflated with each other. The diversity of discipleship, in effect, has become analogous to embracing a diversity of pop music, while assuming that such *pop* discipleship meets the standards of a biblical pop quiz. A pop quiz of the embodied Word, however, will reveal a different meaning and purpose of discipleship that cannot be conflated with any diversity of pop discipleship.

For the embodied Word discipleship is fundamental, without reduction to anything less or negotiation with any substitutes, and thus with no redaction of the Word’s relational terms for discipleship. Yet, with many who identify with Jesus, the purpose of following him is diversified. This is not surprising but evident from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry embodying the whole gospel. A pop quiz may prove helpful in the learning process of discipleship.

After people experienced Jesus feeding the 5,000, many of them followed him (Jn 6:1-24). Why do you think they followed Jesus? Was it for a religious purpose, or was the purpose political? Jesus clarified their purpose for discipleship by exposing the truth that they followed him merely for the benefits—that is, benefits that would satisfy their diverse appetites (6:28). Whatever those appetites are, if following Jesus benefits for having them filled, this is a purpose worth pursuing. Such a self-serving purpose was demonstrated also by the church in Laodicea, whose self-serving identity was based on all the benefits the church had accumulated (Rev 3:14). This kind of purpose for discipleship underlies claiming a prosperity gospel, the proclamation of which has claimed a global diversity of followers.

In the early movement of the Way (before the term Christian was used), an outlier named Simon became a follower (Acts 8:9-13). He was very attentive to his discipleship mentors and wanted to become just like them. Why do you think he became a follower? And what was his purpose to be like his mentors? For Simon, the Holy Spirit was an end in itself that served his means for status (Acts 8:14-19). Peter exposed Simon's purpose and confronted him for the turn-around change needed for his heart, which Simon didn't take responsibility for but subtly displaced on Peter (8:20-24). Status is more of an implicit purpose, unlike Simon's explicitness, that many Christians have for discipleship, especially among leaders and those having more active roles. This purpose is demonstrated by the church in Sardis, whose ministry gained an esteemed status for them. But, the whole-ly Word set the record straight with a "Wake up!" call, because the work of their discipleship was not according to the wholeness of the Word's relational terms and purpose for following him (Rev 3:1-2).

Do you think the Word's wake-up call applies to the underlying purpose many Christians have for their practice of discipleship? Whenever any discipleship has a **performative purpose** (even with the intention of serving), it follows a path of *conformity for relevance* in a surrounding context rather than following the relational path of the Word—a path wider and easier than the Word's. Perhaps a performative purpose becomes as if discipleship is the stage in the theater of life's diversity. Hence, gaining recognition on such a stage implies competition, which results in *value disparities* measuring diversity's *presentation of self*. So, how many churches measure up to the church in Sardis, and what is their value otherwise?

The path of discipleship conforming to the surrounding context is witnessed in an initial pivotal interaction that Jesus had with some of his devoted followers. The interaction will demonstrate how imperative it is for disciples to integrate their secondary involvements into the primary of their reciprocal involvement with Jesus, and thus not to allow their discipleship to be distracted, occupied, defined, shaped, preoccupied and determined by *the reverse dynamic of anything less or any substitutes*. Since this

divergent dynamic is a common practice among Christians, it is indispensable for all Christians to integrate the secondary into the primary by ongoingly engaging the **process of integrating priorities (PIP)**.

In human life and practice, including for most Christians, the surrounding context (namely culture) commonly establishes the priorities of what is important, thus what should receive our primary attention. To the extent that our identity (even as disciples) is shaped and our function (even in discipleship) is determined subtly by these priorities, we have to recognize that we are products of our context and times—and are not engaging in PIP. This subtle defining dynamic became a source of contention between two of Jesus' close followers (sisters Martha and Mary, Lk 10:38-42), whom he loved along with their brother Lazarus (cf. Jn 11:5).

When defined by what they do, these sisters are commonly characterized as different types: Martha oriented to a life of activity and service, while Mary by a life of contemplation and worship. We get a deeper and different understanding of their persons as Jesus interacts with them face to face in relationship. How they function in relationship together reveals where they truly are, and also deepens our understanding of the relational significance of Jesus' whole ontology and function.

Their first interaction takes place because “Martha welcomed *Jesus* into her home” with his disciples during his later Judean ministry (Lk 10:38-42). The term for “welcomed him” (*hypodechomai*) denotes a distinct act of caring for them by Martha, which she apparently initiated; also, identifying it as “her home” is unusual when there is a male in the family. Her hospitable and kind action is no doubt well received by this likely tired and hungry group, and could easily have been the basis for significant fellowship. But fellowship is a context in which the function of relationship is critical. Martha certainly cannot be faulted for what she does (practicing hospitality and serving Jesus), yet she needs to be critiqued for *how* she does those deeds, and thereby scrutinizing the nature of her discipleship. The crucial implication of the definitive context to which Jesus connects this family involves not just any kind of relationship.

For persons like Martha, thinking relationally is always more difficult when the surrounding context defines persons in fixed roles and confines them to the performance of those roles—the performative purpose defining discipleship. The non-fluid nature of their sociocultural context makes individuality outside those roles an aberration; consequently the norm not only constrains the person but also limits (intentionally or inadvertently) the level of involvement in relationships. These barriers make the function of relationship critical for Martha since she is a product of her times—something we all can identify with in one way or another.

The person Martha presented to Jesus is based on her role and what she does, which she seemed to perform well. By defining herself in this way, she focused quite naturally on her main priority of all the hospitable work (*diakonia*) to be done, that is, her

service or ministry (*diakoneo*, Lk 10:40). This work, on the one hand, is culturally hers to do while, on the other hand, it is an opportunity for her to serve Jesus. Yet, defining her person by what she does and the role she has also determines what she pays attention to and ignores (using the lens from her perceptual-interpretive framework) in others, and thus how she does relationships with them—the prevailing bias that predisposes all of us. More specifically, Martha stays within the limits of her role in relationship with Jesus, whom she relates to based on his role, all as determined by the traditions in her local context. In other words, Martha does not engage Jesus and connect with him in the quality of relationship made accessible to her from his whole and thus primary context.

Given her terms for discipleship, a controversy emerges as Martha enacts her discipleship of serving. She creates the controversy with her terms, which she imposes on Jesus to center on for what's primary to her: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the *servicing* by myself? Call her then to help me" (10:40).

The issue strongly raised by Martha also involves the sensitive matter of gender, which will fully unfold shortly with her sister Mary. Since the person Martha presents to Jesus was based on her role and what she does in performing it, Martha doesn't connect with Jesus in the depth of relationship made accessible to her from the primary relational context of Jesus' vulnerable presence and involvement with her—that is, in his intrusive relational path of the whole gospel. Since his gospel didn't change her limits and constraints, this person and her relationship with Jesus can be seen clearly in their second interaction when Lazarus died (Jn 11:1-40).

In this second interaction Martha quickly extends herself again to Jesus when her brother died (Jn 11:21); she appears not to lack in initiative. Her opening words to Jesus are exactly the same words (see Greek text) Mary would share with him in their encounter moments later: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (v.21, Mary in v.32). Yet, while expressing her discouragement and seemingly holding Jesus accountable, in the same breath she qualifies her words with an indirect statement based on her assumption: "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him" (v.22). Whether she is suggesting or requesting that Jesus do something, her indirectness is probably true to cultural form by not asking Jesus (Master, Teacher) for a favor directly. Furthermore, Martha stays within the limits (functional barriers) of relationship between men/rabbi and women. Her indirectness evokes from Jesus a simple yet personal response of what will happen: "Your brother will rise again" (v.23), implying his relational involvement with them. Since Jesus had already taught about the future resurrection from the dead (Jn 5:28-29; 6:39-40), Martha must have learned that lesson as referential information earlier for her theology, making reference to it here (v.24)—another assumption shaping her person and relationships. These words by Martha are what a good student would be expected to say. On the surface of Jesus' response, he then seems to take her on a short theological exercise, yet he is really trying to make deeper relational connection with her at the vulnerable level of her heart—

“believes in me,” the intimate relational work of trust (vv.25-26). Martha responds with a clear confession of faith (v.27) but without the intimate relational connection with the whole person of her faith, who is kept at a relational distance as she goes back to call Mary. Later, even her confession is called into question, as she is tested relationally by reductionism: the fact of the situation vs. the person of her faith (vv.39-40).

Consciously or not, Martha struggles with the shaping influence of her surrounding context, and this indicates the extent to which the whole gospel has penetrated her life. The priorities of Martha’s local context limits her identity to provincial terms from outer in and consequently constrains her person from being able to function from inner out and to engage Jesus accordingly—that is, both compatible and vulnerable to his person. How Martha is defined by her sociocultural context also determines the function of her person, which predisposed her to Jesus and biases how she does relationship with him. As a product of human contextualization, she shapes the relationship together with Jesus in commonized ways. With this cultural-perceptual framework, she pays attention to Jesus primarily in his role as Lord and Teacher but overlooks his whole person in this interaction; she concentrates on serving Jesus but ignores being relationally involved with him, as evidenced in the first interaction. Consequently, she neither exercises her whole person from inner out nor experiences her whole person with Jesus in the primary function of relationship imperative for his followers, which Jesus later made paradigmatic (Jn 12:26). As a substitute for what is primary, Martha occupies herself in what is secondary—not necessarily unimportant (as hospitality and serving Jesus evidence) yet clearly secondary to what is primary.

At this point, examine reflectively what you just witnessed in Martha, as if preparing for a pop quiz. With all her dedication and good intentions, Martha essentially related to and served Jesus with reductionist substitutes and practices, thus demonstrating her weak view of sin and reduced theological anthropology. In terms of how she related to Jesus under the influence of reductionism, what she paid attention to and ignored about both her person as well as Jesus’ person, including about their relationship, Martha inadvertently functioned to reinforce counter-relational work. Such practice takes place all too commonly among God’s people, even while serving Jesus. Consequently, discipleship ongoingly needs to be scrutinized in Christian diversity.

This raises the concern about what it means to serve him and a pervasive issue we readily practice when serving Jesus: defining ourselves by serving, and thus being focused primarily on the work to be done while guided by a servant model. Jesus says “whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be” (Jn 12:26). In these unalterable relational words he communicates the necessary condition to serve him is to follow him and be where he is; that is, this is the function of relationship in ongoing intimate involvement with his whole person. Serving does not come first to define what it means to follow Jesus. The word “to serve” (*diakoneo*) comes from the word for minister, servant, deacon (*diakonos*) and has the emphasis on the work to be

done, not on the relationship between Lord and servant. This transposes the primacy of relationship to a secondary priority based on defining human persons by reduced ontology and function.

This is a vital distinction for all his followers. Because in defining what is necessary to serve him, Jesus is also clearly definitive about what is insufficient to serve him: to focus primarily on the work to be done, or on related situations and circumstances, no matter how dedicated we are or how good our intentions. Jesus did not discount the particular service Martha was doing but *how* she engaged it. *How* we serve is just as important as whether we serve or not. Therefore, any reductionist substitutes and practices for serving him are not an option. For all his followers, Jesus makes **paradigmatic for serving** and imperative for discipleship: *the function of intimate relationship together as the primary priority*—which is not understood in John 12:26 by referential language but only in the relational language of Jesus’ relational messages about (1) his person, (2) our person, and (3) our relationship.

Unfortunately, Martha continued to be conflicted in her discipleship, still remaining in the limits and constraints defining her person and determining her relationships. In their last time together at another dinner given in Jesus’ honor, Martha continued to stay in her traditional place among the women to serve, even though the dinner was not in her home (Mk 14:3; Jn 12:2). Whether she was still occupied by the secondary is not clear; but she did not complain about Mary not serving, who was now even more uncommonly distinguished face to Face with Jesus in the primacy of relationship to be discussed below (Jn 12:3; Mk 14:6).

The discipleship purpose of serving is a complex process to navigate in the contexts of everyday life, which is compounded by the diverse serving engaged in Christian diversity. The embodied Word unequivocally clarified the process, so that his followers don’t get misdirected by a serving purpose at the expense of the primary involvement in relationship together (nonnegotiable in Jn 12:26). Transposing the secondary (as important as it may be or appear) over the primary is a default condition that sincere, serious or dedicated Christians readily fall into. Thus, the Word also corrects this misleading and misguiding purpose in order to repurpose its diversity, just as he did with the dedicated serving of the church in Ephesus (Rev 2:2-4).

The Journey Repurposing Discipleship

Martha’s journey was limited and constrained, in which she had difficulty changing because it engaged a dynamic synthesis of conforming and gender. Her discipleship purpose of serving was slow to be repurposed by the Word’s “there is need of only one *priority*” (Lk 10:42). Women have a difficult time sorting this out to repurpose their lives, with all that is expected or even required of them. Nevertheless, “Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

In a totally unexpected way, not only to Martha but also to the other twelve disciples with Jesus, Mary chose to follow Jesus on his intrusive relational path for the primacy of relationship together: “Mary has chosen the *primary*” (10:42) and she “sat *vulnerably involved* at the Lord’s feet and listened *carefully* to what he was saying” (10:39). Perhaps for us today this seems reasonably the right thing to do, but it was shocking in her time. Her dynamics even for today are extraordinary; that is, Mary engaged in **uncommon function** that went beyond both what was common in her surrounding context and what was common in the other disciples’ function. Past or present, Jesus’ disciples are not distinguished until their function is uncommon from the common in their everyday life, whereby their identity and function constitute whole-ly disciples.

Mary’s choice was not a simple one to make. She cannot be characterized merely as a different personality type from Martha, which predisposed her to extend herself to make better connection with Jesus. In these two interactions Martha actually demonstrates more initiative than Mary. They also were both constrained by their sociocultural context to the same fixed role. Mary had neither the privilege of an optional role nor could she be an exception. This is the reason Martha legitimately expected Mary to be like her, and why she tried to manipulate Jesus (“Lord, don’t you care...”) to make Mary fulfill her role (Lk 10:40). What was culturally hers to do was culturally also Mary’s.

Moreover, household roles and expectations were only part of the pressure Mary faced in her surrounding context. Mary seemed to ignore the work (*diakoneo*) that was culturally hers to do and chose instead to engage Jesus in a manner not customarily available to women. That is, she also goes against the religious culture by sitting at Jesus’ feet in order to be taught by the Rabbi (Lk 10:39); this is a privileged place forbidden for women and reserved only for men, particularly disciples (note also, that serious disciples usually were training for leadership). This takes place during an important period in Jesus’ ministry when he has intensified his private teaching of his disciples in preparation of their forthcoming leadership. Imagine then what his disciples thought (or even said in protest) when Mary sat next to them. Surely, at least, some must have said to themselves: “What is this *woman* doing? Who does she think she is?” On the other hand, if they accepted her actions, her person would have been defined at the bottom of their comparative scale—as the least among them since these disciples were concerned about “who was the greatest” (Mk 9:34; Lk 22:24).

Yet, Mary is willing to risk ridicule and rejection (even by Jesus) by going beyond any religio-cultural constraints in order to pursue the person Jesus. She effectively doesn’t allow reductionism to control her life and merely do what is expected and comfortable—that is, to diminish her person and limit her relational involvement. By

her uncommon choice, she clearly acts only on what is important and necessary: the whole person in the function of intimate relationship together. Jesus fully receives her person for this relationship and, in openly doing so, teaches his disciples not only a lesson on the relationship-specific priority of discipleship but also on the relationship-specific function of leadership—lessons noticeably absent in theological education today.

At this pivotal point in the tension and controversy, Jesus both clarifies the issue and corrects the practice of discipleship: “You are *concerned* and *preoccupied* by many *secondary* things, but only *the primary* is needed for *whole disciples and discipleship*”—the primacy of relationship together in face-to-face intimate involvement—and “Mary has chosen what is *primary over the secondary*, and it will not be taken away from her” (10:41-42, NIV). Not only will the primacy of intimate relationship together be neither taken away nor reduced, but with face-to-face involvement the relationship will grow more deeply together. This experiential truth and relational reality will unfold as the narrative continues.

As we follow the narrative of these disciples, it would be helpful to pause with a pop quiz in order to consider which of them has received and is responding to the embodied Word’s gospel. Which one and why so? The most intrusive outcome of his gospel is the change it brings to persons and relationships. How much change it brings is directly correlated to how deep the gospel penetrates our persons and relationships. We commonly make assumptions about the gospel in our theology and practice, which bias how we see others theology and practice; and such assumptions with their biases are active in the diverse discipleship enacted in this total narrative. The gospel of God’s whole face is vulnerably present and relationally involved; and the specific Jesus that disciples use will be whom they follow in their discipleship. How would you describe that Jesus for each of them?

The primacy of relationship is inseparable from discipleship as defined and determined by Jesus, especially for those who are committed to serve him (unavoidable in Jn 12:26). This necessarily involves the call to be redefined from outer in to inner out, transformed from reductionism and made whole in relationship together—in other words, **the gospel of transformation to wholeness.**² For Martha, who shaped relationship together as a hospitable servant of Jesus, this implied her need for redemptive change. Though she took a small step to connect initially with Jesus in their second interaction, she needed to be redeemed (set free) to be involved in the primacy of whole relationship together with Jesus as Mary was. Unlike Mary, this change was too hard a choice for Martha to make decisively.

² An expanded discussion of this whole gospel is found in my study *The Gospel of Transformation: Distinguishing the Discipleship and Ecclesiology Integral to Salvation* (Transformation Study, 2015). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

Mary's discipleship emerged in this primacy and continues to grow in the depth of her involvement with Jesus. Her whole person functioning in intimate relationship with Jesus is even more evident as we see them in further interactions. Returning to Lazarus' death and their second interaction, Mary quickly goes out to meet "the Teacher" who has asked for her (Jn 11:28-29). When she sees him she says the same opening words as Martha earlier (vv.32,21). These are her only spoken words, but not all she communicates to Jesus. When she sees him, "she fell at his feet" (v.32) and says the above while "weeping" (v.33a). Mary makes her whole person vulnerable and fully shares her heart (likely including some anger) with Jesus, which Martha doesn't seem to do even with the same words. This points to the non-verbal relational messages qualifying their words that Mary communicates profoundly with Jesus, thus deeply moving his heart to make intimate connection with Mary (vv.33b,35,38). In those relational messages about her person, Jesus' person and their relationship, Mary vulnerably opens her person from inner out, withholding nothing (even the negative) from Jesus, and simply lays her person bare before his person whether it is appropriate or not. This is not a time to be restrained or to be measured in her relational involvement in any way, but for their persons to make deep intimate connection. In these moments, she experiences her Teacher (*didaskolos*) more deeply and comes to *know* him as never before—the relational outcome of intimate friends. Their intimate connection is qualitatively distinct from the connection between Martha and Jesus moments earlier. This is the relational outcome in redeemed relationship of the whole person functioning in intimate involvement together. This relational outcome is what Jesus saves and calls his disciples *to*, which the whole gospel does not limit to what he saves us *from*.

The difference between Mary and Martha that unfolds in this defining narrative cannot be explained as the natural diversity among Jesus' disciples. That would assume a God-given diversity, which would be contrary to the disciples chosen by God and counter the relational significance of Jesus' call. Such so-called natural diversity, therefore, has opened the hermeneutic door to interpret the diverse condition of existing disciples and their discipleship as positive expressions to affirm. This bias of Christian diversity is growing in popularity even though the diversity may reflect fragmentary persons and relationships in reduced ontology and function rather than signifying the change of the gospel reflecting the wholeness of God. Once again, *how much change the gospel brings hinges on how deep the gospel is allowed to penetrate our persons and relationships*, and that's why these interactions are pivotal.

Up to now the twelve disciples appear to be innocent bystanders in this defining narrative. A more accurate description, however, would identify the relational distance that the Twelve maintained during these interactions—in measured involvement characterizing their ongoing discipleship—likely to avoid their own discomfort with the relational issues involved. That is about to change in the next interaction the two sisters had with Jesus.

As further evidence of Mary's continued growth in the primary of relational involvement with Jesus, this narrative keeps unfolding in defining relational terms. Mary deepens her intimate connection with Jesus in a third interaction, which illuminates an immeasurable depth of how vulnerable her whole person is made to Jesus' whole person (Jn 12:1-8, par. Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9). We need to pay attention to the growth of her involvement as a distinguished disciple sitting at Jesus' feet with attentive listening of her whole person, because now she goes beyond this level of involvement to the deepest relational connection imaginable with Jesus' whole person—beyond even the level of intimate friends in their second interaction. To enact this involvement Mary again makes another hard choice. As she cleans Jesus' feet, Mary's action might be considered customary for guests to have their feet washed at table fellowship; if this all it were, Jesus would not have magnified it (Mk 14:9). With the cost of the perfume (worth "a year's wages," v.5, NIV) added to her decision, she again acts contrary to prevailing cultural form and practice to literally let her hair down to intimately connect with Jesus—inappropriate conduct for both of them—and humbly with love attends to his needs. Mary is engaged in the deepest relational work of a disciple, which Jesus defines clearly for his disciples as "a beautiful (*kalos*, in quality and character) thing (*ergon*, work of her vocation) to me" (v.6; Mt 26:10, parallel account) because her action unfolds in the primacy of relationship with nothing less of her whole person and no substitutes for the depth of her relational involvement. On this whole and uncommon relational basis, she responds unmistakably distinguished to "follow me."

Mary's whole person from inner out, in distinct **person-consciousness** (not centered in self-consciousness) with its lens of qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness, perceives Jesus' whole person without distinctions of "Teacher and Lord" (cf. Jn 13:13)—which also demonstrated her *syniemi*, *synesis*, and *epignosis* of God's whole presence (as Paul clarified for the church, Col 2:2-4). Not restrained by self-consciousness (as many of us are) her whole person thereby responds to his innermost person (cf. Jn 12:27; Mt 26:37-38). In this relational context and process with Jesus, the whole of Mary's person from inner out, without the human distinction of gender and the secondary distinction of disciple, steps forth. Yet, her whole person could not be celebrated until she broke through the constraints of this dominant distinction and went beyond the limits of this secondary distinction in order to shift from self-consciousness to person-consciousness. Once again, her person further acts contrary to prevailing cultural form and practice, demonstrated boldly by letting her hair down to intimately connect with Jesus—which is uncommon conduct for both of them that necessarily distinguishes the whole gospel's relational outcome and Jesus' call to be whole and live whole together.

Mary's action demonstrated the most relationally significant practice of *diakoneo*, in which she served Jesus while intimately involved with his person more than ever before. She gave her person to Jesus, and Jesus not only received her person but also

received *from* her person. This continued to contrast with Martha's *diakoneo* (Jn 12:2), though not to diminish that kind of service but repurpose it. Yet, we need to understand the ongoing hard choice of function involved here.

The ongoing uncommon choice of how she was going to function was pivotal for Mary, as it is for all of Jesus' disciples. Mary grew further in her person and experienced more of this relational outcome, because she would not allow the counter-relational work of reductionism to prevent her—which is the common influence limiting and constraining Christians—from this opportunity to make intimate connection with Jesus face to face. Without the restraints of reductionism on her heart, she seized the opportunity of the vulnerable presence of Jesus' whole person (as he said, “you will not always have me,” 12:8).

Love functions this way, it always makes the person and the relationship most important—regardless of the need and work to be done. That's why Jesus made it definitive: “I desire *the relational involvement of love*, not sacrifice,” which we all need to learn (Mt 9:13). This is how Jesus functions with us and how he wants us to follow him and be with him. Thus, once again, the accessible Jesus not only received Mary's person for intimate connection in the priority of their relationship, but he also clearly makes this relational process more important than even ministry to the poor—though not reducing this ministry to outer-in serving because this involvement like Mary's is how poor persons (among others, including Jesus) need to be served. Apart from Judas Iscariot's motives (Jn 12:4-6), this was important to learn for the disciples who tried to reprioritize Mary's act (Mt 26:8-9).

It was critical for Mary to embrace person-consciousness of her whole person over a pervasive self-consciousness of merely parts of her, and to engage its lens of inner out instead of a prevailing outer-in lens in order to affirm *personness* (not self or the individual) and celebrate whole ontology and function. Equally important, this was necessary for the distinctions attached to her own person in order to live whole and thus be able to perceive and respond to Jesus' whole person without distinctions—those barriers preventing intimate relational connection. If Mary doesn't embrace personness and celebrate her whole person, she doesn't embrace the innermost of Jesus and celebrate his whole person defined beyond those parts of what he does (even on the cross) and what he has (even as God). In other words, without Mary's conscious action in personness this interaction cannot unfold with the significance of the whole-ly relational outcome distinguishing the Word's gospel, that is, only the gospel of transformation to wholeness.

The common choice of function the twelve disciples made was not only contrary to but in conflict with Mary's uncommon choice. This hard choice of her function signified the redemptive change of the gospel that penetrated, encompassed and integrated her whole person and relationships, the freeing change which had yet to become an experiential reality for the other disciples.

In spite of the experiential truth of the gospel unfolding, the other disciples object to such involvement together since they are focused on the outer in of self-consciousness, which gives priority to the secondary of servant discipleship over the primacy of relationship together (Mk 14:4-5). There is no celebration for them, only the obligation of duty (serving the poor, cf. “fast and pray” at the first new wine table fellowship, Lk 5:33-39). Even the taste of new wine is only a memory for them, as Jesus’ whole person is overlooked (notably at this critical point) and rendered secondary to serving (Mk 14:7, cf. Lk 5:34). Jesus’ rebuttal in relational language is revealing and magnifying.

Jesus stops his other disciples from harassing her and defines clearly for them that Mary is engaged in “a beautiful thing to me” (Mk 14:6, NIV). It is misleading, if not inaccurate, to render Jesus’ words “performed a good service for me” (NRSV). Jesus is not speaking in referential language focused on the secondary of servant discipleship. “Beautiful” (*kalos*, quality) and “thing” (*ergon*, work of vocation or calling) signify the qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness of Mary’s work. Yet, what is this work that Jesus deeply received and the other disciples rejected? First, Mary was not focused on the quantitative from outer in and thus not in self-consciousness about breaking cultural form or the expense of the perfume. Nor was she concerned about performing a good service. Her person-consciousness was focused on the qualitative from inner out, thereby focused on the whole person and the primacy of relationships. Her “beautiful thing” involved nothing less than the qualitative sensitivity and no substitutes for the relational awareness of her **relational work**, which she engaged vulnerably and intimately not *for* Jesus or even *to* him but directly *with* the whole of Jesus in reciprocal relationship Face to face to Face.

As Mary celebrates the whole person (both hers and Jesus’) without outer-in distinctions, she involves her person with Jesus’ in what truly signifies being “naked and without shame” (as originally created, Gen 2:25), that is to say, vulnerable and intimate without the relational distance and barriers signifying the self-consciousness of “naked and covering up” (and related face-masks, as substitutes for being whole, Gen 3:7). Mary celebrates being “naked and without shame” in the relationship together constituted in the beginning, fragmented from the beginning and now being reconstituted to wholeness. This celebration is not just a further taste of the new wine fellowship composed by Jesus but the celebration of its flow shared vulnerably and intimately as family together, the new creation family ‘already’ (Jn 14:18,23; 17:21-23). Therefore, the significance of her involvement and Jesus’ response must be paid attention to because it initiates this relational outcome of new relationship together in wholeness without the veil—the veil (the holy partition) that Jesus is soon to remove to constitute God’s new creation family from inner out without distinctions (2 Cor 3:16-18; Eph 2:14-22; Gal 3:26-28; 6:15; Col 3:10-11). And even though the theology had yet to be formulated for Mary, its functional significance was whole-ly embodied by her.

Mary's significance unfolds as she (1) celebrated Jesus calling her to personness, and (2) celebrated the relational work of her primary vocation with the qualitative depth of her whole person without distinctions, in reciprocal response to Jesus' whole person for the primacy of relationship together in wholeness without the veil, in order to (3) be vulnerable and intimately involved with the whole and uncommon God to celebrate life together in God's whole family—and therefore fulfilling the challenge *of* the whole profile of God's Face and *for* the face of our compatible response and congruent involvement in nothing less and no substitutes of Face-to-face-to-Face relationship together. This constitutes the essential journey repurposing discipleship that all of his followers are accountable to navigate in the diverse contexts of life.

Mary's whole theology and practice illuminate the keys for celebrating God's wholeness, which is the only peace that the Word gives to his followers (Jn 14:27). In this relational reality, her qualitative hermeneutic lens, her heart in the innermost of ontology, and her function from inner out are the keys both to engage God's relationship-specific context and to be involved in God's relationship-specific process necessary to celebrate the whole person without distinctions, new relationship without the veil to be whole together, and the whole and uncommon God in vulnerable and intimate reciprocal relationship Face to face to Face—all with nothing less and no substitutes. And don't make the biased oversight the disciples made, her person-consciousness with qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness in the primacy of relationship together was distinguished from the other disciples' self-consciousness engaged in secondary matter over the primary.

The contrast of the disciples in this narrative is, on the one hand, revealing of fragmentary (as in diverse) disciples and discipleship, and, on the other hand, defining for whole-ly disciples and discipleship—both of which are directly correlated to how deep the Word's gospel has penetrated our persons and relationships to repurpose the diversity of Jesus' followers.

The dynamics of the qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness of Mary's relational work converge to compose the above three-fold celebration. Her relational work provides the hermeneutical, ontological and functional keys to celebrating the wholeness that emerges solely from the relational outcome of the whole gospel. At this stage, the other disciples are still on a different relational path from Jesus, engaged in a fragmentary gospel while (pre)occupied in a renegotiated calling of self-conscious secondary work. Their lack of qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness, with related relational distance, has an unmistakable relational consequence (Jn 14:9), contrary to the whole-ly God's vulnerable presence and intimate involvement strategically embodied by Jesus (Jn 17:2-3) and what Jesus tactically prayed to compose his whole family (Jn 17:20-26).

Mary's relational work is integral to constitute persons in reciprocal relationship together as composed by the experiential truth of the whole gospel. On this qualitative relational basis, Jesus magnifies Mary's person as a key to the significance of the gospel's relational outcome of new relationship together in wholeness, necessarily in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity (as Jesus embodied and prayed): "Wherever the *whole* gospel is proclaimed, *claimed and celebrated* in the whole world, *her whole person's vulnerable and intimate relational work* will be told as a reminder to illuminate the whole ontology and function that necessarily unfolds from the relational outcome of the gospel of transformation to wholeness" (Mk14:9).

The journey repurposing discipleship is an ongoing relational process that requires hard choices and redemptive changes—changes that transform and not merely reform—for diverse purposes to turn around from their divergence. In a pop quiz of the Word, the diversity of discipleship will never pass its scrutiny whenever diversity's practice (1) is lukewarm (like the resourceful church in Laodicea), (2) is not whole (like the esteemed church in Sardis), or (3) serves the secondary at the expense of the primary (like the dedicated church in Ephesus). Hence, such diversity faces hard choices and redemptive changes (as Martha discovered, Mary enacted, and Paul embodied, discussed below) in order to be repurposed according to the whole-ly Word. This relational process is nonnegotiable and thus invariable in any pop quiz of the Word.

The repurposing of Christian diversity in general involves:

Choosing between what's easier and what's harder, thus choosing tradition or the Word, between the half-truths of diversity or the whole truth of the Word, between conforming or transforming, between what's common or uncommon, between the breadth of the secondary or the depth of the primary—that is, choosing between "the road is easy" or "the road is hard" for discipleship (Mt 7:13-14). Vulnerably, then, **changing** integrally according to what's harder in these hard choices—that is, not changes of mere reforms but the deep redemptive changes of transformation, with nothing less and so substitutes so that the *old* dies and the *new* is raised up (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17).

You may wonder how rational these choices could be and how reasonable these changes would be in the existential life of global diversity. Perhaps you may assume that some level of compromise is more realistic, or that a hybrid in Christian identity and function is the best alternative for diversity (like the activist church in Thyatira). However, it's thoughts and assumptions like these that the Word corrected for the hybrid practice of the church in Thyatira, so that "all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will *hold accountable* each of you as your *diverse* works deserve" (Rev 2:23).

The Journey of Chameleon Paul

As discussed earlier, Paul intensely led the fight against the fragmenting consequences of Christian diversity. His journey was neither simple nor easy, but it involved hard choices and redemptive changes for him to move straightforward based on the Word. Ironically, Saul/Paul initially fought vigorously against the diversification of the people of God by those from the so-called Way (Acts 7:58; 8:1-3); and he was unrelenting in the demands of conformity to fundamental Judaism (Gal 1:13-14). Therefore, the Word intervened in Saul's journey to turn him around so that his theology and practice were repurposed.

Paul made hard choices for the changes necessary based on, by and for the Word, which integrally constituted his journey both to take the lead in proclaiming the whole gospel and in the integral formation of the church. Despite having a diaspora Jewish identity as a Roman citizen,³ it is vital to understand how Paul's diverse identity functioned in the multicultural diversity of the 1st Century world, and whose ethno-racial diversity in particular challenged the distinctions of *others*. How did Paul's journey take the lead for the gospel and the church under these conditions? Our understanding of Paul's function is a key to repurposing Christian diversity today.

When the embodied Word commissioned his disciples, he stated "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:21)—that is, "my peace *as wholeness* I give to you. I do not give to you as the *diverse* world gives" (Jn 14:27). On only this whole basis, and thus never on any diversified basis, "As the Father has sent me *into the world's diversity*, so I send you" (20:21), which fulfills his prayer for his family (Jn 17:18). This is the gospel of peace, the only Good News by which the Word sends his now repurposed followers into global diversity in order to enact his relational imperative: "Make disciples *to repurpose* all persons, peoples, tribes and nations" (Mt 28:19). Paul made the choices and changes to wholeheartedly claim the gospel of peace (Eph 6:15) to embody and enact whole-ly the Word's commission for only his repurposed followers.

In Paul's repurposed diversity, "I have become all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22). This seems to give Paul the appearance that he was not his own person but just conformed to others around him; that would misunderstand Paul. Even though the transformed Paul was free from the limits and constraints of diversity's distinctions, he subjugated (*douloo*) himself to all distinctions without compromising his person: "to the Jews...to those under the law...to those outside the law...to the weak"—whatever the distinctions "I have become these to all of diversity...for the sake of the gospel" (9:19-23). How does a person, who transposed the primacy of human distinctions promoted in the church in order to reverse its inequality and inequity, now suddenly subjugate himself to those distinctions?

³ See Ronald Charles discussion of Paul's identity as a diaspora Jew in *Paul and the Politics of Diaspora* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

Make no mistake, Paul didn't elevate distinctions by highlighting them. Rather he related to distinctions in the new way repurposed with a new primacy. Because Paul submitted his person first and foremost to the whole-ly Word and his gospel (9:21), Paul now functioned in the primacy of relationship together constituted in wholeness. On this uncommon relational basis, he repurposed a chameleon dynamic to extend the relational involvement of this primacy to others by connecting with them initially at the level of their distinctions. In other words, Paul wanted to walk in their diverse shoes in order to connect with them on their distinctive ground—not to be confused with divergent terms, but to enact his empathy and not to display merely sympathy or embody mere apathy. His empathetic relational involvement was necessary by the nature of his redemptive changes, so that the experiential truth of their persons and the relational reality of their relationships will be transformed from inner out and thereby constituted in wholeness. For instance, Paul's diverse level of connection on others' ground is observed in Athens when he met with a gathering of philosophers to be involved with them in their shoes (Acts 17:16-34). Paul further demonstrates his diverse connections by his face-to-face relational involvement, on the one hand, with the indentured servant Onesimus while, on the other hand, with his owner Philemon (in Phm).

This is the integral journey of the chameleon Paul, the existential reality of which ongoingly required his unbiased choices and redemptive changes in the face of pushback received from human and Christian diversity, both in local contexts and global context. These choices and changes were essential for his journey in order that his theology and practice remain whole-ly for his identity and function as the Word's new creation. It is only this relational outcome that Paul's chameleon journey pursued "for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings."

To make disciples from human diversity is only a relational process, which can only be engaged by a relational function and thereby fulfilled only by the vulnerable relational involvement of the whole person from inner out not defined or determined by distinctions. The primacy of this integral relational dynamic is never replaceable with secondary distinctions, no matter how capable, resourceful, esteemed or dedicated. When the primacy of this irreducible and nonnegotiable relational dynamic is diversified, it falls into ontological simulations and evolves in functional illusions that are rendered by *the reverse dynamic of anything less and any substitutes*. Is the reverse dynamic what prevails in the discipleship of Christian diversity today?

Diverse Consonant Voices of One Coherent Witness

Language is the primary medium that persons, peoples, tribes and nations use to communicate their identity and function. Music is a vital dimension of language that is helpful to understand the meaning of a communication and for clarity of what is

expressed. For example, the dissonance of the music expressed can make what it's communicating unclear, which then can render ambiguous the music genre played. Analogously, any language used must have consonant meaning (shared "signs") or else the message communicated becomes ambiguous, which then makes the message uncertain and easily misinterpreted. This is the existing problem heard in the voices of Christian diversity that is rendering its witness ambiguous.

The voice of global Christianity is certainly polyphonic, but its witness in the world should be unequivocally monophonic based on the whole-ly Word. In her analysis of the fundamental nature of nationalism, Eloise Hiebert Meneses points to the temporal condition of every state and empire of the last two millennia and the enduring condition of the church advancing toward the culmination of the kingdom. With nationalism in the U.S. representing the Rome of our time, she raises the issue of Christian witness that does not fragment the gospel, and the need for an integral witness:

How are we to avoid syncretizing the gospel at the very place in which it is the most dangerous—the center of global power? Surely this will be possible only with the witness of Christian people from other places. It will be possible to remain truly faithful to Christ in America only by listening carefully to sisters and brothers from elsewhere and by receiving with humble acceptance a theology from the whole church.⁴

In the quantitative extent of Meneses' inclusiveness, however, such an inclusive witness based on global theology does not necessarily either distinguish that witness as integral, or provide that witness with the significance needed to be whole in the prevailing fragmented human condition of the globalizing world. The whole theology and practice of Christian witness is not the quantitative sum of its parts, no matter how many global parts compose its witness. Without synergy, what those diverse voices communicate is in existential reality dissonant with the Word, composing a fragmentary witness that is ambiguous for the surrounding global diversity to embrace in the full significance of the whole gospel.

Historically and currently, the diverse voices of global Christianity are either amplified or barely audible, silent or simply rendered silent.⁵ The overriding issue for all these voices, whether heard or not, is how consonant or dissonant they are, and thus how significant their witness is.

⁴ Eloise Hiebert Meneses, "Bearing Witness in Rome with Theology from the Whole Church," in Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 244.

⁵ Diverse voices of global Christianity are expressed in numerous studies listed in the bibliography of this study.

The reliability of a witness and the validity of their testimony are certainly critical in a court of law. This significance is the nature of witness in jurisprudence, but the process of justice often has not involved this reliability and validity. When the news is reported, the reliability of the reporter and the validity of their report are indispensable for journalism to have credibility. Yet, it is common for most persons to receive the news reported and merely assume the reliability and validity of its information rather than question its reality. Christian witness includes these issues, but it also involves going deeper for its nature of witness and its significance of witnessing. Reliability of a witness, for example, can vary, based on a range from honesty to even good intentions, which is insufficient for compatible Christian witness; and validity is usually based on the facts, which is important but inadequate for congruent Christian witnessing.

Along with the legal description of witness (*martyrion*, and to witness, *martyreo*), what is distinct of some witnesses (*martyrs*) is their participation in and thus experiential knowledge of something. The integrity of Christian witness is distinguished by the direct participation in and thus experiential knowledge of the life of Jesus' whole person, the whole Truth, which will determine the reliability and validity of Christian witness. The truth of the early disciples' witness had a two-fold basis: (1) they were eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus, and (2) they participated in and partook of Jesus' life to experience his whole person, the primary basis of which composed the experiential truth of their witness (e.g. Jn 1:1-4). Since the Damascus road, Paul's witness emerged from the experiential truth of direct involvement with the palpable Word in face-to-face relationship together—his whole witness based on his participating in and partaking of the whole and uncommon God, even though he wasn't an eyewitness of the embodied Word. While our experience may not include the drama of Paul's initial experience, it must involve the depth of his experience with the palpable Word in order to establish the experiential truth of our witness—the integrity distinguished by directly participating in and partaking of the whole of God in uncommon relationship together.

When James headed the Jerusalem council correcting the inequality of distinctions because "God makes no distinctions" between members of Christian diversity (Acts 15:6-17), his own witness made redemptive changes that he communicated unambiguously in his epistle. The book of James addresses the diaspora of people of faith in their diverse identity and function. Unapologetically, he calls them integrally to account for their faith and to distinguish their identity and function as those *uncommon* from the *common* in their surrounding contexts. With direct application of James to today, U.S. Christians are part of this diaspora, and their common distinction can't presume that their identity and function stands alone, apart and above in the diversity of God's family; nor can any other distinction of Christian diversity presume to be unique in God's family. James, however, distinguishes the wholeness from such reductionism, and thus he fights for the former and against the latter in the identity and function composing the diversity of persons and relationships—just as Paul did for the

consonance of their one coherent witness. Contrary to many perceptions or interpretations that James and Paul have different perspectives about faith (i.e. saved by works or by faith), their integral voices communicate one coherent witness that is irreplaceable for the gospel and thus essential for the witness of Christian diversity.

Whatever language in global Christianity voices the gospel, it no doubt communicates the gospel's identity as associated with Jesus. The issue with these diverse voices is less about the gospel's identity and primarily about the gospel's function, which often has dissonant voices. Paul identified the gospel embodied by the Word as "the gospel of peace," so that Christians will function in "the readiness given by the gospel of peace" (Eph 6:15, ESV). The function of the gospel is essential for Christians to fight against the subtle counter-relational workings of reductionism in global diversity (6:10-12), which includes the fragmentary consequences witnessed globally in Christian diversity—with U.S. Christians likely bearing this consequential witness the most.

When the function of the gospel is ambiguous, what the Word embodied as experiential truth becomes elusive as the relational reality of Christian witness. This is demonstrated by a diversity of leaders in global Christianity. From the Lausanne Movement's previous gathering in Cape Town (2010), its theological manifesto was expressed in "The Cape Town Commitment" to spell out what it means for the practice of ministry and mission. In Part II, it initially focused on "Bearing Witness to the truth of Christ in a pluralistic, globalized world," which included the following statement: "Because Jesus *is* the truth, truth in Christ is (i) personal as well as propositional; (ii) universal as well as contextual; (iii) ultimate as well as present."⁶ This is followed by a call to be people of truth, who must jointly *live* and *proclaim* the truth. If we can assume that this reflects the prominent state of witnessing by the global church today, we get an illuminating picture of its level of experience and the extent of its relational significance. Other than to say "personal as well as propositional," there is no indication or even sense that the embodied Truth is experiential truth, much less the whole Truth. This lack or gap in their perception of the personal truth of Christ leaves the embodied Truth without the relational significance of the Truth's only defining purpose to constitute anew the primacy of relationship together in wholeness. Without the experiential truth to fulfill the whole Truth's defining purpose, the primacy of relationship together in wholeness eludes us for the relational reality of participating in and partaking of the whole Truth—what needs to involve Cape Town's statement "must *live* the truth." The relational consequence of this lack of existential relational reality leaves our witnessing without its relational significance to live fulfilled in wholeness and to help others to experience the truth and relational reality of this wholeness in a pluralistic, globalized world—what needs to distinguish Cape Town's "must *proclaim* the truth."

⁶ The Cape Town Commitment: Part II – For the World We Serve: The Cape Town Call to Action (posted 1/28/2011). Online at <http://lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment>, 11.

Hence, it is only for the gospel's integral function that Jesus keeps invoking "Peace be with you" as he sends his followers into the world's diversity "as the Father has sent me." And the repurposed peace that Jesus gives his followers (Jn 14:27) is the good-news basis for Paul making it imperative for the integral function of Christian diversity to have one coherent witness of those "called in one body" (Col 3:15), which is constituted as the new creation family in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity (3:10-11).

Global Christianity, however, has typically functioned with diverse versions of peace, the function of which has been fragmentary and thus consequential both within and between its diversity. This dissonant function counters the peace as wholeness given only by the Word, counters the integral relational dynamic of wholeness with the diversity of a reverse dynamic of anything less and any substitutes—thereby contrary to "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." So, here we are after over two millennia since the Father sent the Word to embody the good news constituting the new creation of relationship together as God's family, and we still can't agree on how the Word also sends us—that is, sends us in order to express consonant voices in the function of the gospel, so that our diverse voices will also embody one coherent witness in, with and for the Word's irreducible and nonnegotiable gospel of peace.

When dissonant voices are heard, even reverberating a diverse gospel, these voices flow from a weak view of sin without reductionism, whose witness doesn't fight against the reductionism in diversity, but either is complicit with its subtlety or reinforces, enables and sustains its diverse workings. This becomes the default condition of Christians and churches not fighting against sin as reductionism, especially since in their version of the gospel Jesus has not forgiven and saved them from the full scope of this sin. Moreover, we are all susceptible to function in such dissonance when our theological anthropology (TA) doesn't compose the ontology and function of the whole person and relationship together in wholeness. In global Christianity, a reduced TA is pervasive, which renders much of the identity and function of its diversity to a compromised integrity. To fight against any compromised integrity in diverse identity and function, the Word integrates peace with righteousness, which integrates further how the Word sends us with how the Father has sent him.

The Gravity for the Galaxy of Christian Diversity

How has the Word sent you in your diversity? Merely imitating the example of Jesus' life or just keeping his teachings are insufficient to integrate the identities and functions of Christian diversity in the Word's whole-ly way whereby he was sent and we sent are in likeness. Without this integration to bring and hold together diverse identities

and functions, the integral relational purpose and outcome of the Word's whole and uncommon peace are elusive. Consequently, without the relational reality of whole-ly peace, diversity becomes fragmentary because there is no sufficient means to bring and hold it together.

In the universe (or multiverse), there are a countless number of galaxies like our own Milky Way, each composed with a nearly endless diversity of celestial stars (and related planets). Each star does not have the autonomy to choose its galaxy or to switch galaxies. Stars are brought together and held together by the dynamic of gravity operating in every galaxy, whose dynamic is generated by the black hole at the center of each galaxy. Black holes have only recently been discovered, and understanding them is barely known at this stage. Yet, depending on the strength of its gravitational force, a black hole has the potential of breaking through another galaxy and absorbing all its stars into one's own galaxy.

The mystery of the black hole approaches the mystery of knowing and understanding the totality of God, which will always be beyond human knowledge and understanding. Yet, the whole-ly God sent the Word to reveal all that is necessary and sufficient for the galaxy of Christian diversity. The wholeness of our galaxy maintains its integrity by the gravity of the "black-hole" Word working at the center of diversity's galaxy. This gravity is not the Word's peace in itself, but peace is integrated with it. So, what exactly is this gravity? Simply stated, "righteousness and peace kiss each other" for the relational process and outcome of the Word's gravitational work, which unfolds in this relational dynamic: "Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps" (Ps 85:10,13).

Righteousness is the gravity of the whole-ly Word that brings and holds together the galaxy of Christian diversity. How so? Righteousness counters sin as reductionism and a reduced TA. First and foremost, this is demonstrated in the Good News of covenant relationship, which God's relational response constituted with the righteousness of the whole-ly Way that is at heart of the Redeemer's steps (Isa 59:16-17) to bring and hold together the diverse people of God's covenant family (Isa 9:7). Righteousness (*sedaqah*) is a legal term used to define God and determine God's relational involvement with humankind. The judicial process of relationships is essential to determine the integrity of the participants, and whether they can be counted on to fulfill their part of the relationship. The relational function of this integrity cannot be implied or presumed but can only be fulfilled by the integrity of the whole participant's *who, what and how one is from inner out*, and on this basis of this righteousness alone can be counted on in relationship together. No other function has the integrity to bring and hold peoples together with the assurance that they can count on in relationship no matter the diversity of their distinctions.

Righteousness constituted the steps by which “the Father has sent me” to be the heart (or black hole) for God’s family. Therefore, righteousness constitutes the steps by which also “I send you,” so that the whole of who, what and how you are can be counted on in relationships together no matter what. The integrity of this integral relational function thereby becomes the gravity that brings and holds together all the distinctions of Christian diversity. Without righteousness, what can be counted on is limited and constrained by the function of diverse distinctions, which lacks the gravity to prevent the fragmentation consequential of diversity. Accordingly, the psalmist declares: “I will proclaim your righteousness, *my God*, yours alone.... My *native* tongue will tell of your righteous *relational involvement that can be counted on as the gravity bringing and holding us in relationship together as one whole-ly family*” (Ps 71:16,24, NIV).

On what basis can you count on others in relationship, particularly if you’ve covenanted together? If others (individually or collectively) function in relationship with anything less and any substitutes for righteousness, what part of them is participating, and thus to what extent can they be counted on? Likewise, each of us is personally accountable for our own person, first in relationship with God and then to each other. So, how would others answer these questions about you?

If the embodied Word “put on righteousness like a breastplate” in order for the heart of his relational steps not be fragmented, then is the breastplate of righteousness optional or essential? Paul makes this breastplate imperative for our function to negate the counter-relational workings of reductionism (Eph 6:14), the workings which subtly pervade Christian diversity to fragment its galaxy and commonize the function of the gospel of peace (contrary to Paul’s imperative in v. 15). Without the gravity of righteousness, Christian diversity cannot be repurposed to have the relational means to bring together, much less hold together, its galaxy. For this relational purpose, the Word “will make righteousness the plumb line” (Isa 28:17, NIV), and “righteousness as your taskmaster” (Isa 60:17), in order for Christian diversity to experience the relational outcome of righteousness: the relational reality of peace as wholeness integrally constituting the persons and relationships together of God’s whole-ly family (Isa 32:17).

Notwithstanding the fact that historically indigenous peoples have been consistently relegated to the distinction of outsiders, explicitly or implicitly, inside the church, this raises a related question. At this stage two millennia after the inception of the church, can you unbiasedly think of any human distinctions that should be distinguished for, and thus by and in the global church?

Without righteousness to counteract a weak view of sin and a reduced TA, therefore, Christian diversity will not have the breakthrough to repurpose its galaxy. The consequence, then, is that our galaxy is subjected to ontological simulations and functional illusions, which are presumed to build the galaxy of the global church. The existential reality of this reductionist process is analogous to modern technology constructing a metaverse with virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR); and such

a contextualized bias readily becomes commonized among diverse Christians and churches to render virtual the global church. The relational consequences have misled some Christians and churches to use augmented measures while still under the bias assumed from a weak view of sin and a reduced TA. Thus, their function is relationally incongruent with how “I send you” and falls functionally incompatible with “as the Father has sent me.” From the diversity of his followers, then, the Word is waiting for the integral reciprocal relational response and involvement constituted by their righteousness that will by necessity fulfill the Word’s commission of them, whereby they will whole-ly embody the fulfillment of his family prayer “that they may all be one...be one, as we *in the Trinity* are one” (Jn 17:21-22).

Unequivocally indeed, peace and righteousness kiss for the Word’s integral relational purpose, for which righteousness is the only dynamic means to unfold the ontological and functional steps necessary to fulfill this nonnegotiable relational purpose in its irreducible relational outcome. In this whole and uncommon relational process, the repurposed galaxy of Christian diversity distinguishes the re-*image*-ing of the church, locally, regionally and globally, which will fulfill the Word’s formative family prayer definitive for the church.

The Diaspora of God’s Whole-ly Family

The covenant of God’s family constituted the wholeness of relationship together, which was inaugurated contingent on the righteousness of Abraham’s “walk before me, and be blameless” (be *tamiym*, Gen 17:1). That is, Abraham’s *tamiym* constituted the whole of who, what and how he was in his reciprocal relational involvement in ongoing covenant relationship together. On this whole relational basis, God’s family unfolded with the global diversity of persons, peoples, tribes and nations (Gen 12:1-3, cf. Ps 87). This diversity composes “a chosen people...belonging to God” and thus becomes “a holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9, NIV). As a holy nation, therefore, God’s family must not by its nature be contextualized in diverse contexts and thereby commonized. But in order not to be contextualized and commonized, the identity and function of each family member need to be distinguished clearly uncommon from the common (1 Pet 1:15-16), whereby they will participate in diverse contexts “as aliens and exiles” (2:11) to compose the diaspora of God’s whole-ly family. No other persons, peoples, tribes and nations can justly claim to belong to the covenant family relationally enacted by God and relationally embodied by the Word.

The repurposed diversity composing the diaspora of God’s whole-ly family is the pivotal redemptive change that relegates each of their distinctions to a secondary significance if focused on in any way. This redemptive change (transformation, not reformation) is the turnaround essential to negate contextualized and commonized biases,

which are consequential for rendering distinctions in a comparative system that measures the inequality between them and the subsequent inequity between those perceived as more/better and those as less/inferior. In this prevailing comparative process, how is Christian identity and function typically rated, and on what basis are they rated better or less?

The inequalities and inequities existing in Christian diversity are inevitable and thus unavoidable if diversity is not repurposed. Moreover, as evident in the status quo, Christian diversity continues to reinforce competition (by choice or default) among its distinctions for the self-oriented purpose of gaining status, resources and/or members. This acceptable engagement is directly consequential for further stratifying global Christianity to enable and sustain inequality and inequity in the global church. On a regional scale, does the Christian diversity in the U.S. demonstrate this existing condition? However you perceive it, our condition has existential ramifications that render tentative, at best, the significance of peace and justice in both Christian witness and democracy—with the ideology of the latter inseparable from the theology and practice of Christian nationalism.

Therefore, whatever your region of global Christianity, don't be misguided in your theology or misled in your practice. As long as Christian diversity is not repurposed, the integrity of the gospel of peace that is presumed to be claimed and proclaimed is in reality: A fragmentary gospel that does not have the integrity of wholeness, as found in common peace, whereby the witness of the global church is compromised by the prevailing comparative process of diverse distinctions—a dissonant witness notably as competition evolves to claim and proclaim its gospel.

This is the existential condition that faces all Christians and churches, for which we are accountable to make hard choices and responsible to enact redemptive changes in order for our diversity to be repurposed so that the global church can be *re-image*-d. Only until then will our identity be compatible with the whole-ly Word and our function be congruent with his integral commission to *be* and make disciples “as the Father has sent me *into the world*, so I send you *into the diversity of global contexts*.”

“My wholeness be with you”—“not as the world gives!”

Chapter 6

Re-image-ing the Church

**You have stripped off the old *from outer in* with its *divergent* practices
and have *been transformed* with the new *from inner out*...
according to the image of its creator.**

Colossians 3:9-10

**“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...
so that they may be one, as we are one.
I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one.”**

John 17:21-23

The COVID-19 pandemic is teaching us vital lessons about human life, and Christians and churches should be at the forefront of this learning process. Now that the Omicron variant of the coronavirus has mutated to amplify the damage of the Delta variant, the condition of herd immunity will be even more elusive—news which many don’t want to hear. This makes the anti-vax movement, and those opposing health protocols, that much more a determinant for fragmenting our condition and keeping us from coming together to fight this pandemic. Moreover, even where there is a willingness to be vaccinated, the shortage of vaccines for the global community also factors into the equation for herd immunity. Less apparent than vaccine shortage, and likely more critical, is the global shortage of syringes and health care workers to administer the vaccine, with the inequality mostly affecting those in the developing world. How do we stop this pandemic unless our divergence and these shortages are resolved? Failure to resolve this shortcoming in the local, regional and global infrastructure renders the vaccine inadequate by itself to turn around the pandemic.

There are lessons here for the church, its infrastructure and practice in the gospel it both claims for its members in the more critical and prevailing *human condition pandemic* and proclaims for the world to fight the human condition endemic to the global diversity of human life.

The most profound lesson to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic is how this global condition has brought to the surface the human condition underlying humankind in all its diversity. And when Christians and churches look in the mirror of the coronavirus pandemic, they can see reflections of how Christian practice has mutated also in variants that reflect, reinforce, enable and sustain the human condition. Furthermore, in this mirror of its sociopolitical variants is reflected an image of the church variants in all their global

divergence. Notably, the infrastructure of the global church mirrors the image of the human global infrastructure, with similar consequences for their respective pandemics. And the Christian counterparts composing the church today construct a systemic condition that evades the “herd immunity” necessary to redeem itself from the endemic human condition pervading the diversity of the global church.

If we (individually and collectively) learn the lessons from the pandemic, then we are not only accountable but responsible to re-image the church. To start, how could you describe the image of your own local church and its regional church? And on what basis do you think this image is determined?

Church Infrastructure

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a neutral evaluation of the existing infrastructure for government, agencies and organizations. So far, significant changes have not materialized to turn around the pandemic, though some upgrades have emerged. Churches and related organizations are also challenged to examine their infrastructure to understand whether it distinguishes the essential significance necessary to deal with both pandemics, the coronavirus and the human condition.

The infrastructure of the church was introduced by the embodied Word when he stated “on this rock [using a feminine noun] I will build my church” (Mt 16:18). The male *Petro* clarified the significance of the church’s foundation as determined only by Jesus Christ, who embodied “a living stone...a cornerstone chosen and precious” (1 Pet 2:4-6). In his ecclesiology of wholeness for the church, Paul made definitive the church’s infrastructure “with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (Eph 2:20). Therefore, the church’s diversity is reconciled together (2:13-14) as “members of the *family* household of God” (2:19) by the church’s infrastructure (cf. Col 1:19-20). As Paul fought against the fragmenting consequences of diversity promoted in the church, he corrected such attempts evolving in a divergent infrastructure: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid” (1 Cor 3:11, cf. 1 Pet 2:7-8). The Word embodied the relational process that constitutes the church’s infrastructure (Eph 1:22-23), the implementation of which can only be enacted by the Word’s relational terms (e.g. Eph 4:25; Col 3:12-15). Thus, it is only the church’s infrastructure in the primacy of relationship together that integrally builds and grows the church as the relational whole-ly body of the Word, not the notion signifying a referential body of Christ.

The Body’s Infrastructure

The theology prevailing in most ecclesiologies centers on the metaphor for church as the body of Christ. This reference renders the church’s infrastructure without the

essential significance embodied by the Word, and thus makes it only a reference point for the church rather than what distinguishes the church in its global diversity. Paul confronts this fragmenting diversity in the church in order for its ecclesiology and practice to be whole. The fragmentation was also evident in the distinction-making that evolved in the diversity of spiritual gifts, abilities and functions of those composing the church, which certainly were ranked in a comparative process. Therefore, to counter and negate any such ignorance (*agnoeo*, 1 Cor 12:1), misinformation, false perception or understanding, all of which diverged contrary to the Word, Paul establishes the body as the church's essential **structural infrastructure** that by its organic nature is indispensable to integrate all the church's parts together for its integral identity and function (1 Cor 12).

The body as the church's infrastructure, however, cannot function by itself or else it becomes static to render the church's infrastructure insignificant—as witnessed in diverse practices of body ecclesiology. This body is constituted essentially solely by the relational dynamic embodied in and by the Word, whose integral relational purpose and process are significant just to distinguish the new creation of the church family of God (as in Gal 5:6; 6:15). In other words, the organic body of the church is vivified only by and in the Word's relational dynamic, so that the church's structural infrastructure is always integrated with the **systemic infrastructure** enacted only in the relational terms of the Word's relational work. Thus, the church's infrastructure is complete just when its structural infrastructure is in symbiosis with the systemic infrastructure that makes functional the organic interrelations of all the church's body parts.

The body of Christ is always static when not understood and enacted on the basis of who, what and how (i.e. the gravity of righteousness) embodied by the whole-ly Word. When Jesus declared “on this *infrastructure* I will build my church” (Mt 16:18), the full identity and function of his church is only distinguished when the focus is given to the process Jesus implied in his statement—which directly involves what he relationally embodied face to face in his life and practice, and which he made further evident in his post-ascension involvement with various churches (Rev 2-3). Jesus' relational involvement and relational work went further and deeper than a gathering, regardless of a gathering's doctrinal and moral purity, its extensive church activity and its esteemed reputation (as demonstrated by churches in Ephesus and Sardis, Rev 2:2-4; 3:1-2). In Jesus' disclosure “I will build my church,” the term for build is *oikodomeo*. This term denotes building a house, derived from its root *oikos* meaning house, home, family, that is, a family living in a house, not merely a gathering under the same roof.

Paul later integrated these terms with their significant cognates for the church's ontology and function, with *oikos* as the basis for the church as God's household (1 Tim 3:15): *oikeios*, belonging specifically to God's family (Eph 2:19); *oikodome*, building God's family (Eph 2:21; 4:12); *synoikodomeo*, being built together as God's family (*syn* and *oikodomeo*, Eph 2:22); *oikonomos*, led by persons who manage God's family (1 Cor

4:1); and *oikonomia*, for which Paul was given the specific relational responsibility to administrate the relational outcome ‘already’ of God’s family (Eph 3:2; Col 1:25), which is in relational progression on an eschatological trajectory to its relational conclusion ‘not yet’ (Eph 1:10).

The relational function of these terms points to the definitive relational process of the new kinship family of God that Jesus constituted in the incarnation. That is to say, the specific relational connections Jesus made throughout the incarnation to build his family together formed the embryonic church from which the whole ontology and function of the church emerged. Jesus provided Paul, partly through the Jesus tradition and mostly by direct relationship together along with the Spirit, with the necessary relational context for the relational embodying of his church and the imperative relational process for the relational function of his church. This is the irreducible relational context and nonnegotiable relational process that the whole of Jesus vulnerably embodied progressively in the whole of God’s relational context of family by his whole relational process of family love. Thus, the church as God’s family was made definitive by Jesus even before the cross, and was fully constituted by his salvific relational work; and this relational outcome is what the Spirit, as his relational replacement, will bring to its relational conclusion—and Paul, not Peter, would engage the *oikonomia* to provide the ecclesiology necessary for the whole of God’s family.

Building and growing the church beyond a mere body to the relational significance of family cannot become an existential reality without the right infrastructure. For this relational purpose, Paul did not formulate the metaphor of the body in a theological vacuum or isolated in an ivory tower as an academician; rather he made definitive the church’s infrastructure necessary to integrate the diversity promoted in the church and to heal the fragmenting consequences of distinction-making (as in 1 Cor 1:11-13; 3:1-4, 21-22; 4:6). Thus, his whole ecclesiology is essential for this relational outcome.

When we think of the body of Christ, we usually think of various parts, hopefully but not necessarily that make up the complete body. Yet, in the physical body the parts are important but not primary, and how they are interrelated is the key to making the body complete. When Paul made definitive the body metaphor for the church (1 Cor 12:12-31), the parts and their interrelatedness have to be understood in what’s primary in order for the body to be complete, that is, for the church to be whole. What’s primary for the church must be distinguished from and should not be confused with what’s good for the church—that is, as Eve saw “good” from the beginning.

In terms of our human body, it is evident that it has diversity of parts, each with a specific function, which hopefully yet not always serve for the well-being of the total body. This result is certainly a health issue of our body parts, their function and how well they integrate to serve the growth, development and maintenance of our physical body.

What is also obvious in the body-care for most (if not all) of us is how we look at the diversity of our body parts differently, viewing their functions with different values and priorities, which then structures our body in stratified body parts whose attention and care become selective accordingly. The ongoing result of this skewed approach to the body is a fragmented body condition that struggles for well-being and is unable to be whole—in spite of good intentions, limited intervening measures, and other hopeful practices, which at best only create an illusion of well-being and try to simulate being whole. Does this sound familiar at all to how we perceive and address the body of Christ?

The fragmentation of the body (human and of Christ) emerges directly from reduced anthropology that composes persons by the parts of what they have and do, and on this fragmentary basis, determine the relationships such persons engage. When Paul unequivocally defined the body of Christ, he did not use a reduced theological anthropology. Nor did he use a reduced ontology and function of Christ to determine the body of Christ (Eph 1:23; 2:14,16; 4:12-13,16; Col 2:9-10; 3:15). The wholeness of Christ's ontology and function was the only determinant (*brabeuo*, Col 3:15) for the body of Christ, and that required the theological anthropology of whole ontology and function for the persons and relationships composing the church body (again, local, regional and global). For Paul, this wholeness was irreducible for the embodied Christ and nonnegotiable for the body of Christ (e.g. by referential terms). How then did he define the diversity of parts and determine their function such that the body benefits to emerge whole, and continues to grow and develop in the wholeness in likeness of Christ's wholeness?

Just as in the human body, the parts are important but not primary for Paul (Rom 12:4-5). Paul composed the church body with "members," who can be seen as parts of the whole yet who must by their nature be perceived whole-ly only as persons. This perception has certainly been problematic for church membership—both by church leaders and church members in general. Parts are secondary to the primary priority of persons and it is their primacy by whom Paul composed each member of the body. This not only qualified *who* the parts are but also defines *what* the significance of the parts is and *how* they serve the well-being, growth and development of the whole body.

The initial focus that Paul gave to the diversity of parts involved the gifts given by the Spirit, which includes by the Son and the Father for the whole of God (1 Cor 12:4-11), that needs to be distinguished from our common notion of spiritual gifts. The latter occupies the primary way members narrowly see each other and thus prevails as the common shaping of how persons are defined and relationships are determined in the church. Like our view of the human body, the diversity of spiritual gifts are seen differently, with their functions having different values and priorities in the church (or even in the academy), which have stratified how persons are defined and relationships are

determined. Paul countered this reduced theological anthropology and fragmentation of persons and relationships with the relational connection and involvement with the whole of God's Spirit ("same Spirit, same Lord, same God") to constitute the primacy of relationship and the relational connection necessary for persons to be distinguished beyond spiritual gifts and to belong to each other in relationship together (cf. Rom 12:5).

Paul illuminated that it is the primacy of the Spirit's integral relational presence and involvement that "is given the manifestation" (*phanerosis*, 1 Cor 12:7) in relational terms "to each *member person*" over their gifts in order to constitute the church body's primacy in persons and relationships together—and not in, with and by the gifts given by the Spirit, as important and necessary as they are. And therefore, the only relational purpose for the Spirit's presence and involvement is neither in the distribution of gifts nor in their needed empowerment—even though the Spirit is integral to both without our self-determination (vv. 8-11)—but for the relational connection necessary to have the integrating relational outcome "for bringing together [*symphero*] each person in the relationships necessary for wholeness of the church body" (v. 7). It is inadequate, even contrary, to render *symphero* as "the common good" (NRSV, NIV, ESV) for two reasons: (1) it reduces the ontology and function of the Spirit's presence and involvement, which shifts the focus to members' gifts over their persons, and (2) it assumes both that such gifts can have the same (or better) results as persons can, and thus that what's good for the church can emerge from a reduced theological anthropology composing 'good without wholeness'.

The notion of the common good for the church was never what Paul illuminated for the primacy of the Spirit's presence and involvement with the church body and the persons and relationships composing its primacy (see also Eph 2:22). What unfolds in this relational process is reciprocal relationship together, the nature of which requires (demands as the relational imperative) this integral involvement: (1) the primary involvement of the whole person, neither fragmented by nor preoccupied with gifts, and (2) the primacy of involvement given to the whole-ly God's Spirit in order to transform the church's persons and relationships to wholeness in likeness of the whole-ly God. For Paul, the primacy of persons and relationships composing the church in wholeness emerges only from the primacy of the persons and relationship in the whole of God (2 Cor 3:16-17; Rom 8:6, 11, 14-16), and unfolds only in this primacy in likeness of this whole-ly God, the Trinity (2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10-11). This is not to say that Paul was a trinitarian but that, ever since the Damascus road, he experienced the reality and truth of the whole-ly God, which made his monotheism complete (*pleroma*, Col 1:19) and the body of Christ complete in likeness as the *pleroma* of Christ (Eph 1:23; 4:12-13).¹

¹ I discuss Paul's completeness in a previous study, *The Whole of Paul and the Whole in His Theology: Theological Interpretation in Relational Epistemic Process* (Paul Study, 2010). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

The primacy of the church body's persons and relationships was fully defined in Paul's metaphor when he transitions from the diversity of gifts to the diversity of persons (1 Cor 12:12-27). This is a crucial transition for church theology and practice in order to be distinguished in what is primary to God, which should not be confused with our common views of what's good for the church.

The primary will not and cannot be distinguished in the referentialization of the Word and by a reduced theological anthropology, because, as Paul made definitive, "the body *is not composed* of one member but of many"; and this counters such a narrowed-down lens that would focus on the secondary parts of members. Whether unintentionally or not, the consequence for members is that their person is subtly transposed to a secondary position and a fragmentary condition. This is not the ontology and function of members that is primary to God and that Paul makes primary in likeness for God's church family.

Therefore, the church's structural and systemic infrastructures are not optional or negotiable for the diversity of the global church. And it is critical for churches to examine the basis for their existing infrastructure, so that what they build is not static and what they grow is not fragmentary. This necessitates scrutinizing global theology and practice at their roots.

Grassroots or Vine-root Ecclesiology

When the examination of global theology centers on its ecclesiology, two critical issues need to be scrutinized: (1) the inclusivity of the global church's theological forest, and (2) the depths of that theological forest and its ecclesiological practice in global church diversity.

The perception of the diverse parts of the global church body must be examined for bias to determine how inclusively the ecclesiology forest is composed. This ecclesiology forest must be determined by insiders, whose grassroots must not be defined by outsiders—the historical perception and practice the global North has imposed on the global South to truncate the ecclesiology forest. In Vinoth Ramachandra's theological reflections about postcolonial criticism, he points to the grassroots witness that is instrumental in the central shift of Christianity to the global South, which is not apparent both to postcolonial critics and to those in the Western institutions interested in this shift.² Yet, this grassroots witness does not answer the question of what those churches in the global South are filled with. Perhaps less apparent is what underlies the grassroots witness that integrally composes the witness necessary for the global church to have relational significance for the globalizing world.

² Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 246-47.

The shape of the global church, as it exists today, has been narrowed down in spite of its central shift to the global South. Many of the defining experiences of Christianity in the majority world have been colonial (dominance by the West). As the global church emerges from colonialism, however, it is insufficient to have a postcolonial worldview, interpretive framework and lens without deeply understanding the nature of sin underlying colonialism and the condition of the Western church. If the global church is to enter into truly postcolonial theology and practice that are redeemed, it needs to go beyond the limits and constraints of our narrowed-down condition.³

Peter could not reduce the whole relational terms composing the Way (integrated with the Truth and the Life) of God's relational response for the whole gospel, nor could he renegotiate the whole relational terms of the Way for his reciprocal relational response to the good news of the primacy of all persons and relationships together belonging to the family of the whole-ly Word. Yet, Peter struggled with his choice of the Way until he made his ontology and function vulnerable from inner out to the challenge of the whole gospel in order to be fulfilled in wholeness. The global church today struggles with its choice of the Way, still often claiming an incomplete gospel that allows the shared ontology and function among the diversity of its persons and relationships to conjointly (1) remain incompatible to the experiential truth of the whole gospel's challenge, and (2) sustain a witness incongruent with the relational reality of the whole gospel's fulfillment in the wholeness of persons and relationships.

Certainly, like Peter, the global church is influenced in various alternative ways of practice by diverse traditions and sociocultural contexts. The pivotal issue again is not the reality of existing diversity but most significantly the reality of existing reduced ontology and function composing diversity; and its resolution goes beyond the common notion of being counter-cultural or of multiculturalism. The subtle spectrum of reduced ontology and function prevails in human contextualization and thus pervades the plurality of traditions and sociocultural contexts. Contextualization of the gospel easily sustains this reduced ontology and function unless we can distinguish the Life's constituting ontology and function of the whole gospel from this reduction. And we cannot distinguish the experiential truth of this whole ontology and function until our persons and relationships are distinguished by the relational reality of our ontology and function in wholeness.

From the beginning, human ontology and function have been shaped by self-determination. Even with a gospel of salvation by grace (faith not works), many of the ways of the church today continue to be shaped by self-determination—a subtle result of a reduced theological anthropology defining the person by what ones does. Compounding this process is the modern development of convenience that promotes narrowing down our ontology and function. The reality of this convenience in the church has this

³ An attempt pointed in this direction, yet still remaining within the limits and constraints of our condition, is found in Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha and L. Daniel Hawk, eds., *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).

consequence: It increasingly constructs a gospel tailored to the convenience of persons and relationships at the grassroots and, accordingly, has shaped more and more ways of the church—all of which unavoidably reinforce and sustain reduced ontology and function in the church and its persons and relationships, whereby the wholeness of the gospel is fragmented and its relational significance is scattered.

What also fragments the gospel of wholeness and scatters its relational significance are the homogenous ways of the global church. This includes the homogeneous composition of churches according to race, ethnicity, tribe, culture, class or caste, and age, even gender—or, relatedly, having a perceptual-interpretive framework and lens based on nationalism, the use of which enforces conformity to its template. Language may require a homogeneous composition as an initial practical necessity, for example, for first generation immigrants, but this composition should not remain for the sake of convenience, particularly for succeeding generations. Discrimination, of course, forced homogeneous church gatherings out of necessity, for example, as experienced by African Americans during slavery and for years following, and also experienced by blacks in South Africa. Yet, even in such grass-root contexts, to remain homogeneous is to continue in their fragmentation of the shared ontology and function of all persons, peoples, tribes and nations, in addition to sustaining persons and relationships in *their* likeness of reduced ontology and function.

This consequence emerges from whatever the homogeneous composition is based on. The reality facing these contexts in their homogeneous ways is critical yet subtle: on the one hand, it becomes (or is designed to be) a convenient context too comfortable to integrate, but, on the other hand, it prevents their persons and relationships to be fulfilled in wholeness and actually scatters them without relational significance rather than gathers them in the relational significance of the whole gospel. With such a grassroots ecclesiology, a homogeneous church does not witness to the relational significance of the whole gospel and cannot witness in its persons and relationships the fulfillment of the gospel of wholeness. Therefore, those in the Lausanne Movement, among others (particularly in the academy), need whole understanding (*synesis* from *syniemi*) to address the reality that the global church in its homogeneous ways is not and cannot be “bearing witness to the *whole* truth of Christ in a pluralistic, globalized world.”⁴

The whole-ly Way continues to challenge the diverse yet fragmentary ways of the global church, the grassroots of which are engaged in reduced ontology and function unknowingly or not. Again, the challenge should not be considered as emerging from the notion of counter-cultural or multiculturalism. Rather, when we examine the culture of church practice today, what is the ontological and functional basis for that practice? When we examine church ministry, what is the ontology and function of persons and relationships that you see the most? When you look at the church’s witness, what is the

⁴ Quoted from the Lausanne Movement’s theological manifesto in The Cape Town Commitment: Part II (posted 1/28/2011). Online at <https://lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment#p2-1>.

significance of the ontology and function that is highlighted and how it is presented? When we focus on the gospel presented by our church, how compatible is it to the experiential truth of the whole gospel's challenge and how congruent is it with the relational reality of the whole gospel's fulfillment in the wholeness of persons and relationships? When we honestly ask ourselves what we personally get out of church, how fulfilling is it for our persons and relationships and their primacy? Of course, answering these questions assumes we are not biased by the contextualized limits and commonized constraints of reduced ontology and function. In this sense, a hermeneutic of suspicion is a helpful practice to ongoingly exercise in family love in order to examine and scrutinize more deeply.

Therefore, the global church must be rooted deeper than grassroots in order for its diversity to belong equally in its ecclesiology forest. This requires a global church infrastructure that can integrate the diverse grassroot parts of the church, as well as correct and change any divergence in those grassroot parts only on the basis of the wholely Word—not by grassroot or outsiders' biases. The global church must engage directly in this essential process, so that the synergy essential for constituting the global church goes beyond its pervasive limits and constraints—the limits and constraints located structurally and found systemically in the grassroots. Otherwise, mere inclusiveness in the global church doesn't integrate diverse identity and function into the integral forest that constitutes the global church's diverse parts in relationship together as the family embodied by the Word.

The church as the family of the Word, not as just the body of Christ, is not an assumption that the global South should automatically make for what fills its churches. For example, African churches have shifted from a Western lens to a lens from African culture, and thus have learned to see church members as belonging to family.⁵ Yet, the question remains if their persons and relationships are distinguished by their primacy in the family of the Word, or do they just have the distinction of their culture? In Asia, the emphasis of relationships is rooted in the family and at home, which then is extended or transferred to the church. Thus, Simon Chan states the following about grassroots Asian ecclesiology:

If previously an individual's self-identity was defined by his or her network of family relationships, as a Christian he or she is now defined primarily by relation to the ecclesial community. If previously self-understanding took place primarily in the home, as a Christian self-understanding takes place primarily in the church as the communion of saints. Christianity, by introducing a new eschatological community

⁵ Discussed in Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 128-141.

that claims one's ultimate (though not exclusive) allegiance, relativizes all other social relationships, including marriage and home.⁶

Yet, aside from a grassroots Asian theology, if church practice of persons and relationships is not distinguished by the theological anthropology of whole ontology and function, then it merely reflects, reinforces and sustains the limits and constraints of Asian cultures—cultures in which persons and relationships have been shaped by the contextualization and commonization from reductionism. Whether in Asia or Africa, therefore, the main issue emerges once again about what fills churches; and the global church must not assume a best-case scenario just because of a primary focus given to family and relationships.

Thus, the depths of the existing ecclesiology forest must be scrutinized in order to go beyond the grassroots of insiders and any other bias of outsiders. Without scrutiny of the global church's infrastructure, any divergence in its diversity will not be corrected and changed but effectively "whitewashed" (cf. Eze 13:10; 22:28) to reinforce, enable and sustain the fragmentation intrinsic to the distinction-making in the identity and function of those merely associated with the body of Christ.

In Paul's ecclesiology based on the *vine-root* (as in Jn 15:5), the church, that is, the whole (*pleroma*) of Christ, is God's relational context of convergence for the theological dynamics in Paul's ecclesiology forest (Eph 1:22-23), and is God's relational context and process of relationally extending these theological-functional dynamics (Eph 2:22; 4:12-13). *Pleroma* (fullness, completion) is the wholeness that reflects the development not only in Paul's thought and theology (e.g. Col 1:19) but also in the whole of Paul's person (e.g. Col 2:10; 3:15; Eph 3:19; cf. Phil 2:1-2; 3:12, 15-16). In the academy, the experiential truth of Paul's development is questioned or obscured by disputes over the authorship of some of these letters, notably Ephesians.

In Ephesians, Paul makes definitive the ecclesiology that by the nature of its roots emerged from antecedents prior to Paul's letters and even predating his studies in Judaism. These antecedents were necessarily integrated into his ecclesiology. The first of these antecedents was rooted in OT Israel as the gathering of God's people. The Septuagint (Gk translation of the OT familiar to Paul, a Roman-citizen Jew) uses *ekklesia* for Israel as the covenant community. This embeds the NT *ekklesia* ("church," e.g., Eph 1:22; Col 1:18) in the context of God's ongoing relational action with his chosen people and their covenant relationship together (Ex 19:5; Dt 7:6-8; Eze 11:19-20). Beyond being a mere historical root and religious heritage, this antecedent is important for understanding the whole of God's thematic relational involvement and the theological dynamics in Paul's ecclesiology forest enacted only for whole relationship together as God's family (Eph 1:4-5, 14).

⁶ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 157.

The term *ekklesia* itself, though used by Paul in his letters, appears to have only limited descriptive value for what the church is and does. As far as function is concerned, *ekklesia* is a static term that is neither sufficiently significant nor necessarily useful to define the church (notably the local church). A more dynamic understanding is needed for the church's ontology and function than merely a gathering (even one called out, *ekkletoi*), which points to a second antecedent integrated into Paul's ecclesiology.

Paul's ecclesiology is rooted in what germinated with the whole of Jesus' person and relational involvement, who relationally embodied the wholeness of God in *pleroma* Christology for *pleroma* soteriology. This *pleroma* is the integrally whole theological-functional dynamic that was first Paul's experiential truth and then was the key antecedent into which Paul's ecclesiology is integrated for the church to be the *pleroma* of Christ. Any ecclesiology not rooted in the Vine and integrated in *pleroma* Christology is insufficient to make functional the relational outcome of *pleroma* soteriology (what Christ also saves *to*), and fundamentally lacks wholeness. Such an ecclesiology is shaped by human terms rooted in human contextualization, which at best is only a gathering—an ontological simulation and epistemological illusion of the *ekklesia* Jesus builds. While a mere gathering may have some functional significance for those gathered, it does not have relational significance to the wholeness of God and to the inherent human need of those gathered (cf. Jn 14:9; Mt 15:8-9).

In contrast with grassroots ecclesiology, Paul's ecclesiology is rooted in the Word's definitive infrastructure: "I am the vine, you are the *diverse* branches" (Jn 15:5), whose identity and function have no significance "unless it abides *relationally* in the vine" (v.4) "because apart from me *your diversity* can do nothing *of significance*." It is only on this integral relational basis that Paul composed **vine-root ecclesiology** for the ecclesiology forest of the global church's branches. In this ecclesiology forest, vine-root ecclesiology is irreplaceable for church branches to be whole and not fragmented, belonging integrally to God's relational whole family only on God's relational terms, which is relationally embodied and whole-ly emerges as in Ephesians. Without his vine-root ecclesiology for the wholeness of the global church with all its branches rooted together, church diversity evolves from the diverse grassroots of the human condition.

Paul's summary of his overall theological forest (Eph 1:3-14; cf. Col 1:15-22) illuminates his *synesis* of God's thematic relational action in response to the human condition, which, as noted earlier, neuroscience defines also as the inherent human relational need and problem. Paul's *synesis* is the whole understanding that becomes the integrating process, framework and theme for the various theological trees (the complex dynamics) in his previous letters (particularly in Romans) which makes definitive their theological forest. It is within Paul's theological forest that the ecclesiology necessary to be whole, God's relational whole only on God's terms, is relationally embodied and whole-ly emerges in Ephesians. Without his ecclesiology in wholeness, Paul's *oikonomia*

(relational responsibility) to *pleroo* (complete) the word of God would not have been fulfilled (Col 1:25).

The dynamic of God's relational communication in what is written and the relational consequence of being apart from it are the issues which Paul raises to challenge the ontology and function of his readers. For Paul, however, the most significant consequence of reducing what is written and going beyond it is the emergence of a renegotiated ecclesiology, notably as grassroots ecclesiology. Epistemic-relational orphans (those not relationally connected and belonging) renegotiate the ontology and function of the church as God's family in the absence of the experiential truth of God's relational communication and involvement (e.g. 1 Cor 11:17-21, 27-30), renegotiating ecclesiology in contrast and conflict with *pleroma* ecclesiology (10:17; 12:13).

It is also insufficient for Paul's readers merely to acknowledge what is written as God's communicative act. Paul assumes that this affirmation involves the reciprocal relational response necessary for the Word's experiential truth to be the relational outcome. Without the experiential truth of God's relational communication, readers are still left functionally in the condition of orphans, epistemic and/or relational orphans. The only recourse is to turn to the source of those words for the experiential truth of its Subject. This critical process of experiential truth—not to exclude propositional truth but going deeper than that—necessary to change from orphans to family starts with the reader's perceptual-interpretive lens (*phroneo*) and what is perceived of what is written, and thus contained in the words of God. The hermeneutic by which the reader engages the word/text is determinative of what emerges from this epistemic process. Just as Jesus critically distinguished the hermeneutic of "a child" from the hermeneutic of "the wise and learned" (Lk 10:21), the epistemic results are in contrast, if not in conflict.

A limited epistemic process of mere human effort from a quantitative lens dependent on outer-in rational interpretation alone invariably separates the object of the text from its relational context and process. This reduces the ontology of the object-God by fragmenting the whole Object into its components (e.g. laws, promises, teachings, example, etc.) without whole knowledge and understanding of the object-God as communicator-Subject disclosing the whole-ly God for relationship together. The epistemic result is without the experiential truth of what is written in relational terms about the whole of who, what and how God is. This is the unequivocal relational consequence that is unavoidable, because engaging the Object of the text also as Subject is a function only of relationship.

In contrast, the hermeneutic of "a child" vulnerably engages in a relational epistemic process, not to be confused with subjectivism or fideism. This hermeneutic certainly does not eliminate reason but puts rational interpretation into congruence with its whole relational context and into compatibility with its whole relational process; thus it does not disembodify the words from the author revealing object-God communicated from subject-God in relationship. For Paul, experiential truth must by its nature involve

the relational epistemic process in which truth is beyond the reader as “subject” and is definitively found in the objective God of the text (notably confirmed in quantitative history). The reader cannot define and determine the object of the text without reducing the ontology and function of God as the subject; and involvement in the relational epistemic process with the Spirit is the conclusive means to disclaim any reification of the object by the reader. Yet, this does not complete the relational epistemic process for experiential truth.

It is vital not only to distinguish object-God from subject-reader but equally important to distinguish the subject-God who relationally communicates with subject-reader for relational involvement together in Subject-to-subject, face-to-face relationship. The reader as person cannot have relational connection with an object but only with the Subject, whose reciprocal involvement can be experienced just in relationship together. The relational epistemic process is complete with this reciprocal relational connection with the objective subject-God through the Spirit, and the definitive relational outcome is the experiential truth of the whole-ly God’s ontology and function in relationship together as family. It is this experiential truth of the *pleroma* of God’s wholeness embodied for face-to-face relationship together that is the integral basis, by the Spirit, to further embody the ontology and function of the *pleroma* of Christ and, with the Spirit, to ongoingly constitute the whole ontology and function of the church. Nothing less and no substitutes than wholeness is the functional basis for Paul’s *pleroma* vine-root ecclesiology. Anything less and any substitutes, even in correct exegesis as propositional truth or rightly integrated for doctrinal truth, are a renegotiated ecclesiology that engages a reverse dynamic of reduced ontology and function for a gathering of epistemic and/or relational orphans. This is the core issue that has to be scrutinized in grassroots ecclesiology.

Paul previously identified the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27; Col 1:24), yet his later dialogue on the church helps to distinguish this as nothing other than a metaphor for an organic structure and system. In Ephesians, however, Paul’s whole understanding (e.g. 3:4) provides the theological-functional clarity to distinguish the body of Christ beyond a metaphor of the church and makes functional the embodying of the church’s ontology as the *pleroma* of Christ (1:23; 4:12-13; cf. his prayer, 3:16-19). Christ’s wholeness is the peace (cf. *tamiym*) that Paul’s epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction have illuminated to the churches throughout his letters (e.g. 1 Cor 7:15b; 14:33; Gal 6:16; Rom 14:19; Col 3:15). In contrast to a classical Greek emphasis on peace, this is not about the mere absence of conflict for Paul, despite its value in the situations he was addressing in the churches. The whole-ly Word’s peace is the presence of wholeness, even in situations of conflict, that only Jesus gives (Jn 14:27). Moreover, this is the wholeness those “in me” will have, Jesus declared (Jn 16:33); that is, the relational outcome “in Christ” Paul illuminated by the *koinonia* with Christ’s body and blood (1 Cor 10:16-17) and baptism in Christ’s death and resurrection through the Spirit

(Rom 6:4; 8:11; 1 Cor 12:13)—the wholeness which Paul theologically and functionally clarifies in Ephesians (2:14-17; 4:3-6).

In full congruence, then, the whole ontology and function of the *pleroma* of God that Jesus embodied in death and the Spirit raised whole in the resurrection is also participated in by those in Christ through the Spirit. The relational outcome of this participation together also embodies them in the whole ontology and function as the *pleroma* of Christ, in the image and likeness of the whole-ly God (Eph 4:24; cf. 2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29). From the convergence of these complex theological dynamics in Paul's vine-root ecclesiology forest emerges this **reciprocating relational dynamic of embodying** by the Spirit, in which the embodied *pleroma* of God is relationally extended in likeness not by a metaphor but by the definitive embodying of the *pleroma* of Christ, that is, the embodied wholeness of the ontology and function of the church (1:9-10, 22-23).

What theological-functional clarity does Paul make definitive for the whole ontology and function of the church? First of all, that the body of Christ clearly is not a metaphor, a doctrine, a truth-claim or a confession of faith. This is only the embodying of the wholeness of the church's ontology and function in likeness of the embodied whole ontology and function in the face of the whole person of Jesus the Christ. Thus, embodying is not theoretical, an ideal, a virtual process or an intention. The embodied church of Christ is the experiential truth of the relational outcome 'already' and the ongoing functional reality in relational progression to 'not yet', both in reciprocal relationship with the Spirit. Therefore, the church is fully accountable to be whole in its ontology and function now, regardless of the diversity of its eschatology.

By its nature in the present, neither epistemic orphans without whole knowledge and understanding of *who* they are and *whose* they are, nor relational orphans with distance, detachment or separation in their relationships together can account for the embodying of the *pleroma* of Christ. For Paul, anything less and any substitutes of whole ontology and function cannot embody whole ecclesiology, but this reverse dynamic only composes a renegotiated ecclesiology of reduced ontology and function in all its grassroots variations—no matter how much its infrastructure is reengineered (analogous to genetic engineering). Embodying in likeness of the embodied wholeness of God is the initial function that Paul makes definitive for the church. This function is not optional for a church's life and practice, nor is it reducible or negotiable; any function in a reverse dynamic always renders the church fragmentary. Embodying in Paul's vine-root ecclesiology is the essential key for the emergence of the church in wholeness. Thus, for the diversity of church *trees* to be integrated in the ecclesiology *forest*, Paul's vine-root ecclesiology keeps unfolding.

Equalizing the Global Church

So, what emerges in this church embodying that distinguishes it clearly from all other church life and practice? Embodying should not be confused with simply an incarnational notion. Just as the incarnation of the wholeness of God is constituted in the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes, so is embodying; thus, this is always in contrast and conflict with the reverse dynamic of anything less and any substitutes. That is, embodying is conjointly whole ontology irreducible to human shaping and construction, as well as whole function nonnegotiable to human terms from human contextualization, including of culture and other contextual influences. In the whole understanding of Paul, the embodying of the *pleroma* of Christ, by its very nature, is defined and determined by only the integrated transformation both of ‘who the church is’ to its ontology in the qualitative image of the whole-ly God, and of ‘whose the church is’ to its function in the relational likeness of the whole-ly Trinity. This integrated transformed identity of ‘who and whose the church is’ is the new creation of God’s family, which emerges only by the reciprocal relational presence, involvement and work of the Spirit. Embodying of the church, therefore, is only the new creation; otherwise, its ontology and function cannot be in likeness to the embodied wholeness of God, as Paul clearly distinguished (Eph 4:23-24; cf. Rom 8:29). Such ontology and function can be rendered at best as just an ontological simulation and/or a functional illusion by relational orphans, since their relational condition of not truly belonging cannot signify anything deeper. Rather relational orphans in the church are limited and constrained in the existential reality that neither can constitute nor do they signify the whole ontology and function of the church in vine-root ecclesiology.

The integrated transformation to the new creation that is necessary to embody the *pleroma* of Christ involves both individual persons and relationships. In Paul’s ecclesiology forest, the theological dynamics of this transformation process are made functional by the Spirit, and thus the transformation of persons and relationships is inseparable from the reciprocal relational involvement of the Spirit. For Paul, the Spirit is simply indispensable for the embodying of the church to emerge in whole ontology and function.

Paul reviews first the transformation of persons to whole ontology and function (Eph 2:1-10). The sin of reductionism prevailed in reduced human ontology and function, to which God’s thematic relational action of grace responded in *agape* involvement for the redemptive change necessary from reduced to whole ontology and function. The process from reductionism to wholeness involves the theological-functional dynamic of equalization, integration and reconciliation, or what converges integrally in **redemptive reconciliation**.

The redemptive change from *old* to *new* involves freeing human persons from being defined and determined by reductionism. The sin of reductionism reduces human ontology and function to be defined and determined from the outer in, for example, by what persons do and/or have. This fragments human persons and enslaves human integrity, worth and identity to these reductionist criteria, to which are ascribed human distinctions not only fragmenting but stratifying human persons as ‘better or less’. Enslavement to reductionism is the prevailing human condition redeemed by God, and persons entrenched in better-or-less distinctions are equalized before God—the redemptive process that frees them from fragmentation to be integrated and made whole in ontology and function. Transformed persons are only equalized persons who have been freed from reductionism by nothing less than this redemptive dynamic, or else they have not been freed in existential reality. Yet, having established that, transformed persons are not just free persons who have been equalized before God but who also have been equalized as persons with each other. This is crucial for Christians and churches today fighting for their freedom, regardless of their partisan bias and polarizing effects.

Thus, the nature of relationships together embodying the church necessarily also undergoes redemptive change. Transformed persons have not only been saved *from* reductionism but they are also irreducibly and nonegotiably saved *to* wholeness in relationship together as family. In other words, being equalized from better-or-less distinctions integrally and inseparably integrates persons (not merely parts of the church body) to whole ontology and function and then reconciles those transformed persons into equalized relationships in order to transform their relationships together beyond a gathering to family—just as Paul previously qualified for redeemed persons (Gal 5:1,13; 6:15-16; cf. 1 Cor 8:1).

The embodying of the *pleroma* of Christ involves this transformation to the new creation in likeness of God (as in 2 Cor 3:18), which necessitates transformed persons relationally involved in transformed relationships together for the church’s whole ontology and function (outlined in Eph 2:15-22). The whole function distinguishing this new creation, which Paul identified as the outcome of persons being equalized, is not merely the work of individual persons but also necessitates the collective function of persons together in relationship (Eph 2:10). This is the function that Paul qualifies as ontology and function in likeness of the whole-ly God (4:24). Paul continues to illuminate the collective function of the church in order to be whole and distinguished from the common of human contextualization (2:11-22).

Transformed persons are equalized persons who are relationally involved in transformed relationships, which clearly necessitate equalized relationships (2:11-13). Paul makes equalized relationships together in the church the relational imperative for the whole function of the church to be compatible and congruent with the wholeness that the person of Jesus the Christ himself embodied only for the embodying of the church to be whole (*pleroma*) in equalized relationships together (2:14-17). In the transformation

process to the new creation, the relational purpose of its theological dynamic of redemption and integration is reconciliation. Without equalized relationships in the church, relationships together are not transformed to whole relationships together, thus they still labor in the fragmentation of persons and relationships defined by stratifying better-or-less distinctions (2:15-16)—distinctions which totally nullify God’s relational response of grace in Paul’s ecclesiology (2:8-9). God’s grace demands being freed from human distinctions (“the veil” in 2 Cor 3:16-18) to be in relationship with God as well as the elimination of the influence from distinctions to be in whole relationship with each other.

Without the transformed relationships of equalized relationships, what the church is saved *from* has lost its functional significance for what it is saved *to*; in addition, the gospel that Paul made definitive has lost the relational significance of what the church is saved *to* (Eph 3:6). This is the gospel of wholeness/peace (6:15) basic to what Jesus embodied and constitutes for the embodying of the whole church (3:6). Therefore, equalized relationships together are neither optional for church function nor negotiable for its embodying. The only alternative is variations of reductionism, the diversity of which fragments church ontology and function by its counter-relational work, notably and inevitably promoting better-or-less distinctions, even under the guise of spiritual gifts and leadership roles (as Paul will clarify, 4:11-16).

Reconciling the Church Intimately

Just as embodying the whole ontology and function of the *pleroma* of Christ should not be confused with a conventional notion of incarnational, the transformation of the church’s ontology and function should not be confused with an increasingly common usage of the notion “transformational.” Paul continues to illuminate the transformed relationships embodying the church’s whole ontology and function, and, as he does, transformed relationships are taken deeper than equalized relationships (2:18-22). Though equalized relationships are necessary to constitute the integrated transformed relationship for the church, they are not sufficient by themselves to complete the transformed relationships involved in the whole relationships together of God’s new creation family.

Transformed relationships are relationships both with God and with each other together as family. While transformed persons are equalized persons before God, they are not in equalized relationship *with* the whole-ly God. Nevertheless they have a unique relationship with God to participate in God’s life. This unique involvement more deeply signifies the transformed relationships both necessary and sufficient together with God and with each other to be whole as God’s new creation family and the *pleroma* of Christ. Paul initially defines this unique relational involvement as having “access in one Spirit to

the Father” (2:18). The term for access (*prosagoge*) was used for an audience granted to someone lesser by high officials and monarchs; it comes from *prosago*, to bring near. This involved not merely an open door but the opportunity to interact with someone greater. *Access* for Paul goes deeper than this notion. He defines further the nature of this relational involvement with the Father as access “to God in boldness and confidence” (3:12). “Boldness” (*parresia*) involves to speak all that one thinks, feels, that is, with “confidence” (*pepoithesis*, trust). This trust to vulnerably share one’s person openly with the Father points clearly to an intimate involvement, not merely having access to the Father. This vulnerability is the intimate connection that Paul previously defined for those who have been equalized to be relationally involved with Abba as his very own daughters and sons, and the connection which makes functional their relational belonging and ontological identity (Gal 4:4-7; Rom 8:15). Access to the Father, therefore, involves this intimate relationship together in which the whole-ly God is relationally involved by family love in being family together (2:4,22); and this intimate reciprocal involvement is reinforced by Paul’s prayer for specifically knowing God in their hearts (1:17-18; 3:16-19).

Therefore, just as important as equalized relationships for church ontology and function is this vulnerable involvement in intimate relationships together with each other. *Together* is not a static condition but the dynamic function of relationship. The transformation of equalized relationships provides the equal opportunity without the distance or separation of stratified relations for whole relationship together to develop, but intimate relationship is the function that vulnerably opens persons to each other from inner out for their hearts to fully come together reconciled as the new creation in likeness of the whole-ly God (4:24-25,32; 5:1-2, 18a-21). This reconciling relational function is the **intimacy** of hearts open to each other and coming together, as witnessed in the intimacy of the Trinity’s relationships together. Thus, only intimate relationships functionally reconcile persons who have had the distance and separation in relationships removed by equalization. Moreover, intimate relationships go deeper than just occupying time, space and activities together, even as equal persons, and take involvement to the depth of *agape* relational involvement in likeness of the wholeness of God (3:19; 5:1-2; cf. Col 3:14). *Agape* is not about what to do in relation to others but how to be relationally involved with others; and *agape* relational involvement goes beyond sacrifice for deeper intimate relationships together—just as Jesus vulnerably disclosed in relationship together with the Father and vulnerably embodied in relationship together with us (Jn 15:9; 17:23,26).

The experiential truth of the ontological identity of God’s new creation family depends on the function of these intimate relationships together. There is no alternative or substitute for intimate relationships that can bring persons into whole relationship together to embody God’s family. For Paul, being *together* is inseparable from relationship and is irreducible from the function of these relationships. Relationally

belonging to each other in one body emerges only from the transformation to intimate relationships together. Relational belonging should not be confused with “belonging” to a church-group, nor should ontological identity be mistaken for church-organizational identity. Despite any cohesion of “belonging” and strength of identity in the latter, they are just simulations or illusions of the relational bond constituted only by transformed intimate relationships together (cf. 4:3).

Paul integrates the sufficiency of these intimate relationships together with the necessary equalized relationships in a dynamic interaction to complete the integrated transformed relationships together for the embodying of the whole ontology and function of the church as **the intimate equalizer**. These integral transformed relationships in wholeness constitute the embodying of “a holy temple...a dwelling place” for the wholly God’s intimate relational involvement (2:19-22; cf. Jn 14:23). In Paul’s vine-root ecclesiology, the whole ontology and function of the church can be constituted just by transformed persons *agape*-relationally involved in transformed relationships together; and transformed relationships are constituted only by the integral function of equalized and intimate relationships together. Therefore, church ontology and function is this new creation in likeness of the whole and holy God, nothing less and no substitutes. And the function of these transformed relationships together, both equalized and intimate, distinguishes the church unequivocally as God’s new creation family. Moreover, those who relationally belong in this definitive ontological identity are clearly distinguished from any other church gathering of relational and epistemic orphans, whose diversity pervades the church trees fragmenting the global church forest. Most importantly, this relational dynamic and outcome of wholeness emerges entirely by the ongoing reciprocal relational involvement of the Spirit (2:18,22; 4:3-4; cf. Tit 3:5), which is why the Spirit’s person is grieved by reduced ontology and function in the church (the context of 4:30).

Common Concerns and Implications for the Uncommon

Given Paul’s vine-root ecclesiology, some or many Christians and churches may settle for grassroots ecclesiology since the former requires hard choices and redemptive changes. I like to ask Christians what color they think they will be in heaven. Assuming our resurrected bodies will be the same as our earthly bodies, except they will be whole like Jesus, my opinion is we will have our earthly color as given or allowed by God (evolution notwithstanding). That means also that we will certainly not all be white because there is no valid basis to think that white is whole like Jesus. OK, assuming our color, then my next question is what race or ethnicity do you think you will be in heaven? If you also said what you currently are now, that would be incorrect. Existing race, ethnicity, and other such distinctions are human constructs, which, as discussed, have been ascribed a distinct value (including for gender) measured by a comparative scale—that should not be confused with God’s measuring line and plumb line (Isa 28:17). God

neither makes such distinctions nor allows us to use them to define and determine our ontology and function, as Peter and the early church learned and had to change. Therefore, no such distinctions or their value attached to color and gender will exist in heaven, nor are they compatible for God's earthly family (cf. 2 Cor 10:12). Accordingly, irreducibly and nonnegotiable, the church and its persons and relationship cannot continue to reinforce, sustain and work to continue to maintain distinctions—even with good intentions for affirming diversity and supporting differences—and expect to compose God's whole and uncommon family on the basis of reduced ontology and function.

Equality and equalizing may raise questions and concerns that this makes being equal the top priority for the church and the highest purpose for the gospel. My short response is yes and no. No, it doesn't if we are talking about 'common equality', which emerges from common peace and from social justice without the integrity of righteousness that don't account for sin as reductionism and an underlying theological anthropology of reduced ontology and function. Yes, it does because we are only focused on **uncommon equality**, which unmistakably and undeniably emerges from the uncommon peace of Christ and his justice with righteousness—"He has abolished *the inequitable practice of the law with its commandments and ordinances*" (Eph 2:15)—in order to save us from sin as reductionism and save us to his family composed by transformed relationships together both equalized and intimate, so that persons and relationships are distinguished in their primacy of whole ontology and function and thereby belonging to the new relational order of God's whole and uncommon family. Yes, the church in uncommon equality fulfills the relational significance of its ontology (who and whose it is), and the equalizing church fulfills the relational purpose of its function (what and how it is)—fulfills by its uncommon peace of whole ontology and function. Do you have a better gospel and a greater function for the church?

Various conversations have taken place in the church and academy about wholeness and being whole. Yet, I am not aware of deeper understanding in theology and practice emerging from this conversation. Paul and his witness to "the gospel of peace" (Eph 6:15) gives substance to wholeness for the church and holds the church and its persons and relationships accountable to be whole, just as he did with Peter. If we don't want to hear Jesus weeping over us and saying "If you, even you, only knew today what would bring you wholeness" (Lk 19:42, NIV), then we need to pay full attention to the person Jesus transformed to witness to his uncommon peace and to help unfold his equalizing church in his uncommon equality for his gospel of uncommon equality. As we pay full attention, Paul takes us further and deeper with the palpable Word—likely "immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20).

What uncommon equality, uncommon relationships and the uncommon church family share together with uncommon peace is the innermost of life centered on the very heart of persons and relationships in whole ontology and function—in likeness of the

whole ontology and function of the whole and uncommon God (Eph 4:24; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10). What all persons, peoples, nations and all their relations have in common is reduced ontology and function. What all anthropology, whatever its variation, have at its core is this shared ontology and function. Thus the global church needs to keep this central in its theology and practice in order to respond to the heart of such concerns as Goethe's Faust inquired, "What holds the world together in its innermost?"

With its inquiry, science has been regarded as the key to unlocking the mysteries of life and what holds the universe together in the innermost. The recent confirming discovery of the Higgs boson to explain why physical bodies exist at all has spurred physics to get to the core of dark matter in the universe. Yet, this heuristic process has not gained deeper understanding of the innermost of human life, perhaps even going in the opposite direction. Moreover, as useful as neuroscience's findings from the human brain are, they don't get to the heart of persons and relationships. By definition, theological anthropology should provide understanding for the innermost of life centered on the heart of persons and relationships. Unfortunately, our theological anthropology commonly tends to reflect, reinforce, enable and sustain the shared ontology and function existing in all of the above—with Jesus crying over our theological anthropology for not knowing what composes the wholeness at the very heart of persons and relationships.

Paul illuminated the good news, "the gospel of peace" (Eph 6:15, cf. Isa 52:7), for the innermost of all human life (encompassing the universe) that gets to the very heart of persons and relationships, and that cosmologically "in him all things hold together" (Col 1:16-17). The wholeness of Christ is the definitive key to understanding the dark matter and fragmentation of human life, and the only solution to make whole the very heart of their ontology and function in the innermost of life together in wholeness (Col 1:19-20). What emerges from this gospel of wholeness is the good news of human equality, yet not the common equality composed still with the innermost fragmented and still of reduced ontology and function—a critical issue for those working for equality. The equality emerging from the gospel of wholeness is uncommon because (1) it involves the innermost of the fragmented human condition and (2) it restores that innermost condition at the heart of all persons and relationships to their new shared primacy in whole ontology and function.

The relational reality of what emerges from the experiential truth of the whole gospel is only the uncommon equality composed by the uncommon peace of Christ in nothing less than wholeness of ontology and function. Anything less than wholeness is no longer whole at its heart but reduced, or remains reduced, in ontology and function. And what is contrary to and in conflict with this wholeness of uncommon equality are human distinctions. Directly addressing this defining issue is the basis, reason and purpose for Paul making definitive without equivocation the following in his conjoint fight for the whole gospel and against its reduction:

“For in the uncommon peace of Christ Jesus you are all in your innermost together the family of God...transformed from inner out at the heart of your ontology and functions to the wholeness of Christ. At the heart of your whole ontology and function, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are whole together in your innermost in the wholeness of Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26-28)—whole-ly new persons and relationships together “being re-newed and made whole [anakainoo] on the basis of experiential knowledge specifically [epignosis] in likeness of the whole ontology and function of its Creator. In that new and whole condition there is no longer Greek or Jew, and any other human distinction, but the wholeness of Christ determines all persons and relationships together in all whole ontology and function (Col 3:10-11, cf. Eph 1:23).

Yet, we have to understand the often subtle reality that human distinctions are substitutes for the innermost of humanity, substitutes which fragment human life at the heart of persons and relationships in their ontology and function. This is the default condition and mode common for all humanity. These substitutes also serve as subtle simulations and illusions of ontology and function assumed to be in their primary condition, when in fact and existential reality they only compose in secondary terms the reduced ontology and function for persons and relationships. Race-ethnic relations, for example, cannot be expected to be resolved beyond a simulation or illusion from common peace, as long as those distinctions are maintained preventing getting to the heart of the problem. The most that emerges amounts to a virtual reality. The consequences of human distinctions, as discussed above, emerge along the spectrum of the human condition in its common ontology and function, with inequality the defining consequence for all persons in relationships to be apart—whether individual, collective, institutional, structural or systemic. Inequality in race-ethnic relations exists because of these distinctions, thus equality cannot be achieved with these distinctions. The solution is not to be colorblind but to address what such distinctions signify, define and determine for human life.

What underlies all human distinctions and their consequences of inequality at all levels, which they all have in common in the innermost, is the inescapable fragmentary condition of reduced ontology and function. There is no substitute, simulation or illusion that can alter this condition and therefore resolve the existing inequality of persons, peoples, tribes, nations and their relationships. Accordingly, we have been recently witnessing, if not experiencing, the increasing relational consequences of inequality around the globe (mainly from macroaggressions), and notably between U.S. college students (primarily with microaggressions) and in U.S. cities between the minority population and law enforcement. Yet, the global church must not be misled in its understanding and misguided in its response. What precipitates conflict relations is comparative relations stratified by human distinctions. Whether these distinctions are

self-imposed or imposed on others, or both, a deficit condition results, which may require power relations to maintain conformity or to try to change. At the center of all this fragmentation of persons and relationships is the defining practice of human distinctions; and at the heart of human distinctions are fragmented persons and relationships in reduced ontology and function needing redemptive reconciliation for transformed relationships together—the relationships composed only by persons both being equalized without distinctions and thus vulnerably involved intimately from the heart of the whole person. We should not be misguided to work for equality while distinctions are still used, which at best can only result in a common equality that lacks wholeness at the heart of persons and relationships. The distinctions of persons we use will be the equality in their relationships we get!

The good news from uncommon peace is that the pivotal breakthrough in the human relations composing the human condition, our human condition, has emerged with the gospel of uncommon equality in order for the heart of all persons and relationships to be transformed (not simply reformed) together in their primacy of nothing less than whole ontology and function. As Paul called forth the new-order church family to proclaim ‘the gospel of uncommon equality from uncommon peace’, the equalizing church must itself be determined by the relational reality of uncommon equality; this specifically involved transformed relationships both equalized and intimate, so that the church family can whole-ly witness to the experiential truth of this whole and uncommon gospel (Eph 6:15). Furthermore, as the context of Paul calling forth the equalizing church indicates (6:10-18), the equalizing church will not be equalizing unless it also fights against any and all reductionism: first, against anything less and any substitutes for ‘the gospel of uncommon equality from uncommon peace’, and next, against the inequality inherent in human distinctions that fragment persons and relationships at the heart of their ontology and function. The integral fight both *for* the wholeness of the gospel and *against* all reductionism is not optional for the equalizing church reconciling intimately, because the relational outcome of wholeness for its own persons and relationships and for all persons, peoples, nations and their relations depends on it. The good news is not that we have been saved from ‘sin without reductionism’ and saved to ‘good without wholeness’.

One qualifying note should be added to clarify the intimate equalizer church. As the new-order trinitarian church family, the intimate equalizer church is still the body of Christ. That is, the functional order that Paul outlined for the church to compose its interdependent synergism is still vital (1 Cor 12:12-31), just as synergism is essential to the interpersonal Trinity. The uncommon equality composing the church in the intimacy of uncommon wholeness does not mean that all its persons do the same thing and equally have the same resources, nor does everyone engage their practice (including worship) in the same manner. The new-order church is neither a homogeneous unit nor a monotonic composition. Diversity as nonconformity in what persons do and as nonuniformity of the resources they have are basic to the body of Christ. The key issue is not differences but

distinctions associated with differences that limit and constrain persons and fragment the relational order of the church family from wholeness together. Having this nonconforming-nonuniform diversity in the church is important for the church's interdependent synergism, but each difference is secondary from outer in and must be integrated into the primary of the whole church from inner out, that is, the vulnerably intimate church in uncommon wholeness and uncommon equality (Eph 4:11-13, 16, cf. Col 2:19). When differences become the primary focus, even inadvertently, they subtly are seen with distinctions that set into motion the comparative process with its relational consequences that persons and relationships with these distinctions have to bear—the consequences Jesus saw in the temple before he reconstituted it.

Therefore, the scrutinized global church is accountable for equalizing its diversity, and then responsible for bringing and holding together all that diversity in the intimate equalizer church—regardless of the changes necessary for this integral relational outcome. Redemptive reconciliation is not optional but essential to the uncommon wholeness of who, what and how the church and its persons and relationships are *to be*. This is the gospel of wholeness Jesus enacted to constitute the uncommon trinitarian church family as *the intimate equalizer* in the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes, thus which is nonnegotiable for the gospel to compose this essential relational outcome.

Re-image-ing the Church

The human and commonized images by which churches have been constructed are the status quo that keeps evolving in new normals for the global church. This existential reality has disaffected many in younger generations, who don't see the church as relevant for their faith practice or as sufficient context to address their needs.⁷ What currently pervades the church accelerates the urgent need for the church to be re-image-d, not reimagined as witnessed today but re-image-d according to its vine-roots.

When Paul defines the church as being reconciled in one body (Eph 2:16) and as equalized persons relationally belonging to God's family (*oikeios*, 2:19), this *oikodome* (church family not church building) is further defined as being "joined together" (2:21). Paul is providing further theological-functional clarity to his previous dialogue on the church (1 Cor 12:12-31; Rom 12:5). His earlier relational discourse appears to describe an organic or organizational structure of the church whose parts are interrelated and function in interdependence. Paul deepens the understanding of interrelated parts in interdependence by further defining the relational dynamic involved to make this integrally function in wholeness together (4:16).

⁷ See, for instance, the survey by the Barna Group, *The State of Discipleship* (The Navigators, 2015).

Implied in church theology and practice biases is the worldview prevailing at the time.⁸ Worldviews shape the surrounding contexts that influence the identity and function of churches as well as of God, notably as the Trinity. Understanding how worldviews get magnified in church theology and practice is critical for re-*image*-ing the church in contrast to reimagining it.

In the church's perceptual-interpretive lens of the Trinity, uncommon likeness also requires the uncommon Trinity, who is not distinguished in common Trinitarianism. God's glory encompasses the heart of the Trinity's qualitative being functioning integrally by the glory of the Trinity's intimate relational nature. At the heart of the Trinity, the trinitarian persons' distinctions of roles and functions (enacted to love us downward) are indistinguishable—"whoever has seen *my whole person* has seen the Father," "The Father and I are one *at the heart of our being*" as the embodied Word disclosed (Jn 14:9; 10:30)—and thus they are not structured together by a system of distinctions, as is commonly perceived in trinitarian theology and practice. The substantive face of the Trinity vulnerably disclosed the heart of the Trinity to distinguish the ontological One of the *person*-al Trinity and the relational Whole of the inter-*person*-al Trinity.

Intimate and equalized relationships inseparably define and integrally determine the whole ontology and function of the Trinity. The uncommon intimate whole essential to the heart of the Trinity's ontology is constituted only by the function of whole trinitarian persons distinguished as subjects intimately involved in relationships together, which by their nature are equalized from the distinctions of their roles and functions and thus without the horizontal and vertical barriers to the uncommon wholeness essential for the Trinity *to be* together and *not to be* reduced or fragmented. Accordingly yet not simply, nothing less and no substitutes can integrally define our persons as subjects and determine our relationships *to be* in uncommon likeness to this Trinity—that is, unless we turn to common Trinitarianism to compose persons and shape relationships in common likeness. So, yes, the Trinity wants to know "What are you doing here?" just as Elijah was pursued (1 Kg 19:9,13).

Intimacy is not optional for the uncommon Trinity, nor can intimacy be optional for those in likeness. This means that equalized persons and relationships are also not optional, both for the whole Trinity and for those in likeness. Not having this option is problematic, for example, for churches seeking more intimacy in their contexts without addressing equalizing their persons and relationships. This is also problematic for Christians promoting social justice and working for social change by equalization without intimate connection. We can't have one relational condition without the other relational condition, because they are inseparably integrated to compose wholeness of persons and relationships in likeness of the whole and uncommon Trinity. Yet, this whole likeness has

⁸ David Naugle discusses worldview history and reification in *Worldviews: the History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

undergone profound reductions in the framework of modernism, and the uncommon likeness has experienced ongoing fragmentation in the scope of postmodern approaches. These surrounding influences urgently amplify the Trinity's questions (including Gen 3:9) and multiply the need to challenge the underlying assumptions of our theological anthropology and hermeneutic lens. In addition, the current condition of persons and relationships confronts our view of sin, the significance of our gospel, and what we are saved *to*. All of these compelling issues converge in the Trinity used in our theology and practice, since that defines the persons we get and determines the relationships we get. Based on the whole and uncommon disclosed by Jesus, only the whole who, what and how of the Trinity is essential to make current realities whole.

The most prominent realities shaping the human context and the majority of its persons and relationships—including the church context and its persons and relationships—have emerged from the narratives mostly of modernism and less so of postmodernism.

In selective summary of the modern narrative from the emergence of the Enlightenment to its unfolding in modern science, its related process of reasoning and the recent effort to quantify the heart of the human person in the brain have profoundly narrowed down the epistemic field and the perceptual-interpretive framework to the realm of physics. As a result, assumptions are made as to the validity of this epistemic process and its reliability for application to all of life, such that the theories composed generate a grand narrative for defining the universe in general and for determining persons and relationships in particular.

Based on its quantitative framework narrowing down its epistemic field and perceptual lens to the outer in, the modern narrative has irreversibly reduced human persons and relationships *not to be* in qualitative relational function having qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness (i.e. being apart, Gen 2:18). From the Industrial Revolution to the internet world, the development of modern technology has indelibly entrenched and literally enslaved persons and relationships on a course of human development that has reduced the primacy of their wholeness with secondary substitutes. These more-valued substitutes can only simulate who, what and how they are in a virtual likeness—notably evident in the use of digital technology—that is, in a reality without qualitative relational significance and thus in no substantive reality.

The existing condition of persons and relationships in developed countries is no mystery and its development—perceived as so-called progress—is evident in the modern narrative. In these contexts in particular, the hope for changing this condition is confounding, and the recourse to make it whole is denied or at least ignored—which is witnessed in U.S. Christians and churches today. As emerged from the beginning, the modern narrative's sweeping assumption has been that “you will not be *reduced*” (Gen

3:4). And the Trinity grieves (as in Lk 19:41-42) because the modern narrative also doesn't know what makes for wholeness, since this uncommon wholeness is beyond its perceptual lens to understand. Those persons and relationships who have subscribed to the modern narrative must live and function by the valid paradigm that reliably can be counted on for its results: the measure they use will be the measure they get—and what their reason thinks they have will evaporate from their grasp (Mk 4:24-25). Whether intentionally or inadvertently, those churches and its persons and relationships who use the modern framework and lens are subject to this paradigm because this is the existing reality that they have gotten in common likeness.

Another more recent narrative has emerged from postmodern thinking counter to the modernist narrative. The grand narrative of modernism is not accepted in postmodernism, at least not ostensibly. The variable thinking of postmodernists opts to define persons and relationships in the grassroots experience of their local contexts. Who, what and how persons and relationships are have their primacy in their particular settings, which cannot be generalized to all persons and relationships as in a grand narrative. In this sense, the epistemic field for postmodernists is narrowed down even more than modernism; yet, on the other hand, the postmodernist lens is broadened to behold a wide range of persons and relationships. Thus, what likeness of persons and relationships that emerge from the postmodern narrative is not a reduced likeness as in modernism, but it becomes fragmented likenesses of persons and relationships merely from the diversity of human contextualization. The postmodern likeness is considered reliable in itself yet not valid for general application. Given its basis and discounting of modernist assumptions, the postmodern epistemic field and hermeneutic lens are useful for diversifying (read fragmenting) global theologies and practices—particularly composed to counter Western dominance—but they are problematic for whole trinitarian theology and practice.⁹

While the postmodern narrative broadens, and perhaps deepens, its account of persons and relationships, any of its theories provide no basis for persons and relationships to be considered whole. Rather, what is proposed is merely nothing more than distinctly fragmentary likeness—the balkanization of persons and relationships in likeness. Since it affirms no general narrative beyond local human context, even though postmodern theories may make statements as if to generalize, the measure it uses can only yield the persons and relationships it gets—beyond whom it must remain silent, without knowledge and understanding of the whole needed for the human condition. And the balkanized likeness of persons and relationships remains in a condition “to be apart,” as if the face of Jesus disclosed nothing relevant or significant for persons and relationships *to be* in likeness. The postmodern fragmentary-balkanized likeness is

⁹ David S. Cunningham considers postmodernism an asset for developing a postmodern trinitarian theology, which would focus on a number of concerns neglected by theologians influenced by modernity. See his discussion in “The Trinity” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 186-202.

problematic for trinitarian theology and practice because there is no wholeness to the Trinity that applies to all persons and relationships. While postmodern thinking has rightly challenged the assumptions of modernism, its own sweeping assumption has rendered it to the default condition and mode of reductionism.

Unlike the modernist narrative limited to the realm of physics, the emergence of the Trinity integrates the realms of physics and metaphysics to disclose the essential integral reality beyond those realms. The essential reality of the whole and uncommon Trinity composes the metanarrative integral for all life—distinguished from the grand narrative of modernism—which encompasses all persons and relationships in uncommon likeness neither reduced nor fragmented. Apart from this integral metanarrative, there is no essential basis for wholeness either for the Trinity or for persons and relationships.

This is the epistemological and hermeneutical dilemma that a postmodern narrative faces, even apart from its counterpart modern narrative. The resolution of this dilemma will only take place—and not without difficulty—when its epistemic field and hermeneutic lens account for and therefore become accountable to the whole and uncommon Trinity disclosed in the human context, yet not defined and determined by human contextualization as postmodernists depend on.

The reduced likeness from a modernist narrative may assume to be applicable to all persons and relationships, but that application can only reduce who, what and how persons and relationships are. The fragmentary-balkanized likeness from a postmodernist narrative is inapplicable to all persons and relationships and makes no explicit assumptions that it does. Yet, there appears to be an underlying assumption that the sum of all those fragments from local settings could apply to the whole of the human context. Perhaps balkanized likeness is considered analogous to diverse nations converging to form the United Nations. That sum, however, would still not equal the whole—which is greater than the sum of any parts or fragments—needed for all persons and relationships *to be* in essential likeness to the whole-ly Trinity.

We need to challenge our own assumptions and face the surrounding reality of reduced and fragmented likenesses; and we need to stop ignoring them or denying their influential reality in our midst, both of which keep us “to be apart” from our essential likeness. That essential likeness for human persons and relationships in life together is uncommon to all that is common, whether in a modern narrative or a postmodern narrative.

Though idolized (as in modernism) or idealized (as in postmodernism), the likeness from such narratives can only compose persons and relationships in a virtual reality of the whole who, what and how essential *to be*. Even the likeness from a premodern narrative involved basically the same issues for persons and relationships. Christendom evolved in the fourth century, for example, to impose its common framework for all theology and practice to conform to a reduced ontology and function in

common likeness. Similar in likeness, other efforts to ensure orthodoxy and to avoid fragmentation in the church established the primacy of doctrine over the primacy of relationships together involving the whole person, which thereby composed common orthodoxy in *unlikeness* to the whole and uncommon Trinity. The common shaping of persons and relationship also emerged in the earliest church. Paul fought against these “fine-sounding arguments, persuasive speech” (*pithanologia*, Col 2:4,8,16-19, notably from the early forms of gnosticism) in order that the interrelated likeness of persons, relationships and the church would be in uncommon wholeness—integrated together with the uncommon whole ontology and function of the Trinity disclosed by Christ (Col 2:9-10, as in Eph 4:13-16).

Thus, implicit in Paul’s uncommon ecclesiology—contrary to a worldview implied in church theology and practice—is the relational dynamic that Jesus constituted in his prayer for the definitive formation of his church family (Jn 17). Paul extends the whole-ly Word’s relational dynamic in order to fulfill his prayer in the existential reality of the church that is *re-image-d* solely by the Trinity (17:21-23). In Paul’s *pleroma* ecclesiology, the functional significance of church ontology and function emerges as the church lives “created according to the likeness of God” (Eph 4:24). The church, for Paul, is the Father’s new creation family embodied in Christ and raised up by the Spirit in the relational likeness of this whole of God, who dwells intimately present and *agape*-relationally involved. If not created and functioning in this likeness, church becomes a gathering of human shaping or construction in likeness of some aspect of human contextualization, which then often reifies its ontological simulations and functional illusions as the body of Christ in contrast to and conflict with the relational intimacy of the Trinity.

Paul was no trinitarian in his theological development, yet his monotheism went beyond the knowledge and understanding of the Shema in Judaism. His experiential truth of Jesus and the Spirit in ongoing relationship together gave him whole knowledge and understanding of the whole of God. The relational and functional significance of Paul’s whole God constituted him as a new creation in God’s family and provided the basis for the church as God’s new creation family to be in the relational likeness of this whole-ly God whom he himself has experienced. The church in likeness of the whole of God was not a theological construct in Paul’s ecclesiology, the concept of which has growing interest in modern theology, of course, as the church in likeness of the Trinity.¹⁰ Yet, Paul’s understanding of the church’s likeness emerged from engagement in the relational epistemic process with the whole-ly God, the *synesis* (whole knowledge and understanding) that appears to elude many of his readers.

¹⁰ For example, see John D. Zizioulos, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985). Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991). Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

Trinitarian likeness was not a theological construct or an ethereal practice for Paul. It signified the reality of his face-to-face involvement with the trinitarian persons, which composed the trinitarian relational process “with unveiled faces...being transformed into *Jesus*’ likeness...who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). This essential relational outcome was the whole and uncommon basis for the whole of Paul’s person and the whole in his theology and practice, which most notably composed the uncommon wholeness of the church and its persons and relationships in trinitarian likeness. In other words, since the Damascus road this monotheistic Jew vulnerably experienced the relational response of the trinitarian persons and their ongoing relational involvement in family love, so that his whole person was *to be* distinguished in trinitarian likeness (see also Col 3:10-11; Gal 5:6; 6:15).

Interacting functions in themselves, however, do not account for the dynamic of the trinitarian Persons’ whole relationship together, which underlies each of their functions and which integrates their uniqueness into the whole they constitute together, the whole-ly God. The ontology and function of God’s whole relationship together lives also in interdependence. In this dynamic, any distinctions of their unique functions are rendered secondary; and such distinctions should not be used to define each of them or to determine their position in the Godhead. As vulnerably disclosed, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are irreducibly defined and inseparably determined only by whole relationship together, and this relational dynamic functions in various involvements with human contextualization to enact, embody and complete the whole-ly God’s thematic relational response to make whole the human condition, that is, to save both *from* reductionism and *to* wholeness together. To highlight their distinctions, for example, by being overly christocentric, simply binitarian, or even gender-specific, is to diminish the whole of God’s ontology and to fragment the whole of God’s function.

Even though Paul was no traditional trinitarian in theology, he clearly made definitive for the church this trinitarian likeness: “There are different...but the same Spirit...but the same Lord *Jesus*...but it is the same God *the Father*”; in addition, “There is one body and one Spirit...one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:4-5), and differences granted to the church are based on each person “given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (4:7) and “given the *presence and involvement* of the Spirit for the *uncommon wholeness of the church*...just as the body is one and has many members...are one *ontological whole in likeness of the trinitarian persons*...all *our persons* baptized into *equalized relationships together without distinctions*” (1 Cor 12:7-13). The whole of Paul and the whole in his theology for the church can only be understood in this trinitarian likeness, which transforms persons from inner out in their relationships without the veil to constitute the uncommon wholeness of the church in uncommon likeness of the whole and uncommon Trinity (as Paul made definitive in 2 Cor 3:14-18).

Churches need to understand, however, that the bond of wholeness is not simply a bond of love but is relationship-specific to whole persons in two vital nonnegotiable ways:

1. Only whole persons can be involved at the heart level for the bond of intimate relationships that is necessary for wholeness in trinitarian likeness; yet, this is only uncommon wholeness and not common peace (passing for wholeness), so the bond of intimate relationships is not a virtual reality that could be simulated, but is irreplaceably the essential reality of the hearts of whole persons (without the veil of differences and distinctions) bonding together.
2. This intimate bond requires then unavoidably that these persons be equalized unmistakably in any and all differences and distinctions, such that the involvement of their whole persons is not compromised and the integrity of this intimate bond is not redefined out in and thereby become a bond of common peace—a bond which would neither be whole nor be in trinitarian likeness.

When Paul earlier held the church accountable to “open wide your hearts” in reciprocal likeness (2 Cor 6:11-13), it was this bond of wholeness in intimate and equalized relationships together in which he challenged their whole persons *to be* uncommon in trinitarian likeness. Nothing less and no substitutes for the church and its persons and relationships can be whole, just as is essential for the Trinity.

For the ontological identity of the church to be of functional significance, it cannot be shaped or constructed by human terms from human contextualization. In Paul’s ecclesiology, the church in wholeness is the new creation by the whole of God’s relational response of grace (“was given grace”) from above top-down, the dynamic of which (“descended...ascended”) Christ relationally embodied to make each one of us together to be God’s whole (“he might fill all things,” *pleroo*, make complete, Eph 4:7-10; cf. 1:23). This is the church in wholeness embodying the *pleroma* of Christ. In God’s relational response of grace, Christ also gave the relational means to church leaders for the dynamic embodying of the church (4:11), which Paul previously defined also as part of the Spirit’s relational involvement to share different *charisma* from the whole (not a fragmented source) for the functional significance of the church body (1 Cor 12:4-11). Paul illuminates this further to make definitive the functional significance of embodying of the church in relational likeness to the whole and holy God.

Church leaders are given the relational means for the purpose “to equip the saints” (*katartismos* from *katartizo*, to put into proper condition, to restore to former condition, make complete, 4:12). This directly points to the dynamic of transformed persons reconciled and relationally involved in transformed relationships together in relational likeness to God, and integrated in interdependence of the various church functions

(“work of ministry”) necessary for the dynamic embodying (*oikodome*, 4:12) of the church’s whole ontology and function of “the *pleroma* of Christ” (4:13). This means unequivocally: For church leaders to be of functional significance, their persons must be defined by the wholeness of the new creation in the qualitative image of God from inner out, not defined by their gifts, resources or the roles and titles they have which reduce their persons to outer in; and for their leadership to be functionally significant as transformed persons, their function must be determined by *agape* relational involvement in transformed relationships together (both equalized and intimate) as God’s new creation family in the relational likeness of the whole-ly God, not determined by the titles and roles they perform (even with sacrifice) that make distinctions, intentionally or unintentionally, creating distance and stratification in relationships together. The latter practices by church leaders renegotiate ecclesiology from bottom-up based on a theological anthropology from outer in.

In Paul’s whole vine-root ecclesiology, church leaders in reduced ontology and function are not created or living new in the image and likeness of God and, therefore, cannot *katartismos* others in the interdependence necessary to be of functional significance for embodying the church in relational likeness of the whole and holy God. Nor can they proclaim the experiential truth of the gospel of wholeness (Eph 6:15). Only transformed leaders—whose persons are ongoingly being restored to the image and likeness of God (*anakainoo*, Col 3:10-11; cf. *ananeoomai*, Eph 4:23)—vulnerably involved in transformed relationships together with the Spirit can help make complete the saints—that is, *katarismos* emerges from conjoint interaction with *anakainoo*. Only whole leaders relationally serve to make complete the saints in the interdependence that is functionally significant for the church’s whole function: to dynamically embody (*oikodome*) the *pleroma* of Christ until all those relationally belonging to God’s family come to (*katantao*, reach, arrive) be together as one (*herotes*, unity), that is, whole in their relational response of trust in reciprocal relationship together and whole in specifically knowing (*epignosis*) the Son of God in intimate relationship, the relational outcome of which is persons without distinctions (beyond *aner*) who are whole-ly complete (*teleios*) in the qualitative depth (*helikia*, stature) of the *pleroma* embodied by Christ, therefore who together with the Spirit can embody the *pleroma* of Christ in functional significance of the relational likeness of the whole of God (4:12-13).

Paul is not outlining an ecclesial function of church growth models, missional models or any other ministry techniques of serving for the quantitative expansion of gatherings shaped or constructed by human terms. Paul makes definitive the theological paradigm for the whole function embodying the church’s ontology and function of who the church is and whose the church is as God’s new creation family in his qualitative

image and relational likeness. This paradigm is the theological dynamic of church ontology, whose function is entirely relational and whose whole ontology and function is the functional significance of just transformed persons *agape*-relationally involved in transformed relationships together in interdependence, the definitive paradigm especially for its leaders.

It is unequivocal in Paul's vine-root ecclesiology that the church in relational likeness of the whole-ly God is irreplaceable for the functional qualitative significance of its ontology and function. For the church's ontology and function to be whole as God's new creation family, it must (*dei* not *opheilo*) be the functional significance of both transformed relationships reconciled together and intimate interrelations integrated together in interdependence; and both of these are functionally significant only in *agape* relational involvement. Church whole relationships together are reconciled together by Christ with the Spirit, thus are by their nature irreducible; and its integrated relational outcome of church interdependence in relational likeness to the whole-ly God is nonnegotiable. Interdependent is how God created his new creation family, as well as created the whole human family in relationship together (cf. Gen 2:18) and integrated all of creation (cf. Col 1:20; Rom 8:19-21). Just as modern neuroscience affirms this interdependence and acknowledges the influence of reductionism to counter it, the whole ontology and function of the church embodies the functional relational significance of this new creation to fulfill the inherent human relational need and to resolve the human condition—which neuroscience can merely identify without good news for its fulfillment and resolution. Yet, the church in renegotiated ecclesiology is also without both the functional significance of the good news of what persons *are* and its relational significance of what persons can be saved *to*.

The church may not want, even though it needs, the presence and involvement of the *person*-al inter-*person*-al Trinity. The primary issue is because *to be* in uncommon likeness, the church and its persons and relationships have to be more vulnerable than they may want or find convenient—even though that is essential to what they need, which makes the want-need issue unavoidable. As Paul illuminated, wide-open hearts are uncommon and churches have consistently existed on a common easier path, contrary to Jesus' intrusive relational path. Yet, to follow Jesus is neither optional nor open to negotiation for the church, despite the reality that discipleship has been presented as such by churches. Such church practice reflects a church's limited Christology and soteriology, and evidences a theological anthropology of its persons and relationships in an ontology and function struggling (knowingly or not) to establish its identity both in the global community and within the global church—perhaps with a reputation like that of the church in Sardis, or with a track-record like that of the church in Ephesus.

The identity a church wants to establish may not be compatible or congruent with the identity the church needs to compose in likeness of the Trinity. As long as the integrity of who, what and how the church is (the whole of its righteousness) is not composed in the ontology and function that distinguishes its likeness beyond a common likeness of its surrounding context (locally, regionally and globally), that church has a major problem. That church's presence and involvement are in a critical condition that compromises the validity of its witness to the whole-ly God and its resource to know more than a common God. Churches in this likeness need to be transformed to uncommon wholeness *to be* in uncommon likeness, and that's the pivotal reason why the church may not want the presence and involvement of the *person-al* inter-*person-al* Trinity.

Can you imagine going into a church and unilaterally turning it upside down in order to restore the relational context and process of God's uncommon temple for all persons without distinctions? Can you also imagine tearing down a church's tradition and exposing the barriers of its practice in order to open wide relationships of intimacy and equality to compose God's uncommon temple? Paul more than imagined these because Jesus embodied and enacted this intrusive relational path to constitute his church family in uncommon wholeness ("not as the *common* gives") in uncommon likeness ("just as I do not belong to the *common*") of the Trinity whole and uncommon, *person-al* and inter-*person-al*.

What jumps out in front of our face from Jesus and Paul about the church as God's temple is the incompatibility between the uncommon and common, and that they are incongruent for any attempt to integrate them in a hybrid, not to mention irreconcilable in function and antithetical in ontology. What is 'holy and sanctified' has been perceived by churches throughout history with a common lens. That is, the uncommon constituting the church by Jesus and composed for the church by Paul has been shaped by terms lacking congruence with the qualitative relational significance integral to their definition and application of uncommon. The most prominent issue-conflict involves the underlying theological anthropology defining persons and determining relationships in the church on the basis of what amounts to a common ontology and function. This church theology and practice further expose an incomplete Christology of Jesus' whole person disclosing the whole and uncommon Trinity, as well as expose a truncated soteriology not encompassing being both saved *from* sin as reductionism and saved *to* wholeness of persons in relationship together as the Trinity's new creation family. This essential reality and relational outcome have been pervasively commonized, such that at best they are simulated with only illusions of the uncommon.

The issue-conflict of defining persons and determining relationships in the church by a common ontology and function may not be apparent in the church's theology, doctrinal statements and decrees of faith. But its operating presence emerges in the church's practice of its persons lack of heart-level involvement in the depth of

relationships together integrally intimate and equalized in their differences and from their distinctions. Wide-open hearts in intimate reciprocal relationships is simply too uncommon and thus threatening for the church to advance for its persons—a threat also for keeping their numbers in the church—plus too difficult for the church to cultivate in its relationships without having to address all the relational issues that emerge as persons become more deeply involved. Palatable relationships are certainly much easier for persons (especially leadership) to face, just ask Jesus and Paul about their experiences related to the temple-church. The reason palatable relationships are easier to face is the fact that they don't bring persons together in face-to-face relationships—which is the seduction of social media and the use of technology in the church. At most, palatable relationships are an association between persons in the church, gathering together essentially as relational orphans still 'to be apart' from the transformed relationships together both intimate and equalized in the new creation family composing the Trinity's uncommon temple, that is, with the curtain torn away and the veil removed.

The relational context and process of the church as the Trinity's uncommon temple have been reconstituted for the primacy of all its persons to have intimate relational connection and ongoing involvement with the Trinity and with each other face to face. For the church's persons to have intimate relationships with the Trinity necessitates, by the nature of trinitarian relationship, the heart of the whole person, who by necessity has *to be* equalized from distinctions *to be* whole from inner out for the person's involvement in intimate reciprocal relationship together—just ask the Samaritan woman, on the one side of this relational equation, and Peter at his footwashing on the other side. The church of uncommon likeness has no available option for palatable relationships, because the intimate and equalized relationships of the Trinity's uncommon temple are not optional but essential for the church *to be* in uncommon ontology and function to distinguish it and its persons and relationships together in uncommon likeness of the *person-al* inter-*person-al* Trinity.

Until the church is re-*image-d*, its contextualized and commonized images will continue to mirror the sociocultural, -political, -economic, and related human orders of the surrounding context, and thereby also (1) reflect the inequality and inequity of these orders and (2) magnify how relationships are enacted. In the diversity of the global community, of course, relationships are ordered and enacted differently, but these grassroots reflect a human image and thus are contrary to the trinitarian image of church identity and function. The global church must face the reality that grassroots don't grow in a vacuum but are cultivated in and by the human condition—namely, the counter-relational workings of reductionism fragmenting persons and relationships in reduced

ontology and function. And the global church cannot presume that these grassroots can be laundered for compatibility as the church's relational order and enactment of relationships. Any variable condition of the human order existing in the diversity of the global church needs to undergo redemptive transformation in order for it to be turned around.

Therefore, the diversity of local and regional churches, along with the collective global church, are accountable to vine-root ecclesiology, whereby they are challenged, confronted and responsible for the image of their identity and function. When churches fully embrace the whole-ly image of the Trinity, they will be re-*image*-d from divergent images composing the global church. For re-*image*-ing *to be* the growing vine-rooted relational reality, the diversity of the global church also needs *to be* re-order-ed anew.

The Church Re-order-ed Anew

In anticipation of the church needing first and foremost to clean out its own house so that it will unfold in the whole-ly relationships of uncommon wholeness for all persons, peoples and nations, Jesus established this priority for his family:

Before “you *address the fragmentation in others*” you need to “*address the fragmentation in your own theology and practice*. How can you say to *others*, ‘Let me *help you out of your reductionism,*’ while *reductionism continues* in your own life? *Don't be a role-player [hypokrites], first redeem your own life from reductionism,* and then you will *be clearly distinguished to help redeem others' lives from reductionism*” (Mt 7:3-5).

Redemptive change in the church is essential *to be* new, whole and uncommon; and there is no substitute for redemptive change that the church can use to get this relational outcome—which Jesus also made definitive in anticipation of the latitude in the diversity of its theology and practice.

Yet, the defining line between diversity and distinctions has disappeared in most church theology and practice today (including the academy's), such that the consequences are not understood or recognized. In whatever way those consequences emerge in the church (local, regional, global), they all converge in inequality of the church's relational order—if not explicitly then implicitly. This unequal relational order of distinctions is contrary to and in conflict with the uncommon wholeness of Christ, therefore incongruent with the whole-ly distinguished Trinity. As Paul made definitive about Jesus' salvific work for the church (as in Eph 2:11-22), Jesus enacted the good news in order to compose the uncommon equality of his church family at the heart of its persons and relationships in whole ontology and function, and therefore unequivocally

transformed them (1) to be redeemed from human distinctions and their deficit condition and (2) to be reconciled to the new relational order in uncommon transformed relationships together both equalized and intimate in their innermost, and thereby congruent in uncommon likeness with the wholeness of the Trinity.

Churches in their diversity have to face the prevailing reality pervading their condition that human distinctions are substitute for the innermost of humanity. As noted above, these substitutes fragment human life at the heart of persons and relationships in their ontology and function to compose the common default condition and mode for all humanity, which Christians fall into when not in whole ontology and function. Unintentionally, these substitutes also serve as subtle simulations and illusions of ontology and function assumed to be in their primary condition, when in fact and existential reality they only compose in secondary terms the reduced ontology and function for persons and relationships. The subtle workings of this assumption evolve in a virtual reality that at its core are persons and relationships needing redemptive reconciliation for integrated transformed relationships together. To emphasize what the Word makes emphatic: The human distinctions of persons we use in everyday life will be the extent of equality in relationships we get.

The gospel of wholeness that Jesus vulnerably enacted only in whole relational terms centered on the innermost of the child-person, who differentiated the heart of the person from inner out and, thus, who lived neither by the bias of human distinctions nor by a naïve lack of discernment. Jesus declared with excitement that the key to receiving and understanding God’s revelation is the vulnerable openness of the child-person, who is not predisposed by the limits and constraints of the epistemic bias (or trained incapacity) of those regarded as “wise and learned” (Lk 10:21). Also, Jesus disclosed in these relational terms that those who compose his family are distinguished child-persons, who have been redeemed from distinctions and thus humbly live at the heart of who, what and how they are (distinguishing their righteousness) without embellishment (Mt 18:1-4), thereby distinguishing their wholeness that can be counted on *to be* in relationships together. Jesus further differentiated that the heart of those child-persons compose the heart of worship and its qualitative relational significance, about which others with distinctions regarded themselves in comparison as having better practice and knowledgeable resources (Mt 21:15-16). Then, Jesus addressed his disciples’ concern for distinctions “as the greatest” and their need for redemptive change as church leaders— leadership differentiated clearly from the greatest distinctions only by the child-person signified “like the youngest” (new, *neos*, Lk 22:24-26).

By centering on the child-person, however, Jesus did not reverse the relational order of his church family, which servant discipleship and leadership commonly imply in narrow referential terms of what to do (e.g. misinterpreting Jesus’ footwashing). In reality, Jesus composed the new (*neos*) relational order for his church family of those new persons redeemed from distinctions and re-newed (*anakainoo*) to the wholeness of

Christ (Col 3:10-11). The new persons in wholeness are the only church leaders who can “equip [*katartizo*, restore, put in new order and make complete] *the persons and relationships of the church in its essential relational purpose and function*, for building up the *family* of Christ, until all of us come to the *whole relationship together* of our faith distinguished by the *whole-ly Word*, to full maturity *on the basis of the only* measure of the fullness, *completeness, wholeness* [*pleroma*] of Christ” (Eph 4:12-13). This uncommon relational process and outcome in whole relational terms cannot emerge and unfold with, from and by distinctions, notably the greatest of Jesus’ followers in the church.

Whether human distinctions used in the church are individual or collective, they impose on persons and/or groups of persons an identity incompatible with the new creation church family. Making distinctions, for example, based on race-ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, and personal abilities and resourcefulness only fragment persons and their relationships; and they counter the transformation of belonging to the new creation of God’s family (as Paul magnified, Gal 3:26-27; Col 3:10-11). The defining and pivotal reality of the new relational order composing those truly belonging to the new creation family confronts our churches today and holds our persons and relationships to be accountable for our transformation to the *new* with nothing less and no substitutes.

While Paul assumes the new creation ‘already’ (a present reality) and its relational outcome with the Spirit to embody the church’s whole ontology and function as God’s new creation family, he never assumes the church will live whole in its new relational order, and thereby make whole in the surrounding context of reductionism. To live in wholeness is the continuous challenge for the church because its ontology and function are ongoingly challenged by and susceptible to the counter-relational workings of reductionism. The tension and conflict between wholeness and reductionism is ongoing with deep repercussions, which is why Paul settles for nothing less and no substitutes in his whole theology.

In Paul’s transformed ecclesiology, for the church to live in wholeness is for the church to be ongoingly involved relationally with the Spirit for its belonging together “in the bond of wholeness” (Eph 4:3). This bond (*syndesmos*) is the whole relationships binding the church together from inner out as one interdependent body, which Jesus embodied and enacted for transformed relationships together both equalized and intimate (Eph 2:14-22). For the church to live in wholeness as God’s new creation family is to be deeply involved together in this **new relational order** of equalized and intimate relationships. This relational involvement of persons in their righteousness activates the gravity that holds together the church in its innermost; and apart from these relationships together with the Spirit, there is just a fragmentary condition of the church—again, even with pervasive ecclesial order. When Paul illuminated “God is not a God of fragmentation but the God of wholeness” (1 Cor 14:33), he also made unequivocal that

this new church relational order is neither optional nor negotiable. The challenge for Paul's readers, then, becomes both about his assumption of the new creation 'already' and if God's new creation family is truly the church. Paul's transformed ecclesiology clearly defines these as inseparable and irreducible. Reductionism would renegotiate church order as sufficient alternative, perhaps even with its reification as the peace of God with irenic identity markers serving to promote the mere absence of conflict. The wholeness of the global church does not emerge from such theology and practice.

Though Paul was not trinitarian in his theology, traditionally speaking, the Spirit was the key for him in his practice (cf. 1 Cor 2:9-13). The dynamic presence and involvement of the Spirit's whole person functions while inseparably on an eschatological trajectory. Yet for Paul, this does not and must not take away from the primary focus on the Spirit's presence and involvement for the present, just as Paul addressed the Thessalonians' eschatological anxiety with the relational imperative not to quench the Spirit's present relational involvement (1 Thes 5:19). The Spirit's present concern and function is relational involvement for constituting whole ontology and function, for making functional wholeness together, and for the embodying of the whole-ly God's new creation family in whole relationship together as the church, the completeness of Christ (as *pleroma*, Eph 1:22-23; 1 Cor 12:11-13)—which is why the person of the Spirit is deeply affected, grieving over any reductionism in reciprocal relational involvement together (Eph 4:30). With the new de-contextualized and de-commonized lens from the Spirit, the person perceives oneself whole-ly from the inner out and others in the same way, and is involved in relationships together on this basis, which is congruent with their experience of relational involvement from God and in likeness of how God engages relationships.

The *agape* relational involvement Paul defines is not about sacrificial love but family love. Clarifying and correcting misconceptions of *agapē* and Jesus' love, family love submits one's whole person from inner out to one another in equalized and intimate relationships signifying whole relationship together—love in likeness of how the whole-ly Trinity functions together and is relationally involved with us. Paul defines conclusively that in the midst of reductionism, this is the new creation church's new relational order in which “the *uncommon* peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your *persons from inner out* in Christ Jesus *from reductionism*” (Phil 4:7) and by which “the God of *wholeness* will be *relationally involved* with you” (4:9).

What unfolds from Christ as the church's **uncommon peace** is the relational significance of persons redeemed from their distinctions, and relationships together freed from the relational barriers keeping them in relational distance, detachment or separation. However comparative relations may be structured, Paul declares in unmistakable relational terms: “Christ has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of *fragmenting differences*” (Eph 2:14, NIV). The relational significance of this uncommon peace is not

for the future but for this essential reality to unfold in our experience now in the church. This is the pivotal breakthrough in human relations that will transform the church to the new creation of persons redeemed and relationships reconciled in the new order uncommon for all persons, peoples, tribes, nations and their relations since ‘from the beginning’. “Christ’s *relational* purpose was to create in *his wholeness* one new *humanity* out of *their fragmentation*, thus making *them whole in uncommon peace*” (v.15). When this identity composed by the new relational order becomes the qualitative relational reality for the persons and relationships of the church, they can claim the integral salvation *from* sin as reductionism and salvation *to* wholeness together as family; and by only this existential relational reality, they can proclaim and whole-ly witness to the experiential truth of this good news for human relations. Without this essential reality, persons and relationships in the church regress in what amounts to fake news based on alternative facts.

Furthermore, and most important, this pivotal breakthrough in relationships also includes and directly involves relationship with the whole and uncommon God. “In *their wholeness together* to reconcile *all* of them *having distinctions* to God through *his relational work* on the cross, by which he *redeemed their fragmenting differences*” (v.16). It is indispensable for us to understand what Paul unfolds for the church here is that reconciliation is inseparable from redemption (to be freed). Redemption is integral for reconciliation in order for relationships (including with God) to come together at the heart of persons in their ontology and function from inner out, which then requires persons be redeemed from outer-in distinctions that prevent this relational connection. We cannot maintain distinctions among us and have this breakthrough in relationships for their reconciliation. This is a confronting issue for those in the church (notably its leaders), who depend on distinctions to establish their identity and self-worth. All discussion about reconciliation must include this reality or there will be no redemptive change in our relationships that brings us together face to face without the veil.

Therefore, the integral relational significance of *redemptive reconciliation* is for the heart of persons now to be vulnerable to each other (including God) without any veil (or masks, as in 2 Cor 3:16-18) and come together in intimate relationships. Intimate relationships are the relational outcome distinguished by the redemptive reconciliation of uncommon peace. Paul doesn’t merely recommend the uncommon peace of Christ but makes it imperative for transformed relationships equalized and intimate in the new relational order. With God, intimate relationship involves going beyond conventional spirituality and a spiritual relationship to the following: the qualitative relational reality of the whole person vulnerably involved ongoingly with “God in boldness and confidence” (Eph 3:12), rooted in the experiential truth of being redeemed from human distinctions, from their fragmentation and the deficit condition of reduced ontology and function, and then reconciled in wholeness together belonging in God’s family—“the *intimate* dwelling in which *the whole-ly* God lives by his Spirit” (Eph 2:22, NIV cf. Jn 14:23). Accordingly

and indispensably, to have this relational outcome with God and with each other requires existing relations to be transformed from the relational distance of their distinctions to intimate relationships composed by the redemptive reconciliation of uncommon wholeness. This whole outcome is the gospel and the cross that Jesus enacted to fulfill for our intimacy together heart to heart, thus with-in nothing less than our complete identity as persons face to face. Mary (Martha's sister) embodied and enacted the whole relational outcome of the gospel, in contrast and conflict with the other disciples who struggled in something less at Jesus' expense and in their relationships together.

The relational significance of intimacy in church relationships should not be idealized, or even spiritualized, because this indeed uncommon relational outcome is at the heart of what Christ saves us to (integrally with what he saves us from). There is no good news unless the church is being transformed to intimate relationships together, no matter how clearly the gospel is defined in our theology and how much it is proclaimed in our practice. This new relational order was the only relational purpose for Jesus when he cleaned out his house for all persons, peoples, tribes and nations to have relational access to God; and the church is accountable to clean out its own house in order to "gather with me and not scatter" (Mt 12:30). To complete his only relational purpose for his house, on the cross Jesus also deconstructed his house by tearing away the prominent curtain (demolishing the holy partition) to open direct relational access face to face with the whole and uncommon God (Heb 10:19-22). This irreversible breakthrough in relationship with God included removing the veil to transform relationships both with God and with each other to intimate relationships together (2 Cor 3:16-18).

Therefore, the church and its persons and relationships are accountable for tearing down any existing holy partition that allows them to maintain practice with relational distance as if still in front of the curtain torn away by Jesus. By being involved with Jesus' relational work enacted behind the curtain, we also are accountable for removing any existing veil over our face in order to be vulnerably involved face to face in the intimate relationships together that Christ saved us to today and not for the future. In other words, the intimate relationship of equalized persons in the church is neither optional nor negotiable but essential for the church's whole-ly identity to be distinguished in likeness of the whole-ly Trinity.

For Paul, God indeed is not a God of fragmentation but the God of wholeness; therefore only nothing less and no substitutes of the person and persons together in the new relational order are functionally significant for all of the following:

To reciprocally involve the whole-ly Trinity in distinct relational terms (Eph 2:17-22), to constitute God's relational whole as family in the Trinity's relational likeness (Col 3:10-11,15; 2 Cor 3:18), and to embody and enact as Jesus' whole-ly disciples the ontological identity and relational belonging that are necessary to fulfill the

inherent human relational need and resolve the human problem existing both in the world and even within churches (Eph 3:6,10-12; 4:13-16).

Congruently, in the transformation embodying whole ecclesiology, the identity for all churches is distinguished beyond all surrounding contexts with nothing less and no substitutes for the following:

The church in whole ontology and function in relational terms constitutes only transformed persons relationally involved by family love in transformed relationships together integrally equalized and intimate, which composes the new relational order for the church's whole-ly identity progressing uncommonly in wholeness in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the whole and holy God (Eph 4:23-25)—who is not a God of reductionism promoting ontological simulations and functional illusions that only regress.

Solely on this basis will the global church “be *whole-ly* as we are *whole-ly*,” and will its persons and relationships “become completely *whole*, so that the world may know that you have sent me *to make them whole* and have loved them *intimately* even as you have loved me” (Jn 17:22-23).

In Paul's transformed whole ecclesiology, the bond of wholeness with the Spirit is embodied inner-out function of whole persons who relationally submit to one another in family love to be intimately involved in relationships together without the limits, barriers or comforts of human-shaped distinctions—signifying relationships without the veil. This relational process of intimately equalizing from inner out needs to be distinguished in the experiential truth of church ontology and function, and not remain in doctrinal truth or as a doctrinal statement of intention, or else its relational reality will be elusive and likely submerged in an alternative or even virtual reality. When doctrine causes an impasse in the church's relational progression, its function (not necessarily its theology) must be deconstructed for the relational process to unfold. This experiential truth happens only when the church is made whole by reciprocal relationship with the Spirit in the functional significance of four key dynamics, which reconstruct **the church as intimate equalizer**. These key dynamics constitute the church as family to function in uncommon wholeness in the qualitative image of God and to live ongoingly in whole relationship together in the relational likeness of the whole-ly Trinity.

Two of these keys for the church necessitate structural and contextual dynamics and the other two involve imperatives for individual and relational dynamics. In each dynamic, redemptive changes are necessary to go from a mere gathering of individuals to the new creation church family—changes that overlap and interact with the other key

dynamics. These are dynamics and related changes that the global church must be fully embraced into its theology and enacted whole-ly in its practice in order for its whole-ly identity to unfold in likeness.

First Key Dynamic: *the structural dynamic of access*

While church access can be perceived from outer in as a static condition of a church structured with merely an “open-door policy,” or with a “welcome” sign to indicate its good intentions, access from the inner out of God’s relational context and process of family is dynamic and includes relational involvement (not just a welcome greeting)—implied, for example, in Jesus’ transformation of the temple for prayer accessible by all. When Paul made Christ’s salvific work of wholeness conclusive for the church, all persons without distinctions “have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph 2:18) for relational involvement together “in boldness and confidence” (3:12) as persons who have been equalized for intimate relationships together as God’s family (2:19-22; cf. Gal 4:4-7). Access, therefore, is the structural dynamic of the church without the stratifying barriers of distinctions that treat persons differently (denoted in *diakrino*, 1 Cor 4:7)—that is, without **the reducing dynamic of *diakrino*** confronted in the church by Paul—which is congruent with Christ’s relational work of wholeness (Eph 2:14-17) and is in relational likeness to God (Acts 15:9; Col 3:10-11).

The issue of access is deeply rooted in human history. Peter himself struggled with his interpretive framework (*phronēma*) and lens (*phroneō*) shaped by his tradition, whose making distinctions treated persons differently (*diakrino*) that denied access to those of Gentile distinction. Even after Jesus changed his theology (Acts 10:9-16), Peter struggled to change from the practice of his tradition because of his emotional investment and likely perception of losing something related to the privilege, prestige and power of having access. Such loss may not become apparent until one is placed in a lower position. Human-shaped distinctions signify having advantage in comparative relations, the absence of which precludes that advantage. After the primordial garden, the human relational condition “to be apart” became an intentional goal of human effort to secure advantage and maintain self-preservation—the ‘survival of the fittest’ syndrome masked even by religious faith. The specific resources for this relational advantage may vary from one historical context to another (cf. even the works of the law and justification by faith). Yet, privilege, prestige and power are the basic underlying issues over which these relational struggles of inequality are engaged—whether the context is family, social, economic, political or even within or among churches. Church leaders, for example, notably pursue such advantages to establish their “brand”; and most churches reinforce this subtle process of inequality by seeking *personalities* over *persons* for their leadership. Any aspects of privilege, prestige and power are advantages (and benefits) that many persons are reluctant to share, much less give up, if the perception (unreal or

not) means for them to be in a position of *less*. The control of this distribution is threatened by equal access.

The unavoidable reality for churches is that human-shaped distinctions create and maintain advantage for some, which certainly fragments relationships together. Inescapably then in church practice, by their very nature human distinctions are an outer-in dynamic emerging from reduced ontology and function, which in itself already diminishes, minimalizes and fragments God's relational whole (cf. the disparity in the early church, Acts 6:1). Access, however, is an inner-out dynamic signifying the relational dynamic and qualitative involvement of grace. That is, the functional significance of access is for all persons to be defined from inner out and not to be treated differently from outer in (including church leaders), in order to have the relational opportunity to be involved with God for their redemption from the human struggle of reductionism, and thereby to be equalized and intimately reconciled together to fulfill their inherent human relational need in God's relational whole (as Paul clarifies in his polemic, Gal 3:26-29). Equal access does not threaten personness and wholeness for the church, but is a necessary key dynamic for their qualitative development whole-ly from inner out. Therefore, for a church to engage the necessary redemptive change that reconstructs its relational order and makes functionally significant 'access without *diakrino*' is relationship-specific to what whole-ly embodies church life and practice for only this relational purpose: the ongoing relational involvement with persons who are different, in order for them also to receive equally and experience intimately the ontological identity and relational belonging to the whole-ly God's new creation family.

This structural dynamic flows directly to the contextual dynamic.

Second Key Dynamic: *the contextual dynamic of reconciliation absorbing natural human differences and valid God-given distinctions*

This is not a contradiction of the church without *diakrino*, but the acknowledgement of the fact of differences in natural human makeup and the reality of valid distinctions given by God, without the church engaging in the reducing dynamic of *diakrino*. The ancient Mediterranean world of Paul's time was a diversity of both natural human differences and human-shaped distinctions. Yet, prior to its diaspora due to persecution (Acts 8), the early church community was a mostly homogeneous group who limited others who were different from access to be included in their house churches, table fellowships and community identity (e.g. Acts 6:1). Despite a missional program to the surrounding diversity, church practice had yet to relationally involve **the reconciliation dynamic of family love** to take in those persons and absorb (not dissolve) their differences, that is, on a secondary level without using any human differences (notably of the dominant group) to determine the primary level of church make-up in

ontology and function (as Paul made conclusive, Col 3:15). This purposeful relational involvement necessitates a major contextual change in the church, especially for a homogeneous gathering, yet this change should not be confused with multiculturalism. Paul was pivotal in bringing such redemptive change to the church (e.g. 1 Cor 11:17-22; Gal 2:1-10), which is incompatible with any forms of reduced ontology and function.

Paul delineates a twofold reconciliation dynamic constituted by God's relational process of family love. On the one hand, family love dissolves human-shaped distinctions and eliminates *diakrino*. Equally important, on the other hand, family love absorbs most natural human differences into the primacy of relationships together, but not dissolving or assimilating those differences into a dominant framework (Rom 12:4-5). The twofold nature of this reconciliation dynamic of family love is the functional significance of Paul's integrated fight against reductionism and for wholeness (1 Cor 12:12-13). Yet, in order to be God's relational whole, it is not adequate to include persons of difference for the purpose of diversity (e.g. to have a multicultural church). The relational process of family love extends relational involvement to those who are different, takes in and vulnerably embraces them in their difference to relationally belong integrally to the church family. This is the dynamic made essential by Paul for the church's "unity of the Spirit in the bond of uncommon peace/wholeness" (Eph 4:3,16); and the relational outcome is not a hybrid church with a mosaic of differences but persons and relationships made uncommonly whole together in likeness of the whole-ly Trinity.

This reconciliation dynamic signifies the contextual change necessary for the church to be ongoingly involved in the relational process of absorbing natural human differences into the church without dissolving or assimilating those differences. Churches typically are not constructed with this design. This involves, therefore, a church's willingness to change to adjust to differences and even to adopt some differences—that is, only those differences that are compatible with God's relational whole and congruent with God's relational terms. Redemptive change also involves the reflexive interaction between these contextual and structural dynamics for the necessary reconstruction of church to become the intimate equalizer in its new relational order. No claim can be made about having a church structure of access if the church's context is not reconciling; conversely, a church cannot claim to be reconciling if equal church access is unavailable to others with differences.

In addition, just as Peter was chastened by Christ in his contextualized bias and theology, and humbled by Paul, making this contextual change functional in the church may require us to humbly accept the limitations of our current interpretive framework (*phronēma*) and lens (*phroneō*)—likely formed with a contextualized or commonized bias—to understand the significance of differences to the whole-ly God as well as of those in the whole-ly Trinity. It also requires us to honestly account for any outer-in bias necessitating the change of transformation to the whole *phronēma* and qualitative *phroneō* from the Spirit (as Paul delineated, Eph 4:22-25; Rom 8:5-6, cf. 12:2). This

humility and honesty are essential for the church's contextual dynamic of reconciliation to be of functional significance to absorb natural human differences into church life and practice as family together (cf. Eph 4:2).

The importance of these structural and contextual dynamics for the church to be whole as the intimate equalizer from inner out—distinguishing its whole-ly identity in the new relational order—also directly involve the other two interrelated key dynamics. These are dynamics for the individual person and our relationships. The four dynamics intensely interact together in reflexive relationship that suggests no set pattern of their development and function. Yet, there is a clear flow to each pair of dynamics—for example, there has to be access before differences can be absorbed—while in crucial and practical ways the latter pair will determine the extent and significance of the former's function. The global church and all its persons and relationships, therefore, are accountable together for their ongoing involvement in these integral dynamics with the essential dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes.

Third Key Dynamic: *the person's inner-out response of freedom, faith and love to others' differences*

When a person is faced with differences in others, there is invariably some degree of tension for that person, with awareness of it or not. The tension signifies the engagement of our provincial context or 'our little world' we live in—that which is constructed from the limitations of the person's perceptual-interpretive framework influenced by contextualized and commonized biases and shaped by culture in the surrounding context. This is why humbly accepting the limits of our particular way of thinking and honestly accounting for our bias in seeing other things in general and other persons in particular are both needed for the reconciliation dynamic to be whole together. What does a person(s) do with those differences in that relational context? The structural and contextual dynamics can be invoked by the church, yet their functional significance in the church interacts with and will ultimately be determined by each individual person's response—a response whose significance must be composed in vulnerable relational terms and not be mere referential terms enhanced even with good intentions.

In everyday life, the person's response will emerge either from outer in or inner out, and it may shift back and forth from one person and/or situation to another. What differences we pay attention to and ignore from our interpretive lens are critical to understand for the following ongoing interrelated issues: (1) what we depend on to define our person and maintain our identity; (2) then on this basis, how we engage relationships in these diverse conditions; and, thus (3), based on these two issues what level of relationship we engage in within the church. These are **inescapable issues** that each

person must address as an individual and be accountable for, on the one hand, while the church community must account for these in practice at the same time.

Paul demonstrated the person's inner-out response to others' differences that is necessary both to be a whole person and to be involved in whole relationship together. In his fight for the whole gospel, Paul is also always fighting against reductionism. One aspect of the relational outcome of the gospel is the freedom that comes from being redeemed. Yet, for Paul the whole composing the gospel is not a truncated soteriology but the whole relational outcome of the full (*pleroma*) soteriology—what we are all saved *to* and not just *from*. This is a crucial distinction that we have yet to clearly distinguish in our theology and practice. In Paul's whole theology and practice, he composes Christian freedom in the relational context of God's relational whole, so that the relational purpose of Christian freedom and its functional significance would not be diminished, minimalized or abused in reductionism (Gal 5:1,13; 1 Cor 8:9). How would you assess the pervasive effort by many Christians and churches in the U.S. to exercise freedom of choice in the COVID-19 pandemic?

From this interpretive framework and lens, which counters contextualized and commonized biases, Paul highlights his own liberty and the nature of his relational response to others' differences (1 Cor 9:19-23). As discussed earlier, the chameleon Paul deeply engaged the relational dynamic of family love in the vulnerable relational process of submitting his whole person to those persons, simply declaring "I have become all things to all people" (v.22). Clearly, by his statement Paul is not illustrating what to do with the tension in those situations created by human differences and how to handle those differences. Further clarification is needed, however, since his apparent posture can be perceived in different ways, either negatively or positively.

Given his freedom, Paul was neither obligated nor coerced to function according to the immediate context, in what appears to be an absence of self-identity in where he belongs. His response also seems to contradict his relational imperative to "Live as children of light" (Eph 5:8). Yet, in terms of the three inescapable issues for all persons (noted above), the person Paul presented to others of difference was not a variable personality who has no clear sense of his real identity (e.g. as light). Nor was Paul communicating to them a message of assimilating to their terms, and to try to fit into their level of relationship or even subtly masquerade in the context of their differences. Contrary to these reductionist practices, Paul engaged in practices of wholeness without the veil of outer-in distinctions. Since Paul did not define his person in quantitative terms from the outer in, he was free to exercise who he was from inner out and to decisively present his whole person to others even in the context of any and all of their differences (natural or not)—which always remained in secondary distinction from the primary. He openly communicated to them a confidence and trust in the whole person he was from inner out, the integrity of which would not be compromised by involvement with them in their difference and thus could be counted on by them to be that whole person in his face-

to-face involvement with them—his righteousness integrated with the integrity of his identity. His involvement with them went deeper than the level of their differences and freely responded in the relational trust with the Spirit (the relational involvement of triangulation), in order to submit his whole person to them in their differences for the relational involvement of family love needed for the relational purpose “that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). Paul submits his whole person to them in family love not for the mere outcome of a truncated soteriology of only being saved *from*—and perhaps for them to become members of a church—but for the whole relational outcome of also being saved *to* gained from “the *whole* gospel so that I may share in its blessings of *whole relationship together as family*” (v.23). Therefore, his inner-out response to others’ differences clearly distinguished to what and who Paul belonged.

It is essential for all in the global church to take Paul seriously and to highlight him along with Mary as the disciples of whole theology and practice necessary for the relational progression of the gospel. In the face of others’ differences, Paul neither distanced himself from them in the province of ‘his little world’ nor did he try to control them to assimilate and fit (or conform) into his world and the comforts of his framework—as witnessed historically in the Western church and presently in segments of the global church. In contrast, he acted in the relational trust of faith to venture out of his old world (and old wineskin ways of thinking, seeing and doing things) and beyond the limitations that any old interpretive framework (contextualized or commonized bias) imposes on personhood and relationships. Paul underwent such transforming (not reforming) changes in order to illuminate the wholeness of God in the midst of reductionism. In this relational process, he also illuminated the relational need of the person and persons together as church to have contextual sensitivity and responsiveness to others in their contextual differences, without losing the primacy of who and whose he was, or denigrating their own ontological identity of who and whose they were (cf. Paul in Athens, Acts 17, and Jesus at the wedding in Cana, Jn 2:1-11).

Clearly, Paul demonstrated the necessary response of the whole person from inner out to those differences in order to engage those persons in the reconciliation dynamic of family love for their experience to belong in the relational whole of God’s family. Yet, Paul’s response also demonstrated the needed changes within the individual person involving redemptive change (old wineskins, biases and practices dying and the new rising). This process addresses in oneself any outer-in ontology and function needing to be transformed from inner out (*metamorphoo*, as Paul delineated, Rom 12:2-3). This transformation from outer in to inner out not only frees the relational process for the new creation but directly leads to its embodying in the new relational order. Redemptive change must antecede and prevail in the relational process leading to reconciliation to the whole-ly God’s new creation family.

Change always raises issues, especially if it intrudes on our freedom to live as we want. In the freedom of the person's inner-out response to submit one's whole person to others in family love, the act of submitting becomes a reductionism-issue when it is obligated or coerced apart from freedom. There is a fine line between obligation and freedom, which is confused when our responses merely conform; it is also compounded in diverse contexts under the framework of honor-shame. Freedom itself, however, becomes reductionist when it is only the means for self-autonomy, self-determination or self-justification, because these are subtle yet acceptable substitutes from reductionism. Paul clarified that God never redeems us to be free for this end (Gal 5:1,13; cf. 1 Cor 7:35). God frees us from reductionism to be whole in both our persons and relationships (1 Cor 10:23-24). Redemption by Christ and what he saves *from* are inseparable from reconciliation and what he saves *to*. To summarize the relational process and outcome:

The integral function of redemptive reconciliation is the whole (nonnegotiable) relational process of the whole (untruncated) relational outcome of the whole (unfragmented) gospel. Anything less and any substitutes for any of these essential dimensions fragment the church and reduce its persons and relationships.

Therefore, it is crucial for our understanding of the inseparable functions of personness and human relationships, both within the church and in the world, to understand that deeply implicit in the wholeness of Christian freedom is being redeemed from those matters causing distance, barriers and separation in relationships—specifically in the relational condition “to be apart” from whole relationship together, which if not responded to from inner out leaves the inherent human relational need unfulfilled even within churches.

Paul's exercise of freedom in submitting his whole person to others in family love was constituted by his whole theology and practice. This first involved the convergence of the theological dynamics of his complete Christology in full soteriology with whole pneumatology for transformed ecclesiology. This whole theology then unfolds in practice in order to be involved in the relationships together necessary for embodying the church in the relational order as intimate equalizer from inner out. This whole theology and practice are what Paul condenses in the gospel of transformation to wholeness vulnerably embodied and relationally enacted in the full-profile face of whole-ly Jesus (as in 2 Cor 4:6), which has the relational outcome ‘already’ of only whole persons *agape*-relationally involved in whole relationships together both equalized and intimate.

The integral function of whole persons and whole relationships together is deeply integrated, and their interaction must by their nature in relational terms emerge from

inner out. For the person and persons together as church to have the functional significance of being equalized in intimate relationships, their ontology and function need to be whole from inner out—nothing less and no substitutes for the person and for relationships together. This inner-out process leads us from the key dynamic for the individual person to its interaction with the key dynamic for relationships.

Fourth Key Dynamic: *relationships engaged vulnerably with others (different or not) by deepening involvement from inner out*

The dynamic engaged within individual persons extends to their relationships. What Paul defined as his whole person's inner-out response—"I have become all things to all people"—also defines his relational involvement with them by making his whole person vulnerable from inner out—"I have made my person vulnerable to all human differences for the primary purpose of inner-out relational involvement with all persons." This decision to engage relationships vulnerably must be a free choice made with relational trust (the significance of *faith* in God) and in family love (the significance of experiencing God's love), because there are risks and consequences for such involvement. On the one hand, the consequences revolve around one's person being rejected or rendered insignificant. The risks, on the other hand, are twofold, which involves either losing something (e.g. the stability of 'our little world', the certainty of our interpretive framework and the identity of our belonging, the reliability of how we do relationships) or being challenged to change (e.g. the state of one's world, the focus of one's interpretive lens and mindset, one's own identity and established way of doing relationships). The dynamic of 'losing something-challenged to change' is an ongoing issue in all relationships, and the extent of the risks depends on their perception either from outer in or from inner out.

For Paul, this is always the tension between reductionism and wholeness, that is, between relationships fragmented by limited involvement from outer in and relationships made whole by deepening involvement from inner out. Regardless of the consequences, Paul took responsibility for living whole in relationships for the inner-out involvement necessary to make relationships whole together, because the twofold risks were not of significance to those in wholeness but only to those in reductionism (cf. his personal assessment, Phil 3:7-9; also his challenge to Philemon).

As noted above, Paul appeared to qualify the extent of his vulnerable involvement in relationships by stating "I try to please everyone in everything" (1 Cor 10:33). The implication of this could be simply to do whatever others want, thereby pleasing all and not offending anyone (10:32)—obviously an unattainable goal that doesn't keep some persons from trying, Paul not among them. Paul would not be vulnerable in relationships with this kind of involvement. *Aresko* means to please, make one inclined to, or to be content with. This may involve doing either what others *want* or what they *need*. Paul is

not trying to look good before others for his own benefit (*symphoros*, 10:33). Rather he vulnerably engages them with the relational involvement from inner out that they need (not necessarily want) for all their benefit “so that they may be saved *to whole relationship together in God’s family*.” In his personal disclosure, Paul does not qualify the *extent* of his vulnerable involvement in relationship with others by safely giving them what they want. He qualifies only the *depth* of his vulnerable involvement by lovingly giving them what they need to be whole, even if they reject his whole person or try to render his whole function as insignificant (cf. 2 Cor 12:15). This depth for Paul enacted the first two inescapable issues that first defined his whole person and identity, and thereby engaged relationships with others’ differences—both of which mirrored how Jesus enacted his person in relationships and thus unmistakably identified Paul as his whole-ly disciple.

This deepening relational involvement from inner out to vulnerably engage others in relationship with one’s whole person certainly necessitates redemptive change from the prevailing ways of doing relationships in Christian diversity, including from a normative church interpretive lens of what is paid attention to and ignored in church gatherings and relationships together. This redemptive process then also includes the underlying biases not merely from diverse surrounding contexts but shaped by the common. If the vulnerability of family love is to be relationally involved, whether by the individual person or persons together as church, the concern cannot be about the issue of losing something—something that has no significance to the primacy of wholeness but creates tension or anxiety when the secondary is made primary. The focus on such risks will be constraining, if not controlling, and render both person and church to reduced ontology and function, hereby exposing the greater risk of our own existing condition being challenged to change and our need for it.

Therefore, our faith as relational trust in ongoing reciprocal relationship with the Spirit is critical for freeing us to determine what is primary to embrace in church life and practice and what we need to relinquish control over “for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of wholeness” (Eph 4:3; Gal 5:16,25). The bond of wholeness by its nature requires change in us: individual, relational, structural and contextual changes. With these redemptive changes for persons, relationships and churches (including infrastructure)—encompassing the three inescapable issues in their depth—the integral function of redemptive reconciliation can emerge in family love for vulnerable involvement with others (different or not) in relationships together from inner out. Such reconstruction by design becomes, lives and makes whole uncommonly in the new relational order, which is not a mere option, merely recommended or simply negotiable for churches and its persons and relationships. Anything less and any substitutes for persons, relationships and churches are no longer whole and uncommon but simply engage a reverse dynamic.

The dynamic flow of these four key dynamics is the dynamic of uncommon wholeness composing the experiential truth and relational reality of the *re-image-d* church's ontology and function as the re-order-ed intimate equalizer from inner out. In ongoing tension and conflict with the church in the bond of wholeness is reductionism seeking to influence every level of the church—individual persons, relationships, its structure and context. For Paul, this is the given battle ongoingly extended into the church, against which reductionism must be exposed, confronted and made whole by redemptive change at every level of the church. While Paul presupposes the need for redemptive change given the pervasive influence of reductionism, he never assumes the redemptive-change outcome of the new emerging without the reciprocal relational involvement of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17-18; Gal 5:16; 6:8; Rom 8:6; Eph 3:16). Accordingly, the reciprocal nature of the Spirit's relational involvement makes change in our persons, our relationships and our churches an open question. Our lack of reciprocal relational involvement makes the Spirit grieve (Eph 4:30).

God's family has become the vulnerable dwelling of the whole and uncommon God (as Jesus made conclusive, Jn 14:23, and Paul definitively reinforced, Eph 2:19-22), yet this relational outcome has no relational significance as long as the curtain (holy partition) and veil are still present. God is vulnerably present and relationally involved for intimate relationship together. While we cannot be equal with God (perhaps the purpose for some in the practice of deification), we have to be equalized to participate in and partake of God's life in his family together. That is, we cannot be intimately involved with God from the basis of any of our outer-in distinctions, all of which signify the presence of the veil keeping us at relational distance. Those distinctions have to be redeemed without exception, so that we can be equalized from inner out and thereby reconciled in intimate relationship together; and this equalization is necessary to be transformed in relationships together as God's whole and uncommon family. The transformed relationships that distinguish the church family must then be, without variation, both equalized and intimate. There can be no complete intimate involvement together as long as the veil of distinctions exists.

Distinctions focus our lens on and engage our practice from outer in, unavoidably in comparative relations that create distance, discrimination, separation and brokenness, all of which are incompatible with intimate relationships, and incongruent with equalized relationships. Therefore, the experiential truth and relational reality of the redemptive reconciliation of uncommon peace (never commonized) involve re-order-ing the church in the integral transformed relationships together of equalized persons in equalized relationships, the *re-image-ing* of those who are vulnerably involved in intimate relationships face to face, heart to heart as God's whole and uncommon family as the intimate equalizing church.

Indeed, based on the uncommon peace of Christ that Paul makes the only determinant for the church (imperatively in Col 3:15), nothing less than equalized relationships and no substitutes for intimate relationships compose the new-order church family of Christ, whose wholeness distinguishes the church's persons and relationships in their primacy of whole ontology and function in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the whole-ly Trinity. If we take Paul seriously, we cannot take him partially or use him out of his total context but need to embrace his whole theology and practice for ours to be whole also. Therefore, beyond any contextualized or commonized bias, what emerges from the church's uncommon peace is the experiential truth of *uncommon equality*, which is the good news transforming the fragmentation and inequality of all persons, peoples, tribes, nations, and their human order and relations. The relational reality of this uncommon equality unfolds from the relational progression of this whole-ly church family as it is ongoingly involved in equalizing all persons, peoples, tribes, nations and their relationships—equalizing in whole relational terms composed by the redemptive reconciliation of uncommon peace.

Despite the extent of differences in the body of Christ, Jesus embodied the church to be nothing less than whole (complete together, *pleroma*, Eph 1:22-23). As the *pleroma* of Christ, the church body is neither a mere gathering of our differences nor merely a collection of these differences, as if their distinctions enhance the integrity of the church. In this sense, the metaphor of the body of Christ is insufficient to compose the whole-ly identity of the church as *family*, whose identity is composed only in the new relational order of the whole-ly Trinity.

So that the church is re-*image*-d unmistakably just in the Trinity and re-order-ed anew, Jesus enacted the good news for this relational purpose and outcome:

To compose the uncommon equality of his church family at the heart of its persons and relationships in whole ontology and function, and therefore unequivocally transformed them (1) to be redeemed from human distinctions and their deficit condition and (2) to be reconciled to the new relational order in uncommon transformed relationships together both equalized and intimate in their innermost, and thereby congruent in uncommon likeness with the wholeness of the Trinity.

Redemptive reconciliation is not optional but essential to the uncommon whole of who, what and how the church and its persons and relationships are *to be* in and for this essential work. This is the gospel of wholeness Jesus enacted to constitute the existential new creation as his uncommon church family in nothing less than *the intimate equalizer*.

Whether at the grassroots or as insiders, the diversity composing the global church is at a pivotal juncture for its theology and practice. For instance, in the cultural climate of the global church, though not likely in its theology, there is explicit or implicit practice that considers certain Christians as outsiders, if not designating them to this comparative status that stratifies the global church. Typically, these are not a theological decision but what evolve from the practice of a contextualized gospel. Thus, what encompasses this juncture in the global church converges in the composition of the gospel pervading this diversity, the prevalence of which should raise concern in the persons, peoples, tribes and nations of the global church.

Those in the global church have to examine the gospel we have claimed, and should wonder in the midst of our diverse condition: Do we have a different gospel and outcome determining the function for the church and its persons and relationships than the uncommon peace embodied by the Word: for “he came and proclaimed peace to you *in a deficit position distinction* and peace to those *in a better position of distinction yet still in a reduced condition*” (Eph 2:17)? Common peace affirms a variable gospel in diverse theology and practice. Consequently, this leads directly to the urgent need to determine the hue of the gospel embodied and enacted in the global church.

Therefore, when the hue of the gospel is not examined and its existential practice not scrutinized, what Christians and churches are saved *to* becomes elusive, which then renders the church to contextual imagining that leaves its persons and relationships in a diverse condition of a commonized order.

Chapter 7

The Color of the Gospel

**“I tell you the truth, where this gospel is preached throughout the world,
what she has done will also be told.”**

Matthew 26:13, NIV

**I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you
in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.**

Galatians 1:6

In December, 2021, President Biden convened leaders from more than 100 countries in a virtual “Summit for Democracy” in order to bolster democracy globally. He stated that preserving democracy is “the defining challenge of our time.” Given the partisanship and polarized climate witnessed in the U.S. that has compromised democracy, the instability of the U.S. renders its credibility as the leader of the democratic world suspect for advancing the integrity of democracy.

Many Christians and churches in the U.S. affirm its American democracy as the nation of God, the freedom of which others should follow and emulate as the will of God. This nationalism has fostered tribalism that many have embraced, thus also making suspect their credibility for advancing the integrity of the gospel—which is evident pervading existing Christian witness. The reality is that the integrity of democracy and the integrity of the gospel are inseparable in common conventional Christian thinking, and their interrelation evolves with a biased perceptual-interpretive lens that conflates the gospel with American democracy to give the gospel a hue of partiality.

Such partiality is consequential for the integrity of the gospel claimed and proclaimed. This process is demonstrated in how the news media operates in most contexts today. Two issues of partiality are evident in mainline news media: (1) The prevailing focus is on the bad news of the day, with little if any attention given to any good news—of course, this could be merely reporting the existential reality of our times—and (2) listeners, viewers, or readers of the news typically turn to and rely on sources that are partial to their views, because the news media is structured with such bias in order to inform mainly on the basis of their partiality. Accordingly, the integrity of the news from these sources is always suspect and cannot be counted on for the full, whole picture of what is truly happening. And those who rely on such sources are misled and misguided when they use information lacking integrity for everyday life.

These two issues of partiality apply also to the gospel claimed and proclaimed. The first issue, however, is the reverse of news media reporting. Rather than the gospel's focus being on the bad news—which is an integral part of the gospel—the prevailing attention is given to the good news, under the assumption that the gospel is only the Good News. Consequently, Christians both favor claiming this so-called Good News without knowing and understanding the depth of the bad news, the news from which the gospel only can be claimed as good news. Furthermore, they also lean to proclaiming the gospel with the partiality of good news because of their bias against drawing attention to the bad news and thereby turning people off. Therefore, the integrity of the gospel with good news partiality is always suspect and cannot be counted on for the full, whole news embodied the whole-ly Word. Any gospel with the hue of partiality is always misleading and misleading. Is this the basis pervading Christian theology and practice that is witnessed in the diverse hues of the gospel composing the global church?

Diversity's Prism of the Gospel

Christian diversity is a tapestry of many colors, tints and shades. The gospel is not colorblind, but it renders secondary all the hues from diversity's prism. When they are given primacy, the human significance of these hues discolors the gospel—hues which are incompatible with the *color* of the whole gospel.

It is from diversity's prism of the gospel that the good news has been reported ongoingly with the bias of different hues—hues with selective facts and nuances of its truth, thus reporting the gospel with variable good news composed even by alternative facts and virtual news. The diverse hues from this prism have augmented the gospel outside the boundaries of its theological trajectory and relational path (as in Mt 7:13-14). Paul was simply astonished to see this existential reality emerge to discolor the gospel (Gal 1:6-7, cf. Col 2:4).

This biased partiality to the good news was also anticipated by Simeon when the gospel was whole-ly embodied. Just Luke's Gospel reported Simeon's relational response to the gospel, because Luke was concerned about the gospel's inclusiveness to counter any bias of partiality that would distort or taint the gospel. Simeon, who embraced the whole gospel as the Spirit revealed to him, clearly distinguished the gospel's good and bad news, and he anticipated its impact on those in the tradition of God's people:

“This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in *God's kingdom*, and to be *the significance* that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Lk 2:25-35).

As forecasted, the relational path of Jesus' gospel intruded on the tradition of God's people, "and his own people did not accept him" (Jn 1:10). Even though their tradition included enough similarity to accept Jesus, the roots of their theology and practice were incompatible with Jesus' vine roots. The incompatibility of prevailing religious tradition was ironic but not surprising, and should alert us to existing traditions today. The whole gospel Jesus embodied was *right* for the heart of human life, and he enacted integrally the bad and good news to make *right* the human condition. His gospel is incompatible with any complicity or reflection of injustice, and their tradition (and those today in likeness) lacked the relational significance of justice as defined by the relational terms of God's authority and rule of law—regardless of their conformity in referential terms. Therefore, their Rule of Faith could not embrace the whole gospel enacted by Jesus, which exposed the injustice rooted in their tradition. In his gospel, accordingly, Jesus clarified any misconceptions and corrected any illusions with the undeniable paradox:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring *common* peace, but a sword...." (Mt 10:34-36)

The bad news of the gospel not only antecedes the good news but necessarily qualifies what the good news is that is essential for *whole* justice and *uncommon* peace—the whole-ly relational outcome of Jesus' gospel (cf. Mt 12:18-21).

Back in June, 2015, Mark Labberton, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, responded to the murders of nine African Americans at a church in Charleston, South Carolina; this bad news was perpetrated during their weekly Bible study by a white young adult proclaiming racial superiority. Labberton responded in part: "Until our lives [including at Fuller] reflect a gospel powerful enough to eradicate roots of racism and violence, the faith we proclaim will be a marginalized impertinence."¹

Indeed, the essential truth of the whole gospel must first be the essential relational reality of the church and its persons and relationships, including the academy and other Christian organizations. Yet, the issues of justice and reconciliation rooted in the bad news of the gospel must go beyond ethical-moral terms and reach deep into the heart of persons and relationships in their ontology and function. This gospel process necessitates unavoidably getting past the secondary—as important as it may be in existential life—into this primacy and requires the redemptive change of our theological anthropology that reduces persons and relationships in their ontology and function. If we want justice with whole righteousness, then the gospel of the uncommon wholeness of Christ and integrally its uncommon equality also require this essential reality in the church without divergence:

¹ Quoted from "Out of Anguish, We Commit to Change," posted 6/22/2015, <http://fuller.edu/offices/President/From-the-President/2015-Posts>.

the new, uncommon and whole relational order for the church *to be* distinguished as the new creation family not just of Christ but the Trinity, whereby its gospel will have the qualitative relational significance for all persons, peoples, tribes, nations and their relationships to be made whole in their innermost—that is, in the primacy of their inner out transformed without the veil of distinctions and the barriers to intimate equalized relationships together.

How persons do relationships in Christian diversity, however, is filtered through the prism that colors the gospel in a partiality to bias their own persons and relationships favorably and those of others less favorably. This common human dynamic discolors the gospel with a consonance or dissonance heard (or seen) accordingly—a gospel, in Labberton’s words, of “marginalized impertinence,” which diverse Christians and churches are accountable to change and responsible to make whole-ly relevant.

Diversity’s prism commonly discoloring the gospel uses contextualized soundtracks to claim and proclaim the gospel. While such a soundtrack may have consonance in that context, it readily has dissonance in other contexts whereby the gospel’s significance and primary relevance cannot be heard. Yet, without the gospel’s significance, what can be heard by others could have secondary relevance. Christmas is the prime example of a discolored gospel having consonance for others, who would otherwise consider the gospel dissonant and thus without relevance for their lives. As the most prominent Christmas soundtrack of the gospel, “Silent Night” has been widely translated and embraced in the global community, even by the diversity of those who are not Christians or are of another religion; but they still are touched by the consonance of its sound, not by the significance of the gospel embodied for them to receive in order to resonate in their hearts for the primary relevance of their life in wholeness. This is a prime example of how the *medium* displaces the primary significance of the *message*, and then becomes the message in itself. Silently and sadly, ‘hallelujah’ is a verb in relational response to *jah* (YHWH, God) that has typically lost its relational significance in worship to become the message as a noun, reverberating as an end in itself; this end-message has even reverberated in secular soundtracks, often reduced to merely ‘hallelu’.

As “Silent Night” illustrates, gospel soundtracks are translated in native languages to better reverberate in listeners. While this may help a gospel soundtrack to be consonant, it does not get down to the heart of the gospel to illuminate its essential significance and primary relevance. The primary issue for the whole gospel’s soundtrack revolves around the gospel’s language and genre embodied by the Word. Paul was unequivocal that the gospel’s language is composed “not with words of *contextualized* wisdom” but by the language embodied and enacted relationally by the Word (1 Cor

1:17, ESV). In other words, **the gospel is a verb** communicated only in the Word's relational language. Based on the Word, this is the only language that makes the gospel soundtrack consonant for listeners to hear (or see) its essential significance and primary relevance (cf. Jn 8:43). Moreover, the gospel's soundtrack genre is vital to illuminate the gospel as clearly distinguished from the diverse colors evolving from diversity's prism. Paul further clarified that human contextualization has biased diversity's lens "so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the *whole* glory of Christ, who is the image of *whole-ly* God" (2 Cor 4:4, NIV). Therefore, the genre of the only color giving clarity to the whole gospel is **light**, and any other hue from diversity's prism is rendered secondary; but when such colors are made primary, they discolor the gospel to distort its significance and taint its relevance.

The genre of light takes the gospel further and deeper, for example, than merely major news to report (even as 'breaking news') or just theological doctrine to believe and practice. Yet, typically, the light of the gospel is misunderstood with a contextualized bias (as in Jn 1:5; 2 Cor 3:14) or is simply obscured with a commonized bias (as in Jn 1:10-11; 3:19). In the genre of light, the gospel illuminates the whole-ly identity and function of the Word's vulnerable presence and relational involvement enacted in the active voice of the transitive verb distinguished only in relational language.

Notwithstanding the importance of the diversity of native languages, the gospel's whole composition can only be determined by the primary parameters of the Word's relational language. With the whole gospel being a verb, it cannot be claimed or proclaimed as a mere common noun, nor as merely an adjective modifying what God has given to the world. As a transitive verb, the gospel is the relational action enacted by the Word that communicates in relational language directly to those who, without distinctions and partiality, are the recipients of the Word's whole-ly relational action. Thus, the gospel's relational action is never a virtual transitive action in what would amount to a verb in the passive voice. The Word's relational language is the soundtrack only of communication in the active voice of the whole-ly God, whose vulnerable presence and relational involvement in real time constitute the gospel's integral significance and relevance.

With the gospel in the relational language composing its transitive verb, the active voice of the gospel's soundtrack resonates for the diversity of all persons, peoples, tribes and nations, resonates in the consonance necessary to hear the integral bad and good news that illuminate seeing the Light embodying and enacting the whole gospel (Jn 1:9; 8:12). Therefore, the gospel in the essential significance of only this language and with the primary relevance of just this genre has the unbiased impartial basis for the diversity of all to claim and proclaim together as one family in the image and likeness of the Trinity in uncommon wholeness.

Mary's and Paul's Color of the Gospel

Given Mary's vulnerable relational involvement and reciprocal response constituting her discipleship (as discussed previously), Jesus highlighted her identity and function as a central feature wherever the gospel is preached in global diversity (Mt 26:13). Why central when the gospel is openly expressed and not just implied when the gospel is noted? The answer emerges in relational language.

That is to say, nowhere in the NT do we find a person who enacts the whole gospel as a verb with more relational significance than Mary. How so? There are **two key ways** fundamental to the gospel. First, Mary embodied a person who would not be and thereby was not limited and constrained by her surrounding context, both cultural and religious. In spite of her diminished distinction as a woman, her person demonstrated the hard decisions necessary to make redemptive changes in her identity and function—that Jesus highlighted for Martha (Lk 10:42)—which distinguished the redemptive transformation at the heart of the gospel as a verb for all recipients to undergo. The first key about Mary is her relational action as the verb of the gospel in the active voice of her vulnerable relational involvement foremost with Jesus. This key relational way unfolds integrally in the second key. Her relational action as a verb was only in the active voice of a transitive verb. The only discipleship response to “Follow me” that has significance to Jesus is the response to his vulnerable presence and relational involvement in the primacy of **reciprocal** relationship together. The whole gospel as a transitive verb does not enact unilateral relationship but only reciprocal relationship for wholeness together. Mary, more vulnerably and intimately, embodied and enacted these key ways with her Lord and Teacher (in contrast, e.g. to Peter, Jn 13:6-7).

Therefore, in the Word's unbiased perceptual-interpretive lens, *Mary neutralized* the diverse coloring of the gospel (contrary to what Martha and the other disciples practiced) to enact the relational language of the whole gospel, whereby the Light was not misunderstood or obscured. Accordingly, in their vulnerably intimate face-to-face reciprocal relational involvement together, the soundtrack of the gospel that Mary's person deeply expressed resonated in the heart of Jesus' person to signify the relational outcome of the gospel—the relational outcome ‘already’ when constituted by the relational dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes.

Should Mary, then, be featured at the heart of the whole gospel wherever and whenever? The answer depends on making hard decisions, likely with redemptive changes. The hard reality of Mary's discipleship is that she ongoingly challenged conventional thinking (both Martha's and the other disciples'), the diversity of which discolors the gospel to distort or taint it so that its soundtrack doesn't have the consonance to resonate the gospel's essential significance and primary relevance in the hearts of listeners. If conventional thinking is not changed redemptively, Mary's person is

reduced to just another figure in the NT narrative, who doesn't warrant the attention that Jesus ascribed to her.

There is no knowledge about whether Mary and Paul ever met. But they were sister and brother in the new creation family of the gospel of peace. Their connection, however, goes deeper than the conventional gender distinction of brother and sister, because at their hearts from inner out their primary identity and function are *persons*, persons in relationship together both equalized and intimate as church family.

Paul's person reflected Mary's person rather than mirroring the distinctions of his old self (as in Phil 3:4-6). Any color of the gospel that Paul might have had from a contextualized bias was neutralized by his redemptive transformation from the relational action by the Light of the gospel, which confronted Paul face to face (Acts 9:3-5). Even his secondary complaints later were changed in the relational outcome of the gospel (e.g. 2 Cor 12:7-9). Therefore, just like Mary, Paul was not limited or constrained by contextualized biases and conventional thinking in Christian theology and practice; rather he definitively neutralized the diverse coloring of the gospel (Gal 3:26-29) and unequivocally exposed the gospel's discoloring (Gal 1:6-7).

Indeed, Paul didn't diminish the bad news of the gospel by skewing it with the good news; that would only discolor the integral gospel into a fragmentary hue. And, of course, just like Mary, Paul's relational involvement enacting the gospel as a transitive verb in the active voice served its relational purpose and outcome for the Light to be seen (or heard) without misunderstanding or obscurity (2 Cor 4:6).

The Integral Gospel for the Global Church's Wholeness

It should not be surprising if much of Christian diversity prefers a partial gospel colored by hues from diversity's grassroots. Why? Because such discoloring does not make the good news contingent on the bad news of the gospel, which then would make it less dissonant for their contexts and thus easier to listen to—similar to the partiality of news media's skewed reporting. But a partial gospel doesn't give the whole picture to see the light of the gospel.

In the light, the whole gospel's bad news exposes the contextualization and commonization of the human condition, which pervades Christians and churches for their condition. Then the gospel's unavoidable bad news confronts the reduced theological anthropology defining their identity and determining their function, which evolves from a weak view of sin lacking reductionism that is also confronted in Christian diversity. Thus, the bad news gets down to the core roots of diverse Christian theology and practice that need redemptive change. This is demonstrated by Jesus enacting the gospel in the intrusive voice of his ongoing transitive verb action. When he cleaned out his family

house to make it the *shared* dwelling in covenant reciprocal relationship together for all nations (Mk 11:15-17), the Light illuminated what's integral to the uncommon peace that only he gives, which would compose his church family for all persons, peoples, tribes and nations without their comparative distinctions.

The good news is of little or no significance unless it is directly relevant for the existential condition in Christian diversity that requires the change to free it from the limits and constraints preventing all the persons and relationships in the global church from being transformed (not reformed) to wholeness. This wholeness together is nothing less than the integrally equalized and intimate relationships reconciled in the whole-ly image and likeness of the Trinity, just as Jesus prayed definitively for his family (Jn 17). If you do the math, do all the diverse parts of the global church body, past and present, add up together to compose the global church in the wholeness of the gospel's new creation—no matter how vibrant the diversity or resounding the parts?

Paul's verb action begs for relational unity in the church (Eph 4:1-5) in the active voice of relational language, which is not expressed as a reminder in referential terms to maintain in church doctrine and to advocate in referential language by church leadership—both of which are without relational significance. Paul expresses in the depth of relational terms what Jesus transformed *into* Paul: the wholeness of Christ composing the whole of who, what and how (the gravity of righteousness) the church is in its unity, oneness (*henotes*)—the oneness distinguished only by wholeness together and differentiated from anything less than whole relational terms. The primary identity and function of the church's righteousness is Paul's deep concern over any secondary identity and function of the church's diversity (cf. Rom 14:17), the secondary practice of which must always be integrated into the primary of who, what and how the church and its persons and relationships are (cf. 14:18-20)—brought together and held together by the gravity of their righteousness.

Therefore, this is the existential reality encompassing the global church:

Only the integral gospel integrates the defining bad news into the transforming good news by the relational action of the gospel as the transitive verb in the active voice of relational language, in order to constitute the new creation relational outcome of the gospel deeply in the experiential truth and relational reality of all persons, peoples, tribes and nations in Christian diversity—with their diversity re-purposed, their churches re-*image*-d, and re-order-ed to celebrate the whole gospel integral for the global church.

Just the integral gospel enacts the relational dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes.

Perhaps the following musical gospel will help the church's celebration to resonate anew:

'New Song' News (Musical Gospel)²

Ps 96:1-2; 98:1-2; 71:15; 40:3; Lk 22:30; 2 Cor 5:17; Lk 6:38; Eph 1:13; 4:23-24

1. Have you heard the news / the news of the gospel?
There's news not often heard / the gospel's full story.
2. The gospel sounds good / but not the whole story.
Good news points to the bad / bad news of the gospel.
3. Have you heard bad news / in news of the gospel?
This news not often heard / the gospel's whole story.
4. No news is good news / until heard with the bad.
The bad needs to be changed / for the gospel to be whole, for the gospel to be whole.
5. Do you see this news / declared in the gospel?
Bad news is given hope / now by the whole gospel.
6. The news that brings change / the complete gospel
is the news to be claimed / to embrace the whole gospel.
7. Now the news is told / Do you hear gospel?
It's the story of bad / in us made new and whole.
8. This is the only news / that makes it the gospel.
It's called the 'New Song' News / the new of the whole gospel.

² Music available online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

9. Have you heard the news / news of the whole gospel?
Without the new there is / no claim to the gospel.

So...!

10. Claim the 'New Song' News / the news of complete change.
The only whole gospel / composed by the new covenant,
/made by the new creation,
/made by the new creation. Oo...oo...oo!

11. Sing the 'New Song' News / the news of us made whole.
The new now made complete / defined by the new wine
/determined by the new self. The new self!

12. Declaring the truth / of the whole of God
His righteousness revealed / His salvation now complete...complete!

13. Proclaiming 'New Song' / our 'New Song' gospel
For all to see the whole / the gospel in us made new! New! New!

Closing:

Yes, the 'New Song' News!

O, O 'New Song' News!

O, O, O New Song

New Song, New Song, New Song!

(slow) Thank You, You, You!

(slower) Father, Son, Spirit!

(slowest) Thank Yoooouuu!

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