

Inescapable Issues Accountable *in All Christians*

Integral Theology & Practice
for Viable Faith in Everyday Life

T. Dave Matsuo

©2022 TDM All rights reserved

No part of this manuscript may be reprinted without permission from the author

Contact:

www.4X12.org

tdavematsuo@4X12.org

Contents

Introduction.....1

Ch 1 ISSUE 1: Understanding the Surrounding Context, Culture and Infrastructure.....11

What Surrounds You	12
Getting <i>into</i> What Surrounds Us	14
Humans in Context	18
Contextualized by and in Culture	19
Humans Progress Evolving	21
Contextualization's Infrastructure	23
The Culture of Contextualized Christians	25
The Critical Cultural Shift	27
Jesus Engaging Culture	28
Jesus' Integral Approach	30
The Culture of Our Theology and Practice	33
Accountable for Our Will	36

Ch 2 ISSUE 2: Examining Our Identity Formation and Its Roots.....39

Human Identity Formation Footprint	40
Identity Formation Equation	42
Revising the Identity Equation	47
The Word's Identity Call	52
Identity Crisis	57
Bifocal Identity	63
Identity Formation Narrows to the <i>New</i>	68
The Taste of the <i>New</i>	71
The Growth of the <i>New</i>	73
The Uncommon of the <i>New</i>	75
The <i>New</i> Distinguished from the <i>Old</i>	80
The <i>New</i> Embodied Alive	84
Counteracting Identity Theft	87

Ch 3 ISSUE 3: *Knowing God & Understanding the Bible*.....91

The Words of the Bible	91
The Language in Use	94
Language Barriers	100
The Subtitles of Language	102
The Unavoidable Need to Challenge Interpretations	103
Transitioning in Our Challenge	112
The Math of God’s Word	120
Calculating Holy	122
The Only Outcome of Significance	126

Ch 4 ISSUE 4: The Issue of Highest Priority: Listening.....129

Hear or Listen	130
Dissonance and Consonance	132
The Illusion of Consonance	135
Listening for Viable Faith	136
Listening’s Relational Outcome	141

Ch 5 ISSUE 5: How Our Person Functions.....143

A Conscious Narrative	143
Conflicting Narratives	147
Variable Ontology and Function	153
Qualifying the Whole Person	159
Embodying Our Image or God’s	167

**Ch 6 ISSUE 6: Knowing Our Neighbor and Understanding
 Our Witness.....177**

The Rule of Law or Rule of Relationship	177
The Human Dynamics of Neighbor	178
The Tactical Action for Neighbor	180
The Nature of Witness	183
The Basis for Our Witness	184

The Constituting Basis of “My Witnesses” 186

**Ch 7 ISSUE 7: The Theology and Practice of Our Discipleship
and the Church.....191**

Distinguishing Discipleship as Unfolded from the Gospel	192
The Relational Progression of Jesus’ Disciples	198
Progression as Disciples and Church or Regressing?	210
Church Identity Transitioned	215
Church Function Transitioned	222
Church Witness Transitioned	226
The Church Transitioned as Equalizer	231

Ch 8 Living with Viable Faith.....235

The Works of Faith Work	236
Living Viably in the Human Context	240

Scripture Index (Primary Source).....243

Bibliography (Secondary Source).....246

INTRODUCTION

“Where are you?” Genesis 3:9

“What are you doing here?” 1 Kings 19:9,13¹

As the world observes the diversity of Christianity, we Christians are challenged to clarify the disparities in our witness displayed in our actions or inactions—as well as to correct those disparities. All Christians are accountable to distinguish a viable faith in our everyday life, or else bear the consequences of displaying a Christian witness with little or no significance to the scope of life. Christians in the U.S. also bear the additional burden of a fragmenting performance of democracy in the U.S. and the disparaging reviews it has rightly received on the global stage. As those identified as followers of Jesus Christ, we bear the responsibility to “be my witnesses in the world” (Acts 1:8). Collectively and individually today, we must account for this ongoing responsibility by directly addressing the issues inescapable for all Christians living “in the world.”

So, my sisters and brothers, what do you think of the current conditions surrounding you: political, economic, social, medical-health, environmental, cultural, family and personal? In your diverse situations and circumstances, how are you affected by them and/or do you feel about them? Perhaps you don’t give much thought to them, yet you certainly are affected by them in one way or another. Thus, does your level of awareness of these conditions become defining for your faith and determining of your witness “in the world”?

The extent of our awareness directly correlates to the spectrum of our human consciousness, thereby indicating where our individual consciousness is focused and what it revolves around. Historically and currently, Christians consistently have faced a (pre)dominance of *self*-consciousness, which has defined Christian identity and determined our witness. Based on this focus revolved on self, what would you imagine that world observers conclude about Christians and the significance of Christianity?

In the emerging years of Christianity, as it intruded into the ancient Roman Empire, the apostle Paul addressed Christians and churches about the evolving dynamics of competing influence; and he anticipated how they would evolve to shape Christian identity and determine Christian function. Because of the influences of the surrounding context, Paul made it imperative for Christians to “keep alert” (1 Thes 5:6; Eph 6:18)

¹ Unless indicated differently, all Scripture quoted are from the NRSV; any italics in the Scripture quoted throughout this study signify emphasis or further rendering of terms.

about what was going on around them; thus that would include essentially not to let their consciousness go into a fog or be dulled as if asleep (1 Thes 5:4-11; Eph 6:10-18). Staying awake and keeping alert involve the imperative that Jesus made ongoing for his followers as they journey in the big picture (Mk 13:32-37). This applies even more so for us today, given how competing influences have evolved in our expanding contexts.

Our awareness must never be assumed. Likewise, our conscious involvement with what's happening around us must always be subject to examination and feedback, or else our consciousness may actually be engulfed in a fog or be asleep in spite of engaging in a high level of activity. King Saul assumed he was fulfilling God's purpose for him, only to be awakened to the reality of his skewed consciousness (1 Sam 15:13-23). What escaped Saul's consciousness was the insignificant level of relational involvement he had directly with God; this was a common condition existing among God's people that afflicted them from the beginning.

Saul, along with a majority of others ever since Saul, failed to understand the primacy of relationship with God and the imperative relational function to "Listen" (*qashab*, 1 Sam 15:22)² carefully to the one God (Dt 6:4-6) and the Word (Mk 4:24, cf. Lk 8:18). Why a relational imperative? In order to truly *know* God (not mere information about God) in covenant relationship and to understand the Word's terms for reciprocal relationship together. Listening was the pivotal key that opened the door in Job's hermeneutic process to know his God intimately and understand God's Word (Job 42:1-6). In fact of the truth, Jesus highlighted (in the above Scripture) the consequences of our level of paying attention to what we hear by making axiomatic the direct correlation between "the measure we use *or engage* will *result in* the measure we get *back*"—nothing more can be expected but less certainly can and will result.

Listening is the key essential function in relationships, foremost with God and inclusive of all others. Christian awareness rises or falls based on our conscious listening. And like Saul (cf. 1 Sam 15:12), the extent of our self-consciousness will determine the level of relational involvement we engage with God and others (cf. 1 Pet 2:19; Rom 3:20). The relational consequences have evolved through Israel's history, church history and the contemporary global church, reverberating for the world observers to assess at God's expense.

² Hebrew and Greek word studies used in this study are taken from the following sources: Horst Balz, Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce Waitke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980); Ernst Jenni, Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997); Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Harold K. Moulton, ed., *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978); W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1981); Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible* (Chattanooga: AMG Publ., 1996).

The Narrowing Path Ahead

Living as a Christian in the 21st Century is in principle no different than living in the 1st Century. Of course, the surrounding contexts in contemporary life are more complex, compounding our situations and circumstances. Yet, adapting to these changes involves the same outworking of Christian principles embodied by the Word. What is problematic is that many Christians have engaged an evolutionary process of adaptation, whereby a wide diversified path is undertaken to “survive” as (or at least among) “the fittest”—inherent to evolution. Certainly, Christians need to survive. The issue, however, is how Christians define survival, and what goes into that process to achieve a fit outcome.

Christian witness today makes evident that we are journeying on multiple lanes of a widening freeway with an undesignated speed limit wandering through the human context. It’s as if our formative GPS defining for Christians has been reprogrammed, or simply turned off. Younger generations of Christians also need to account for the algorithms that permeate their GPS to structure their daily journey, define their epistemic process, and determine their multi-tasking function. Younger or older, all Christians urgently need to become significantly more alert to the surrounding human context and pay attention to inescapable issues that must not be passed by regardless of our situations and circumstances. This awareness, however, will depend on our journey taking a narrowing path through the human context at the appropriate speed limit in order to be openly accountable to a distinctly integral theology and practice for the essential purpose of the viability of our faith in everyday life.

Approaching Inescapable Issues:

It is critical for the integrity of the Christian journey that all Christians not pass by but exit, stop and address the following issues. This list is not exhaustive but it is inclusive of what we are all accountable to God and each other for, and thus the issues are inescapable.

1. Understanding the surrounding context, cultures and infrastructures—initially locally, then regionally, and eventually globally—and their influence in shaping or forming our beliefs and values.

Gaining this understanding requires understanding interconnected issues that are unavoidable: **(1a)** the breadth and depth of the human condition; **(1b)** the limits, constraints and opportunities of free will; and then integrating this understanding

- to implement (1c) getting to the heart of life issues in our awareness in order to address them at their core.
2. Within the context and dynamics intrinsic to issue (1), examining our identity formation that has emerged both as an individual and as a group, whether as Christian identity or secular identity and gaining an awareness of any identity theft of the former by the latter. A question, for example, to pursue is how skin-ny or able our identity might be. To enhance our examination, a related issue is necessary to broaden and deepen our understanding of what needs to be addressed: (2a) knowing the history, heritage and origins of those who preceded us, thus better delineating the identity of *who* we are and *whose* we are.
 3. *Knowing* the Word and understanding the Bible—an inescapable issue that has been widely assumed to be indistinguishable, interchangeable, or simply misinterpreted and misapplied. Underlying this issue is the pervading problem of language: (3a) distinguishing between God’s language and human language, that is, between God’s relational language for the sole purpose of communication, and human referential language for the primary purpose to transmit information, even with wording *about* God rather than the words *of* God. The Word was embodied in order to communicate “the Way, the Truth and the Life” as the integral theology and practice for our viable faith in everyday life, the integrity of which is diminished and compromised by referential language. Unavoidably, we don’t *know* the Word apart from the relational language he communicates in direct relational connection with us, no matter the extent of the referential knowledge we possess in our so-called understanding of the Bible. In effect, the Word’s relational language becomes a foreign language to many Christians. This issue encompasses inescapably all Christians at all levels, notably including in the global church and related academy. Furthermore, Christians need to know the calculations we use for the Bible—the math of God’s Word critical to understand.
 4. Given God’s relational language silencing the noise of human referential language, the inescapable issue taking on the highest priority for all Christians is: Listening in the vulnerable context foremost within our relationship with God in order to be aware of, respond to and heed the Word’s ongoing communication in the primacy of reciprocal relationship together (cf. Dt 31:12-13); this requires being involved in the relational context and process of the *uncommon*, which irreducibly distinguishes God from the *common* inherent to humans.

This begs the questions, do we simply have some contact with God—as prayer or time in the Bible could indicate—or do we indeed experience relational connection with the Word? This now pivotal issue of listening to reciprocate in the communication process makes unavoidable the core issue of (4a): the nature of relationships and persons either as created by God or as evolved in human development.

5. Issue 4 leads us directly into the most fundamental human dynamic unfolding or evolving since the beginning of human life. How we live in everyday life depends on the following:

Our person functioning either from inner out or from outer in—that is, either as the whole person from the *inner* qualitative heart of the person created in the qualitative image of God, integrated with the *outer* person incorporating the relational likeness of God; or as a person reduced or fragmented to the quantitative *outer* self with its comparative differences, without including much of the qualitative deeper *inner*.

This involves the essential life issue of wholeness or partialness, whole or fragmentary. Understanding how we function in daily life is the basic awareness that opens the functional door to consciousness. The consciousness that unfolds from the inner-out person functions primarily in a distinct *person-consciousness*, while the consciousness unraveling from the outer-in self revolves consistently in an unmistakable *self-consciousness*. What results from each fundamental dynamic makes this the constitutive issue on the list—defining the extent of how the previous issues are perceived, addressed and concluded, and then becoming definitive for the following issues, thereby determining the extent of how they will function. The existing reality staring in our face, however, is that too many Christians make assumptions about how they function and thus never address this constitutive issue.

Therefore, implied directly with God’s explicit trajectory of wholeness is the competing trajectory of reductionism, whose narrative ongoingly counters the whole of God. The existential consequences have been and continue to increasingly be the subtle and not-so-subtle compromise of Christian faith and its witness—which evolve in the next issue.

6. The inseparable issue of knowing our neighbor and understanding whose witness we project:
How we see our neighbor will determine the distinctions we ascribe to them and how we compare those differences; or our lens will define the likeness perceived in our neighbor’s diversity. This will expose any biases that distort our perception,

which God always holds us accountable to address. Moreover, in order to love our neighbor we have to be openly aware of them; in order to be openly aware of them we have to be involved with them in our consciousness. Our witness in loving them has to go beyond merely having *contact* with them but must go deeper to involve having relational *connection*. The Word clearly directs and expects us to love God no differently, such that when we love our neighbor they will experience the essential source of that love. Thus, we are always faced with whose witness we project to our neighbor.

7. For Christians, all of the above converge in the last issue on our list to address—again issues not exhaustive but inclusive. This issue incorporates:

The theology and practice of both discipleship and the church, each of which has a strategic and a tactical dimension that must be integrated in order for wholeness to unfold in this theology and practice.

Without their integration we can only expect fragmentation to evolve—a fragmentary theology and practice diminishing us in a reductionist faith and witness. The existential reality currently pervading our discipleship and our churches makes it critically essential for all Christians (whatever their development and role) to address: (7a) the ins and outs of discipleship, examining the reality (not ideal) of *whom* we truthfully follow as well as understanding the path of *how* we follow; combined with (7b) assessing the state of our church(-es) as an institution, a gathering or as an existential family, while examining its strategic trajectory as the kingdom of God. Then we need to openly reflect on the strategic and tactical bearings that our discipleship and our church(-es) have on the identity implied in our witness and on the viability rendered to our faith.

Each of the following chapters will discuss one of the inescapable issues as outlined above. Their discussion will clarify the path ahead essential for all Christians and correct any misunderstanding or ambiguity for those following Jesus, whereby the Christian status quo will be challenged, confronted and held accountable to narrow down the path of options ahead for the journey of Christian faith. To be sure, this discussion before us will be a limited discussion of these issues. A more complete discussion of each issue is found in my other studies. If you want to study more of the theology and practice involved in any or all of the issues, please undertake my corresponding study(-ies) listed in the bibliography.

Widening the Challenge Before Us

The challenge before us is not between conservatives and progressives, or evangelicals and liberals. The unavoidable scope of the challenge makes it urgently inclusive of all Christians, on the one hand. On the other hand, the challenge facing us is encompassing of the whole of each person—not merely part, such as a mental exercise—which likely will make it confronting for many Christians and tension elevating for most Christians. Why? If you haven't already felt the tension or been confronted, you probably will as you continue this study.

The challenge before us keeps widening, and thus requires it to also increasingly deepen to the heart of these life issues. That necessitates also penetrating into each of our hearts. But the challenge alone is unable to penetrate to our deeper heart level, that is, unless we willfully open our hearts as well as our minds to these issues. Initially and ongoing, this requires each of us to become vulnerable with our heart, so that we will be affected, stirred, moved by the issues. Yet, the challenge also necessitates the humility of each Christian, in order that we can acknowledge our biases, face up to our assumptions, and avoid making premature judgments, and thereby be open to *listening* to the heart of these life issues and *learning* in the process.

Unfortunately, being vulnerable from inner out is not the norm for most Christians, no matter how much reference is made of the heart or how broadly simulated to function as a new normal. This raises a critical question that makes the challenge before us boundless: How vulnerable has God become to us? In response to God's vulnerable presence, then, how vulnerable are we to God?

The relational dynamics of this vital vulnerability process are signified, distinguished and embodied only in the gospel. The gospel underlies and undergirds all that is stated above and will be stated hereafter. Therefore, the overriding challenge facing us is the defining essential issue: What is the truth of the gospel? And is the gospel that Christians claim indeed the identical experiential truth vulnerably embodied by the Word? Relatedly, what do Christians experience in existential life directly as a result of the gospel they claim? Is our experience congruent with the relational outcome that Jesus made the relational reality for all those who follow him vulnerably with their whole person from inner out?

Ongoing throughout this study, confronting all Christians is the gospel's intrinsic relational message communicating this **implied challenge**:

To *know* the gospel face to face according to its relational language, and thereby to understand the gospel heart to heart solely as the Word embodied.

Jesus embodied the *whole* of God for reciprocal relationship together in wholeness, with nothing less and no substitutes to constitute *his* gospel and its relational outcome for those who claim it by vulnerably being relationally involved with him in reciprocal response.

We will never complete this challenge without the humble vulnerableness of our person from inner out, regardless of how outspoken we may be about the gospel we claim. Likewise, our witness will lack the full substantive significance of his gospel until our theology is congruent with the relational language of the Word and our practice is compatible with the relational path of the Way, the Truth and the Life. This could require some deconstruction in our theology and certainly necessitates transformation in our practice. For example, the soteriology prevailing among Christians centers on what Christ saves us *from* without the primary significance of what he saves us *to*. This truncated soteriology may gain converts, but it doesn't embody the new creation rooted in the heart of his gospel—the new creation in the essential practice transforming the church into his family by relationships together according to the whole of God's (i.e. the Trinity's) relational likeness, not human likeness. Furthermore, the gospelspeak commonly heard from pulpits, in evangelism, and on the mission field is usually not composed by God's relational language; and thus, while it may transmit information about a gospel, it doesn't communicate the relational substance of his whole gospel—the relational substance that first must be embodied from inner out in the daily lives of those who claim to have the gospel.

No doubt, the watchful world observing Christian witness will continue to be bewildered by the so-called gospel claimed and proclaimed by Christian disparity. And they will remain without substantive hope until this challenge of the gospel is first completed by Christians, individually and corporately. Urgently, then, this needs to challenge all Christians with God's intimate question, "Where are you?" (as in Gen 3:9), as well as must confront us with God's humbling query, "What are you doing here?" (as in 1 Kg 19:9,13)—always communicated in God's relational language for relationship together only according to the wholeness of God's relational terms, not by our fragmentary terms even with good intentions.

The Axiom of the Word

As the challenge before us widens and the path ahead narrows, we must by necessity (not obligation) always carefully pay close attention to what Jesus made axiomatic about the methods we use that effectively become our *modus operandi* (MO) and/or *modus vivendi*. The Word declares unequivocally in this definitive paradigm:

“The measure you give will be the measure you get” (Mk 4:24); that is to say, the measure, method, means, lens, involvement, and so forth, that we give, use or access to address a matter, then that will determine the resulting level, degree or significance of what we get back—and nothing more can be expected, though what we thought we’ve gained could be rendered insignificant, having no substantive basis.

In the Word’s paradigm, insert your own specific replacement for “measure”. Then, pay attention and take to heart what the Word makes axiomatic, and thereby anticipate that that will be the results of what you get back from the issues you address. Again, nothing more can be expected and what you think you’ve gained could merely be insignificant.

The Word’s axiom is inescapable. And any attempt to avoid it simply implements his paradigm with a different replacement for “measure”. Therefore, clearly the challenge before us widens and the path ahead narrows, both of which also unmistakably deepen to the heart of life’s issues and hopefully to each of our hearts called to be humbly vulnerable.

Listen carefully and pay close attention! And don’t let the *noise* diminish your involvement.

Chapter 1 ISSUE 1: Understanding the Surrounding Context, Culture & Infrastructure

**God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;
and let them *rightfully rule over the life upon the earth.*”**

Genesis 1:26

Now the *adversary* was more crafty than any other *thing* the Lord God had made.

**He said to the woman, “Did God say,
‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden.’?”**

Genesis 3:1

Living in the world today is more complex than ever in human history; yet not because it is more complicated but due to the expanding dynamics and competing sources that make understanding what surrounds us difficult. The cosmos is expanding, as the most recent views from the James Webb space telescope make evident. Whatever questions raised and left unanswered by these discoveries may deepen the mystery of life. But it also makes more urgent the need for our understanding of human life in the earthly context.

The macroscopic view that the Webb telescope points to and highlights also implies a reflexive microscopic view of its observation point and contextual source. Not limited to the scientific community, this context includes the general public, which will be revealed in a reverse view of the surroundings that make evident constraining forces. Like my wife and me, I’m sure many others are amazed at these space images. Yet, the complex reality of today also must include those who perceive these images as fake—just as some previously considered the moon landing fake—perhaps even seen as part of a conspiracy theory exposing efforts by science to take control over human life. These speculations may not seem baseless, given the competing sources of misinformation and disinformation pervading our contexts today. This is part of the expanding dynamics—for example, as the pervasive internet prevails among us—that we need to grasp in order to understand what surrounds us in the breadth and depth of their complexity.

On the other hand, this complexity is not complicated. Rather in the factual truth of life, our understanding can be facilitated when our examination is enhanced by a strategic awareness of the bigger picture to bring us to the heart of the issue. This awareness of the bigger picture has been a critical challenge for human life from the very beginning. And Christians most of all are accountable to know not only the bigger picture but God’s big picture, which strategically and tactically frames all of life in its essential

perspective. Therefore, paying attention and taking heed is not an abstract exercise but vulnerably addressing the existential reality of everyday life.

What Surrounds You?

To expand our awareness, let's slow down and contemplate the road we're on. Now personally consider: How far-reaching is your surrounding context? That is, how influential is that context(s) (1) to your inner circle of family and friends, then (2) to your extended circle of church members, acquaintances and community contacts; and lastly, (3) to the peripheral boundaries that form your local context or region? And besides your culture of origin, what other cultures (including from the internet) are displayed in your daily life; and how have those cultures influenced your thinking and behavior? In addition, as these narratives (not abstractions) emerge, have you ever considered any infrastructures undergirding them and what will result in the future of any narrative?

In the macroscopic breadth and microscopic depth of what surrounds us, our understanding will always be incomplete and languish until we also directly question "Where is your God?" (as in Ps 42:3). In this narrative of being tested personally in his surrounding context, the psalmist laments having this question raised to him; and other contexts have confronted God's people with this basic question (see Ps 79:10; 115:2; Joel 2:17; Mic 7:10). Christians also wonder where God is in various situations and circumstances. Yet, when they/we really understand what surround us, then the question flips its focus from God to them/us: who or what is *your* God? Since God has already vulnerably revealed the whole of God (not God's totality), God's ongoing relational presence has already answered "where is God?" thus, only we can answer the question focused on "your God". In other words, the question really facing us in our surrounding contexts centers on *who* or *what* existentially is or becomes our God in those contexts. Again, this is not an abstract matter for us to examine, though we may discover that the who or what of our God is a virtual reality. This, then, opens our understanding to the adaptations we make to what surrounds us—adapting to be fit or be part of "the fittest."

Christian adaptations can be a subtle process to understand, mainly because such adaptations are legitimated by the various cultures surrounding us. Political or social cultures, for example, are intentionally and inadvertently embraced by Christians as a means of validation, even if that culture is a competing source with God's big picture and the Word's way of life. This makes culture inescapable for all Christians; and a culture's influence on our lives is unavoidable without our awareness, as well as will prevail without our understanding. Jesus' first disciples lacked this awareness and understanding in spite of Jesus distinguishing the infrastructure of God's big picture for them (e.g. Mt

24). The influence of their surrounding culture prevailed in their discipleship, thus notably they competed to be the greatest among them (Mk 9:33-34; Lk 9:46; Mt 18:1). How have Christians evolved since then to adapt in how we follow Jesus?

It is vital to understand where what surrounds us is leading, and thereby anticipate what outcomes the future will bring. Of course, any prophetic input from the Holy Spirit to supplement the Word is always welcome in this examination. Given the Word at hand, let's expand this examination without making assumptions for the Spirit and vulnerably depend on his presence and his leading us in the truth (as Jesus predicted, Jn 16:12-13). Perhaps, if so desired, the examination can also be facilitated by the use of strategic concepts from game theory.¹

A key concept in game theory is called "background induction": looking ahead to the potential outcomes that may arise in the future (the so-called game tree) and then working backward to determine what the optimal actions are for the participants involved to take today. (That future, however, will always have roots in the past, which must not be overlooked or ignored.) Consider: What could you imagine the future outcomes of partisan politics in the U.S. will be? Christians at all levels have to acknowledge where they stand on the issue and define what actions they need to take today and develop tomorrow. Based on such actions or inaction, what does God hold us accountable for, and what would be God's basis for that?

Knowing and understanding our best role in any issue necessitates getting to the heart of what surrounds us. This involves an awareness of the surrounding influences exerted on us, which then challenges us to understand if, regarding an existing surrounding condition, we are explicit or implicit enablers, tacitly in complicity, or overtly in some counteractive position. And understanding this engagement in this stepwise contextual process does not and will not get to the heart of the matter without integrating it into the irreducible context of God's big picture as distinguished by the Word's relational terms. Therefore, regardless of the issue, Christians need to look ahead to anticipate outcomes in the future and reflect backward on what actions are best to take today that God holds us accountable for—a distinct integrated step-wise process without negotiation or compromise. The implications this has, for example, for partisan politics should be transforming for our practice, if not deconstructing some of our theology.

The next step takes us to another important lesson to learn from game theory: Beliefs play a critical role in determining how participants will act. How Christians act on a surrounding condition will reveal what they believe in and thus value for their everyday function, not for their ideal religious beliefs. Such action or inaction will also expose to others the extent or nature of what Christians believe and their operating values, which will inform others of what to expect from Christians. In partisan politics currently, for example, are we promoting Christian nationalism, or are we silent on issues, or voicing

¹ Used by economists Anastassia Fedyk and David McAdams and applied to the war in Ukraine. *Los Angeles Times*, OP-ED, July 24, 2022.

counter positions? Moreover, in current extreme climate conditions, what do Christians believe about climate change, and how does that determine how we address it? Do we believe that God’s essential directive at creation (Gen 1:26) is negotiable?

Our actual beliefs and their operating values play a critical role in determining all of this, which Christians must by necessity (not by obligation) understand and be accountable for their working beliefs and values—accountable inescapably for those from God and from what surrounds us. Our witness (intentional or inadvertent) is defined and/or determined by what unfolds in our daily life, including online.

Getting *into* What Surrounds Us

Up to now we have only touched on the heart of what surround us. Now we have to deepen our examination to get *into* its heart, so that we can have the opportunity to address, affect and change life issues—assuming, of course, we will exercise our will (individual and collective) to make such decisions.

With the recent and still unfolding discoveries, the known horizon of the cosmos keeps expanding—perhaps raising human speculation about reaching the horizon of God. Even though these horizons surround us, Christians (including as scientists) must understand the defining reality that eludes our common understanding. The horizons of the human context and God’s context are mutually exclusive, with one exception: if One penetrates into the horizon of the other unilaterally, thereby entering into the other 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, and which will require going beyond and deeper than current scientific explorations. The human context needs to know its limits and constraints. In the scientific approach of its context, there is apparent basis to acknowledge its limits and constraints. Scientists, however, shaped by their human context don’t often function either by the limits and constraints intrinsic to science, or with awareness of their human context biasing their overall human function, general thinking, and specific interpretations as scientists.² In other words, while scientists probe the universe for new horizons, they also need to probe more deeply into the personal horizon of their immediate surrounding context in order to know what underlies their function not merely as scientists but as humans.

Likewise, even more urgently, Christians need to examine their own horizon to know and understand their surrounding context’s shaping influence on their function,

² Thomas S. Kuhn discussed the human bias shaping scientific theory in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

general thinking, and specific interpretations as Christians—and also not assume that the horizon of God’s context has converged with theirs.

The narrative of human life has been composed with variations of fact and/or fiction, ongoingly revised with optimism or pessimism, rendering plausible or implausible our prospects in life. Whatever narrative is embraced has far-reaching implications for all human life and immediate consequences for everyday life. Human life, in every narrative, comes with a human order, which inescapably defines the identity of those persons in that order, and which inevitably determines their function. The outcome can be good news or bad news, but the outcome is unavoidable for those occupying that human order of life. This outcome for Christians has also biased the news used to compose their gospel. Given such influence, this raises the critical issue and vital question:

What is the specific (not ideal) human order under which you live life; and are you aware of the reality of this order defining your identity, and do you understand the reality of how it determines your function?

Your experiences and knowledge of others may not have informed you yet. But whether we as Christians face it or not, the realities of the world shape the reality of our everyday life. How and when we react to or act on this reality will depend on the underlying basis that defines who and what we are and that determines how we are. Therefore, recognized or not, realities of the world challenge the reality of our life, and without an integral basis these realities *will* shape that reality and control the outcome of our everyday life.

We have to examine our background more deeply in order to understand how it has formed life as we experience today. Hopefully then, we will also understand how human life has been *deformed*, fragmenting who, what and how persons are. Throughout human history the defining order of human life has been perceived in various ways. In simple summary:

In the past and the present, or for the future, human order has been conceived by human theories, the practice of which at their core have not proven either to have deep significance for human life or to fulfill an order that meets the needs (not necessarily the desires) essential for human life.

What must be learned from what amounts to human experiments cannot elude our understanding:

What is essential for human life does not emerge from a theory, whatever its human source, but can be understood only from a full knowledge of human life. Any

theories based on a limited knowledge (its epistemic field) cannot and do not grasp what is essential for the primary dimensions of life. Without this whole understanding, human theories can only make assumptions (plausible or not) about human orders; and, where applied, such theories can only construct incomplete, insignificant or false human orders, the formation of which reduce human life to a fragmentary human condition needing at its heart to be made whole.

What is the human condition that humans (including all Christians) are contextualized in, thus necessitating Christians to penetrate into this condition's heart of what surrounds us? This requires understanding the past to get to its roots.

The human order has evolved through human history and has certainly devolved in historic moments. If we search for our roots in this evolutionary process, we have to include these historic moments. Christians, for the most part, would use creation as the starting point for the human order. Yet, how well this starting point serves as the root of how we currently enact the human order, as well as forms the branches of our identity and function in everyday life, is an underlying issue. What we subscribe to in our theology does not ensure that it also becomes our practice. Intervening variables always disrupt the direct correlation between theology and practice. Thus, in order to know our roots and its branches, Christians need to examine what has evolved in the human order since creation, and then see if any evolved and devolved roots have supplanted the roots of creation. This includes examining evolved roots among God's people and in the church, which could test how vulnerable we are willing to be and let the facts speak for themselves.

When we have some understanding of this, we will better know if current branches in our way of life correlate to creation or to its evolution. To make these connections correlative and not on mere assumption, we need to understand *who* and *what* were created and how they have evolved. This may require keeping an open theological mind and setting aside biases from our practice, whereby we will wait upon the Word to enhance our understanding of these roots and branches.

Most Christians seem to believe in creation and not in evolution. Yet, the creation narrative (Gen 1-2) is incomplete in its details, so this is an insufficient basis to define our science. That is, in what has been revealed unequivocally about God's creation, there are unknown aspects that leave room for evolution to fill in, either unequivocally or equivocally. For example, DNA of the human species can be traced back to Neanderthals and apes. However, though this evolution of *Homo sapiens* may account for their physical development, this quantitative account does not form the qualitative development of the human person. Quantified terms are insufficient to explain the human person, much less understand the person unique to all life that incorporates the person's qualitative depth from inner out.

Within the cosmological parameters of creation, God created the human person as the centerpiece. In order to understand the roots of this unique person, we have to know not only *who* God created but also *what* God created. The human person's beginning was created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1-2). God's image becomes ambiguous in human perception when considered in quantitative terms (Isa 40:18; Acts 17:28-29). Here again, evolutionary roots cannot be confused for creation roots, which would conflate the human context with what constitutes God's context. God's image is rooted in God's ontology, whose being is constituted qualitatively ("God is spirit," Jn 4:24)—although God's qualitative function includes quantitative acts but cannot be reduced to those secondary limits. The *what* of the human person, therefore, is created in the qualitative image of God, first and foremost, which is rooted in the heart of the person distinguished from inner out at the innermost. Thus, as constituted according to God's qualitative ontology and function, any quantitative terms describe the person just from outer in, using distinctions that are always secondary to the person's primary identity and function rooted in God's qualitative image—distinguished only in the innermost.

On the essential basis of God's qualitative image, the human person emerged in the beginning as the centerpiece of God's creation when, and only when, in ongoing function by the heart. The function of the qualitative heart is critical for the whole person and holding together the person in the innermost, which creation makes irreducible and nonnegotiable. The biblical proverbs speak of the heart in the following 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).

Without the function of the heart, the whole person from inner out created by God is reduced to function from outer in, distant or separated from the heart. In other words, the qualitative heart is the foundational root for the human person in the qualitative image of God. On this qualitative basis alone the human person emerged as the highlight of God's creation. Evolution has not and cannot raise this person up from its limited roots and branches.

Yet, this focal point of creation appeared to be incomplete. The who was certainly there, but the what seemed still to be missing something. When God said "It is not good that the *person* should be alone" (Gen 2:18), did the Creator forget that something and thus created another person to be his partner? It is commonly thought that two initial responses are what clarify and correct what God unfolds in creation. First, the other person was of female gender, the who of whom appears to be an *add-on* to help the male

person and keep him company—notably as “a helper to be his partner” is commonly interpreted, thus making her subordinate in the human order of creation. Evolution could also explain such human development. Second, the what of each person appears to be highlighted as partners in marriage to form the pinnacle of creation, while still in the same human order. Both of these responses are prominent for composing Christian thinking and way of life. But they both in reality reduce the who and the what of God’s created persons, as well as compromise the integrity of their persons in the image and likeness of God. Thus, it is critical to understand our responses to creation in order to make the distinction necessary to know the person’s basic roots of *who* and *what* God created.

Humans in Context

In John Donne’s classic words “No man is an island,” he pointed to the reality of humanity that humans are interconnected. Even though persons may be alone or feel alone, they are interconnected. That is to say, the related reality is that persons could in fact be “alone in a crowd” or a group, a tribe, a family, and even in a church. This raises the questions: How are persons interconnected, and then, what is the significance of their interconnection?

The integral design of humanity originally did not evolve but was created by God. In the original design, persons are not “to be alone” but in relationship together at the depth of their whole person from inner out, and thus deeper than the association of any type of relationship (Gen 2:18,25). Thus, the created human context was constituted by whole persons interconnected in integral relationships together from inner out in the image and likeness of Creator God’s wholeness (Gen 1:26-27); and anything less and any substitutes rendered them “to be apart,” not just “to be alone,” that is, “to be apart from God’s wholeness.” The human context, however, did evolve when persons shifted from their integral design in order to reshape their identity and function, the consequence of which *contextualized* humans from outer in at the expense of their wholeness from inner out. The reality for the human context since this evolution is that reductionism contextualizes all humans in all human contexts with anything less and any substitutes. This real (not virtual) reality is inescapable, even to “an island.” So, then, what does this tell us about our surrounding context? And what significance does that context have for our identity and function?

Contextualization has been a pivotal issue facing God’s people ever since this human evolution. In Scripture, notably from the beginning of the OT, the people of God were exposed to a different context common to their surroundings, which was distinctly contrasting and in conflict with God’s context, God’s whole and holy-uncommon (wholly) 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 "Where is 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 as in effect about "Who and what is our 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—as illustrated by the current emphasis of online learning.

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, which involves but goes deeper than merely cultural diversity. 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 subtle 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 and working values.

This evolving narrative 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 in fact contextualizes humans, and often irresistibly so in key ways, is a specific culture of that surrounding context, which forms an infrastructure for everyday life. Therefore, this culture composes the determining primacy we need to know, and signifies the primary determinant we need to understand, in order to assess 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 (discussed in Chap 2)—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, real or virtual) 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, which then becomes its infrastructure.

At its earliest stages of development, culture emerges from the life and practice of those persons gathered together, thus culture is defined and determined by them either formally or informally. As that culture is established, its shape remains consistent or firm, with ongoing minor modifications. In the subsequent process of its life and practice, culture essentially takes on a functional “life” of its own to shape its participants with its infrastructure; that is to say, those persons become defined by their culture, and thus how they function is also determined by their culture. To be contrary is to go against the norms of culture, or, in other words, be counter-cultural, which for some groups is intentional whereby they evolve by adapting with their own culture in order to survive notably in counter-culturalism.

Moreover, 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 to form our theology and guide our practice, for example, in following Jesus and practicing church. 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—an infrastructure whose pervasive influence commonly eludes our consciousness.

Human Progress Evolving

The issue of human progress has not lacked controversy. What has been most contentious rightly questions, challenges and confronts what is considered *progress*. This needs to be a basic issue in the socioeconomic-political dimensions of our theology that directly involves the public way of life of any person and all peoples. To know our roots we have to understand how they evolved in the framework of human progress, whose subtle workings have altered the growth of human life with dubious branches.

The issue of human progress emerged in the beginning with human persons and evolved from their public engagement in the primordial garden. After the historic creation of the human person, what unravels in the primordial garden is history (Gen 3:1-10). Some consider this narrative as allegory rather than historical; yet, either account simply elucidates the reality that has entrenched human life at its core. This reality must be neither oversimplified nor minimized, in order to understand both how this reality evolved and how public theology needs to address it in the everyday way of life of all persons, peoples, tribes and nations.

First, what is this reality and how did it evolve from the beginning? In this discussion, you will be able to learn if you've oversimplified or minimized this reality in your way of life—learn, that is, if you suspend your biases and become vulnerable.

The initial persons stepped forward in the primordial garden according to the created way of life constituted in *wholeness*, which was demonstrated in how they each defined their person from inner out and functioned in relationship together on this primary basis (Gen 2:25). Along this definitive way created by God, they were then encouraged to make human progress by taking a byway. Encouragement to progress sounds good and can look good, but this so-called good is the subtle workings of the source of this encouragement. The source of this reality is usually oversimplified in Christian theology and often minimized in Christian practice. That's why the integrity of theology must ongoingly account consciously for the ongoing presence of Satan and his ongoing involvement in subtle counter-workings against God's wholeness. His subtlety emerges notably by cultivating human desires for progress with attractive byways that in reality fragment wholeness.

The existential reality of Satan's counter-measures revolves around the condition "to be apart" (Gen 2:17), which counters (1) how the whole person is defined from inner out and (2) how persons together are determined by the primacy of their integral qualitative-relational function. This person and their relationships together (both with God and with each other) start to evolve when Satan raises a seemingly innocent question: "Did God say to you...?" (Gen 3:1). What appears as an innocent request for information must always be understood in Satan's counter-relational workings. At the

most basic level of relationship, Satan addresses the communication taking place from God and seeks to confuse the relationship with God with alternate interpretations that misinform the recipient of the original message (3:4-5). Alternative interpretations of God's messages (communicated in relational language) should not be oversimplified, nor should resulting misinformation be minimized, because they both have relational consequences ("to be apart") in the quality of life together created by God. Satan's purpose, of course, always works to counter God by reducing the quality and fragmenting that wholeness—again, by the quantity of human progress available on the byways that embellish human identity and function.

After Satan's alternate interpretation of God's message, the human persons embraced that misinformation to pursue their human progress with the expectation that their identity and function would be enhanced—perhaps beyond what their persons ever dreamed. The human brain was also at work here and being rewired accordingly—for example, to recondition the perceptual lens and its priorities—to supplant the primacy of the whole person's heart in qualitative-relational function. What was happening in Eve's brain when she "saw that the tree was good for *progress* and that it was a delight to the eyes" (Gen 3:6)? And how did her thinking supersede her heart when "the tree was to be desired to make one wise"—all likewise affirmed by Adam? Moreover, what made them think that their identity and function would progress to the presumed level that "your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil," disinformation contrary to the relational communication of God's message in clear relational terms composed for their wholeness?

As these whole persons made the critical shift from person-consciousness to self-consciousness, their brains were certainly rewired to reduce their perceptual lens from the depths of inner out to the narrow limits and constraints of outer in: "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (3:7). Contrary to and in conflict with their whole persons without shame from inner out (Gen 2:25), the so-called progress they expected in reality reduced their identity and function to the fragmented human condition resulting from **sin as reductionism**.

Sin from the beginning must not be oversimplified or minimized merely to disobedience of God's message. When sin is limited as such, then the reality that has evolved from the beginning is not understood much less addressed. Without knowing the roots of sin, the subtle counter-workings of Satan are not adequately perceived by the lens used by our brains. That, of course, allows branches of reductionism to evolve and devolve in human life, which take root in our everyday identity and function to prevail (subtly or not) in our public way of life. Certainly then, the lack of knowing and understanding these roots and branches encompassing sin as reductionism makes us susceptible in our persons and relationships to inescapably reflect, unavoidably reinforce, and inevitably sustain the fragmentary human relational condition "to be apart from God's wholeness." In this pervading and prevailing process, our human condition

becomes reduced of its integral qualitative-relational function in wholeness created in the image and likeness of the Trinity.

From the beginning, God asks the human person “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9), in order for persons to face up to the evolution of their created identity and function in the sin of reductionism. We can either react to God and hide behind masks shielding the person from inner out (as demonstrated by the initial persons, 3:8-13); or we can remove our veils and respond to God to be both redeemed from reductionism and transformed to wholeness in God’s likeness (as in 2 Cor 3:16-18). Yet, to be vulnerable to account for how we have evolved (personally and collectively) requires the willingness to take responsibility for any and all evolved roots and branches that are contrary to and in conflict with our created roots and branches. To answer “Where are you?” therefore, will encompass much further understanding to know where we really are. And underlying all of this throughout our theology and practice is the view (basically strong or weak) of sin that we have, and thus use in our way of life. Nothing less and no substitutes for sin as reductionism emerged from the beginning. Nevertheless, anything less and any substitutes for this fundamental root have weakened this view of sin, and thus have rendered many branches with the contextualized appearance of “good and not evil” when in reality they are rooted in reductionism.

As the author of reductionism, Satan’s only purpose and goal is both to reduce the whole of God (Father, Son, Spirit in the primacy of whole relationship together)—for example, as the Son experienced progressively in Satan’s temptations (Lk 4:1-13)—and to fragment God’s created wholeness. Therefore, “Where are you?” exposes the root of the condition and gets to the heart of what’s evolved. When Christians lose awareness of the reductionism that surrounds us and operates in us, our consciousness readily falls into a fog, asleep to the counter-relational workings of Satan. This makes our human condition susceptible, for example, to the influences of culture, whereby, just like the early disciples, we engage in its comparative dynamics sustained by self-consciousness. This said, of course, how these narratives are composed is always based on the free will with which all humans were invested at creation. And God always wants to know “What are you doing here?”

Contextualization’s Infrastructure

Understanding the influence of what surrounds us is not optional for Christians, because such influence can be a shaping determinant for our everyday life—even for the church. We become contextualized by this influence; and most notably pervasive in this conscripting process is some cultural infrastructure.

Consider these narratives currently surrounding us. First, 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 with its ubiquitous infrastructure.

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 transforming modern societies, which has raised speculation about the sovereignty and autonomy of modern states.³ Globalization is having a pivotal impact both economically (positive and negative) and politically (responsive or reactionary); and its expanding efforts in general⁴ and for U.S. politico-economic policy more specifically⁵ 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 with an infrastructure apparently beyond the limited control of national and regional constituents.

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 (notably as Christians) not to live in reduced human identity and by reduced human

³ 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).

⁴ Vinoth Ramachandra engages this discussion in *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

⁵ 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).

function—so that whole ontology and function can emerge for humans to flourish, not progress.

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. 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),⁶ then of race, ethnicity, class, age, 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

Once again emphatically, 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 that basically defines the human person and relationships without wholeness, 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 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 ever since.

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 therefore what we live—which certainly has permeated how we learn what we learn and how we teach what we teach, thus how our education is what Christian education is. Indeed, the value infrastructure of 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 existentially in our basic ontology and function by our contexts' cultures.

⁶ 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>.

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.” Meanwhile 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*, Lk 2:47, cf. Mk 8:17-18) 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. Such results evolve from naïve acceptance or unexamined tolerance of the surrounding cultural context (as the church in Thyatira, Rev 2:18-20), which contextualizes Christians and their daily practice regardless of their theology.

In most Christian thinking (whatever the level), assimilation into the surrounding context is simply 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, as many Western Christians would claim. 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 be counter-cultural (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 everyday life and practice.

What then is the primary culture serving as the main determinant for your most visible identity in daily life that shapes how you practice what you practice?

The Critical Cultural Shift

Allowing culture to be the main determinant for Christians at whatever level contradicts what Paul made imperative 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, for Christians to allow 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 into these surrounding contexts, the first aspect of the prevailing (common’s) function that all his followers encounter 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 (cf. Jn 17:14-18). He thus 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?

Jesus Engaging Culture:⁷

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.

To say that Jesus looked at culture theologically must not be separated from the function of his identity. His whole identity always functioned whole in the primacy of God's culture as the only determinant. Accordingly, his function was also uncommon in the surrounding contexts, which signified the critical cultural shift from those cultures.

⁷ I extend the discussion previously made on *The Gospel of Transformation: Distinguishing the Discipleship and Ecclesiology Integral to Salvation* (Transformation Study: 2015). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

Foremost, then, his theological lens extended from his whole and uncommon perceptual-interpretive mindset formed by God's relational language and terms. Thus, theology for Jesus was not about doctrine, propositions of static truth, or systems of beliefs and values—just as the Word exposed in the church in Ephesus (Rev 2:2-4). Though his lens was certainly theologically orthodox (not in a gospel-speak, salvation-speak sense), it was always in conjoint function with orthopraxy—that is, his integrally whole and uncommon (whole-ly) life and practice—in the whole-ly God's relational context and process for relationship together. Jesus functionally engaged culture not only in orthodoxy but with orthopraxy, with the latter at times appearing to contradict the former, which was an ongoing source of controversy in many of his interactions—notably in a so-called orthodox religious context since his practice was often perceived as counter-cultural.

Yet, Jesus' theological engagement of culture was not for the end result of orthodoxy, or even orthopraxy, but only for the outcome of relationship together and being whole. Accordingly, his engagement was always the relational language expression of communicative action enacting God's thematic relational response to make whole the human condition (cf. Jn 12:46-47)—embodying the strategic trajectory of God's big picture. In other words, he saw culture through the uncommon contextual lens of God's perception and desires, and this primacy defined and determined his response. For Jesus, any other engagement with culture was secondary, which should neither define nor determine what is primary or its shaping primacy—as Jesus demonstrated at the wedding in Cana (Jn 2:1-11).

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. Thus, to truly know the embodied Word cannot be diminished or oversimplified to the Word's teaching or example (cf. Jn 14:9).

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.

Any reduction in life and practice of the whole person and those persons' relationships together needs to be made whole to fulfill who, what and how they are as God's creation. Hence, the reduction of what defines human persons (e.g. in a comparative process to stratify human worth or value) needs to be redefined for persons to be made whole. Likewise, the reduction of human relationships from qualitative function and significance (e.g. by diminishing intimate relational involvement or promoting barriers to relational belonging) needs to be transformed for the relationships together necessary to be whole. These reductions are the operating values directly composed by the surrounding culture, and its primacy certainly then requires the critical cultural shift enacted by Jesus.

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 and ontology 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.⁸ This includes variations or refinements of his typology.⁹ 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 in order 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 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.
3. *Incompatibility* "to be whole"—thus, there is conflict, not merely tension, with no room for flexibility in differences; the 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

⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* 50th-anniversary ed. (N.Y.: Harper San Francisco, 2001).

⁹ 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.

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 human condition. The so-called gospel proclaimed by many Christians falls into this baseless category of insignificance.

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 has not appeared because of the critical cultural shift essential to be relational in *how* Jesus was and continues to be with his whole-ly person.

We cannot be followers of Jesus without following his whole-ly person on the 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 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* his church family on his intrusive relational path. That is, this relational outcome will extend into a church that makes no assumptions about the culture of its surrounding context, and thus functions 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 church ontology and function, 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 (Jn 21:15-21).

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, therefore we are challenged not to be shaped by its misinformation and its biases.

Christian theology and practice have long been dominated by Western culture. 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 constituted by his terms in relational language.

At this time let’s limit our focus to the U.S. and consider the existing condition here of evangelicals. Evangelicalism is not a monolith around the world and certainly not in the U.S.¹⁰ In the U.S., however, evangelicals form a curious, unique, unpredictable (take your pick) diversity, which not surprisingly maintains incompatible divisions between them. Much to the chagrin of many evangelicals, the public perception of evangelicals lumps them together as one entity, if not always in theology certainly in practice. Yet, the incompatible divisions among evangelicals have less to do with their

¹⁰ See Brian C. Stiller, Todd M. Johnson, Karen Stiller and Mark Hutchinson, eds., for the current state of *Evangelicals Around the World: A Global Handbook for the 21st Century* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015).

theology and more to do with their practice, both of which are influenced and shaped by culture in the surrounding contexts. Whether it is social, political, economic, or a combination of factors underpinning a surrounding culture, that culture has become a main determinant forming the perceptual-interpretive mindset of evangelicals. And its cultural infrastructure supplies a subtle means to achieve this end.

For example, identity politics has been a key determinant for many evangelicals' identity and function, notably among high-visibility leaders. Moreover, the partisan political values of culture have been the key for the increased intensity among various evangelical groups to promote nationalism, no matter the repercussions for other persons, peoples, tribes and nations.¹¹ Recent surveys indicate that a majority of evangelicals want the U.S. declared as a Christian nation. I don't think the current "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) movement would have impetus, perhaps even survive, if evangelicals didn't support its nationalism at the forefront.¹² In the midst of this divisive condition, there are certainly evangelical counter-activists, whose source of identity and function is more ambiguous; though they may have the appearance of counter-cultural, their action is not clearly distinguished as emerging from the critical cultural shift embodied and enacted by Jesus, thus rendering them to reactions from all sides. Then there are the many evangelicals who are simply silent, who may identify their theology and practice as evangelical but whose identity and function just mirror the silent majority composing the U.S.

Whatever variation of evangelicals is highlighted, what is illuminated is the urgent need for all evangelicals to discover the perceptual-interpretive culture shaping their theology and practice, so that they can make the critical cultural shift to be true followers of the whole-ly Word, and not merely identified as 'people of the Book'. Of course, this is assuming that they would make the choice to follow the Word on his terms in relational language as their primary priority.

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 wider path than Jesus' narrow path 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 as well as extended in the academy. Moreover, most

¹¹ Further discussion on this key issue is found in Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, eds., *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008).

¹² In an OP-ED, Randall Balmer recently pointed to an underlying bias of racism in white evangelicals' political agenda, "Evangelicals show their true colors," *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 2017. See also his book *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).

consequential to understand is how this wider path effectively reflects, reinforces and sustains the human condition, which is replicated in our condition.

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,¹³ 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 based on the misinformation 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?

To counter the reductionism composing culture in the human context from the beginning, and to neutralize and transform culture’s determinant influence, the incarnated 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 the depth of his vulnerable presence and intimate relational involvement distinguished in the who, what and how of his righteous embodiment. 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).

Perhaps the Word’s relational language is a foreign language to many Christians, thereby requiring subtitles to understand his language. Pay attention to the “subtitles” in what follows. 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). Then his perceptual-interpretive mindset was clarified: “All the

¹³ 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>.

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).

Is the path we are on to follow Jesus narrowed down with the Word or has it widened with the perceptual-interpretive mindset of the surrounding culture?

Accountable for Our Will

All Christians have volitional freedom, regardless of the limits and constraints of our contexts. Since we cannot expect others to make our decisions, we need to take full responsibility for how we exercise that freedom. Even not to choose is to make a choice, so it is always consequential (cf. Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 2:16)—consequences which should never be underestimated.

At the beginning of creation, the human person was invested with the free will to “*rightfully rule over the life* on the earth” (Gen 1:26). Those persons initially chose to follow this relationally ordained rule but soon made a subtle contrary choice in for their so-called progress. The consequences have evolved ever since—notably in God’s people and in the church, whose history we must learn from or be susceptible to repeat it. If millennials and Gen Zers, for example, are truly looking for a more substantive Christian faith, their faith equation must also factor in the following: They will have to account for their volitional freedom—including all the choices they make on social media—and take responsibility for the consequences of their choices. No Christian is exempt from accountability, no matter how substantive or diluted their faith. “Who or what is our God?” is an open question needing an ongoing answer from all of us.

Hence, with our volitional freedom amplified by the Word, if we don’t ongoingly make the conscious choice to be vulnerable in whatever life issues we address, we will never get to the heart of the human condition that prevails both surrounding us and within us. Our agency (individually and collectively) is always accountable in our daily life because God holds us accountable for our will. Until Christians exercise their will and apply their agency on the basis of the relational terms of the Word, the only basis for any hope and expectations is consequential. That is, the consequences will continue to impact all Christians at the heart of *who* we are and *whose* we are; and that always becomes defining for the *who* and *what* of our person and determining of the *how* our person functions in what surround us.

Therefore, all Christians are confronted with the inescapable challenge to join together in a strategic intrusion into the human condition—unavoidably both surrounding us and within us. These are vulnerable actions integrated with the strategic trajectory of God’s big picture that penetrates to the heart of reductionism inherent in the human

condition. Thus, the irreducible and nonnegotiable purpose embodied in our persons (only from inner out) actively fights against any and all sin of reductionism in order to redeem, reconcile and transform all of life, starting with our own.

Certainly and unequivocally, our challenge comes with the ubiquitous competing counter-workings of reductionism's author—working subtly even in the church (2 Cor 11:14-15)—which will diminish, compromise or negate any intrusive action on the human condition. Accordingly, as our challenge widens, the path ahead by necessity narrows so that we follow Jesus and “be where I am” (Jn 12:26). What unfolds or evolves will be the witness that all Christians make evident in and to the world.

“Did the Word say that?”

Chapter 2 Issue 2: Examining Our Identity Formation and Its Roots

“Who told you that you were naked?”

Genesis 3:11

“You thought that I was one just like yourself.”

Psalm 50:21

As the world today changes, what immediately surrounds us is always having to adapt to this ongoing flux. Except for a context of deniers, humans are undeniably the most impacted by such changes. This impact is evident the strongest likely among those in human migration today. Yet, human migration (voluntary or involuntary) has occurred since the beginning, and these roots are vital to understand in the identity formation of all humans. So, this prompts the question, even for all Christians: Who is not a migrant?¹

If migrant is the default status for humanity, how this affects the identity formation of any and all humans is critical to factor into our own identity equation. Why? I suggest that migrants have the most problems with their identity, because what forms that identity is subjected to the pressing changes surrounding them. If we all have migrant roots, we have to examine how this has affected our current identity formation. And we have to understand how that history has shaped our adaptations to the changes surrounding us, whereby our current identity is defined and our daily function is determined. These are narratives that need to be highlighted, because they underlie *who* we are as well as *who* or *what* our God is.

Perhaps you give little thought to your identity and rarely consider how it is formed. Take heed: The issue of identity formation is inescapable for us not merely to understand but also to exercise our agency in its process, determination and outcome. In the midst of changes surrounding us, it is crucial for Christians to know the impact changes have on us.² For example, has there been any identity theft affecting Christians, even beyond their awareness? Consider also: How skinny is your present identity, and how able do you think your identity is?

¹ For the migratory roots of Christianity, see Jehu J. Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2021).

² In his argument, Carl R. Trueman examines such changes in a limited scope to illuminate what Christians face in *Strategic New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

What follows should clarify the answers for us, whereby we could be corrected for necessary further changes to make as Christians. Our journey will illuminate all this for us as we begin from our human roots, which then will help us understand what converges today and thereby be able to anticipate the path ahead.

Human Identity Formation Footprint

The metric used to form human identity has always become defining for the human being that emerged, which has also become determining for how that person(s) functioned—just as the Word predicted in his axiom (Mt 4:24). Given this, it is essential to understand the human identity equation and how its roots were established and have sprouted today to still cultivate who we are and how we live.

Identity formation is not a simple process. No single identity forms the whole of a person's identity, which can include physical, family, social, cultural, ethnic, racial, class, age and gender identities. Yet, there are primary and secondary identities that go into defining who and what persons are. The key determining process for our identities involves the extent and depth of our relationships. It is not only critical for any anthropology to understand this but vital notably in theological anthropology for who emerges and what develops and survives.

There is no significance to deliberations of human being in isolation, as if human life can be observed in a vacuum. The person as a *subject* (not a mere object) is complex because of qualitative involvement in relationships within the surrounding social context; and the subject's qualitative-relational involvement is critical to understand for who and what define the person emerging. In the past with his natural philosophy, Aristotle considered relations only in quantitative terms that, unlike substances (properties things have), cannot exist independently. This led to a hard distinction between substances and relations, in which relations are not essential, for example, to what a human being is. This, as F. LeRon Shults notes in his discussion on theological anthropology, “came to be orthodoxy in Western philosophy that the relations of a thing to other things are not essential to defining or knowing what that thing is.”³ Aristotle's model may be used as a Procrustean bed to shape a simple object but it cannot contain the complex subject-person, whose ontological identity is also composed in relationships with others. The qualitative and the relational converge dynamically and irreducibly in the integral process of identity formation for the complex subject-person.

³ F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 15.

Relationality (notably social relatedness and community) has received increasing attention in theological anthropology, and rightly so; Aristotle's influence has been too far-reaching and longstanding. A distinction needs to be made about relationality, however, between simple association and complex relationship. Simple objects have simple associations but cannot have complex relationship since the latter requires the vulnerable involvement of a *subject* for reciprocal relationship together. Complex subjects can have complex relationships but also simple associations, depending on the level of their involvement—with vulnerability the determining factor, an issue noticeably absent in theological anthropology. The extent and depth of involvement determines having either complex relationship or simple association; and it is on this basis that identities are formed and their significance is determined.

Relationships are the key to human identity. The identity of who and what emerge, develop and thereby survive is keyed to the quantitative (simple association) or qualitative (complex relationship) significance of their relationships. Accordingly, the identity of the person emerging, developing and surviving is contingent on the extent and depth of distinctly vulnerable relationships. Yet, being vulnerable is rarely addressed, if discussed at all, in theological anthropology's focus on relationality. The dynamic tension between "they were naked, that is, whole-ly embodied before each other from inner out, and were not confused or ashamed" and "they were embodied before each other from outer in, and in their discomfort they put on masks" discloses the extent of the relationships of the persons in the primordial garden (Gen 2:25; 3:7), and reveals the depth of their involvement; and on this basis, it determined who and what emerged, developed and survived. Theological anthropology needs to account for these relationships. Here again, it is critical for all persons to understand (1) on what basis we are naked and (2) what needs to be addressed in our relationships in order for human identity to be complete.

Furthermore, integral to this relational process is the primary ontological identity that constitutes human identity. The Creator's question "Where are you?" is not a referential question seeking information about the location of the person. This is a critical question in relational language, which composes the primary relational context and process, seeking to establish the whole of who and what human identity is. Relationships, therefore, become the hermeneutical, epistemological and ontological keys to knowing and understanding the human person, unlocking the doors to both defining the who of human being and determining the what of being human. Any misinformation about this, however, reduces the who and fragments the what.

Reciprocal relationships with others, foremost with the whole of God, feed back the epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction necessary for whole knowledge and understanding of the person and persons together in relationships. And

Christians and their working theological anthropology continue to need this epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction for their ontology and function to be whole. This relational context and process is indispensable for knowing and understanding the human person, and irreplaceable for deeply knowing and understanding other persons (including God, cf. Jer 9:24), and, likely most important, fully knowing and understanding even our own person. Without this vulnerable level of relational involvement, the identity of the person whom we think we know and understand is a mere assumption having little if any basis in reality. Such an assumption becomes the basis for ontological simulations and functional illusions of human identity.

There are no shortcuts to the development of the person constituted in whole ontology and function. The human context surrounding us presents ongoing challenges to the person with alternatives of anything less and any substitute of the whole, which fragment the person in functional illusion and ontological simulation that can only signify reduced ontology and function. Essential to identity formation, then, the whole person does not emerge until the human context sufficiently includes the primary context needed to compose the human narrative in complete context. Moreover, of immeasurable importance, while the whole person does not emerge apart from complete context, the person does not develop and survive unless this person in the surrounding context can adequately address the human condition.

It is critically within and inescapably from the human condition that theological anthropology must account for the integrated development of the complex subject and complex relationships in order for the whole person clearly to be distinguished in its discourse and, indeed, to be significant in the lives of its proponents. The person who is presented and lived can be nothing less and no substitute.

Therefore, the question once again emerges to pursue our person, which all Christians in their explicit or implicit theological anthropology cannot avoid: “Where are you?” Of equal importance is the uncovering question, which is key to the identity formation equation: “Who told you that you were naked?” (Gen 3:11).

Identity Formation Equation

The roots of identity formation compose a compelling narrative that formulates the metric for identity, both for humans as well as for God. As will become evident, how we define ourselves biases how we see our God. But God directly clarifies and corrects this bias: “You thought that I was one just like yourself” (Ps 50:21).

When God was grieved by how persons functioned in the human context, Noah was the exception whom God identified as a righteous and blameless person who walked with God (Gen 6:5-9). In God's relational response of grace to the human condition, God constituted a relational covenant with Abraham, whose reciprocal relational response gave account of Abraham's involvement as righteousness (Gen 12:1-4; 15:4-6, cf. Rom 4:3,11; Gal 3:6). God also made definitive the terms for relationship together: Abraham's ongoing reciprocal relational response in righteousness was, irreducibly and nonnegotiable, "walk before me and be blameless" (Gen 17:1). What distinguished Abraham's and Noah's identity with the equation using the metric of righteousness and blameless?

There is an integral identity emerging from the beginning that signifies the ontology and function of whole persons who are distinguished in the human context—which our theological anthropology must compose with nothing less and no substitutes. As the first metric, righteousness (*ṣēdāqâh*) needs to be understood as a relational term in relational language (notably in a juridical process about a covenant), which involves the relational dynamic of the whole of who, what and how a person is that others can count on to be this whole person in relationship together—a trust essential to significant relationships, without which render relationships tentative, shallow or broken. Righteousness in referential terms becomes an attribute merely describing information about someone, which is insufficient to account for the dynamic function of the whole person's relational involvement. For God, the ancient poet declares, righteousness is the ongoing determinant that establishes God's relational path—the whole of who, what and how God is that can be counted on in relationship (Ps 85:13). In relational terms, righteousness confirms that the person presented to others in relationship is truly the person one says one is.

In other words, righteousness is critical for the identity of persons (including God) to be distinguished from prevailing identities in the human context that do not identify the whole person; righteousness composes a true identity of the person. Given this, the next metric integral to this identity distinguishing persons in righteousness is the further relational dynamic to be *tamiym* (blameless), which also must be understood as a relational term in relational language. What is the relational function of *tamiym*?

Regarding what's expected of the person God created and living as that person in the human context, we know the following: the qualitative innermost that constitutes the whole person from inner out is the function of the heart, which is the unmistakable function that God expects and seeks (cf. Jn 4:23-24). The heart's qualitative function is embodied in relational terms by righteousness to involve the true identity of the person from inner out, and not an identity of something less or some substitute from outer in (as shaped in human history from the beginning, cf. Isa 29:13). This integral relational function must by its nature be further embodied by *tamiym*.

The heart signifies the unmistakable function of what God seeks: the whole person, nothing less and no substitutes. When God made conclusive to Abraham the terms for covenant relationship together, the LORD appeared to him directly and said clearly in order to constitute Abraham's relational response: "Walk before me, and be blameless" (Gen 17:1). That is, "be involved with me in relationship together by being blameless (*tamiym*)."

The tendency is to render "blameless" as moral purity and/or ethical perfection (cf. Gen 6:9), notably in Judaism by observance of the law (cf. 2 Sam 22:23-24). With this lens, even Paul perceived his righteousness as "blameless" (Phil 3:6). Yet *tamiym* denotes to be complete, whole, and is not about mere moral and ethical purity. Beyond this limited perception, *tamiym* involves the ontology of being whole, namely the whole person from inner out involved in the primacy of relationship together. In this identity equation integrated with righteousness, *tamiym* completes the relational function to involve jointly the true and whole identity formation of the person—the integral identity embodied by Noah and Abraham that God expects of persons in reciprocal relationship together.

In God's relational nature, the only way God engages in covenant relationship is by reciprocal relationship and never by unilateral relationship. The relational terms of reciprocal relationship together require the whole person's involvement, which then requires the human agency of a person's will to fulfill the terms for reciprocal relationship with righteousness and being whole. God holds human persons responsible for their human agency created for reciprocal relationship and holds accountable their choices of will in relationship together both in God's context and the human context—"Where are you?" and "what are you doing here?"

From the beginning, however, this integral identity has been diminished or minimalized under various assumptions (most notably "You will not be reduced"), even with functional illusion (e.g. "your eyes will be opened") and ontological simulation (ultimately, "you will be like God"), which makes critical knowing the source of such information (Gen 3:4-5). The focus on purity, for example, was problematic, and still is today in Christian ethics in terms of ethical perfection. In Israel's history purity often was measured functionally by a code shaped by human contextualization, and thus focused more on what persons were responsible to do (fragmentary quantitative behavior) rather than on the primary function of being involved in relationship together (integral qualitative behavior, cf. 1 Sam 15:22; Jer 7:22-23; Hos 6:6; Mic 6:6-8; Mt 5:21-48). When such practice was operating, this demonstrated a pivotal redefinition of human ontology from inner out to outer in, thereby reducing persons to the measured indicators of what they did and had—and measured in a comparative process of self-consciousness to quantify a basis for human boasting (cf. Jer 9:23; Mk 7:5,14-19; Acts 10:13-14).

Moreover, in this reductionist process the metric for Israel's identity became more about land and nation-state rather than about a people and covenant relationship together, more about religious culture (e.g. ethnocentrism with quantitative identity markers) and politics (e.g. nationalism), rather than about the primacy of relationship together (both collective and personal) in the image and likeness of God and having theological significance as God's relational whole on God's relational terms. In other words, Israel's history became the frequent narrative of God's people diminishing the covenant relationship and their identity by getting defined, determined, embedded, even enslaved, in the surrounding human context (cf. 1 Sam 8:19-20; Jer 3:10; 12:2; Eze 33:31). This identity equation also applied to the tradition of certain Pharisees during Paul's time (see Jesus' penetrating analysis, Mt 15:1-20, cf. the Qumran Essenes' critique⁴). More importantly, this reductionism pointed to the integral basis for Jesus' nonnegotiable terms for relationship together: that our righteousness be distinguished beyond these particular Pharisees (Mt 5:20).

These reductions all fragmented the integrated functional and relational significance of *tamiym* that God made conclusive to constitute Abraham in covenant relationship together. To be "blameless" by its nature must be fully integrated with *what* and *who* God seeks to be involved with, which cannot be measured by mere quantitative and referential terms. Therefore, "blameless" is both inseparable from the qualitative function of the heart and irreducible of the ontology of the whole person from inner out, whose true identity can only be embodied by the relational function of righteousness. As a Pharisee who rigorously observed the law, Paul had considered his righteousness to be "blameless" (Phil 3:6). Yet Jesus previously had exposed the reductionist practices of certain Pharisees in Paul's day and their underlying ontology of the person from outer in without the significance of the heart (as noted above). The critical assessment of one's faith must account for the ontology of the whole person. That is to say, to be blameless is nothing less and no substitutes for being whole as created in the image and likeness of the whole of God. For Abraham, this was the integrated functional and relational significance of his involvement with God signifying his faith, and therefore constituting the necessary relationship together of the covenant on God's relational terms from inner out, which is embodied just by righteousness.

This integral relational function of righteousness and *tamiym* is beautifully embodied by the wisdom of the ancient poet when he uses *shalom* to express the wholeness of *tamiym*: "righteousness and wholeness will kiss each other" (Ps 85:10)—indeed, since they are functionally inseparable in the bond of the primacy of relationship. It is on the basis of this integrated functional and relational significance that those whose life and practice are *tamiym* in the primacy of their relational work are blessed along with

⁴ See 4QNah 1:2,7; 2:2-3; 3:3,8.

Abraham (cf. Ps 119:1). Paul did not receive this blessing on the Damascus road for his rigorous faith as a Pharisee and intense service to God (albeit persecuting the church). On the contrary, *tamiym* signifies the *epistemological clarification* and *hermeneutical correction* he experienced instead. It is this definitive whole that redefined Paul's person from inner out and newly determined his life, practice, thought and theology with his new identity. What further defines this whole that God expects persons to be in relationship together?

First, we cannot think or describe in quantitative static terms that which is qualitatively dynamic, though not the same as being 'in process'. In the whole's functional significance, being whole or wholeness is understood as involving necessarily the following:

Being whole, wholeness, constitutes the ongoing life and function of the whole of God (the Trinity), who created human life and function with the ontology of the person in the qualitative image of God, and thus the person was created whole signified by the qualitative function of the heart; this function of the person is integrated inseparably to the created design and purpose for relationships and the relational involvement necessary together to be whole in likeness of the relational ontology of the Trinity—nothing less and no substitutes (cf. Gen 1:27; 2:18; Col 3:10-11). Therefore, the individual person alone is never sufficient to complete being whole, no matter what substance is attributed to the individual; to be whole by its created nature in the image and likeness of the whole of God involves also the relationships together necessary to be whole, God's relational whole. This also is signified by how each person in the Trinity is understood. No trinitarian person alone is the whole of God. That is, each trinitarian person is whole-ly God but is not complete in being the whole of God apart from the other trinitarian persons; necessarily by its nature only the three trinitarian persons together constitute the relational ontology of the Trinity—in whose likeness human persons in relationship together have been created and thus must function together by its nature to be whole, God's relational whole.

Anything less and any substitutes are reductions of the whole—that is, in essence “to be apart” in ontology and function—thus can never reflect, experience or represent wholeness; at best they are only the ontological simulations and functional illusions from reductionism and its counter-relational workings. These are critical ongoing issues that Christians in their theological anthropology need to better understand to distinguish the person God created and expects to live while in the human context—forming our identity irreducibly and nonnegotiablely.

Revising the Identity Equation

Unfolding in tense juxtaposition with the integral identity emerging from the beginning is a diminished or minimalized identity equation for persons. To be whole in ontology and function is to live distinguished (*pala*) beyond the comparative process of human distinctions that define and determine persons in reduced ontology and function—as in human context’s prevailing models (e.g. determining Israel, 1 Sam 8:5,18-20), promoted ideals (e.g. defining the early disciples, Lk 9:46; 22:24), and pervading templates (e.g. the influence of social media today). Living according to the comparative process of human distinctions requires a perceptual-interpretive framework and lens that makes an underlying assumption of defining persons by what they do and have from outer in. This self-definition becomes primary also for how others are defined, and, on this basis, how relationships are engaged, which then determines how relationships together (e.g. as church) are practiced—the three inescapable issues for our ontology and function.

What equation and metric we pay attention to or ignore in the created narrative due to our interpretive lens is critical to whether the whole identity of the person emerges or a diminished, minimalized identity unfolds. The qualitative innermost of the image of God in God’s relational likeness defines the whole ontology and function of human persons (Gen 1:26-27). In the first creation narrative immediately after this definition in the image and likeness of God, then the work of human persons is described (1:26b) and the purpose human persons are to fulfill (1:28). Our perception of the person and person-consciousness become problematic if the above order is inverted (if only by emphasis) and the primary source of defining the human person becomes “the work”—that is, basing the person on what we do, no matter how God-related or directed. Such a focus is consequential for the whole person and the whole of God.

The human persons’ choice to move away from the relational terms of God precipitated conditions outside the primordial garden that would make work difficult (Gen 3:17-19) and human purpose a struggle (3:15-16). Life as God created is not being redefined here; God’s created design and purpose remain unaltered. Yet, what is subject to redefinition is the human person’s self-perception—influenced by the workings of “Who told you that you were naked”—making it now problematic how the person functions; work, for example, was never to be done in any manner. Nowhere is the susceptibility to redefining the person and person-consciousness greater than in relation to work (or what we do) outside the primordial garden. It is vital to reexamine this influence on our practice after this pivotal shift in the primordial garden and how it affects our perceptual-interpretive lens determining what we pay attention to or ignore, thus predisposing us even to inadvertent or unintentional practices. This framework also

is critical importance for how we see the person today and what human activity determines person-consciousness distinguished from self-consciousness—the function of theological anthropology.

The significance of “work made difficult” is not about how hard it can be but about its controlling influence on the person such that work becomes what defines that person from outer in. This influence tends to be enslaving, if not in quantitative ways (for example, time and energy), certainly on more qualitative matters (like self-worth). “*Who you are*” becomes about “what you do.” And “*what you are*” becomes determined by how much you accomplish in “what you do”—notably measured in a comparative process with others. In this process a great deal is at stake here, and the drive for a payoff can be consuming. Consequently, the primary investments made in this lifestyle are bonded to work-related activity (vocational and avocational). Invariably, then, this process of defining ourselves by what we do or have becomes an unavoidable comparative process in relation to other persons, thus creating quantitative distinctions between persons, with relational consequences—notably stratified relationships, which, when formalized, become systems of inequality (the basis for Paul’s concern, Gal 3:26-28; 5:6; 6:15).

At the very least, defining the person by what one does conflicts with how God created us and thus defines us; and it inverts the created order by designating (even inadvertently) secondary matter (like work to be done, even if assigned by God) to the primary position, thus reducing (even unintentionally) the primary matter of God’s qualitative relational design and purpose for the person and relationships to a lower priority in actual practice. This consequence can happen despite having a theology in place affirming the primacy of God’s design and purpose—a consequence often seen among Christian workers while doing Christian service. This not only reduces the whole of God’s qualitative innermost transplanted into us but also conflicts with it, and thus counters God’s expectations of the person as one lives in the human context—no matter how sacrificial and dedicated to God.

The often subtle shift in the identity equation to redefining the person away from the qualitative significance of the heart (1) increasingly becomes quantitative (things measured in quantified terms for more certainty, or identified primarily by rationality for more control), (2) increasingly transposes the secondary over the primary, and (3) shapes substitutes for the qualitative significance of persons distinguished in the image and likeness of God. This three-fold shift amplifies human consciousness of the parts that compose human distinctions—that is, heightens self-consciousness of what we do and have in order to define (or measure up) ourselves in a comparative process. As this self-consciousness increases, there is a correlated decrease in person-consciousness. Accordingly, as person-consciousness fades, there is a proportional decrease in a person’s *qualitative sensitivity* and *relational awareness*. The lack of qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness is a critical condition for the person in the human context, resulting in a self increasingly distant from the heart and in relationships, that is, increasingly “to

be apart from God's whole" and unable to live in ontology and function by the qualitative image and relational likeness of God.

Critically, this pivotal shift has immediate, though often not apparent, relational consequences: This reductionism not only conflicts with how God created us and thereby defines us, it conflicts with how God vulnerably is involved with us, therefore confounding relationship with God. Theological anthropology needs to understand this relationship in its reciprocal nature and the whole person in compatible relational terms in order to whole-ly distinguish God's design, purpose and desires that are indeed distinguished from "to be apart". If our theology is not whole, we cannot expect our practice to be whole, thus be integral together for the viable faith needed in today's world.

From the beginning Adam was not created for what he could do and the activity simply of *doing something*, whether work related or not, though a part of his function was to work. We can essentially define this aspect of work as what we connote by the function of making a living. In creation, however, work was not designed for this end in itself; accordingly, work could not be done in any manner but was engaged on two distinct terms. When God "put the man in the primordial garden to work" (Gen 2:8,15), it was clear the Creator established ("put" *siym*, establish, appoint) this creature in the work. Thus, the first term for work was that it was to be undertaken within the functional context as creature in relationship to Creator—that is, *the relational context*. Secondly, God was clear about the terms (command, desires, 2:16) for engaging work in this context and that involvement in this necessary relational context was only on God's terms—thus, *the relational process* defined by God, the whole and uncommon God beyond the universe. These two distinct terms for work are significant only as relational terms; referential terms may reference the information of these terms but they do not compose their qualitative function in the primacy of relationship.

This relational context and process of creation are fundamental for a valid function of work and most importantly are intrinsic to the primary function of the whole person as created in the likeness of the triune God. This integral dynamic constitutes the basis that distinguishes persons and relationships. How a person functions is determined by how the person is defined and perceived in this relational context and process. This definition of the person determines not only how we do work but even more significant to God also determines how we do relationships together. How we do relationship with God is determined by our relational involvement and reciprocal response as whole persons to the whole being of God, yet not by our referential terms but only on God's relational terms. The relational context and process of how we engage in relationship with God is signified by the reciprocal relational involvement of worship and not defined by how we do work for God, even though serving is part of our response of worship—part of a complete relational response.

It is not a coincidence that the term for “work” (*abad*, 2:15) is the same term used for worship in the OT denoting service. The authentic worship of God must also involve the relational response of *service* distinctly based on relational *submission*, *adoration* and *praise*, always defined in relational terms to distinguish the primacy of relationship together. These four responses together (forming the acronym PASS) constitute worship and signify how to engage in relationship with God; worship is the functional *pass* to the intimate presence of God. Therefore, *how* work (or service) is to be done must function by engaging in this primary relational purpose as designed by the Creator in relationship with the created person. Without involvement in this relational context and process, work (or service) has no relational significance to God and thus has either little meaning or no qualitative fulfillment for the person created in God’s image. For example, lack of fulfillment is certainly an occupational hazard experienced by many in their vocations. Reductionism of any dimension of creation has far-reaching repercussions on our person today, on our relationships and consequently on how relationships together as church is practiced, which should alert us to what we need to take heed now.

We need to more deeply understand in function that the person was created with a qualitative function intrinsic to God, the quality of which work (or doing something, even service) by itself did not have (a condition God defined as “not good,” Gen 2:18); and, therefore, the function of work (or what we do, even for God) could not fulfill this qualitative function—no matter the nature of the work nor the extent of experience from it. This qualitative function for the human person that God implanted in creation was whole-ly relational. God “breathed” (cf. Gen 2:7) in us the primacy of relationship in likeness to the whole of the triune God, by which the Trinity is intimately involved with each other and now intimately involved with us.

In the creation narrative (Gen 2:18) God may appear focused on the work as the purpose for which Eve was created. That emphasis would be inconsistent with how God defines the person and, once again, would invert the primary priority of God’s created design and purpose. Further, this emphasis on what we do becomes problematic because it predisposes us in a reductionist identity equation and metric affecting not only how we define ourselves but also how we do relationships and thus how we practice church. This includes how spiritual gifts are perceived and the emphasis on giftedness to define the person and to appoint church leadership. We need to return to God’s created order so that we can more deeply understand both our person and also understand God, including the nature of both as well as our relationship together.

“To be alone” (*bad*) is necessarily rendered “to be apart” in God’s created order, because it illuminates the wholeness in creation from which “is not good to be apart.” The difference between “to be alone” and “to be apart” is immeasurable since for Adam it was not just the secondary matter of having no one to share space with, no one to keep him company or to do things with (particularly the work). “To be apart” is not just a

situational condition but most importantly a relational condition. A person can be alone in a situation but also feel lonely in the company of others, at church, even in a family or marriage because of relational distance—“to be apart.” This rendering is more reflective of the dynamic process of relationship in God’s created design and purpose—and needs to replace the conventional “to be alone” not only in our reading but in our theology and practice. Christians need to connect this to the growing relational condition of students today feeling lonely.

What the person Adam (thus all persons) needed in the above context had little to do with help for work but everything concerned with his primary function, the quality of which work cannot provide or fulfill—as many ever since make evident and can bear witness to. This concern was God’s focus and provision for the first human person. God’s equation constituting human identity only involves relationship fundamental to human make-up constituted in the image and relational likeness of the triune God, involving reciprocal relationship basic to the function of the whole person (from inner out), involving intimate reciprocal relationship primary (above all else) to the created order of life. This is the primacy of the created context and process of inter-person relationships: the relational context and process of the whole of God.

God created Adam initially without this human relational context, though the relational context and process existed between him and God. Yet, created life in the human context could not remain solitary because of the image and likeness of this relational triune God. The human person was never meant “to be apart.” Eve completed the inter-person relational nature of human life, which was predicated on the intimate relational nature of the triune God, constituted first in the intimate relational communion between the persons of the Trinity and then by that same communion between God and human persons. Into this deeper qualitative context of inter-person relationships we all were created and for this distinguished relational purpose our lives are designed. It is from this trinitarian relational context and by this trinitarian relational process that God is glorified in the reciprocal relational response of worship—not by the focus of what we do, even in worship, which renders us to self-consciousness increasingly distant from our hearts and in relationships (as in Isa 29:13; Mk 7:6-8).

Therefore, the primary work God created us for and expects from us is whole-ly **relational work**. All other work is not only secondary and subordinate to relational work but also to be undertaken and engaged according to this primary work of relationship. And relational work in our reciprocal involvement with God is the foremost priority, which by God’s relational nature also includes relational involvement with others that no other work has priority or more importance over—the relational significance of God’s two summary terms for relationship together in the relational involvement of love (Mt 22:37-40). This relational work is what God expects from the whole person, and what constitutes the person to live whole in the human context.

Accordingly, this relational work is contingent on the essential outworking in three inescapable issues for our ontology and function: (1) defining our person from the inner out, and (2) on this qualitative basis, relational work emerges from compatible involvement in our relationships, which then (3) needs to determine whole relationships together, not fragmentary, distant or secondary relations. This integral identity is both true and whole because it is constituted by the conjoint relational function of righteousness and the whole of *tamiym*. It is critical for all Christians in their theological anthropology to understand and thus vital to make definitive: How God defines the whole person is how God expects persons to be and thereby to live whole in the human context with God and with others, which clarifies and corrects any revisions of the identity formation equation.

The integral identity of these persons further involves addressing the ongoing interdependence between the above three inescapable issues for ontology and function, and these three unavoidable issues for all practice: (1) the integrity of the whole person presented to others, which by the nature of this person's created image and likeness must be presented in relational terms, not presented in referential terms; then on this basis (2) the qualitative significance of communication in relational language that 'the whole person presented to others' expresses to these others; so that (3) the deep level of relational involvement this whole person engages with those others unfolds for relationship together to be whole—all of which are constituted by the inseparably integral relational function of righteousness and being whole. As these three inescapable issues and three unavoidable issues converge in ongoing interaction, what emerges to distinguish persons is this integral identity of persons true and whole from inner out; and what continues to unfold is for these persons to be distinguished (*pala*) in the human context and not "to be apart".

The Word's Identity Call

As the Word becomes more vocal, whether it resonates with Christians or not, the identity challenge widens and its path narrows for all Christians. Take heed, the Word is neither ambiguous nor negotiable; and any misinformation about the Word will be clarified and corrected by the Word's communication in relational language, because the Word is always involved for relationships together to be whole.

As Jesus started proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God had come (Mk 1:14-15), he extended his call to follow him: "Come" (*deute*, 1:17, cf. Jn 1:39). His exclamation to come "follow after" (*opiso*) him was the opposite of what he told Satan earlier: "Away with you" (Mt 4:10, *opiso*, get behind). Later, Peter also received this

contrary message from Jesus to “get behind me” (*opiso*, Mt 16:23). Yet, before that Peter clearly received Jesus’ call to follow after him (*opiso* in positive response). The opposing messages Peter received help distinguish the nature of Jesus’ call.

When Jesus called “Come,” he initiated a relational dynamic that composed his calling in three interrelated processes:

1. The process of redemptive change—the innermost change (*metamorphoō*, not the outer change of *metaschematizō*, cf. Rom 12:1-2) of being redeemed from reductionism in which the old dies so that the new can rise (Jn 8:31-32; Eph 4:21-24, cf. Rom 8:5-6).
2. The process of transformation—the relational outcome of redemptive change from reduced ontology and function to whole ontology and function (Jn 1:12-13; 3:3; 2 Cor 3:18; 5:17).
3. The reciprocal process of living and making whole—the ongoing vulnerable involvement, first, in reciprocal relationship together both with God and God’s family, and, second, in reciprocating contextualization with the world both to be distinguished from human contextualization and to make whole the human context; the process composed by whole relational terms in Jesus’ formative family prayer for his followers (Jn 17:13-26).

Peter indeed received Jesus’ call but had difficulty responding to Jesus in these three interrelated processes—with the first process certainly the main impasse for him. Jesus exposed that impasse for Peter with the contrary message to “get behind me.” But, unlike with Satan, Jesus used this pivotal interaction to give the clarification and correction Peter needed for the nature of his call. In only this relational dynamic initiated by Jesus, Peter’s (and any of our) identity formation unfolds in Jesus’ calling.

Jesus always contended with reduced ontology and function because he called his followers to be whole, first and foremost—just as Abraham was called for covenant relationship. His call to his followers necessitates conjointly being redeemed from reductionism and transformed to wholeness. We can’t be saved *to* wholeness without being saved *from* reductionism, which is our default condition and mode as long as we live in reduced ontology and function. We can’t be forgiven for our sin in order to be redeemed without being forgiven also for our sin of reductionism. A truncated soteriology and an incomplete process of change create unresolvable identity problems for those related to God. That is what we witness in God’s people from the OT, in would-be disciples, and in even his closest followers, including in the early church. This should not be surprising or unexpected as long as reductionism in human contextualization is not dealt with.

The surrounding human context (namely culture) commonly establishes the priorities of importance for life and practice, hereby making relative what those primary priorities will be from culture to culture, subculture to subculture, community to community, even family to family. Reflecting again on our contemporary expanding surroundings, the global context is having a profound effect in reducing the priorities of local contexts by increasingly shifting, embedding and enslaving persons in secondary priorities and away from the primacy of qualitative and relational priorities. This is becoming, if it has not already become, another fact that misrepresents reality that composes the quality of life. And this so-called progress is taking its toll on the minds and bodies of those affected—which has been confirmed by nongovernmental organizations and human rights groups, and that neuroscience would also confirm. Being occupied, even preoccupied, with secondary matter is a pervasive condition also found in theological education—notably preoccupied with referential information—which shapes the academy by the prevailing influence from its surrounding context, currently with digital learning.

The shift to the primacy of the secondary must further be understood in the underlying quest for certainty and/or the search for identity. This process engages a narrowing of the epistemic field to better grasp, explain and have certainty, for example, about what holds the person and world together in their innermost. Functionally, the process also necessitates reducing the qualitative-relational field of expectations from inner out (too demanding, vulnerable with uncertain results) to outer in for quantitative-referential terms that are easier to measure, perform and quantify the results of, for example, in the search for identity and finding one's place in human contexts (including church and academy). In other words, the shift to the primacy of the secondary and its preoccupation are not without specific purpose that motivates persons even in the theological task and the practice of faith. Yet whatever certainty and identity result in secondary terms can only be incomplete, ambiguous or shallow.

Identity formation in particular for Jesus' followers is problematic when it is composed either apart from his call or not understanding his call—problematic most noticeably when not composed by the process of redemptive change (process 1 above). Peter's identity (in the above interaction) was contrary to Jesus' call because it was still determined primarily by human contextualization: "you are setting your mind not on *God's* things but on human things" (Mt 16:23). The influence of human contextualization, of course, is a pivotal issue for all of us, which must be dealt with ongoingly for our primary identity composed by Jesus' call to emerge and unfold.

Jesus taught a critical lesson (e.g. Rev 2-3, to be discussed later) that delineates a simple reality of life about the human person and the surrounding social context—matters we either pay attention to or ignore depending on our assumptions of theological anthropology and the human condition. His lesson is integrated with his formative family prayer (Jn 17:9-19) and addresses the issue of **contextualization** defining us. Since we do

not live in a vacuum, our ontology and function (both individual and collective) are either shaped by the surrounding context we are *en* (v.11, thus “of the world,” v.14) or constituted by what we enter *eis* (dynamic movement “into”) that context with. In the latter constituting process, for the dynamic of *eis* to define and determine our ontology and function in congruence with Jesus (v.18) necessitates the *ek* (“of” indicating source) relational involvement to negate any defining influence on us from a surrounding context (“not of the world”) in order to determine us by our primary source in the whole of God’s relational context and process, therefore constituting the whole ontology and function in the primacy of relationship together for the *eis* relational movement back to the world (vv.16-18). Human contextualization, though neither disregarded nor necessarily unimportant, is clearly secondary to God’s in this process that integrally distinguishes our primary identity of who we are and whose we are (v.9). This reciprocating relational process (*ek-eis* relational dynamic, as in *reciprocating contextualization*) signifies the relational demands of grace for reciprocal relationship conjointly compatible with the theological trajectory of Jesus’ coming *eis* the world and congruent with his relational path of wholeness for all of life with which he engaged the world. Nothing less and no substitutes can distinguish the whole ontology and function of Jesus and of those in likeness who indeed follow him in the primacy of whole relationship together without veiled identities of ambiguity or shallowness.

The wholeness of his followers’ identity is the relational outcome of embracing Jesus in his full identity—the outcome emerging from the process of transformation (process 2 above) composing his call. In this relational dynamic initiated by Jesus, the clarity and depth of his identity are vital and become a *christological contingency*. The key, and thus the contingency, is who Jesus is. If who Jesus is defines the basis for our identity as his followers, then Jesus by necessity is both the hermeneutical key and the functional key for identity formation. This, of course, makes our life and practice in discipleship contingent on our working Christology—specifically, whether or not it involves the embodied whole of Jesus (as person and as One in the Trinity) to compose the discipleship of complete Christology.

When Jesus said in his formative family prayer “I sanctify myself” (Jn 17:19), this was not about sanctifying his ontology but about sanctifying his identity to function clearly in the human context to distinguish the whole of his ontology. Since Jesus’ ontology was always holy (*hagios*, uncommon), this sanctifying process was mainly in order that his followers’ ontology and identity may be sanctified (*hagiazō*) uncommon in the experiential truth of his full identity (as Jesus prayed). Moreover, since Jesus’ embodied identity did not function in a social vacuum with relational separation, it is vital to understand his sanctified identity for the experiential truth of our identity to be in his likeness and our ontology to be in the image of the whole-ly God (as Jesus further prayed).

What is Jesus' sanctified identity? As the embodiment of the uncommon God, Jesus' identity functioned in congruence with the origin or source of his ontology. Earlier in his formative family prayer, he indicated the source of his ontology as "I myself am not of the world" (vv.14,16, NIV). "Of" (*ek*) means (here in the negative) out of which his identity is derived and to which he belongs. Yet, this only points to Jesus' full identity. In his prayer he also defined his function as "in the world" (v.13, cf. Jn 13:1). "In" (*en*) means to remain in place, or in the surrounding context, while "out of" the context to which he belongs, thereby pointing to his *minority identity* in that surrounding context. It is the dynamic interaction of Jesus' full identity with his minority identity that is necessary for the significance of his sanctified identity. In his identity equation they are conjoined, and if separated our understanding of who, what and how Jesus is as the whole person is diminished. This fragmentation signifies an incomplete Christology that is consequential for the clarity and depth of identity to emerge.

In relational terms and not referential, Christian identity must by its nature be qualitatively rooted in and ongoingly relationally based on Jesus' identity. On this irreducible and nonnegotiable basis, Christology is basic to our identity; and any reduction of our Christology renders our identity to a lack of clarity (as "light") and depth (as "salt"), consequently precipitating an identity crisis ("no longer good for anything," Mt 5:13). Therefore, questions like those by the disciples ("Who is this?" Mk 4:41) and Paul on the Damascus road ("Who are you?" Acts 9:5: cf. Jn 8:25) need to be answered in complete (*pleroo*) theological determination for the answer to be definitive of the qualitative and relational significance of both the incarnation and the whole gospel. The disciples struggled with this relational epistemic process, while Paul received the epistemic clarification and hermeneutic correction to engage the whole of Jesus for relationship together without veiled identity—the relational outcome of whole ontology and function redefining who Paul was and transforming what he was and how he lived, signifying the new wine/creation.

Directly related to the above questions are questions such as "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9) and "What are you doing here?" (1 Kg 19:9,13). These, of course, are the urgent questions from God that also involve our theological anthropology and related theological assumptions of Christology, which are critical for identity formation. Both sets of questions need to be answered to define the depth of our theology (as signified in "Do you also wish to go away?" Jn 6:67), and to determine the depth of our reciprocal relational response (as signified in "do you love me?" Jn 21:16). Our response emerges from the primary identity of who we are, and the identity we form emerges from our theology, that is, the interaction between our theological anthropology and Christology. The ontology and function that result are contingent on this theological process. And this ontology and function identify the persons at the heart of Jesus' call—both his person and our persons, apart from whom creates an identity crisis.

Identity Crisis

As the identity challenge widens in our examination, the path narrows for followers of Jesus to make evident what in effect is any identity theft. Any such theft would keep them from *being* “where I am” (Jn 12:26).

Our identity serves to inform us about who and what we are, and thus how to be. While identity is certainly not routinely singular, from this primary identity we can present that person to others. No moment in time, not one situation or association adequately defines an identity. Identity formation is an ongoing process of trial and error, change, development and maturation; and this process can be explicit or implicit, intentional or inadvertent. 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 a broader context.

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

1. The first issue is *ambiguity* in not presenting ourselves 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. 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).
2. The second issue is *shallowness* in our identity. This identity, for example, may have the correct appearance in our presentation but not the deeper substance of 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 substance 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.

Light and salt formulate the identity equation with a nonnegotiable and irreducible metric that narrows the path to follow Jesus.

Christian identity, namely as Jesus' followers, must have both *clarity* and *depth* to establish qualitative distinction from common function (notably from reductionism) and 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 (as Jesus clarified, Mt 5:20).

Going beyond reductionism necessitates the shift in righteousness from merely displaying character traits (an issue of integrity) and practicing an ethic of right and wrong (an issue of being upright) distinctly deeper to the qualitative involvement of what, who and how to be in relationship—relationship both with God and with others. This is the significance of righteousness that is qualitatively distinguished from common function, and thus is contrary to and goes beyond those who reduce righteousness, the law, the covenant, God and his communicative action to disembodied quantitative terms. Jesus clearly makes this distinction of righteousness the relational imperative for his followers to be distinguished beyond practice that reduces God's whole (Mt 5:20).

In these metaphors of the light and the salt, Jesus was unequivocal about the identity of his followers: that “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, that cannot be uninvolved with others and still qualitatively reflect the vulnerable Jesus (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 belongs in relationship with Jesus and the function as his followers.

Yet, in everyday 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-ly God and also lacks the qualitative distinction 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.

Let's take a moment to reflect on whether or not we have a **skinny identity**. The equation for a skinny identity uses the metric of outer distinctions for forming identity.

What quantifies outer distinctions the most is skin color. So, to the extent that skin color is used in our perceptual-interpretive lens, then that will be the identity we get for defining both ourself and others. The status quo of identity formation is an inescapable issue for all Christians, because a skin-ny identity prevails both in what surrounds us and among us. Given this, a skin-ny identity is not automatically racist but it is a shallow identity that renders any Christian identity ambiguous.

While the embodied Jesus was distinctly Jewish, and his predominant surrounding context was Jewish Galilee and Judea, the person Jesus presented (who and what) and how he interacted at the various levels of social discourse were a function of a *minority identity*, not the dominant Jewish identity. One advantage of his minority identity was to clearly distinguish his significance from the prevailing majority—including from the broader context pervaded with Greco-Roman influence. A major disadvantage, however, was to be marginalized (viz. considered less, or even ignored if not intrusive) by the majority or dominant sector. This disadvantage is problematic at best for his followers and can precipitate an identity crisis, that is, if his followers are not experiencing the truth of who, what and how they are.

The consequence of Jesus' minority identity is one issue all his followers must address (cf. the consequential characteristic of the last beatitude, Mt 5:10). At the same time, Jesus' full identity is an interrelated issue inseparable from the minority issue, not only conjoined to it but antecedent to it. Thus, both issues must be addressed for the functional clarity of his followers' identity as well as for the experiential depth of this identity necessary to mitigate an identity crisis.

In a complete Christology, the person presented by Jesus is a function of his whole person—nothing less and no substitutes, thus irreducible in the nature of his incarnation involvement with the human context; and Jesus' whole person is a function of relationship in the trinitarian relational context and process—also nothing less and no substitutes, thus nonnegotiable to the terms of any other context and process. In this complete Christology the whole gospel of God's thematic relational action of grace emerges for the experiential truth of Jesus' full soteriology (saved both *from* and *to*), the significance of which is only for relationship together.

An identity crisis begins to emerge when the truth (or identity) of Jesus we follow is incomplete of his whole person—for example, focused on his disembodied teachings or example. This crisis develops when the Jesus as Truth we embrace is not his whole person in relationship together; whatever we then experience is some substitute for his person in a context and process simulating the context and process of intimate relationship as family together. The consequential lack of depth leads to a lack of clarity, that is, not necessarily a lack of clarity of what the object of faith is but a lack of clarity of the significance of Jesus' whole person. Any lack of clarity of who Jesus is also reflects a lack of understanding of what faith involves as our reciprocal relational

response to Jesus' whole person (cf. would-be disciples who believed, Jn 6:60-66). These lacks are a relational consequence of functioning in relationship with Jesus without relational significance. Therefore, identity crisis for his followers is a direct function of reductionist relationship, first with Jesus then together with each other—the relationship of persons in reduced ontology and function, whose identity equation uses a conflicting metric.

Any aspect of identity crisis as followers of Jesus is correlated to their function in relationship with Jesus and its relational significance. In his full identity Jesus is the hermeneutical and functional keys to the whole-ly God (notably the Father) and for constituting the relationships necessary to be whole together as family. In this relational process, on the one hand, the full identity of who Jesus is constitutes the experiential truth of his followers' identity as belonging to God's family, which is the basis to mitigate an identity crisis. On the other, embracing Jesus in his full identity will always involve not only being associated with a minority identity but also being composed in it, which will unavoidably involve being different from the surrounding context. The incarnation principle of nothing less and no substitutes does not give his followers latitude to be selective of who, what and how they will be, even with good intentions (as various followers learned the hard way).

Wholeness 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 made definitive in his sanctified life and practice and outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. Clarity and depth of his followers' identity is rooted in the following: *what* we are in the relational progression of reciprocal relationship with Jesus, and thus *who* we become intimately with the Father in his family together, as we also reciprocally work with the Spirit in *how* we ongoingly function. This unmistakably narrows the path for whoever follows Jesus. And this relationship-specific process should not be mistaken for a spiritual discipline.

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 distant from this relationship (which happens even in church) or in competition with this relationship (which happens even in Christian subcultures) diminishes the basic identity of being the whole-ly God's very own ("the light") as well as deteriorates its qualitative substance ("the salt"). Certainly, then, the whole and uncommon presentation of self to others is crucial to the identity of Jesus' followers. This is the importance of Jesus interrelating identity with righteousness in conjoint function. While identity informs us of who, what and how we are, righteousness is the functional process that practices the whole of what, who and how we are—an uncommon function distinguished from the common. 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-ly God, the Trinity. Righteousness is necessary so that his followers can be

counted on to be those whole persons—nothing less and no substitutes, and thereby distinguished from common reductionist practice (Mt 5:20).

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 in order 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*, which defines their identity also by what they do. While this identity formation has certainly challenged many Christians historically to serve in missions, the identity equation has promoted practices and an identity that do not go beyond reductionism. By taking Jesus’ words out of the context of the vital whole of his major communication (definitive for discipleship, Mt 5-7), they fail to grasp the significance of Jesus’ call to his followers—the extent and depth of which Jesus summarized in this major communication and increasingly made evident in his sanctified life and practice.

Let’s pause again to reflect on having an **able identity**. This equation uses the metric of what and/or how much we are able to do in order to form our identity. An able identity would also underlie a skin-ny identity, thereby compounding Christian identity. How much do you define your identity by what you do and can do—even on the basis of your spiritual gifts? Such an identity formation is consequential for those limited in what they can do, because the metric of **ableism** has created a stratified infrastructure even in the church that remains unresolved. Those also without disabilities but with less abilities (or spiritual gifts) are negatively impacted in more subtle ways by able identity. Here again, a shallow identity renders Christian identity ambiguous, which demonstrates the pervasive influence of a culture of ableism. This should be expected because it is rooted in “who told you that you are *able or dis-able*” (Gen 3:11).

The seriousness of the issues of clarity and depth in our life and practice cannot be overstated. The alternative common in Christian practices of essentially obscuring our identity as “the light” is a crucial 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 communication Jesus addressed, for example, in the practice of the law and relationships with others (5:21-48; 7:1-5). Yet, as denoted in *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 each for different contexts at church and work) and composite identities (subordinating “the light”) are commonly accepted Christian practices that

demonstrate the mindset of reductionism—a framework (*phronema*) and lens (*phroneo*) incompatible for those in Christ (as Paul clarified theologically, Rom 8:5-6).

Moreover, any identity rooted only in the practice of propositional truth and the 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 is not the whole and uncommon identity of Jesus’ followers. Such disembodied 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 compose the qualitative change of the innermost (i.e. *metamorphoo*, transformation from inner out) 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), which involves the integral processes of redemptive change and transformation composing Jesus’ call. 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, detached and disconnected for the relational outcome of wholeness.

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 qualitatively different in function from the whole of God (whose image the person supposedly bears), there is reductionism of the human ontology. This reduced ontology is demonstrated 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 detached or disconnected from the relational nature of God and from God’s wholeness as distinguished in the Trinity. In other words, who, what and how this person is never goes beyond reductionism, even if by default—remaining within the limits of its ontological simulation and epistemological illusion.

Therefore, until Christians (individually and collectively) take accountability and vulnerably address this issue at its heart, the identity crisis will continue to evolve; it evolves even subtly as a culture with a new normal for Christian practice, thus as if culturally mandated. Is this the prevailing condition of Christian identity in the U.S.? Moreover, does this identity equation not only form our identity but the identity of who *our* God is, using the metric “that I was one just like yourself” (Ps 50:21)? Consider further: What are the diverse identity veils worn by Christians that render their inner-out whole identity in Christ ambiguous or shallow—veils that contradict the Word’s identity formation for us (2 Cor 3:16-18)?

Bifocal Identity

The Word makes unmistakable the identity he embodied, which then makes his followers' identity irreducible and nonnegotiable in the primary and flexible in the secondary. It is always consequential, however, when this identity equation is reversed, even with good intentions for the identity formation of a multicultural diversity in the global church. It is consequential of the identity theft of Jesus and of who his followers truly are.

When Jesus demonstrated to his disciples the depth of his *agape* involvement by washing their feet, he embodied the identity equation of the experiential Truth, relational Way and whole Life for his followers in order for them to be congruent with his full identity without constructing a different identity (Jn 13:16). That is to say, in this defining interaction Jesus vulnerably revealed his primary identity, which was not merely as "Teacher and Lord" ("what I am," vv.13-14) but as his whole person from inner out distinguishing the who of his primary identity and the how of his primary function. It is insufficient for Jesus' identity to be defined by anything less (such as his role and title); such common substitutes effectively become his identity theft. It is also inadequate for his followers' identity to be formed and defined by any other metric than his primary identity equation. In his shock (13:8), do you think Peter learned about identity formation in this defining interaction (cf. Gal 2:11-13)?

Integrally at the same time, this is not private or separatist congruence with Jesus but further and deeper congruence with Jesus' minority identity in the surrounding context (both local and global). That is, this is the definitive congruence for a called follower who is experiencing his/her identity being redefined (redeemed), transformed and made whole by Jesus in the three processes composing his call. This experience with Jesus is the process of discipleship he defined by the term *katartizo* (Lk 6:40). *Katartizo* denotes to prepare fully to completion or to repair fully for completion, both of which are involved in the process of following Jesus: to repair (redeem) any brokenness or fragmentation (e.g. from sin of reductionism), to restore and transform (reconcile) the person to wholeness as well as to the relationships necessary to be whole in congruence with the whole of Jesus and his sanctified life and practice in the world (cf. *katartizo* in Eph 4:12-13).

The functional truth for our identity is this irreplaceable formation: to be *just as* (*kathos* and *hos*) Jesus was necessitates our following in the path of *katartizo*. The functional reality commonly existing for our accountability is typically that the prevailing practice of discipleship does not involve *katartizo*—and this pervades churches, seminaries and related Christian academy locally and globally. Without *katartizo* Christians cannot grow together in the depth of Jesus' full identity to be clearly distinguished in his minority identity as his whole disciples, both in the church and the

world. Without *katartizo*, our identity gets shallow or ambiguous, particularly with the influence of the surrounding context. The alternative identity we tend to practice in place of his whole and uncommon identity—practice intentionally or unintentionally, often by default—is what I call *bifocal identity*.

Bifocal identity is a process of identity construction in a context in which one is considered (real or perceived) as a minority or part of a subordinate group (even if not a numerical minority). For example, in the United States persons of color have always been minorities; even though they are collectively now the numerical majority, they are still the subordinate group. Minorities are always marginalized. For minority persons to be acceptable in the dominant surrounding context (not accepted into the dominant group) invariably requires assimilation: the practice of dominant values, which usually comes with the cost of relinquishing minority practices. Unless persons of color have essentially denied their minority associations, or become separatists, they negotiate identity construction in a dominant surrounding context with a bifocal process. Moreover, given the default migrant status of all Christians, a bifocal identity typically is constructed.

Similar to the function of bifocal eyeglasses, a minority person perceives the more provincial, private and intimate aspects of one's life through the "lower reading lens" of one's racial-ethnic identity. All other aspects are seen through the "upper general lens" of the dominant identity. While this appears to be a rather simple either-or operation, the actual perceptions often vacillate between lenses, frequently overlap, and at times even seem confused. Using the "correct" lens for the "right" purpose requires ongoing adjustment since neither remains constant for a fixed prescription, similar to being fitted for the proper bifocal eyeglasses. This dynamic process of identity construction and presentation is a familiar phenomenon for minority persons, yet not without its identity conflicts and frustrations—not only specifically about being fragmented and thus not whole, but also embedded in an identity not only of being different but considered as *less*. What is not apparent, however, to most Christians is how the bifocal process is a common phenomenon for Christian identity formation in the surrounding context. This also directly interrelates to the mutual workings of skin-ny identity and ableism identity.

When Jesus sanctified himself in life and practice (just as he prayed, Jn 17:19), he established the identity necessary for his followers to be constituted fully submitted to the Father and set apart for the whole and holy (uncommon) God in the world. As his followers function in this sanctified (whole and uncommon, or whole-ly) identity, they declare their minority identity in the surrounding context—even if they've had a majority identity up to then. Whatever prevails in that surrounding context is neither who they are (and what defines them) nor whose they are (and what they belong to); thus, white evangelicals, for example, need to pay deeper attention to Jesus and take heed. Whatever the pressures and influence of that context, Jesus prayed for his followers not to be separated from it (Jn 17:15). The only context for their calling to make whole is in the surrounding context (local and global). Yet Jesus understood in his formative prayer that

the integrity of their minority identity necessitates a single-vision congruence (contrary to bi-focal) with his whole-ly identity (17:17-19). Just as the Father sent him into the world is how Jesus sends his followers into the surrounding context. This congruence involves both context and function. And Jesus' function was always demonstrated distinctly by his relational involvement, thus necessitating interrelated congruence of his minority identity (involved in human context) conjoined with his full identity (in the primacy of God's context)—the relational dynamic of *reciprocating contextualization* constituting his whole-ly identity.

Identity formation and maintenance as his followers can only be functionally realized as the minority that Jesus also embodied as his identity. Yet, the existential function of this minority identity is incomplete as a bifocal identity. His followers cannot negotiate their identity in a dominant context by a bifocal process and still have the distinction as his called followers. Unless Christians in effect have functionally ceased following Jesus, they have no negotiable option to construct a composite, hybrid or parallel identity with some partial aspect of Jesus' identity. Just as Jesus addressed his disciples earlier, while a disciple is certainly not “above” Jesus to construct his/her own identity, called followers who are growing in discipleship wholeness (*katartizo*) also are not apart from any aspect of Jesus' identity to function on their own terms (which would effectively construct their own identity, Lk 6:40).

It is the temptation or tendency of every minority person in a dominant context to fall into the following: (1) defer to the dominant group and be rendered passive; (2) compromise with the dominant values and be reduced in one's own significance; (3) be co-opted by the dominant context for identity theft and lose one's sense of purpose, and thus value to that context. A bifocal process of identity construction involves any or all of these practices. This is the function of bifocal identity. For the Christian minority in the world, this is what's at stake. And as this identity challenge widens, take heed that it unequivocally encompasses white evangelicals and Christian nationalism.

For Christians to relegate their identity with Jesus to the “lower reading lens” for function in the provincial, private and intimate aspects of their life and practice is to defer to, compromise with and/or be co-opted by the surrounding context. To render the influence of the surrounding context to the “upper general lens” for their function in all other aspects of life and practice is to lose the qualitative distinction unique to Jesus' followers—and thus, contrary to how Jesus prayed, to preclude both their joy shared intimately with the whole-ly God (Jn 17:13) and their value to the surrounding context (17:21,23). On the other hand, bifocal Christian identity exposes the ontological simulations and functional illusions of our identity constructions incongruent with Jesus' whole-ly identity; any such identity is what forms by all identity equations from reductionism—the contrary metrics of “who told you that you were naked.”

If the whole of Jesus' person is our hermeneutical and functional keys, this perceptual-interpretive lens will “listen to my Son” (Mt 17:5) and result in congruence

with the relational nature and functional significance of his whole-ly identity. If we listen closely to the Son, this will change our perceptual-interpretive lens to understand that the Father meant “listening” not only to the words the Son told us but also to his whole person, and thus to how he functioned. His whole followers walk together conjointly in the relational posture of his full identity and in the functional posture of his minority identity. The only alternative to this qualitative interaction necessary for their identity formation to be integrated with the Son’s is some form of reductionism constructing anything less or any substitutes. Accordingly, the path for his followers keeps narrowing.

Jesus’ sanctified life and practice discloses two vital issues about this identity interaction necessary for his followers, as he prayed: (1) without the relational function of his full identity, there is no truth and function of his minority identity (cf. some ministers with an incomplete Christology, missionaries with a truncated soteriology, or activist Christians with disembodied ethics or morality; also those who experience primarily outward change [*metaschematizo*] and function merely in role behaviors [*hypokrisis*]); and (2) without the function of the truth of his minority identity, there is no experiential truth of his full identity (e.g. as those with bifocal identity). This qualitative interaction between identities is an ongoing relational dynamic: the relational outcome of which constitutes the whole-ly identity of his followers fully submitted to the Father and set apart for the whole and uncommon God in the world; and the function of which signifies the ontology of his followers together in the relationships necessary to be whole as his family in likeness of the Trinity—the qualitative relational wholeness that will make whole the human context, as Jesus prayed (Jn 17:21-23).

This said, there is a variation of Christian bifocal identity that needs to be discussed. This involves Christians who present a distinct Christian identity in general public or the dominant surrounding context, while functioning with a different identity in private. Basically, this reverses the bifocal process with a reductionist form of Jesus’ minority identity or full identity used as the “upper general lens,” while an alternative identity is used for the “lower reading lens” in private. This is characteristic notably of these followers: of ministers serving in the name of Jesus who construct their own identity in effect as if “above” or even apart from Jesus, thus lacking depth of their identity; of missionaries and evangelists who seek to save the lost in the world, while practicing a personal identity incongruent with what Jesus saved us *to*, thus lacking depth in their function; of Christian activists who promote the so-called ethics and morality of Jesus in the surrounding context while having no sense of relational involvement with the person of Jesus in their own life and practice, thus lacking clarity of their identity; and also included are Christian scholars whose theology have little, if any, connection to their practice. This reverse bifocal identity is also characteristic generally of those who present a serious Christian identity in public (albeit sincerely or with good intentions) but have no depth to their identity to signify the ontology of their whole person, thus who become embedded in a self-conscious lifestyle.

All these persons characterize Christians who lack the clarity and depth of identity to go beyond reductionism, and who are not being redefined (redeemed), transformed from inner out (*metamorphoo*) and made whole in congruence with Jesus' whole-ly identity. They effectively operate in relationship with God on their own terms, working under the assumption "that I was one just like yourself" to form who *their* God is essentially in their image. Thus, these bifocal identities are of persons who function in the ontological simulations and functional illusions of the wide spectrum of reductionism, and thus who must account for *hypokrisis*—the leaven of reductionism, which Jesus made imperative for all his followers "to pay attention to" (*prosecho*, Lk 12:1).

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-ly God, thus also 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.

How we receive Jesus' statements depends on what we pay attention to and what we ignore—that is, the direct function of what serves as our perceptual-interpretive framework (cf. the various disciples discussed previously). Our framework functions as the lens (our "eyes") through which we perceive Jesus, read the biblical text, see ourselves and others, and view the world. In this perceptual-interpretive process reductionism presents a formidable challenge to the relational context and process of Jesus' followers, primarily because we don't pay focused attention to reductionism as sin, or we ignore its presence and influence. What we perceive of God's self-revelation and what we interpret about the whole of God are skewed by the influence of reductionism in human contextualization, which includes Christian cultures. The validity of our perceptions and interpretations emerge only from the framework that Jesus definitively disclosed upon thanking the Father for his revelations to "little children" (Lk 10:21), which is not apparent that we pay attention to or even take him seriously (as in Mt 18:3-4).

This clearly makes evident the need for what specifically serves as our perceptual-interpretive framework/lens to be changed—the redemptive change constituted by listening to the Son, submitting to the Father and reciprocally working relationally with the Spirit. This includes the necessary redemptive change of our whole person and the relationships necessary to be whole signifying the ongoing relational involvement of our whole identity distinguished in who, what and how we are with the whole-ly God.

Without this change our identity is rendered fragmentary by the prevailing influence of reductionism in our surrounding contexts. The person distinguished in Jesus' call can only be composed by a new identity, which by its nature cannot be shaped by human contextualization.

Identity Formation Narrows to the *New*

It would not be surprising that many Christians would consider the above discussion an inconvenient truth, which they could address at a more convenient time. Given the existing reality of Christian identity formation, the most inconvenient truth facing us is the inescapable need for *change*—that is, to be transformed, not merely to reform. This widening challenge is certainly inconvenient for Christians, but the narrow path for change confronts all Christians to be accountable for what Jesus embodied.

The narrow path for change confronting all Christians has to be predicated on the change that Jesus instituted in his direct relationship with his followers. He overtly shifted from tradition to make vulnerable the existential reality between him and them:

“I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends...” (Jn 15:15). In other words, the Word declared the definitive identity equation that unequivocally distinguishes the identity of his followers only in the nonnegotiable primacy of relationship together.

Depending on how you define what a friend is, this may appear like a minor change. After all, aren't servants of God important and necessary? The metric for identity formation, however, that the Word makes irreplaceable involves the irreversible change of his followers' identity from the person commonly defined outer in to the person uncommonly defined inner out. Getting to the depths of this identity is the change the Word embodies.

Change in human life can be natural, unnatural or uncommon. The change in Mary (Martha's sister), for example, was considered unnatural by the contextualized and commonized biases of the other disciples (Jn 12:1-5; Mt 26:6-9). Perhaps today her change is considered natural and thus of no greater significance to highlight for the gospel and magnify to distinguish Jesus' followers. However perceived, change represents something different from what exists, and such change can be positive or negative—even a simulation of something new or an illusion of something better.

Like Mary, we all have opportunities to change, that is, to grow and mature in relational progression with Jesus, rather than avoid his essential progression and thereby

resist change. When we don't resist change in our discipleship, the issue becomes the type of change needed that truly signifies the relational progression distinguishing his disciples. The so-called progress witnessed in human contexts has often been merely a simulation of something new or an illusion of something better, and such progress is typically duplicated by Christians. The maturity of "perfect" (the *teleios* imperative of Mt 5:48), however, involves the change that is relationship-specific to the whole-ly God and, therefore, progresses only in what's whole and uncommon. This progress then requires the change to be **the new**, not a simulation of something new. To say the least, simulations and illusions of progress are alternative/virtual realities that regress under the common assumptions of progress. In real fact, they are regressions specifically in our relational condition, which emerge from, reinforce and sustain the human condition.

Therefore, all of Jesus' followers should not conflate 'seeking to be new' with 'pursuing progress of something new'; the former seeks his person in relationship (as in Mt 6:33) while the latter primarily pursues results in situations, making the relationship secondary (as in many innovations of ministry and worship). Our discipleship needs to maintain this distinction in order to be distinguished in the new and the uncommon for our persons, relationships and churches.

In our ancient history, the change for the new and the uncommon was attempted at Babel in order to prevent diversity in the human context and unify the fragmentation of the human condition (Gen 11:1-9). As human migration expanded, these residents determined to "build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make *an identity* for ourselves and not be *fragmented* over the face of the whole earth" (v. 4, NIV). In their self-determination, they wanted to construct a unity and have an identity together, without being fragmented into separate entities. What also converged with their self-determination was having good intentions, which is a common motivation that we often assume as sufficient basis for our function notably as servants. Yet, there is a deeper understanding critical to human ontology and function that unfolded in this context paralleling contexts today; and this needs to be given a voice to articulate the human condition, our human condition. God totally rejected their good intentions and denied their human intervention and achievement for a common unity and identity together. Why wouldn't God be pleased with them? Wasn't this human progress from what God witnessed before the flood?

The reality is that this just further unfolded from what was set into motion from the beginning. We cannot merely assume that their good intentions didn't reflect defining 'good without wholeness', or that their optimistic efforts engaged in anything more than reinforcing and sustaining the human condition. The parallel reality for today is the good intentions of human achievement for the purpose of so-called human progress (such as in technology and globalization) and the optimistic (vain or arrogant) efforts to build empire (such as in colonialism, including by the U.S., with economic neocolonialism). Our ancient counterparts chose the redefining alternative of self-determination, which

conjointly required unavoidably a narrowed-down perceptual-interpretive lens and also composed them unmistakably in reduced ontology and function. Therefore, they assumed they could construct the whole based on their fragmentary parts and the sum of those parts—a false assumption lacking synergism—and that the result would be wholeness in their life together (cf. the church in Sardis, Rev 3:1-2). Furthermore, their self-determination assumed they could construct the whole from ‘bottom-up’, and that the result would rise above the human context (with its limits and constraints) to achieve human progress to the level of God’s context (“a tower that reaches to the heavens”). The latter assumption is to be expected from a narrowed-down perceptual-interpretive lens, while the former assumption is understandable given the need for ontological simulation and functional illusion to sustain engagement in self-determination despite its limits and constraints. The reality, in other words, is that they tried to construct an alternative reality (virtual in retrospect) with alternative facts to avoid the existing reality of the human condition, which required them to deny their own condition.

Reduced human ontology and function can never achieve wholeness because the reality of its irremediable (not irreversible) condition, however variable, can never be whole. Human intervention, whether at the systemic level or interpersonal level, cannot go beyond the limits and constraints of its context and its defining ontology and function. Thus, human intervention is embedded in a contextualized bias and commonized bias that skew its efforts. This is indispensable to understand for the tower of Babel and for parallel efforts today to construct unity, wholeness and the whole. In relational response to the human condition, God deconstructed Babel in order to clarify their illusion and correct their simulation, and thus to expose the influence of reductionism composing their human condition in reduced ontology and function. Throughout human history—from Egypt, Babylon through the Roman empire, Great Britain to the United States and former Soviet Union, and now China—we have witnessed the recurring dynamic of Babel unfold, with God continuing to clarify and correct our illusions and simulations in relational response to our human condition in reduced ontology and function. As long as we don’t pay attention to our condition and consequently do not respond to God’s pursuit of us, then human development in our persons, relationships and churches will not grow and mature in wholeness; and we remain enclosed epistemologically, hermeneutically, ontologically, functionally and relationally within the limits and constraints of our condition. Can we justify this state among us, in all its diversity, as the gospel and simply accept it as sufficient for our faith to experience?

Just as Babel confused their efforts for all humanity to progress with the change of what’s new and uncommon, our modern history has evolved to further embed us in this confusion. The so-called progress in the present foretells perhaps an ominous future, namely in technological achievement. Advancement in computer technology has emerged prominently with robots to simulate, substitute for and replace human activity, which is certainly something new in the human context and uncommon to human make-up. What

compounds this progress and complicates its change is the enigma of artificial intelligence (AI). This technology is becoming increasingly sophisticated such that AI is soon anticipated to achieve artificial consciousness to supplement, compete with and perhaps dominate human consciousness. In considering this outcome, this so-called progress in what's new and uncommon can change the world, yet not to improve the human condition but at the expense of humans who become expendable. How this scenario unfolds will depend less on AI and more on the essential reality of those truly changing to the new and the uncommon—that is, real persons who are transformed from inner out (not programmed from outer in) to be new and therefore whole and uncommon.

Whether we recognize it in humanity in general or acknowledge it in ourselves as Christians in particular, the human condition thirsts for change. When the focus is on changing to the new and the uncommon—not merely for fragments of something new and uncommon—it centers on the change that Jesus enacted for the human condition, our human condition. Yet, Christians have struggled with embracing this change and to have their identity distinguished by this change. In bringing change to the new, on the one hand, Jesus was welcomed because expectations were high for the Messiah (or Savior) to fulfill this change. However, on the other hand, the change to the new enacted by Jesus was both whole and uncommon, and this change to the new was too uncommon for many to claim, much less have their identity distinguished in. This resistance or struggle even for Christians is not surprising, since Jesus said “no one *can* put *the* new into old *and common ways of thinking, seeing and doing things in their theology and practice*”—as in “putting new wine into old wineskins” (Lk 5:37-39).

The Taste of the *New*

Jesus introduced his disciples to the change he brought by giving them a taste of the *new wine*. In a defining table fellowship, Jesus led his disciples in the relational involvement that initiated the change to the new. He and his disciples celebrated in relationship together rather than engage in the common practice of fasting with all the other diverse disciples in the surrounding context (Lk 5:33-36). Their relational involvement distinguished the primary from and over the secondary. The change Jesus established for the new integrally composed his disciples in a different identity in two significant ways:

1. Traditional disciples in those days were rabbinic students, whose central focus was on the teachings of a rabbi. This information formed their way of thinking, seeing and doing what was important for them to become teachers also. Jesus changed the identity of his disciples to a new discipleship that was distinguished uncommon from the prevailing common and ordinary way.

2. The new discipleship was more than uncommon in the sense of being out of the ordinary. What Jesus established was neither innovative nor necessarily anti-Establishment. Jesus enacted his whole person from inner out—beyond merely his teachings but not apart from them—in order for his disciples to experience the primacy of their whole persons in relationship together with his person. This primacy was never enacted by other rabbis, thus it was never experienced by their disciples nor engaged in their discipleship—all of whom were preoccupied with the secondary without integrating it into the primary. In contrast for Jesus’ disciples, this taste of new wine was beyond what his disciples could have imagined to “Follow me.” The change to the new, therefore, is integrally whole and uncommon, and the relational progression of this **uncommon identity of whole-ly disciples** only unfolds in the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes.

In spite of Jesus’ early disciples having a taste of the new wine, they obviously struggled with being distinguished in this uncommon identity. The common kept reemerging because their contextualized and commonized biased ways of thinking, seeing and doing things in their theology and practice still needed to be transformed. Unlike the others, the new composed by the whole was not a point of contention for these disciples. But, because this new was undeniably uncommon—that is, so out of the ordinary—they didn’t take it seriously enough to stand out unambiguously in this identity, just as light in the darkness does (Mt 5:14-16; Jn 8:12). Likewise, since the identity of Jesus’ disciples is different from all other disciples—composed by **the essential difference**—our identity has to be both uncommon and whole.

The difference of our identity that Jesus changed to the new was not about being innovative, and was more than unique. The new identity counters an **assimilated identity** shaped by the common of the surrounding context, which included the norms of religious tradition and of culture. In its depth, what the new identity counters is the human condition of reduced ontology and function. When Jesus was confronted about his disciples not following the traditional norms of their religious identity, he clearly defined the whole person from inner out as the essential identity of human ontology and function—which countered the common identity from outer in (Mt 15:1-20). Even after the taste of new wine, Peter still didn’t understand the essential difference distinguishing the identity of who, what and how they were as Jesus’ disciples (15:15-16). Essentially, the whole of this new identity was too uncommon for those in any assimilated identity, with the issue always revolving around the condition of our ontology and function.

This essential difference also raises the subtle issue of inconvenience for our theology and practice, which puts further pressure on our bias to use old wineskins (as Peter did). This is why Jesus said that many will conclude “the old is good, *good enough, or even better*” (Lk 5:39). Old wineskins are the relational consequence of becoming embedded in an ontological lie from reductionism that imposes an identity deficit, in

which a person (or together as church) struggles to erase any deficit by efforts of self-determination in what one can do (e.g. fast). The more control one can exercise over this process, the more certain the results of one's efforts can be expected. The pursuit of certainty, however, requires a reduction epistemologically, ontologically and relationally in order for the control needed to succeed in self-determination—notably narrowing the epistemic field to the probable and minimizing vulnerability in relationships.

This is how God's terms for covenant relationship outlined in the *torah* have been reduced to a behavioral code, how persons seek to become justified by what they do, how Jesus' teachings become disembodied to mere principles to follow, how the new wine gets put into an old wineskin. The nature of old wineskins, therefore, is the nature of the human condition *in* its reduced ontology and function, seeking self-determination and self-justification *by* its reduced ontology and function in order to overcome the deficit *for* its reduced ontology and function—a vicious cycle enslaving human persons. And, accordingly, old wineskins emerge from an ambiguous or shallow identity necessitating the veil in relationships, because such an identity fails to engage the integral identity formation outlined by Jesus in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-10), and as a substitute pursues a reduced righteousness from outer in rather than whole righteousness from inner out (contrary to Mt 5:20 in Jesus' manifesto for his followers).

The Growth of the New

The outline of this process was clearly distinguished in the beginning of Jesus' major communication to his followers: the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). It is vital to keep in mind that the context for his major communication always remains in his call and 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). Paul helps us go beyond our knowledge and understanding in order for God's whole to unfold.

When our identity adequately informs us of 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 efforts

of constructing human ontology from self-determination, even with good intentions of acting as servants of 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 communication with his disciples and the whole context of the Sermon on the Mount.

New and whole identity formation involves the necessary functional convergence of identity with righteousness and human ontology in a dynamic process based on God's grace in order to go beyond the reductionism exposed (deconstructed) by Jesus to be whole. 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 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.

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 basic 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 human contextualization. Not surprisingly, Jesus began the process by focusing immediately on the ontology of the person and giving us no basis to define our self by what we do or have—again, notably as servants.

This unfolds immediately in the 1st Beatitude (Mt 5:3) where “the poor in spirit” recognize, acknowledge and live in the true nature of their human condition. Made vulnerable by this reality, such persons experience the heartfelt pain of their condition and thus “mourn,” which is the out-growth of the 2nd Beatitude inseparably from the 1st. The out-growth from these two is the open and honest acceptance of their true identity, which can only rightly form with their “humility” (3rd Beatitude, v.5). When these Beatitudes are integral for identity formation, the growth of the *new* has its foundational basis. When they are not the existential reality integrally forming the person from inner out, the *new* will not grow. In other words, the *new* cannot emerge and grow until the *old* is vulnerably dealt with from inner out.

Though Jesus was not explicit in the beginning of his communication about the irreducible importance of the heart, the function of the heart underlies everything he said and all that we do (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 person—notably what we do and have (cf. Mt 15:10-20). Yet, since the latter perception is a prevailing perceptual-interpretive framework 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.

The Uncommon of the *New*

It is apparent, perhaps obvious, that Christian identity has struggled in the human context to be distinguished in its whole identity—notably today in its diverse condition. The taste of the new-wine identity is no longer a foretaste of Jesus’ whole-ly disciples emerging, but it has become an aftertaste of this whole-ly identity that has not unfolded. Whatever variations of the new-wine identity exist today, their integrity has not been integrally the whole distinguished with-in the whole-ly Word; and this lack of integrity leaves that identity in a regressing condition unable to progress in the new creation of persons and relationships to wholeness in likeness of the whole-ly Trinity.

Jesus' encompassing family prayer to the Father (Jn 17) centered on their whole-ly ontology and function, with the focus on those whose identity emphatically does "not belong to the *common*, just as I do not belong to the *common*" (17:13,16). The function of his followers' uncommon identity, however, is not to be separated from the common but instead to not be reduced in the function of their whole identity (17:15), in order that the integrity of their identity's ontology and function will be distinguished uncommon in the very context of the common. That is, uncommon identity intrudes in the common, while not belonging to it, in distinct likeness of whole-ly Jesus (17:17-19) and in essential likeness to the whole-ly ontology and function of the Trinity (17:20-23). So, then, would you affirm that the integrity of Christian identity can be variable, and perhaps even negotiable according to the context? And would you say that Christian identity today exists as Jesus prayed and unfolds in the context of the common in likeness of the whole-ly Trinity? The integral integrity of our identity is directly dependent on the relational reality that it will unfold just as Jesus prayed definitively for his whole-ly disciples as his family together.

What Jesus saves persons *to* was tasted at that new wine fellowship together and is summarized in his relational prayer, which includes making definitive the relational work necessarily involved to live by whole ontology and function into the common's human context. The viability of this relational work by necessity includes integral identity formation that is distinguished, on the one hand, *in* God's relational context and, on the other hand, *from* the human context. Practically speaking, how do Christians live in God's context now while living surrounded in the human context? That is the issue at hand that we all need to be addressing today because we are accountable for this living now. Identity distinguished from the human context is critical for whole ontology and function because it is not shaped by the limits and constraints of the human context, notably by secondary or false human distinctions. Accordingly, this viable relational work requires being able to live in the human context by the primacy of God's context—that is, by an indispensable process of **reciprocating contextualization** (RC), wherein ongoing interaction with the primacy of God's context determines function in the person's primary identity while in the human context. This function involves having a new visibility in our surrounding context (think about *light*) and a deeper relational involvement (think about family love), both of which may not be welcomed because of being out of the ordinary.

Since the taste of new wine relationship together in wholeness was initially experienced at a pivotal relational connection in new wine fellowship, it unfolds with significance only on God's terms. In God's relational action there are complex theological dynamics that converge in Jesus' theological trajectory and relational path to constitute the whole-ly God's integral relational response of grace to the human condition. The roots, growth, outcome and maturing of the new creation were integrally signified in the metaphor used by Jesus about the new wine (Lk 5:33-39). The focus of

new wine provides us with a whole understanding of the priority of person-consciousness from inner out and its primacy of relationships together, in contrast to a self-consciousness of secondary matter.

The parable of new wine tends to be used incorrectly to emphasize new forms and practices, innovations focused more on the secondary and shaped more from outer in, all of which signify a common lens of referential language and terms. Part of misinterpreting or inadequately understanding the new wine involves, again, Jesus' relational language. Jesus was not focused on situations and circumstances in life and, for example, being innovative in what we do in those situations and circumstances to maximize them. The seeds of the new wine are planted in the innermost of human life, not in secondary matter—the common option in which the new wine cannot grow. Jesus' primary concern is not about *what* we do but for *who* we are and *how* we live. Therefore, in relational terms Jesus engages the ontology and function of those present (even his critics) and unfolds the whole ontology and function of the new creation—in contrast and conflict with prevailing reduced ontology and function. This contrast in ontology and function was demonstrated in this context by Levi's transformation for the relational outcome of the new wine table fellowship together as family (Lk 5:27-32), further constituted later with Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10) in the relational progression of Jesus' tactical and functional shifts. The new wine emerges only from the inner out of ontology and function made whole in the innermost of persons and relationships coming together intimately. When the new wine emerges from redefined and transformed persons, then its whole and uncommon relational outcome is unmistakable in the intimacy of family relationships together with no veiled identities.

The taste of new wine, however, turns sour, or new wine escapes, within the context of old wineskins. Old wineskins are implied in the common alternatives of anything less and any substitutes, which are used especially to minimize being so out of the ordinary in the surrounding context, not to mention being vulnerable with our person. Certainly then, old wineskins both constrain the flow of the new wine and reduce it of its qualitative and relational significance. The nature of old wineskins emerges with any reduction of our ontology and function, thus from an ambiguous or shallow personal-collective identity with relationships still having the veil—for example, who we are without *what* and/or *whose* we are in the primacy of God's context—in contrasting and conflicting function with Jesus' new wine table fellowship that simply functioned in *essential difference* (i.e. whole and uncommon). Following Jesus in essential difference without the veil, of course, makes our person vulnerable to comparative scrutiny in the surrounding context. The alternative is to not be as intrusive as Jesus, which would mean for our visible face (presence) to be ambiguous and our involvement to be more shallow. That is to say, anything less and any substitutes subtly transpose the identity of our persons from their wholeness inner out to fragmentary outer-in parts, whereby the full profile of the identity of who and whose we are is veiled in ambiguity if not obscurity.

Paul revealed about his identity that “I have become all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22). He didn’t imply, however, that the integrity of his identity varied with his surrounding context. All his various contexts were secondary to the primary context of his salvation, whose belonging defined his person and determined his function. Paul was redeemed and belonged to none of those contexts (9:19)—signifying not belonging to the common, as Jesus prayed—yet he chose to be relationally involved in family love with each of them in order for them to be saved to wholeness together in the relational outcome of the gospel (9:20-23). Not only did Paul maintain the integrity of the uncommon identity of his whole person, but the integrity of his whole function in who, what and how Paul was in relationship with each of them could be counted on by them to be true, complete and thus whole, rather than variable, partial or fragmentary. The latter is common in human contexts to minimize vulnerability of persons in relationships, yet how satisfying is it to be involved with persons on that basis? The relational function demonstrated by Paul is vital for the integrity of all Jesus’ followers in their primary identity.

When some Pharisees tried to entrap Jesus to indict him, they ironically identified Jesus with his description: “you are *a person of integrity*, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality *to their differences*” (Mt 22:16). The integrity (*alethes*) they identified extended from the way of God’s covenant relationship, in which Abraham’s relational function was to have the integrity of *tāmiym* (blameless, complete, whole, Gen 17:1). In his relational involvement in covenant relationship, on the basis of *tāmiym* (i.e. being whole, not perfect), Abraham’s identity was distinguished as “righteousness” (Gen 15:6; Gal 3:6), whereby his integrity was established with God. How so?

Abraham’s relational response and involvement in covenant relationship could only be whole according to God’s terms for the relationship. Righteousness, to emphasize, is not about being perfect but identifies the whole of who, what and how a person is. Because of righteousness, this person can be counted on by God (and others) to function in relationship together as that whole person, nothing less and no substitutes. Even for whole-ly God, as the psalmist illuminated, “Righteousness goes before him and makes the *relational* path for his steps” (Ps 85:13). Therefore, the person’s righteousness safeguards the heart of that whole person’s integrity (Prov 13:6). Without righteousness, that person’s integrity in relationship is always in doubt, making the identity of who, what and how that person is questionable if not in dispute.

This is the background for the ironic claim that the above Pharisees made about the integrity of Jesus’ identity. Moreover, they not only identified the whole of Jesus’ person, but they also claimed paradoxically that Jesus’ identity was uncommon—without being influenced or shaped by the common of human contexts (“defer to no one...with partiality”). In other words, however dubious, they distinguished Jesus’ whole-ly person and affirmed the integrity of his identity as whole and uncommon; in so doing, they

exposed their own so-called righteousness and the variable integrity of their own identity in their practice of covenant relationship, which they didn't engage vulnerably with their whole persons. How many Christians live in their irony and function in their paradox?

In his definitive manifesto for discipleship, Jesus corrected the ambiguity or shallowness of the identity of his followers, without partiality or distinctions for their diverse condition (Mt 5:13-16). Whatever their diversity, Jesus made it imperative that their righteousness has to be clearly distinguished beyond the so-called righteousness of those in the faith (Mt 5:20). That is, their righteousness cannot be influenced or shaped by reductionism and thus commonized, in order for the integrity of their identity to distinguish (as in transformed, not re-formed) the whole-ly in their ontology and function (as the Beatitudes compose). Reductionism underlies the variable integrity of Christian identity by subtly composing its diversity with secondary matters (such as contextualization) over the primary of whole-ly identity. The integrity of the identity of Jesus' whole-ly disciples is integrated by necessity with righteousness, so that the whole of who, what and how they are without the veil integrally functions distinguished with-in the Uncommon, and thus distinguished from and beyond the common.

All of this converges in relational terms for Jesus' disciples and has relational progression in the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes. Our identity cannot have integrity without the righteousness composed by God's relational terms. Jesus made definitive the pivotal fourth Beatitude to integrate the seven Beatitudes of our identity formation: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for *their persons and identity* will be filled *whole-ly*" (Mt 5:6). Therefore, unequivocally, integrity integrated with righteousness is the primary priority for all his disciples, distinguishing this relational progression:

The integrity of his disciples' identity is based only on the relational response of those who "seek first *to be relationally involved in the relational context of God's family and the relational process of his righteousness in family love*" (Mt 6:33), whereby their **integral identity** as whole-ly disciples emerges with nothing less than **the whole who they are** and unfolds with no substitutes for **the uncommon whose they are**. And this relational progression unfolds in the ongoing change to the new distinguished whole with-in the whole-ly God, the integral integrity of which "will be given to you *whole-ly*."

As noted previously, the relational progression of Mary's relational response and involvement as the whole-ly Jesus' disciple unmistakably distinguished her integral identity beyond the contextualized identity of all the other disciples, and distinguished her person deeper than their commonized identity. In her ongoing change to the new, her integral identity magnified the *whole* who she was and the *uncommon* whose she was as his whole-ly disciple. This is the relational outcome of the whole gospel *with-in* which

Jesus wants all his disciples to experience progression. This essential relational progression, however, does not unfold unless his disciples contend with the ongoing influence of reductionism in the common's surrounding context. The most prominent source of the common's influence is culture, which Mary consistently countered while the others just accepted or went along with.

The *New* Distinguished from the *Old*

It is essential that Christian identity forms in the *new* that Jesus constituted with the new wine, the new covenant (Lk 22:20), the new creation (2 Cor 5:17) and new self (Col 3:10). Obviously, this is essential to distinguish our identity from the *old*. Yet, most certainly, it is essential to distinguish the new from subtle ontological simulations and functional illusions of a so-called new, the misinformation of which pervades Christian theology and practice. This raises the question about our understanding of what's old.

The Word constituted Paul in the new, which distinguished Paul's whole person with the primary identity that made secondary his Jewish identity. It is important for us to see this new identity as it unfolds in the church and the surrounding context. We further turn to Paul at this point to help us gain this understanding. As the formation of the new wine identity develops in clarity and depth, God's new creation family increasingly is challenged both in its life together and in the surrounding context of the human condition. Therefore, in congruence with the relational dynamic resulting in adoption, the ontology and function of the new church family must always be in the dynamic of 'nothing less and no substitutes' for whole relationship together, which Paul integrally made unequivocal (Eph 4:1-6, 13-16, 22-24). Both the person and persons together are accountable without exception. As these theological dynamics of wholeness, belonging, and ontological identity converge in Paul's theological forest, at the same time the dynamic of reductionism and its counter-relational work are always seeking to redefine the qualitative-relational process constituting their theological interaction and to reshape, reconstruct or otherwise fragment the relational outcome emerging from their theological integration. In other words, we are all unavoidably subjected to reductionism; whether we become subject to its influence is an ongoing issue. In relational terms, the consequence of this contrary influence is that the new creation family is rendered to an ambiguous ontology and shallow function; and its new wine identity is reduced of its clarity and depth that by necessity distinguished it in human contexts.

This conflict for Paul necessitates distinguishing the truth of the whole gospel clearly from "a different gospel" (Gal 1:6-12). In his polemic for this conflict, Paul made definitive two critical and necessary conditions to constitute the only gospel, both of which he implies in Gal 3:28:

1. While the incarnation embodied the *pleroma* (complete, full, whole) of God in human contextualization (Col 1:19; 2:4), the whole of Jesus and his gospel are incongruent and incompatible with any human shaping. Culture in some particular ways can give secondary human characteristics of outer-in form to the gospel but is unable to determine the substantive composition of the gospel itself (e.g. Col 2:16). Human culture in general is always subject to the sin of reductionism, and thus can never be assumed to be neutral. In Paul's examples, reductionist distinctions, stratified contexts and systems of inequality are the primary functions of human constructs that impose human shaping on the gospel (cf. 1 Cor 4:6-7).
2. The only composition of the gospel is *whole*, which by its nature must be determined solely by the whole of Jesus, the *pleroma* of God, who by God's initiative (grace) alone relationally involved (*agape*) the whole of God for the irreducible and nonnegotiable whole relationship together of God's new creation family (Eph 1:22-23; 2:19-22).

The reciprocal relational means for experiencing this definitive whole relationship together as God's family was also at the center of this conflict for Paul. He understood that this issue is unavoidable and ongoing unless understood in its proper context. In Galatians, the conflict of relational means appears to be between "the law" and "faith" (Gal 3:1-26). Yet, this would not only be an oversimplification of Paul's polemic but also a reduction of the law as God's desires and terms for covenant relationship, as well as a reduction of faith as the necessary reciprocal relational response to God's promise of covenant relationship together. Paul put the issue into its full perspective.

Galatians represents Paul sharing the functional clarity for the whole gospel to address their current issue, situation and related matters in order to take them beyond the human contextualization of reductionism (not only of Judaism) to the further and deeper contextualization of God—the whole-ly God's relational context of family and relational process of family love embodied in the whole of Jesus. Within God's relational context and process, the law (as God's whole relational terms) neither reduces nor renegotiates the covenant relationship. In reality, as God's terms for relationship together, the law is whole-ly compatible with the covenant and even is a vital key for the emergence of whole relationship together. That is, not as a functional key to fulfill the promise (3:21), the law serves rather as a heuristic framework (*paidegogos*) for both learning our human condition and discovering the source of its whole solution (3:10, 22-24; Rom 3:19-20). This heuristic process returns us to the identity formation of the first beatitudes, from which all Christians need to ongoingly listen and learn.

Paul's focus on the law addressed the condition of human ontology in two vital ways, both of which perceived the law as God's desires and terms for covenant relationship:

1. The law unequivocally exposes reduced human ontology and function and the insufficiency and relational consequence of all human effort, notably for self-determination and self-justification, which are pivotal to embrace in any response to God for relationship (as Paul noted above and Jesus outlined in the first three beatitudes above).
2. Moreover, the law also clearly identifies the whole human ontology and function necessary for the relational involvement in reciprocal response to the whole-ly God, which is congruent with God's desires and compatible with God's terms for relationship together (Gal 5:14; 6:2; cf. Jesus on the law, Mt 5:43-48, and James on faith, Jas 2:8).

When Paul refers to "the law of Christ," this is God's law/desires constituted by Jesus' whole ontology and function in the incarnation (cf. 1 Cor 9:21b), who takes the law of Moses further and deeper into the whole-ly God's relational context and process. By vulnerably embodying God's relational ontology and function, the whole Subject of the Word is the hermeneutical key to interpreting God's law/desires and the functional key for its practice in relationship together (as Jesus defined in the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5:21ff), which by necessity requires whole ontology and function (as Jesus implied about practice of the law in likeness of the Father, Mt 5:48).

This became the critical issue for Paul because—as implied in the first three beatitudes—human ontology is inexorably embedded in the sin of reductionism; and this enslavement needs to be redeemed for human ontology and function to be freed to become whole. Yet, whole human ontology is constituted only by the redemptive relational dynamic of adoption for relationship together in God's family. Reduced human ontology is incapable of a response that would be compatible to Jesus for this relationship together. In Paul's whole perspective, the issue underlying the law is nothing less than the issue of human ontology. Therefore, his communicative epistles on the law challenge existing assumptions on human ontology to expose reduced human ontology (those subject to reductionism), while his communication on faith assumes the definitive ontology that illuminates the whole human ontology and function needed for relationship together in God's family—and which also fulfills the law of Christ (Gal 5:6; 6:2).

The reciprocal relational means both necessary to receive and compatible to respond to Jesus for whole relationship together is the issue for Paul, which then necessarily involves human ontology. When human effort is relinquished—namely, ceases in self-determination and desists in shaping relationship together, as the first

beatitude composes to be vulnerable from inner out—and replaced by the relational response of faith (as unfolds humbly from the 3rd beatitude), Paul adds for functional clarity that we are no longer under the limited supervision (*paidagogos*) of the law (Gal 3:25). Paul is only referring to the law's *paidagogos* function. This does not mean that the law (as God's desires and terms for covenant relationship) is finished and no longer functional for the practice of faith (5:14; 6:2; cf. Rom 3:31; 1 Cor 9:21). Paul in truth wants the law to be fulfilled by human persons, and he may confuse us by stating that the law cannot be fulfilled by human effort (Gal 3:10; 5:3). By focusing on the relational involvement of *agape* (5:14), however, he makes definitive how the law is or is not fulfilled. By necessity, this engages the two conditions of human ontology (whole or reduced), and Paul differentiates their respective involvement with the law (5:6; 6:15).

Whole human ontology functions from inner out in the relational response of trust to be vulnerably involved with God and others in family love—just as Christ functioned (cf. Jn 15:9-12)—thereby reciprocally responding to God's desires and terms for relationship together. Reduced human ontology, in contrast and conflict, functions from outer in to try to fulfill the quantitative aspects of the law, consequently renegotiating God's terms for relationship by human terms shaped from human contextualization. This reductionism essentially redefined relationship with God to mere relationship with the law (e.g. conforming to a template), which then disembodies the law from the whole-ly God and God's desires for relationship together. The scope of this defines the theology and practice of the old, from and by which the new cannot emerge and grow.

For Paul, the underlying issue between function by law and function by faith is clearly between reduced ontology and function and whole ontology and function. The relational consequence of the former is not only the inability to fulfill the law but enslavement to the reductionist futility of human effort (Gal 5:3-4). The relational outcome of the latter is to receive and respond to Christ for whole relationship together with nothing less and no substitutes. The first two beatitudes confess the limits and constraints of the former, and the third beatitude affirms the connection of the latter.

The new wine identity emerging from these dynamics is irreducible in ontology and nonnegotiable in function. This integral process of identity formation necessitates the ongoing integration of identity and righteousness. For Paul, righteousness is the relational function of the heart that lives not according to reduced notions of 'by faith' but in whole ontology and function in the image and likeness of the whole-ly God (Col 3:10; Eph 4:24). This inner-out function of the heart signifies ontological identity, the primary identity necessary to have wholeness despite the presence of reductionism (Col 3:15). Therefore, ontological identity is definitive of who the person *is* and the determinant of what and how the person *is*, regardless of the surrounding context. And the integrity of identity is rooted in a person's ontology, which needs to be whole or its integrity will be fragmented (cf. Paul's communication about the church at Corinth). As Paul summarized

in Galatians 6:15, any function of reductionism is without any ontological significance of existence (*eimi*); only the new creation exists in ontological wholeness.

The New Embodied Alive

The credibility of identity is rooted in a person's righteousness, which must not be fragmentary (cf. Peter's *hypokrisis*, Gal 2:14) or it will lose both its credibility and the integrity of wholeness in identity (as in Jesus' expectation of righteousness as whole ontology and function, Mt 5:20). The whole of Jesus' identity in the incarnation was based on the integrity of his ontology and the credibility of his righteousness, which persons could count on and trust in relationship together. Likewise, the identity of his followers "hunger and thirst for righteousness, for *their identity formation* will be satisfied" (the pivotal 4th Beatitude, Mt 5:6, ESV). The image and likeness of his whole ontology and function embodies *what* we are transformed to (2 Cor 3:18) and *who* we become (Col 2:10; 3:10), and only on this basis *how* we function (Eph 4:24; Col 3:15; cf. Ps 71:15). Therefore, anything less and any substitutes defining our ontology and determining our function are a reduction of our wholeness together, a fragmentation of the ontological and relational whole of who we are and whose we are in Christ. Vulnerably and humbly submitting to this wholeness of persons and relationships together embody what ongoingly emerge and unfold alive from the beatitudes to compose the ontology and function of the church as God's family.

Moreover, as our identity reveals the underlying roots or heart of how we define our ontology and determine our function, our primary identity also signifies the composition of our gospel—if it is whole or reduced. Paul's gospel and thus his own identity were not defined and determined by what he had and/or did (both past and present, cf. Phil 3:7-9) or even by his current weaknesses (2 Cor 12:7-9). In his polemic for the gospel and against reductionism, Paul made definitive both the ontological and relational changes that must by its nature (*dei*) embody the truth of the whole gospel and its whole relational outcome, that is, by the nature of who and what Jesus embodied as "the image of God" and relationally involved of the whole-ly God's ontology and function "in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4,6). Paul clearly made distinct that anything less or any substitute is not the gospel of the glory of Christ, the gospel of wholeness, but a different gospel composed by reductionism.

The new wine constituted by Jesus flowed *into* Paul, who further embodied alive its relational outcome as the new creation (Eph 4:23-24; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:10). The new wine identity emerges, develops and matures entirely from whole ontology and function. As the new wine grows from redefined and transformed persons, its relational outcome is distinguished unmistakably in the primacy of family relationships together with no veil—signified in the table fellowship of the new creation (2 Cor 3:16-18; Eph 2:14-22; Gal

6:15-16). As Paul theologically and functionally clarifies the new creation, there is a realistic sense interjected in his message: “As for those who will follow this...*wholeness* be upon them, and mercy” (Gal 6:16). The term for follow (*stoicheo*) involves progressing embodied within a certain framework. This engages the perceptual-interpretive framework by which Paul defined ontology and determined function. For Paul, he follows Jesus’ whole ontology and function in the relational progression of Jesus’ theological trajectory and relational path for the relational outcome embodying the new creation family. *Stoicheo* requires the qualitative and relational framework of the whole of Jesus to rise up alive to this relational outcome.

At the first new wine table fellowship, the disciples present did not taste the new wine yet but could only be associated with it. Their perceptual-interpretive framework and lens still reflected the old in their transition to be redefined and transformed. The practices of the early disciples and early church raise further questions about the relational outcome of the new wine, questions that still need to be raised today. What is this relational outcome embodied alive? Where do we see it new? Why don’t we see more evidence of it rise up alive? What are the issues involved here?

When Paul interjected that “mercy” (compassion, *eleos*) be upon those who follow in this framework, he is building on Jesus’ framework of discipleship that involves Jesus’ distinguished relational process and progression disclosed at the new wine table fellowship (Mt 9:10-13; cf. Mt 12:7)). This relational dynamic also interacts with the integral process of identity formation in the remaining beatitudes for the further development of his followers—“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy...” (Mt 5:6-12). God’s relational response of grace underlying this relational dynamic constitutes Jesus’ theological trajectory and relational path, which involves the relational outcome of mercy, compassion and making whole the human condition. Yet mercy must be experienced first before it can be extended alive to others. This necessitates whole understanding and experience of God’s relational response of grace in Face-to-face relationship at the depth of an undivided “heart, for they will see God.”

Once Jesus’ sacrifice for atonement was completed, the torn curtain was no minor detail in the events of the cross; nor is it merely symbolic but in rather improbable relational terms it opened up the Holy Place of God’s intimate presence to be vulnerably involved in direct relationship together Face to face, heart to heart. Jesus’ sacrifice unmistakably constituted “the new covenant in my blood,” as he disclosed in communion together (Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). This composed the improbable of Jesus’ theological trajectory and the intrusion of his relational path that composed this gospel of transformation and its relational outcome of relationship together without the veil. The removal of the veil, a necessary condition for embodying alive the new covenant relationship Face to face, was contingent on the nature of the sacrifice. Prior sacrifices behind the curtain were insufficient to open direct access to the whole and holy God.

Nothing less and no substitutes for God's whole-ly nature can constitute this sacrifice to bring about this relational outcome. Likewise, nothing less and no substitutes for our whole person, with all our sin (notably as reductionism) signifying "poor in spirit," can receive and respond back to the whole-ly God in the depth of Jesus' relational process and progression for the wholeness of reciprocal relationship together *in* the innermost of God's holy presence, *with* God's holy involvement and *by* God's holy relational work of grace. Without our vulnerable function "poor in spirit" there is a relational impasse. Anything less and any substitute for God or for our persons will be insufficient to enact or engage the depth of Jesus' relational work of grace, consequently cannot reconcile integrally life together both alive in the innermost of relationship embodied without the veil with God (Eph 3:12) and alive in relationship together embodied with no veil in God's family (Eph 2:13-16; 2 Cor 3:16-18). Paul claims to be sufficient (*hilkanos*) only in the new covenant (2 Cor 3:5-6).

The primary focus of the new wine is not on being redeemed from the old, as Paul clarified for the gospel (Gal 4:4-6; Rom 6:4). Though being saved *from* sin is a necessary condition for the new wine, it is insufficient for the relational outcome of the new wine flowing embodied alive as the new creation. The relational outcome of God's relational response of grace cannot be experienced in just the atonement for sin but necessarily also what Jesus' sacrifice saves *to* that emerges solely without the veil: the primacy of whole relationship together as God's family that is reciprocal both Face to face and face to face. It is a critical reduction of God's grace, therefore, to make the primary focus merely being saved from sin because there is no relational outcome beyond this truncated soteriology; moreover, there is no accounting of the sin of reductionism because such an accounting necessitates being saved to wholeness—the integral relational outcome of God's relational response of grace that embodies alive the new.

It is immeasurable for our whole understanding and experience of the relational outcome of the new wine as the new creation family, and that God's grace is not reduced to our terms. The irreducible experiential truth and nonnegotiable relational reality are that *grace* is not a gift given, a resource shared and an action enacted by God in the context and for the purpose of *unilateral* relationship. Grace only creates the opportunity for reciprocal relationship together, for which the recipients of God's relational response of grace are responsible and therefore accountable—whereby their identity formation narrows to the new embodied alive.

As Jesus made clear to various churches (Rev 2-3), God is not unaffected by the sin in reciprocal relationship; and as Israel's relational history evidenced, God has reciprocated with his own relational distance ("hide my face from them," Dt 31:17; 32:20; Isa 1:15; 45:15; 54:8). In other words, God's grace comes with relational demands. Compatible with God's relational response, the demands of grace are

irreducible and nonnegotiable that God wants the whole person from inner out for the relationships together necessary to be whole as the new creation family in likeness of the whole of God. Congruent with God's relational response, grace ongoingly does not allow for anything less and any substitutes.

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 unequivocally distinguishes the relational outcome of the new wine embodied alive integrally to live whole in the human context and to make whole its human condition. So take heed, the only integral relational outcome that unfolds is not the church in our image but the new creation family in the relational likeness of the Trinity, whose primacy in relationship together is irreducible and nonnegotiable to the influence of identity theft.

Counteracting Identity Theft

Identity theft commonly occurs on the internet and is an increasing condition in our surrounding contexts—notably among those not alert. Likewise, Christians tend not to be tuned in adequately to know “who told you that you are...” Christians' lack of awareness and sensitivity has been exacerbated by COVID-19's pandemic, which has constrained in-person contact and amplified the use of substitute identity equations and metrics. Consider further a growing reality close to home: The increasing stress and anxiety that Christian tweens and teens experience with identity formation, which is partly due to social media and mostly due to older Christian bystanders who don't counteract the underlying problem of identity theft taking place in their primary engagements—for the latter at work, in the community, at home and at church, and for the former at school and in venues like Twitter, Instagram, Tik-Tok and YouTube. The mental health consequences for tweens and teens has become a growing problem that Christians and churches cannot be mere bystanders to.

Given the extent of cultural influences impacting Christians today, our awareness of our identity equation, metric and formation are widely challenging. Bifocal identity, for example, is normative among Christians. So, can we define specifically the Christian basis for the identity occupying the primary position in our daily life? And would we be aware if our Christian identity has actually undergone identity theft, leaving us with only simulations and illusions in the practice of our faith?

Our challenge inescapably widens because we (individually and collectively) must counteract our prevailing identity equations, metrics and formations in order to

redeem them from contrary influence and restore them to the Word's terms. That is, redeem and restore so that what defines our identity and determines our function can be transformed to the *new* constituted only by the embodied Word. The transition, however, from any of our old to the new necessitates our accountability for explicit counteractions against that which substitutes, neutralizes and negates the Word's identity constituted for his followers; thus, these counteractions cannot be engaged by mere servants of Christ whose identity is based merely on what they do. This counteraction response is against anything less than the wholeness of who and what we are in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity (just as he prayed, Jn 17).

The steps of where we go from here has clarified a narrow path. We have to turn around from the ways we have negotiated the everyday practice of our faith on the basis of our own terms to widen the path. And we have to face the reductionism, the sin of reductionism, that shapes our identity and constructs its function in our surrounding contexts—fighting both *against* this reductionism and *for* the wholeness of the new. Why so comprehensive? Because for the original and new creation “it is not good to be apart from God's whole.” God's qualitative relational design for human creation has never changed. This identity for the person persists in God's terms, despite the misinformation composing the identity equation, metric and formation of God's people through history. Now we have to answer what our posture will be from here.

What surrounds us will not back down or away and thereby will continue to exert its influence on us. For example, in spite of various limits and constraints recently placed on social media platforms, they continue to dictate the prevailing identity equation and metric whereby the majority's identity is formed. Unless we consciously exert our will to fight against this influence, we fall into the same human condition—perhaps even willfully participating in shaping others. It is essential, however, that our choices be clearly distinguished from the human condition, or else we could merely reflect, reinforce or sustain it, as some Christians make evident.

In order not to be complicit with or enablers of what surrounds us, it is essential to embody alive the following:

1. Our consciousness must be aware of the sin of reductionism that fragments human identity and diminishes human function, including the subtle ontological simulations and functional illusions of Christians.
2. Our conscious choices must be exercised with the **qualitative sensitivity** and **relational awareness** based on the Word's relational language, in order to counteract the ontological simulations and functional illusions indicative of identity theft by reductionism.
3. Qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness emerge in our consciousness only to the extent of our being vulnerable from inner out, which is essential for our will to be exercised with our person-consciousness and not by self-consciousness.

4. Person consciousness vulnerably embodies alive the primacy of the qualitative and the relational, whereby it then would constitute the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity, all of which is irreplaceable to distinguish our identity and function in order to counteract identity theft.

Qualifier: Our image and likeness must by its nature be constituted on the basis of the Trinity and not according to our human basis, in order to counteract the mindset “that I was one just like yourself.”

The vulnerable turn-around process of identity formation from the old to the new involves not only counteracting identity theft. Integrally necessary is also the deconstruction of veiled identities substituting for the new (see 2 Cor 3:14-15). Reexamine Paul’s identity formation from the old to the new and his metric: “Yet whatever gains I had *in the old*, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ” (Phil 3:4-7). His old identity deconstruction also necessarily included deconstruction of common identities ascribed to Christ: “even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way” (2 Cor 5:16). When the deconstruction of the old identity takes place, then, and only then, the new creation identity forms unequivocally from inner out to reconstitute the whole person embodied alive (2 Cor 5:17). Paul was emphatic about the new’s identity equation and metric—“For neither *the identity metric of circumcision* nor *the metric of uncircumcision* is anything *for our identity equation*; but a new creation is everything *for our identity formation*” (Gal 6:15)—and he ongoingly counteracted anything less and any substitutes, even in his new identity (see 2 Cor 12:7-9).

So, have you examined your default status as a migrant, the roots of which are even more pronounced as Christian sojourners (Heb 11:13; Phil 3:20; 1 Pet 1:17; 2:11)? The changes surrounding all of us and the impact of their influence on each of us make our identity formation an inescapable challenge. You could deny the condition of what surrounds you, or you could avoid the challenge as an inconvenient truth. However you exercise your free will, be assured that you are always accountable for your choices. Because whoever you are or whatever you become as a Christian cannot negate *whose* you can be or will become in his new creation family.

Take heed: The identity equation and metric you use will be the only identity you get—for yourself, God and others; and the identity you use will be the faith you get and the witness you have.

Chapter 3 ISSUE 3: *Knowing God & Understanding the Bible*

“But let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me.”

Jeremiah 9:24

“Have I been with you all this time and you still do not know me?”

John 14:9

Common in today’s world, diverse local and global surrounding contexts are devolving with misinformation and fake news. Christians need to seriously consider how much of this permeates our practice and composes our everyday playbook. Where we get our information is certainly at the center of this condition. The internet, for example, is how Gen Z becomes informed and thus consistently misinformed about the world. In today’s divisive climate, the ability or desire to distinguish fact from fiction and truth from falseness eludes even Christians. Therefore, being able to discern misinformation from facts and fake news from the truth is an inescapable issue that affects us all, thereby challenging the perceptions and interpretations of all Christians—including academicians engaged in the theological task. Since we are influenced in one way or another by this (mis)Information Age, no one is a bystander.

A historical narrative of misinformation has frequently shaped Christian perceptual-interpretive frameworks for theology and lenses for practice, which also has claimed the Bible as its source. Such a narrative has diluted the integrity of the Way, compromised the integrity of the Truth, and fragmented the integrity of the Life, which the Word vulnerably embodied to constitute with nothing less and no substitutes. When the whole person embodying the Truth, Way and Life eludes our understanding, these become bits of information or soundbites in Christian vocabulary. Therefore, our challenge widens with the need among Christians to *know* the Word. But, on the other hand, our path narrows when the Way, the Truth and the Life is understood.

The Words of the Bible

The narrative history of Christians’ interpretation of the Bible can read like a cautionary tale, which by necessity makes inescapable the issue of understanding the Bible either as a book or a context. Evangelicals, for example have been known as people of the Book, while the identity of too few Christians is defined by the Bible as a context. As a book, the Bible is assumed by many Christians to be the main source (if

not inerrant) for knowledge of God, yet what many hold in theory is not upheld in actual practice. That is to say, the epistemic realm of our knowledge of God often has undergone subtle redefinition, thereby replacing God's Word as the main source with other conflated sources or extra-biblical sources. For example, as a general source of knowledge today, Wikipedia (and other similar websites) has become a prominent source occupying the public mind. Likewise, a host of biblical commentators has formed (both unintended and intended) an analogous Wikipedia source (e.g. as Theopedia) for conflated or extra-biblical knowledge, which serves as the main source of our knowledge of God (the what) that in practice supplants the how by the words from God. The critical issue is the spread of misinformation. Consequently, we have to openly ask further if the cyber world has co-opted the epistemic realm from which our learning is defined and our understanding is determined.

Nico Mele, the director of Harvard's Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, expounds generally on the damaging effects of the use of this technology not only on compromising the integrity of information but its power to shape our thinking. For Nico, however, the problem is not technology but "there's something in our culture that has become less substantive"; this is the problem of the human condition that he admits to not fully understanding.¹ The lack of understanding the human condition with its underlying sin of reductionism is also indicative of many, if not most, Christians. This has certainly impacted the integrity of both churches and the academy, raising legitimate concern about the significance of the education and learning in those contexts.

The reality we need to wake up to is discomfoting: The oft-unrecognized limits of this epistemic realm provide the rationally constricted and emotionally constrained parameters for the extent of our knowledge, while also biasing our learning and understanding of God, such that what we think we know of God is really less because God has been reduced to *less*.

This raises further key questions about our epistemic realm that we urgently need to address:

- *Who* is the God we see and claim in the Bible?
- *What* is that God we have in our theology?
- *How* is that God in our everyday life?

The interpretation directly leading to our answers to these questions also further involves hermeneutic issues, the sum of which will either expose their reduced condition of less (as in fragmentary at best) or be integrated for their wholeness.

¹ Nico Mele expressed his views in an interview in the *Los Angeles Times Business Beat* (March 6, 2018) and in his book *The End of Big: How the Internet Makes David the New Goliath* (New York: Macmillan, 2013).

These basic issues and questions are essential to resolve in our relationship with God, in order to truly know and understand the whole of God (the Trinity) revealing who, what and how God *is* to, for and with us. This resolution amplifies the need for redemptive change (the old dying and the new rising) in our learning processes and education systems, both in the church and the academy.

An ongoing tension will exist in our discussion between ‘discourse to inform’ and ‘communication to connect’; the former is aligned to the Bible as book and the latter to the Bible as context. Perhaps you may consider your interpretations to engage both sides. Yet, that does not resolve the tension, which hopefully will become evident.

Consider this: 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.

When I was in the U.S. Air Force, I was exposed to different parts of the U.S. and the world, which until then I had only virtual awareness of. This exposure brought direct experiences of these differences, which clarified and corrected my virtual ones. I recall vividly when I became friends with a colleague who was from the deep South of the U.S. We shared the same language, but being from the heart of the Midwest, Chicago, there were numerous times that I either didn’t understand his southern dialect or misunderstood his connotations of the same words. Since we both had played football, we shared that common bond; yet, making ongoing connection in general was not without difficulty, and a challenge we both had to work on linguistically. (By the way, he shifted more to a Midwesterner than I did to a Southerner—which some may see as a misinformed “victory” for the English language.)

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 in their mutual contest, “Why is my language not clear to you?” (Jn 8:43). 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). Critical to this process, what underlies interpretation conflicts with the Word are language barriers generated, erected and sustained by reductionism (8:42-47).

How reductionism is at the heart of interpretation conflicts emerged from the beginning; and it is indispensable to understand the language barriers reductionism creates, if we are to get past our current level of biblical interpretation and deeper into the Word's context of connection. The challenge before us is to understand the language presented in the Bible in order to know if we are interpreting a book's 'discourse to inform' or a context's 'communication to connect'. And we need to understand also, as the Word made axiomatic for listening to his words: The language we use in our interpretation will be either the amount of information we get or the extent of connection we have.

The Language in Use

The text of the Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, yet this literary fact does not necessarily define the composition of Scripture and the language distinguished by the Word. An abundance of exegesis and word studies of the biblical languages, not to mention critical studies, have accumulated a wealth of data (cf. Eccl 12:12) that have not advanced biblical studies with the significance to answer Jesus' above question. This is the type of learning and education that Paul cautioned Timothy not to be misled and shaped by (2 Tim 3:7). The problem yet to be adequately resolved by churches and the academy is twofold: (1) understanding the nature of the Word's language, and (2) addressing the reductionism that is the barrier to this understanding.

The biblical text is expressed in various genres, which is helpful to know for discerning what is being expressed. This knowledge, however, neither accesses the original-*original* composition of the Word nor insures an understanding of the composition in its *original* language—that is, beyond and deeper than its Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek wording. The specific composition of the Word doesn't clearly emerge and fully unfold from its general expression unless that composition is perceived (read and listened to) in what is truly its original language. Stated briefly: The original language antecedes the biblical languages and gets us to the nature of the Word's language, which is essential for understanding the Word. Furthermore, this understanding is essential to know the self-revelations God communicates to connect vulnerably with us, so that we can, will and do *know* the whole-ly God, not merely information about God.

Jesus used parables to express various ideas, yet his thoughts 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 and rendered to a book. As noted earlier, at creation the 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—for example, as an indirect behavioral code instead of direct reciprocal relational involvement.

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 shift to the 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.

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 to only inform—the narrow transmission of information—therefore a language that cannot understand the composition of the words *from* 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?”

In Jesus’ paradigm for hearing/listening to the Word, applying also to reading the Word, the following are to be further understood as axiomatic:

- The nature of the language we use will be the Word(s) we get.
- This measure of the Word(s) we use will be the purpose of the Word(s)’s language that we get.
- The nature and purpose of the language we use for the Word(s) will be the knowledge and understanding of God we get—which then defines how we learn and what constitutes education, which goes on to determine how we educate and thus what we learn, all either merely *of* God in the virtual realm or deeply *from* God in the direct realm of relational connection.

When Jesus illuminated the presence, influence and consequences of reductionism, he was not only clarifying our existing condition but also addressing what needs to be corrected. Our initial discussion of reductionism only introduces us to the scope of this prevailing reality and its workings. We also need to understand the breadth and depth of its prevalence.

From the beginning, the dynamic workings of reductionism have put into living motion (not virtual) the human (including our) condition. Therefore, we need to recognize unmistakably and to understand entirely:

Reductionism by its nature routinely imposes a narrowed perceptual-interpretive mindset that reduces our lens with the following consequences:

1. limits the epistemic realm to fragment our epistemology,
2. diminishes the ontology of all persons,
3. minimalizes any and all relationships.

The perceptual-interpretive mindset of reductionism evolved in Israel's theology and practice from the OT into the NT, which composed a referential theology and formed an outer-in practice that were critiqued initially by the prophets (e.g. Isa 29:13; Eze 33:30-32) and further by Jesus (Mk 7:6-8).

Referentialization of the Word is the most significant, and least understood, consequence emerging from the dynamic of reductionism. As Jesus would further clarify and deeply correct:

- The language we use for the Word will be the measure of the God we get—that is, relational language distinguishes God as Subject, who functions accordingly, whereas referential language limits God to Object, as the Object of our faith, our doctrine and/or related information.
- The measure of the God we use will be the measure of our persons we get—Subject God constitutes subject persons in whole ontology and function, while Object God reconstitutes objects simulating persons in reduced ontology and function.

These axioms are essential to understand in our theology, to address in our practice, and to apply in our theology and practice. The alternative is to be rendered to the “idols” of both God and our persons erected in our theology and practice (Ps 115:8; 135:18).

Given the definitive nature of the words from God's language and the determinative purpose of the Word's clarification and correction, it is crucial for our theological anthropology in particular and theology in general to understand a distinction that is not interchangeable.² Despite the indispensable place of the creation context to complete the context composing the narrative for human beings, it is insufficient, inadequate and incorrect for theological anthropology simply to reference the context of the Creator. As Subject, the Creator's context is not a referential context; and Creator-Subject's creative and communicative actions (as well as salvific) are enacted only in relational terms, never referential terms that diminish, minimalize or make secondary the primacy of God's relational design, purpose and function. In other words, God by nature

² I reemphasize this discussion I made previously in *The Person in Complete Context: The Whole of Theological Anthropology Distinguished* (Theological Anthropology Study: 2014). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

acts simply in relational terms, which we quite simply often overlook or ignore. There is a basis for this.

The relational terms composing these relational actions can only be distinguished in Creator-Subject's relational context, and not a referential context in which this relational significance becomes elusive, gets obscured, or is lost. This points to the underlying use of language. The use of relational terms and its composing relational language function for the primary purpose of *communication in relationship*. In contrast, and often in conflict, the use of referential terms and its composing referential language function for the purpose of *transmitting information*, which is only secondary at best to the primary function and purpose of relationship. Essentially, on the one hand, it can be said that referential language was not "designed" for the further development of qualitative communication in relationship but, on the other hand, in reality it purposely went in the opposite direction that takes us away from qualitative relational connection. Historically, the referential language of prose evolved after poetry, and early poetry was sung, the qualitative significance of which was basic to communication in relationship and not the mere transmission of information.³ For further consideration, Iain McGilchrist locates this qualitative process in the function of the right brain hemisphere. This qualitative function of the right hemisphere, and its related view of the world, is in contrast to the quantitative reduction of words to the referential language of prose by the left brain hemisphere for its function not of communication in relationship but to merely make discourse about something.⁴

This further makes explicit the non-interchangeable terms composing the distinction between relational language and referential language. We need to understand this distinction to identify the language used by God and that of theological discourse because the two languages have distinctly different levels of significance, if not meaning. That is to say, language matters, and our working language will mean the difference between whole-ly knowing and understanding God and the human person, or merely having common fragmentary knowledge and referential information about them. And we cannot boast of the former on the basis of having the latter, no matter the quantity we possess (cf. Jer 9:23-24). Jesus' above paradigm is axiomatic for our theology and practice, and thus pivotal for their significance.

Moreover, language matters because language both forms thought and makes functional any thought (notably human consciousness) antecedent to language. It has become increasingly apparent to modern scientific research that the language we speak shapes the way we see the world and even the way we think (not necessarily producing

³ See Oliver Sacks for a discussion on perfect pitch, tonal communication and protolanguage, *Musophilia: Tales of Music and the Brian* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008); see also Edward Foley, *From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991), 9.

⁴ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 105.

thought).⁵ This points to the function of language not merely as a means of expression but also as a template imposing a constraint limiting what we see and the way we think.⁶

This modern awareness provides us with some understanding of the dynamic of referential language—how it works and what effect it has—that was set in motion from the primordial garden. So, what do you perceive as the purpose for the words from Creator God to the persons in the primordial garden? Was the purpose to transmit important information, or to communicate vital relational terms? Given that specific purpose, does that purpose engage those persons as subjects or merely as objects—that is, as subject-persons to be involved in relationship together, or as objects merely to conform to what God said?

From the primordial garden to the Law to the teachings of the Word, if the language you use is referential language, then what is the purpose you get from your interpretations; and what significance does that purpose have to God?

In the nature of God’s relational language, the only purpose that God has, enacts, and fulfills is to communicate with persons for relationship together, not for their information to conform to, and therefore for their inner-out involvement in the primacy of vulnerable relationship together—reciprocal relationship together face to face, person to person. Moreover, this primacy of relationship is constituted by persons not subtly defined and determined from outer in as those in reduced ontology and function, but only the reciprocal relationship involved vulnerably with persons from inner out constituted in whole ontology and function. When the nature of the language in use has lost its relational integrity, that language has compromised its purpose for the persons engaged. The unavoidable consequence is that that language either has no significant purpose or is simply used as an end in itself. Referential language fulfills either consequence in its assumed purpose; but then, that is the nature of referential language as conjointly composed by reductionism and propagated by its counter-relational workings (as Jesus clarified and corrected, Jn 8:44-45).

If we understand the nature of language, then whatever way we read the Bible, engage Scripture, or listen to the Word should always evoke our concern for the purpose of the language in us. Is this language to inform me, or to communicate with me? Is God merely engaged in theological discourse, or deeply involved to make relational connection with me? How we define this purpose is contingent on the language God uses. Accordingly, our understanding of the language composing the Word will determine whether we have been merely informed by the words of God composing a Book, or we have been relationally communicated with by the words from God constituting the context for connection. The outcome we will take away from this vital concern is the

⁵ Reported by Sharon Begley in “What’s in a Word?” *Newsweek*, July 20, 2009, 31.

⁶ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 110.

extent of knowing and understanding God, or at least what we think we know and understand about God.

Language Barriers

What Jesus illuminated in the above interaction is that there are unavoidable language barriers preventing understanding; and that until these language barriers are removed there will be interpretive conflicts and impasses in understanding. This problem is analogous to marriage conflicts, which may require the spouses to have marriage counseling to get past the language barriers that they either don't understand or are reluctant to face. In such situations counseling is not merely a suggestion but a need.

Subtle language barriers also emerge in the common use of technology today and the level of involvement it generates that diminishes relationships as an existential reality. Users have not understood the nature of such language barriers and have been reluctant to face them because of an underlying addiction to this technology. This addiction has evolved similarly to the current opioid addiction crisis in the U.S. Opioid addicts may have initially used painkillers for legitimate needs, but soon found themselves entrenched in its use as an end in itself. Compounding this addiction is the pharmaceutical industry, which has promoted opioid use despite knowing its consequences for users. This condition is accelerated by doctors' prescription abuses and amplified immeasurably by drug cartels pushing Fentanyl. Yet, both for users and developers in either addiction, these current conditions help point out the nature of language barriers that is not understood or is resisted to face up to, and thus may even willfully impose, sustain and promote language barriers on purpose.

Language barriers are a "natural" occurrence in human relations, yet their existence is evidence of the nature of the human condition. The current political divisiveness dominating the U.S. is simply a demonstration of this human condition, and the language barriers of identity politics can be summed in a single word: toxic. Toxic is the single "word of the year" chosen for 2018 by the editors at the Oxford English Dictionary; Dictionary.com chose "misinformation," which is certainly a primary medium of toxic language and the spread of conspiracy theories. This word describes the language dominating still and the obvious purpose it has fulfilled in its use. Sadly, but not surprisingly, Christians leaders have also used toxic language to emphasize their partisan political views, as well as engaged in the spread of misinformation to support those views. The barriers created, however, go beyond the use of such language. As science has discovered, the language we speak also shapes both the way we see the world and even

the way we think. This reality of our minds helps illuminate the nature of our human condition and the language barriers evolving from it to determine human relations, even in relation to God.

Certainly, the political parties in the U.S. would benefit from “marriage” counseling to get past their language barriers. But this outcome depends on the willingness of the parties to be open to each other. This openness involves a vulnerability both to one’s own person and to the other person. The same dynamic of vulnerability is necessary to get past language barriers with the Word. This process is distinguished in a key interaction with the Word (Jn 3:1-11).

Jesus had been communicating intensively the words from God, which was at the heart of his actions and underlying his “miraculous signs” (*semion*, 3:2). Yet, the theological trajectory and relational path composed by his language expressions were not understood by this biblical scholar (a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin), because Jesus’ language signs could not be processed by Nicodemus’ perceptual-interpretive mindset (3:4,9-10). What Jesus clarified was Nicodemus’ prevailing referential language, which created this language barrier preventing Nicodemus from understanding the relational significance of the words Jesus communicated. Accordingly, Jesus had to correct Nicodemus’ narrow thinking formed by his referential language in order to overcome the language barrier between them.

Language barriers by nature and on purpose subtly pervade the Christian community, distinctly shaping both relationship with God and relationships with each other either without relational significance or in non-relational terms. On the one hand, this is not surprising because this existing (and still evolving) condition is the ingenious workings of reductionism; on the other hand, Christians can and should expect more existential reconciliation since this is the stated outcome for the gospel composed by the Word (as in Col 1:21-23; Eph 2:14-18). Even though this composition of the Word has been used to formulate doctrines of salvation, which most Christians subscribe to, has this doctrinal language (no matter how dogmatic) significantly reduced the language barriers still existing in relationships both with God and each other? If not, why this disparity between our theology and practice?

In consideration of your thinking and what formed it, how do you perceive the book of Deuteronomy and interpret its main composition with the sum details of God’s law? You would likely see Deuteronomy as the Book of Law and interpret its composition as the Rule of Law by which God’s people need to live, fulfilling its duties and obligations in obedience to God. This is the most prominent perception and interpretation, yet it emerges from a perceptual-interpretive mindset that in reality creates a language barrier with these words from God—as the scholar Nicodemus would testify. Again, the language we use will be the Deuteronomy we get; and the above perception and interpretation evolve from referential language, which, to repeat emphatically, formed the perceptual-interpretive mindset establishing this language barrier in order to

frustrate the language purpose of God, thereby promoting misinformation in our theology and practice.

With the nature of God's relational language, the book of Deuteronomy is composed definitively to fulfill the language purpose essential for the words *from* God. Deuteronomy is not a book transmitting important information about the Law, despite the fact that it details what obedience to God looks like. On the contrary, the relational language of Deuteronomy in primary function communicates the words from God, specifically in order to share the relational terms (not mere law) necessary to have depth (as in whole) of relationship together integrally with God and with each other. Without God's relational terms, relationship together will not emerge and unfold as the relational reality, though referential language certainly has informed us of its evolution as a virtual reality. For God's language purpose, therefore, the book of Deuteronomy is uncommonly composed as the ultimate love story (highlighted in Dt 4:37; 7:8; 10:15; 23:5; 33:3,12), that is, the Book of Love (not Law) to fulfill God's only language purpose:

The irreducible and nonnegotiable covenant of love (Dt 7:9) for relationship together in wholeness—the relational language and terms which compose and thereby distinguish the nature of *tamiym* (“be whole”) that emerged in Genesis 17:1 (cf. Dt 18:9,13), unfolded in whole ontology and function with the Shema (Dt 6:4-6), and is sustained in face-to-face relationship with God's definitive blessing (Num 6:24-25).

Whether the focus is Deuteronomy or any other part of Scripture, the relational nature and purpose of the words from God elude those using referential language. And there will always be this language barrier as long as their perceptual-interpretive mindset is formed by the reductionist ingenuity of referential language. Given this prevailing condition underlying much theology and practice, how do you assess your thinking and what formed it? Like Nicodemus, the clarification and correction by the Word is always available to those who are willing to be vulnerable with their person and thus change—which was a simple yet difficult process to embrace by the disciples to address the barrier in their thinking (Lk 9:44-45; Mk 9:33-34).

The Subtitles of Language

Serious Christians would not separate knowing God from knowing God's Word. Yet, if God's language is essentially foreign to understand, how would any Christian know God's Word without subtitles? Subtitles, however, don't automatically result in understanding a foreign language, because who or what produced the subtitles could be

misleading or lacking in nuance—especially if only a literal translation. Subtitles, therefore, lead us directly into the wider issue of interpretation and the inescapable challenge of our interpretations of the Bible.

Basically, from the beginning subtitles have been added to the words from God: “that the tree was to be desired to make one wise” (Gen 3:6). And the interpretive history of God’s people has been a narrative of misleading subtitles or lacking the relational nuance of God’s language essential in God’s revelations (cf. Ps 50:7-14; 51:16-17; Isa 29:13). In a defining moment pivotal for those active with God’s Word, Jesus clarified and corrected (1) what is God’s Word and its basis, as well as (2) how it is seen (or heard) and that outcome: “I thank you, Father, Lord of *all life*, because you have hidden ‘the words from God’ from the *mindset of the wise* and the intelligent and have revealed them to *the mindset of the vulnerable*” (Lk 10:21), whereby the Bible either becomes a book of God’s words or is the context for the connection together with God.

When Jesus literally leaped for joy and danced (*agalliao*) in his above praise of his Father, his excitement revolved around the integral fight against reductionism and its defeat by the words from God revealed in wholeness. What Jesus distinguished in this key moment must not be overlooked or dismissed: The revelation of God’s words emerges only with a distinct perceptual-interpretive mindset, and only these interpretations unfold with whole understanding (*synesis*) of the words communicated from God. Anything less and any substitutes for this mindset (*phroneo*) illuminated by the Word form an alternate perceptual-interpretive mindset, which is challenged in all its interpretations—just as Peter experienced with the interpretation from his mindset (Mk 8:31-33). Today the need for challenging interpretations is wider than ever because they form subtitles consequential for the composition of the Word.

Unavoidable Need to Challenge Interpretations

Persons, groups, peoples, tribes 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. 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 communicative 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 realm of 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, extending the previous discussion on John 3:16, 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, including apparent 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 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).

Not to be overlooked in the Word’s challenge are the interpretations of his main disciples, which also needed to be challenged in this narrative. Their interpretations of Jesus’ person were challenged implicitly in his direct question to the twelve—as always composed in relational language—which included the implied three relational messages that focus on his person, their persons and the relationship between them. After “many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (6:66), “Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’” (v.67) That is, given how Jesus vulnerably revealed his whole person, how then did they see his person (cf. Mt 16:13-15); and on this basis, what did his disclosure face to face say about both their persons and the relationship between them? Peter responded that their search focused on no other source (unlike those above in John 5:39), and that their interpretations provided the knowledge to put their faith in the fact “you are the Holy One of God” (6:68-69). Later, Peter’s further interpretation of the words from God concluded that “you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16-17).

The Word raised these questions to challenge their (and our) interpretations, whereby to clarify language barriers and to correct misinformed, misleading and biased interpretations. His challenge is needed ongoingly to counter, neutralize and transform the common perceptual-interpretive mindset of reductionism that is formed by the primary medium transmitting reductionism: referential language and terms. How would you assess Peter’s interpretations of the embodied Word? Since you likely have the same interpretations of the Word, what would you conclude about his mindset and any bias in his interpretations? Peter’s were exposed right after his definitive interpretation about the Word as the Messiah.

When Jesus vulnerably shared the reality of what his person would soon experience—not a mere event and historical fact—this was incompatible with Peter’s messianic expectations (Mt 16:21). Accordingly from this mindset (*phroneo*), he confronted Jesus on what essentially echoed the earlier disciples’ interpretation: “This is a hard *disclosure*. Who can accept it?” Peter didn’t accept it and rebuked Jesus to his face: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” (Mt 16:22). This encounter

certainly precipitated the urgent need for immediate attention to challenge Peter's biased interpretation and existing perceptual-interpretive mindset. Jesus' person then flared open to counter Peter's reductionism, mindset and referential interpretation: "Get behind me, *Peter—acting as a surrogate of Satan!* You are a *conflicting barrier to my person*; for you are setting your *phroneo* not on *God's realm* but on *the limits and constraints of the human realm*" (16:23). Hence, Peter's biased interpretation and reduced mindset were corrected, yet still in need of transformation—the need Peter further demonstrated through much of his discipleship.

Like Peter, do you have professions of faith that may need to be challenged, not necessarily for their doctrine but for their significance? Hopefully the Word will clarify that for you through this study and present you with corrections to carefully listen to and consider in your theology and practice—and thereby embrace as needed.

This points us back to the second relational message that Jesus communicated in his questions above: our person, how he sees us and how we see 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:

- If 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 at the exclusion of anything secondary.
- If 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 at the exclusion of the quantitative secondary but always in this order of priority.

In this second relational message implied in his question, Jesus implicitly clarified the theological anthropology used by the twelve to define their person, which then affected (biased) how they saw his person and interpreted the Word (the focus of the first relational message). By challenging their interpretation, the Word exposed their reduced ontology and function, in order for the correction needed that would eventually lead to the transformation essential for their whole ontology and function. Their transformation to wholeness unfolded as they addressed their reductionism in their theology and practice. Yet, as clearly witnessed, this relational outcome needed ongoing challenges to their interpretations (e.g. Mk 8:14-21). Critically, however, not all challenges are adequate for this relational purpose, nor are any source of challenge sufficient for this relational outcome. Integral to *the need* for challenging interpretations is *the basis* for these challenges.

The Basis:

God's trajectory into the universe and the human context has been a subject of philosophical speculation and debate through the ages, the results of which have essentially reduced God's trajectory to a virtual reality. This reduction diverts or prevents us from distinguishing the real reality of the theological trajectory of God's presence and the relational path of God's involvement in the common context of human life. Not only philosophy but any and all reductionism keeps us from distinguishing the trajectory of this presence that only God reveals, and also the path of this involvement that only God determines—the presence and involvement experienced only in God's context of connection. The revelation of God's presence and the determination of God's involvement emerge distinguished unmistakably and unfold accordingly in the Scriptures. The terms, however, for God's presence and involvement have been redefined in human terms, whereby the basis for presence and involvement has undergone diverse interpretations. We need to return to the definitive basis of God's theological trajectory and relational path, so that all such interpretations can be challenged only by the communication revealing the words from God.

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."⁷ At the same time, this historical account must be interpreted theologically—contrary to historical criticism—in order to fully account for God's action and involvement in the human context, not to overlook accounting for the whole of 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.

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*) 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

⁷ 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.

understanding to emerge; yet, as evident in the academy, the hermeneutic process also needs to be qualified in order to understand God as revealed in Scripture.⁸

Whole understanding emerges based on how God is revealed in Scripture—that is, based on God’s communication of self-disclosure distinctly by the words from God, rather than based on surrogates just transmitting information about God using the words of God. This distinction of how God is 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—including 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 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 words from God communicated directly to us in relationship for the sole relational purpose to experience in relationship together in our current context.⁹ 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

⁸ 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).

⁹ 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).

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" the primary of God's relational language, he clearly demonstrates for us the primary basis for interpreting the words from God—a 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 self-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).

Further Critical Distinctions to Make:

The above essential distinction points to further critical distinctions that need to be made to establish the primary basis for interpretations. In the dynamic of interpretation there is the ongoing direct epistemological interaction between revelation and **discovery**, that is, God's revelation and our discovery. In this reflexive interaction, it must be clearly realized that God's revelation is always antecedent to our discovery, and thus is always primary to any and all secondary efforts by our engagement of the Bible (and other biblical sources) to discover knowledge of God. In the interpretive dynamic—no matter how reflexive it becomes (as in a hermeneutic cone or spiral)—knowing and understanding God emerges foremost when we listen carefully to God first, and thereby always maintain this primary hermeneutic context and process in the primacy of relationship together. Only on this basis does the basis for interpretation become primary.

The transcendent God cannot be humbly discovered in a limited epistemic realm or by a narrowed-down epistemic process—which apophatic (negative) theology rightly claims about what we can say about God, yet wrongly limits it to what cannot be said. However, as Moses taught us, the transcendent God can be known and experienced through the face-to-face presence and involvement of God—taking us beyond merely an encounter based solely on faith—whose depth emerged in the beginning with the Word

and converged in the embodied Word. This is the relational outcome when our discovery is anteceded by and thus based on God’s revelation—which the two disciples on the road to Emmaus learned the hard way (Lk 24:31-32).

This points to a second critical distinction, which the two disciples made evident in their previous interpretations of the Word, the kind of interpretation that has evolved exponentially. In the diverse interpretations of the Word and what so-called knowledge and understanding of God have amassed, the sum of what is concluded is best described as merely a **parenthesis**: an additional comment or explanation about the words of God, signifying interpretations that substitute for the expression of the words from God communicated in relational language. Accordingly, parentheses prevail in biblical interpretation and studies but only with the following limits: As the diverse comments and explanations from our ideas and concepts of God in referential language, and in spite of how widely transmitted, they don’t get to the heart of the Word from God; thus they neither know nor understand God in the primary context of relationship and its essential relational process—the relational context and process necessary to be involved in order to know any person, human or divine. Therefore, whatever their source or level of expertise, parentheses are human theological shaping of God that must be exposed, clarified and corrected as a basis for interpretation, so that our interpretations can get to the heart of God’s presence and involvement to truly know and understand God in our theology and practice (as illuminated in Ps 25:4-5, 9-10,14).

As we learn from Moses, when God speaks face to face in relational language, the Word reveals God’s glory—*kābôd*, the depth essentially of the heart of God—so that the Word from God unmistakably distinguishes God’s ontology as whole-ly beyond all the common of life (Ex 33:18-23; 34:5-6; Isa 5:16, cf. Ps 29). When God’s presence and involvement are distinguished in whole ontology and function—for which Moses held God accountable to reveal—the words from God render any parentheses about the words of God secondary at best, but mostly speechless to speak for God or mute to echo God’s words—just as Aaron and Miriam were chastened and corrected (Num 12:2,5,8-9), along with others who have taken the road to Emmaus.

This leads us to a third critical distinction urgently needing to be made among more mature Christians, because the quality of biblical interpretations today has created a theological fog. The existing global church and academy are not lacking in biblical interpretations, with increasing theological interpretations supplementing this quantity. Basically, they all contradict the Word’s priority to “Be still” (*raph*), signifying to *cease* human effort and *desist* from human shaping in order to “know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). The issue here is not their quantity but both their quality and their underlying basis. Much of this knowledge is ambiguous in its understanding because much of its understanding is misleading in significance—that is, for significance in what is primary instead of merely the secondary.

The distinction needing to be made here is between **biblical literacy** and actually knowing and understanding God (the critical boasts in Jer 9:23-24). This distinction brings to the surface the basis for biblical interpretation and the differences that center on the secondary or the primary, and that result in quantity or quality respectively. On what side of this distinction do you see many Christians, church leaders and scholars, not to mention yourself?

The practice today of biblical literacy centers on gaining and possessing knowledge of the words of God referenced throughout the Bible. What characterizes this knowledge is the information composed in referential language, which may accurately inform the reader about the words of God but by the nature of its language also render that knowledge ambiguous and understanding misleading. The understanding evolving from biblical literacy is misleading, because based on its referential language its understanding centers on only what appears (and is assumed) to be the words from God—when in fact it is simply composed by the referential information about the words of God. Proper biblical (not extra-biblical) fact-checking (not proof-texting) make evident that only simulations of the words from God are utilized, subtly or unknowingly, which then not only misinform and mislead but also promote, reinforce and sustain illusions about what is known. Simply stated about biblical literacy:

The ambiguity is that the knowledge is only partial at best or simply fragmentary—notably as it is used for theology to formulate partial doctrines with fragmentary propositional truths (as in a Rule of Faith), then conforming to this Rule of Faith for practice in what amounts to a virtual reality—thereby misleading its possessors and practitioners into thinking that understanding of *more* (an illusion of the whole) is gained.

Biblical literacy, however, is not the knowledge and understanding—no matter how much the quantity of expertise—that can claim to know and understand God. But, then, that is both the nature and purpose of referential language as evolved from reductionism, summarized as follows:

To form the perceptual-interpretive mindset, framework and even worldview that create epistemological illusion about what we know and understand (including of “good and evil” as well as of God), in order to promote ontological simulations about God for simulations in our ontology and function, so that ambiguous knowledge and misleading understanding will generate fog in our theology and practice.

Therefore, the reductionist basis of biblical literacy requires us to go beyond questioning only the legitimacy of many challenges in interpretation and leads us also to questioning

the education and what is learned in our churches and academy, and to challenge their legitimacy.

In contrast and conflict with the boasts of biblical literacy, biblical discovery and parentheses of what amounts to a book, for our clarification and correction the words from God are communicated in relational language in order to distinguish the essential context specifically for our relational connection to actually know and understand God—to know and understand integrally as the experiential truth (not merely propositional) and the relational reality (not mere virtual). As the two disciples learned from the *whole* Way, this *uncommon* relational connection is accessible even if we find ourselves on the road to Emmaus. The Word is accessible, however, only by the relational involvement defined by the Word's relational terms; and in this specific relational context and process the Word vulnerably makes accessible:

His whole person, the whole of God and God's wholeness, and the whole (not just big) picture of the design and purpose of God's presence and involvement, and the whole relational outcome fulfilled by the whole-ly Trinity—all embodied, enacted and fulfilled irreducibly, as well as integrally distinguished nonnegotiablely, by whole ontology and function, therefore on the basis of nothing less and no substitutes.

Transitioning in Our Challenge:

The words of the Bible with anything less and any substitutes for the Word render the Bible to a book without its essential context. This context is elusive when it's composed in a language foreign to it; and this is the typical perceptual-interpretive lens that has widened the path to misguiding and misleading subtitles—interpretations that include traditions of theology and practice. The epistemic and hermeneutic processes indicated above converge in this issue: the math of God's Word that calculates God's terms for theology and practice, introduced briefly here and expanded on in the next section.

Calculating this math is illustrated by Nathaniel (Jn 1:44-50). He was ready to redact the Word with a common stereotype, but he made a pivotal transition from using a traditional subtitle of a book to the vulnerable context face to face with the embodied Word—but only after recalculating his math of the Word. This was essential for having clarity of perception and the correct interpretation of the Word, which widened the challenge for Nathaniel's perceptual-interpretive lens.

The simple truth is: God communicates, and only God speaks for God, using human contexts, authors and language to express in relational terms the whole of who, what and how God is. All Christians are subject to the authority of God's communication,

which is not about conforming literally to the text of Scripture. Thus, we are all challenged in our interpretive (hermeneutic) process. **The hermeneutic challenge** is the relational process of involvement that responds directly—neither indirectly nor with the latitude of personal interests and biases—to God and submits to the authority of God’s communication. This makes unmistakable the transition in our challenge. Any identity of God that does not unfold from this hermeneutic challenge of Scripture should be suspect—and rightfully encountered with a hermeneutic of suspicion—as well as challenged for clarification, if not confronted for correction.

While the text of Scripture requires interpretation, the authority of Scripture is not subject to interpretation, particularly under the cloak of the priesthood of all believers. Authority is God’s domain and Christian faith only affirms the truth of this reality, so our faith does not compose this authority. This subtle distinction is critical to maintain in our faith. Moreover, while the practice of this faith may be variable among Christians, the affirmation of this truth is not dependent on faith alone and thus not subject to the diversity of Christian beliefs. Even though the relational response of the priesthood of all believers may reciprocally represent God, those who so respond do not speak *for* God.

This directs us in our involvement to the following:

Beyond merely a step of faith, undertaking the hermeneutic challenge requires a valid basis and reliable process of interpreting Scripture that is crucial in order for all Christians to be able to trust what God says and reveals.

Nathanael represents a disciple who initially entered the scope of the hermeneutic challenge (Jn 1:44-50). In spite of his bias (“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”) Nathanael submitted to the hermeneutic challenge to look for the Word in the reality disclosed only by the Word, which required him to suspend his bias enough for him to be open to this deeper reality—to whom the Word responded, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit” (v.47). The relational outcome distinctly from Nathanael’s reciprocal relational response was to learn and know the Word, though his understanding at this stage of the hermeneutic process was still limited and in need of deeper relational involvement. Nevertheless, given what the Word made paradigmatic in the hermeneutic process (Mk 4:24), Jesus affirmed the involvement of Nathanael’s person at this stage with the anticipation that “you will see greater *revelations*” (v.50). Clearly, his vulnerable integrity not only impressed Jesus but witnessed to the *how* that the Word makes evident for connection face to face, person to person.

Given what Jesus also made the relational imperative for the integrity of his disciples to “Follow me, *my whole person before my teachings and example,*” it is imperative for all his followers to be vulnerable with their person in order to know and understand the Word in the primacy of relationship together, and thus “where *and how* I am, my *follower* also will be” (Jn 12:26). This is the relational outcome unfolding only

from openly honest engagement of the hermeneutic challenge. By vulnerable involvement in the how of the Word, our person enters the Word's context of connection to meet, receive, embrace, and relationally respond to the whole Word face to face, person to person, whereby our whole person is able to "Follow my whole person" in reciprocal relationship together.

The relational imperative for our faith must be integrated ongoingly with the paradigm for our hermeneutic process in order for our practice of faith to have relational significance to God, as well as to be distinguished as true followers of the Word. This again raises the three basic questions essential for the theology and practice of discipleship:

1. *Who* is the God we see and claim in the Bible?
2. *What* is that God we have in our theology?
3. *How* is that God in our everyday life?

All disciples must answer these questions with relational significance to truly be distinguished as followers of Jesus—that is, distinguished beyond what commonly exists among Christians. Most Christians presume in their practice to have the answers to basic questions 1 and 2, and on the basis of those assumptions (or presuppositions) they answer question 3. But the answer to question 3 can only be fully defined and determined by the depth of significance that question 2 is answered with. Further and integrally, question 2 unfolds (not evolves) defined and determined only by the depth of significance that fulfills question 1. Therefore, as we proceed in this examination these three questions are basic to who and what are essential to our faith and vital for how we practice.

Getting to the depth of significance of God's communication in Scripture has been problematic for Christians down through history, to say the least, notably because only relational significance constitutes the depth of God's communication. Relational significance is the difference that distinguishes God's relational language from the general use of referential language, which is commonly used even by Christians—especially in the academy to compose biblical and theological studies. That makes listening to God not only a priority but primary in the process of interpretation, making all other hermeneutic activity secondary (not unimportant)—perhaps at times even unnecessary, certainly if it distracts us from the primary or disconnects us from the primacy of relationship that the grace of God's communication constitutes only in this context of connection. Listening is fully discussed in the next chapter. That still leaves us with the text of Scripture, which is contained within human contexts and historical settings that render God's communication more complex than literal expressions of simple truths.

Since the communication of God's Word is expressed by human authors, in historical contexts and through literary genres, these need to be accounted for in the

interpretation process in order not to misunderstand God speaking. And where we need to start is from the beginning with “Did God say *that*?” (Gen 3:1)¹⁰ As emerged from the beginning in the primordial garden, on the other hand, these characteristics of the biblical text are always secondary to what remains primary in God’s Word; thus they must neither distract nor take away from the primacy of the relational context, process and purpose of God communicating God’s relational terms to us. Indeed, “God does say **that**” and our challenge in the interpretive process is to receive God face to face (as in Num 12:6-8; Job 42:3-5; 2 Cor 4:6), and not take liberties to speak for the Other—as commonly takes place in human interaction to prevent the relational connection for significant communication. In *Other* words, **interpretation of Scripture is making relational connection with the heart of God**—the God who vulnerably makes the integrity of God accessible whole-ly (i.e. whole and holy/uncommon) in relational response to us, who responds to our human context for the primacy of relationship together but not according to human terms (including our terms as Christians).

Given the existing plurality assuming Christian identity and the diversity composing Christian theology and practice, who is making relational connection with the heart of God? What are non-Christian observers to conclude about the lack of coherence in Christian theology and practice, much less assess the fragmentation of Christian identity? Such diversity witnesses to the lack of significance (even to the insignificance) of both Christians and God; and the absence of their wholeness renders the gospel a false hope for the human condition—contrary to and in conflict with Jesus’ formative prayer for Christian identity in likeness of the whole-ly God, the Trinity (Jn 17:20-23).

Jesus made a distinct hermeneutic process the relational imperative for all his followers, or there would be consequences in their theology and practice (Lk 8:18; Mk 4:23-25). Based on his imperative, the unmistakable reason for the existing diversity in Christian theology and practice is the failure to meet Jesus’ hermeneutic challenge, leaving the interpretation of the Other (the Word and his gospel) to others in all their diversity—even those with good intentions, These others would include the magisterial Reformers and all others (notably evangelicals) who subscribe to *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*.¹¹ As a consequence predicted by Jesus’ paradigm—“the measure you give [or use] will be the measure you get” (Mk 4:24)—the common composition of orthodoxy has become a theological construction without the relational significance of God’s Word, therefore lacking the orthopraxy of the whole-ly Way, Truth and Life.

¹⁰ See my study on the hermeneutic challenge from the beginning and its ongoing implications for our theological task. “Did God Really Say That?” *Theology in the Age of Reductionism* (Theology Study, 2013). Online at <http://4X12.org>.

¹¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer examines Christian diversity in both-and terms that affirms a hermeneutic based on the *solas*, and thereby highlights the underlying unity existing in plurality of interpretation. See *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

In the hermeneutic challenge both of and by the Word, disciples must be able to distinguish in their theology and practice the relational response of following the person of Jesus in history from a belief (however convicted) in Jesus as a historical subject. The latter belief constrains the Word (even in *sola scriptura*) to a narrowed-down epistemic realm (a common source of knowledge) of mere referential information of Jesus' words, teachings, miracles, example, and the like. But, in explicit contrast and implicit conflict, the former relational response embraces the whole person in relationship based on the relational language communicated by the Word—listening to all his words without selecting only what we want to hear. For these disciples, what Jesus communicated in the Gospels (whether in narrative or metaphor) in different human situations and historical contexts has ongoing relational significance for all Christians (from past to present to future), the authority of which defines and determines all discipleship according to his terms without having the latitude to shape relationship together by our terms (i.e. to diversify the way, Mt 7:13-14, cf. Jn 10:7). Again, the latter's belief essentially speaks for the Other with words (even as correct doctrine) that lack relational significance (cf. "every careless word," *argos*, unprofitable, in Mt 12:33-36). Unlike Nathanael, this essentially redacts the Word.

Certainly interpretation is always occurring about what the Word communicates. The hermeneutic challenge doesn't preclude our interpretation but always puts it in its primary context, whereby the Word speaks first and thus for himself—always Jesus' relational imperative for the hermeneutic process. However—and this must be recognized and acknowledged—as long as the hermeneutic door remains wide open to "Did God say *that*?" others will increasingly speak for God, speaking contrary not to orthodoxy and orthopraxy but to whole theology and practice.¹² This then further raises the question: If Christians meet Jesus' hermeneutic challenge, will there no longer be all this diversity in theology and practice? As just footnoted, opinions differ about the nature of existing Christian diversity and what is needed today. Just taking up Jesus' hermeneutic challenge would likely not eliminate existing diversity, but it would greatly reduce it to the extent of our relational response of ongoing relational involvement in the hermeneutic process—the significant involvement of which is neither defined nor determined by the mere adjective 'relational'. Only the depth of our relational involvement will meet the hermeneutic challenge that counteracts our divisive condition and the biases inherent in it (as Nathanael witnessed).

At the same time, to discount illusions and simulations of unity—existing within churches, between churches, and in the global church and academy—we need to

¹² Christian Smith describes this existing condition in Christianity with stronger either-or terms in *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011). Peter J. Leithart calls for the death of Protestantism in order for the unity in the church to be restored, in *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

ongoingly emphasize that the hermeneutic key to the reality of Christian unity is not conformity to and uniformity in theology and practice, but rather receiving the depth of the whole gospel and the wholeness of Jesus. The unavoidable challenge for all Christians is becoming disciples of whole theology and practice that unfolds from only the *whole* gospel and is distinguished by its *whole* Word. For this relational outcome to unfold, however, integrally includes in the unavoidable challenge the ongoing fight against reductionism and its counter-relational workings that subtly fragment the whole gospel and reinterpret the Word's wholeness into parts not integrated together, or that are simply missing. This challenge has not been well incorporated into the prevailing hermeneutic process, mainly because reductionism is either ignored or not understood (even by church leaders and those in the academy).

Reductionism emerged distinctly in the primordial garden yet evolved with ambiguity (Gen 3:1-5). The subtlety of reductionism's workings created hermeneutic confusion and theological fog by first raising reasonable skepticism or the seeds of doubt with the seemingly harmless question "Did God say *that*?" Implied in this query of interpretation, which seems basic for all wanting to know what God said, is a hermeneutic shift of who has priority in the interpretive process: "If God did in fact say that, then what did God really mean by that?" This is when and how the hermeneutic door has opened wide for others to render their voice to speak for God's intentions (e.g. "you will not die," v.4). The consequence is a subtle fragmenting of God's words apart from the wholeness of God's communication and thus a shift into diverse theology (as in "your eyes will be opened and you will be like God," v.5) and practice (on the assumption of "knowing good and evil"). Sounds reasonable, doesn't it? After all, the main alternative is to be a biblical literalist or to fall into skepticism, perhaps solipsism, or even despair. With the hope of knowing what God said since this beginning, however, the hermeneutic process has been developed with further sophistication and justification; yet it mainly still operates implicitly under the priority of the interpreter and thus covertly under the determining influence of reductionism.

A reductionist mindset has prevailed in human history, shaping human perceptual-interpretive frameworks and lenses in underlying ways with a fragmentary focus. As we witness and are seduced today, the digital age of modern technological convenience has imposed its parameters on our thinking and shaped our practice with a dominating binary perceptual framework and interpretive lens. Subtly, our knowledge has been reduced mainly to either-or quantitative terms, which lack qualitative depth and relational significance—the consequences of convenience gained from the internet and experienced on social media. In no other context is this more true, though not prevailing overtly, than in the history of God's people, with the modern Christian context the most evident notably lacking qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness. A cartoon demonstrates this condition. Moses is seen returning from Mt Sinai with the stone tablets

of God's commandments raised above his head, with this new declaration for God's people: "**Behold! Now both thinner and lighter.**"¹³ Ironically, and sadly, the historical reality for ancient Israel was their reduction of God's relational terms for covenant relationship together down to "thinner and lighter" conforming to a code of behavior for religious-national identity, thereby losing the qualitative depth and relational significance of the covenant relationship of God's love (as in Dt 7:7-9).

Also, sadly, yet not surprisingly, to this day new "thinner and lighter" declarations are made to speak for "Did God say *that*?" and/or to give account for what God really meant by *that*. What does this say both about contextual influence in our interpretations and about the so-called authority of God's communication in Scripture, which we supposedly affirm by our so-called faith? And directly related, what does this "thinner and lighter" say about the integrity of the gospel—is it really quantified binary—and its so-called grace, which we presumably claim by our so-called faith?

In the realm of connection embodied by the Word, the person presented by Jesus always had to be clarified and corrected throughout the incarnation. That is, the Word's clarification and correction were necessary in order for his whole person to be rightly and fully perceived, received, known, understood, and responded to in the primacy of reciprocal relationship compatible to the whole-ly God. And throughout Scripture the words from God also clarify and correct for this specific relational purpose and outcome. Yet, this integral process is epistemic, hermeneutic and relational, not to mention ontological, and it only unfolds in the breadth and depth of God's whole-ly context of connection. To distinguish God's uncommon theological trajectory along with the Word's vulnerable relational path, each dimension of this process is necessary for the outcome to be whole—which means uncommon by nature to the surrounding common. The critical issue is and remains: Whose epistemic source, hermeneutic routine, and relational terms constitute the context of connection for engaging the Bible? This needs to be resolved in the transition of our challenge.

Jesus told Nathanael in their initial context of connection that "you will see greater *revelations*" (Jn 1:50). The Word's prophetic voice, however, would only be an experiential reality for Nathanael if he went deeper into this context of connection. Just as for Nathanael, this requires from all of us the depth of relational involvement based only on the Word's relational terms, which are integrally designed for experiencing the relational reality in God's whole-ly context of connection. The early disciples (unfortunately, including Nathanael) struggled in their epistemic, hermeneutic and relational context of connection with the Word; and it is arguable if this condition prevails among Christians today or has even become more relationally distant from the Word's clarification and correction. How do you see our condition today, and more importantly, how do you experience the Word? This is a math issue, the calculations of which are consequential.

¹³ From *Parade Magazine*, "Cartoon Parade," 12/8/2015.

Perhaps the calculations of God's terms illustrated in the movie *Yentl* will be helpful for this process. The movie's setting is in Poland during 1904. Yentl is a Jewish female (portrayed by Barbra Streisand), whose father nurtured her intellect in a learning process that went against Jewish tradition. Understandably (and rightly) Yentl thirsted for even more after her father died. That opportunity, however, was accessible only at a rabbinic school, which was open only to men. This reality among God's people led Yentl to challenge their calculation of God's terms, whereby she expresses her feelings to God in song:

“There’s not a morning I begin without/A thousand questions running/Through my mind,/That I don’t try to find the reason/And the logic in the world that God designed.../And tell me where—/Where is it written what it is I’m/Meant to be,/that I can’t dare/To have the chance to pick the fruit/Of every tree,/Or have my share/Of every sweet imagined possibility?/Just tell me where, tell me where?/If I were only meant to tend the nest,/Then why does my imagination sail/Across the mountains and the seas,/Beyond the make-believe of any/Fairy’s tale?/... And tell me where—/Where is it written what it is I’m/Meant to be,/That I can’t dare—/To find the meanings in the/Mornings that I see,/Or have my share—/Of every sweet-imagined possibility?/Just tell me where—/Where is it written?/Tell me where—/Or if it’s written anywhere?”¹⁴

By vulnerably engaging God's context, Yentl recalculated the misguided subtitle of God's terms imposed on her that reduced her person and diminished her function created by God. Therefore, she countered this dominant culture by disguising herself as a man and entered rabbinic school to pursue “every sweet-imagined possibility” God had for her life. I won't say what happened to her in case you haven't seen the movie. But as the direct extension of her opening song to God vulnerably expressed above, the movie closes with Yentl singing:

“It all began the day I found/That from my window/I could only see/A piece of sky./I stepped outside and looked around,/I never dreamed it was so wide/Or even half as high./ ... The more I live—the more I learn./The more I learn—the more I realize/The less I know./Each step I take—(Papa, I’ve a voice now!)/Each page I turn—(Papa, I’ve a choice now!)/Each mile I travel only means/The more I have to go./What’s wrong with wanting more?/If you can fly—then soar!/With all there is—why settle for/Just a piece of sky?”¹⁵

With her whole person from inner out, her heart soars with the closing relational message

¹⁴ *Where Is It Written?* lyrics by Alan and Marilyn Bergman.

¹⁵ *A Piece of Sky*, lyrics by Alan and Marilyn Bergman.

“Papa, watch me fly!”—as she journeys with God from old to new.

The Word makes relational connection with us for us also to experience a similar transition.

The Math of God’s Word

Mathematics is irreplaceable for the theories composed by science and for their outcomes to be valid and reliable. Math is also a critical framework for God’s Word in order to understand how God’s terms are calculated for theology and practice. The most basic calculation of God’s terms is simply stated by the words *from* God: “You must diligently *be involved in all the terms* that I *communicate* to you; do not add to it or *subtract* from it” (Dt 12:32). The invariable measure of the Word’s calculation was established earlier (Dt 4:2) and here reinforced to directly counter and neutralize the normative calculation: “You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever they *calculate* is right [*yashar*, level, straight] in his own eyes” (Dt 12:8, ESV, cf. Jdg 17:6; 21:25). The norm could calculate God’s terms not only with addition or subtraction but also with division and multiplication—the math of God’s Word calculated by variable and relative subtitles that reduce the wholeness of God’s terms and/or paraphrase or conflate God’s terms without their relational significance. The product of this math contradicts God’s irreducible and nonnegotiable terms and thereby widen the path “to the right or to the left” (Dt 5:32-33; 28:14; Jos 1:7, cf. 2 Kgs 22:2).

This math of God’s Word is critical to understand. In mathematics, the accuracy of any calculations depends on accounting for intervening variables (or dependent variables) by the calculus of variations and finite differences, which determine their effect on the dependent variable being calculated. The resulting dependent variable then is inseparable from the independent variable in the equation. The independent variable of God’s Word is the invariable state of God’s uncommon terms. The dependent variable in this equation is our calculation of God’s terms. Our calculation is always subject to intervening variables from the influence in our surrounding contexts. Since such intervening variables subject God’s uncommon terms to our common terms, they must always be accounted for in our calculations or else God’s terms become relative in a wider path of our common terms.

The wider path to the right or the left could be subtle, which can render the math of God’s Word to ambiguity. For example, the calculus of God’s identity is rooted in the Shema (Dt 6:4) for God’s people. Thomas McCall concludes about Second Temple

Judaism that it was reliably monotheistic: there is only one God, and this God is *the* Creator and Ruler. Yet “this account of monotheism is not centered on numerical oneness, nor does it obviously dictate that there is at most one divine person.”¹⁶ He quotes contemporary Jewish theologian Pinchas Lapide in support:

The Oneness of God, which could be called Israel’s only ‘dogma,’ is neither a mathematical nor a quantitative oneness...the difference between gods and the One God is indeed not some kind of difference in number—a more miserable understanding there could hardly be—but rather a difference in essence. It concerns a definition not of reckoning but of inner content; we are concerned not with arithmetic but rather with the heart of religion, for ‘one’ is not so much a quantitative concept as a qualitative one.¹⁷

Lapide’s distinction between a quantitative concept and a qualitative one is necessary to make, yet it is insufficient to understand Paul’s monotheism.

The issue of the Shema involves *what* distinguishes its God and thus *how* this God is distinguished. God is distinguished as ‘the only One’ entirely from outside the universe, who therefore has no other qualitative kind in the world by which to be compared. ‘God is one’ means unequivocally ‘God is incomparable’. Yet this qualitative distinction of God is insufficient to resolve the issue of the Shema. This exclusive identity is not a concept, quantitative or qualitative—though philosophical theology historically has rendered it as such. Rather the full identity of God emerges from the essential relational outcome of the qualitative being (the who) of God’s vulnerable self-disclosure as Subject. Now the complex Subject illuminates the whole and uncommon God’s direct relational involvement (the how of God’s presence) in communicative action to clearly distinguish the relational nature (the what) of God—disclosing the vulnerable presence and relational involvement of the innermost being of the who, what and how of “God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6, the depth of Paul’s monotheism). Without God’s relational response from outside the universe, the whole and uncommon God is not distinguished to us and no one knows of the One who is incomparable. Therefore, the *who* of the Shema is fragmentary unless both *what* distinguishes its God and *how* this God is distinguished are clearly defined qualitatively and determined relationally. Accordingly, the qualitative and relational whole of this One can neither be reduced to referential terms (even as the Shema) nor negotiated down to human shaping (a numerical One), both of which are contingent on and comparative to what is probable within the universe, and consequently is unable to go beyond self-referencing to distinguish the incomparable One of the Shema.

¹⁶ Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 60.

¹⁷ McCall, 60-61.

Given the calculations noted above in the math of God's Word, how common do you think these calculations operate today? If we don't pay attention to the math and understand the calculations used, the products calculated today will correlate directly with the invalid and unreliable math of the past.

Consider again: Do present calculations detail Deuteronomy as the Book of Law, or do they account for its primacy as the Book of Love (as discussed previously)? Furthermore, in what framework does our math put Leviticus? With the correct calculation of God's terms, the book of Leviticus is not a detailed enumeration of a behavior code. Rather Leviticus communicates the consummate contextual process that distinguishes the whole-ly (whole and uncommon) God from the common in the human context, in order to define the identity and determine the function of God's whole-ly people in covenant relationship together (Lev 10:10, cf. Eze 44:23). This widens our math challenge today to examine the existing calculations for what is uncommon or holy, because many past calculations "have made no distinction between the holy and the common" (Eze 22:26).

Calculating Holy

In the calculus of God's terms for covenant relationship together, two sub-issues are inescapable to calculate: (1) clarifying what holy is, and (2) correctly accounting for the difference between the holy and the common, which is essential to calculate to distinguish God's terms from anything less and any substitutes calculated by our terms (as Eze corrected in 44:23).

First Sub-issue:

What is holy is clarified by *who* is holy (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7). Holy (*qadesh*) is to be clean, pure and thus set apart from what is the common constituting the human context. Therefore, holy equates to what is the uncommon, which is distinguished only by who is uncommon (as the Lord revealed, Lev 10:3). Calculating holy is incomplete as purity or perfection and must incorporate *who* is uncommon to embody *what* is holy that is clearly distinguished as uncommon by being distinctly set apart from the common.

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 reality among his people, which continues to exist today, not typically explicit in our theology but implicitly in our practice. The essential reality is that "I am holy" (*qādōsh*, 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, which are both nonnegotiable and irreducible by common terms. Anything less and any substitutes from human shaping make the whole-

ly God's presence and involvement indistinguishable. Forming God's identity in our common images has unavoidable relational consequences, notably forming a barrier to experience the relational reality and outcome of God's definitive blessing for only God's covenant family (Num 6:24-26).

The whole profile of God's holy face is distinguished by nothing less and no substitutes. The 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—reduced terms that also are projected back on "God composed in our likeness."

Second Sub-issue:

When holy is clarified by the uncommon, then the second sub-issue challenges us to correctly account for the difference between the uncommon and the common. God unmistakably distinguished the uncommon as incompatible with the common and thus as incongruent in the common's lens. 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 (as Jesus embodied and prayed, Jn 17:19), it then has a place in our practice to be holy and also whole inseparably, thus integrally whole-ly; but its theology must not be composed with a commonized bias of idealized notions.

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 only *wholeness* in

relationship together (as God’s blessing initiated, Num 6:26, and the Word embodied, Jn 14:27). 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 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—all of which we must account for to have relational connection.

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 over the uncommon (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 which 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). 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 advanced 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. Since such a claim apparently is the prevailing condition among Christians, the common still existing effectively has become the acceptable practice to define the identity and determine the function of Jesus’ followers distinctly *in front* of the holy

partition still in place. This relational condition is unacceptable in the Hebrews manifesto, not to mention clarified, exposed 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).

Nathaniel asked in his cultural bias whether anything good (*agathos*, beneficial, significant, distinguished, thus whole and uncommon) can come out of *what's only common* (Jn 1:46). If Jesus were not clearly distinguished from the common, the answer would certainly be NO. Since Jesus' presence and involvement were enacted apart from the shaping influence of the common, his ontology and function were unmistakably distinguished by the uncommon, that is, distinguished whole and uncommon. This essential reality is the whole-ly who and what Nathaniel discovered as he suspended his bias. It is unlikely at that point that Nathaniel exercised a bias in the uncommon; but he was open enough to allow the uncommon to be discovered, experienced and thereby be responded to beyond the limits and constraints of the common. What we witness forming for Nathaniel further compels our need for what we see being composed in the above discussion, which unfolds only on this basis:

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.

Certainly Peter struggled with the influence of the common in his discipleship that composed his bias as a disciple. So, it is relationally significant that his own relational progression was complete and matured (*teleios*) to transform his ontology and function to be whole-ly, and thereby further illuminate the whole-ly theology and practice for persons, relationships and the global church (1 Pet 1:13-16; 2:9-12). And for this distinguishing bias *with-in* the Uncommon, we must thank the whole-ly Mary whom Jesus magnified for taking the lead in order for the gospel's whole-ly relational outcome to be the essential reality for all of Jesus' followers. Her everyday life functioned in the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes—in contrast to the others' prevailing function in the reverse dynamic of anything less and any substitutes—whereby she distinguished the uncommon identity for all disciples.

As the calculus for these two sub-issues clearly distinguish our whole-ly identity and function on the basis of the Word's whole-ly terms, our relationship together deepens to know and understand the whole-ly God (as delineated in Jer 9:24 and contrasted in Jn 14:9). Given the math of the Word, can we justify any other outcome from our calculations?

The Only Outcome of Significance

Engaging the Bible either centers on various levels of sorting through the words of the Book to know its subject-matter, or it enters the context of the Word for a connection that will lead to knowing the Subject revealed therein. The history of engagement in the former has resulted in an encyclopedia of knowledge about God, which the average Christian today could easily consider of little significance, perhaps irrelevant, as younger generations would likely confirm. Younger Christians, however, are challenged by the common basis used to know someone, anybody notably on social media, the bias of which would be applied readily to the context of the Bible and thus render the Subject of the Word to these reduced terms. The outcome from engagement that results for all of us is either knowing something about someone, or knowing *who* the person is and thus understanding *what* and *how* that person is from inner out. This begs the question for all Christians: What is our basis for knowing anyone, and when do we think we know and perhaps understand that person?

Jesus' frustration with his disciples for not knowing his person after he's been vulnerably involved with them for three years (Jn 14:9) should intensify our challenge with the Bible. A teaching narrative will help us understand Jesus' feelings and narrow the path for us to take as the basis to know someone. Just prior to his steps to the cross, Jesus "began to be grieved and agitated" so he told his disciples "I am deeply grieved" (Mt 26:37-38). He asked them to keep watch with him; then he went privately to pray. When he returned, he found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?" The same thing happened two more times, intensifying his sadness, "Are you still sleeping and *centered on your rest*?"

What's obvious to you in this interaction? And is it apparent to you why they didn't know Jesus? Moreover, based on how you do relationships, what do you think you would have done if you were in their shoes?

Consider this: We have to have relational awareness for our engagement with others (including with the Word) to be significant. In order for our relational awareness to be significant, we must make connection with the other(s). For that connection in our relational awareness to be of deeper significance, it has to be direct connection face to face. And for face to face connection to have deep significance must involve **intimacy**—that is, the vulnerable relational process of hearts opening to each other and coming together heart to heart, not only face to face.

Moses wanted to have deeper connection with God, so he basically asked the Lord directly “Show me your glory”—that is, “the deep measure of your being” (Ex 33:18). God, then, opened even more vulnerably to Moses, revealing the mystery of God’s face (33:20, cf. 32:30), by which God communicated with Moses face to face (Num 12:7-8). God’s revelations in the Bible constitute the communication from God’s face (*paneh*) that distinguishes the relational context God provides for direct connection face to face (as in Num 6:24-26; 2 Cor 4:6). In addition, the relational process initiated with Moses is further deepened for the involvement of intimacy to distinguish the redemptive change from the old to the new (2 Cor 3:13-18). The Word, in relational words, defines the relational context and determines the relational process essential for the intimate face to face involvement that has the relational outcome of knowing God and understanding the Bible—the only outcome of significance.

Today, Christians need to ask themselves if they can truly “boast (*halal*, or celebrate) about this, that they understand and know me” (Jer 9:24). Or if they, at best, can only boast in their wisdom or boast merely in their other secondary resources (9:23). The state of Christian education is challenged, on the one hand, by its level of understanding the Bible; and more importantly, on the other hand, it is confronted by its depth of knowing God. When this examination is directed specifically to theological education, where do you think the main focus of its boast centers? As documented in seminary libraries, the biblical calculations from theological education are unavoidably consequential, notably for Christians who depend on them to understand the Bible in general and in particular to know God. Thus, the Christian community needs to recognize the liability that theological education could compose in its calculations; then we will take accountability for the wider challenge and the narrower path facing us face to face, heart to heart.

The Word is not silent on this issue when he addresses “the wise and learned” of his earthly time. In spite of all their studies and so-called expertise, they didn’t know the Father (Jn 5:37-39) or understand his revelations (Lk 10:21). And these scholars were amazed and astonished at Jesus’ teaching at the temple: “How did this man get such learning without having studied?” (Jn 7:14-15, NIV). Paul also critiqued such education when he exposed those “who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a *deeper* knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 3:7).

Recently in the academy there has been a paradigm shift in the perceptual-interpretive framework of some biblical scholars to a more relational dimension by the use of *prosopological exegesis*.¹⁸ In Greek *prosopon* means “face” or “person” (in Hebrew, *paneh*), which then forms an exegesis with more relational awareness. Biblical scholar Scot McKnight discusses the need for this framework also for theologians in order to understand the Bible as the context for communication by the Word to humans who can communicate with God.¹⁹ This is certainly a step in the right direction for theological education to be of deeper significance. However, it doesn’t go deep enough to develop the qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness to connect with God vulnerably for the intimate involvement heart to heart (not just face to face) to listen fully to God’s communication. Only at this depth will our person(s) receive the experiential truth and relational reality of the relational outcome of knowing and understanding the whole-ly God. And it is only in this relational outcome will we no longer hear “I have been with you all this time and you still do not know me.”

Take heed: No other outcome will have this full significance, regardless of whatever else Christians feel is significant to boast about. With the subtlety or ambiguity of anything less and any substitutes, the Word remains sad that “you are still sleeping” and “you still do not know me.”

¹⁸ See Matthew Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Scot McKnight, *Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021).

Chapter 4 ISSUE 4: The Issue of Highest Priority: Listening

“Listen and learn to *trust* the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of *God’s relational terms*.”

Deuteronomy 31:12, NIV

“So that *the next generation*, who have not known *those terms*, may *also listen* and learn to trust the Lord your God as long as you live.”

Deuteronomy 31:13

“Therefore, consider carefully how you listen.”

Luke 8:18, NIV

In the essential dynamics of human interaction, making connection with each other depends on two primary interrelated measures: (1) the level of involvement with each other, and (2) the degree of listening to each other, which are both predicated on how vulnerably a person listens to one’s own self down to the heart. The first measure is too often just assumed, and the second is mostly taken for granted, while listening to one’s own heart is typically avoided. Since these primary measures also apply to human interaction with God, Christians are alerted to be cautious about how they consider these measures in their daily life.

After I became a Christian at the age of twenty, I went through different stages of my interaction with God. Initially, while in the U.S. Air Force, I didn’t have a regular church context or Christian fellowship. I turned to the Bible and listened to God speak, notably to me. In my naiveté I took God’s words at face value and believed literally what he said. For example, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13) was formative in my early Christian life, and I learned to trust him accordingly—that is, expecting God’s words to be fulfilled, even when situations appeared to the contrary. The key issue here was listening to God speak (communicate) instead of my speaking for God, and then trusting in the truth of his communication in our relationship. This deeply touched my heart in a way I had not previously experienced.

Unfortunately, yet not surprisingly, my simple relational faith was increasingly distracted from this vital relational process of listening, thereby disrupting my intimate relational involvement with my God. This subtle shift happened as I became more involved in church and “learned” how a Christian should be. Furthermore, my relationally significant early faith became an established religious faith as I formally engaged in biblical and theological studies, not to mention my preoccupation with philosophy and apologetics. My reading of the Bible became more critical than essential,

and its relational significance was commonly lost in translation as I subtly began speaking for God instead of listening. What resulted from this theology and practice was a doctrinally correct religious faith without the relational significance of the good news of God's words communicating the full, complete, whole relational purpose and outcome of God's nonnegotiable offer. Then what evolved was my priority focused on serving, which even with my good intentions made secondary my relationship with God and listening to his communication. Subtly, my serving and Christian reasoning developed at the expense of our relationship together. Sound familiar?

During this time I also did clinical work with troubled teens as a psychiatric counselor. What was instrumental in making connection with them to make a difference in their lives was listening to their diverse situations and being able to grasp some of their deep-rooted feelings. Apparently, our director thought I was a good listener and commended me for making a difference with a mutual patient he worked with for years. My listening, however, was merely a situational work tool, so it didn't reflect how I functioned in my interactions in general—particularly with God. This had to change if I were to advance in my journey of faith beyond the limits and constraints of theological education.

The journey of all Christians is challenged by this inescapable issue of highest priority, and which also makes the degree of listening pivotal for the three issues already discussed and the three issues to be discussed. In other words, much rests on our listening and more is at stake in how carefully we listen. Make no mistake, the Word never assumes for us nor takes for granted from us that we listen. Therefore, **the pivotal issue** of listening must not be minimized to a minor issue low on the Christian priority list.

Hear or Listen

The Shema opens with "Hear" to communicate first the defining whole-ly identity of God, and secondly the level of involvement determining God's peoples' relationship with God (Dt 6:4-5). The Shema's definitive *relational message* communicated from whole-ly God cannot be understood by merely hearing the words but only by a sufficient degree of listening. This relational message often eluded God's people throughout the OT because of their insufficient degree of listening. So, without assuming or taking for granted that they listened, God later communicated to them, "Hear, you deaf" (Isa 42:18, ESV), in order to critique their level of involvement with God and with each other. But, how do the deaf hear?

Obviously, God was critiquing the degree of their listening, which is inseparably interrelated to their level of involvement. With the highest priority, the Word illuminates a critical difference between hearing and listening. Can the deaf hear? No, but can a hearing-impaired person listen? Not surprisingly, the hearing impaired likely listen better than most who hear. How so? Because their qualitative sensitivity lacking the distraction of quantitative sound from others deepens their level of involvement to have a relational awareness that the hearing typically assume or take for granted. When Christians examine this difference between hearing and listening, they may be surprised with what they find about how well they listen. Starting with oneself, many persons may hear their own hearts at times, but most persons don't listen to their heart.

Hear the Word and listen: “your ears are open but you hear nothing”—that is, “you hear sounds but do not listen” (Isa 42:20, cf. Jer 5:21). The Word further illuminates: “hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.... For this people's heart has grown *distant*...so that they might not...listen with their ears” (Mt 13:13-15). “Therefore, consider carefully how you listen—and *don't confuse it with hearing*” (Lk 8:18). The Word makes it imperative for us: “Pay attention to what you hear” (Mk 4:24) in your interaction with the Bible. Why imperative? Because what we hear from the Bible are not the mere words of God composing a book. So, the Word is axiomatic that “if the degree of listening we use is merely to hear, then all we will get are mere words.” However, the only way to “Hear” the communication by the relational words *from* God is to “listen carefully” in order to have connection at the depth level of relational involvement vulnerably embodied by the Word.

This degree of listening and level of relational involvement can only be embodied by our person from inner out, whose heart is consciously vulnerable in our interactions both with God and others in their respective contexts. And we must not settle for what we only hear in those contexts because that will maintain our relational distance either with God or others. It was not surprising to me, then, that I kept relational distance from the Word during my theological studies and serving; and my listening regression was the norm in theological education, which still pervades in the academy today. In my *hearing bias*, I thought that I understood the Word: “Whoever serves me must follow **me**, and where I **am**, there will my servant **be** also” (Jn 12:26). Needless to say, listening to the Word communicate took me to the depth level of involvement necessary to experience intimate relational connection once again—the connection and involvement the Word just distinguished for his true followers.

Given the critical difference between hearing and listening, how do you interpret the Word in John 12:26 for your existential practice? This calculation is critical for the outcome experienced.

Listening is the irreplaceable interaction that is essential to fulfill the hermeneutic challenge of our interpretations in order to understand the Bible. Yet, merely

implementing the mechanics of listening is insufficient and often results in misinterpretation, which is indicative of putting ‘the interpretive-cart before the listening-horse’ and thereby end up speaking for God. “Hear” and hearing are not synonymous, and thus hearing is never interchangeable with listening in our interaction with the Word—no matter how clear our hearing is. Of course, many with a “hearing bias” will assume that what they have heard was listened to. But the Word makes no such assumption in his communication. Therefore, listen before we speak, and then speak on the basis of what we have carefully listened to the Word communicate.

Moreover, listening to the Word is the key to our identity formation according to the Word’s whole-ly terms, apart from which Christians need to ask what they listened to for their identity. Accordingly, the same question also applies to our everyday beliefs and operating values in our surrounding contexts. What’s at stake for all Christians keeps pivoting on listening.

Dissonance and Consonance

When you think about your everyday beliefs and operating values, how did they originate? And where do you think you heard about them such that you embraced them for yourself? What you heard must not have been dissonant or it’s unlikely you would have embraced them. Consider further the identity you’ve taken on associated with them and on what basis your identity is consonant or becomes dissonant with those beliefs and values.

The issue of dissonance and consonance is a direct result of what we listen to in our surrounding contexts, human contexts and relationships; and the results are directly correlated to what we value. For example, take music. I’m sure that most everyone can identify what music has consonance or dissonance for them, and perhaps even explain why so. Yet, what music we like or dislike to hear doesn’t necessarily involve our listening.

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.

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—biases that become generalized in beliefs and values. 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, especially when dissonant with our beliefs and values. 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. Like music, the consonance of likes and the dissonance of dislikes expose beliefs and values that Christians must be held accountable for in their theology and practice.

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). Hence, what Christians consider dissonant or consonant in the differences they see or hear about is a direct result of *how* they listen based on *what* they listen to and value. And converging in this process is the **core issue**: (4a) the nature of relationship and persons either as created by God or as evolved in human development.

In the existing reality of human diversity, how we *see* (perhaps even hear) human distinctions is shaped more by our eye and revolves less around 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—a nonnegotiable framework signified in “nothing beyond what is written.”

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, which Paul illuminated by applying it to Apollos and himself in their favored distinctions “so that you may learn.”

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 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

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>.

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. Unfortunately, Christian beliefs and values are consistently unable to dispel this illusion since they typically reflect such bias.

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. The current issue in the U.S., for example, of Christian nationalism creates a fog for many Christians.

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,” which too many Christians make assumptions about or simply take for granted.

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. And those who listen carefully to the Word will have the depth of relational involvement necessary to “follow me, and where I am there will my *whole-ly followers* be” (Jn 12:26).

Listening for Viable Faith

The inescapable challenge of listening keeps narrowing the path of Christian faith in existential practice. Following Jesus to *be* where he *is*, Paul was at the forefront of narrowing this path for Christian faith to be viable. Paul's theological engagement cannot be described in conventional terms (thankfully) but is better defined in function as a process of *living theology*—in which theology was never separated from function and the priority was always function over theology for Paul. (This would make Paul an unlikely candidate for a teaching position in today's academy.) Thus, Paul was involved in communicating God's story of thematic relational response to the human condition, a narrative with which Paul earlier had had only historical association. Theological engagement, then, involved implicitly a *relational "methodology"* for Paul. His readers need to understand that this theological process is a function of relationship, not a quantified theological task without that qualitative involvement even if it included biblical exegesis.

In his theological process, Paul made a further claim to "have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). If his claim is understood in only epistemological terms, then what Paul possessed was further knowledge (albeit inside) *about* God—a quantity of information lacking its qualitative-relational significance. For Paul, however, having the mind of Christ was the relational outcome of reciprocal relationship with the Spirit (1 Cor 2:9-10; cf. Jesus' claim, Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:12-15). To have the mind of Christ from the Spirit signifies the new thinking and mindset with the Spirit (Rom 8:5-6), which are necessary for the whole knowledge and understanding (*synesis*) to engage unequivocally in factual theological communication of God's story and definitive theological dialogue of the whole-ly God's thematic relational action. This theological engagement for Paul further implies a *qualitative "methodology"* of having the mind of Christ for the needed interpretive framework and lens, which provide the relational awareness and qualitative sensitivity to fully learn the relational extent and qualitative depth of God's vulnerable revelation (cf. Paul's imperative, Rom 12:2). This qualitative methodology emerges in function entirely from reciprocal relationship with the Spirit, the outcome of which is by its nature a relational outcome and not from a subjective self-consciousness of even spirituality. Therefore, Paul's qualitative methodology is inseparable from and in ongoing interaction with his relational methodology, whereby the Word's qualitative-relational significance unfolds.

Paul never engaged in theological discourse beyond God's self-disclosure (as he demonstrated, 1 Cor 4:6) in order to construct any fictional parts of God's story or to speculate about God's thematic relational response to the human condition. He did not need to be engaged in such theology in effect from bottom up speaking for God, because

he was relationally involved with the mind of Christ ongoingly with the Spirit to extend the theological dialogue of the Word from top down. The relational outcome of Paul's reciprocal relational response was from "him who...within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can *do* or imagine *by our own theological reflection*" (Eph 3:20, my paraphrase): "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"—those things God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:9-10).

Listening to God became a relational function for Paul and no longer just a pronouncement of moral obligation from the tradition of Jewish Scripture (as in "Hear," "Listen and learn"). Relational connection and involvement with the whole-ly God was nonnegotiable for Paul and the relational imperative for both his function and his theology. Therefore, Paul was able to make complete the communicative word from God and to illuminate whole (not fragments) theology only on the basis and to the extent of his relational and qualitative methodology; this compatible process clearly signified his reciprocal relational response to God's vulnerable revelation and Paul's ongoing relational involvement with the whole-ly God. And by his reciprocal relational involvement in the whole-ly God's relational context and process, Paul's theological engagement is paradigmatic for all his readers (notably in Pauline studies) by which to listen to the Word.

The nature of God's revelation defined the nature of and determined the terms for the response to the words from God. Since the nature of God's words is relational communication, the nature of the response can only be relational and must function in the reciprocal relational terms of God to be compatible. The consequence of this faith response becomes equivocal when determined merely by the notion of obedience. That is, obedience is insufficient response by itself and becomes incompatible when this response is only to disembodied words, laws or propositional truths. The consequence of this type of obedience essentially shifts the nature of the response from God's relational terms to human terms, even with good intentions or unintentionally, and thus focuses the response more on what we do rather than how to be relationally involved with God. Such obedience's focus is quantitative from outer in and the response becomes measured, for example, in accordance with a code of behavior or doctrinal purity to create the illusion of consonance. The response of God's relational terms is qualitative from inner out and is increasingly vulnerable to the vulnerable presence and relational involvement of God.

Obedience alone, at best, is an ambiguous response to God's revelation and can be, at worst, an incompatible response in conflict with God's words—an issue raised even in a response for justification by faith. Moreover, disobedience can even have the appearance of obedience in settings of the normative character and collective nature of the sin of reductionism, which emerged from the primordial garden and continues to evolve among Christians today.

By the definitive nature of God's words, listening to God is solely a relational function from inner out for Paul, whose response is distinguished by its nature from all reductionist alternatives and thus predicated on vulnerably listening to his own heart. Both the nature of God's relational action and of human relational response are irreducible and nonnegotiable. In the relational language of Paul's communicative letters, his shorthand term for this reciprocal relational response is *faith*. Yet, faith in practice is often the notion of what we have and/or do, the possession or act of which is perceived as necessary and also sufficient in itself. James certainly refuted such a redefined view of faith (Jas 1:22; 2:17-20) and Paul's practice did also. While the object of such faith is God, God becomes only an Object in the relationship who happens to intervene and support as necessary. Paul's theological communication is centered on God as the Subject in whole ontology and function for reciprocal relationship together (cf. 2 Cor 4:6); and compatible response to this Subject (not Object) in Paul's theology is with the whole ontology and function of the human person as subject also in Subject-to-subject relational connection (cf. Eph 3:12).

In Paul's own experience, his faith shifted from the tradition of what he had and did back to the nature of God's revelation and terms. His transforming shift was to the faith constituted by Abraham, which often was not the faith practiced in Judaism throughout the OT narrative. Even further and deeper than Abraham's experience, Paul's faith-response to God's vulnerable revelation signified the relational response of being vulnerable with his whole person. Yet, just as Abraham was in *tamiym* (whole, Gen 17:1) this vulnerable involvement was constituted by the ongoing relational trust of his person from inner out to the whole-ly God for reciprocal relationship together, not unilateral relationship or measured involvement. Nothing less and no substitutes of relational trust make a person vulnerable for compatible response to the communicative words from God, significantly and vulnerably embodied by the Word. Paul did not define a new faith-response but extended the original relational response further and deeper into God's relational context and process in order to intimately participate in the whole of God's uncommon life in whole relationship together—just as Jesus embodied, promised and prayed for (Jn 14:6,23; 17:26), and Paul illuminated theologically (Eph 2:8,18,22) and prayed functionally (Eph 3:14-19).

Christian faith is viable only when constituted by the vulnerable relational involvement of *trust* in the whole-ly God. And this relational outcome ongoingly unfolds from listening to God communicate in the relational context of connection in intimate reciprocal relationship together.

Listening's Relational Outcome

I recently saw a statement by someone trying to help a friend listen: “God gave you two ears and one mouth. Do you know why he gave you one mouth?” The implication, of course, was so that we can listen more than talk, which a Jewish saying adds to “God gave.... So listen more and talk less.” While this certainly gives priority to listening over speaking, this quantitative focus doesn't get to the qualitative depth of listening that brings the vital significance to its relational outcome. In other words, persons can use their ears more than their mouth, but that doesn't guarantee the results that God designed for humans or embodied and enacted for their inherent human condition.

The viable faith of relational trust carefully listens to whole-ly God and thereby embodies the Word's whole-ly terms for the primacy of relationship together with the relational outcome to know and understand God. This relational outcome emerges, however, only when the competing sounds of referential language are silenced—though the noise could still be heard—by listening to God's relational language of communication. When our degree of listening cannot clearly discern what is consonant and dissonant with God's relational terms, referential language will reverberate in our theology and practice.

The urgent challenge for us to listen carefully in order to reciprocate with the Word in this communication process begs the question: Do we simply have some contact with God—as faith practice in prayer or time in the Bible could indicate—or do we indeed experience a depth of relational connection with the Word? The latter is the relational outcome only from vulnerably listening to the Word with the depth of relational involvement that reciprocates with the vulnerable presence and intimate involvement of whole-ly God.

If we have yet to “*carefully* listen and *fully* learn to *relationally trust* the Lord your God and follow *vulnerably* all the words of *God's relational terms*” (Dt 31:12), how can we expect younger generations also to “*listen* and learn to *relationally trust* the whole-ly God for a viable faith” (Dt 31:13)? Is this why younger generations have left the church or no longer identify as affiliated with faith?

Until we fully learn to listen carefully in unmistakable contrast with hearing, we will simply have such relational consequences pervade our faith. Therefore, we cannot escape the relational consequences and are accountable for listening's relational outcome. And this learning and growing process is predicated on how vulnerable we will be with listening closely to our own heart and not keep our distance.

Take heed: The primacy of much is resting on our depth of listening, and more is at stake in the integration of our listening with our deep relational involvement—both in the primacy of relationship with God and with all others.

Chapter 5 ISSUE 5: How Our Person Functions

What are human beings...?

Psalm 8:4, cf. 144:3

“Let us create human *being* in our image, *being human* according to our likeness.”

Genesis 1:26

The pivotal issue of listening that is essential for human interaction leads us directly into the most fundamental human dynamic underlying everyday life: How the human (our) person functions, which basically becomes **the constitutive issue** defining the extent of how the previous issues are perceived, addressed and concluded, as well as determining the extent of how the following issues will then function. Basic to Christians discussing this issue is the explicit or implicit theological anthropology (TA) that is constitutive for our existential practice—a theological anthropology working even unintentionally or unknowingly but nevertheless still determining for how our person functions. And this function in effect embeds Christian practice in a TA culture that is most influential in our identity formation and related values.

Listening to our own stories about our person, and those of other persons both in our surrounding contexts and down through history, is a key interaction process for us to learn these essential functions: (1) how my person functions, (2) how other persons function, and (3) how God designed the person to function and thus wants, expects and holds accountable all persons to *be*.

“Listen and learn” in this constitutive issue, which widens our ongoing challenge the most of all the issues discussed so far.

A Conscious Narrative

Historically, in the question expressed at the top of the previous page, the psalmist deliberated about human being, and this further examined what is basic for the human person. This deliberation is familiar to all of us, and whether in our awareness or subconsciousness it has engaged us at one time or another—evoking conclusions, promoting theories and explanations, or provoking ambiguity, confusion, even despair. Whatever optimism or pessimism emerges from such deliberation, whatever hopes or limitations and insufficiencies result, all depend on the context locating the human being

in question. This context composes the narrative of human being that shapes *who* emerges and *what* results. In other words, the nature and extent of this context(s) will define and determine the *what* and *who* of humans and, therefore, is critical to any discussion of human being and being human.

In his deliberation, the ancient poet includes the Creator (“...that you are mindful of them”), but it is unclear whether the poet is merely enhancing his limited context or pointing beyond to a further and deeper context defining and determining human being (cf. 1 Chr 29:14; Ps 144:3). Others’ deliberations observe a physical context (without a creator) of millions of years to compose a material narrative of human being. Still others, unable to incorporate such an expansive context having no differentiation of design, purpose or meaning to distinguish the what and who of human being, turn to a more specific and often limited context to differentiate a unique narrative for humans, likely with a primary spiritual element (e.g. with the soul of dualism). Some attempt to reconcile the two positions in a somewhat hybrid narrative that differentiates the how and perhaps what of being human but not necessarily the who of human being (e.g. as does nonreductive physicalism). Each of the contexts locating the human being in question in these further deliberations composes either an incomplete or a fragmentary narrative, thereby rendering the what and who of human being incomplete and/or fragmentary.

When I was growing up in Chicago (USA), I managed to attain a measure of academic and athletic success—having ascribed to me a label as “star” in my American football career. This happened despite my physical stature; I was always the smallest guy of the team, even more noticeable in the locker room at high school and college. I was not only physically small but being a racial minority (the only Asian American on the team and often the only one in classes) I was also physically different than the prevailing majority. So, I became self-conscious about my genes, yet I would be neither determined nor limited by those genes—at least in terms of being small.

My experience illustrates and points to two vital ongoing issues for being human and human being. First, my being human was not limited to biology and determined by my body, though my physical action irrefutably played a major role on the football field (this wasn’t played out in my mind). From my physical context, limited strength and pain were a frequent source of feedback rendering me fearful and informing me not only that I can’t do this but shouldn’t—which my surrounding contexts (including my mom) reinforced in the constraining influence of culture. As my narrative illustrates, however, it is important to understand the influence of my will and the psychology of my mind (though not mind over matter), and how they interacted with my body to take me beyond any limitations of my genes, or to free me from self-imposed constraints and related cultural constraints shaped by my body (stereo)type. Some would interpret this interaction as the triumph of the soul/spirit over the body, espousing some form of

dualism. Others opting out of dualism for a form of monism (as in nonreductive physicalism¹) would advocate that this interaction demonstrates a higher level human function (notably the mind) having determining effect (if not cause) upon lower level human function (the body); this process is called supervenience, a quality (not a substance) in human being that is distinct from the body yet is inseparable from and interdependent with bodily function (namely the brain).²

This leads to the second vital issue illustrated in my experience. No doubt my early experiences highlighted for me the benefits of prestige, along with related privilege and perhaps limited power or influence over others, which shaped my early life into adulthood. Yet, even though I wasn't a Christian during most of this period (becoming a Christian at twenty), there was something stirring or even agitating within me that would expand the context composing my narrative. More important than the above, these experiences illuminated the reality of an increasing dissatisfaction I felt being treated on this basis. That is, rising within me was a distinct consciousness of this unsettled feeling: I never felt during this period that *me* (who and what I really am) was received and accepted apart from my successes. Indeed, even at an early age, I was suspicious of others' positive attention and I distinctly wanted *more* in relationships. Unknowingly, I was exercising a naïve yet valid version of a 'hermeneutic of suspicion', both to deconstruct images as well as to search deeper for what my consciousness was pointing to and wanting to fully emerge: the person, the unique human person underlying all that I did and had, whose function eluded me.

For physicalists rendered by determinism, the thoughts and feelings going on in my mind were not from a consciousness that can affect the behavior of our bodies but were a physically-caused experience known as an epiphenomenon (a phenomenon of physical cause having no other basis or effectiveness). Epiphenomenalism does not allow for consciousness to cause any further action to happen, no matter how real it seems and how strong the thought and deep the feeling. I don't doubt that my consciousness is inseparable from my brain and depends on biology, but I have no basis to discount the interdependent nature of this reflexive relationship or to deny the causal role my consciousness had in changing how I saw my body and the person signified together with it. Accordingly, I consider epiphenomenalism to be a narrowed-down explanation of human life that renders epiphenomenon a reduction of human function.

The underlying person being defined and determined on the basis of my abilities (what I have) and performance (what I do) unexpectedly emerged, but not surprisingly.

¹ Various aspects of nonreductive physicalism are discussed in Malcolm Jeeves, ed., *From Cells to Souls— and Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

² Further discussion on supervenience is found in Dennis Bielfeldt, "The Peril and Promise of Supervenience for Scientific-Theological Discussion," and Niels Hendrik Gregersen, "God's Public Traffic: Holist versus Physicalist Supervenience," in Niels Henrik Gregersen, Willem B. Drees and Ulf Gorman, eds., *The Human Person in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 117-188.

This includes the realization that this was an inadequate and even unfair basis for who, what and how I *am*—the whole of my person that few recognized and affirmed, not even by my mother. How do I account for this emerging person? I say “unexpectedly emerged” since my social contexts and related cultural context did not advocate for this underlying person but, to the contrary, labored in and reinforced the prevailing human images shaped and constructed by what we do and have. Even had I been a Christian when my consciousness emerged, it would have been unexpected; my religious context most likely would have composed my narrative with the prevailing theological anthropology of reduced ontology and function—in other words, a religious context shaped by and thus embedded in surrounding human contexts. Accordingly, the underlying person emerging despite the limits and constraints of these contexts can only be unexpected, yet the emerging reality of such person is not surprising.

I say that this emerging person is “not surprising” when, and only when, we pay attention and give priority (not in terms of total determination) to further and deeper contexts that can compose the narrative of human being beyond and more fully than prevailing contexts have up to the present. While acknowledging the provisional nature that all contexts must operate with, there are some contexts that take us deeper into the human narrative if we pay attention to them—pay attention not merely by observing behavior or monitoring brain activity. Paying attention, however, is not a simple process and may require some kind of wake-up call (cf. Mk 4:24; Rev 3:1-2); in addition, we may need a change in our perceptual-interpretive framework and lens in order not to ignore certain contexts integral for human being (cf. Lk 8:18; Rev 2:2-4). Therefore, whatever is needed in our response, it should be unmistakable that the contexts we pay attention to or ignore are consequential for defining and determining the what and who of human being.

Human consciousness is one of those contextual areas of immediate interest that, on the one hand, has been widely interpreted while, on the other hand, has been given minimal attention to, that is, in terms of helping us understand our own person—if only by illuminating our unsettled condition or exposing our dissatisfaction. Yet, looking beyond the psychological context of the mind, the ambiguity of and the ambivalence about our own consciousness involves our need for whole understanding of human consciousness.

There are two types of human consciousness that must be distinguished: (1) consciousness of one’s person, and (2) consciousness of one’s self. The second type is **self-consciousness** focused on the outer in signified by reduced ontology and function, and thus is quantitatively oriented with any focus of ‘in’ not having much, if any, depth—demonstrated in my self-consciousness about my genes, which thankfully didn’t prevail in my narrative. The first type is **person-consciousness** focused on the inner out constituted by whole ontology and function, and thus is qualitatively-relationally oriented with the focus on ‘out’ fully embodied and inseparable from the ‘inner’. This vital focus

is demonstrated in my growing awareness of how I wanted and needed to be seen and treated as ‘person’, not as ‘self’—an ongoing process unfolding not without issues and struggles yet more deeply distinguished in its outcome for my person and my lens of others.

What type of consciousness we pay attention to will determine both what and how we pay attention, and thereby define who will be the outcome. If you insert your personal story at this point, who is the person that you see and what do you learn about your person?

Conflicting Narratives

An ongoing defining issue about human consciousness that must be understood and addressed accordingly unfolds as follows: Person-consciousness and self-consciousness are in ongoing tension, the process of which engages continuous contention with veiled conflict. If not adequately addressed and redefined by person-consciousness, self-consciousness will prevail over person-consciousness (even by default from the latter’s lack) and render it indistinguishable—most notably accomplished by functional illusion and ontological simulation to construct human life in fragmentary function of persons and their relationships.

The two types of human consciousness and their respective processes are evident in the primordial garden. This context is jointly critical and pivotal for composing the narrative of human being from the beginning. Converging in the primordial garden are the various contexts that interact to compose a complete narrative of human being: the creation context, the evolutionary biology context, the psychological context of the mind, the relational context between Creator and humans, and humans with each other, all of which are integral for the context of human consciousness, and which are all subjected to, if not subject to, the ongoing contentious context of reductionism. Whether seen as historical or interpreted as allegorical, the primordial garden presents the most indispensable context and inescapable process that any significant deliberation of ‘what is human being’ must pay attention to necessarily and cannot ignore by necessity.

The narrative of human being emerges in the beginning distinctly in the context of human consciousness. This integral process is also both critical and pivotal for defining and determining the what and who of human being along with the how of being human. I will highlight the human consciousness aspect of this narrative here, with further discussion below.

In the creation narrative, the human male and female came before each other “naked and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:25). So, 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, what is unique emerging? Well, nothing significant emerges 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-materialist and dualist lenses) overlooks or even ignores is human being from inner-out and the presence, for example, of human masks worn both to shield the whole of human being and to prevent being human from the depth level of connection necessary to distinguish their wholeness in relationship together—the created condition of all persons distinguished in the qualitative image and relational likeness of God. The innermost of human being is indispensable and irreplaceable to distinguish the person and persons together in relationship whole-ly from inner out.

For this male and female to be naked and without shame involved a composition of the human 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 from outer in were all there was and all they would get, it would not be difficult to imagine such feelings emerging.

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 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 the conjoint 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 other words, the context of person-consciousness composes the human narrative in ‘naked and without shame’—the whole ontology and function necessary to distinguish the human person from merely common distinctions focused in self-consciousness.

The human being-being human interaction is an essential process that must not elude Christian consciousness. It is helpful to reflect frequently first on “What existentially makes me human?” After reflecting specifically on your *human being*, then reflect on “How are you *being* that *human* in your everyday life?” Your two reflections directly interact either with consonance or dissonance, with congruence or incongruence. This process helps all Christians discern any simulations in human being and any illusions in being human, which often become too subtle to recognize without it.

While person-consciousness is clearly distinguished, we cannot ignore the reality that it is ongoingly subjected to the ceaseless contentious context of reductionism. If this context is ignored or not adequately paid attention to, this becomes consequential for person-consciousness being subject to reductionism. This consequential condition is critical for any deliberation on what is human being, and its influence has been prevalent, if not prevailing, even to today in theological anthropology discourse. This consequence on human consciousness is also exposed in the primordial garden, as we witness a shift to “the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized they were naked...and made coverings for themselves” (Gen 3:7, NIV). This evolves to be covered not only with clothes but with titles, credentials, other personal resources, and covering up the person even with notions of gender. That is, “they put on a different perceptual-interpretive lens that focused on the outer in of human being, which narrowed their attention to the outer-in parts that now defined them, which then became the basis for determining their fragmentary engagement of each other embodied in the outer in of being human.” In this reality of being subjected to reductionism, person-consciousness made the consequential shift to self-consciousness, which could only compose the human narrative from outer in on the basis of reduced ontology and function.

“Naked,” consequently, has a different meaning with a perceptual-interpretive framework and lens from outer in that fragments persons into parts and thereby reduces the significance of persons to their parts or the sum of those parts, which does not add up to be whole. Whereas “naked” from inner out is still seen as naked yet embodied in the wholeness of *person*, who and what is “not ashamed” (whatever the physical form) but affirmed and honored, and therefore not reduced in ontology and function as seen from outer in with self-consciousness. The latter involves shaping of humans subtly constructed by the functional illusion and ontological simulation of reductionism, whereby self is defined and determined by the primacy of one’s parts, that is, what one has (body, mind, soul) or does (namely in self-determination)—as evidenced above to compose the human narrative. In distinct contrast and even conflict, person-consciousness not only takes us to the depths of human being but also points beyond to that which distinguishes human uniqueness.

The two types of human consciousness evidenced in the primordial garden is a critical distinction to understand in our deliberation of what is human. Moreover, this distinction is pivotal in theological anthropology discourse in terms of the following:

1. The type of human consciousness used in the theological task will determine what composes the human narrative and who emerges.
2. Which then defines the nature and extent of the epistemic field we will engage for the source of our knowledge and as the basis for our understanding.
3. Whereby our conclusions of human being and being human can neither exceed nor be significant beyond any limits and constraints of the epistemic field we engage and the type of human consciousness used in our theological task.

Therefore, we cannot ignore or minimize the importance of our human consciousness in order for theological anthropology to distinguish persons in whole ontology and function and not to render them fragmentary in reduced ontology and function. Such rendering (even with good intentions) is the basis of any unnecessary or even false dualism, and for material reductionism and related causal determinism.

A related note about human consciousness is helpful to account for. Paying attention to human consciousness should not stop when we go to sleep (literally, not figuratively). Human consciousness does not cease during our sleep (as witnessed in brain activity) but in fact may become less encumbered to illuminate the state of our human being. That's why dreams should not be ignored but examined. For example, a dream may highlight our self-consciousness to inform us of how embedded we are in reduced ontology and function. Ignoring or responding to such a dream can be pivotal to our human narrative and critical to opening us to person-consciousness (cf. 1 Sam 3; Dan 2ff; Acts 10:9ff). This raises a related question of whether human consciousness exists apart from the body (e.g. pointing to the soul), or when body parts are in crisis or don't function. Both questions engage the fragmentation of human being into separate parts (namely, body and soul) or a reduction into a part without the necessity or at the exclusion of the other part. This is a common engagement that ceases to assume the integrity of the whole person by failing to account for the various contexts integral for human consciousness, that is, distinctly person-consciousness.³

Furthermore, what we pay attention to in this human narrative from the beginning has added significance consequential for what is human being in the process of being human. Understanding the difference between "naked and without shame" (person-consciousness) and "seeing nakedness and covering up" (self-consciousness) is indispensable not only for what constitutes the vital nature of human life but, equally important, also for clearly illuminating the interrelated and inescapable matter of the human condition resulting from reductionism and its counter-relational work. The

³ For further deliberation, consider the recent experience of neurosurgeon Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2012).

pervasive context of reductionism is an ongoing composing influence of the human narrative that must be paid close attention to in our deliberation and carefully accounted for in our discourse both in anthropology and theological anthropology. We cannot discuss or theorize about humans and their nature in the lab or in a vacuum isolated from everyday life (including our own), as if to assume the human condition is not an instrumental (if not causal) factor in defining and determining who, what and how humans are. Clarifying the connections underlying, we cannot ignore the human condition without fragmenting humans to the limits and constraints of reduced ontology and function (a clear indicator of self-consciousness).

In other words, the human condition—in its various forms and expressions throughout human history, both individually and collectively, and likely subtle rather than extreme—signifies the outworking of human shaping and construction that skews, misleads and distorts the narrative of human being. Its implications inescapably involve consequences needing to be accounted for, decisively addressed and reconstituted in our deliberations and theological task, in order that in our human narrative the nature of human being emerges whole in the ontology and function necessary by that nature to define and determine the whole of who, what and how we are—nothing less and no substitutes. With anything less and any substitutes, our ontology and function fall into the human condition by default, which then evolve inevitably with simulations of our human being and illusions of our function in being human. This condition commonly composes too many Christian narratives.

When the ancient poet deliberated on “what are human beings?” he specifically included the context of the Creator to compose the human narrative: “...that you are mindful of them...are *relationally involved (paqad)* with them.” How so?

The question raised by the poet is focused more on the Creator than on human beings, though certainly he implies an interrelated structural condition and contextual process between them that he considers both definitive and conclusive. Accordingly, his question connects our deliberation back to the creation context—a context, of course, many don’t acknowledge but others don’t adequately utilize—composing the narrative focused on human being. In the creation context, the Creator declares about the human individual (even from inner out): “It is not good for *this individual* to be alone” (Gen 2:18, NIV), hereby enacting the Creator’s mindful and relational involvement with human beings.

While only introducing this discussion now, we need to consider what is being composed here. “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 human order, whose design, meaning and purpose are both definitive and conclusive for the narrative of human being and being human.

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 fully connected to someone else, that is, not 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 human order. In the human narrative, a person may be alone in a situation but indeed also feel lonely (pointing to person-consciousness) 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.” How many feel lonely in the midst of all their so-called connections on social media?

In the design, meaning and purpose of the created human order the human narrative is composed conjointly (1) for human being “to be part” of the interrelated structural condition and contextual process with the Creator, and (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 relational function of an ontological condition); that is, good signifies the Creator’s whole ontology and function constituting the righteousness of God (defining the whole of who, what and how God is). In whole terms, only creator God is good—the difficult lesson Jesus illuminated for the rich young ruler about the primacy distinguishing human being and being human as his followers (Mk 10:18). And human beings are constituted in this “good,” in whole ontology and function in likeness of the righteous whole of who, what and how God is. Nothing less and no substitutes can constitute human beings as good, and any diminishment can only be “not good.” Therefore, anything less and any substitute is “to be apart” from this distinguished whole, rendering human being reduced and being human fragmentary.

This summary context from the beginning composes the narrative 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’.” Your own story as a Christian may note the creation narrative in your belief references; but it may not get to the depths of the narrative and thus leave you in the condition “to be apart” without understanding this existing reality in your own story of human being and being human. If so, you are certainly not alone among Christians. Therefore, all Christians by necessity must give account of their existential ontology of human being and function of being human.

Variable Ontology and Function

Human ontology and function is not a static condition, though it is 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 was created whole in the beginning. The issue from the beginning, however, is whether this ontology and function will continue to be whole by living whole. This outcome certainly was not predetermined, nor can we consider it our default condition and mode.

To continue to be whole is a qualitative function of person-consciousness that focuses on the person from inner out, that is, on 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 one's will that further distinguishes the person's uniqueness created by God.

Yet, a complex subject cannot be oversimplified in its human agency. A qualifier is raised by genetic limitations of brain function (e.g. mentally challenged), those suffering brain dysfunction (e.g. Alzheimer's) and mind disorders that appear to lack human agency or lose human will—seemingly rendering them simple objects. This observation can only be made of a person from outer in; and any of its conclusions can neither account for variable ontology and function nor explain reduced ontology and function. While certain qualitative and relational functions may demonstrate a lack, if not appear lost, this involves the complexity of the human subject. The qualitative innermost constituting the uniqueness and human agency of the person functions integrally in the person as a whole, thus never separated from the body (whatever its condition), for example, in the spiritual substance of the soul, nor determined solely by the physical workings of the body. Regardless of any lack in the physical workings of the body, the qualitative innermost of the whole person still functions without being determined by the body and without being apart from the body in a separate function of the soul. How do we account for these persons then?

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 comparative process of prevailing human distinctions that compose a deficit model identifying those differences as less. This has obvious relational implications for those cultures and traditions that have favored certain persons (e.g. by race) and discriminate against others (e.g. by class, gender, age). Such practice is not only ethically and morally unacceptable for the global church (e.g. contrary to caste in India),

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 whole 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 be lived 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 define them and engage them in relationship. Any differences from our perceptual-interpretive lens that we impose on them reflect our reduced ontology and function, not theirs.

As a complex subject in the human context, the human will is responsible for the perceptual-interpretive lens used to focus either inner out or outer in on the person, albeit with the influence of the surrounding context. Person-consciousness is intrinsic to being created whole but ongoing person-consciousness involves the person’s will. The person’s choice also can include using a lens focused on the person from outer in, which then shifts from person-consciousness to self-consciousness (as witnessed in the primordial garden). The vacillation between person-consciousness and self-consciousness is a reality of human agency that all persons assume by the function of their will, and that all persons are responsible for in living with whole ontology and function or reduced ontology and function—necessitating the careful and vulnerable examination of “Where are you?” and “what are you doing here?” And the further reality from the beginning needing to be understood is that self-consciousness and its lens of outer in have become the default choice. Unless this reality is addressed with the reality of human agency, the default mode will prevail in human consciousness and the perceptual-interpretive lens used. Moreover, this process of reality is nonnegotiable and thus is not amenable by a hybrid consciousness.

Along with the lens used for the person and the human consciousness engaged, the human will is also responsible for the type of work engaged in. Given the reciprocal nature of whole relationships together, *relational work* is primary. How this work is perceived and the extent in which it is engaged—if it is perceived or engaged at all—unfold from the person’s will. For example, if the deliberate choice is not made to engage the primacy of relational work, secondary work becomes the primary focus either by intention or by default. In other words, the will is central to what ontology and function emerges from the person. That person and theological anthropology in use must be able to account for variable ontology and function. The soul of dualism and supervenience of nonreductive physicalism are insufficient to explain human agency and to define whole ontology and function. For example, the qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness of person-consciousness are not defined merely by a soul, nor is their lack explained by supervenience.

Person-consciousness and the primacy of relational work are integral and thus inseparable for the whole ontology and function created by God. We cannot integrate person-consciousness with mere simple association with others, nor can we engage the primacy of relational work with self-consciousness. Person-consciousness is relational work, the primacy of which distinguishes the relational involvement of the whole person defined from inner out. The integral interaction between person-consciousness and relational work is both irreducible and nonnegotiable; and merely using the term relational in Christian vocabulary is both insufficient and misleading for a person's function.

Yet, from the beginning relational work has been further problematic for persons whenever a reductionist perceptual-interpretive lens misperceives God's purpose for creating Eve and the significance of her relationship with Adam. These are vital issues necessary to include in TA discourse to understand what adds or subtracts in the relational equation of God's created (original and new) design and purpose, particularly for relationships together constituting the church.⁴ Critical to our deeper understanding of the purpose for Eve's creation is the focus on the kind of work emphasized in the creation narrative. If you translate the Hebrew expression '*ezer kenegdo*' as "a helper suitable for him" (Gen 2:18, NIV), thus interpreting the woman as an assistant or helpmate to the man (as gender complementarians do), then the focus is on the work in the primordial garden with the emphasis on "what they did." Or if you translate it "a power [or strength] corresponding to man"⁵ with the interpretation of Eve corresponding to Adam in every way, even "be his equal" (as gender egalitarians do), the focus can be on any type of work with the emphasis still on "what they do." Both of these interpretations and perceptions minimize or even preclude the primacy of relational work, the nonnegotiable relational work in God's design and purpose for relationships between persons distinguished by God's qualitative image and relational likeness. This is the consequence because an emphasis on "what we do" reduces the qualitative focus of how we function in relationships in order to be whole merely to performing a role, even if that role is in a relational context.

It is also not sufficient to say that Adam was lonely because he was living without community and needed a proper counterpart. Though these conditions existed, community and its formation connote different perceptions to persons, the very least of which may not even involve intimate relationships as understood in the community (communion) of the Trinity. Yet, God did not create Eve for Adam in order to have simply a collective dimension to life called community or a social context within which

⁴ For what adds or subtracts in the gender equation, see 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 <http://www.4X12.org>.

⁵ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce and Manfred T. Brauch, eds., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 93-94.

to do their living. This has deep implications notably for relationships together composing the church and the basis for constituting this gathering in distinguished terms from other gatherings in the human context. By necessity this is true for churches in both the global South and North, though the emphasis would be different in each sector.

As signified by also being created in God's image, Eve was created for the primacy of relationship, thus for the completion of the human relational context by which their persons (from inner out) could now involve themselves in the relational process constituted in the triune God and signified by both the qualitative image and relational likeness of whole-ly God. Without the completion of this relational context and process, a person(s) would "be apart"—a condition God defines as "not good" but which has been normative for the human condition and has become the norm for gatherings in the human context, even among Christians.

Eve's purpose was neither about working the primordial garden nor filling the earth, especially as we have come to define those purposes with the emphasis on "what we do." These would be quantitative reductionist substitutes that redefine the person from the outer in—for example, according to roles and our performance. Even though Eve was created as a person in God's image to complete the relational context and process, she was not immune to reductionism because she was free to redefine her person—the human agency of the will. While making this choice does not change the created qualitative ontology of personness, it shifts that ontology to outer in and thereby reduces how the person functions and constrains what the person experiences, thus effectively constructing a personhood in the limits of human perception—an unfortunate consequence often seen in TA dialogue for practice.

It would be a further reduction of Eve's purpose, and thus an inaccurate interpretation, to perceive that women (gender and sexuality) were created primarily for specific relationships with men. That is to say, underlying Eve's function to work is the purpose God gave her and Adam to "fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). Obviously, this then involved the created function of marriage (2:24) and procreation (3:20). Yet our deeper understanding of marriage and procreation for God's purpose is also contingent on the kind of work emphasized in the creation narrative. If the work focused on is merely about making a living and extending it in raising a family (a dominant view), then our perceptions of marriage and family become reductionist (as previously noted about what we do) and our practice increasingly quantitative (as discussed about how we do relationships). This was not the purpose for Eve's creation.

In God's purpose to "fill the earth" the term for "fill" (Heb. *male*) denotes completion of something that was unfinished. With this in mind we need to understand what God started in creation that Eve and Adam were to work for its completion. Did God just create a man and a woman, male and female, with work to do? Did God merely create the human species to be the dominant conclusion to all of creation? Or did God create whole persons in the very image of God's being (constituted as the qualitative

significance of heart) for the purpose of these persons having and building intimate relationships together in the likeness of the relational nature of God as constituted in the communion of the Trinity? The former emphasizes any secondary work engaged by persons in referential terms that fragment persons and relationships. The latter is focused only on persons engaged in the primacy of relational work that embodies the whole of these persons and their relationships together—the primacy that is never reduced in priority to any secondary work, even if such work may have importance.

Reductionism turns God’s purpose to “fill the earth” quite simply into making children and the quantitative work of populating the earth. Likewise, perceptions of “be fruitful and multiply” become based on quantitative notions. If this were God’s purpose, the results such work had initially produced would have been partially acceptable, and God would not have started over with Noah and his family (Gen 6:1ff). But God’s purpose is qualitative; filling the earth is not about the numbers. What God started in creation was an extension of the triune God’s being and nature—not to be confused with pantheism. The person was created with the qualitative significance of God to have intimate reciprocal relationships with other persons, both of whom are undifferentiated (not reduced) by quantitative distinctions (such as gender or sexuality). Gender or sexuality does not distinguish the qualitative significance of human persons and relationships, though the whole person is certainly embodied in them irreducibly. This aspect of creation serves to illuminate in general the intimate relationships for which all persons are created, not to determine the ultimate context in which these intimate relationships can be experienced, that is, male-female relationships and marriage.

When relational work is functionally established as God’s primary purpose for all persons, then the ontology and function of person-consciousness will not only emerge to be whole but also unfold to live whole in the human context. Person-consciousness and the primacy of relational work, as theological anthropology must account for, are ongoingly subjected to the prevailing influence of reductionism and its counter-relational work. Overtly yet subtly emerging from the beginning in the primordial garden, reductionism directed the shift away from person-consciousness and compromised the primacy of relational work. The integral relationship with God that constitutes the relational context and process of human life was fragmented by human will and the choice for self-determination, with the relational consequence “to be apart.”

More emphatically, not only in relation to work but also in our relationships (especially with God) this condition “to be apart” underlies our reductionist tendencies, the substitutes we make in life and why we settle for less. In the human narrative, essentially every human activity since Adam and Eve’s human agency in self-determination has been to diminish, distort or deny the primacy of relationships in the created order. In the divine narrative, everything the Trinity has done is relational and is done to restore relationships to God’s original design and purpose. This created design and purpose is what Jesus came to restore us to—both with God and with others. Our TA

and related doctrines need to reflect this coherence not only in our theology but most importantly for our practice. Without integral theology and practice, our faith has no basis to be viable in everyday life.

As we reflect on creation and the relational context and process, we have to examine how we also “see” God and thus relate to this God. If we only see God as Creator, there can be a tendency to define God only by what God did—not only in the past but also the present, prompting “what have you done for me lately” (cf. Israel in the wilderness)—and, based on this lens, ignore God’s whole being. This is the result when our perceptual-interpretive lens is reductionist, primarily focused on the parts of what God does. To focus on and relate to God’s being is not only to engage the sovereign God (who commands) but also to be involved with the triune God (who is intimately relational in existential presence). On the basis of this whole-ly God, not parts of God, the relational process is constituted. Any other God is a reduction of the God of creation and the God of revelation vulnerably shared with us integrally whole and uncommon. Whichever God is perceived and engaged certainly has determining influence for theological anthropology; and this implication intensifies the need for our TA to address reductionism and its counter-relational work.

In the narrative of Peter’s life (discussed previously) what evolved is important to learn from for our theology and practice. Peter’s variable ontology and function demonstrated two important issues for theological anthropology to integrate in its dialogue for practice:

1. His person lived consistently, if not primarily, in the default mode of self-consciousness and its perceptual-interpretive lens from outer in, regardless of his good intentions (and referential confessions) to serve Jesus as his disciple, whereby his integral identity was diminished and his person-consciousness and relational work were minimalized.
2. Peter’s will (no matter how committed and dedicated) was limited by the constraints of reductionism and, therefore, by itself was unable to constitute the redemptive change necessary to be and continue to live whole in ontology and function, consistently by nothing less than person-consciousness and no substitutes for the primacy of relational work.

Whole ontology and function is always subjected to reductionism and its counter-relational work—ongoingly both overt and subtle. To continue to live whole becomes a struggle when qualitative sensitivity to reductionism and relational awareness of its counter-relational work are lacking in the person to expose its influence. Variable ontology and function results when any person’s integral identity is diminished and their person-consciousness and relational work are minimalized. Therefore, in the human context what is clearly evident from the beginning for any theological discourse on

human persons is to establish a strong view of sin: that is, a definitive view of **sin as reductionism**—not merely as moral and ethical failure—which provides the understanding needed to expose the reductionism of sin prevailing in the human context that composes the human relational condition “to be apart” from the whole, God’s qualitative relational whole and the whole-ly God. A critical part of distinguishing the person in complete context is to address the influence of reductionism in the person’s surrounding context. To ignore the presence of reductionism and to not pay attention to its influence in the surrounding context are indicators that theological discourse about persons has already been shaped by this influence.

For example, in contexts where honor-shame are more determining for practice than ethical and moral views (with focus on innocence-guilt), honor-shame would expand our view of sin with a more collective-relational emphasis. Yet, such a collective-relational concern would most likely be engaged merely in referential terms and not be involved by God’s whole relational terms (as in the primordial garden, Gen 2:25). On such a limited basis, honor-shame becomes a self-concern centered on self-consciousness that still continues in reduced ontology and function. Honor-shame, then, subtly extends sin without reductionism, or a weak view of sin. This is of utmost importance for global South Christians in particular to understand and not to be influenced to shape their view of sin.

Anything less than a strong view of sin and any substitutes for sin as reductionism render persons to reduced ontology and function, unable to consistently live whole ontology and function into the human context. Without understanding sin as reductionism, the distinction between self-consciousness and person-consciousness is erased from human consciousness. In this common condition, persons and relationships are always limited to and constrained by an inescapable default condition and mode—the prevailing alternative to the person simply centered in self-consciousness.

There is an irony, and perhaps paradox, to TA’s view of sin. On the one hand, a weak view of sin (not composed as reductionism) signifies for soteriology that a human person is only saved *from* sin in what is, at best, a truncated soteriology. This incomplete salvation does not result in whole ontology and function for the person no matter how much sin the person is saved from. On the other hand, the strong view of sin as reductionism requires of soteriology that a human person is not only saved *from* the sin of reductionism, but by the nature of being redeemed from reduced ontology and function the person is conjointly saved *to* whole ontology and function in a complete soteriology. A truncated soteriology is fragmentary, which cannot make a person whole but only saves them from sin without reductionism. A complete soteriology by definition includes to be made whole; in other words, a person is never saved from being reduced (or “to be apart”) until the person is also saved to being whole. Salvation is always incomplete and remains fragmentary without this integral salvific process. This is the gospel that unfolded with the embodied whole of Jesus and also emerged with the relational Word

from the beginning—the gospel that constitutes the person in theological anthropology (composed whole, not reduced) to be and live whole ontology and function into the human context.

Qualifying the Whole Person

“To be apart” signifies the human condition that prevails in the human narrative—a condition that must be accounted for in our deliberation of human being as well as accounted 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 the 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.

At this point, a broader grasp of contextual issues will deepen our understanding. 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 the human 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).⁶ Supposedly, then, a valid definition of truth is

⁶ 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).

determined only by what *is*. Yet, given the contextual issues that influence the formation and shape of what is true, 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). Perhaps with the mis(dis)information composing so much so-called truth today, even among Christians, few would be willing to go further and deeper.

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.⁷
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).

Obviously in today’s climate, many have illusory confidence in their knowledge. In their bias, they have a hard time recognizing, for example, existing disparities in human life, and thus they would resist or deny the existential truths of these human conditions. Psychologists refer to this kind of broad bias in perception as “*motivated cognition*”: the skewed mindset engaged in mental actions that ignore, discount or downplay contradictory evidence in order to maintain coherence between their beliefs and reality. Do you see any of this today? In the U.S. the Republican Party is currently dealing with this in its evolving position on former president Trump.

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

⁷ 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 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.

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—as in the primordial garden, “you will not be *reduced*...you will be like God” (Gen 3:4-5).

This composition is commonly seen in the ‘naturalistic fallacy’, which consists in identifying what *is* with what ought to “be”. This not only misleads the epistemic process but distorts it, thereby imposing limits and constraints on both the extent and validity of knowledge resulting. Moreover, such limited or constrained knowledge consistently confuses what *is* with self-referential notions of what ought to “be”, all emerging from a fragmentary interpretive framework and lens that unfolded from the primordial garden (“...your eyes will be opened,” Gen 3:5). This epistemic dynamic exists today in theological anthropology discourse, evident in dualism and even nonreductive physicalism.

In the cosmological context, all knowledge is rendered provisional, though not necessarily relative or evolving. This has been an ongoing practice in physical science, for example, leading to new discoveries about the universe (now also considered a multi-universe). Yet, such practice has often not realized the underlying engagement exercised in this heuristic process; nor has it likely understood the direct correlation in the heuristic process between the knowledge available for discovery and the extent of its epistemic field. Here again, cosmology evidenced a major breakthrough in the heuristic process when its epistemic field shifted from a geocentric model to a heliocentric model of the universe. The cosmological context, however, continues to be the critical issue ‘in the beginning’ (creation) and indeed pivotal ‘from the beginning’ (what has evolved), involving the epistemic field composing the human narrative and any related limits or constraints on the heuristic process defining human being and determining being human.

Some of these limits or constraints perhaps could be found in the world of neuroscience. Iain McGilchrist locates these heuristic and epistemic processes in the brain activity apparently of the right and left hemispheres. He concludes that each brain hemisphere represents different views of the world. The left hemisphere, for example, looks at parts or fragments and then makes generalized abstraction, aggregated from the parts. It is the special capacity of the left hemisphere to derive generalities—the dominant function characteristic of scientists—but these generalities have nothing to do with wholes because, as McGilchrist rightly notes, they are in fact necessarily built from parts, aspects, fragments of existing things within the universe; these things in themselves could never have been generalized. This knowledge gained from putting things together from bits—the knowledge called facts—is the only kind of knowledge permitted by science (at least in theory if not always in practice). Yet, this resultant sought-after “certainty,” on

which the left hemisphere concentrates in its need to be right, is also related to narrowness, with the effect that the more certain we become of something the less we see (perhaps like narrow-minded). Consequently, this knowledge, with its left hemisphere function, does not provide a good idea of the whole, but, at best, just a partial reconstruction of aspects of the whole.⁸ And how we use this knowledge, and its underlying assumptions, may not only indicate perhaps the dominance of the left hemisphere but also will critically determine the breadth and depth of our perspective of the world and all who live in it.

With the provisional nature of knowledge, there is a certain degree of humility needed to openly engage the epistemic process without predetermining what can or cannot result. Epistemic humility minimizes being so predisposed. For engagement in the epistemic process to be unrestricted in its heuristic purpose and function, thus leading to any further knowledge and deeper understanding, there are distinct assumptions that need to be made. To hold to assumptions, to employ any assumptions, is to exercise a level of faith—which even scientists do, often without direct acknowledgement or clear realization. This does not involve a shift from rationalized thinking (as in science) to faith as faith is often perceived without any valid basis other than a believer’s own supposition (even presupposition). To exercise faith is the function of trust extended necessarily to our epistemic field and the epistemic process in order to establish our level of confidence in any resulting knowledge; the practice of faith/trust varies but nevertheless is required and operative to engage a heuristic epistemic process. In no other area of knowledge is this more necessary than anthropology and understanding the nature of human being and the function of being human, the whole of the human person.

For the epistemic process in our deliberation of human beings to develop, the process must by its nature be heuristic. Yet, this heuristic epistemic process does not and is unable to go beyond its epistemic field; that is, it is distinctly limited and constrained to the extent of its epistemic field, no matter how much faith is exercised. Therefore, both science and theology are unable to explain, define and determine human beings any further than the knowledge available to them in their epistemology. This discussion consistently challenges our epistemic field and the interpretive framework and lens used for what we pay attention to and/or ignore in the epistemic process.

This brings us back to the cosmological question of how the human narrative is composed. Science and its knowledge are engaged in a heuristic process that, arguably, both exposes their limits and also inadvertently points to the source (cf. Rom 1:20) that takes them beyond those limits to the whole knowledge and understanding of reality and life—what *is* and not just what ought to “be”. The provisional nature of knowledge also reveals the fragmentary condition of what can be observed, whether in the universe (even now with the Webb telescope) or in human life, with only parts to work with and attempt

⁸ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

to piece together for an elusive whole. This fact reveals the basic reality of life: the whole cannot be achieved from mere parts (whatever their quantity or sum total); wholeness can neither be understood nor experienced from things which/who are only fragmentary.

The heuristic process of science, when engaged honestly and openly (a mistake to merely assume), acts just as Paul said the law in Judaism works to expose our limits and point us to the source of whole life (Gal 3:19,24). Likewise, Paul clearly distinguished that this law should not be the primary determinant of human function, which speaks to related parts in theology used misguidedly to construct the whole. Given their limits—and yet their rightful place and role in human life that should not be disregarded but affirmed for their heuristic purpose—science and adherence to the law (both of nature and of God) cannot be the primary source of self-understanding to determine human beings and construct human identity. Emerging from provisional knowledge within a limited epistemic field, such self-determination is merely self-referencing and cannot go beyond the limitations of human resources, even weakness and imperfection; nor can it adequately account for these limits in its knowledge and understanding of life, thus rendering human ontology and function to illusion and simulation (“and you will be like God,” Gen 3:5).

This makes evident a further step of vulnerability critical for human engagement: both epistemic as well as ontological humility are necessary in order for science and the law to engage the heuristic function of their nature, namely pointing to the source beyond human contextualization. To remain within the limits of human contextualization is to be susceptibly subjected to, and likely become subject to, the ongoing defining and determining influences of reductionism.

Theology by definition should “take us” beyond human contextualization, that is, not merely point us or lead us beyond in heuristic function but to distinguish indeed that source beyond—which/who is clearly the Subject of theology, theological engagement and the theological task. Yet, the theological task often has been rendered to mere human contextualization, either by design (e.g. natural theology, liberalism) or by default (e.g. much of evangelicalism). This is most evident in theological anthropology.

Knowledge and understanding of God depend foremost on their primary source, whose context by nature is beyond human contextualization. Furthermore, our interpretation of this source beyond must emerge from the interpretive framework compatible with this source in order for our knowledge and understanding of God to be congruent with the source distinguished from beyond. Certainly, if this source beyond is inaccessible, compatibility and congruence are irrelevant. Of course, if such an improbable source can have no valid basis for existing, then the burden is upon, for example, the scientific community to explain how and why its narrow epistemic field of probability can eliminate, discount or ignore the improbable in the heuristic process. Anthropology can be sustained in the limited epistemic field of physicality, yet what survives of human being in this context cannot be of significance for the human person.

Conversely, theological anthropology cannot survive with only a limited epistemic field, yet even from such limits conventional TA, historically, has often sustained notions of human being that have little or no significance to the human person and the Creator. Knowledge and understanding of human beings are rooted in knowledge and understanding of their Creator; and the context composing the former is contingent on the context constituting the latter (cf. Jer 9:23-24; Jn 14:9; 17:3).

We cannot underestimate the importance vested ‘in the beginning’ for our understanding the whole as well as our need to be whole. And we can neither allow this to be diminished by science nor minimalized by philosophy as well as theology. Essentially, its importance involves no less than the search for identity, human identity, not in social terms but in primary terms of creation. Accordingly, this identity is inseparable from the identity of the Creator outside the universe, whose intrusive action set in motion the relational dynamic that holds the cosmos together in its innermost in the beginning, ongoingly from the beginning, to and through the end. The whole—in which human identity is defined and by which it is determined—constitutes the identity of God, the whole of whose creative action composes the universe and all in it.

This created whole, however, was sadly fragmented by reductionism—the contrary of wholeness—making necessary the whole-ly God’s salvific action to transform human being and thus all creation to be whole. Nothing less than this identity can be whole, and any substitute for this whole identity is only shaped by reductionism. This reductionism and its counter-relational work are consequential for the fragmentation of life constituting the human condition, not *in* the beginning but *from* the beginning—as demonstrated in the primordial garden (Gen 3:1-7). Therefore, the search for identity has had a long history of human shaping and construction; underlying this history is the shift of ontology from inner out to outer in, and thereby the shift in function from qualitative to quantitative (cf. Gen 2:25 and 3:7). And, most certainly, this shift has restricted the epistemic process to limited (narrowed-down and fragmentary) knowledge and loads of information. Moreover, it has prevented the involvement necessary to go further and deeper in the epistemic process for whole knowledge and understanding.⁹

Theological anthropology can only survive when the context of its source unmistakably distinguishes the Creator as Subject to compose the human narrative beyond the limits of physicality and conventional metaphysics. Theological anthropology becomes significant for the human person when the improbable theological trajectory of the Creator relationally intrudes the human context in order to clearly distinguish what *is* the nature of human being and the function of being human. When the epistemic field for theological anthropology incorporates this relational context and process, it also shifts the specific direction of our hermeneutical methodology: “to interpret nature in the light of grace and not the other way round,” as Alan Torrance observes for theological

⁹ McGilchrist locates this shift in the prevailing activity of the left brain hemisphere and its dominance in shaping the modern world. *The Master and His Emissary*.

anthropology. Its direction, he continues, “must think *from* God *to* humanity and not *from* our prevailing conception of humanity (and those facets of it deemed to be significant either by science or culture) *to* the transcendent.” We can add in this respect that the theological task must be able to distinguish theological anthropology from anthropological theology (as sustained above). Torrance draws this conclusion:

If theology is not to offer crude divine ratification of our prevailing scientific hypotheses and cultural affiliations, then God’s self-disclosure at the heart of the Christian faith must be given a foundational and not a derivative role in the business of determining what it is to be human. The decision not to begin there inevitably amounts to a decision not to arrive there! What I am suggesting, therefore, is that the knowledge intrinsic to faith supplies the fundamental ontological categories with which to approach theological anthropology and cannot leave it to science, psychology, or philosophy to provide these. To refuse to operate in this manner amounts to a *de facto* denial either that God has given himself to be known in revelation or that God’s self-revelation has any fundamental bearing on the interpretation of the shape and function of human existence.¹⁰

This brings us face to Face with the creation context and the cosmological question “Did God really say *that?*” (Gen 3:1, NIV). My basic assumption of faith about ‘what are human beings’ is that this living entity is a creature with a creator—without discounting the context of evolutionary biology but also not being limited to it or constrained by its pervasive thinking. My functional trust, extended in the epistemic process, arrives at the heuristic outcome that this creator is God based on direct relational self-disclosure; and this Creator-God has also revealed the knowledge and understanding of the human person necessary in order to be definitive for theological anthropology to be complete, that is, whole in ontology and function and thus conclusive of its relational design, purpose and outcome.

When the context composing the narrative of human being and being human is complete, both the human person is illuminated to emerge whole and the human condition is exposed in its fragmentation “to be apart” from the whole. This can be summarized as follows:

The human person (conjointly inseparable individually and corporately) is constituted in the relational context of the whole of God (or the trinitarian relational context of family) in which the human person emerges whole-ly by the relational process of the whole of God (i.e. the trinitarian relational process of family love).

¹⁰ Alan J. Torrance, “What is a Person?” in Malcolm Jeeves, ed., *From Cells to Souls—and Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 209, 211.

Apart from God's relational context and process, the epistemic field for human existence is narrowed down to quantitative terms, observing human life from outer in that can only be self-referencing—given the scope of its epistemic field and process—thereby fragmenting human existence into parts and rendering the human person incomplete, that is, reduced in ontology and function, and thus signifying the human condition “not good to be apart from the whole.” The whole of God—who has also been theologically fragmented into parts, consequently obscuring the whole ontology and function distinguishing God—and God's relational context and process are irreplaceable for distinguishing the nature of human being, and therefore are irreducible and nonnegotiable for constituting being human only as persons in the image and likeness of God's whole ontology and function. Nothing less and no substitutes.

This critical relational context and process were established in the primordial garden, which the context of reductionism then renegotiated and reduced to fragment human persons to the outer in of reduced ontology and function. That was pivotal for what composed the human narrative—partial context or complete context. And understanding these contexts remain critical and pivotal for the epistemic process of theological anthropology, and therefore for the existential practice of what are human beings.

Embodying Our Image or God's

As this constitutive issue widens the challenge for all our persons and narrows the path for each person, nothing is more constitutive for the human being we become and thus the being human we are in everyday life than the *image* of the person we embody. This is illustrated in Job's narrative, whose experience we can also learn from for our own narrative.

In his frustration or cynicism, and perhaps despair, Job initially raised the same question as the psalmist from a different approach: “What are human beings that you make *such a big deal (gadal)* of them, that you *even* set your heart (*leb*) on them and are *involved (paqad)* with them every day...*all the time?*” (Job 7:17-18) What provoked Job's question specifically involved his own person in God's context, which obviously seem to contradict his current trauma.

First, Job experienced being the object of Satan's reductionism to define his person by what he had and did (Job 1:10-11). Initially, Job would not let his person be defined in those reduced terms (1:20-22). But then, Job's focus on his person shifted from

inner out (2:3) to outer in (2:4-5). When he also made the outer in primary, he was conflicted in person-consciousness and became self-conscious in his context with God (e.g. 10:1; 27:2). What unfolded is critical to the process of theological anthropology and basic to what and who constitute the person in God's context.

To answer his question about the person in God's context, Job narrowed his epistemic field (e.g. 23:3, 8-9) in order to explain his person from outer in, and why this was happening to his person in God's context. What Job experienced was a struggle common to all persons in God's context: the vacillation between inner out and outer in (19:26-27)—also between person-consciousness and self-consciousness; and the confusion such preoccupation in the outer in creates (19:19; 27:2; 29:2-5). In the midst of this struggle, Job's will remained focused on the primacy of relationship with God (2:9-10), even though his person-consciousness waned. His primary focus was the key that allowed him to receive feedback to his answers—answers which begged the question from God (38:2)—in order to engage the relational epistemic process with God for the heuristic function to know and understand his (including our) whole person in God's context. This process and the relational outcome are fundamental for theological anthropology, Job's and ours as well.

In God's response to Job (38-41), God takes Job's epistemic field beyond the human context to establish the person unequivocally in God's context, that is, the complete context necessary to compose the narrative for human being in whole ontology and being human in whole function (as in 38:36). Therefore, in Job's assumptions about the person in God's context, he realized his speculation was based on a narrow epistemic field and its hermeneutic limits (40:5); whereby he received God's direct relational response in this relational epistemic process (42:4-5) that provided Job with the epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction needed for whole knowledge and understanding contrary to his fragmentary knowledge and understanding (42:3). This relational outcome can only be experienced in the primacy of relationship with God in both epistemic and ontological humility. Thus, Job learned a critical lesson in being apart from God's relational context and relational epistemic process:

Anything less than and any substitutes for the whole signify theological anthropology discourse that “obscures (*hashak*) God's plan and purpose (*'esah*) for the human person with words without whole knowledge and understanding” (*da'at*, 38:2); this is the reductionist result of attempting “to explain (*nāgad*) the person in God's context I did not understand, the person too distinguished (*pala*) for me to know from a limited epistemic field and narrow perceptual-interpretive lens” (42:3).

The heuristic process does not and cannot go beyond its epistemic field. So, for example, both science and theology cannot explain, define and determine the human person any further than the knowledge available to them in their epistemology—though

obviously this hasn't stopped speculative discourse from speaking about and even for God (sound familiar?). As we deliberate on the person in God's context, we need to learn from Job. He experienced ontological struggle when he focused on his outer in, which thereby led to relational difficulty in reciprocal relationship with God. On the one hand, Job shared his feelings openly with God but then, on the other hand, he spoke for God on his own terms; and the latter involved both an epistemological and hermeneutical problem. The ontological, relational, epistemological and hermeneutical issues are critical for our knowledge and understanding of the whole person distinguished in God's context.

As Job discovered humbly and thus vulnerably, persons in God's context cannot negotiate either the qualitative condition of their ontology or the relational terms of their function. Any theological anthropology discourse must be engaged accordingly in order to get to the heart of human being and the depth of being human. For example, when discussing the social nature and character of human persons, it is insufficient for TA to talk about merely social relatedness and community to define and distinguish the human person. For nonnegotiated theological anthropology, the person is created in the qualitative image of God to function in relational likeness to the whole of God (discussed shortly). Without renegotiation, therefore, human persons are created in whole ontology and function for the primacy of relationship together solely in whole relational terms as follows:

The qualitative ontology of the person's heart vulnerably opens to the hearts of other persons (including God) in order for the relational outcome of the primacy of relationship together to be nonnegotiable and irreducibly distinguished by the wholeness of intimate relationships—defined as hearts open and vulnerably connected together to be whole, that is, whole solely in the image and likeness of the whole of God (“not to be apart...but naked and relationally connected without disappointment”).

It is an open question whether Christians have discovered this and thus experience its relational reality.

In contrast and conflict, when God's relational terms from inner out are shifted to referential terms from outer in (even unintentionally or perhaps inadvertently), something less or some substitute replaces the above and renders the person and relationships to fragmentary-reduced ontology and function without the primacy of the qualitative (with the function of the heart) and the relational (in intimate relationships of wholeness). This qualitative and relational consequence no longer distinguishes persons in God's context, only shapes them in the limits of the human context by the constraints of the human condition (“to be apart...naked and relationally distant”). This is **the human image** constitutive of the human being and being human that commonly embodies persons.

The diversity of human images prevailing in the human context to constitute the person that we could embody is inescapable. If we don't understand God's image beyond an association for our theology and practice, we are highly susceptible to embodying a human image for our person. In that state, like Job, we would be confronted with God's question "Who is this *person* that *functions* without knowing?"

Definitively *what* was created and *why* are contingent on the whole ontology and function of God, and therefore contingent on the Word in the beginning, in whose image human being is created to be whole and in whose likeness all human ontology and function are created to live whole—to be and live whole together in relationship with the whole of God and God's creation (Gen 2:18,25, cf. Rom 8:17,19). The *whole* illuminated was not a product of some dialectic or abstract process; it was the relational outcome in the beginning of the whole-ly God's communicative-creative action. This uncommon *whole* emerged only with the Whole from outside the universe to constitute the whole of the universe and all in it in the innermost (Col 1:17). Moreover, the Whole does not become the universe (pantheism), nor is the universe all there is of the Whole (as in panentheism). The whole-ly God (the triune God) remains distinguished outside the universe and this Whole's likeness distinguishes the universe in the innermost to be whole—the innermost otherwise elusive to the human perceptual-interpretive lens. Though this wholeness was the reality in the beginning, reductionism clouded the human lens to fragment the whole of human ontology and function, and also creation (Gen 3:7,10,17; cf. Rom 8:19-21). The good news, however, is the deeper unfolding of the Word to give the light to the innermost necessary to be whole, "who has shone in our hearts..." (2 Cor 4:6).

For Paul, there is definitive epistemological clarification in "the knowledge of the glory of the whole of God *vulnerably revealed* by the face of Christ *as the image of God*" (2 Cor 4:6, cf. v.4). 'Glory' illuminates the being, nature and presence of God (as Moses requested, Ex 33:18), which reveals the qualitative heart of God's being, God's intimate relational nature and vulnerable presence (cf. Jn 17:22,24). The whole of Jesus magnified the heart of God's being, relational nature and vulnerable presence in the human context by embodying an improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path (Jn 1:14,18). The whole gospel illuminates this glory magnified in Christ as the image of God (2 Cor 4:4, cf. Col 1:15). From Paul's first encounter with Christ, he experienced this glory in relational terms.

The glory and image of God in the face of Christ disclosed in the incarnation are primary to the complex theological dynamics composing Paul's complete Christology. These dynamics illuminate the glory and image of God beyond their understanding in Judaism and further and deeper than in the Jesus tradition. In the OT, the image of God's glory is mainly characterized as strength and power (e.g. Ex 15:6,11; 16:6-8; Ps 24:7-10; 29:1-9; 59:9,17). The incarnation, however, deepens this image and glory of God to illuminate the qualitative heart, relational nature and vulnerable presence of God

relationally disclosed by the whole of Jesus only for involvement in relationship together. This strategic shift did not exclude God's strength and power (as demonstrated by the resurrection) but presupposes God's reign (notably over darkness and now over death). On this basis, this strategic shift in Jesus' intrusive relational path fully focuses on God's relational response of grace whole-ly extended within the innermost of the human condition—that is, not merely in its situations and circumstances but more importantly to the persons who are apart from the whole of God's wholeness, in order to reconcile them to the relationship necessary to be whole together. This relational outcome can only emerge from the function of relationship, and the incarnation constitutes only this function.

As the function of relationship, nothing happens without the experiential truth from the incarnation embodying the relational dynamic of the image and glory of God, not the conceptual image or doctrinal glory of God. The Jesus tradition rightly understood this relational outcome as only from God's grace yet did not fully understand the theological dynamics involved or the theological anthropology necessarily engaged. This gap was demonstrated at a church summit in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-29) and by Peter's interpretive framework and lens prior (10:9-16, 34-36), for which Paul later still had to give hermeneutic correction to Peter's practice for the experiential truth of the whole gospel embodied by Jesus (Gal 2:14).

In the incarnation of God's relational dynamic determined only by the relational function of grace, Jesus fulfills the whole of God's thematic relational response to the inherent human relational need and problem (which neuroscience rightly identifies). By fulfilling God's relational response only in the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes, Jesus embodied the wholeness of the image of God (*eikon*, Col 1:15). *Eikon* implies not merely a resemblance to but the total correspondence and likeness of its archetype, here the invisible God—just as Jesus claimed to his first disciples (Jn 14:9). The *eikon* of God is made definitive by the illumination (*photismos*) of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, whose vulnerable embodiment made God's qualitative being and relational nature functionally involved with persons for experiential truth in relationship together (2 Cor 4:4b,6).

Beginning with his face-to-face encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road, Paul experienced directly this relational dynamic of Christ's illumination now extended also to him. In this relational process with Jesus, God's relational function of grace and its outcome of intimate relational connection together (not mysticism) provided Paul with his ongoing experiential truth of the glory of God “in Christ”, the image of God. All this was to definitively establish for the church at Corinth “by the open statement of truth” (*phanerosis* from *phaneroo*, 4:2) that the relational dynamic is from God and not from human shaping (4:1). For Paul, the image of God was unmistakable in the relational dynamic of Christ's magnification of God's glory, which Paul simply integrates in “the gospel of the glory of Christ” (4:4b).

This relational dynamic of the image and glory of God is essential for Paul's *pleroma* Christology (completeness, fullness, whole, Col 1:19; 2:9) because it signifies the whole of Jesus' person vulnerably embodied, magnified and involved for relationship together, fulfilling the following three functions unique to the face of Christ:

1. Whole knowledge and understanding of the whole of God's ontology as nothing less and no substitutes of God's qualitative being and relational nature (Christ the epistemological-theological key).
2. Whole knowledge and understanding of the whole of God's function in the relational context and process constituted only by God's relational terms of grace (Christ the hermeneutical key).

This relational dynamic of the image and glory of God in Christ functions also to illuminate the whole knowledge and understanding of the face of Christ's function from inner out in God's relational context and process, whereby to function congruent to only God's relational terms of grace from top down. Christ's face and function together are irreducible and therefore indispensable for Christology to be complete. In Paul's *pleroma* Christology, Christ's face and function constitute the whole person vulnerably involved in relationship. The relational outcome, in contrast to the relational consequence above, is that the whole of God is now accessible for intimate relationship Face to face. The relational implication is that the function of this distinguished Face is compatible only with the human face in qualitative image and relational likeness of his for the qualitative-relational connection and involvement necessary to be whole-ly Face to face to Face. These essential dynamics unfold just by God's relational terms from top down, thus they cannot unfold shaped from bottom up by human terms.

This relational outcome is the purpose and function of the unequivocal image and glory of God vulnerably embodied by the whole of Jesus only for relationship together. Indispensably throughout the incarnation, Christ's function illuminated the whole knowledge and understanding of the qualitative image and relational likeness of God in which the human person and function were created; and by his qualitative-relational function between the manger and the cross, Christ also vulnerably demonstrates the ontological image and functional likeness to which human persons need to be restored for whole relationship together face to Face. Therefore, the relational dynamic of the image and glory of God is essential in Paul's *pleroma* Christology for a third function fulfilled in the distinguished face of Christ necessary for relationship together:

3. The qualitative image and relational likeness of the whole of God necessary for human ontology and function, as individual-person and collective-persons together in God's family, in the same dynamic as Christ of nothing less and no substitutes (Christ the functional key).

Without Jesus' whole person and function throughout the incarnation, whole knowledge and understanding of the image and glory of God would neither be illuminated for vulnerable self-disclosure in experiential truth, nor be definitive for vulnerable human reciprocal response in the image and likeness necessary for whole relationship together (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10). Our TA becomes constitutive only in the face of Christ and unmistakably distinguishes the human person only in Face-to-face-to-Face relationship together—the constitutive issue *constituted*.

It is conclusive for theological anthropology that the person essential to God and distinguished in the Trinity is embodied by Jesus. Jesus' whole person, as Paul made definitive theologically, is the exact and whole "image of God...in the vulnerably present and relationally involved face of Christ." Jesus as *person* is not a referential concept or anthropomorphism imposed on him but his vulnerable function as "the image of the *transcendent* God...in *his person* all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:15,19). His person as the image of God—along with the person of the Spirit, Jesus' relational replacement (Jn 14:16-18; 16:13-15; 2 Cor 3:17-18)—is essential for the human person both to know the qualitative significance and to have whole understanding of what it means to be and function as the person created in the image of God. There are certainly irreducible differences between God as Creator and creatures. As Jesus vulnerably disclosed (e.g. in his formative family prayer, Jn 17:21-23), however, there is also an irreducible likeness between the persons of the Trinity and the human person created in the image of the whole of God (cf. Col 3:10; Eph 4:24). Anything less and any substitute of God or humans has been reduced. Therefore, as the Father tells us to "listen to my Son" (Mt 17:5), he also means to "listen and learn from him!"

Any uncovering of theological anthropology that reveals a person in the unlikeness of God may not be surprising, since it will no doubt involve issues about relationship that are not accounted for in relational terms. For example, what is the significance of John 4:23-24 and how is this interrelated to the person in Matthew 15:8? The answers should be at the core of theological anthropology to distinguish the person. Here again, the nature and extent of our Christology is the key, which is why we need to pay close attention to and heed the whole of Jesus as the Father said (Mt 17:5, cf. Mk 4:24).

Integral to the relational likeness of God is the qualitative image of God, and conversely. Since God transplanted the heart of his being to the innermost of the human person to connect with the whole-ly God (Ecc 3:11), the whole person can only be distinguished from inner out and just in relational terms (as in Jn 4:23-24). However, any

shift of focus to outer in also shifts to referential terms, as in “these people draw near with their mouths...while their hearts are far from me” (Isa 29:13, cf. Mt15:8); and this is when relationship becomes a critical issue reflecting the *unlikeness* of God. The person (both Jesus’ and ours) in his call must be accounted for in whole relational terms or else reflect the unlikeness of God embodying the human image.

The embodied Word relationally communicated the whole knowledge and understanding of God to make definitive the functional reality of God’s image and likeness (as Paul illuminated, 2 Cor 4:4,6), while also conclusively providing the epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction of God’s unlikeness (as Paul reflected, 2 Cor 3:14-18). Jesus distinguished the relational likeness of God in two relational contexts: (1) within the whole of God, the Trinity, together with the persons of the Father and the Spirit, and (2) with other persons in a human context, whether together or not.

In his vulnerable involvement of family love, Jesus confronted the relational human condition and restored persons (e.g. from reductionist human distinctions) to qualitative wholeness from inner out in relational terms in the relational likeness of the Trinity as God’s own family. This was demonstrated in his relational interactions, for example, with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:7-26), Levi (Mk 2:13-17), Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10), the prostitute (Lk 7:36-50), Martha’s sister Mary (Lk 10:38-42), even including his mother Mary and beloved disciple John while on the cross (Jn 19:26-27)—making evident the qualitative innermost of the whole person in the qualitative image of God.

The ontological One and the relational Whole, which is the Trinity, is what the whole of Jesus embodied in his life and practice throughout the incarnation. Though unique in function by their different roles in the whole of God’s thematic relational response to the human condition, what primarily defines their trinitarian persons are not these role distinctions. To define them by their roles is to define the trinitarian persons primarily by what they do, which would be a qualitative reduction of God to quantitative parts/aspects. This reduction makes role distinctions primary over the only purpose for their functional differences to love us vulnerably from top down, consequently reducing not only the qualitative substance of the Trinity but also the qualitative relational nature distinguishing God and its significance of what matters most to God, both as Creator and Savior.

Accordingly, the image we embody composed by our different roles and related resources is always a human image, which no longer embodies God’s image and likeness. Such human images are also consequential for how we do our relationships, which no longer embodies the likeness of the Word’s (i.e. Trinity’s) family love. This image is at the heart of how our person functions, thus is inseparable from the who, what and how we are in everyday life—both our person individually and our persons together collectively.

Therefore, our intimate relational involvement of family love signifies both the relational oneness with the Trinity in ongoing communion in the life of the triune God, and the relational and ontological oneness of God's family as church living to be whole in likeness of the relational ontology of the Trinity. This is the oneness that fulfills Jesus' definitive prayer for his family (Jn 17:20-26), which we cannot embody with anything less or any substitutes. Thus, this relational oneness is not about a structure of authority and roles, or a context determined by such distinctions, but oneness only from the function of relationships in the intimate relational process of family love. These ongoing dynamic relationships of family love, however, necessitate by its nature the qualitative innermost of God (Mt 5:8) and thus relationships only on God's terms (Jn 14:21; 15:9-10; 17:17-19). Moreover, intimate communion with the whole-ly God cannot be based only on love, because God is holy—*uncommon* apart from the *common*. This relationship requires compatibility of qualitative innermost, and therefore the need for our transformation in order to have intimate relationship with the holy God. God's love vulnerably from top down does not supersede this necessity, only provides for it. Further interrelated, the whole-ly God's relational work of grace constitutes the redemptive reconciliation for our relationships in his family to be transformed to equalized and intimate relationships together necessary to be God's whole on God's whole relational terms, that is, in relational likeness of the whole and uncommon God

On the one hand, Christians embodying human images can be subtle and elude awareness. This is directly connected to a lack of qualitative sensitivity, which results from self-consciousness operating over person-consciousness and thus displacing the qualitative image and relational likeness of whole-ly God. After all, “who told you that you were naked?”—which, for example, those dependent on social media need to face up to. On the other hand, this problem must not remain subtle or elusive if our person would embrace the *image* embodied by the Word (Col 1:15) and thereby vulnerably embody his integral *likeness* in reciprocal response face to face (2 Cor 4:6).

In the narrative of your person, have you discovered the person that Job discovered about himself? Do you think that your person has been in your image or God's? *Who* and *what* we are to define our human being and *how* we become to determine our being human, this is an ongoing constitutive issue that simply encompasses all our lives in the human context. The question always facing us in this issue is whether creation prevails or evolution further pervades; and the existential answer will always be evident in the function of our person(s).

As the direct extension of the pivotal issue of listening, what's at stake for this constitutive issue is immeasurable: all of our persons and our relationships to be whole and not fragmentary (“not to be apart”), thereby fulfilling our creation constitution and not our evolutionary potential, wherein we can enjoy the wholeness of reciprocal

relationship together with the Trinity and with each other as family with satisfaction and without shame. Therefore, all Christians are accountable for their person to be congruent with the qualitative image of God and for their relationships to be reconciled in the relational likeness of the Trinity.

Take heed: Our persons are irreducible and our relationships are nonnegotiable. A wider path is not an option, but we are all created with the free will to choose anything less for our person and any substitutes in our relationships.

Chapter 6 ISSUE 6: Knowing Our Neighbor and Understanding Our Witness

“And who is my neighbor?”

Luke 10:29

“You also are to testify *for me*.”

John 15:27

The daily path that the Christian person takes in the surrounding context will define their identity and determine their function in everyday life, whereby the person will witness to who they are and whose they are—a testimony all the world observes. Moreover, *whose* is an existential issue of belonging that is either typically ignored by Christians, or ambiguous to observers. What the Christian person experiences in all this is dependent on their depth of knowing God and their extent of understanding the Word.

The journey we’ve been on so far in this study keeps widening in its scope of essential issues such that our challenge is unavoidable. On the other hand, whether our path is actually narrowing is based on our resolve for these inescapable issues. The next two issues will challenge our resolve much further, so that our path narrows in very practical terms for the unmistakable viability of our Christian faith (not any faith). Perhaps this should further alert you to suspend any assumptions you might have, given the seeming familiarity of these next two issues. “Listen and learn” is our ongoing challenge to be open to these issues and then to be vulnerable to resolve them.

The Rule of Law or Rule of Relationship

When God’s people originally received the Torah from God, it became their Rule of Law. God communicated to them (not unilaterally commanded) the terms of the Law in relational language to define the relational terms for covenant relationship together. They, however, too often received the Law in referential language, which thereby transposed those terms of relationship to a mere behavioral code for them to follow with variable connection to covenant relationship. Hence, God’s Law was transposed from its essential qualitative terms as the Rule of Relationship to a reduced quantitative system for a Rule of Law. When the Rule of Law is quantified out in, it inevitably distorts justice and becomes inequitable—the systemic condition prevailing globally today. As

this reduced system evolved further as an outer-in behavior code, it shifted further away from the qualitative significance of relationship and its primacy for God. This Rule of Law prevailed in the ancient history of God's people and became a major issue of contention with Jesus throughout the incarnation because Jesus embodied and enacted the Rule of Relationship. Let's examine some parts of the interaction that Jesus had with experts of the law.

Generally, since Jesus wasn't into observing a quantitative system, the legal experts frequently indicted him for breaking the law. Each occasion always gave Jesus the opportunity to clarify and correct their bias by using the qualitative terms of God's Law for the primacy of the Rule of Relationship. During one of their debates, another teacher of the law asked Jesus to state the most important commandment (Mk 12:28-31, cf. Mt 22:34-40). Clearly, Jesus distinguished the Rule of Relationship from a Rule of Law. Yet, here again, the Rule of Relationship can only be understood in relational language, and merely having the same terms in reference is misleading and misguided.

This emerged on another occasion when a lawyer tested Jesus about inheriting eternal life; Jesus used the opportunity to clarify and correct what's written in the Law (Lk 10:25-28). But, the lawyer was an outer-in person defined by what he did, so he asked "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus' response made the answer unmistakable to the lawyer (vv.29-37), yet likely without him understanding the human dynamics involved. Such a lack of understanding the Word's Good Samaritan is common among Christians also, so what Jesus illuminates challenges many assumptions about the Good Samaritan.

Who Jesus made unmistakable thereby challenged the lawyer to change from compliance with a quantified Rule of Law to qualitative adherence to the Rule of Relationship. The Good Samaritan also makes unmistakable to all of us the human dynamics in the issue of neighbor, so that we would enact the Rule of Relationship rather than a Rule of Law. The challenge to change is not simply replacing the latter with the former, but a major turnaround for the persons involved and the nature of their interactions.

The Human Dynamics of Neighbor

Who would better know the details in the Book of Leviticus than a priest and Levite? They certainly heard these details of the Law often, but whether Leviticus 19:18 rang in their ears upon seeing their injured neighbor is an open question. I'm sure many Christians in their shoes would have at least called for emergency help; but they could still be engaged in human dynamics about neighbor not unlike the priest and Levite. Really, how so?

When the priest and Levite separately saw the beat-up man on the road, they each chose to pass by him on the other side of the road. They didn't overlook him or even deny his bad condition, or else they wouldn't have moved to the other side. Overlooking, ignoring or denying neighbors are certainly dynamics that happen all the time among neighbors—even among friends and Christians. Jesus illuminated, however, a more pervasive human dynamic engaged by the priest and Levite: **keeping relational distance**.

In ancient Israel, all priests belonged to the Levite tribe, a tribe that had special status among its tribes (Num 3-4). Given the Levites' status, what human dynamics emerge from Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan? The Levites were a unique tribe that took seriously their role to serve as priests and teach the torah. The first human dynamic emerging, then, centers on this equation used for their identity formation. This equation added up what they did to define their identity. In other words, their identity was based on a person from outer in, whose function would be centered in self-consciousness more than person-consciousness. Their outer-in lens focusing on human distinctions inevitably engaged in the comparative process of human dynamics, which measures the outer-in distinctions of self and others on a vertical scale stratifying their status. Remember, Jesus' disciples also engaged in this comparative process (e.g. Lk 9:46). So, how do these human dynamics affect how we engage in relationships with this type of interaction?

Since the Levites were knowledgeable about the terms of God's Law, they were aware of how to treat neighbors, strangers, and aliens (as in Lev 19). But they transposed God's relational terms to quantified details of a Rule of Law, and this outer-in lens determined how they saw others, and thus how they related to neighbors, strangers and aliens. Based on their lens, how would you describe the way the priest and Levite treated the injured man?

Their outer-in identity as priest and Levite also projected an outer-in identity onto the injured man. Other than his injury we don't have any information about him, but he was obviously not one like them. His different distinction didn't measure up to theirs, and the usual consequence at the very least was to keep relational distance (contrary to Lev 19). Even if they assisted the man in some way, their action toward him would have been condescending, paternalistic at best, which still would have maintained a stratified structure in the relationships between them—which should not be confused with love of neighbor. The diverse ways these human dynamics could be enacted can also be subtle to elude the awareness of those giving or even receiving the action. Thus, it is critical to understand:

These human dynamics converge with the quantified terms of a Rule of Law to make it variable or relative; and the dynamics also conflate with culture to shape its beliefs and values—a culture that helps formalize human distinctions to systematically stratify the surrounding context.

Remember the basis for skin-ny identity and ableism identity and their consequences (discussed in Chap. 2), because it's all part of the human dynamics of neighbor.

I think it's safe to assume that the priest and Levite observed a Rule of Law, because I don't think that Jesus was illustrating the blatant disregard of neighbor by their behavior. As the object of comparative treatment himself, Jesus had a deeper purpose in this parable to illuminate these human dynamics:

1. The range of ways the treatment of neighbor can have.
2. And that merely observing a Rule of Law should not be confused with and must not be considered as enacting the Rule of Relationship, and thus cannot be a substitute for God's relational terms constituting "love your neighbor as yourself."
3. Bringing to the forefront and making foremost the relational involvement required to love just as Jesus loved.

It is likely Jesus used the actions of the priest and Levite as a cautionary tale to fulfill the first part of his purpose, so that others like us will be alerted about the discordant treatment of neighbors. Therefore, based on Jesus' threefold purpose, the Good Samaritan widens the challenge for all Christians and unavoidably narrows the path for our existential treatment of our neighbors.

The Tactical Action for Neighbor

Given the fact that the human dynamics of 'neighbor' can be subtle and elude awareness, Christians have to understand how our actions can be in actual discord with the Rule of Relationship for neighbor. For example, various neighborhoods in the surrounding context implement a tactical plan to keep their neighborhood strictly on their terms—terms, that is, in order to prevent any intrusion that would change things in their biased view. The tactic is 'not in my backyard' (NIMBY). The distinctions used for NIMBY are always quantified on a comparative basis, with the value measurement enacted in a stratified process. Those neighbors having the same (or similar) distinctions join together to preserve their joint neighborhood, likely with little regard for how neighbors in other neighborhoods would be affected by NIMBY. Christians haven't been immune from using this tactic and may in fact take the lead for the cause of NIMBY. What NIMBY Christians need to account for is how their actions create discord with Jesus' Rule of Relationship for neighbor. This emerges as we understand the tactical

action for neighbor that the person of Jesus embodied to enact with each of us, his neighbor.

First of all, Jesus' person from inner out embodied the strategic action of whole-ly God's relational response of grace to the human condition. Jesus then enacted God's tactical action that distinguishes unmistakably God's vulnerable relational involvement of love with persons in the human context, which functionally unfolded directly in relationships face to face—all condensed in the often misunderstood parameters of John 3:16, which the whole Gospel of John summarizes. The strategic, tactical and functional actions by Jesus embodied the relational terms of God's Rule of Relationship, which he unequivocally constituted in the primacy of the relational involvement of love: first with God, then with others, including our own person (Mk 12:29-31; Jn 13:34). Love is *the* tactical action in God's Rule of Relationship that obviously widens the challenge for all Christians. Less obvious, however, is that the relational terms of love certainly narrows the path for relationships in the Rule of Relationship.

“Just as I have loved you” is the irreducible and nonnegotiable basis for the tactical action of love. When we don't understand or even directly experience Jesus' love, we readily turn to variable forms of love to observe his two commandments. If Jesus' love is misrepresented, then, the love we give to others doesn't represent him—a common witness that Christians project. The tactical action of Jesus' love is first directed to us in order for us to personally experience the relational reality of his love's involvement with our whole person from inner out—not merely a love of what he does for us. The latter is secondary to the primacy of his love's relational involvement with us face to face, which does not keep a sacred distance. On this irreplaceable basis, Jesus makes further definitive the tactical action of love: “Just as I have loved you, you also *need to be vulnerably involved* to love one another. By this *tactical action* everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you *are relationally involved in* love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35).

Yet, Peter ignored the tactical action made definitive by Jesus and instead immediately focused on the secondary, both about Jesus' person and his own person. With the secondary, he expressed his devotion to Jesus not by his relational involvement of love but about what he would do for Jesus—that is, sacrificing his body for Jesus but not giving him his whole person (13:36-37). Given Peter's relational distance, it should be no surprise for him to hear later the disarming question from Jesus: “Do you love me?” (Jn 21:15-18). Peter answered with a variable form of love (*phileo*) because he didn't understand how Jesus loved (*agape*) him. The love of *phileo* can have merit, for example, in the fellowship between Christians, but it is not a substitute for the relational involvement of love given us by Jesus and for our reciprocal response of love to him and others. *Agape* is the only constituting basis for the tactical action of love.

Peter's relational distance caused him to misrepresent Jesus' tactical action of love; and the tactical action Peter used as a substitute made outer-in distinctions (Acts 10:13-16), which Peter assumed in observing a quantified Rule of Law. But Peter's tactic dealt a harmful blow to the early church's tactical action. Thus, his tactic along with other leaders needed to be confronted and changed in order for Jesus' tactical action of love to constitute the church (Gal 2:11-14; Acts 15:1-19). Even though the tactical action of love turned persons around to grow the early church, this tactical cycle recurred through church history and has been consequential for the relationships by Christians—first with God, second with each other, and then with all others. Yet, repeating the tactical cycle should not surprise us, since the variable forms of love used by Christians generate simulations and illusions in relationships that readily perpetuate relational distance embedded in the secondary over the primary, the quantitative over the qualitative, and thus the outer in over the inner out.

Where does this leave the tactical action for neighbor? There are numerous tactics Christians can take with neighbors, even in the name of love. The issue for us, however, is not about the numerous ways we can love our neighbor. Jesus narrows the path for all Christians by an interdependent relational dynamic essential for God's Rule of Relationship: (1) "Love your neighbor **as yourself**" (Mk 12:31), and (2) love others "**just as I love you**" (Jn 13:34). Commonly for persons, of course, there are also various ways that persons love themselves. But the qualitative terms of the Rule of Relationship always define the person as whole from inner out. Love our whole person from inner out requires us to be vulnerable with our heart and not maintain distance that prevents love from touching us deeply. This involves more, for example, than a spiritual exercise but getting down to the whole person, which also requires vulnerably listening to our heart in all its feelings. Jesus only loves with his whole person, whereby he only loves our whole person. That's why when our focus is on secondary matters—no matter how important that secondary may be—we become distracted from his relational involvement of love. This happened to Peter when Jesus washed his feet. In this condition—a default mode for many—how do Christians experience the relational reality of his love and thereby be able to love our whole person, so that we can love our neighbor and love each other just as he loves us?

We cannot reciprocate in Jesus' likeness and give out what we do not vulnerably experience in our whole person. In the path Christians take, all must account for this reality:

Love is variable in a Rule of Law, but love is irreducible and nonnegotiable in the Rule of Relationship—the *agape* Jesus embodied in his whole person to vulnerably enact with nothing less and no substitutes.

Anything less and any substitutes for the tactical action of love enacted by Jesus to be embodied in the Rule of Relationship unmistakably leaves our neighbor at a distance on the other side of the wide path taken—left out in the cold. To undertake nothing less and no substitutes requires, necessitates, makes imperative, even demands the tactical action of *agape*, which is demonstrated by the Good Samaritan. Make no mistake, however, the Good Samaritan demonstrated not in the extensive secondary (albeit important) things he did for his neighbor but in the primacy of his relational involvement of love he made vulnerable to his neighbor. Here is a person whose sociocultural distinction was a marginalized identity that many wouldn't want in their neighborhood, yet he chose not to be defined by those outer-in terms. Thus, he loved himself, so that his person from inner out would love his neighbor.

This relational process and outcome can only unfold from nothing less and no substitutes for the tactical action of love as Jesus enacted in order for his followers to enact in his relational likeness. Hence, the Word's Good Samaritan identity is ascribed incorrectly to too many persons just because of their goodwill and deeds—which in itself is good but not to the qualitative depth of the Good Samaritan. Christians need to understand this critical difference and account for their tactics with neighbors.

Therefore, the tactical and functional actions in our everyday practice will constitute what kind of person we are and thereby determine who is our neighbor. The results make evident what we give to our neighbor and thus what our neighbor receives.

The Nature of Witness

The non-virtual fact: Our neighbors only experience from us what we give out. The existential reality: What we give out is limited to what we personally experience. This fact and reality underlie a Christian's witness in the surrounding context, whether their witness is intentional or inadvertent. Hence, all Christians need to understand the nature of their witness and account for the witness they give out.

All persons give out a witness during the course of everyday life, which others can experience or at least observe. This is a **passive witness** that merely gives out something about that person. Christians are always giving out a witness about themselves that others use to assess our faith, even though that witness wasn't so intended. Most of Christian witness is just the passive type, and this prevailing testimony is rarely accounted for. Consider the partisan evangelicals who, despite their emphasis on evangelism, don't address the passive witness they give out that also bears witness to the gospel they proclaim.

Then, there are two active types of witness that are relevant for Christians also to account for. The active witness and passive witness form **the witness loop** that puts Christian witness in an ongoing mode—even a default mode signifying Christians are always bearing witness. The shift to active witness emerges with Jesus before his crucifixion and after the resurrection. Gathering with his disciples afterward, he summarized what just happened to him and stated “You are witnesses of these things (Lk 24:46-48). In the N.T., witness (*martys* and its verb, *martyreo*) denotes one who has knowledge about what they saw and heard, and thus can confirm it by bearing witness or giving testimony. On the one hand, Jesus seems to be identifying what actually just defines **the first active witness** as simply witnessing to what they saw, heard or know—that is, in effect as an observer of these facts and information that are received from the embodied Word or collected from the written Word. As Christians progress from a passive witness, more often than not they become this first active witness expressing what facts and information they heard and know. Perhaps most Christians would think that this active witness is important to form the witness loop, or that it’s better than just having a passive witness. Jesus would not agree that such an active witness would be “my witnesses in *the global human context*” (Acts 1:8).

His witnesses are **the second active witness** that emerges with Jesus before his crucifixion. When Jesus revealed that his relational replacement, the Holy Spirit, is going to “testify for *me*, not just truths and knowledge about me,” he also declared unequivocally to his followers: “You also *must* testify” (Jn 15:26-27). Why so? “Because you have been *involved* with me to *experience my person in relationship together*.” The second active witness is clearly distinguished from the first by being a witness who doesn’t just observe Jesus for facts and info. Rather this witness experiences Jesus by being a relationally involved participant, who thereby can testify of and for his whole person—sharing with others his vulnerable presence and intimate relational involvement embodying the whole gospel. Nothing less and no substitutes can be, will be and are “my witnesses.”

The Basis for Our Witness

Have you examined your witness loop yet? Have you ever considered what your neighbors observe from your witness, or from your Christian friends and church witness? The basis for our witness prompts these questions, so we can understand the path we’re on and meet the challenge before us.

All Christians certainly give out a passive witness in their everyday life and the composition of this witness should have our ongoing attention. At the same time, our active witness must be understood regarding its basis. Whatever we actively express about our faith is always either subject to critical review by others receiving that witness,

or subjected to evaluation by the Word (together with the Spirit)—or by both. Our witness should never be considered an end in itself but always understood as a primary means to the existential end that confirms either some reality about oneself or the reality of whole-ly God embodied by the Word. When the latter is conflated with the former, the means-end process becomes ambiguous such that the end of “my witnesses” eludes our witness. These dynamics make it imperative for Christians to understand the basis of their current witness. Lacking this understanding relegates our witness easily to having no legitimately significant basis or simply no basis at all. When Christian witness and the Word are not on the same page, the world (including our neighbor) has a basis to render our witness without significance and dismiss the relevance of the Christian faith.

In effect, Christians need to be part of a *Witness Protection Program* in order to ensure the integrity of their witness is maintained. Without this maintenance, Christians will labor in the means-end witness process and thereby lose their voice to echo the Word and to rightly proclaim his whole gospel. The lack of integrity in our active witness also exposes our passive witness being rendered by various influences in our surrounding context, which then begs the question about what we are really experiencing to determine the nature of our giving out. Therefore, whenever our witness’ integrity is not ensured, our passive witness becomes the main determinant for our witness loop; this then delegitimizes the basis of our active witness and makes it subjected to scrutiny by the Word (with the Spirit).

“Listen and learn” from the scrutiny by the Word of the witness given out by the following churches:

Two churches gave out a very active witness, which many churches today would be proud to have. One of those gave out such a popular witness that they gained a reputation of “being alive.” But the Word’s scrutiny assessed their witness as effectively “dead.” They needed to “Wake up...for I have not found your *witness complete, that is, whole* in the sight of my God” (Rev 3:1-2). The other church actively gave out a witness that strictly adhered to the facts and information about God, regardless of the pushback they received in their surrounding context. The Word wasn’t impressed, “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you experienced at first” (Rev 2:2-5). They basically shifted their witness from the tactical action of love constituting the Rule of Relationship to a quantitative tactical action composing a Rule of Law that merely conforms to a code of behavior. They needed to turn around (“repent”) and return to what’s primary for “my witnesses,” so that what they give out would be based on their relational experience of the Word’s relational involvement of love with them.

Another active church witness was less active than the two above. Their witness gave out a very accepting hand to the diversity in their surrounding context, which absorbed those outer-in distinctions into a hybrid process for this church. The Word

scrutinized their witness to its core in order to both reconstitute their witness from inner out and so that “all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts” (Rev 2:18-23). The last church witness to learn from was a relatively passive witness that maintained relational distance in what they gave out. Basically, their witness emerged from the esteemed distinctions of their quantitative resources, which rendered what they gave out as “neither cold nor hot”—as in a distasteful “lukewarm” water that “I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” Since the Word will “reprove and discipline those whom I love,” in spite of their lukewarm witness the Word gently called out to them to turnaround and “Listen! I am *relationally involved* at the door *to your heart*, knocking *to be let in so that there is no relational distance between us*” (Rev 3:14-20).

Though the Word does not subpoena us to “testify on his behalf” as the Spirit testifies (Jn 15:26), he ongoingly pursues us for relationship so our testimony will be in likeness. Sadly, too many Christians merely quantify Jesus’ knocking (Rev 3:20) without its qualitative-relational significance, such that their personal experience lacks the Word’s intimate relational involvement of love. The relational consequence diminishes the experiential basis of what they give out to lukewarmness—what becomes a distasteful witness others would spit out of their mouths.

Our witness loop has much to “Listen and learn” from in order for our witness to undertake the narrow path of “my witnesses.”

The Constituting Basis of “My Witnesses”

When Jesus declared without equivocation that others will know “you are my disciples,” what did he illuminate that those disciples give out? Certainly this outcome is contingent on disciples loving each other but that’s not the constituting basis for the witness with this outcome. “**Just as** I have loved you” is not a reference to what Jesus did but brings to the forefront the constituting basis for loving one another (Jn 13:34). What is given out by these followers witnesses to the experiential truth and relational reality of their persons who “follow *my person*” in the primacy of relationship together to be intimately involved “where I am” (Jn 12:26). The integrity of this witness is not unequivocal just by loving one another, because human love is too variable to ensure its integrity. Therefore, “just as I love you” is the only constituting basis to provide the experience necessary to give out the love that witnesses unequivocally for all others (especially our neighbor) to “know that you are my disciples” (13:35). And while Jesus’

agape no doubt transforms our person, we shouldn't assume that it alters our genes to make giving out *agape* our default mode.

This tactical action of love constituting the basis of our witness as “my witnesses” is essential to understand at its qualitative-relational roots. These roots begin from the trajectory of God's grace to humanity and emerge strategically when the Word embodied the whole and uncommon (holy) God to tactically enact the *agape* involvement of the Trinity. Foremost, these roots distinguish the *agape* involvement within the Trinity (as in Jn 17:23,24,26), which unfolds in reciprocal relational involvement between the trinitarian persons. It is only on the basis of their reciprocal relational involvement of *agape* that the Son gives out love: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” (Jn 15:9). Therefore, whole-ly God's *agape* is not unilateral, but by its qualitative-relational nature it is always reciprocal for those who experience God's *agape* involvement. Does this clarify and correct Christian notions of John 3:16, which John unfolds in his Gospel?

Jesus used the metaphor of the vine and the branches to describe this relational process (Jn.15). We tend to perceive this as a static structural arrangement that is necessary for quantitative results (“fruit”). This shifts the focus from the dynamic process of intimate relationship Jesus is describing. Three times he mentions the reciprocal effort “to remain” in each other (15:4,5,7). The word “remain” (Gk. *meno*) means to remain, dwell, abide; applied to another person it denotes reciprocal relational involvement. This is the same word Jesus used to describe his authentic (Gk. *alethes*) disciples intimately involved (“hold,” *meno*) with his “teachings” (*logos*, his essence, his person, Jn.8:31). When there is this kind of relational involvement, there are distinct relational outcomes experienced in this process. One outcome is to know God intimately—not to be confused with knowing information about God—which only emerges from vulnerable reciprocal interaction. A further outcome is the experience of *agape* involvement, not only from Jesus but also from the Father (Jn.15:9; 17:26). These relational outcomes underlie the fruit his disciples bear. This fruit does not reflect the quantitative results of what we do; this fruit witnesses to the relational outcome of being intimately involved in reciprocal relationship with Jesus as his disciple (Jn.15:8). The specific relational outcome witnessed to is the experience of God's qualitative difference in his *agape* involvement. This fruit of the vine must be seen as the *agape* involvement with others that Jesus said clearly distinguishes his disciples (Jn.13:35). Hence, only these relational roots bear this relational fruit just in reciprocal relationship without relational distance.

“To remain” is a reciprocal effort because it is a relationship involving the relational work by each participant. Jesus *remains* in us with his *agape* involvement, as he further shared about the progression of the vine (Jn.15:9). But he also said, “Now remain in my love.” God doesn't do all the relational work, nor do we but we have our part in the relationship. Our relational work includes obedience – the relational act of submitting our person (15:10). This may seem like a contingency to experience his love

or to be his friend (15:14). Yet, it is crucial for discipleship to grasp that these really are not conditional statements but relational messages. What comes first in these verses is his love, not our obedience (15:9).

Moreover, obedience can be either adhering to the quantitative terms of a Rule of Law, or making our person vulnerable in response to the Rule of Relationship. According to the Word, obedience is the relational way we submit our true and whole person to him for intimate relationship that has the outcome of further experiencing his love (Jn.14:21,23). Accordingly, love is not some substance he gives us and thus we possess it; love is what we experience from him in how he involves himself with us and treats us. Love is not a feeling; it is what we relationally experience of him in our heart that increasingly transforms it and grows it. Love is not something we do, or even he does; it is what we ongoingly share together in reciprocal intimate relationship. Through obedience we vulnerably submit our inner-out person to him for this relationship. As noted earlier, Jesus defines his own obedience to the Father for the purpose of this relationship and remaining in his love (15:10b).

In his tactical action of love, Jesus was always closing the relational gap in his interactions with others, as well as reducing the relational distance in his connection with his followers. As hearts kept opening to each other, there would be intimate connection. Thus, the nature of the witness he always gave out was based on the vulnerable relational involvement of his whole person from inner out. The love he enacted embodied the whole-ly God, which he distinguished in his prayerful communication with the Father that became definitive for his family. In this closing prayer to the Father for all his disciples, Jesus shifted from the vine-branches metaphor to the relational reality the metaphor symbolized: the intimate reciprocal relationships uniting them together in family love (Jn.17:20-23). The uncommon bond of these reciprocal intimate relationships, which is rooted in the irreducible and nonnegotiable relational process engaged in *agape* involvement, witnesses to the world of the experiential reality in the relational progression of the incarnation (vv.21,23). Jesus reconstitutes our quantitative reductions of what witnessing involves; and he radicalizes our common notions about evangelism by deepening our focus from merely what he did to the qualitative substance of his intimate relational presence in order for our reciprocal response to be “my witnesses.”

Therefore, the tactical action of love constituting the basis of our witness is neither reducible nor negotiable to our variable terms in order to constitute the integrity of “my witnesses.” This is the qualitative-relational nature of the witnesses that the embodied Word constituted as he prepared to ascend from the earth (Acts 1:8). Though the palpable Word would still be present and involved, his relational replacement, the Holy Spirit, would testify further “on my behalf.” Most challenging is that the Word

constituted the reciprocal relational involvement of his followers to give out cooperative testimony with the Spirit (Jn 15:27) to be his personal extension in the global human context as “my witnesses.” Accordingly, as we share his *agape* love with others (including our enemies), then we witness unmistakably to him who is *agape* involved with us. Christians must not mistake “my witnesses” with merely giving out facts and important info about him, nor with just confirming propositional truths of the gospel. To witness to Jesus’ person as the whole-ly God (with Father and Spirit) is to share the experiential relational reality of intimate involvement in his life and of receiving his vulnerable qualitative ontology and relational function given directly to us in face-to-face relationship together as family.

How many neighbors in the world have been the relational recipients of “my witnesses”? The palpable Word continues to scrutinize what we give out.

Take heed: The tactical action of love undertakes a narrow relational path of involvement “just as I am relationally involved in love with you” to account for being “my witnesses” with the integrity of nothing less and no substitutes. This directs us to the integral theology and practice of our discipleship and of church, which inescapably converge in the 7th issue to further widen our challenge and narrow our path.

Chapter 7 ISSUE 7: The Theology and Practice of Our Discipleship and the Church

**One of you says, “I follow...”; another, “I follow...”;
another, “I follow...”; still another, “I follow....”**

1 Corinthians 1:12, NIV

“Follow me, and where I am...be also.”

John 12:26

**“That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you,
that they also may be in us.”**

John 17:21, ESV

The current condition of Christianity in the U.S. is likely best described as in a state of transition. Transition to what is an open question that all Christians need to address, if they haven't already answered it for themselves. More and more Christians have left the church, which the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated but only by amplifying faith issues Christians had already. Some have left the faith altogether, but most have realized that the church was unnecessary or even irrelevant for their faith. Younger generations have also identified themselves increasingly as unaffiliated with a formal faith, while some others are demanding more from churches by their activism. At the same time, there is an increase in pastors who have left their role in the church or who want to leave—primarily because of the shortcomings Christians' practice in their faith. Add to this that in a new report the Barna Group finds over 30% of Christians distrustful of how their churches handle finances, and limit their giving accordingly.

All of this helps make inescapable the issues of *who* we follow and *what* the church is. *Who* and *what* will always be in transition until Christians (individually and collectively) are rooted in the theology and practice illuminated and embodied by the whole-ly Word. Therefore, I pray that you are prepared to “Listen and learn” more than ever, because now the challenge before us is the widest and the path calling us is the narrowest in order that our transition is constituted according to the embodied *experiential Truth, relational Way and whole Life*.

Distinguishing Discipleship as Unfolded from the Gospel

In a relatively recent study on the existing condition of discipleship in the U.S., Barna Group researched Christian adults, church leaders, exemplar discipleship ministries, and Christian educators. “The clearest insight from this study [on ‘What is discipleship?’] is that it’s unclear!”¹ Such a study makes evident both the variable involvement by Christians with the Spirit and the diverse understanding Christians have of the gospel, both of which have left us in a condition lacking a manifesto definitive for all disciples and discipleship. Either there isn’t such a manifesto signified by the gospel, or we are not paying close attention to what and who is disclosed by the Word.

Implicit in the identity formation and integral to the relational outcome of Jesus’ new wine fellowship (Lk 5:33-39) is the relational process of discipleship. Along with identity, however, discipleship easily becomes ambiguous or shallow, lacking the clarity and depth of this relational process. For this reason Paul interjected “As for those who will follow” to his message of the new creation (Gal 6:16), thereby challenging those to follow in progression within Jesus’ qualitative and relational framework for discipleship. Otherwise, the whole process becomes fragmentary and subject to our shaping from the variable influence of surrounding contexts—contexts that also have been shaped by the fragmenting influence of reductionism.

While God certainly responded to save Noah from the human condition, this was situational and did not establish God’s full relational response. That good news (or gospel) of God’s full relational response first emerged with the formation of the covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:1-11). The nature of God’s response is essential to understand for composing the truth of the gospel that the Word embodied in the incarnation. The covenant God established was not based on an exchange framework that formed a contract of exchange between the parties involved (a *quid pro quo*); this would amount to fake news, not good news, though many still see covenant with God basically in exchange terms. Historically, the faith of God’s people in response to the covenant has often been reduced to such exchange terms, thereby essentially revising the gospel with alternative facts; and misleading or misguided practice has been used to evoke such responses to the gospel, which includes misrepresenting “by faith alone” (*sola fide*) and promoting diverse discipleship.

God stipulated terms for the covenant, initially for Abraham and later expanded with Moses in the Torah. These nonnegotiable terms unfolding from the gospel devolved among God’s people as the relational terms were reduced to a behavioral code that served a covenant of exchange—for example, keeping the commandments to reap God’s

¹ Barna Group, *The State of Discipleship* (The Navigators, 2015), 19,24.

benefits. Various scenarios renegotiated the covenant with alternative facts, essentially under the assumption ‘do this and God will do that’; and this assumption basically continues today to define God’s terms unfolding from the gospel (e.g. with a consumer gospel), though Christians may not admit to ulterior motives for being obedient in the faith.

God’s terms, however, are distinguished only as **whole relational terms**—composing also the new covenant—all of which converge in God’s declaration to Abraham: “Walk before me and be blameless” (Gen 17:1); that is to say, “Be involved with me in relationship together and be *tāmiym* [complete, whole] in your person and involvement.” The nature of God’s response is the essence of relationship—the relationship constituted in who, what and how the Trinity is—therefore the covenant (including the new covenant) can only be distinguished with the truth of the gospel as the covenant relationship composed by the Trinity’s relational response of grace. Furthermore, God’s unwarranted, unmerited response constituted the covenant relationship only as **the covenant of love** (Dt 7:7-9). God’s love has always been good news, yet fake news and alternative facts have misrepresented this gospel distinguished by the depth of God’s relational involvement (the significance of love) and the covenant relationship of love that unfolds in the whole gospel.

From this beginning, the gospel of God’s relational involvement ongoingly unfolds in God’s definitive blessing (Num 6:24-26), and what is further disclosed is **the face (*paneh*) of God**. *Paneh* signifies the very front of the person’s presence, not an oblique, opaque or obscure view of the person, thus involving the vulnerable disclosure of the person. The good news of **God’s definitive blessing** is that the figurative face of God (who has no literal face) is vulnerably distinguished by God’s depth of involvement in face-to-face relationship together—as Moses experienced (Num 12:6-8):

“The LORD bless you...make his face to shine upon you *in face-to-face relationship*, and be gracious *in relational response* to you...lift up his face to you *eye to eye* and give you peace.”

This blessing is still good news today when heard in its relational terms. Yet, it is commonly repeated in a perfunctory way (as in a benedictory blessing) that has lost its relational significance, rendering the face of God to a still portrait for us to display and remember. Perhaps this is the extent of the good news that persons are comfortable possessing.

If we indeed embrace the truth of the gospel disclosed in God’s definitive blessing, the reality is that the face of God is intrusive (face to face) and thus confronting (eye to eye)—in contrast to the norm in human interaction and in conflict with what

dominates social media today. Therefore, what is distinguished unfolding from this gospel is intimate relationship together, both with God and each other; and, if we are honest with ourselves, in reality we are neither accustomed to such depth of relationship nor even willing or capable to be vulnerable for this intimacy together. God understands our condition better than we do; and on this basis what unfolds from this gospel must clearly be distinguished to constitute our faith and practice: "...and give you peace."

"Give" (*siym*) can be rendered and has been presumed in various ways—think again about a covenant of exchange. *Siym* in the good news of God's face in relationship together unfolds in these relational terms: 'to establish a new relationship', which then requires a change from the old (notably our fragmentary relational condition), so that persons and relationship together will now be constituted in *wholeness* (the peace of *shalôm*). Nothing less than and no substitutes for this new relationship together in wholeness (*siym* with *shalôm*) distinguishes what unfolds from the good news of God's face; and this is the truth of the whole gospel that cannot be revised by fake news or renegotiated with alternative facts. In other words, speaking for God's relational terms, what does this say about our diverse interpretations and our diversity of practice that are presumed to flow from the gospel?

The gospel of God's face unfolds further to be disclosed face to face and eye to eye as never witnessed before. Now we come to the incarnation and the face of Jesus, who embodies the depth of the whole gospel and fulfills the whole of God's relational response of love to our human condition (as Paul summarized, 2 Cor 4:4-6). What is this new relationship from the face of God? And what is this wholeness of the covenant and how are we to understand this to define our faith and determine our practice?

Parallel to the gospel, and often in open contrast to if not in subtle conflict with it, the diversity of Christianity has evolved since the early church, as the Word (with the Spirit) exposed in his post-ascension critique of the church (Rev 2-3). Both within and outside the ancient Roman Empire, diversity in theology and practice may in fact have been more the rule rather than the exception, at least more than often presumed.² So, the diversity that continues to exist today in Christian theology and practice indicates an insufficient or lack of connection with the gospel of God's face—that is, relational connection, not doctrinal connection, as the Word clarified and corrected for the church in Ephesus (Rev 2:2-4).

If we are to distinguish the nature and significance of discipleship unfolding directly from the gospel, this gospel can be neither just any gospel nor even the truth of a gospel (a portion of good news). But this gospel must by its nature be the experiential Truth of the whole gospel enacting the relational Way and whole Life in order to compose the complete significance of "Follow me." The other versions of the gospel

² For examples of the diversity that evolved in early Christianity, see William Tabbernee, ed., *Early Christianity in Contexts: An Exploration across Cultures and Continents* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

yield the diversity existing from past to present. The foremost priority, therefore, for our identity, theology and practice as Jesus' disciples (assuming we follow Jesus) must first be to understand the whole identity of Jesus and the effect his whole person had on other persons to make them his followers. Not only is this critical to fulfill his commission to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19) but to fulfill in our own life what it means to be his disciple (Jn 12:26).

The whole identity of Jesus (not fragmented by his teachings, miracles, example, etc.) is both at the heart of the gospel composed by God's face and thus central to the text of Scripture. The relational terms of Scripture provide the text composing the narrative history and inspired testimony about Jesus remembered by his distinguished first followers, which ironically includes his identity as seen by his enemies.³ How we interpret his identity from these accounts is antecedent to and defining for our identity as disciples and is determining for how we follow. Or, to use the Word's axiom (Mk 4:24), the gospel we use will be the disciples/discipleship we get. Once again, then, with the diversity existing among Christians throughout church history—not solely but notably from the Reformation for us today—what does this say about our gospel? Besides related issues about the integrity of Scripture, what does this say about the identity of Jesus we follow and, unavoidably, about our interpretation of Scripture composing our theology and practice? Moreover, how is all this diversity compatible with the view of the authority we affirm for Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) by our faith?

Our existing condition raises the questions of where we can find integrity in theology and practice and how it can be restored in who, what and how we are. For the only response able to fulfill this need in transition we turn to the whole gospel embodied by Jesus' whole person, from whom unfolds the whole theology and practice that distinguishes his disciples from the diversity in Christian theology and practice existing globally.

The relational outcome ahead will unfold with the gospel of the whole and uncommon God's face to distinguish an irreducible and nonnegotiable manifesto for all Christians that is not subject to any of our diverse theology and practice. This manifesto is outlined definitively by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (as in Mt 7:14,21-23) and summarized in the book of Hebrews (see Heb 5:11-6:1). Yet, the wholeness composing this manifesto does not mean and should not be confused with conformity to homogeneity and with precluding the God-given diversity of persons composing his family—those persons together in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity. At the same time, the gospel of God's face is intrusive, and Jesus along with the Spirit may clarify, correct and convict more than you can anticipate or may want disclosed. Whoever is willing (cf. Lk 13:34), however, to "Be still and desist from human

³ For a discussion of this identity of Jesus, see Chris Keith and Larry W. Hurtado, eds., *Jesus among Friends and Enemies: A Historical and Literary Introduction to Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

determination” (as in Ps 46:10), they will experience the relational reality of intimately knowing God in the new relationship together constituted by wholeness , and thereby converge in *the church* (not *a* or *any*) reconciled and intimately involved together as God’s new creation family.

The ongoing involvement in the primacy of reciprocal relationship together is a continuous challenge for Jesus’ followers. If you are as I am, I have to consciously work on not being distracted from this relational involvement. Whether in theology or practice, it is common for Christians to become preoccupied with secondary matters (not necessarily unimportant) at the expense of this primacy. The experiential truth and relational reality we have consistently failed to grasp are that we cannot conflate the secondary in our life with the primary in God’s life and still experience the significance of relationship together. Perhaps this is most evident today in the context of modern worship, notably with the augmented reality used to enhance our worship experience.

What we need to learn and mature in is following Jesus with this relational imperative: To always integrate the secondary *into* the primary—not the converse, and also not to equate them—in order for our everyday, ongoing involvement to be in the primacy of reciprocal relationship together on God’s whole relational terms. “Where are you?” and “What are you doing here?” continuously face us with this challenge, so that in our discipleship we will not be faced with “Don’t you know *my whole person* yet, after all this time *as my disciples*?”

The NT provides narratives of various disciples who struggle with this challenge (as noted previously for Peter). They 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 anything less or any substitutes. Since this diversion 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 but in a state of transition.

The early disciples demonstrated an ambiguous, if not shallow, discipleship that focused mainly on what they did in serving with minimal relational involvement with Jesus. This reflected the prevailing focus on the secondary that emerges from reduced ontology and function. While discussing what is primary in life, Jesus disclosed the defining paradigm for serving him: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also” (Jn 12:26). Jesus’ relational imperative has some

parallel to Copernicus' presentation of a new model of the world. That is, embracing Jesus' new model for discipleship (in contrast to a prevailing rabbinic model) required a paradigm shift: a radical reordering of one's beliefs, way of living and perceptual-interpretive lens—a shift from the quantitative work to be done (the focus of *diakoneo*, serving) to the qualitative function and primacy of relationship (the focus of *akoloutheo*, following), and accordingly a shift from a view and function of the person from outer in to a view and function of the person from inner out.

In Jesus' framework for discipleship, his paradigm for serving implies both the primacy of relationship (making the work secondary) and defining the person and determining their discipleship in qualitative terms from inner out. That is to say, to distinguish his followers, Jesus assumes a change to whole ontology and function in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the whole-ly God ("where I *am*, there will my servant *be*," *eimi*, verb of existence). Anything less or any substitutes of this whole ontology and function—no matter how well-intentioned and dedicated to serve Jesus—is transitioning in reduced ontology and function based on shaping and constructing discipleship by human terms, which may be the prevailing model even in churches (cf. Rev 2:2-4; 3:1-2); such terms no longer follow Jesus only on his whole relational terms.

This is a common reduction of discipleship that prevailed in Peter's life and signified the gap in relationship the early disciples had with Jesus (Jn 14:9). His followers' primary identity cannot be reduced to serving, which is the prevailing identity practiced or, at least, perceived by Christians and churches today.

This provides the whole understanding—the interpretation of *syniemi* for the full picture—for the integral truth and reality essential to compose our theology and practice in everyday life, with this ongoing understanding: (1) We don't choose to be Jesus' disciples but disciples emerge from the gospel's chosen relational outcome, whether we want it to be or not; (2) however, the disciples we are and the discipleship we engage are contingent on our choice of the gospel we claim and its outcome we embrace, whether we are aware of it or not. These direct, unalterable and thus unavoidable connections define the truth and determine the reality of our persons and relationships. In the competing influence of our surrounding context today, we are faced with if not shaped by post-truth and alternative facts, as well as alternative, augmented and virtual realities. The extent of this influence on our truth and reality will depend on the gospel we use.

Since the incarnation there have been various forms and shapes that discipleship has assumed. In "Follow me," however, following is nonnegotiable to our terms and his person is irreducible in ontology and function. On this integral relational basis, Jesus' relational imperative for discipleship to be involved ongoingly with his whole person becomes intrusive, penetrating, provoking for our person—and perhaps no longer good news commonly associated with the gospel—because it requires the unmistakable relational connection face to face to distinguish discipleship as the relational outcome of the whole gospel and thus integral to salvation.

The light of Jesus and his gospel becomes hazy (even obscured) when it is refracted by a biased lens that is unable to focus on Jesus' whole person. The reality of relative darkness remains for Christians when they exist in a theological fog emerging from an incomplete Christology of merely parts of Jesus; this then locates them in an obscure outcome and ambiguous practice from a truncated soteriology (saved only from partial sin). In other words, the gospel encompasses not remaining in the relative darkness of our diverse condition of fragmentary theology and practice and its underlying condition of reduced ontology and function. These are critically urgent conditions that have not undergone the relational progression with Jesus as long as they undertake following a different relational path from the essential relational progression of his whole person.

The Relational Progression of Jesus' Disciples

It almost seems elementary to talk about believing Jesus at this stage of discipleship. In terms of Jesus' relational progression, however, this is the compelling challenge of the writer of Hebrews in his discipleship manifesto: "Therefore, let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and *progress* to maturity, not *remaining focused on* the foundation of *our faith*" (Heb 6:1, NIV). In this manifesto the writer pays close attention to God's communication in the Son (Heb 1:1-3) and our urgent need to follow Jesus' whole person—the person enacting the whole gospel in his essential relational progression in order to compose the relational significance of what he saved us whole-ly *from* and *to* (2:11-12; 8:13; 10:1-10). In God's whole relational terms, Jesus' relational progression presents the whole who, what and how of God that is essential to account for the experiential truth and relational reality of the presence of God's whole-ly face—without whom there is no valid basis to claim relationship together face to face, presumably the gospel of our faith.

In our theology and practice we have to distinguish between *what* Jesus presented as the main Object of *the Rule of Faith* (composing our faith as religion), and *who* Jesus presented as the primary Subject of *the Relationship of Faith* (composing our faith only as relationship). At the heart of the issues of the person presented is the integral reality of **presence**:

That is, the person present beyond the fragmentary referential terms of the embodied Object—who can only be observed within the limits of those terms—to have the presence of Subject in whole relational terms, who is vulnerably involved to be experienced within the context of relationship, and therefore who is inseparable from the distinguished Face engaged in relationship Face to face (cf. *paneh*, presence, face, Ex 33:14).

How the person Jesus presented is defined and how Jesus' person's presence is defined both directly involve a relational process that has issues needing to be clarified, which emerges with responses in relational terms to these interrelated questions:

1. Is there the significance of presence in the person presented?
2. Is there the integrity and quality of presence in the person communicating?
3. Is there the depth of presence in the person relationally involved?

The integral reality of presence does not emerge from the Object, who is neither vulnerably present nor relationally involved but embodied simply to be observed and be the object of any faith and theological or biblical study. In pivotal contrast, it is the Subject's vulnerable closeness and relational involvement that ongoingly defines this integral reality; and the experiential reality (neither virtual nor augmented) of his presence only has significance in relationship face to face, which then necessitates reciprocity compatible with his presence—as opposed to mere belief in the Object. This may require reworking our theological anthropology of defining the person from outer in to inner out and of restoring the primacy of relationship. Moreover, the Subject-person's face-to-face presence opens to others an integral reality beyond what may appear probable, seem logical or exceed the limits of convention. This is problematic for narrowed-down thinking in a conventional mindset (e.g. from tradition, a quest for certainty, or even just habit). Consequently the depth of his presence is often reacted to by attempts to reduce it to the probable, the logical, and to renegotiate it to familiar (and more comfortable) referential terms,⁴ or reacted to simply by avoiding his presence—all of which refocuses the primary attention to secondary things about his person at the loss of his real presence. All such reaction redacts his gospel.

Thus, openness to his presence requires a compatible perceptual-interpretive framework and lens that are conjointly qualitative and relational, which are not the common practice found among Christians. Turning to the primary qualitative-relational focus on Jesus' presence necessitates ongoing engagement in the process of integrating the secondary into the primary (PIP).

On this basis then, 'presence' is least observed by those at a relational distance from the person observed, and is most experienced by those relationally involved with the person presented. The limited, constrained or absent experience of presence is evidence of the human relational condition, our relational condition. This is the reality that Jesus made definitive in Luke 10:21, which we need to take seriously for the epistemic process if we truly want to know and understand God.

⁴ In life in general, Iain McGilchrist locates this activity in the dominance of the left brain hemisphere. *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 140.

Christians have commonly depicted Jesus' face in diverse ways, notably with the bias of their dominant surrounding context (social, cultural, economic or religious, not to mention political). For example, there are idealized portraits of a white, well-groomed man (as by Warner Sallman in 1940), or different snapshots of Jesus' face in various situations—the most prominent, of course, is his profile on the cross. None of these faces, or their sum, provide the full profile of Jesus' face. In fact, the alternative facts composing the profile of these faces distort the reality of Jesus' face with the alternative reality of something less or some substitute. After Philip responded to Jesus' call to "Follow me," he told Nathanael that they found the Messiah, "Jesus of Nazareth." Based on that profile of Jesus' face, Nathanael rightfully questioned the significance of this portrait of Jesus' face: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:45-46).

Until Christians see the full profile of Jesus' face, we all need to question the significance of Jesus' portrayal in our theology and practice. If we do not have in our embrace Jesus' whole face, how do we have face-to-face relationship together? Without the full profile of Jesus' face, with whom can we claim to have relationship of any significance? Without Jesus' whole face, we are relationally not connected with the essential person of Jesus. And if we are relationally disconnected from his whole person—even though our theology could be doctrinally sound—how can we profess to follow Jesus and on what basis is our discipleship formed? All of Jesus' disciples need to answer these questions. Our discipleship is challenged to follow nothing less and no substitutes but the relational progression essential to the full profile of Jesus' whole-ly face.

Implied in the compelling challenge from the Hebrews manifesto is the call to follow Jesus' whole person beyond what in effect has become convenient in our faith (Heb 10:19-25). The comfort, certainty or security of **convenience in theology and practice** has been influential in misdirecting us to not be on the same intrusive relational path of Jesus' relational progression. Further, this misguided focus has been an instrumental distractor to maturing as the whole persons who constitute Jesus' disciples. Deeper still, it has been a common barrier to intimate involvement in reciprocal relationship together face to face, both with the whole-ly Trinity and with each other as God's new family.

Christians have been slow to recognize that the existing reality (whether real, alternative or virtual) of comfort, certainty or security from convenience in theology and practice has been consequential in both defining and determining ways:

1. Convenience in theology and practice is formulated with diverse alternatives, all of which become defining as fragmentary substitutes for whole theology and practice—most notably as a reduced theological anthropology and a weak view of sin.

2. Therefore, what these fragmentary substitutes determine are persons and their relationships in subtly reduced ontology and function, unable to be whole and live whole together among themselves, much less make whole in the human context—thus always transitioning contrary to the relational progression.

These consequences are contrary to the distinguishing *faith of relationship* (not the *faith of religion*) as distinguished in Hebrews 11, and they counter the relational progression of God's purpose and outcome unfolding from the whole gospel: "God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would *we all* be made *complete—the new relationship together in wholeness*" (Heb 11:40, NIV).

The relational purpose and outcome of the relational progression—which is essential in order to complete the Trinity's relational response of love to us in our human relational condition—is face-to-face relationship together in wholeness as God's new family. The 'grace alone' (*sola gratia*) of salvation cannot be taken out of this relational context and process, or it reduces God's grace to a virtual commodity that God dispenses for our consumption. In God's relational response distinguishing grace solely, there is no other purpose nor outcome for the Trinity's relational progression, who transforms us to be whole in likeness of this essential relational progression. The relational purpose and outcome of the Trinity's progression further required the intrusive relational path of Jesus to penetrate deeper into our human condition; and this penetrating intrusion was neither convenient to receive nor comfortable to respond to in relationship together face to face. This depth of the gospel is seldom proclaimed, which should make us question the profile of Jesus portrayed in the so-called Good News (or perhaps fake news?).

We need to account fully for what unfolds in the relational progression to distinguish his followers and what counters it. It is always more convenient and comfortable to keep relational distance from Jesus in relational progression, and thereby, in effect, remain in front of the temple curtain without having to intimately connect face to face with the whole-ly Trinity. Therefore, those who truly "Follow me in my whole person" have to undertake the relational progression to be on the same relational path together "where I am."

For Jesus' disciples to experience following him "where I am," they have to be involved directly in the full relational progression the embodied Word enacted vulnerably, as outlined below.

Strategic Shift:

The essential relational progression emerged with the strategic shift of the Trinity's response in the whole-ly person presented vulnerably by Jesus to the Samaritan woman. This marginalized person received him as she also vulnerably responded in the

tension of face to face (Jn 4:4-26). The relational terms that only the complex Subject of Jesus' whole person made definitive in this interaction (4:23-24) are neither optional nor idealized terms, and certainly cannot be understood as mere referential terms. Jesus' relationship-specific terms embody the whole-ly God's integral relational response of grace in the gospel and constitute the only terms by *what* and *how* God does relationships for the gospel's reciprocal relational outcome. Understanding the qualitative significance and relational significance of the gospel, however, does not stop with the strategic relational shift. Further shifts unfold in the relational dynamic of the gospel distinguished by the relationship-specific progression to deepen our understanding and to fulfill our experiential reality for its whole relational outcome—as Jesus made definitive in his family prayer (Jn 17:20-23,26).

And in a further shift by the irreducible Subject of the Word, this gospel will be characterized as more of the improbable and intrusive, thus neither a common nor popular gospel. For all who follow Jesus, this progression is essential to define their persons and to determine their discipleship.

Tactical Shift:

From the moment the Subject of the Word established the vulnerable presence and intimate involvement of whole-ly God—"I am he, the *person* who is *communicating face to face* to you" (Jn 4:26)—the full profile of God's face was distinguished unmistakably for only new relationship together, never to be merely observed. What people *needed*, however, was often not what people *wanted* (as in Jn 6:60,66, cf. Mk 10:17,21-22); and the desire and pursuit of the latter continues even today to shape theology and practice, notably prevailing in a selective process of consumption (as in the commodity of grace). This was the human condition in Judaism that confronted Jesus to his face, and that the face of God embodied whole-ly in Jesus confronted in all our human condition.

As the whole ontology and function of Subject-God's relational work of grace (not as referential Object) made a strategic shift with the incarnation, Subject Jesus' relational work of grace makes a tactical shift for deeper engagement in the relational progression. With this shift, only the whole ontology and function of Jesus makes evident the gospel further in the improbable, and deeply distinguishes his intrusive penetration into the human relational condition.

Jesus emerged in the midst of a religious context pervasive with messianic and covenant expectations, with the surrounding context prevailing in cultural, economic and political stratification. He also encountered the interacting effects of these contextual pressures in his public ministry, yet these effects neither defined nor determined what emerges in the tactical shift of the gospel. The presence of these and other contextual influences, pressures and related problems, however, have importance in the life of Jesus, and accordingly for his followers, and are valuable in our understanding of the gospel, for

the following purpose: (1) They help define the pervasive common function from which Jesus' function was distinguished; and (2) they help identify the prevailing common function from which persons needed to be redeemed—both of which are indispensable for the identity of his disciples. This purpose is realized with the tactical shift. The relational dynamic enacted by Jesus in the tactical shift conjointly distinguished his relational involvement in progression with persons, and distinguished those persons in their reciprocal relational response in relational-specific progression with his.

Intrusively as complex Subject and vulnerably as whole person, Jesus' tactical shift enacts the relationship-specific dynamic in this relational progression for marginalized persons like Levi to go from a disciple (and servant) of Jesus to his intimate friend (Jn 15:15), and then to be whole together as family (Jn 14:23; 17:21). As persons, our discipleship must by this nature account for this intimate relationship together; and collectively, our ecclesiology must by this tactical shift account in our church practice for this new relationship together as family—not just friends but sisters and brothers in the primacy of God's whole-ly family. Anything less and any substitutes in our discipleship and ecclesiology deny the relational outcome of the intrusive Subject's tactical shift and disconnect us from the vulnerable presence and intimate involvement of the whole-ly Trinity's strategic shift. Thus, the question of what kind of news (good, bad, fake) composes our gospel keeps emerging, which the whole-ly Subject (Jesus, Father and Spirit) holds us accountable to answer.

Past or present, the existing relational condition also deepens and broadens our understanding of sinners and the function of sin. In the trinitarian relational context and process vulnerably enacted by Jesus, sin is the functional opposite of being whole and sinners are in the ontological-relational condition “to be apart” from God's whole (the “not good” of Gen 2:18). When sin is understood beyond just moral and ethical failure displeasing to God, *sin becomes the functional reduction of the whole of God*, thus in conflict with God as well as with that which is and those who are whole. Sin as reductionism is pervasive; and such sinners, intentionally or unintentionally, reflect, promote or reinforce this counter-relational work, even in the practice of and service to church. This is the salvation people needed and yet didn't often want, because to be saved from sin as reductionism includes by its nature to be made whole and thus to be accountable to live whole—an uncommon life in contrast and conflict with the convenience of the prevailing common, which unfolds only on a narrow path.

What we are saved *to* and what relationship is necessary together with the whole-ly Trinity to make us whole directly involve Jesus' tactical shift for further and deeper involvement in the relational progression of God's family. It is this relational function of family that the full profile of Jesus' face made unmistakable, irreducible and nonnegotiable by the trinitarian relational process of family love. This points to the functional shift of Jesus' relational work of grace to constitute his followers whole-ly in the consummation of this relational progression distinguishing the gospel—the

irreducible Subject composing in relational terms nothing less than its relational outcome transforming to wholeness. This shift and its outcome make it more inconvenient in our theology and more uncomfortable for our practice to “Follow me” in the relational progression essential to who we are and whose we are.

Functional Shift:

In the relational progression essential both to Jesus and his followers, the functional shift is inseparable from his strategic and tactical shifts. They are integral to the relational purpose and outcome of the gospel, yet the functional shift of the Trinity’s relational response is often either commonly minimalized or simply overlooked.

The strategic and tactical shifts illuminated the face of only Subject-God, clearly distinguished from an Object. These shifts make evident the ontology of the Subject—the whole of who, what and how God is—which is inseparable from the Subject’s function. As accessed in these shifts, the Subject’s ontology and function are most notably distinguished in relationships, both within the whole-ly Trinity and with others. To emphasize again, the Trinity is not distinguished by each person’s title or role, which would create distinctions causing stratification and relational distance between them. Rather the whole-ly God is always distinguished by the ontology and function of the trinitarian persons inseparably being relationally involved in intimate relationship together as One, the Trinity as family (Jn 10:30; 17:21-23). Subject-God’s vulnerable self-disclosure constitutes the ontology and function in likeness that distinguishes his followers as whole, and his followers in whole relationship together as family (his church). This relational outcome will fulfill Subject Jesus’ prayer above as his functional shift becomes an ontological and functional reality.

In God’s strategic and tactical shifts, the whole of God’s thematic relational action integrally converges within Jesus’ relational work of grace in the trinitarian relational context of family and by **the trinitarian relational process of family love**. This coherence of relational action is completely fulfilled by Jesus’ whole person with his vulnerable relational involvement in distinguished love—the love that is further distinguished by this process of family love, of which, for example, Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10) and Levi (Mk 2:13-17) were initial recipients. With the qualitative significance and relational function of family love, Jesus (only as Subject) enacted in whole relational terms the gospel’s functional shift—the function necessary for the innermost involvement in the relational progression in order to bring it (and his followers) to relational consummation (not yet to full conclusion). What is this family love specific to the trinitarian relational process?

During their last table fellowship, Jesus intimately shared with his disciples-friends “I will not leave you orphaned” (Jn 14:18). While Jesus’ physical presence was soon to conclude, his intimate relational involvement with them would continue—namely as the palpable Word and through his relational replacement, the Spirit (14:16-17). This

ongoing intimate relational involvement is clearly the dynamic function of the trinitarian relational process of family love, which directly involves all the trinitarian persons yet beyond the sum of their persons (Jn 14:16-18,23,27). However, the full qualitative significance (in relational terms not referential) of this dynamic of family love is not understood until we have whole understanding (*synesis*) of the relational significance of Jesus' use of the term "orphan" and his related concern.

In their ancient social context orphans were powerless and had little or no recourse to provide for themselves, which was the reason God made specific provisions for them in the OT (Dt 14:29, Isa 1:17,23, cf. Jas 1:27). This might suggest that Jesus was simply assuring his disciples that they would be taken care of. This would address the contextual-situational condition of orphans but not likely the most important and primary issue: their fragmented relational condition separated from the whole of relationship together. It is critical to understand that Jesus' sole concern here is for the relational condition of all his followers, a concern that Jesus ongoingly pursued during the incarnation (e.g. Lk 10:41-42; Jn 14:9; 19:26-27), after the resurrection (e.g. Lk 24:25; Jn 21:15-22), and in post-ascension as the palpable Word (e.g. Rev 2:4; 3:20). Moreover, to understand the qualitative and relational significance of the gospel is to have whole understanding of the gospel's relational dynamic unfolding the depth of the Trinity's relational response to the breadth of the relational condition of all humanity.

Orphans essentially lived relationally apart; that is, they were distant or separated from the relationships necessary to belong to the whole of family—further preventing them from being whole rather than living fragmented. Even orphans absorbed into their extended kinship network were not assured of the relational function of belonging in its qualitative relational significance, assuming it had such significance. The relational condition "to be apart" from God's whole and to not experience the relational function of belonging to the whole-ly God's family would be intrinsic to orphans. This prominent relational condition—the subtlety of which is also innermost to the human condition—defines the relational significance of Jesus' concern for his disciples not to be *relational* orphans but to relationally belong. And the primary solution for what addresses an orphan's relational condition is the **process of adoption**. Without adoption, distinguished in the primacy of whole relationship together as family, this relational condition remains unresolved and irremediable to all other alternatives (including church membership). Therefore, Jesus' relationship-specific work of grace by the trinitarian relational process of family love enacted the process of adoption, together with the Spirit, to consummate the whole-ly God's thematic relational response to the human relational condition (Jn 1:12-13, cf. Mt 12:48-50; Mk 10:29-30). Paul later provided the theological and functional clarity for the triune God's relational process of family love and its relational outcome of adoption into God's family (Eph 1:4-5, 13-14; 5:1; Rom 8:15-16, Gal 4:4-7).

The reality of adoption may appear more virtual than real experience, and that would depend on whether adoption is constituted by the experiential truth of the Trinity.

In referential terms, adoption either becomes doctrinal information about a salvific transaction God made, which we can have more or less certainty about. Or adoption could be merely a metaphor that may have spiritual value but no relational significance. Both views continue to lack understanding of the qualitative and relational significance of the gospel enacted by Jesus' whole ontology and function, and further *misre-present* the gospel's relational outcome in the innermost of persons and their **belonging in relationship together**.

The qualitative relational outcome from Jesus' intimate involvement of family love constitutes his followers in relationship together with the Trinity as family, so that Jesus' Father becomes their Father (Jn 14:23) and they become "siblings" (*adelphoi*, Jn 20:17, cf. Is 63:16; Rom 8:29). If the functional significance of adoption is diminished by or minimalized to referential terms—or simply by reductionism and its counter-relational work—the relational consequence for our life and practice is to function in effect as 'relational orphans', even as visibly active members of a church. In the absence of his physical presence, Jesus' only concern was for his followers to experience the ongoing intimate relational involvement of the whole-ly Trinity for the experiential truth and relational reality of belonging in the primacy of whole relationship together as family (beyond church membership)—which the functional shift of his relational work of grace made permanent by adoption. This irreversible relational action established them conclusively in the relational progression to belong as family together, never to be "let go from the Trinity as orphans" (*aphiemi*, Jn 14:18) as Jesus promised.

Functional and relational orphans suffer in the human relational condition "to be apart" from God's relational whole, consequently they lack belonging in the innermost to be whole. While this is certainly a pandemic relational condition, it can also become an undetected endemic functional condition among his followers and in church practice—obscured even with strong association with Christ and extended identification with the church. Its absence can be subtle and elude awareness, yet the dissatisfaction from its relational distance or disconnect is certainly experienced when the heart is vulnerable. This critical condition requires urgent response from the global church, with particular care directed to areas of expanding church growth today. Its seriousness among participants is an undetected condition when it is masked by the presence of ontological simulations and functional illusions from reductionist substitutes—for example, performing roles, fulfilling service, participation in church activities (most notably in the Eucharist) and membership (including baptism), but without the qualitative function from inner out of the whole person and without the face-to-face relational involvement of belonging together vulnerably in family love. When Christian life and practice is without this integrating qualitative-relational significance, it lacks the qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness of wholeness because it effectively functions in the relational condition of orphans, functional and relational orphans.

This then suggests the likelihood that many churches today (particularly in the global North) function more like orphanages than family—that is, gatherings of members having organizational cohesion and a secondary identity belonging to an institution but without belonging in the primary relationship together distinguished only in the innermost of family, that is, the Trinity’s family. This exposes the need to be redeemed further from the influence of reductionism in the human relational condition, most commonly signified by the human shaping of relationships together, which the relational function of family love directly and ongoingly addresses for relationship together as family in likeness of the Trinity. And the penetrating depth of the Trinity’s response and involvement converge in the relationship-specific process of adoption.

Adoption, therefore, is indispensable for making accessible the Trinity and for helping to distinguish the ontology and function of the Trinity, which do not prevail in our diverse theology and practice. Adoption simply is irreplaceable in our theology and practice in order to be compatible with the functional, tactical and strategic shifts of the Trinity’s ontology and function. This compatibility requires being on the same improbable theological trajectory and uncommon intrusive relational path as the Trinity, which then may require corresponding shifts (notably Jn 4:24) in our theology and practice—for example, a shift from a theological anthropology of reduced ontology and function, from an incomplete Christology and truncated soteriology, and essentially from the fragmentary religious traditions and reforms prevailing in our contexts. The experiential truth and relational reality of adoption cannot justify anything less and any substitutes in order for our theology and practice to be whole. While adoption may not be familiar to your background, we all readily understand the experience of belonging and the relational consequences of not belonging. Hence, nothing lacking the relational significance of belonging can replace adoption for constituting our discipleship integrally as a whole person and collectively as church family together.

In its innermost function, the trinitarian relational process of family love can be described as the following communicative and creative action by the whole-ly Trinity:

The Father sent out his Son, followed by the Spirit (as in Jn 1:14; Mk 1:10-12; Jn 17:4), to pursue those who suffer being apart from God’s relational whole, reaching out to them with the relationship-specific involvement of distinguished love (as in Jn 3:16; 17:23,26; Eph 1:6), thereby making provision for their release from any constraints or for payments to redeem them from any enslavement (as in Eph 1:7,14); then in relational progression of this relational connection, taking these persons back home to the Father, not to be mere house guests or to become household servants, or even to be just friends, but to be adopted by the Father and therefore permanently belong in his family as his very own daughters and sons (made definitive for the new creation church family in Eph 1:4-6; 2:13-22).

This is the innermost depth of the Trinity's family love, which vulnerably discloses both the relational significance of God's relational work of grace and the qualitative significance clearly distinguishing Jesus' relational involvement from common function, even as may prevail in church and academy. This integral qualitative relational significance discloses the whole and uncommon God, who penetrates with an intrusive relational path that we must account for in our theology and be accountable to in our practice—as inconvenient and uncomfortable as that could be. This God, the whole-ly Trinity, is present and involved in no other terms, and thus can be experienced in no other way.

By the relational nature of the Trinity, the trinitarian relational process of family love is a function always for relationship, the relationship of God's family. These are the integrated relationships functionally necessary to be whole in the innermost that constitutes God's family. That is, distinguished family love is always constituting and maturing God's family; therefore, family love always pursues the whole person, acts to redeem persons from their outer-in condition and to transform them from inner out, and addresses the involvement necessary in the primacy of relationships to be whole as family together in likeness of the Trinity. In only relational terms, family love functionally acts on and with the importance of the whole person to be vulnerably involved in the primacy of intimate relationships together of those belonging in God's family.

When the trinitarian relational process of family love is applied to the church and becomes functional in church practice, any church functioning as an orphanage can be redeemed from counter-relational work to function whole as God's family together. Then its members will not only occupy a position within God's family but also be involved from inner out and experience the relational function necessarily involved in belonging in the innermost of God's family that integrally holds them together—together not merely in unity but whole together as *one* in the very likeness of the Trinity, just as Jesus prayed for his church family (Jn 17:20-26).

In this functional shift enacted for the gospel, Jesus' relational function of family love vulnerably engaged his followers for the innermost involvement in the relational progression to the whole-ly Trinity's family. This integrally, as well as intrusively, involved the following relational dynamic: the shift of being redefined (and redeemed) from outer in to inner out and being transformed (and reconciled) from reductionism and its counter-relational work, in order to be made whole together in the innermost as family in likeness of the Trinity (as Paul made definitive, 2 Cor 3:18; Col 1:19-20).

Theologically, redemption and reconciliation are inseparable; and the integral function of **redemptive reconciliation** is the relational outcome of being saved to the whole-ly Trinity's family with the veil removed to eliminate any relational separation or

distance (as Paul clarified, Eph 2:14-22). The irreducible and nonnegotiable nature of this integral relational dynamic of family love must (*dei*) then by its nature be an experiential truth having qualitative-relational significance for this wholeness to be the relational reality of consummated belonging to the Trinity's family. Family love also then necessarily involves clarifying what is not a function of God's family, and correcting misguided ecclesiology and church practices, and even contending with notions that misrepresent God's family, which includes confronting alternative and virtual realities of the church. The integrity of God's whole is an ongoing concern of family love, and this relational involvement certainly cannot be enacted without first experiencing its relational reality in face-to-face relational progression with the Trinity.

Also intruding, however, on Jesus' relational path specifically for the relational progression of his disciples, is reductionism and its counter-relational workings. The ongoing influence of reductionism is more commonly subtle, which imposes limits and constraints on our persons and relationships that counter the relational progression. Therefore, Jesus made this **relational contingency** for his true disciples:

Integrated with the irreplaceable relational structure in John 15:1-11 for all his disciples, Jesus made nonnegotiable our reciprocal involvement in the primacy to "*dwell [meno, abide] in my relational terms for relationship together; and you will know the embodied Truth in face-to-face relationship, and the Truth will set you free from your limits and constraints*" (Jn 8:31-32).

There is no relational progression to belong in the whole-ly Trinity's family without redemption, and there is no redemption to be reconciled together as family without relationally receiving and responding face-to-face to Jesus' family love in his functional shift (Jn 8:35-36). This transformation, however, is the relational outcome only of following Jesus' whole person behind the temple curtain to have the veil removed for intimate face-to-face relationship together with the whole-ly Trinity and with each other as family in the Trinity's likeness (2 Cor 3:18; Eph 2:14-18, cf. Heb 10:19-22).

Jesus certainly understood our human relational condition—specifically our tendency to labor in ontological simulations and functional illusions of God's family (as in Jn 8:33,35,39,42; 14:9), which he (as the palpable Word) exposed in his post-ascension critique of churches (Rev 2-3). This further raises the penetrating questions: "Where are you?" "What are you doing here?" "Don't you know me after all this time?" They get to the heart of our condition and the status of its direction.

Progression as Disciples and Church or Regressing?

To be relationally involved face to face with the whole Word (i.e. in relational terms, not referential terms), and thus to relationally know the embodied Truth only in relational terms, are both indispensable for the complete Christology necessary that constitutes the full soteriology of what we are saved *to*. Therefore, the relational progression does not and cannot stop at just being a disciple, or end with liberation as it did for many of God's people in the OT. The prevailing influences from the surrounding contexts—most notably present in the human relational condition shaping relationships together, yet existing even in gatherings of God's people—either prevent further movement in the relational progression or diminish deeper involvement in its primacy of relationship. God's salvific act of liberation is never an end in itself but an integral part of God's creative action for new relationship together in wholeness—the distinguished Face's relational work of *siym* and *shalôm* that brings this relational outcome (Num 6:26).

Our human bias (contextualized and commonized) towards the secondary preoccupies or embeds us away from the primary composed only by relationship together. This subtle bias is evident where church practice overemphasizing deliverance and other liberation theories are found lacking in this primacy, and thus which promote, reinforce or sustain a truncated soteriology. For example, when the people of Israel were frequently seeking deliverance by YHWH, they usually pursued neither it nor God for the purpose of deeper involvement in the primacy of relationship together in wholeness. Then, for what purpose are we delivered or liberated?

The embodied Truth (of the Way and Life) in the trinitarian relational process of family love is the fulfillment of the whole-ly Trinity's thematic relational response, nothing less than the strategic shift and no substitutes for the tactical and functional shifts of the Trinity's relational work of grace. And the full profile of God's vulnerable presence and relational involvement distinguished within the Truth as Subject are solely for the primacy of this relational outcome. If our gospel is based on 'the Bible alone' (*sola scriptura*) but does not encompass this whole relational outcome, then the good news is selectively composed, not on the basis of the whole Word (cf. Jn 5:39-40). From the beginning, liberation (redemption, *peduyim*, *pedut*, *pedyom*, Ps 111:9) was initially enacted by YHWH for the Israelites in contingency with the Abrahamic covenant's primacy of relationship together (the relational outcome of *shakan*, "dwell," Ex 29:46). To be redeemed was never merely to be set free as an end in itself (cf. Gal 5:13) but freed to be involved in the relational progression together. And all our secondary matters, however important, need to be integrated into the primary purpose and function of this primacy.

Moreover, redemption is conclusively relationship-specific to the whole-ly Trinity's family together on just this God's whole relational terms, which are the trinitarian relational context and process the Truth embodied. Jesus' relational words must be understood in the whole context of the Trinity's thematic relational action as well as in their immediate context. By the strategic, tactical and functional shifts of the Trinity's relational work of grace, the Subject of Jesus' person fulfilled whole-ly God's relational response to the human condition, thereby also defining the **contextual contingency** of the familiar words (Jn 8:32) of his relational contingency. Jesus' relational language is unequivocal:

The embodied Truth is the only relational means available for his followers to be liberated from their enslavements to reductionism (or freed from a counter-relational condition, Jn 8:33-34), for the innermost relationship-specific purpose and outcome, so that they can be adopted as the Father's own daughters and sons and, therefore, be distinguished as intimately belonging to his family permanently (*meno*, 8:34-36; cf. *shakan* above).

Yet, and this is a crucial distinction for the church, belonging in family together has significance only in likeness of the Trinity; and the Word and Truth embodied the relational Way and the whole Life of the Trinity in order to intimately disclose in face-to-face relational progression this likeness for family together (Jn 14:6; 17:26), so that there would be no confusion about the nature and identity of the church family (cf. Jn 8:38-39,41,47).

Therefore, Christians and churches are faced with this provocative reality, which is jolting to our existing condition and its direction: With the Good News of this essential relational progression to wholeness together, there is only one exclusive whole relational outcome that emerges and unfolds from the whole-ly Trinity's relational response to our human condition. Accordingly, we are accountable to be distinguished integrally in our theology and practice for **what we are saved for and to**.

It is an ongoing issue and problematic for Jesus followers when the relational progression of these integral shifts is condensed into our theology, and thereby limits, constrains or prevents its function in our practice. Such condensed theology and lacking functional practice are subtle indicators of reductionism shaping our theology and practice. This was the critical issue for the doctrinally-sound church at Ephesus, whose primary focus on theology in the Rule of Faith rendered their practice without the primacy of relationship—thus “you have abandoned *the primacy* of the love you had at first” (Rev 2:4). Abandoned (*aphiemi*, to leave, let go or quit) is the relationship-specific condition of orphans, which directly counters the relational reality of adoption that Jesus constituted in the relational progression (Jn 14:18; Heb 2:11-13).

The relational reality of the whole-ly Trinity's family constitutes the maturity that the Hebrews manifesto challenges us to embrace in the relational progression of the Relationship of Faith (as in Heb 11); this progression will require ongoing clarification and correction from the Father in order for his family to fight against reductionism and grow in wholeness together (Heb 12:1-11). Therefore, whenever church practice is not involved in the primacy of relationship together in wholeness (not any kind of relationship) as the Trinity's family, that church is engaged essentially in the counter-relational workings of reductionism. In the fragmentary condition of the church today—a misguided diversity in the global church on a wide variable relational path from whole-ly Jesus (cf. Ps 106:35)—we are faced inescapably with the church family's responsibility (as in Paul's *oikonomia*, Col 1:25) to account for what the whole-ly Trinity saves us *for*. Until we account for what we are saved for, we will not progress and mature in what we are saved *to*. In further reality, life is not static but dynamic, as is relationship. Accordingly, if we are not **progressing** in the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes, then our persons and relationships are **regressing** in something less or some substitute. This is the hard reality facing us today that we cannot avoid by rendering it virtual—though we certainly can (and have) deny it with alternative facts.

As emerged and unfolds in the relational progression, the primacy of relationship essential to the Trinity and essential for us is composed only by face-to-face relationship together in the irreducible and nonnegotiable dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes. Face to face is the intrusive relational function that makes our persons uncomfortable at the least. The common response among Christians and churches is to diminish or minimize such involvement—even if they know what God saves them for. The subtlety of this common response is to maintain relational distance—for example, in virtual or augmented ways that only simulate connection—which then essentially rejects Jesus in relational progression behind the curtain and remains engaged in practice in effect in front of the curtain. The reality of this subtle condition exists in the function of disciples with veiled faces who lack transformation—those followers likely laboring in ontological simulations and functional illusions of God's family.

This brings us back to convenience in theology and practice and to the distinguishing significance of Mary (Martha's sister) for us today. What did Jesus magnify in Mary, which also should continue to be magnified by all Christians in the global church today? In the relational progression of Mary, we see the face of Mary's whole person unfolding to its full profile. She certainly had culturally sanctioned basis to veil her face and to be measured in her relational involvement according to her tradition and culture. Rather than maintain any relational distance, she seized opportunities to present her whole person in face-to-face relationship together with Jesus. Disregarding the common limits and constraints prevailing among the other disciples, she engaged the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes to be intimately involved without the veil, directly with Jesus' whole person as family together—even before this theology was

composed for practice. In other words, Mary involved her whole person (nothing less) without the veil (no substitutes) in direct face-to-face relationship together with Jesus' whole-ly person; and she thereby enacted the relational outcome of the whole gospel even before Jesus completed his relational work in the relational progression behind the curtain to demolish the holy partition and remove the veil. Are you impressed yet with Mary as Jesus was?

The full profile of Mary's face progressed face to face only because the Good News of whole-ly Jesus penetrated to the heart of her person. Her relational progression, therefore, distinguished the gospel's whole relational outcome of what the whole-ly Trinity in the relational progression saves us for and to—in contrast and conflict with a gospel of truncated soteriology. The face of her relational progression, unfolding only from the relational outcome of the gospel, is the whole who, what and how of Mary that Jesus magnifies (Mk 14:9) for (1) all who claim the same gospel, and thereafter (2) who follow his whole-ly person face to face in the same dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes. Is there justification, then, for Mary to be magnified today to distinguish whole disciples and their discipleship from the diverse condition of other disciples and their discipleship, just as the other disciples experienced in Mary's face-to-face presence?

The other disciples in Mary's narrative were influenced and shaped by the surrounding context, which biased their theology and practice in the disciples they were and how they followed Jesus. Mary was distinguished from them not because she was exceptional; Jesus expects from all his followers this relational outcome composed by the gospel. Her person and discipleship were distinguished, however, beyond what commonly existed and even prevailed in the surrounding context. That is, Mary embraced the **uncommon** composed by whole-ly Jesus, thus, unlike the other disciples, she was freed from the bias of the common. The effects of the others' bias on their theology and practice limited how they saw Jesus' person and their own persons, which was consequential for the state of their direction. Accordingly, with this skewed and fragmented perception, they constrained how they engaged their relationship together—most notably not giving primacy to face-to-face relationship together and thus not integrating their secondary matters into the only primary (as in PIP) that has significance to whole-ly Jesus (i.e. to the Trinity). Like the two disciples heading to Emmaus in a different direction than Jesus' relational path (Lk 24 13ff), the other disciples from Mary were on diverse paths that neither involved their whole persons nor connected with Jesus' whole person in face-to-face relationship together. Consequently, contrary to Mary, the other disciples (and all those in likeness) were not progressing in the primary but subtly **regressing in the secondary**.

The difference between progression and regression is immeasurable, and the gap distinguishing progression from regression cannot be quantified by referential terms in our theology and practice. This makes us susceptible to opening the hermeneutic door (“Did God say that?”) to alternative facts and realities—as in diverse interpretations and

proof-texting—that are merely substitutes in subtle regression. For example, the subtlety of regression also emerges from a modern bias in discipleship today, which confuses progression with innovation—apparent especially in worship practice that gathers many in eventful celebration with little (if any) relational significance. Innovative alternatives are unique substitutes for the relational progression and have the same relational consequences experienced as if in front of the curtain—all of which counters the new wine Jesus constituted.

As Jesus intimately told Peter face to face later at his footwashing, therefore, “Unless you are relationally involved with me face to face, you have no share with me in my whole person and thus in relational progression with the whole-ly Trinity” (Jn 13:8). Still a yet-to-be distinguished disciple in his discipleship, Peter was at the pivotal juncture of what relational path he would follow:

Will he be involved face to face with Jesus in the primacy of the relational progression, and progress in the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes?
Or will he be engaged, occupied, even preoccupied in the secondary of his theology and practice, and thereby regress in the limits and constraints of anything less and any substitutes?

The pivotal juncture, in other words, is either progression in or regression from face-to-face relationship together, which is further defined by the essential question: **To be whole or not to be?**

This pivotal juncture is critical to the human condition and essential for the defining ontology and determining function of all persons and their relationships. The human condition, our human condition, is the basic relational condition “to be apart” from God’s whole (as constituted in Gen 2:18); and this prevailing relational condition has become increasingly subtle and pervasive in the spectrum of human relationships—including among Christians and in churches. Therefore, all Christians and churches are confronted by the reality that, like Peter, we are all at the pivotal juncture of progression or regression, and what relational path we will follow either to be whole with nothing less and no substitutes, or not to be, with anything less and any substitutes.

The inescapable reality also facing us at this pivotal juncture is provoking not only for the diverse condition of our theology and practice but for all those with good intentions practicing more of what amount to the secondary:

The focus on the secondary always relegates us to regression in anything less and any substitutes of wholeness. In ways not always recognized, understood, or is just ignored, the relational consequence for Christians and churches is “to be apart” from the whole-ly Trinity and from each other as new family together in wholeness. This relational condition “to be apart” in all its subtle diversity, then not surprisingly,

reflects, reinforces and sustains the human condition of all persons and relationships, even as the gospel is proclaimed.

This reality is obviously difficult to accept in the context of our faith, but the burden of proof rests in our practice of faith to distinguish our persons and relationships beyond the human condition and thus deeper than what is common in our context.

“Follow me” certainly has been oversimplified in our theology and practice—even with affirming Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and humanity (as in *solus Christus*, Christ alone). This oversimplification is reflected, reinforced and sustained in the diverse condition of disciples and discipleship. In his essential relational progression, Jesus integrates all his followers together by declaring “I will not leave you as orphans.” His penetrating call to us today is to gather together all the relational orphans occupying, prevailing and serving in the global church to be adopted into the Trinity’s whole-ly family by relationally belonging to nothing less and no substitutes.⁵

“Listen! I am standing at the *church* door, **knocking**...with the Spirit: (Rev 3:20,22). When our response to Jesus’ call (1) integrates his essential relational progression with the whole-ly Trinity and (2) encompasses our relational progression to the new church family in whole-ly likeness of the Trinity, we then experience the relational outcome of the whole gospel to be transformed as his whole disciples following him in whole theology and practice by the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes. And like Mary, we progress in the uncommon identity of **whole-ly disciples**.

Church Identity Transitioned

What the church is has been rooted in the Word, and the church grows when *who* we follow also is rooted in the Word. But church identity keeps evolving in transition when it is not *transitioned* whole-ly in the theology and practice illuminated and embodied by the whole-ly Word. *Transitioning* widens the path that Christians can take, which is evident today in the less orthodox theology that more and more evangelicals believe—a trend even about Jesus and the Bible. Obviously, such Christians dilute the church’s identity, assuming they even remain in the church. This urgently amplifies a wake-up call for the self-examination by Christians and churches, so that transitioning among Christians and churches will be transitioned.

⁵ An expanded discussion on the global church is found in my study *The Global Church Engaging the Nature of Sin and the Human Condition: Reflecting, Reinforcing, Sustaining or Transforming* (Global Church Study, 2016). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

The whole of God's theological trajectory and relational path in response to our human condition unfold for only one purpose: our redemptive reconciliation to new relationship together in wholeness. This outcome rooted in the Word has been perceived as the kingdom of God, the church 'already' and the new Jerusalem 'not yet' (Rev 3:12; 21:2). Whether its reality is understood as in the present or to come, its discourse in referential terms has been a source both of diminishing our theology of primary matter and of reducing our practice to having little experiential significance—specifically of God's relational response to our human condition. It may be difficult to accept but any such good news composed in referential language can only have a referential outcome, which would not be rooted in God's trajectory and relational path and thus not have the primacy of the relational significance distinguishing the gospel's only outcome.

As we concentrate our focus on the gospel's only relational outcome, our theology and practice will be challenged, may also be threatened, and perhaps will be resistant to going beyond re-formation to transformation. On the one hand, limiting our focus to what we are saved from is both comforting and comfortable. Extending our involvement to be inclusive of what we are saved to, on the other hand, makes us vulnerable from inner out, requires our whole person in whole relationships, and demands our ongoing accountability for nothing less, without substitutes. The Spirit is present and involved for the reciprocal relationship necessary to take us through this relational process together to complete the relational outcome of wholeness.

Knowing relationally *who* came remains elusive for the gospel if its experiential truth of whole relationship together is not based on the complete Christology of the whole-ly God. Likewise, understanding *what* has come remains ambiguous for the gospel if its outcome does not have the same relational basis. For Jesus, the what he saved *to* focused on the kingdom of God, which was the relational realm of his qualitative focus from outside the universe (cf. Jn 18:36) that encompasses the whole-ly God's uncommon wholeness. As he delineated his kingdom, he also by necessity clarified misperceptions and corrected misunderstanding of the kingdom (as in Lk 17:20-21)—all vital for his gospel and its outcome. Distinguishing and understanding *what* has come—that is, distinguishing it from our human shaping—has been problematic and necessitates the whole knowledge and understanding from complete Christology. An incomplete Christology is insufficient to distinguish the relationship of God from human shaping, which is necessary to delineate the kingdom in other than referential or quantitative terms.

What emerges from salvation and being born again (from above), and is synonymous with eternal life and the eschatological hope, is the kingdom of God (or heaven, used by Matthew to be indirect in reverence for God for Jewish readers). The relational outcome of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed always raised questions and related

issues. The primary questions involved in the interpretive issue of the kingdom are inseparable: (1) what is the kingdom that has come? and (2) when does the kingdom emerge? As much as the imminence of the kingdom has been debated, I contend this cannot be adequately answered until the kingdom itself is sufficiently defined and understood. When this is understood, I further emphasize that the question of its imminence becomes secondary—not unimportant, only less significant in the eschatological plan of God’s strategic action.

The term “kingdom of God” is not found in the OT, yet the reality and expectation of God’s kingship and sovereign rule as vested in Messiah are embedded in the OT. The issue then and now is how the Scriptures are approached, and thereby how God’s kingdom is perceived and responded to.

When the Pharisees questioned Jesus about the coming of the kingdom of God (as noted in Lk 17), he could have replied as he did in the above communication and with Nicodemus: “You study and teach the Scriptures but do you not understand this?” (cf. Jn 3:10) Yet, the clear implication of such a reply came in response he gave: “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is,’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is *within* you” (Lk 17:20-21).

The focus of Jesus’ response tends to be on “is within you.” Before, however, this can be understood, we need to address the issue Jesus raised about ‘observation’ (*parateresis*, watching closely), which includes the implication his reply involves. “Careful observation” (NIV) characterized the rigorous practice of Pharisees observing their covenant code of behavior, which, more importantly, reflected the lens of their perceptual-interpretive framework operating in their approach to the Scriptures and their eschatological hope—which also reflected their underlying theological anthropology defining the person from outer in by what they do. Jesus implied (as with those in Jn 5:39) that their careful observations through the lens of their perceptual-interpretive framework only focused on the quantitative aspects of the kingdom—a process somewhat analogous to the Enlightenment’s scientific method.

Accordingly, the issue Jesus addressed about the kingdom “within you” (*en*) is less about any measured-temporal sense of the kingdom—that is, “among you collectively,” and thus is present (‘already’, realized eschatology), or “within you,” understood as merely an inward (spiritual) nature pointing to the future (‘not yet’, future eschatology). More significantly, I affirm, Jesus addressed the issue between reductionism of the kingdom to mere quantitative terms as opposed to the qualitative integrity of the whole of the kingdom’s relational significance. This is the major issue of the kingdom in its past, present and future—in Israel’s past, in Jesus’ present, in the whole-ly God’s strategic and tactical actions in relational progression to the future—which directly involves how the Scriptures are approached, how God’s kingdom is perceived and responded to. When we also adequately address this major issue, we more congruently follow Jesus on his relational path for the outcome of what has come.

The kingdom of God cannot be reduced to quantitative aspects, though it certainly involves them in secondary ways that can never be made primary to determine God's kingdom. The kingdom can only be defined in whole by qualitative terms, which vulnerably involves the whole person (signified by the heart), though the whole of the kingdom is contained neither in the individual person only nor spiritually within us. Integrated with this definition, the kingdom can only be determined in function by qualitative relational terms directly involving the relationships together necessary to be whole, the whole-ly God's uncommon wholeness in likeness of the Trinity.

This was the qualitative significance that the whole-ly Word embodied to disclose vulnerably the whole-ly God for covenant relationship together in "the kingdom of God has come to you" (Lk 11:20). Luke's Gospel narrates Jesus' salvific communications and work with the emphasis of the kingdom of God for all peoples. A Jewish bias, particularly in a reductionist hermeneutic of their Scriptures, would reduce the whole of the kingdom and preclude access by all, or at the very least stratify the access for others. Thus, it is important in Luke's narrative accounts to interrelate Jesus' communications about approaching the Scriptures integrally with understanding the relational significance of the kingdom of God that has come (cf. Lk 10:21).

When Jesus illuminated the kingdom, it unavoidably involved the redemptive change implied in "repent" (Mt 4:17, cf. 3:2)—the process from old to new, the old dying and the new rising, which necessarily involved deconstructing human shaping of God's kingdom. We need to embrace this change in order for his kingdom to clearly emerge from any of our shaping, and thereby distinguish God's dwelling in our midst—dwelling vulnerably and intimately. This certainly may require changes in both our theology and practice.

In Matthew's portrait of Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus came to fulfill God's covenant promise and the eschatological hope of Israel as God's people, not as nation-state. Accordingly, Jesus' kingdom of heaven had continuity from the OT (Mt 3:1-3; 4:12-17, cf. 25:34). Yet, there was also a clear qualitative distinction about this kingdom (Mt 5:3,10,20; 7:21; 12:48-50; 18:3; 19:14). While the kingdom of heaven was an extension of the old covenant and the fulfillment of its covenant promise, there arrived also directly with Immanuel—the vulnerably present and intimately involved "God with us"—a new and deeper covenant relationship together that he composed in the kingdom of heaven. In relational terms, Jesus fulfilled both the quantitative terms of the old covenant and its qualitative relational significance, which Jesus vulnerably embodied for the direct experience of this covenant relationship together in its new and deeper relational process. And Jesus appeared to further associate this relational significance with his church (*ekklesia*, gathered body, Mt 16:18-19), which involved building (*oikodomeo*, to build a house, v.18, whose root is *oikos*) his household family (*oikos* and kingdom together in Mt 12:25). Building "with me" is in the trinitarian relational context of family and by the trinitarian relational process of family love to "gather with me"

(*synago*, Mt 12:30, the root for synagogue, the counterpart to *ekklesia*) the family of God, both signifying and constituting “the kingdom of God has come to you” (12:28).

Therefore, after Jesus disclosed to his disciples “the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” (*mysterion*, hidden, hard to understand because undivulged, Mt 13:11-51), he made the following definitive for every teacher of the covenant relationship who has been made a functioning disciple (*matheteuo*, rendered inadequately in NRSV as “trained”) in the kingdom of heaven: As persons belonging to the household family of God, they openly share the qualitative relational significance of the new covenant relationship together as well as the fulfillment of the old (Mt 13:52). This involves the full soteriology of both what Jesus saved from and what he saved to—the conjoint function of his relational work of grace only for new covenant relationship together, and thus for only the transformation to wholeness of persons and relationships.

Yet, the *mysterion* of the kingdom can remain hidden even though they were vulnerably disclosed by Jesus and made directly accessible even to “little children.” This happens for two important reasons, which Jesus identified at the beginning of the above communication with his disciples (with the parables of the kingdom directed to the crowds, Mt 13:13). First, Jesus the Messiah and the kingdom of heaven were disclosed only for covenant relationship together, not for the quantitative aspects and functional implications of his kingly rule. The latter become the focus determined by a reductionist perceptual-interpretive lens, which Jesus identified as an ongoing issue in Israel’s history (vv.13-14). Predisposed by reductionism, what they paid attention to and ignored precluded their understanding (*syniemi*, denotes putting the pieces together into a whole) and prevented them from perceiving deeply (*horaō*, not merely to see but to pay attention to a person to recognize their significance, encounter their true nature and to experience them). Furthermore, their whole person had been reduced (signified by “*their* heart has grown dull,” v.15) to function without the critical significance of both qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness, thereby biasing what they paid attention to and ignored. This had a direct relational consequence “to be apart” from the whole-ly God, to which God’s strategic relational work of grace in Jesus’ tactical action of love would respond if they opened their heart.

This points to the second important reason the kingdom remains hidden despite Jesus’ vulnerable disclosure and intimate accessibility. Jesus began this communication saying “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not” (v.11). This was not a selective bias by Jesus showing preferential treatment to some while denying access to others, which he appeared to embed in a system of inequitable distribution (v.12). The significance illuminated here rather was about relationship and its reciprocity, distinguishing the involvement in the relational epistemic process that Jesus made clear (Lk 10:21; cf. Mk 4:24-25). Jesus was pointing to the terms necessary for the nature of the relational process he was defining, and to the relational outcome or consequence of its ongoing experience or lack thereof. “To know”

(*ginosko*, experience) was not mere referential information, for example, of propositional truths to quantify in a belief (or theological) system—which is the typical composition for evangelicals, likely speaking to why dissatisfied evangelicals have left some of those beliefs. In strong contrast, this was experiential Truth that “has been given” (*didomi* in Gk perfect tense, passive voice), hereby illuminating the experiential reality of Jesus’ relational communication of this kingdom knowledge in relational terms “to you” and stressing his ongoing relational process for his disciples to respond back to and be involved with him in for their experience of the Truth of the relational Way’s new covenant relationship together. This reciprocal relational involvement in his relational process is the nothing-less-and-no-substitute terms necessary for whole knowledge and understanding of the kingdom of heaven—the qualitative relational terms Jesus illuminated, which he affirmed the disciples engaged, however imperfectly, while the others did not (vv.16-17).

These terms for relationship are the terms for adherence that Jesus defined for his disciples (*mathetai*). These terms for adherence to Jesus are inherent in being his disciples (*matheteuo*), not only for teachers of the covenant relationship (in his above definitive statement, 13:52) but for all his followers to have qualitative relational significance in the kingdom of God. Matthew’s Gospel takes *matheteuo* very seriously, given the evangelist’s emphasis on discipleship.⁶ Moreover, Matthew is the only Gospel to record a specific imperative in Jesus’ Great Commission, to “make disciples (*matheteusate*, imperative of *matheteuo*) of all nations” (Mt 28:19). This further composes the nature and integrity of reciprocal relationship in his kingdom.

These are the qualitative relational terms necessary for new covenant relationship together with the whole-ly God and for the experiential reality of God’s kingdom to emerge. Without the function of whole relationship together in Jesus’ relational context and process, there is no experiential truth of the kingdom of God, regardless of whether the kingdom is ‘already’ (present) and/or ‘not yet’ (future).

When Jesus initiated the Lord’s supper for the ultimate table fellowship, he illuminated that the “cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20). The disciples had not yet understood the significance of the new covenant for relationship together in the kingdom, since immediately after the supper they disputed about which of them was the greatest (Lk 22:24-30, cf. 13:29-30). While Jesus exposed their reductionism and constituted their relationships in the relational whole of his kingdom, the disciples exposed their need to be changed (cf. Mt 18:1-4)—that is, the process of redemptive change in which the old dies so the new rises. Earlier Jesus pointed to the significance of the *new* with the parable of new wine (Lk 5:33-39). As previously discussed, this tends to be used incorrectly to emphasize new forms and practices, but the

⁶ In his study of the term *mathetes* (disciple), Michael J. Wilkins makes a case for calling Matthew’s Gospel a manual on discipleship in *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 126-172.

new only involves changed persons experiencing new relationship together (the focus in vv.34-35) that distinguished the new wine communion together of God's kingdom (Lk 13:29-30).

The process to the new is what Jesus' salvific work saved us to: the kingdom of God, or its equivalence in John's Gospel, eternal life. John's Gospel replaces "kingdom" language with eternal life, possibly in part to avoid any conflicts such language could create with Gentiles, yet more importantly to provide the further and deeper significance of the kingdom in the relational context and process of the whole of Jesus. The kingdom that had come came embodied *in* Jesus, the whole-ly the Word. As he told Nicodemus, the qualitative relational shape of the whole-ly God's kingdom was "born from above," not by human shaping but born new by the Spirit as the new creation in the image of the relational ontology of the whole-ly God, thereby made whole in new relationship together in likeness of the Trinity—just as Jesus asked the Father in his formative family prayer (Jn 17). On this basis, the kingdom of God indeed signifies more than God's kingly rule; and Jesus embodied that significance and constituted the kingdom in the trinitarian relational context of family by the trinitarian relational process of family love for this new covenant relationship together—functioning beyond the quantitative limits of the old to intimate relationship together in the very likeness of the relational ontology (*zoe*) of the Trinity.

Therefore, Jesus' salvific work and the kingdom must be understood in this further and deeper relational context and process. The whole-ly God and God's action are only about relationship, relationship together, covenant relationship together in the whole-ly God's uncommon wholeness, which certainly then is only on God's qualitative relational terms. And if God's terms for relationship are interpreted only as kingly rule, this would reduce the qualitative relational significance of Jesus' relational work of grace in *agape* involvement to fulfill God's thematic relational response to the human condition. Historically, such rule has been wrongly imposed on others in the name of God for the sake of God's kingdom—evident in the West's theology and practice globally. Relationship, by the nature of the relational ontology of the Trinity, however, cannot be decreed, legislated, otherwise imposed, nor can it be unilateral, all of which are assumed in the primacy of kingly rule. In contrast, God's kingdom is qualitatively defined irreducibly and relationally determined nonnegotiablely by the whole relationship of God, and thereby functions in whole relationship together in likeness of the Trinity. And this relational basis renders our shaping of who came and what has come in our theology and practice to fragmentary terms without significance, therefore without the experiential reality of this whole relational outcome.

The shape of the kingdom of God as the whole-ly God's vulnerable and intimate dwelling cannot emerge from reductionism. Reductionism always counters the relationships of the whole, separating or distancing persons in the relationships to be whole—for example, by stratifying relationships in a system of inequality, which Jesus

found operating in the temple and throughout the surrounding context. Revisiting the disciples' dispute about which of them was greatest, Jesus redefined the significance of ruling in relationship together in his kingdom by composing their relationships in unstratified intimate involvement together (Lk 22:24-30)—the relationships equalizing each other from their secondary distinctions. His clarification and correction both pointed them back to the function of “little children” and the need for redemptive change for the new relationship together in God's kingdom (Mt 18:1-4), and pointed ahead to relationship together with the veil removed (as Paul distinguished, 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 2:14-22). This was the kingdom that Jesus embodied and distinguished for his followers, which was incompatible with reductionism and its counter-relational workings.

Reductionism reshapes the kingdom of God into ontological simulations, and distorts its shape with functional illusions, most notably evolving in unequal persons in unequal relationships. Consequently, we need to fully understand Jesus' relational context and process for the *whole* of his kingdom to expose the presence and influence of reductionism. The only shape constituting the kingdom of God emerges from the whole of Jesus embodying the whole relationship of God for new relationship together in likeness, thereby fulfilling God's strategic and tactical relational actions in response to the human relational condition “to be apart” from the whole-ly God's whole family. Church identity is transitioned by nothing less and no substitutes, which is why the identity of churches keeps transitioning.

Church Function Transitioned

For the church to be transitioned in its identity is contingent on its existential function also being transitioned. This transition can only be constituted specifically in the Trinity's *relational context*, by the Trinity's *relational process*, with the Trinity's *relational outcome*. The integration of these constituting bases converges whole-ly in the Word's intimately equalizing church family. Therefore, only for this whole-ly relational context, process and outcome did the Son pray to the Father (Jn 17). This is the challenge and the path facing all churches and their persons and relationships gathered in them.

When the kingdom of God's dwelling is understood as unfolding in his church, the basis for the church must be defined and determined by complete Christology. That is to say, Jesus' whole person and his relationships (both within the Trinity and with others) are definitive for the church's theology and practice, and therefore determinative of its identity and function. Nothing less can be compatible with the vulnerable theological trajectory of God's relational context, process and outcome responding to our human condition; and no substitutes can be congruent with Jesus' relational path.

The prominent human distinction among God's people, which fragmented them and stratified relations, was between Jew and Gentile, with the former seen as better and the latter less. Paul made unequivocal that "Christ is our uncommon peace" and illuminated its relational significance for the church family composed by his uncommon peace (Eph 2:14-18). Peter, as we discussed, struggled with uncommon peace both in his theology and practice, and he maintained a common peace until he could not deny the experiential truth and avoid the relational reality that "God has made no distinction between them and us" (Acts 15:9). The truth and reality of human distinctions facing us today are that all such distinctions emerge from human construction, the constructs of which we can neither ascribe to God nor have legitimated by God. Paul was instrumental in Peter's transformation to uncommon peace, just as he needs to be for the church's transformation today for the redemptive reconciliation of human distinctions pervading the church and shaping its persons and relationships.

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 its existential relational reality to unfold 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 becomes the relational reality for the persons and relationships of the church, they can claim salvation *from* sin as reductionism and salvation *to* wholeness together; and just on this relational reality, they can proclaim and whole-ly witness to the experiential truth of this good news for human relations. Any other basis for the gospel claimed and proclaimed is something less of the whole gospel.

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 *the salvific work* of the cross, by which he *redeemed them from their fragmenting differences*" (2:16). It is indispensable for us to understand what Paul unfolds for the church here is that reconciliation is inseparable from redemption, so that the church is transitioned by **redemptive reconciliation**. 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 those persons to 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. All discussion about reconciliation must include this reality or there will be no redemptive change in our relationships, only evolving simulations and illusions. In other words, from the Word redemptive reconciliation encompasses the irreplaceable constituting process of **redemptive change**, in which the old in us dies first so that the new can rise in our person, our relationships and our churches as nothing less than the new creation.

Therefore, the relational significance of redemptive reconciliation is for the heart of persons now to be vulnerable to each other (including God) and come together in intimate relationships. Only intimate relationships are the relational outcome constituted and thus distinguished by the redemptive reconciliation of uncommon peace. With God, intimate relationship involves going beyond conventional spirituality and a spiritual relationship to the following:

The 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 to intimate relationships constituted by the redemptive reconciliation of uncommon peace—the relational context and process integral to the Trinity by which the church is transitioned in likeness.

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. This 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 (Mk 11:15-17), for which the church is accountable to clean out its own house in order to “gather with me and not scatter.” Completing his only relational purpose for his house, on the cross Jesus also deconstructed his house by tearing away the prominent curtain 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). The church and its persons and relationships are accountable for tearing down any existing curtain that allows them to maintain practice with relational distance as if in front of the curtain torn away by Jesus. Inseparably interrelated, 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—the relational outcome of redemptive reconciliation.

Equally important, implied in what Paul already illuminated and now continued to make explicit (Eph 2:19-22), there is one other involvement necessary to complete the relational outcome of transformed relationships together. Common peace allows (even affirms) human distinctions to operate as long as there is no conflict or disharmony in relations—which can only exist as an illusion or simulation. Uncommon peace, however, negates those distinctions, removes their significance and does not accept their fragmenting presence in God’s family. “Consequently, you are no long *defined and determined by distinctions like* foreigners and aliens but *are whole persons as full* citizens with God’s people and *whole* members of God’s family.” The experiential truth of this relational outcome is not referential or just doctrinal, but composed in whole relational terms for the relational reality of transformed relationships together to also involve **equalized relationships** integrally with intimate relationships—integrally for the church to be transitioned.

God’s family has become the vulnerable dwelling of the whole and uncommon God (as Jesus also made clear, Jn 14:23), yet this relational outcome has no relational significance as long as the curtain 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 veiled basis of any of our outer-in distinctions. Those fragmenting distinctions have to be redeemed 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 in relational likeness of the Trinity. The transformed relationships that distinguish the church family must then be both equalized and intimate. Since intimacy is distinguished only by hearts opening to each other and coming together, this relational bond cannot come together or be constituted unless equalized from inner out. This relational context, process and outcome are not only challenging but threatening to churches, whose persons likely rather have the comfort and convenience of measured relational distance.

Do not be misled or misguided: There can be no complete intimate involvement together in likeness of the Trinity as long as the veil of distinctions exists. Distinctions focus our lens on and engage our practice from outer in, unavoidably in the relational distance and inequity of comparative relations, which is incompatible with intimate relationships and incongruent with equalized relationships. Therefore, the experiential truth and relational reality of the redemptive reconciliation of uncommon peace involve the church in the integral transformed relationships together of equalized persons in

equalized relationships, who are vulnerably involved in intimate relationships face to face, heart to heart as God's whole and uncommon family. The church keeps transitioning with anything less.

Indeed, based on the uncommon peace of Christ, 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. 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 relations. The relational reality of this uncommon equality unfolds from the church family as it is ongoingly involved in equalizing all persons, peoples, nations and their relationships—equalizing in whole relational terms composed by the redemptive reconciliation of uncommon peace. Emphatically therefore, church function is unequivocally transitioned when it emerges, unfolds and grows as *the intimate equalizing church*—which becomes equivocal with anything less and any substitutes.

Church Witness Transitioned

Like all Christians, all churches are always witnessing. Whether in passive witness or active witness, their witness loop keeps working. When the world observes Christian witness in transition, what it observes includes both what Christian individuals and churches give out. There is one aspect of Christian witness, however, that only the church can give out, and this function emerges only from church witness transitioned into the intimate equalizing church family. Only **the church as equalizer** can distinguish this new order for humanity in the world, which is distinguished just on the narrowest path for church identity and function. This challenges the global church the widest.

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 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 focused only on uncommon equality, which unmistakably and undeniably emerges from the uncommon peace of Christ and his justice with righteousness—"He will proclaim justice to the *marginalized*...until he brings justice to victory" (Mt 12:18-20) and thereby "making peace" (Eph 2:14-17)—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 (Eph 2:18-22). Yes, the church in uncommon equality fulfills the relational significance of its identity (who and whose it is), and the equalizing church fulfills the relational purpose of its function (what and how it is)—fulfilling by its uncommon peace of whole ontology and function in likeness of the Trinity (Col 3:9-15). 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) give substantive significance 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 peace *as 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's relational outcome distinguished integrally by equalized intimate relationships together as the new creation church family. 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).

The significance of the uncommon emerges only when it is distinguished clearly from the common—which the Son unmistakably distinguished in his formative prayer for his church family (Jn 17:14-16). 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, tribes, nations and all their relations have in common is reduced ontology and function. What all anthropologies, whatever their variation, have at their 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?”

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 thus 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. Anything less cannot be equalized from inner out but only simulated from outer in, which various Christians commonly have illusions about—perhaps thinking that anything is better than no change at all.

The relational reality of what emerges from the experiential truth of the whole gospel is rightly just 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, in which any degree of reduction is still not whole. 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).

Human distinctions are a fact of human life, the prevailing reality of which has fragmented persons, peoples, tribes, nations and their relations from the very beginning. The reality of this fact, however, is that this fragmenting fact has emerged only because of the human construction of distinctions shaping the course of human history. Human distinctions are not a formative fact of the shared ontology and function in all humanity—that is, basic to that shared ontology and function that was already fragmented. Human distinctions have evolved from this common human ontology and function, and the global church must account for this evolution in its theology and practice.

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 undergo redemptive 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) to be distinguished in the church’s function and witness as the new creation. 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.

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 inequity is the default condition and mode 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 essential 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 to prevent getting to the heart of the problem. The most that emerges amounts to a virtual reality, which doesn’t unfold in existential reality—a struggle still existing in U.S. race relations since the Civil Rights Movement. 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. For the church, this involves redemptive change so that this old dies in order for the new to rise.

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. 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 both persons 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 (1) that lacks wholeness at the heart of persons and relationships, and (2) that functions with a veiled equity lacking existential depth. The distinctions of persons we use will be the equality in their relationships we get in the church—nothing more and maybe even much less.

Only the church in relationships together can witness to the whole gospel and its relational outcome, yet that witness must be transitioned. 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 latter overlaps with the church’s constituting body parts and spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12), and thus must never be the basis to define the person and determine the relationships in the church or else the church will not be transitioned in its function and witness.

The integral fight both *for* the wholeness of the gospel and *against* all reductionism is not optional for the equalizing church, because the relational outcome of wholeness for its own persons and relationships and for all persons, peoples, tribes, 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’, and this fake news needs to be exposed in church witness.

The global church is urgently faced with professing the whole and holy (uncommon) God, claiming the whole gospel and its uncommon relational outcome, and

thereby proclaiming the experiential Truth of God's presence and involvement and the relational reality of relationship together in wholeness. Or we of the church can profess something less of God to idolize, claim an incomplete gospel, and settle for its common result, whereby we can only proclaim the truth of God and the reality of our life together without the relational significance of their primacy in wholeness. If we profess the latter, there exists an inequality about God shaped by common terms; and therefore there is an existing inequality common to all of our persons and relationships that we have to accept, resign ourselves to, or simply have no significant basis to change. Is this what many segments of the global church are going through today, knowingly or unknowingly? Yet, the reality is that the global church cannot expect equality when its God exists in inequality.

The Church Transitioned as Equalizer

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 infrastructure 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 nonconformity in the resources they have are basic to the body of Christ. The key issue is not differences but distinctions associated with differences (or imposed on them) 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 peace/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 fragmenting comparative process with its relational consequences that persons and relationships with those distinctions have to bear—the consequences Jesus saw in the temple before he reconstituted it.

The defining line between diversity and distinctions has disappeared in most church theology and practice (including the academy's) today, 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 Trinity. As Paul made definitive Jesus' salvific work for the church, 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.

Redemptive reconciliation is not optional but essential to the uncommon whole of who, what and how the church and its persons and relationship are *to be*. This is the gospel of wholeness Jesus enacted to constitute the uncommon trinitarian church family as **the intimate equalizer**.

The church as equalizer holds us accountable for our distinctions and confronts us in our self-determination because the choices for both imply and are consequential of the following:

1. They are incompatible with the uncommon peace and equality of Christ, who saved us from reduced ontology and function and saved us to wholeness together in the heart of our ontology and function.
2. They are incongruent with the new, uncommon, whole relational order of the transformed church family of Christ.
3. They are contrary to the good news for all the ages of persons, the diversity of all peoples, the differences of all tribes and nations, and all their relationships to experience wholeness in their primacy from inner out.
4. They are in conflict with the redemptive reconciliation needed for the transformed relationships together, both equalized and intimate, composing the relational outcome of this gospel of wholeness and uncommon equality.

Therefore, the church as equalizer by necessity confronts us and holds us accountable, because this is the relational outcome of the experiential truth of the uncommon God's vulnerable trajectory and the relational reality of the whole of God's relational path to respond to us in whole and uncommon relational terms—which we do not have the freedom to reduce or renegotiate. Thus, Paul is emphatic about our choice for globalizing the church: “pursue [*dioko*, follow eagerly, endeavor earnestly to acquire] what makes for wholeness and for mutual upbuilding *of the transformed global church family*” (Rom 14:19).

The experiential truth of this uncommon equality of persons and relationships in their primacy, and the relational reality of the equalizing church for its persons and relationships in wholeness integrally converge to embody the church as equalizer in likeness of Jesus as the equalizer. Equality distinguishes the innermost of the whole and uncommon God and is at the heart of God's relational response to our human condition. The church as intimate equalizer distinguishes the innermost of God's likeness and extends the heart of God's relational response to the fragmentary condition of all the persons, peoples, tribes and nations in this pluralistic, globalizing world—just as Jesus prayed for his church family.

As the global church emerges on the relational basis discussed above, by these whole and uncommon relational terms the global church and all its churches, persons and relationships unfold transitioned in wholeness together—nothing less and no substitutes.

Take heed: The trajectory that composed the experiential Truth of God's vulnerable presence in the human context and the path that composed the relational reality of God's relational involvement, and the relational outcome of God's vulnerable trajectory and relational path, are all at stake here. That is, God's righteousness, which kissed uncommon peace to integrate justice with righteousness in wholeness for the foundation of his kingdom church family, is at issue here—which also unavoidably includes our righteousness as Christ's followers and as church that distinguishes the whole who, what and how we *are* for others to be able to count on in the scope of relationships. Therefore, the integral theology and practice whole-ly embodied and enacted by the Word is not optional for his followers and his church, but it is inescapable for us to be held accountable!

Chapter 8

Living with Viable Faith

**For by grace you have been saved through faith...
not the result of works, so that no one may boast.**

Ephesians 2:8-9

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

James 2:17

When you listen to a song, what attracts you to it, the music or the words? If the music resonates or even reverberates for you before the words, then priority is given to the music and the words become secondary, assuming that they're listened to at all. This basically involves the medium or the message, an issue of prime importance. With the focus on the medium, where does that leave the message? What needs to be sorted out about songs is what's primary and what's secondary. This also applies to Christian songs, especially the ones selected for worship.

Of course, many songs are composed with the emphasis on the medium over the message. Songs of significance, however, emphasize the message, which can be intensified nonverbally by its qualitative communication from the heart. Some music could be heartfelt but the quality of that music itself is not the message of the song. A heartfelt message always resonates deeper and above any musical medium.

More importantly, the medium-message, secondary-primary process is critical for Christian faith, both in its theology and practice. What's emphasized in Christians' practice of faith and the theological basis (explicit or implicit) for their practice underlie each of the inescapable issues discussed in this study; and that faith will either converge with the whole message of the issues combined, or be separated ("be apart") by the fragmentary medium the issues present. The results will either be a viable faith with integral theology and practice, or an effectively lifeless faith transitioning with variable theology and practice. And make no mistake, faith is not viable merely because you possess faith, which is an assumption too many persons make with their Christian affiliation—the medium of their faith that becomes its message at the expense of what's primary. Could this be the reason that more and more of the younger generations have indicated no faith-affiliation as the "nones"?

The Works of Faith Work

The distinction between works and faith can be and has been confusing for Christians. This is an issue that has not been fully resolved in the theology of most Christians, especially if they consider Paul and James to be in conflict (as the verses at the top of the chapter may indicate).

Both Paul and James challenged a faith reduced to practice without relational and functional significance (Gal 5:6; 1 Thes 1:3; 2 Thes 1:11; Jas 2:14,21-24). Both countered a faith that was an end in itself or a means for oneself, even for justification (as Rom 3:28 may suggest). When justification (*dikaiosyne*) is seen only in its judicial aspect before God, it has lost the compatible relational function with God necessary for ongoing involvement in relationship together. Justification by faith becomes inadequate when the process is limited solely to being justified before God. This limitation involves a reduced faith, which implies a truncated soteriology focused only on being saved from sin—and that view of sin is limited also. The root of justification, however, also involves righteousness, which is not an attribute but the congruent function of a person's whole ontology in relationship. That is, righteousness is the inner-out function of the whole of who, what and how a person *is*, which God and others can count on to be that person in relationship together. Being righteous engages the whole person in the fullness of soteriology and thus involves those persons directly in what we are saved *to*—whole relationship together in God's new creation family.

As distinguished for the Lord, "Righteousness will go before him and will make a path for his steps" (Ps 85:13), so also righteousness constitutes the compatible involvement needed for reciprocal relationship with the whole-ly God. This essential relational process is an inner-out relational function emerging only from the vulnerable relational response of **trust**—the relational significance of the wholeness of faith. Therefore, the more basic issue underlying the issue of justification by faith is the nature of the faith practiced to claim justification. This basic issue addresses the sin of reductionism and its influence to redefine faith and truncate salvation without the fullness of being saved to.

Reductionism in faith-practice has had an ongoing history among God's people, whether by ancient Jews, Christian Jews, Jewish and Gentile Christians, or modern Christians, whether for identity, ideology or justification. Such faith has the primary focus on oneself, which has no relational significance to God and functional significance to others without its relational significance of trust. The practice of such faith in relationship is outer in, and thus is measured or distant, if not detached. In contrast, the

relational response of trust makes one vulnerable from inner out and engages the primacy of relationship, first with God and then with others, for the reciprocal relational involvement necessary for relationship together to be whole—not measured or distant and thus, simply fragmented.

In other words, for both Paul and James, faith is not static, passive, self-involved and a mere statement of belief. Rather, by the nature of God’s righteous relational action, compatible faith is the righteous relational dynamic, actively responding to God and others in relationship with one’s whole person from inner out as the relational outworking of one’s belief (Gal 5:6; Jas 2:17; cf. Amos 5:21-24). Anything less and any substitutes of this relational response are reductions evolved from the counter-relational workings of the sin of reductionism. The simulations and illusions of faith from reductionism is the underlying issue Paul and James challenged in its function and outcome, both of which they countered with whole faith—the wholeness of one’s relational response of trust and its relational outcome of whole relationship together with God and God’s family.

The reciprocal relational *means* for experiencing this definitive whole relationship together as God’s family was also at the center of this conflict for Paul. He grasped that this issue is ongoing unless understood in its proper context. In Galatians, the conflict of relational means (not an end) appears to be between “the law” and “faith” (Gal 3:1-26). Yet, this would not only be an oversimplification of Paul’s polemic but also a reduction of the law from its composition as God’s desires and terms for covenant relationship, as well as a reduction of faith as the necessary relational response to God’s promise of covenant relationship together. Paul put the issue into its full perspective.

Galatians represents Paul sharing the functional clarity for the whole gospel to address their current issue, situation and related matters in order to take them beyond the human contextualization of reductionism (not just of Judaism) to the further and deeper contextualization of God—the whole-ly God’s relational context and process embodied in, by and with the whole of Jesus. Within God’s relational context and process, the law neither reduces nor renegotiates the covenant relationship. In fact, as God’s terms for relationship together, the law is integrally compatible with the covenant and even is a vital key for the emergence of whole relationship together. That is, not as a functional key to fulfill the promise (3:21), the law serves rather as a heuristic framework (*paidegogos*) for both learning our human condition and discovering the source of its whole solution (3:10, 22-24; cf. Rom 3:19-20).

The reciprocal relational means both necessary to receive and compatible to respond to Jesus for whole relationship together is the issue for Paul, which then necessarily involves human ontology. When human effort is relinquished and replaced by the relational response of faith, Paul adds for functional clarity that we are no longer under the *paidagogos* of the law (3:25). Paul is only referring to the law’s heuristic function. This does not mean that the law (as God’s desires and terms for covenant

relationship) is finished and no longer functional for the practice of faith (Gal 5:14; 6:2; cf. Rom 3:31; 1 Cor 9:21). Paul in truth wants the law (in its relational purpose) to be fulfilled relationally by human persons, and he may confuse us by stating that the law cannot be fulfilled by human effort (Gal 3:10; 5:3).

By focusing on the relational involvement of *agape* (Gal 5:14), however, he makes definitive how the law is or is not fulfilled. By necessity, this engages the two conditions of human ontology (whole or reduced), and Paul differentiates their respective involvement with the law (5:6; 6:15). Whole human ontology functions from inner out in the relational response of trust to be vulnerably involved with God and others in family love—just as Christ functioned (cf. Jn 15:9-12)—thus reciprocally responding to God’s desires and terms for relationship together. Reduced human ontology, in contrast, functions from outer in to try to fulfill the quantitative aspects of the law, thus renegotiating God’s terms for relationship by human terms shaped from human contextualization. This reductionism essentially redefined relationship with God to mere relationship with the law, which then disembodies the law from the whole-ly God and God’s desires for relationship together.

For Paul, the underlying issue between function by law and function by faith is clearly between reduced ontology and function and whole ontology and function. The relational consequence of the former is not only the inability to fulfill the law but enslavement to the reductionist futility of human effort (Gal 5:3-4). The relational outcome of the latter is to receive and respond to Christ for whole relationship together with nothing less and no substitutes.

In the discussion above, works and faith are inseparable, on the one hand, yet Paul also distinguishes works from faith, on the other hand. Paul sees works also as inseparable from God’s law. Works of the law in practice reflect a perceptual-interpretive lens that Paul addressed, challenged and exposed. Paul’s roots did not originate in Judaism, thus his discourse on works went beyond his religious tradition and deeper into human origin. That is, Paul is addressing human ontology and how the human person is defined, and what determines human function. Paul knew from the creation narrative that the human person was designated with “work” to accomplish (Gen 2:4-5,15). The term for work (*abad*) also means to serve, minister and worship. *Abad* then is not an end in itself by which to define human persons. *Abad* is a designated function in a broader context than just the individual person, which the Creator established to define human ontology and determine human function. The issue for *abad* becomes whether this broader context is to serve the physical creation, minister to the human creature or worship the Creator. This is an ongoing problem of the perceptual-interpretive lens that will determine our perception of work, the significance of its context and what will define the human person. Paul was addressing these issues in his discourse on works.

Relationship in God's likeness is the deeper context of *abad* that established the roots for Paul's perceptual-interpretive lens defining all works, inclusive of all human activity for physical creation, for human creatures or for the Creator. In Paul's deeper theological framework, therefore, the primary work defining human ontology and determining human function is **relational work**: namely, the whole person from inner out in the vulnerable relational response of trust with God (faith) and in the vulnerable relational involvement with others in relationship (*agape*, Gal 5:6)—which can be counted on when relational work functions in righteousness. All other works and human activity are secondary to this relational work in the primacy of relationship together. If persons are defined by doing secondary work or activity, for Paul this constitutes a reduction of the person created in God's qualitative image and relational likeness, a reduction which signifies a quantitative perceptual-interpretive lens redefining human ontology and function from inner out to outer in.

In Paul's polemic, if persons define themselves by this reduced human ontology and by their function in the works of the law, then they are obligated to do "all the things written in the book of the law" (Gal 3:10) and are measured by "the entire law" (Gal 5:3). Without complete and perfect adherence, they can never fully measure up on these terms; therefore they are deficient ("cursed") and must be deemed as *less* and unacceptable to God, that is, on these redefined terms based on reduced human ontology constituting persons by what their works. Paul is only raising a hypothetical process of works on human terms, not God's terms. By this polemic, Paul challenges the assumptions about theological anthropology of all his readers.

To be sure, good works are inseparable from relational faith because of the relational nature of God's communication revealing the law (cf. Num 12:6-7). God's law, without reduction and disembodiment, expresses God's desires and terms just for reciprocal relationship together in the covenant of love. Thus, observing the law is more accurately described as the relational function of responding to God's desires for relationship, which for Paul became the experiential truth of his discipleship with Christ in relationship (cf. Acts 26:16b; 1 Cor 11:1)—just as Jesus made definitive for observing the law (Mk 10:21) and for serving him (Jn 12:26). God did not vulnerably share these desires and terms for the sake of the moral and ethical conformity of persons in doing good; such works simply reduce persons to the limits and constraints of the human condition. The relational response of God is to redeem persons from such reductionism and to reconcile them to whole relationship together (Gal 4:3-7, *pleroma* soteriology)—the redemptive reconciliation at the heart of the whole gospel.

The integral convergence of faith and works is illuminated by Paul and reinforced by James. If the perceptual-interpretive lens used doesn't discern Paul's and James' relational language, they would exhort their readers to "take heed." Consider again: The reciprocal relational response of trust is the vulnerable involvement necessary to be compatible with God's relational response communicated in the relational message of

the law, and to be congruent with the human ontology and function created in relational likeness to the whole of God. Merely doing good and good works, even with good intentions, reduce God's relational response, God's law, human ontology and function. James does not make works an end in itself, as if the medium of works is the message of faith. Paul's polemic exposes these reductions and illuminates the *good* to make them whole. The wholeness of his theological discourse on good defines unmistakably its determinant relational work by those who function from inner out ongoingly in reciprocal relational response back to God for nothing less than and no substitutes for the primacy of whole relationship together—what the whole-ly God saves us *to*, which is indeed the only good news for the inherent human condition's relational need and problem. No amount of good works alone is sufficient to meet this need and adequate to resolve this problem.

Paul's theology gives the basis for the relational context and process of faith to constitute faith's primary function: the relational work of ongoing reciprocal involvement in trust of whole-ly God. The practice of the relational work of faith unfolds in the relational outcome of related works, which are secondary to the primacy of faith's relational work but inseparable from it. When these related works are not integrated with faith's relational work, then faith becomes "useless...is dead" (as James clarified, Jas 2:20,26). The integral theology and practice that Paul and James make definitive for Christian faith likewise clarifies, corrects and confirms what is viable for all Christians in their faith. In spite of how Paul and James are interpreted with a variable practice, what is integral for them is irreducible and nonnegotiable.

Living Viably in the Human Context

Listen and learn! Our surrounding contexts bear down on us to influence our persons, relationships and churches to remain in transition. Moreover, the human condition renders us ongoingly by default to be anything less than whole, to be fragmented by any substitutes. The most influential medium today, for example, is social media, which typically misrepresents the Christian faith by disseminating misinformation from unscrutinized sources. Consider if you will: If Jesus had a social media account, how many more "followers" would he have today than before? But, if he posted the relational message of faith encompassing the Sermon on the Mount, would those more followers still give Jesus "likes"? In addition, do virtual gatherings in the church (as in the COVID pandemic) reinforce the convenience of the medium as the message as well as the comfort of the secondary over the primary, which churches generate virtually even in person?

Given our surrounding contexts, however, the viability of faith's relational work (1) clarifies its primacy over the secondary function of all related works, and (2) corrects the misinformation, misrepresentation and mistaken practice of **the medium of works** composing **the message of faith**. Whenever such a medium composes the relational message of faith, what others hear and see has no substantive quality to distinguish that faith as viable and thus to constitute it as living. This appears to underlie the practice of spiritual disciplines and formation, which Dallas Willard was instrumental in developing but who was also wary of its practice by many Christians. The issue is this practice becoming merely an end in itself, thus making the medium of spiritual works primary over or at the loss of its relational purpose constituted by the message of faith's relational work.

Therefore, the relational work of our faith is ongoingly challenged more and more by the inescapable issues discussed above. And faith's relational work comes alive on the narrow relational Way based on the experiential Truth for the whole Life embodied and enacted by the whole-ly Word. Its purpose alive is just for all Christians to be vulnerably involved in reciprocal relationship together, both intimate and equalized as his church family in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity. Accordingly, on the basis of righteousness (as in Ps 85:13; Mt 5:6) we all need to account specifically for the depth level of who, what and how we *are* that can truly be counted on by God and others in this relational reality.

For this integral relational context, process and outcome, all Christians are accountable whole-ly from inner out—individually as persons and collectively as church. Take heed!

Scripture Index (Primary Source)

Page numbers in **bold** indicate where the primary discussions can be found.

Old Testament

Genesis

1:1 95
1:26-28 11,14,17,18, 36,
47,95,143,156
2:4-5 238
2:8-16 **49-50**
2:17-18 17,21,50,95,
151,155,203,214
2:25 21-22,41,147,159
3:1-7 11,21-22,41,44,
95,103,115,117,123,
136,149,151,162 166
3:8-13 1,8,23,39,42,56,
61,170
3:15-19 47
5:1-2 17
6:5-9 43,156
11:1-9 24,69
12:1-4 43
15:4-6 43,78
17:1-11 **43-44**,78,140,
192-193

Exodus

2946 210
33:11-23 108,110,127,
170
34:5-6 110

Leviticus

10:10 122,125
11:44-45 **122**
19 179

Numbers

3-4 179

6:24-26 102,123,127,
193,210
12:5-9 109,110,114,
115, 127,193

Deuteronomy

4:37 102
5:32-33 120
6:4-6 2,102,130
7:8-9 102,118,193
12:8,32 120
31:12-17 86,129,141

1 Samuel

8:5,18-20 47
15:13-23 2

1 Kings

19:9,13 1,8,56

Job

1:10-11,20-22 167
2:3-5 168
2:17 12
7:17-18 167
19:26-27 168
23:3,8-9 168
29:2-5 168
38-41 168
42:1-6 2,115,168

Psalms

8:4 143
25:4-5,9-10 110
42:3 12
46:10 110,196
50:21 39,42,62,122,161
79:10 12
85:10-13 43,45,78,236,
241
111:9 210

Proverbs

4:23 17
13:6 76
14:30 17
27:19 17

Ecclesiastes

3:11 173

Isaiah

1:15 86
28:17 229
29:13 51,174
40:18 17
42:8 130
42:20 131
Jeremiah
7:3-7 33
9:23-24 91,111,126,
127
23:16-17 137

Ezekiel

13:10 137
22:26 122
33:30-32 97
44:23 122

New Testament

Matthew

3:1-3 218
4:10 52
5:3-12 73,75,84,85,218,
241
5:13-16 56,57,51,72,
74,79
5:20 28,45,58,74,79,84
5:21-48 61,82
5:48 69,124
6:1 61

6:33 69,79
7:1-5 61
7:15-20 136
7:21-23 195
9:10-13 85
12:18-30 137,218-219,
226
13:13-15 131,219
13:11-52 218-219
15:1-20 45,72
15:8-9 35
17:5 65,173
16:12-23 53,61,105-
106,124,218
18:1 13
18:3-4 67,218,222
22:16 78
22:37-40 51
26:6-9 68
26:37-38 126
28:19 195,220

Mark

1:14-17 52
2:13-17 174
4:17 218
4:23-25 2,9,25,35,39,
115,131,195
4:41 56
7:6-8 51,97
7:13-14 116
8:14-21 106
9:33-34 13,102
11:15-17 224
10:18 152
12:28-31 178,181-182
13:32-37 2
14:9 213

Luke

2:47 26
4:1-13 23
5:27-32 77
5:33-39 71,74,76,192,
220
6:40 63,65

8:9-10 95
8:18 35,106,115,129,
131
8:31-32 209
9:44-46 13,47,95,102
10:21-29 67,103,127,
177,219
10:30-37 178
11:20 218
12:1 61,67
13:29-30 221
17:20-21 216-217
19:1-10 77,74
19:41-42 137,227
22:20 80,85,220
22:24-30 222
24:31-32 110,213
24:46-48 184

John

1:1 95
1:12-13 53,205
1:14 207
1:18 27,170
1:44-50 112-113,118,
125,200
2:1-11 29
3:1-11 101
3:16-17 29,187,207
4:7-26 174,201-202
4:23-24 17,35
5:37-40 104-105,127
6:14-69 104
7:12-15 127
8:31-34 53,93,187,211
8:35-47 93,99,209
10:30 204
12:1-5 68
12:26 37,57,113,131,
137,186,191
13:8-16 63,124,214
13:34-35 181-182,186
14:6,23 140,211
14:9 91,126
14:16-18 204-206,211,
227

14:21-23 175,203,206,
225
14:27 27
15:1-11 208
15:9-10 175,187
15:14-15 68,188,203
15:26-27 177,184,186,
189
16:12-13 13
17:9-19 30,53,54-56,
64-65,76,123,227
17:20-26 30,53,65,76,
115,175,187,188,191,
202,208
18:38 161
19:26-27 174
20:17 206
21:15-21 32,181

Acts

1:8 1,188
9:5 56
10:9-16,34-36 171,182
15:1-29 171,182
15:8-9 134,223
17:28-29 17

Romans

3:19-20 81
3:31 238
8:5-6 62,138
8:15-16 205
14:19 232

1 Corinthians

1:10-12 135,191
1:19,31 135
2:9-16 138,139
3:3-4 134
4:6-7 135,138
9:19-23 78,81
11:25 85
12:12-30 230,231

2 Corinthians

3:5-6 86
3:14-15 89
3:16-18 53,84,127,173,
209,222,224
4:1-4 171,194
4:6 115,121,170,174
5:16-17 53,80,84,89
11:12-15 37,135
12:7-9 84,89

Galatians

1:6-12 80
2:11-14 182
3:1-28 78,47,80,81,83,
164,237,239
3:25 83
3:26-28 228
4:4-7 86,205,239
5:3-6 47,82-83,236,237,
239
5:14 83,238
6:2 82,238
6:15-16 48,84-85,89,
192

Ephesians

1:4-5,13-15 205
1:22-23 81
2:8-9 235
2:13-18 86,101,140,209
222-223,226
2:19-22 81,84,207,224,
227
3:12 86,224
3:20 139
4:1-6,11-19 80,140,231
4:21-24 53,80,83,84
6:10-18 1-2,227,230

Philippians

3:6 44-45
4:13 129

Colossians

1:15-17 170,171,175,
227
1:19-23 81,101,172,208
1:25 212
2:4 81
2:10 84
3:10 80,83,173,228
3:15 27,83,227

1 Thessalonians

1:3 236
5:4-11 1-2

2 Timothy

3:7 94,127

Hebrews

1:1-3 198
2:11-13 124,198,211
5:11-6:1 195,198
10:10-14 123
10:19-25 200,224
11:13 89,
11:40 201
12:1-11 212
12:14 124

James

1:22 140
2:14-24 140,235,236,
237,240

1 Peter

1:13-17 89,125
2:9-12 125

Revelation

2:2-5 29,185,194,211
2:18-23 26,35-36,186
3:1-2 35,70,185
3:12 216
3:14-20 186,215

BIBLIOGRAPHY (Secondary Source)

- Acolatse, Esther E., *Powers, Principalities, and the Spirit: Biblical Realism in Africa and the West* (Grand Rapids: 2018).
- Balmer, Randall, *Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).
- Balz, Horst, and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).
- Bantu, Vince L., *A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity's Global Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020).
- Barbeau, Jeffrey W., and Beth Falker Jones, eds., *Spirit of God: Christian Renewal in the Community of Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).
- Barna Group, *The State of Discipleship* (The Navigators, 2015).
- Bartholomew, Craig, Colin Greene, and Karl Moller, eds., *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).
- Bartholomew, Craig G., and Heath A. Thomas, eds., *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).
- Bates, Matthew, *The Birth of the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- Beck, Richard, *Reviving Old Scratch: Demons and the Devil for Doubters and the Disenchanted* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016).
- Bednarowski, Mary Farrell, ed., *Twentieth Century Global Christianity: A People's History of Christianity, Vol. 7* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).
- Bishop, Bryan, *Boundless: What Global Expressions of Faith Teach Us about Following Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015).
- Bockmuehl, Markus, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).
- Bockmuehl, Markus and Alan J. Torrance, eds., *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).
- Boersma, Hans, *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021).
- Boff, Leonardo, *Trinity and Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005).
- Brauch, Manfred T., *Abusing Scripture: The Consequences of Misreading the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

- Brown, Colin, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975).
- Brueggemann, Walter, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).
- Brueggemann, Walter and John Brueggemann, *Rebuilding the Foundations: Social Relationships in Ancient Scripture and Contemporary Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).
- Buckley, James J., and David S. Yeago, eds., *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).
- Cacioppo, John T. and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).
- Chan, Simon, *Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2014).
- Charles, Mark and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019).
- Charles, Ronald, *Paul and the Politics of Diaspora* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).
- Chilton, Bruce D., "Judaism and the New Testament" in Daniel G. Reid, ed., *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004).
- Chung, Sung Wook, ed., *Christ the One and Only: A Global Affirmation of the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).
- Crouch, Andy, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids; Baker Books, 2017).
- Cruz, Joel M., *The Histories of the Latin American Church: A Handbook* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).
- Cunningham, David S., "The Trinity" in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- Curtice, Kaitlin B., *Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020).
- Damasio, Antonio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010).
- Darko, Daniel K. and Beth Snodderly, eds., *First the Kingdom of God: Global Voices on Global Mission* (Pasadena: Wm. Carey International University Press, 2014).
- Dawkins, Richard, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

- De La Torre, Miguel A., *Decolonizing Christianity: Becoming Badass Believers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).
- De La Torre, Miguel A. and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, eds., *Beyond the Pale: Reading Theology from the Margins* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).
- Detweiler, Craig, *Selfies: Searching for the Image of God in a Digital Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018).
- Dickson, John, *Bullies and Saints: An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2021).
- Dunn, James D.G., "Criteria for a Wise Reading of a Biblical Text" in David F. Ford and Graham Stanton, eds., *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom* (London: SCM Press, 2003).
- Dyrness, William A., *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).
- Edgar, William, *Created & Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).
- Ellis, Bruce and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, eds., *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008).
- Escobar, Samuel, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).
- Evans, Craig A. and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
- Fairbairn, Donald, *The Global Church: The First Eight Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021).
- Fee, Gordon D., *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994).
- Floyd-Thomas, Juan M., Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Mark G. Toulouse, *The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Popular Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).
- Giddens, Anthony, *The Consequence of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).
- Gladd, Benjamin L. and Matthew S. Harmon, *Making All Things New: Inaugurated Eschatology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).
- Goldingay, John, *Biblical Theology: The God of Christian Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).
- Green, Gene L., Stephen T. Pardue and K. K. Yeo, eds., *Jesus without Borders: Christology in the Majority World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

- _____, *The Trinity among the Nations: The Doctrine of God in the Majority World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).
- Greenman, Jeffrey P. and Gene L. Green, eds., *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).
- Gregersen, Niels Henrik, “Varieties of Personhood: Mapping the Issues” in Niels Gregersen, William B. Drees and Ulf Gorman, eds., *The Human Person in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
- Grenz, Stanley J., *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).
- Grindheim, Sigurd, *Living in the Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).
- Groody, Daniel G. *Globalization, Spirituality and Justice: Navigating the Path to Peace*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).
- Gunton, Colin E., *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).
- Hanciles, Jehu J., *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).
- Hardy, Daniel W., “Reason, Wisdom and the Interpretation of Scripture” in David F. Ford and Graham Stanton, eds., *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom* (London: SCM Press, 2003).
- Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce Waitke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).
- Hays, J. Daniel, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, IVP, 2003).
- Held, David, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, eds., *Global Transitions: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).
- Hellerman, Joseph H., *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).
- Heslam, Peter, ed., *Globalization and the Good* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).
- Hibbs, Pierce Taylor, *The Speaking Trinity and His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018).
- Hiebert, Paul G., *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

- Hill, David, *White Lies: Nine Ways to Expose and Resist the Racial Systems that Divide Us* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Books, 2020).
- Hoglund, Jonathan, *Called by Triune Grace: Divine Rhetoric and the Effectual Call* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).
- Hooker, Morna D., *Endings: Invitations to Discipleship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).
- Horrell, David G., *The Making of Christian Morality: Reading Paul in Ancient and Modern Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).
- Hunter, James Davison, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Janz, Denis R., ed., *A People's History of Christianity: From the Reformation to the Twenty-first Century, Vol. 2, Student Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).
- Jenkins, Philip, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- _____, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Johnson, Todd M. and Cindy M. Wu, *Our Global Families: Christians Embracing Common Identity in a Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).
- Kaiser, Walter C., Peter H. Davids, F.F. Bruce and Manfred T. Brauch, eds., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).
- Kalantzis, George and Gregory W. Lee, *Christian Political Witness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).
- Kambara, Kary A., *A Theology of Worship: 'Singing' a New Song to the Lord* (2011). Online at <http://4X12.org>.
- _____, *The Gender Equation in Human Identity and Function: Examining Our Theology and Practice, and Their Essential Equation* (Gender Study, 2018). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *Hermeneutic of Worship Language: Understanding Communion with the Whole of God* (Worship Language Study, 2013). Online at <http://4X12.org>.
- _____, *Worshiping God in Likeness of the Trinity: Not Determined 'in Their Way'* (Uncommon Worship Study, 2016). Online at <http://4X12.org>.
- Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).
- Keener, Craig S., *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

- _____, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).
- Keener, Craig and M. Daniel Carroll R., eds., *Global Voices: Reading the Bible in the Majority World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2013).
- Keith, Chris and Larry W. Hurtado, eds., *Jesus among Friends and Enemies: A Historical and Literary Introduction to Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).
- Kittel, Gerhard, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).
- Kuhn, Thomas S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
- LaCugna, Catherine Mowry, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991).
- Lane, Tony, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, completely revised and expanded edition (London: T&T Clark, 2006).
- Lanier, Jaren, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).
- Laughery, Gregory, "Language at the Frontiers of Language," in Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, Karl Moller, eds., *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).
- Leithzrt, Peter J., *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).
- Lennox, John C., *2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2020).
- Lynch, Gordon, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, (Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).
- Mahbubani, Kishore, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).
- Malcolm, Matthew R., *From Hermeneutics to Exegesis: The Trajectory of Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2018).
- Malina, Bruce J., *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).
- Malina, Bruce J. and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).
- Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

- Matsuo, T. Dave, *“Did God Really Say That?” Theology in the Age of Reductionism* (Theology Study, 2013). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *The Disciples of Whole Theology and Practice: Following the Diversity of Reformation or the Wholeness of Transformation* (Discipleship Study: 2017). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>
- _____, *The Diversity of the Integral Gospel: Repurposing Diversity to Re-image the Global Church* (Diversity Study, 2022). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *The Essential Dimension & Quality for Theology & Practice: Discovering the Function of Music as Basic to Significance in Life* (Study on Music-like Theology: 2019). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *Following Jesus, Knowing Christ: Engaging the Intimate Relational Process* (Spirituality Study, 2003). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *The Face of the Trinity: The Trinitarian Essential for the Whole of God & Life* (Trinity Study, 2016). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *The Global Church Engaging the Nature of Sin & the Human Condition: Reflecting, Reinforcing, Sustaining or Transforming* (Global Church Study, 2016). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *The Gospel of Transformation: Distinguishing the Discipleship and Ecclesiology Integral to Salvation* (Transformation Study, 2015). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *The Human Order of Creation & Its Political Theology for the New Creation: Distinguishing God’s Integral Way of Life* (Political Theology Study: 2021). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *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>.
- _____, *Jesus’ Gospel of Essential Justice: The Human Order from Creation through Complete Salvation* (Justice Study: 2018). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *Jesus into Paul: Embodying the Theology and Hermeneutic of the Whole Gospel* (Integration Study, 2012). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *The Person in Complete Context: The Whole of Theological Anthropology Distinguished* (Theological Anthropology Study, 2014). Online: <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *The Person, the Trinity, the Church: The Call to Be Whole and the Lure of Reductionism* (Wholeness Study, 2006). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *The Relational Progression: A Relational Theology of Discipleship* (Discipleship Study, 2004). Online: <http://www.4X12.org>.

- _____, *Sanctified Christology: A Theological & Functional Study of the Whole of Jesus* (Christology Study, 2008). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *What's Next? A New Future or Repeating the Past* (Essay for Tomorrow: 2020). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- _____, *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>.
- McCall, Thomas H., *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).
- McConnell, Douglas, *Cultural Insights for Christian Leaders: New Directions for Organizations Serving God's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).
- McDonough, Sean M., *Creation and New Creation: Understanding God's Creation Project* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2016).
- McGilchrist, Iain, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
- McKnight, Scot, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014).
- _____, *Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021).
- McKnight, Scot, and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called TOV: Forming a Goodness Culture that Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2020).
- McKnight, Scot, and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013).
- McKnight, Scot, Peter Rollins, Kevin Corcoran and Jason Clark, eds., *Church in the Present Tense: A Candid Look at What's Emerging* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011).
- Middleton, J. Richard, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).
- Millar, J. Gary, *Changed Into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos/IVP Academic, 2021).
- Moreau, A. Scott, *Contextualizing the Faith: A Holistic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).
- Moulton, Harold K., ed., *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).
- Mouw, Richard J., *Restless Faith: Holding Evangelical Beliefs in a World of Contested Labels* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019).

- Naugle, David K., *Worldview: the History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).
- Niebuhr, H. Richard, *Christ and Culture* 50th-anniversary ed. (N.Y.: Harper San Francisco, 2001).
- Nisbet, Richard E., *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003).
- Noll, Mark A., and Carolyn Nystrom, *Clouds of Witnesses: Christian Voices from Africa and Asia* Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011).
- Oakman, Douglas E., *The Political Aims of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012).
- Olson, Roger E., *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity*, 2nd edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).
- Ott, Craig and Harold A. Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).
- Pearse, Meic, *Why the Rest Hates the West: Understanding the Roots of Global Rage* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).
- Phan, Peter C., ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- Pilch, John J. and Bruce J. Malina, eds., *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993).
- Ramachandra, Vinoth, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).
- Rieger, Joerg, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).
- Rogers Jr., Eugene F., *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).
- Ross, Kenneth R., Daniel Jeyaraj and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *Christianity in South and Central Asia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2019).
- _____, *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2018).
- Sacks, Oliver, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).
- Schultze, Quentin J., *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).
- Shanks, Hershel, ed., *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A Parallel History of Their Origins and Early Development* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeological Society, 2011).

- Shults, F. LeRon, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
- Smith, Christian, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011)
- Smith, James K. A., and James H. Olthuis, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant and Participation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).
- Smith, Kay Higuera, Jayachitra Lalitha and L. Daniel Hawk, eds., *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).
- Starling, David I., *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship: How the Bible Shapes Our Interpretative Habits and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).
- Stassen, Glen H., D.M. Yeager, John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).
- Steiner, George, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- Stegemann, Wolfgang, Bruce J. Malina and Gerd Theissen, eds., *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).
- Stiller, Brian C., Todd M. Johnson, Karen Stiller and Mark Hutchinson, eds., *Evangelicals Around the World: A Global Handbook for the 21st Century* (Nashville, TN, Thomas Nelson, 2015).
- Strickland II, Walter R., and Dayton Hartman, eds., *For God So Loved the World: A Blueprint for Kingdom Diversity* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020).
- Tabbernee, William, ed., *Early Christianity in Contexts: An Exploration across Cultures and Continents* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).
- Thacker, Jason, *The Age of AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Thrive, 2020).
- Thiselton, Anthony C., “Biblical studies and theoretical hermeneutics” in John Barton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1998).
- _____, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992).
- _____, *The Holy Spirit—in Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries, and Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).
- Tidball, Derek, *The Voices of the New Testament: Invitation to a Biblical Roundtable* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

- Tiénou, Tite, “Christian Theology in an Era of World Christianity,” in Craig Ott and Harold A. Netlands, eds., *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).
- Torrance, Alan J., “What is a Person,” in Malcom Jeeves, ed., *From Cells to Souls—and Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).
- Turkle, Sherry, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
- Van Engen, Abram C., *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2020).
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J., *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).
- _____, ed. *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. and Daniel J. Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).
- Vickers, Jason E., *Invocation and Assent: The Making and Remaking of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
- Vine, W.E., *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1981).
- Volf, Miroslav, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
- _____, “Community Formation as an Image of the Triune God: A Congregation Model of Church Order and Life,” in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002).
- Volf, Miroslav and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology that Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019).
- Wallis, Jim, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a World Divided* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014).
- Watzlawick, Paul, Janet Helmick Beavin, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967).
- Welker, Michael, *In God’s Image: An Anthropology of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).
- Wenham, David, *Did St. Paul Get Jesus Right? The Gospel According to Paul* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2010).

- West, Cornel and Eddie S. Glaude Jr., eds., *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).
- Westermann, Claus, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997).
- Wilkins, Michael J., *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995).
- Williams, Jarvis J., *Redemptive Kingdom Diversity: A Biblical Theology of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021).
- Wilson, Jonathan R., *God's Good World: Reclaiming the Doctrine of Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Journey toward Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).
- Worthen, Molly, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Wright, N.T., *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
- Yeh, Allen, *Polycentric Missiology: Twenty-First Century Mission from Everyone to Everywhere* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).
- Zimmermann, Jens, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).
- Zizioulas, John D., *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).
- Zodhiates, Spiros, ed., *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1996).