

Jesus' Gospel Protest, Voicing His Whole Gospel:

**The Bias, Naiveté or Integrity
of Proclaiming the Gospel**

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Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	1
<u>Ch 1 Understanding What, Why & How Who Came</u>	3
The Who	4
The Why	7
The How	8
Knowing Who Came	10
<u>Ch 2 Tuning In to Jesus' Whole Gospel</u>	13
Tuned In to the Right Frequency	14
Tuning In to Words or the Word	17
The Robust Tune of the Gospel Volition	21
<u>Ch 3 Echoing Jesus' Gospel Voice</u>	23
Echoing or Simulating	23
The Standards for "My Witnesses"	26
The Inflection of the Word	27
<u>Ch 4 Proclaiming the Gospel by Resonating His Sounds of Protest</u>	33
Reverberating Optimism and Performative Sounds	34
The Arc of Justice	35
Resonating the Sounds of Protest	41
The Lament of Jesus' Gospel Protest	42

Ch 5 The Sounds of Peace Underlying Protest.....45

His Way of Peace	46
Its Interdependence with Justice	48
Premature Justice and Immature Peace	49
The Justice of Love	56

**Ch 6 The Inconvenient Meaning & Belonging
 Proclaiming the Gospel.....63**

Convenient or Inconvenient	64
His Inconvenient Gospel	67
Belonging Together in Face to Face Justice	70

Ch 7 “My Witnesses” Stand in the Breach.....77

The Irreversible Breach in Humanity	78
The ARC of “My Witnesses”	79
The Narrow Way of “My Witnesses”	88

Scripture Index (Primary Source).....91

Bibliography (Secondary Source).....93

INTRODUCTION

Righteousness will go before him and will make a path for his steps.

Psalm 85:13

All the people did what was right in their own eyes.

Judges 21:25¹

Recently and notably in the U.S., protests on college campuses have become a major activity, which has been likened to the even more widespread protests of the Vietnam war enacted from the '60s. While current protests mirror those earlier, their counterparts are reflected throughout history in the narrative consequences of the human condition, which reduces the humanity of many. For example, protests against racial inequality and gender discrimination have also been heard to give the marginalized a voice of hope for change. Protests, in other words, are an encouraging sign that people no longer accept or passively are complicit with the wrongs perpetrated in and on human life. Certainly, however, some protests in reality become a means to perpetrate wrongs, sometimes under the illusion of appearing to be right.

Given the dynamics of protesting, this raises an urgent question for those of Christian faith: Where is your protest and what, if any, is it all about? This also raises a related question about the gospel we claim and proclaim: Is our gospel apolitical, politically neutral or politicized? What happens in the surrounding context of life for all persons reflects the human condition of humanity, which then unavoidably engages the politics of everyday life that involve the self-concerns and interests of those pursuing their fulfillment. In other words, the surrounding context exerts influence that shapes the identity and function of Christian faith today just as in the early history of God's people (as summarized in Judg 21:25).

God protested the variable practice of God's people throughout the Old Testament. Their working paradigm to do "what was right in their own eyes" essentially reflected, reinforced and sustained the human condition. God's people not only needed to be unequivocally distinguished from this practice but also in direct ongoing opposition to it. Jesus embodied God's response to all this and enacted the gospel that composed integrally the bad news of God's protest and the good news changing the *old* to the *new*. This study centers on Jesus' gospel protest, and thus what by its nature necessitates proclaiming his whole gospel—not what we think is right in our own eyes. Therefore,

¹ All Scripture references are taken from the NRSV, unless noted differently; any italics in the Scripture quoted in this study signify emphasis or further rendering of the words.

Jesus' Gospel Protest, Voicing His Whole Gospel will address the bias or naiveté commonly underlying proclaiming the gospel, in order that its integrity will be restored.

What we all need to examine is whether or not we are in tune with the gospel embodied and enacted by Jesus' person. For example, we cannot be in harmony with Jesus' gospel merely by claiming and/or proclaiming his teachings. That is to say, his teachings commonly and readily become disconnected from his whole person, which then widens the way, truth and the life of the gospel. This has relational consequences for the constitution of the gospel that are analogous to a gospel generated by artificial intelligence (AI). An AI gospel includes Jesus' teachings but is not relationally connected to his person to generate the qualitative substance inherent to his gospel. Furthermore, an AI generated gospel is enhanced with supplemental information, which is analogous to how the gospel is routinely claimed and proclaimed in real life. Any such presentation and representation of the gospel is out of tune with Jesus' gospel, and therefore is not, will not and cannot be in harmony with his person—even though it may harmonize with what prevails for, among and by Christians and churches.

At the same time, there are also human voices that propagate, directly or indirectly, variable tunes of the gospel by posting Christian themes on social media. Christian sounds heard on social media have no clear genre to which they belong; and who or what they identify with is even more diverse than humanity's composition. Any gospel that may emerge from this ubiquitous process has opened the door to proclamations lacking the integrity directly based on Jesus' vulnerable embodiment and relational involvement. What may sound good, seem valid and promote hope becomes out of tune when measured by the melody of his gospel. Nevertheless, social media continues to be a prevailing source for claiming good news, and a dominating medium for proclaiming any bias of the gospel. If users would pay closer attention, they will hear the dissonance of Jesus protesting—that is, protesting the bad news of the human condition.

Jesus has always protested such bad news so that his good news can be embodied by persons from inner out, and thereby will be enacted by their whole persons in harmony with his whole person and with each other's. For Jesus, the bad news is inseparable from his good news, therefore protest is inevitable and integrally essential to his gospel.

The nature of the Way enacted by Jesus is only embodied by the righteousness defining his whole person (as declared in Psalm 85:13). The righteousness of his daily path makes definitive relationally the whole of who, what and how his person is, and thereby can be counted on in relationship to be whole and function with nothing less and no substitutes. And anything less and any substitutes from us (cf. Mt 5:20), even with good intentions, simply reflect, reinforce and sustain the bad news of the (and our) human condition.

What unfolds in this study clarifies his protest and corrects our alternatives substituting a different gospel.² No doubt, many will find this an inconvenient study to consider for their theology and practice.

² This study is an extension of two earlier studies: *The Gospel of Transformation: Distinguishing the Discipleship and Ecclesiology Integral to Salvation* (Transformation Study, 2015), and *Jesus' Gospel of Essential Justice: The Human Order from Creation through Complete Salvation* (Justice Study, 2018), both available online at <https://www.4X12.org>.

Chapter 1 Understanding What, Why & How Who Came

“Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these *actions* I delight.”

Jeremiah 9:24

Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.

Psalms 85:10, NIV

It is vital to understand the dynamics underlying the gospel in order to know what, why and how God initiated the response to embody the gospel. These dynamics have been set aside, forgotten or even ignored by many who claim and proclaim the gospel. Thus, we need to return to these dynamics, so that they restore the gospel's constituting integrity of what, why and how who came.

Growing up in a Christian home and among others identified with Christianity in one way or another, the gospel I heard revolved around John 3:16. It was basically about personal salvation. Later, I engaged in formal theological education, I learned the nuances of salvation composing the gospel and the fundamental elements constructing the gospel's composition. The quantity of this important information, however, was relatively static and lacked the dynamic essential to make the gospel the experiential truth and relational reality; this dynamic makes existential the truth and reality that Jesus embodied and enacted with his whole person, not merely by his teachings and his example. Yet, the priority given to what amounts to secondary details during my theological education left my mind saturated with this referential information, which I embraced naively to subject my mind to an intellectual bias. But, this limited knowledge and skewed engagement also created a dryness in my heart thirsting for a deeper quality I was missing in my relationship with Jesus' person. Of course, the gospel I claimed had good news, but it lacked the face to face, heart to heart relational involvement with Jesus' whole person, only cerebral connection with his teachings.

My experience is typical for most Christians and is the norm for those in theological education. The relational consequences of not fully knowing and thus not understanding the whole of what, why and how who came are critical to the gospel we claim and proclaim.

The What

It may seem ironic but returning to John 3:16 will help make definitive what we need to understand. This deeper understanding unfolds from what John 3:16 reveals. That is, what is revealed is not a static truth of what God did. Rather, what is revealed is the dynamics, the relational dynamics, of what God enacted. These dynamics cannot be reduced to static truths, or else God's (1) relational response to humanity, (2) vulnerable presence in the world, and (3) intimate involvement with those who trust God all become elusive if not lost.

So, what is God's relational response that can only be dynamic?

Have you ever received something from someone, and you really liked what was given to you? After a while, though, you spent less and less of your focus on that specific thing, despite never forgetting how much you liked it; perhaps it just became something in your possession you took for granted. This is a common experience among Christians with what God gives in John 3:16 after taking possession of it.

First of all, what we take possession of from God is critical to understanding the what God gave. The what, for most, is about eternal life, but it is essential to understand: "life" that God gives is not *bios*, the quantitative nature of everyday life composing one's biography; rather, "life" here is the qualitative substance of *zoe* intrinsic to the very life of God, which certainly is eternal in quantity but most significantly having the depth of quality unique only to God. In other words, the what given by God is only the very life of God.

Next, on this basis of *zoe* alone, the what God gives is not and cannot be composed by anything less than or any substitute for the *zoe* of God constituted by God, no matter how much the quantity. Therefore, God gave the qualitative extension of God in the person of the Son, not the quantity of something but the very presence of God. This is not a mere static truth, and can only be understood as the dynamic of God's relational response made vulnerable to humanity in the relational presence and involvement of Jesus' whole person.

The qualitative process of God's relational dynamic is summarized in God's relational terms:

1. God **gave** the very *zoe* of God to be vulnerably present and relationally involved.
2. God **offered** the whole person of the one and only Son for relationship together to any persons who entrust their whole person to him.

As a relational dynamic, furthermore, it is essential to understand that God's relational response is not a unilateral action, which could be received by anyone effectively believing in a unilateral relationship. On the contrary, belief is not a static component of John 3:16, which many express in order to receive eternal life. Rather than this common practice, "everyone who believes in him" can only be enacted by the relational dynamic of *trust*, which involves making one's person vulnerable from inner out to Jesus' person for not merely an initial relationship but only for ongoing involvement in reciprocal relationship together. With this vulnerable relational response and involvement, respondents from inner out experience the what who came, nothing less and no substitutes.

The Why

The *bios* of humanity exists only for a limited time period and solely under its inherent constraints. The *zoe* of God is eternal and boundless, thus free to be the whole of God's intrinsic being. God's purpose is for humanity to share in God's *zoe*, which necessitates the transformation of the existing old condition of *bios* to the new condition of *zoe*. This transformation constitutes the salvation of John 3:16, the outcome of which integrally constitutes both being saved *from* the old as well as saved *to* the new. Merely saved *from* is not why "God so love the world."

The above outcome is only constituted by a dynamic relational outcome. And this relational outcome can only become a relational reality by transforming the existing old condition of humanity, nothing less. That's why the narrative leading to John 3:16 involved the key interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus to make explicit the transformation to be born anew. In Nicodemus' condition, however, he didn't understand the why Jesus came, so Jesus voiced the reality to expose the cracks in his assumed condition for him to be transformed from old to new. Hearing this protest as Israel's teacher, Nicodemus must have been in disbelief to learn that he didn't belong to the kingdom of God in his present condition. But hearing the bad news was the key for Nicodemus to later embrace the good news of Jesus' whole gospel.

As John 3:17 states further, the why of God's response is not to relegate humanity to the inevitable consequences of its human condition but rather for the integral outcome of being saved *from* and *to*. Jesus came to fulfill this relational outcome, yet for this to become a relational reality required that humanity's old condition be exposed, confronted and changed. This intensive process cannot be minimized, overlooked or ignored,

because it unavoidably included the why Jesus came. Accordingly, the why composes the bad news inseparable from his gospel's good news, and it provides the basis for his gospel's protest to be integral to proclaiming the gospel.

The How

The what and the why of who came are not fully understood unless they are distinguished unequivocally by the how. Yet, the how in John 3:16 tends to become equivocal, because "God so loved the world" is not understood sufficiently to distinguish the how of God unequivocally.

For Christians, God's love is a given, but how God loves is usually assumed to be about merely what God does for us. For example, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the ultimate of God's love, right? After all "God so loved...that he gave his only Son." Doing this or that for others, and giving up oneself for them by putting them ahead of self have all determined the composition of love. This becomes the basis used for defining God's love and how Jesus came. Even though these actions can be included in God's love also, this view of love is insufficient to understand the how distinguishing God's love.

First of all, love is not performative for God. Persons who want God's love typically want God to perform some deed for them. Yet, even if they receive that deed from God, they are not experiencing how God loves. When God gave-offered his Son, Jesus came not just as a miracle performed by God. In love, the whole of God (the Trinity) became vulnerable in the person of Jesus in order for the wholeness of God to be openly present in the human context, so that other persons could connect with God face to face for relationship together as family heart to heart (cf. Jn 14:23; Eph 2:22).

For relationships to develop beyond mere associations, the persons involved need to connect with each other person to person. For this relational connection, persons have to become vulnerable for the depth of their person from inner out to be involved with their whole person in the relationship heart to heart. In a pivotal interaction, Jesus vulnerably disclosed this relational process to a Samaritan woman and revealed how much the Father seeks the whole person in their involvement with him (Jn 4:21-26). Love relationally enacts (not performs) this intimacy of hearts opening to each other and coming together. God's love is nothing less than this relational enactment and thereby involves no substitutes for the whole person of the Son, as well as the Father and the Spirit.

Therefore, as Nicodemus learned to his surprise of the how of the Son was enacted vulnerably before him, and that anything less and any substitutes reduce God's whole terms for relationship together, terms which are nonnegotiable to any of his (our) terms. These are terms we impose on God, even subtly with good intentions. But, in distinctly voicing his gospel, Jesus makes unequivocal that anything less and any substitutes are out of tune with the way God enacts in love the gospel of John 3:16. The unexpected lesson Nicodemus learned as "a teacher of Israel" should have become a wake-up call to this faith community. Yet, even though Nicodemus later spoke initially on Jesus' behalf (Jn 7:50-51), he did not add his voice to Jesus' gospel protest of their reduced faith practice reflecting, reinforcing and sustaining the human condition (cf. Jn 19:39).

This relational process is the only way God loves, thereby solely constituting the whole of how Jesus came to embody God's relational response to humanity that enacts the gospel. Moreover, the how of God's wholeness is never enacted in a contextual vacuum, but, by its nature, this how deals directly with anything that reduces the wholeness of God and the wholeness of God's creation. That requires directly addressing the human condition in part and in sum, thereby dealing with the bad news that counters the good news of the gospel, the voice of which resounds in protest.

In John's Gospel record, we are given the relational significance of what, why and how Jesus came more than the other three Gospels. His focus goes deeper than the historical narrative of the others and provides the big and deeper picture of God's incarnation. Notably, John records the voice of Jesus protesting the bad news of the immediate human condition (Jn 2:13-16) in order that the good news of his gospel would unfold (see Mk 11:15-17). Thus, John records Jesus' intense protest much earlier than the other Gospels, and his focus highlights the how and the why effectively as a precursor to John 3:16.

The relational dynamics converging in and emerging from John 3:16 cannot be simplified to a propositional truth minimizing the relational significance of the gospel Jesus embodied and enacted in love. Nor can the gospel simply be affirmed as the gospel Jesus enacted without his vulnerable person in relationship together. In other words, we cannot claim the gospel Jesus embodied and enacted without understanding what, why and how who came; and, on this relational basis, thereby entrusting our whole person to his whole person in the relational dynamics constituting his gospel. Therefore, the relational reality of our claim involves our old condition being transformed into his new condition just because he protested our bad news so that his good news prevails over anything less and any substitutes.

Thankfully, Nicodemus submitted his person to Jesus in this transforming relational process to experience the irreducible relational outcome of belonging in God's kingdom-family as the relational reality superseding his old belief system.

Knowing Who Came

The gospel is not merely a truth to claim and believe in, a mere commodity to hope for and proclaim. Who came embodied the experiential Truth of a person to embrace, and who enacted the relational dynamics of belonging in relationship together as family to constitute the relational reality of the gospel. Thus, the gospel is the existential presence and involvement of who came, and knowing this whole person is the only way to claim the gospel embodied and enacted by his wholeness.

As noted earlier, “righteousness will go before him and will make a path for his steps” (Ps 85:13). Righteousness (*sedeq*) is a legal term used in covenant relationship together that ensures a relational process for the persons involved being who they claim to be and thereby can be counted on to function accordingly with nothing less and no substitutes. Whenever righteousness is attributed to God, it reveals more than a basic attribute but discloses the relational nature of God’s whole being vulnerably present and involved. Therefore, these relational dynamics of God’s righteousness make definitive the identity of the person who came and determines unequivocally his relational function, who can be counted on to be that whole person and thereby be known fully in relationship together. On this righteous relational basis, Jesus protested his first disciples for not knowing his person after all their intense time together (Jn 14:9).

Now you may question the validity of Jesus voicing his objection to those who gave their daily life to serve him at great expense. They could boast about the extent of their discipleship, which included wanting to boast about “who was the greatest” (Mk 9:33-34; Lk 9:46). But missing in their boast throughout the incarnation is the sad reality and inconvenient truth that they really didn’t know Jesus’ whole person vulnerably involved with them, in spite of all the information they possessed about him. Does Jesus’ protest speak to those in theological education?

For Jesus and his followers, nothing is more important than the primacy of relationship together, whereby “whoever serves me must follow me (my person), and where my person is, in that relational context and process will my servant also be relationally involved with me in relationship together” (Jn 12:26). The priority of what’s primary for Jesus over what’s secondary for others was clearly distinguished by Jesus throughout his time with his followers (e.g. Jn 6:26-67). Consequently, not knowing Jesus’ person exposes a relational disconnection of anything less and any substitutes that are unacceptable to who came, and for the what, why and how constituting the gospel.

Even before God's incarnation, the primacy of knowing God in qualitative relationship was evident in God voicing objection to the boast by persons about the quantity of what they have and do, even on behalf of God. The emphasis on these secondary areas always have relational consequences that create relational distance and form barriers to the relational involvement necessary to know God—whose vulnerable presence and relational involvement “acts with steadfast love, justice and righteousness” (Jer 9:23-24). In addition, the Son made absolute in his prayer to the Father that “I have revealed you...made you known to them and will continue to make you known” (Jn 17:6,26, NIV). Therefore, the only result of significance from John 3:16 is the relational outcome of knowing the whole of God: “this is eternal life, that they may know you...and *my person* whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3).

The whole of God revealed by Jesus embodied righteousness with his whole person to faithfully make known God's wholeness (*shalom*, peace) enacting steadfast love and justice. Therefore, in God's irreducible relational process, “steadfast love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and *shalom* kiss each other” (Ps 85:10, NIV), and thus are inseparable for constituting the wholeness of who came—not a partial or fragmented profile commonly depicting him (cf. Jn 1:10-11; 6:53-66).

When we know the whole of who came, we can understand the relational dynamics of the what, why and how of God's ongoing vulnerable presence and relational involvement constituting the gospel to distinguish its good news made distinct by its bad news voiced in protest. Who came proclaims nothing less and no substitutes! Unavoidably, then, we are accountable for claiming and proclaiming anything less and any substitutes; and we can rely on the fact that Jesus' gospel protest will always expose our bad news.

Chapter 2 Tuning In to Jesus' Whole Gospel

“Why do you not understand my language?”

John 8:43, NIV

**For the word *from* the Lord is upright and all his work is *enacted* in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is *engulfed* in the steadfast love of the Lord.**

Psalm 33:4-5

Christians in the past and the present typically have claimed a gospel commonly associated with some tradition. Many traditions of the gospel, however, have been out of tune, because they are not tuned in to the right frequency of the gospel voiced by Jesus. These diverse sounds of the gospel have a dissonance not often recognized, which is consequential (1) for lacking the integrity of the gospel claimed, and (2) for creating a bias or naiveté about the gospel practiced. Such bias precludes the inclusive sounds voiced by Jesus; and any naiveté confuses dissonant sounds with having consonance with Jesus' voice.

For example, after cleaning out the temple, Jesus declared: “My house will be *the relational context for direct connection with God through the intimate communication of prayer for all nations, tribes, peoples and persons*” (Mk 11:17); he, thereby, reiterated and reinforced the inclusive response of God enacting the gospel (Isa 56:1-8). Given Jesus' inclusive voice, when any parts of this human diversity is precluded, this creates a bias that, for example, doesn't reach out to take in and embrace the scope of humanity. Such bias exposes that the gospel claimed by those persons is out of tune with the voice of Jesus' gospel, notably resonating in his protest at the temple.

Also, when Jesus declared unequivocally and surprisingly, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” (Lk 12:51). Hearing this directly from Jesus' voice creates confusion, which the naïve simply assume to be consonant with the gospel—that is, assuming peace is not a priority for the gospel. Or the naïve person could just assume it's a mystery and practice a simplistic gospel without much sound.

What the world witnesses from either biased Christians or naïve Christians is the practice of a gospel culture claimed to be from Jesus. This culture is generated intentionally or unintentionally simply by the gospel they've claimed on their terms. Such a culture emerged even in the early churches, which affected Paul: “I am astonished that you...are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel” (Gal 1:6-7).

In the fact of reality, in such a culture these Christians are faced with the inconvenient truth that they effectively deafen or mute the sounds of the gospel voiced by Jesus. Whenever anyone deafens or mutes, they also essentially become gospel deniers—much like deniers in a political culture today.

Given the issues before us, we need to be certain that we are tuning in to Jesus' whole gospel or else be susceptible to belonging to such a gospel culture. And we need to pay close attention and listen carefully, because we can only be tuned in at the right frequency of his voice—the frequency of Jesus speaking for himself and not others speaking for him.

Tuned In to the Right Frequency

The sounds of the gospel voiced by Jesus don't resonate at variable frequencies, even though such renditions may reverberate for many. The main issue is less about the general teachings of the gospel and more about the person vulnerably embodying the gospel, and mostly about his whole person's relational involvement enacting the gospel's relational process for only the gospel's irreducible and nonnegotiable relational outcome.

The first sound of the gospel was heard in the Old Testament, in which God was offered to Abram in the distinct tune of covenant relationship (Gen 17:1-2). In this gospel, God's voice promised a fruitful life, but its measure was not centered on the quantitative. Rather the gospel voiced by God resonated on the qualitative relational involvement of relationship together—the covenant of love initiated by God's favor (i.e. grace), enacted vulnerably by God's direct relational involvement, and constituted by the wholeness of God (see the Book of Love, Dt 4:37; 7:42; 10:15; 18:9,13; 23:5; 33:3). These relational dynamics further unfolded face to face in God's definitive blessing, in which God gives new relationship together in wholeness (Num 6:24-26).

God's covenant of love did not compose the sound of the gospel's frequency in a unilateral relationship of God's promise; rather, God clearly voiced the frequency of the gospel's reciprocal relationship together in order for Abraham and those to follow to be tuned in to the right frequency. To make tis definitive God clearly delineated the terms for Abraham's reciprocal response in the covenant of love: “walk *with me* and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you *the relational reality*” (Gen 17:1-2). “Blameless” has been heard in a range of frequencies, for example, as “perfection”. God knows without equivocation, however, that we all sin and cannot be perfect. Thus, the frequency of God voicing “blameless” (*tamiym*) to Abraham only communicated for the involvement of Abraham's person in reciprocal relationship together “to be complete, whole”; that is, only the wholeness of Abraham's person could,

would and had to be vulnerably present and relationally involved in order to reciprocate in likeness with God to consummate the covenant of love.

Now Paul (Saul at the time) actively served God's people of Israel and rigorously acted on their behalf—notably against Christians and the early church emerging. Without any doubt in his mind, Saul assumed he was tuned in to the covenant promise made to Abraham. This gospel history and his personal resume are the backstory for one of the most pivotal protests voiced by Jesus to enact his gospel: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). The frequency of Jesus' voice was resonating to Saul; it was the sound of the gospel that he never truly listened to before, yet that he had assumed to be tuned in to. Why did this frequency resonate with Saul like no other before?

The frequency of Jesus' gospel protest resonated deeper for Saul than what he audibly heard. First of all, who came to Saul was unmistakable, because Jesus made his whole person vulnerable to Saul face to face: “I am Jesus, *the person* you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). In this face-to-face encounter (or confrontation), Jesus' person took personally and directly (“persecuting me”) Saul's efforts to eliminate Christians and the church, which served to reinforce and sustain the gospel culture among Jews. After letting Saul know unequivocally how he was affected by Saul's actions, what unfolded from his gospel protest of this bad news was the personal offer to Saul to experience the relational outcome of his gospel's good news. The frequency of Jesus' offer resonated even deeper to penetrate Saul's heart and turn him around.

In his turnaround, Paul's whole person not only tuned in to the right frequency of Jesus' gospel, but he also exposed those not listening to the frequency of Jesus' voice or those propagating divergent frequencies for the sounds of the gospel. His epistles record the depth to which Paul's protest went to counter those voicing an out-of-tune frequency for the gospel. Most notable was Paul's exposure of Peter, who should have known the right frequency of Jesus' whole gospel yet voiced it out of tune (see Gal 2:11-14). By being tuned in to the right frequency, Paul became the main human voice that would build the church in the sounds of Jesus' whole gospel.

In spite of all the sounds of Jesus' voice that Peter heard during their time together, he had difficulty listening to the frequency of Jesus' gospel. His struggle to tune in pointed to the influence of a gospel culture had on him, which Peter didn't recognize. For example, his view of the messiah to save Israel was a dissonant frequency that he amplified to Jesus' face, which essentially countered the frequency vulnerably voiced by Jesus directly to Peter (Mt 16:21-23). The culture's biased influence shaped Peter's lens, which then blocked his ability to tune in to the right frequency even later in the early church (just as Paul exposed him above). For Jesus and Paul, the sound waves voiced by Peter were shock waves. This should alert all of us to the subtle and shaping influence a gospel culture can have to block us from tuning in to the right frequency; and, like Peter, we can be susceptible to voicing a bias amplifying a frequency out of tune.

To counter a gospel culture, John's Gospel reveals from the beginning that the person of Jesus vulnerably embodied *zoe* (the quality of life). His *zoe* also magnified the light for all humanity, but those in the surrounding darkness did not understand its frequency (Jn 1:4-5). Even though he enacted all of creation to be in his image and likeness, such creatures did not recognize him. Moreover, he vulnerably revealed his whole person face to face with those identified as God's people, but "his own people did not accept him" (1:10-11). Contrary to the Word, the good news of the gospel voiced by Jesus was drowned out by the bad news amplified in the human condition. Therefore, no one can tune in to the right frequency of Jesus' whole gospel until the bad news is addressed directly and its diverse sounds silenced, cancelled and retuned in the only frequency voicing Jesus' gospel.

Later, John highlights those claiming the gospel in the wrong frequency, which essentially reflected their human condition in order to obtain for their possession what effectively just reinforced and sustained their condition (6:24-27). They assumed that they could claim the gospel on their terms. As they tried to fine tune their terms, Jesus voiced the right frequency requiring them to be retuned in order to be tuned in to the right frequency of only his terms. Sadly, they chose to stay out of tune (6:28-66).

The sound of Jesus' protest has a distinct frequency that is unmistakable. This is the existential reality even though the intonation of his protests have different intensity. Peter can testify to the range of intonations of the protests that Jesus voiced to him personally (e.g. Mt 16:23; Jn 13:8; 21:17,20-22; Acts 10:13-15). The different intonations of Jesus' voice do not make the frequency of his gospel unclear or ambiguous to prevent tuning in to the right frequency. His protest of the bad news is inseparable from the frequency of the good news. The issue with tuning in to the right frequency revolves around hearing, listening, and then responding to his protest, in order that the good news can be claimed on only his terms for the gospel. Peter obviously had difficulty tuning in to the right frequency, because in one way or another he imposed his terms on Jesus to cause dissonant sounds for the gospel.

We need to learn from Peter's experience three critical lessons:

1. No one can connect with the right frequency of the gospel to claim the good news without first taking responsibility for the bad news of the human condition by first owning the specific condition about oneself and then by taking up the general condition about humanity.
2. No one can be tuned in to the right frequency to experience the reality of the good news as long as they are defined and/or determined by their human condition.
3. Anyone seeking to connect and experience the good news without changing from their bad news should expect to hear the intonation of Jesus' gospel protest exposing their human condition.

Too often Christians fail to learn lessons 1 and 2 but assume to be in tune with the gospel, because they haven't encountered personally the protest of their bad news like Peter. The intonation of Jesus' voice, however, is present and involved, which necessitates being carefully listened to (as in Lk 8:17-18; Mk 4:24). Such an assumption is common in a gospel culture, since it deafens and mutes any sounds of the gospel that are considered dissonant and unable to amplify the good news composed on their terms. Obviously, the sounds of Jesus' gospel protest would be at the top of that list.

Tuning In to Words or the Word

In the beginning of John's Gospel, he reveals the Word as God incarnate (Jn 1:1,14). The Word didn't merely speak words for teaching in the human context, but his whole person was vulnerably present and relationally involved "among us." The urgent question this raises for those claiming the gospel is whether we are tuning in to just his words of teaching or the Word himself.

The Word of God is synonymous with the Bible, so when persons want to hear God's Word they typically turn to the words in the Bible. What becomes problematic in this process is that God becomes quantified by these words. This reduces the revelation of God's whole being (embodying *zoe*) communicated in the qualitative terms of relational language down to the quantitative terms of referential language merely to transmit information. The relational consequence of merely hearing the words from God in referential language is that people merely tune in to those words; and no matter how much information about God is accumulated or how much that reverberates in one's mind, it always stops short of constituting the Word in person. Nothing less and no substitutes constitute the vulnerable presence and relational involvement of God's Word communicating face to face, heart to heart with us (as the Samaritan woman would testify); and when the Word's person is tuned in to on his qualitative relational terms, the Word resonates in the hearts of those responding (as Paul would testify).

That's why God protests the boasts of those based on their quantitative accumulation and possession—even of their vast information about the words from God, as heard from those in the theological academy—in order that they would turn around to "understand and know me" (Jer 9:23-24).

The process of claiming the gospel also engages either tuning in to words or tuning in to the Word. The words of John 3:16, for example, are well known, but how known and understood is the Father's person who gave the Son's person who came?

There is a substantive difference between the words of the gospel and the gospel's Word, which needs to be distinguished in any claim of the gospel or else the frequency tuned in to becomes ambiguous, distorted or confusing. How would you assess what Peter tuned in to in his early discipleship—words or the Word?

In communicating the right frequency of his gospel, Jesus revealed his person as “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6), who, when tuned in to, would “set you free” (Jn 8:32). The Word's communication of this relational process and outcome necessitated countering those focused on merely the initial words from God composing the gospel (Jn 8:33-41). Consequently, in his gospel protest of their human condition, Jesus raised the essential issue: “Why do you not understand my language? Because you are *tuning in to words*, you are unable to *tune in to the Word*” (8:43, NIV).

The Word communicated his person to others and not mere words. This engages a relational context and process integral to the gospel enacted by the Word. The ancient poet sets the focus for us that puts God into this relational perspective. This poet made the request of the LORD to utter: “say to my *innermost*, ‘I am your salvation’” (Ps 35:3). If the poet had been focused on his surrounding situations and circumstances, what he requested would have been a referential statement transmitting information merely about what God does—that is, deliver him from his negative situations and circumstances. Since his request was for the LORD to speak to his innermost (*nephesh*, the qualitative of God distinguished in the human person), he wanted only relational words from God, not referential. The relational response he wanted from God did not necessarily make his situations and circumstances unimportant but clearly secondary to the primacy of relationship together; therefore he was able to affirm God's righteous involvement in their relationship in spite of his continued troubles (Ps 35:28).

This speaks to the significance of the whole gospel. What the ancient poet wants is the depth of God's relational response from inner out, which a response only to his situations and circumstances would not satisfy. His feeling is the affect of eternity-substance in his heart (Ecc 3:11) pursuing God for more, not in quantitative terms but qualitative. Therefore, he impressed on God to communicate this relational message to his innermost, a message that would be insufficient as an “I am” statement in referential terms. Only the “I am” as relational words in relational language can communicate on the innermost level these vital relational messages that the poet wanted to receive: (1) who, what and how the whole of God is; (2) who and what God sees in our person and how he feels about us; and (3) what the relationship between us means to God and how the whole of God responds to us for our person and the relationship to be whole.

These relational messages integrally compose the heart (innermost) of the whole gospel, the depth of which is necessary to respond to the breadth of the human condition. And the gospel unfolds from the beginning with nothing less and no substitutes; otherwise our gospel is not whole, not a gospel at all, as Paul declared (Gal 1:7).

Curiously then, this raises a question mark about the early disciples. As noted earlier, these disciples lacked knowing Jesus the person even as they engaged their discipleship with intense commitment (Jn 14:9). Obviously, the Word was embodied before them, yet not necessarily as *zoe with* them on his relational path. Any form of detachment (e.g. relational distance) from the Word's relational path ensures disconnection from the Word as Subject, and thereby relates primarily to the Word as Object—in spite of their activity level together. This all-too-common relational consequence among Jesus' followers occurs when the Word is transposed to a different language and terms (e.g. Mk 8:14-18).

The *zoe* of God as Subject constitutes the Word in relational terms on an intrusive relational path, whereas God's theological trajectory in referential terms only composes the *bios* Object of the Word. The shift to the latter refocused the theological task to pursue theological significance with a reduced lens. This lens from this quantitative interpretive framework emerged along with the construction of a new language in referential terms (i.e. referential language) that substitutes for God's relational language.

The shift to referential language opened the door to shape, redefine or reconstruct the so-called information transmitted by God to narrowed-down interpretation. This interpretation is reduced to the intention of what God really meant by that, the implied meaning that “your eyes will be opened”—that is, opened to reduced referential terms that leads to speaking for God on our own terms (signified in “to make one wise,” Gen 3:1-5). When referential language is the prevailing interpretive framework for our perceptual-interpretive lens, then this shapes the way we see God's revelation and the way we think about God's words.

What we tune in to is influenced, shaped or controlled by *how* we tune in. That is to say, when we focus on listening to the words in language, we may or may not be focused on communication from another. Words in referential language are commonly what we use to transmit information to talk *about* something and to express how well we can talk about it, notably to explain it. *It* can also be *about* someone, such as God, in our discourse. Yet that other being remains impersonal if the focus is not on communication for relational connection; the focus on words in referential language becomes an I/we-it relation rather than the I/we-you relationship involving communication. In referential language the other is just an object while in relational language the other is always a subject. This distinction is critical for determining the message unfolding in the words in and from the beginning, and most essential for tuning in to the Word.

What is the nature of the message God communicated with the Word? The definitive nature of the message unfolding with the Subject of the Word in and from the beginning is (1) cosmological, (2) relational, and (3) whole. This provides the full composition of the Word's trajectory embodying and enacting the gospel.

Intruding from outside the universe, the whole gospel emerges cosmologically from the beginning. ‘In the beginning’ put into motion the relational dynamic of the thematic relational action of the whole of God, whose relational response of grace unfolds from this ‘starting point of relationship’. To fast forward, the whole of God’s thematic relational response of grace was enacted ongoingly throughout the OT to culminate in the relational process embodying the Word as Subject in order to be fully disclosed and fulfilled in, by and with wholeness. The integral relational work of the Word of God that unfolded in the incarnation must be contextualized from the beginning to fully understand the whole of God’s (thus Jesus’) relational work composing the gospel.

The relational dynamic to bring change and establish whole relationship together was vulnerably embodied by Jesus, the Word unfolding, to intimately disclose (*phaneroo*, not merely reveal, *apokalypto*) the whole of God to completely fulfill God’s thematic relational response from ‘the starting point of relationship’. This is light unfolding in the Word (Ps 119:130; Jn 1:4): in the beginning, being the whole of God (Col 1:19; 2:9); relationally fulfilling “the light of the whole gospel” from the beginning and vulnerably embodying the whole of “the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:4-6); who has “turned his face to you” to live whole in the world and make whole the human condition (Jn 14:27; 16:33; Col 1:20; 2:10; 3:15; Eph 2:14; 6:15)—just as the gospel of wholeness was definitively enacted by God’s face from the beginning (Num 6:26).

This is the whole gospel composed by the *zoe* Subject of the Word in the qualitative significance of relational language. And the gospel of wholeness, unfolded with the Word by its cosmological nature in the beginning and by its relational nature from the beginning, emerges whole only in this relational language. Based on this relational source, nothing less and no substitute can be definitive of the relational message that the whole of God communicated with the Word. Referential language, and its reliance on quantitative words to transmit information, is incapable of communicating the relational language of the Word and is deficient in accounting for the Word’s relational work. Furthermore, referential language is rendered impotent for the qualitative-relational significance necessarily involved in the whole of God’s definitive blessing (Num 6:24-26) to bring change and establish the new relationship together of wholeness (the *shalom* only the Word gives). These referential words may serve a benedictory function but lack relational significance until communicated in relational language.

Therefore, how we tune in will always determine what we tune in to. In this process of tuning in, Jesus made it imperative to “pay attention to *how*” because the results are axiomatic: “the measure of *language* you use will be the measure of *words or the Word* you get” (Mk 4:24). Be alerted, we cannot expect any other result from the measure of language we use, though the eventual outcome forecasted by Jesus of this axiom is loss for referential language and gain for relational language (4:25).

The Robust Tune of the Gospel Volition

When Jesus declared rhetorically “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you” (Lk 12:51), he also integrally voiced robustly “for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 6:38). Jesus enacted the volition necessary to constitute the gospel (Jn 6:40; 17:3), and without his volitional resolve there is no gospel (as Paul protested, Gal 1:6-7).

The resolve of Jesus’ volition unfolded even when he had contrary feelings of doubt, sadness, pain or discord. He demonstrated his resolve at the peak of his feelings in Gethsemane to reaffirm his volition to the Father to fulfill the gospel (Mt 26:36-46). In contrast, his disciples’ volition was situational, not relational; and despite any good intentions, they did not choose to be relationally involved with him to share in this critical time with his person (vv. 38,40-41,43,45). Is it surprising then that they didn’t really know him, as Jesus lamented in protest (Jn 14:9)?

The resolve of Jesus’ volition certainly signified the volition of God, which, on the one hand, would be expected from the Word. On the other hand, what’s constituting the Word’s volition has a robust tune that is integral for constituting the gospel and the volition for those claiming it. The robust tune of the Word’s volition is summarized by the psalmist:

For the Word *from* the Lord is upright and all his *relational* work is *enacted* in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; and the earth is *engulfed* in the steadfast love of the Lord (Ps 33:4-5).

When the frequency of this tune is tested, its robustness resonates the Word’s whole person (“righteousness”) whose volition (“faithfulness”) enacts his vulnerable presence and relational involvement (“steadfast love”) in response to the depth and breadth of the human condition (“justice”). The Word’s robust tune then resonates in other whole persons who claim his presence and involvement, because he can be counted on in relationship together for his gospel’s relational outcome. In the relational reality of his gospel’s relational outcome, the volition of these persons echo his robust tune to proclaim his gospel protest to the human condition. This is the experiential truth of the gospel volition—as inconvenient as it is—which is tuned in to the only frequency of the Word to resonate as “my witnesses.” These changed persons in his likeness vulnerably enact in faithfulness their relational involvement of love by the righteousness of their whole persons to respond to the human condition with nothing less than and no substitutes for justice.

Therefore, all persons tuned in to the right frequency of Jesus' whole gospel are tuned in to the Word only by his relational language, and not to the words of the Bible in referential language. The volitional claim of these persons to the gospel voiced by the Word is constituted by the vulnerable relational involvement of their whole person with the Word's whole person in relationship together as family. Thereby in relational likeness, their function ongoingly enacts the gospel volition with the resolve of the robust tune voiced by Jesus. Without enacting their volition with resolve, their practice is reduced to a diluted discipleship, which results from not being tuned in to the right frequency—as witnessed in his early disciples and others past and present. The unavoidable relational consequence is claiming a different gospel, even with good intentions to serve.

The relational outcome, however, of any claim tuned in to the only frequency of his whole gospel is irreducible, as well as nonnegotiable to our terms. Accordingly, then, in the relational process of this volitional claim tuned in to the Word's relational context includes by its nature proclaiming his sounds of protest with resolve.

Chapter 3

Echoing Jesus' Gospel Voice

“I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line.”

Isaiah 28:17, NIV

**“You will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth
—engulfing it with steadfast love.”**

Acts 1:8

Jesus' gospel voice is typically heard in only one frequency. Even when that frequency is partially in tune with his voice, it does not harmonize with the full range of his voice. That is to say, Jesus never voices the good news of his gospel without it harmonizing with his voicing the gospel protest of the bad news. His harmony cannot be reduced to separate frequencies in any proclamation of the gospel, because that would not and cannot echo his voice of the *whole* gospel.

This raises the inescapable question for the Christian community, for which we are all accountable: In our proclamation of the gospel, what is being echoed of Jesus' voice; and how does our proclamation harmonize with the frequency of his whole gospel voice?

Echoing or Simulating

Whenever Jesus voiced his gospel, he vulnerably enacted his whole person in order for those claiming the gospel to know the whole of God in relationship (Jn 17:3,26). It was essential for them to experience directly the Word's whole person relationally involved in the intimacy of love, and not merely to hear words from his mouth. This intimate relational connection was necessary for them to be involved with his whole person heart to heart—who is neither defined by his title nor determined by his role—whereby they could be witnesses for his person to others and echo his gospel voice.

The opportunity for this intimate relational connection was opened up directly when Jesus made his whole person vulnerable freely to his disciples by washing their feet person to person without his title or role (Jn 13:1-17). By enacting intimately with them the wholeness of his love (v.1), he established the relational process necessary to be the basis for them to embody being “my witnesses” and to enact echoing his gospel voice. Peter’s response to Jesus, his teacher and Lord, highlights being out of tune once again.

After Peter’s cultural bias refused to make his person vulnerable to Jesus (vv.6-8), the Word declared unequivocally “Unless I wash you, *your person*, you have no share with me, *my person*.” Peter replied, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head” (v.9). Given how Peter defined the person from outer in by merely one’s title and role, how would you assess Peter’s response to Jesus? And on the basis of what Jesus voiced about claiming his gospel, did Peter echo Jesus’ gospel voice?

It is critical to understand the dynamics taking place between Jesus and Peter. In the relational language voiced by the Word to communicate his whole person from inner out, he shares with Peter “Unless I, in my whole person not reduced to my title and role, wash you, in your whole person from inner out, then your person has no share with my person in the vulnerable relational involvement of person-to-person, heart-to-heart reciprocal relationship together; this is the only essential relational outcome of my gospel.” What’s heard back from Peter is not the echo of Jesus’ gospel voice but rather a simulation of a person rendered by one’s outer-in parts (“Lord, not my feet only but also...”). In other words, words not in tune with the Word, Peter could only simulate at best the gospel enacted to him face to face, person to person.

The function of Peter’s person was of great concern for Jesus. In anticipation of Peter soon to be “my witness to the world,” Jesus confronted Peter about his level of relational involvement: “Do you *with your whole person* love me, *my whole person*, *by the vulnerable relational involvement of love heart to heart—with nothing less and no substitutes?*” (Jn 21:15-17). Jesus understood that no matter how much Peter was able to imitate Jesus to others, his witness would only be a simulation and would not echo the vulnerable presence and relational involvement of Jesus’ whole person. At that level of function, Peter could not proclaim in and for the right frequency of Jesus’ gospel voice.

Peter wasn’t and isn’t an exception of those proclaiming a gospel. Sometimes there is a fine line between echoing and simulating. What distinguishes the former from the latter is (1) how the person is defined from inner out instead of outer in, and (2) how this determines the basis for the person’s vulnerable relational involvement with others person to person in relationship together. When persons are defined and their relationships are determined on this irreducible basis, the who proclaiming emerges whole to echo the whole *who* who came. These persons are the only persons whom Jesus counts on to be “my witnesses” echoing his gospel voice—that is, vulnerably extending his whole person with their whole person to others in the human condition.

A witness (*martys*) is someone who has information or knowledge of something, whereby the witness can give information, bring to light or confirm something. When this process is applied to the gospel, the issue becomes specifically what or whom the witness is focused on. The issue of *what* prevails for the gospel today; and its witnesses provide information that simulate the Word's voice of the gospel with words of gospelspeak. Such gospelspeak may proclaim a quantity of information or knowledge related to the gospel, but it lacks knowing directly the person constituting the gospel. Consequently, as much as the what is proclaimed, it can only simulate the who and cannot echo his person's gospel voice. Therefore, such witnesses never fulfill the primary purpose of "my witnesses" to bring light to and confirm the Word's whole person integrally embodying and enacting the gospel. John the Baptist modelled the function of who (not what) fulfilling this relational process necessary to *be* (not simulate) "the witness of my person in the world" (see Jn 1:6-9; 3:29-34).

In contrast, Christians have a diverse witness in the world today, much of which only simulates the identity and function of "my witnesses." These witnesses proclaim a gospelspeak that is composed by words related to the gospel but not tuned in to the Word. The subtlety of such simulation can be very deceiving to mislead those with even the best of intentions. This was demonstrated by an early church in Ephesus, whose witness adhered to the words from God with rigorous, enduring practice without compromise (Rev 2:1-3). Their witness would seem to model what Jesus would be proud of for any church. But, the Word voiced his protest to confront them in their best intentions: "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first *in the primacy of reciprocal relationship together*" (v.4). That is, they were "no longer vulnerably involved with my person in the intimacy of love heart to heart to echo the Word but merely simulating the words of a gospelspeak."

The subtle simulation of gospelspeak was demonstrated more emphatically by an early church with the reputation comparable to the brand of modern megachurches. This church in Sardis, however, was confronted by the voice of the Word's protest: "Wake up...for I have not found your *witness complete, whole (pleroo) according to the standards* of my God" (Rev 3:1-2). The Word's wake-up protest is even more necessary today to enforce the standards for his person's witness. Megachurches, among others, should be alerted.

The Standards for “My Witnesses”

Christian witness either proclaims information that confirms the words of the gospel, or it proclaims knowing the Word to confirm his whole person enacting the gospel. Proclaiming information certainly involves theological scrutiny to ensure that misinformation is not propagated. To proclaim knowing the Word necessitates going deeper than theological scrutiny, in order to get to the depth of the person so that the whole person is confirmed and not just things about the person. This depth involves standards revealing who is witnessed to and by whom—standards that are irreducible and thus invariable.

The gospel voiced by the Word distinguishes his whole person, revealing the nature of his identity and function. When the Word communicated that “I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line” (Isa 28:17, NIV), he made definitive the formula for framing his identity to constitute the gospel. This distinct framework irreplaceably defines his identity, because “righteousness and justice are the foundation of your *kingdom*” by the relational process of “steadfast love and faithfulness *determining your function*” (Ps 89:14). That’s why for the relational involvement of the Word, “steadfast love and faithfulness meet together, and righteousness and peace kiss each other,” and that “righteousness goes before him and *determines* the path for his steps” (Ps 85:10,13). This irreversible formula is integrally qualitative and relational, the integrity of which are irreducible and nonnegotiable.

Righteousness is the standard for relational involvement that determines if that person can be counted on in relationship with others to be the whole of who, what and how they claim to be. This plumb line for determining how straight and upright that person really *is* provides the assurance—not to mention the legal basis—of the person fulfilling their relational work with the integrity of nothing less and no substitutes. The righteous person is who Jesus embodied to enact his gospel. Therefore, righteousness is the irreplaceable standard for who is witnessed to as well as for defining and determining who witnesses. Righteousness is not an ideal to strive for but the plumb line distinguishing “my witnesses.”

This essential process is outlined by Jesus in his identity formation for his true disciples (Mt 5:2-11); and what characteristic is pivotal for this identity formation is for his disciples-witnesses “to hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be *whole from inner out*” (5:6). Righteousness is the only plumb line to define and determine the identity and function of who is witnessed to and by whom.

Integral to the Word's plumb line is his measuring line of justice. Integrated along with the heart of God's being in righteousness is God enacting justice with steadfast love (as in Jer 9:24). The measuring line of justice is essential to know and understand God, which is the only boast of significance to God (as stated in Jer 9:23). Moreover, "For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds (i.e. justice); the upright will *connect with* his face" (Ps 11:7). Justice, therefore, is the inflection of the Word's voice that provides the relational connection to know and understand him further and deeper. This relational outcome is necessary to be "my witnesses," who must by their nature be righteous for enacting justice to develop and mature.

The Inflection of the Word

How is righteousness integral for enacting justice? First of all, righteousness precludes persons (including the Word) being defined by the outer-in differences that determine who and what they are. The consequences of these outer-in distinctions have created inequities rendering persons unequal, even for those claiming the gospel (e.g. Acts 6:1). This inequality existed in the development of the early church, whose injustice had to be turned around because God makes no such distinctions—as Peter testified as a result of the Word's protest of his bias (Acts 15:9).

Justice does not develop and mature but remains immature or premature from efforts lacking the significant change that transforms persons from inner out and their relationships in their primacy. The inflection of the gospel voiced by the Word functioned for the measuring line of justice to be whole without anything less and any substitutes. Furthermore, the Word's invariable measuring line aligned by the plumb line becomes the inflection point challenging the diversity of the global church and protesting its inequality contrary to "my house being the relational context of family for all nations."¹

The integral process between righteousness and justice is witnessed in a strategic interaction Jesus had that revealed God's relational response to the human condition. In this inflection point, understanding who and what Jesus enacted in this interaction provides the means needed to echo the Word's gospel voice, in contrast to substituting a simulation of gospel words. In the Word's gospel, the whole of God's theological trajectory and relational path were clearly distinguished in what I call 'the strategic shift' of God's thematic relational action. What would you do if you came face to face with the

¹ See my study on the global church for further discussion of this issue: *The Global Church Engaging the Nature of In & the Human Condition: Reflecting, Reinforcing, Sustaining or Transforming* (Global Church Study, 2016), available online at <https://www.4X12.org>.

improbable (both religious and sociocultural) and were faced with the unknown (both epistemological and relational) that takes you beyond your knowledge and understanding? This was what and who a Samaritan woman faced when she encountered Jesus at Jacob's well (Jn 4:4-30).

Their noon encounter was not accidental, though the woman perhaps went to the well to draw water at the least occupied time because of her diminished social standing among the other women—due to an apparent contrary lifestyle (4:16-18). Jesus purposefully initiated this interaction and by design he broke through religious, sociocultural and relational barriers to be involved with her face to face (4:7-9)—that is, the face of the improbable vulnerably present to engage her (as in 4:27). She could have ignored Jesus at this point, resisted him or continued to face what would be the unknown for her. To respond and pay attention to the unknown would require her to break through the same barriers Jesus did, which she vulnerably chose to do to engage what and who was about to take her beyond her knowledge and understanding. By acting in vulnerable humility to engage Jesus, she demonstrated participating in a whole model of the gospel and its outcome that needs to distinguish all of our theology and practice, not merely for the future but for the immediate present.

The dynamics that unfold in this interaction are not referential to transmit information about God but are relational dynamics communicating knowledge and understanding of God—that which distinguish the whole of God in compatible reciprocal relationship together. Jesus not only embodies the gospel to her (“the gift of God,” v.10) but also illuminates the relational context and process necessary—not suggested or optional terms that are reducible or negotiable—to experience this good news of intimate relationship together (“who asks you...you ask him...he gives you,” v.10). The woman responds from her limited epistemic field (“you have nothing...where can you get this”), but she also opens her lens to engage the relational epistemic process so that her assumptions don't maintain a barrier to discover the face of Jesus (“Are you greater,” vv.11-12). Her initial openness allows Jesus to continue to reveal the relational significance of what distinguishes his gospel and its outcome both ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ (vv.13-14, cf. Jn 17:3). From the limits of her interpretive lens, she embraces this good news (“Sir, give me this water...never be thirsty or have to keep coming here,” v. 15), yet Jesus is taking her beyond her limits. In order to have this relational outcome she needed to be vulnerable as a person in her bad news so as to be involved with Jesus face to face—that is, for the relational connection necessary for the whole of God's relational action to be received and responded to (vv.16-18). Any disconnect by her, such as denying her bad news, would have created an impasse to the relational process constituting the whole of God's revelation.

She doesn't retreat from Jesus' vulnerable presence or withdraw from his intimate involvement; and in his relational context and process her lens is expanded (or transformed) to see more of Jesus' person ("I see that you are," v. 19). This is the relational outcome that only emerges from face-to-face connection (cf. Num 12:6-8). As she acknowledges her assumptions from human shaping and further engages this relational epistemic process that expands her epistemic field (vv.20,25), she is taken beyond her limits and comes face to face with the whole of God ("I am he," v.26): the improbable who is vulnerably revealed from inner out only in relational terms (not referential) for the whole purpose of compatible (i.e. vulnerable and intimate) reciprocal relationship together (vv. 21-24).

Contrary to what the Word enacted, "just then his disciples *returned to observe*. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman" (6:27). Why? Given the surrounding culture's influence on them, they didn't understand that by interacting with her Jesus protested the injustice of her condition. Since the disciples had yet to be in tune with Jesus' gospel voice, his inflection point with the Samaritan woman constituting his gospel protest was a frequency that eluded them to echo in their witness.

Though Moses' experience of God's direct involvement with him in Face-to-face relationship was a pivotal interaction by God, that was a precursor to the strategic shift of the gospel. This strategic shift clearly emerged with the Samaritan woman. In the shift from a place (like the mountain, tabernacle, or Jerusalem), and from situations and circumstances, the whole of God becomes vulnerably and relationally accessible for ongoing involvement in direct relationship Face to face. This makes the transcendent God accessible to all peoples and persons regardless of their human distinctions from outer in, on the one hand, which certainly opened up a unique opportunity for this woman, viewed as a person of despicable race-ethnicity, debased gender and likely denigrated character, thus relegating her to the inequitable injustice of her sociocultural context. On the other hand, however, this was unique access only for the relationship-specific involvement from inner out in the primacy together of God's family, for which this woman would have to shift from outer in to be compatible. This then makes the holy God accessible for relationship only to those who respond in the innermost of Jesus' relational context and process—in other words, relationship only on God's terms (cf. Jn 8:31-42). Was this good news or bad news for this woman?

The relational significance of God's strategic shift is magnified in this highly improbable interaction. For a Jewish rabbi to engage a Samaritan woman one-on-one in public required to be freed from constraints of the *old* (and what defined them), and thus opened to vulnerably engage each other in the relationship of the *new*. Jesus tore down the constraint of "double jeopardy" (double discrimination based here on ethnicity and gender, without even considering her apparent social ostracism) for her and gave her direct access to a highly improbable, though ultimately unique, opportunity: unrestricted connection and intimate relationship with the whole of God.

As the interaction unfolds, it becomes increasingly vulnerable Face to face. When her emerging person began to understand (*theoreo*) a deeper significance of the person engaging her (v.19), she turned the focus to God and the existing structure of religious practice (v.20). Yet, her focus should not be limited to the issue of worship but necessarily involved the accessibility of God. Perhaps she had doubts about accessing God if she had to participate in the prevailing practice. Any ambivalence at this point would be understandable, given her social standing in the community.

In relational language, Jesus vulnerably engaged her to reveal that the *old* (prevailing religious tradition and way to see things) was going to be changed (Jn 4:21-22), and that the *new* “is now here” (4:23-24). This was a foretaste of the redemptive change of the human condition that is at the heart of his gospel. The strategic shift in the holy and transcendent God’s presence was embodied vulnerably with her in a highly improbable encounter—improbable both in God’s action and in human thinking. As Jesus disclosed the qualitative and relational significance of his whole person (the Word of YHWH) in his pivotal “I am” relational message to her (v.26), the whole of God’s ontology and function became vulnerably accessible for ongoing involvement in direct relationship Face to face.

The same relational dynamic was also extended improbably to Paul on the Damascus road, which raised similar issues for Paul in his religious tradition, as for the woman in hers, but with further implications and consequences. This shift to the new relational context and process, however, necessitated (and still necessitates today) terms significant for compatibility in order to distinguish relationship together from prevailing human terms, self-definition and determination. In the strategic shift of the gospel, there is no relational progression with the whole-ly accessible God without these ongoing relational terms: “in spirit and truth” (4:23-24).

The functional significance of “in spirit and in truth” can only be understood in the relational significance of the holy and transcendent God’s thematic action fulfilled in the incarnation of Jesus’ whole person (cf. Ps 33:11b). Though the Samaritan woman expressed no understanding of these words in his gospel voice, she was experiencing their functional significance in their involvement together not only Face to face but also heart to heart.

This raises two important questions. What if Jesus’ person were something less or some substitute of God, or what if the person Jesus presented in his life and practice were anything less or any substitute of his whole person, even as God? The former has been an ongoing theological issue, which Jesus’ first century adversaries tried to establish about him. Any revisionism of Jesus makes discourse about an accessible God insignificant, if not irrelevant. The latter question is a functional issue that essentially has been ignored. Yet, its critical importance has theological implications about the reliability of our Christology, and more importantly creates a functional problem of integrity for the relational involvement of trust. How reliable is your knowledge of someone if the person

presented to you is anything less or any substitute of the who, what and how of that person? Moreover, how can you trust someone in a relationship if you can't count on that person's involvement to be beyond anything less or any substitute of the whole person? This is not about having faith in someone without having a sound basis, such as fideism; nor is it about engaging in relationship together on the basis of quantitative information.

Jesus demonstrated to this woman that his involvement with her was nothing less and no substitutes for his whole person defined by the plumb line of righteousness. This was congruent with his ongoing self-disclosure of the whole of God and, specific to her, opened access to the transcendent "God is spirit." Something less or any substitutes would not have fulfilled this function for her, much less fulfilled the whole of God's thematic action for all humanity. The implication is "I who speak am [here to openly disclose to you that spirit] with the integrity of the measuring line of justice."

The relational outcome from the inflection of the Word constituted the relational connection necessary to claim the Word of the gospel, whereby to know and understand the whole of God for the relational basis essential to *be* "my witnesses." The Samaritan woman experienced this relational outcome to effectively serve as "my witness" (Jn 4:28-30, 39-42).

Likewise, anyone who claims the gospel in tune with who and what the Word voiced, that person is accountable to function as "my witness," not merely witnessing any words of the gospel in a performative manner. Therefore, just as the Word embodied the plumb line of righteousness to enact the measuring line of justice, "my witnesses" proclaim the sounds of protest to echo the Word's gospel voice integrating justice. Any other witness proclaims words and not the Word, thus their witness at best can only simulate the identity and function of "my witnesses." To inflect with the Word necessitates foremost to be vulnerable with one's person from inner out in order to have the relational connection raising up the *new* for being "my witnesses"—just as the Samaritan woman experienced to echo Jesus' gospel voice.

Chapter 4 Proclaiming the Gospel by Resonating His Sounds of Protest

**“Here is my servant...who will proclaim justice to *humanity*...
until he brings justice to victory.”**

Matthew 12:18-20

“I have not come to bring peace but a sword.”

Matthew 10:34

As the U.S. presidential election of 2024 targets its conclusion in November, there are various versions of good news being propagated. Most of these versions claim to be the truth, and thus its proponents assume to bring hope in proclaiming its good news. These political gymnastics parallel proclaiming the good news of the gospel and the claims and assumptions that Christians make in their proclamation.

When Jesus declared without equivocation that “I have not come to bring peace but a sword” (Mt 10:34), he revealed the integral news composing his gospel. On the one hand, some Christians will use “a sword” to justify proclaiming news that further polarizes the political climate. On the other hand, many Christians will ignore the essential significance of “a sword” in their proclamation of the gospel; they just simply assume that the gospel is only about good news.

At the juncture of the Word “became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14), there was a man who had waited to see the gospel before he died. When Simeon saw the child Jesus, he proclaimed without revision the integral news of Jesus’ gospel—which amazed Joseph and Mary to hear (Lk 2:25-33). Most notable in Simeon’s proclamation was the news signifying Jesus’ function: “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in *the surrounding context* and to be a sign that...will pierce your own soul too” (2:34-35).

The gospel Simeon anticipated was not composed by the influential optimism voiced in his surrounding context. In contrast to a biased optimism reverberating hope, the gospel anticipated by Simeon was constituted by both the good news and the bad news to be voiced by Jesus. Simeon waited for this whole gospel to be revealed, not with a biased optimism of humanity but with the reality of its human condition, which Jesus’ sword will penetrate to the heart of by resonating his sounds of protest.

Christians hereafter need to listen to Simeon's frequency for the gospel in order to claim Jesus' whole gospel, so that the gospel they proclaim resonates with nothing less and no substitutes.

Reverberating Optimism and Performative Sounds

It should be apparent today that what is considered good news has a range of interpretations. These perceptions form biases about reporting what is good news or bad news. Underlying the most common perception of good news is the bias of optimism, which interprets situations and circumstances accordingly, whether true or not. Based on this bias, any news that counters this good news would be labelled bad news. In other words, only what is considered optimistic would reverberate as good. Thus, Simeon's frequency for the gospel wouldn't reverberate but fall flat in the ears of the optimistic.

Reverberating optimism was problematic for Jesus, notably with what Peter claimed and proclaimed. For example, when Jesus proclaimed the bad news necessary for the gospel, Peter proclaimed "This shall never happen to you" (Mt 16:21-22, NIV); and when Jesus enacted what Peter considered dissonant for the gospel, he rebutted "You shall never wash my feet" (Jn 13:8, NIV). Peter's bias of what was good news extended into the early church when he denied Jesus' request: "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean" (Acts 10:13-14), the biased distinctions of which countered the inclusive nature of the gospel that made no distinctions between persons (cf. Acts 15:9). At that stage, the gospel for Peter often reverberated with a biased optimism, which then shaped his practice of the gospel with performative sounds out of tune with Jesus' gospel—as Paul protested to his face to hold him accountable for the whole gospel (Gal 2:11-13).

Like Peter, any biased optimism composing good news always has difficulty facing bad news, and thus would be strained or stressed to associate the good news of the gospel with the bad news, much less consider them integral. Since the bad news of humanity's human condition is inescapable, any good news for humanity must unavoidably address its bad news. Failure to do so proclaims the gospel with a false optimism under the assumption that anyone who claims its good news will simply quiet the sounds of their bad news.

Falling into a false optimism is a subtle process that is not discernable apart from the bad news. Underlying this process is the reduction of persons and relationships to the function of outer in, which involves the dynamics of a comparative process measuring them on a hierarchy of more or less, better or worse, good or bad. Human life becomes a performance of what one can do, accomplish and possess, whereby humanity is stratified

in an unequal, inequitable condition. This performative practice preoccupied the early disciples, who were always assessing “who was the greatest” among them (Mk 9:34; Lk 9:46; cf. Mt 18:1). Their performative sounds should not be surprising, because its diverse sounds become the norm for any part of humanity that doesn’t deal with its human condition.

Rather than changing the human condition from inner out, performative sounds start to reverberate from outer in to occupy the mind with optimism. Consequently, the human condition is not addressed more deeply to get to its heart, thereby leaving the inequities of human life unchanged. The gospel claimed by many has been relegated to reverberating optimism, who then proclaim that gospel to the tune of performative sounds.

Jesus enforces a sword to shred false optimism disguised with peace in order to penetrate to the heart of the human condition and “proclaim justice to humanity” (Mt 12: 18). By proclaiming justice, Jesus did not reverberate in optimism, but rather he resolutely overturned humanity’s condition by protesting its bad news so that the good news could resonate in the hearts of those claiming his gospel of justice. And his sounds of protest should never be mistaken for performative sounds.

The Arc of Justice

Who or what defines justice will determine the trajectory that justice takes. The current U.S. Supreme Court’s controversial decisions have projected justice on a trajectory that has created either optimism or pessimism. This unintended effect may also seem apparent in the justice proclaimed by Jesus. One wouldn’t think that the gospel proclaimed by Jesus would not purposely create pessimism. Yet, that would assume his gospel composed only good news even while proclaiming justice.

The existential reality of justice is that its trajectories are either competing or in conflict. In a democracy, justice would be expected to have competing trajectories. That would be the ideal of democracy, which the U.S.’s democratic structure short-circuited with conflicts evolving from its false optimism. Justice unwinds in conflict trajectories when justice struggles to exist at all. For example, U.S. policy for immigrants (notably those seeking asylum) has struggled to give them justice because the U.S. population is in conflict about what would be justice.

Going back to Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman, his strategic shift revealed to her the trajectory of justice constituting the whole of God’s response in the gospel. His trajectory of justice didn’t compete with others’ trajectories, including the disciples’, but was in conflict with them because he dealt with the bad news to change her human condition. Obviously, the disciples’ trajectory of justice would not have brought

justice to even address the bad news, much less deal with it directly, thereby keeping her in her human condition even if she happened to claim the good news proclaimed by them.

The existential reality of the human condition innately composes its bad news, from which humanity needs to be redeemed in order to be reconciled with the good news. This redemptive reconciling process necessitates the justice that overlooks none of the bad news, so that the good news doesn't fall into any false optimism of reconciliation. The justice proclaimed by Jesus is in conflict with anything less and any substitutes for its righteous nature.

The gospel Jesus enacted with justice encompasses an arc that integrates three dimensions: (1) fully encompasses the past, (2) whole-ly embraces the present, and (3) completely encircles the future. The 1st dimension of his gospel encompasses both creation and the fall into reductionism. The 2nd dimension embraces both human life in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity, and how the human condition has evolved (or devolved) from the beginning; and the 3rd dimension encircles the whole relational outcome of his gospel in completion. All three dimensions are integrated for the whole 3-D picture of his gospel. Therefore, omitting any dimension or reducing any of them no longer distinguishes Jesus' whole gospel but determines a partial (flat or distorted) or virtual (realistic but not real) portrayal of a gospel shaped by human terms and bias—the tension and conflict between his gospel and our gospel.

In the whole 3-D picture of the gospel enacted by Jesus, the arc of justice traverses the human condition to bring its bad news into the light—that is, into direct intersection with the light embodied by the Word for humanity to receive his gospel. However, in spite of the arc of justice making distinct the human condition by the Light, many have failed to recognize the gravity of the bad news weighing down their daily life, and thus either have not claimed his whole gospel or merely have claimed portions of the good news without the bad news. This has become a truncated result of presumed salvation that reduces his 3-D to a flat, distorted or virtual portrayal shaped by human terms and bias. In such a process, which short circuits the arc of justice, many today can be found who profess to claim the gospel.

At this critical juncture, it is essential to understand the dynamics underlying his 3-D gospel. His 3-D gospel is necessary to identify, respond to and embrace the whole person created also in 3-D based on the image and likeness of the Trinity: (1) the person as an individual subject (not individualism), (2) the person in collective/corporate union with other persons, and (3) the life-order of these persons in relationship together. Jesus embodies and enacts the relational response to the 3-D person of human life with his 3-D gospel in order to transform persons and relationships for the whole relational outcome of the new creation of persons and relationships in God's kingdom-family. Anything less and any substitutes do not, will not, and cannot portray the whole 3-D picture of his gospel; and the outcome from any such gospel will be measured accordingly—nothing more.

Therefore, the arc of justice proclaimed by Jesus encompasses by necessity the intrinsic anthropology integrated with the nature of sin that constitutes humanity in its human condition. Thus, Jesus proclaims the justice that integrally both gets to the heart of persons constituting humanity and deals with the reduction, fragmentation and brokenness of those persons and their relationships. Without this anthropology and view of sin, the arc of justice is flattened, distorted or short circuited, whereby humanity continues to recycle in the bad news of its condition.

Many consider the existing human condition to be a result of the evolution of human life. This result can be considered natural and to be taken in stride, or as a condition needing further human adaptation. Either conclusion has only exasperated the condition and amplified the human desire to fill a void, to fulfill an insatiable need. While most Christians don't subscribe to this account of the human condition, they live everyday with similar desires and need. This raises another basic question that all of us need to face:

Where do we *live*? That is, do we live in the created world of God or the evolving world of human development and so-called progress?

Part of answering this question involves knowing what the human condition is and understanding how this condition subtly envelops our life and infects us to determine our condition. The everyday reality of human life is that its unavoidable condition is intractable, and that this condition by its nature disables human persons from being whole and functioning in wholeness. If this indeed is the reality of our condition, what is at the heart of this condition and how does it pivotally affect the heart of human life?

When we examine the dynamic unfolded in the primordial garden much deeper, what emerges gets into the heart of the human condition (Gen 3:1-13). Satan challenged the relational words of Subject God by raising what appeared as a reasonable question: "Did God say...?" His purpose was neither to clarify nor correct what God commanded, but rather to transpose God's words, redefine their meaning, and to construct a subtle alternative with appealing information. The underlying outcome in his purpose was to distance or detach said subjects as inner-out persons from their reciprocal relational involvement with Subject God, and thereby relegate these persons to objects now redefined subtly from outer in. How so?

Any discussion of the narrative of this encounter in the primordial garden must take place in the full narrative of the relational context and process of creation. To understand the depth of what transpired in this encounter and its consequence requires keeping in clear focus the relational outcome of the Subject's creation in relational language and terms: whole persons, from inner out, distinguished in ontology and function by the Subject's image and likeness, involved whole-ly as subjects in the primacy of reciprocal relationship together both with Subject God and with each other.

Who and what emerged from this relational outcome must be in juxtaposition throughout this encounter in order to understand its significance and get to the heart of its consequence.

By asking “Did God say *that*?” Satan introduces the inaugural persons (and us today) to a compelling alternative for their lives. Along with transposing Subject God’s relational language to referential language, Satan interjects alternative terms to the relational terms already communicated definitively by the Subject. The relational terms for the primacy of reciprocal relationship are unequivocal, as those persons knew (Gen 3:2-3). What is transpiring, however, goes deeper than the terms for relationship, which we need to understand beyond the mere issue of disobedience commonly ascribed to those persons as their sin.

When God said, “*Function by my relational terms*, or you shall die” (Gen 2:16-17), as noted about the commandments earlier, it is crucial to examine how we see and think about death. Here again, we have to keep this pivotal encounter in the relational context and process that already constituted whole persons and relationships in wholeness. Satan counters God’s words with “you will not die”—a relative proposal, whose significance commonly eludes most Christians (even church leaders and scholars) because of how we see and think about death. In this narrative, did the inaugural persons die after they partook? No, that is, unless you see and think about dying and death in the full context and process of creation.

In fact, Satan proposes in his alternative that persons will see and think with the perspicacity of God, going beyond merely being in the image of God, and further acquiring the revered resource of “knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:4-5). How appealing is this resource for those seeking justice and working for peace? It appealed to the inaugural persons also, since it “was to be desired to make one wise” (3:6), a better person, one better able to serve God—or so the thinking goes. Consider becoming such a person. Would you consider that person disobedient, much less a person who dies?

What evolves in this encounter is the ongoing dynamic at the heart of the human condition. God certainly wants us to be wise, to know good and evil, and to flourish to the full capacity of our person—and obviously not to die. Yet, that is not what is offered in Satan’s proposal. Who and what were these inaugural persons already from creation? As whole persons, what more could they *be* than those subjects? And what could they gain as persons from inner out by consuming an outer-in alternative for an inner-out resource? In the relational language of what solely is primary, nothing. In the referential language of what is at best secondary, a qualified *something*; and it is this *thing* that has subtly appealed to those in the primary and seduced them into anything less and any substitutes. This pervasive influence needs to be exposed.

The consequence from this prevailing dynamic only has significance as it collides with the heart of creation. First, Subject God is reduced to Object, shaped by human terms regulating (not denying) who, what and how God is. Next, the whole human person from inner out (as in Gen 2:25) is reduced to outer in (as in 3:7), typically functioning merely as an object shaped by surrounding influences and alternatives. Then, these reduced persons no longer function whole-ly in their primacy of relationship together, but they resort to and become preoccupied in secondary matters that reduce their presence and involvement in relationships down to common fragmentary ways (as in 3:7-10). This often subtle dynamic has only this common consequence:

The reduction of creation at the heart of human life, which compromises the essential integrity of the whole person and fragments the wholeness of persons in their primacy of relationship together.

What we need to understand about the inaugural persons is the alternative they fell for by choice and thus fell into as a consequence. Their sin in the garden was solely and nothing less than **the sin of reductionism**, which set in motion the human condition. Our view of sin has to go beyond merely disobedience and encompass *sin as reductionism*, and nothing less in our theology and practice. Otherwise we have a weak view of sin—a view that lacks the scope of injustice because it lacks understanding justice, a view that doesn't serve for the depth of peace because it lacks wholeness. Reductionism is at the heart, the fragmentary heart of the human condition. The human condition that emerged from the primordial garden indeed composes sin, but only the sin of reductionism. A weaker view of sin neither gets to the fragmentary heart of the human condition nor gets *right* our human condition and our own sin, even as we seek justice and work for peace.

In all the ways noted above, with all their subsequent refinements and evolving progress, reductionism has composed all persons, peoples, tribes and nations with the human condition lacking the justice and without the peace created for human life by the Subject. Reductionism quantifies persons (e.g. by the quantity of their knowledge of “good and evil”) by transposing their inner-out qualitative image of God to quantitative measures from outer in (e.g. having resources like God), and thus reductionism *object-*ifies the integrity of persons as subjects and fragments their wholeness (both individually and collectively).

The evolving reality of reductionism disables the whole person by quantifying their essential identity, for example, with physical characteristics/distinctions from outer in (as with color, sex, appearance), with the development of their intellect by knowledge and information (as in idolizing education), or simply with the extent of their abilities and resources (as the primary source defining human identity and determining human

function). Quantifying the person based on such measures basically object-ifies the person created as subject by the Subject; and this reduction disables the person by fragmenting the whole person into variable parts of who, what and how the person should be in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Subject.

This quantification and object-ification of persons happens in multiple ways in human life and its order, and each reduction generates a lack of justice. When the integrity essential to persons is compromised and their wholeness together fragmented, there is no justice and peace in which all of human life was created by the Subject. And no matter how many variable parts of this fragmentation can claim to make one a better person, wiser, and even better able to serve others and contribute to humanity, the sum of those parts does not, will not and cannot add up to enable the person to be whole and persons together to live in wholeness. The synergy of life cannot emerge from reductionism but only from creation by the Subject. Therefore, the reality that we need to embrace at its heart is unmistakable:

Reductionism and wholeness are incompatible, an object and a subject are incongruent; and any effort to conflate the latter with the former will disable the latter and render it without its essential significance.

When we don't understand sin as reductionism, we don't get to the fragmentary heart of the human condition, our human condition. How we see and think in this condition lacks justice and disables us from getting *right* what is wrong, unfair, and/or unjust in everyday life. How we live in this condition every day lacks peace, even in the absence of conflict, because our wholeness is fragmented. And the sad fact compounding this existing reality is that we commonly fail to realize this dynamic of reductionism in our theology and practice.

In whatever context, form or operation the dynamic of reductionism is found, that condition lacks justice whether we call it injustice or not. Inseparably, that condition lacks peace whether there is apparent conflict or not, and whether or not we call it wrong, unfair or unjust. In that condition, fragmentation in one way or another takes place as the prevailing consequence that determines the fragmentary heart of the human condition. Given the breadth and depth of what pervades human life today and prevails in its human order, the unavoidable reality facing us is that the human condition is inescapable, and that its bad news needs to be protested ongoingly.

When the heart of the human condition (and our condition) is encompassed by the arc of justice proclaimed by Jesus, justice will be served with nothing less and no substitutes and thereby brought to victory. Anything less and any substitutes will not compete with his trajectory of justice but will always be in conflict with it. Those who claim to have the gospel and serve as witnesses to it are accountable for what and who they proclaim.

Resonating the Sounds of Protest

Protests are heard and seen at different levels. The intensity of these protests usually is the determining factor for the effect of a protest. When the sound of a protest reverberates, more attention is typically brought to the issue protested; or at least more notice is given to the reverberating protestors. The sound of Jesus' gospel protest, however, are not determined by their reverberation.

Certainly, when Jesus cleaned out the temple, his protest reverberated in the minds of those present, observing or simply recounting his action. Yet, it was not that intensity that defined the significance of his protest and determined its effect. By comparison (not contrast), in his protest with the Samaritan woman, Jesus was mild in tone and gentle in behavior but nevertheless no less effective than at the temple. Why? This brings out the depth of his protest that defines its intensity and determines its effect.

Injustice should reverberate in the minds and consciousness of those in the surrounding context. For many activists, reverberating protest is considered a viable means to achieve their goals of justice—an end which can even evolve to justify the use of most any intense means. This process evolves further when the effect of protesting is inconsequential, whereby many protestors continue their engagement as an end in itself—perhaps as witnessed in prolonged protests on college campuses today. After all, protesting injustice does provide those engaged an identity marker that they could be proud to assume in public life. But, these persons should never presume to be “my witnesses of the sounds of protest enacting my proclamation of justice.”

To clarify definitively and unequivocally, merely reverberating is insufficient protest for justice to penetrate to the heart of the human condition underlying any injustice. Whenever justice stops short, the injustice will keep recycling; this is a frustrating and discouraging experience for protestors, which is an existential reality that should serve as a wake-up call that something is missing or not right. This has been evident, for example, in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, which for decades has had to address the recurring injustice of racial inequality.

As witnessed in Jesus' protest of the injustice suffered by the Samaritan woman, Jesus only proclaimed the justice necessary to redeem the heart of her human condition. This was the effect he had on her because his protest didn't merely reverberate in her mind but resonated to the depth of her heart. That's why the sounds of his protest penetrated to turn her life around.

For injustice to be turned around by justice necessitates by the nature of Jesus' justice to be transformed and not just reformed. Transformation distinguishes the inner out of persons from their outer in, which only unfolds at this depth for being first redeemed from the bad news. Therefore, *redemptive change* from injustice is at the heart

of the arc of justice embodied, enacted and proclaimed by Jesus. Anything less and any substitutes don't resonate in tune with the sounds of his gospel protest. The early disciples had difficulty learning this arc and thus struggled in their trajectory of justice to resonate as "my witnesses"—no matter how much they reverberated, as witnessed in Peter's discipleship.

In the arc of justice, Jesus enacts God's love for justice (Ps 33:5; Jer 9:24). If God's heart is vulnerably present and involved by love to proclaim justice, then God's heart is equally stirred to action by his hate for injustice (Ps 5:5; 11:5; 45:6-7). In other words, as God's heart resonates in the love of justice, it integrally resonates in the lament of injustice.

The Lament of Jesus' Gospel Protest

Who would associate lament with the gospel, much less connect it integrally? Perhaps pessimists who aren't hopeful about the gospel becoming an existential reality. Yet, lament is irreplaceable for anyone claiming and proclaiming the gospel.

If God's love resonates with you, then it is unavoidable for God's hate and related feelings for injustice to constitute the lament of Jesus' gospel protest. We cannot be selective of God's heart in our bias and not fragment his heart's wholeness. This was directly implied when Jesus shared his lament with Peter about whether Peter loved him (Jn 21:15-19). No one can say that God's love resonates with them without God's love also resonating about what causes God to lament.

The underlying issue is understanding the heartbeat of God that Jesus embodied. The affects that Jesus experienced in his heart (not just his mind) are essential to his whole person. These affects are not merely about the dynamics of Jesus' humanity. His feelings are integral to the emotions of God, which ongoingly had been shared openly in Scripture for the sake of God's people, and now are further and more deeply expressed distinctly by the heart of the embodied Word enacted vulnerably with his person. God's emotions are simply essential to distinguish God beyond merely as the Object of our beliefs. When God's emotions are overlooked, ignored or even discounted, God then is reduced from being the Subject whose overt ontology is vulnerably present and actively involved (as Subject) directly in relationship with us. The complete profile of the whole of God doesn't emerge and unfold whenever God is related to as Object, no matter how venerable the profile. Therefore, what we proclaim in our witness is always insufficient for the who of the gospel enacting the whole of God's heart.

A significant introduction to the emotions of God is compiled by David Lamb, who rightfully outlines the scope of God’s emotions by giving equal attention to the negative emotions of God’s hatred, wrath and anger.¹ Yet, the weight given to God’s harder feelings doesn’t imbalance God’s love, rather it keeps it from being distorted, for example, by idealizing or romanticizing it. In contrast, most Christians usually tip the emotions scale in favor of God’s love, whereby the profile of God is distorted to fit a portrait framed by our biases and assumptions. Nevertheless, the incarnation of the Word reveals the affective narrative that vulnerably discloses: (1) the heart of the whole of God, and (2) the heart of God’s image and likeness by which human persons are created and now transformed in the new creation—with nothing less and no substitutes (2 Cor 3:18; 5:17).

The trajectory Jesus enacts for the arc of justice is further distinguished when Jesus intentionally focused his trajectory on a person who both participates in the injustice of that time even while being subjected to it (Mt 9:9-13). Jesus connects with a tax collector named Levi (Matthew) sitting at the tax office, and he says to him “Follow me.” So, leaving everything behind, Levi gets up and begins to follow him. On the surface, Jesus’ call appears inconsistent with what would be expected for his disciples. Yet, this is a key indicator that Jesus’ trajectory is deepening. Since Levi is ostracized by the Jewish community, Jesus purposely involves himself in a grand banquet hosted by Levi at his house. Many tax collectors and sinners are also eating with Jesus and his disciples. Thus, Levi represents a key addition to his chosen disciples in this tactical shift, which equalizes them without the constraining inequities of their sociocultural distinctions.

Jesus’ inclusive declaration reveals the tactical depth of his trajectory, which he wants us to learn in order to follow him. His trajectory is constituted not only by how inclusive his embrace of individuals is, but equally important is what underlies “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” What he desires (*thelo*) involves not only willfully wanting this but also pressing on to enact it. This means not only to engage individuals but also to address their collective contexts and infrastructure—which “sacrifice” implies about Jewish life. To address the infrastructure of collectives, however, also necessitates addressing the full spectrum of the human condition for its redemptive change—nothing less and no substitutes, as Jesus’ trajectory enacts. As our *thelo* enacts this together with him, we will understand his heart further, and thereby learn that his love goes beyond his warmth and tenderness to include feelings not commonly associated with love—enacting tough love, so to speak, to deal with the bad news of the human condition.

¹ David T. Lamb, *The Emotions of God: Making Sense of a God Who Hates, Weeps and Loves* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022).

Any tough love of God's heart enacts his love of justice, which then constitutes his hard feelings about injustice as the basis for the lament of Jesus' gospel protest. The scope of the feelings in his heart, therefore, intrinsically encompass the integration of negative feelings with positive feelings. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel witnessed most intensely to resonate the lament of God's heart in protest about the human condition of God's people. Their witness was a precursor for the witnesses who will vulnerably enact the lament of Jesus' gospel protest.

God's heart of wholeness cannot proclaim the positive feelings of the good news without first sharing the negative feelings of the bad news in protest. Without the lament of his gospel protest, his heart is obscured by any good news, and in spite of any reverberation, his gospel will not resonate at the heart level.

Who then will proclaim the whole gospel by resonating the lament in his sounds of protest to help him "bring justice to victory as my witnesses"?

Chapter 5 The Sounds of Peace Underlying Protest

**The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their ways.
...The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice.**

Isaiah 59:8,15

**“For you *practice secondary things* and neglect justice and the love of God;
it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.”**

Luke 11:42

Christians in general would not intentionally deny justice for the human condition, but the reality emerges that their intentions could be complicit with injustice. Christians particularly in the U.S. are being tested about this dynamic currently evolving in the 2024 general election—notably since a woman of color now headlines the candidacy for president. From past to present, this justice-injustice dynamic has defined the majority in the U.S., and throughout human history, who determine its outcome for everyday human life.

In a survey of what’s primary or secondary in the practice of God’s people, Jesus found their practice (pre)occupied with secondary matters at the expense of what’s primary (Lk 11:42; Mt 23:23). Thus, they became complicit with injustice because they neglected what’s primary to God and God’s law: “justice and the love of God,” and “justice and mercy and faith (relational trust).” Further back in history, God’s people were exposed in their practice: “The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their ways” (Isa 59:8). Past or present, among God’s people in particular or humanity in general, the existential reality of human life is the evolving condition calling for, necessitating and even demanding protest. That is, only the protest that resonates the whole of God’s heart: “The Lord saw *their practice*, and it displeased him that there was no justice” (Isa 59:15); “Woe to you” (Lk 11:42; Mt 23:23).

Woe to us, indeed, who don’t know the way of peace, and thus who don’t enact justice in our everyday life!

His Way of Peace

John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, predicted that his son would witness for Jesus and proclaim his gospel, which would "guide our feet into the way of peace" (Lk 1:67-79). Whether Zechariah understood how John would fulfill his purpose is not clear, John proclaimed the gospel by resonating Jesus' heart in protest. That is, John protested the bad news of the human condition in order for the good news to "guide our feet into the way of peace."

Simeon predicted that Jesus' relational work (*semeion*, sign) would "be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be *exposed by the piercing of a sword*" (Lk 2:34-35). His proclamation affirmed the protest of John's proclamation and qualified the good news proclaimed by the angels of Jesus' birth bringing "peace among those whom he favors" (Lk 2:14). How is it affirmed and why is it qualified?

Christians knowingly wouldn't protest against peace. But what peace might they protest for is an open question needing an answer. Few Christians have been witnessed among the ranks of those involved in peace movements. This was evident in the peace movement of the '60s-'70s, though there is more involvement currently in the peace efforts to stop the war in Gaza. Paul makes imperative for the church that "the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, *that is, be the primary determinant of your persons from inner out*" (Col 3:15). Jesus made definitive for the identity and function of his followers to be "peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Mt 5:9). Yet, as Jesus' survey of God's people exposed, they essentially don't know the way of peace in general and his way of peace in particular.

John the Baptist prepared the way of peace that Jesus constituted with the heart of God's lament. John's protest pointed to Jesus' protest enacting his gospel of peace (cf. Eph 6:15). Therefore, Jesus affirmed the protest of John's proclamation (Mt 11:7-15), and then he advanced their protest to qualify the way of peace. Continuing from what Simeon predicted (Lk 2:34-35), Jesus declares "I have not come to bring peace but a sword" (Mt 10:34)... "but rather division" (Lk 12:51). Why does this qualify the way of peace and simply not counter peace?

First of all, the sword used by Jesus doesn't divide the relationships of human life, notably in families. The sword Jesus uses in protest essentially cuts through the darkness to bring to light the existential division of relationships composing the human condition, notably even in families. This division needs to be accentuated, because the subtlety of relational distance keeping families apart often takes on the appearance of being at peace with each other; and it is that so-called peace that needs to be qualified. Moreover, there are layers of this condition that need to be cut through in order to get to the heart of problem.

The sword used by Jesus opens the way for the “peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives” (Jn 14:27). That is to say, “my peace I give to you is uncommon in contrast to the common peace that is available from other sources in the world.” The difference between his uncommon peace and the common peace of human life is critical to understand, because to interchange them, conflate them or confuse the latter for the former are consequential for reflecting, reinforcing or sustaining the human condition.

As Jesus approached Jerusalem on his journey to the cross, his heart wept in protest: “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your *biased eyes*” (Lk 19:41-42, NIV). In the contexts of human life, even among God’s people, the common perception of peace is the absence of conflict; and, thus, the way to bring peace involves making the changes to reduce, suspend and eliminate the conflict. The absence of conflict is certainly desirable and a valued condition, but this perception and interpretation of peace creates a bias that prevents seeing, understanding and knowing the uncommon peace given by Jesus.

“My *uncommon* peace I give to you” embodied and enacted the gospel constituted earlier by the *shalom* of God’s definitive blessing (Num 6:22-27). This blessing must not be taken out of its formative context, or it becomes reduced to a mere benediction of worship tradition. In the formative tradition of God’s people, the Sabbath has been a key identity marker to distinguish them from other persons, peoples and nations. What should have been integral, however, for who, what and how they are as persons and in relationship together became fragmenting of their created ontology and function. Consider carefully the Sabbath in God’s rule of law, which constituted the climax essential to creation (Gen 2:1-3). The Creator enacted the Subject God’s righteousness in what is *right* and whole, and this is how human persons are to function in likeness—function contrary to the pressure and demands of self-determination to measure up and succeed, and that preoccupy us with secondary matters at the expense of the primary.

The Sabbath signifies the most transparent stage in the creation of all life, in which we see God being God. In the context of the world, God’s whole ontology and function just *is*, without any other action or activity defining and determining God in this moment. On this unique day, God’s relational message is “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). At this perspicacious point of just being God, God constituted whole-ly the relational context and process of what is primary *of* God and who is primary *to* God for the whole-ly relational outcome of all persons coming together in the primacy of face-to-face relationship.

The uncommon wholeness of God’s relational process and outcome emerged distinguished in relational terms when God responded face to face with his kingdom-family by the relational involvement of his definitive blessing (Num 6:22-27). “*Subject God* make his face to shine upon you...and give you peace” is the most common blessing in our tradition, whose use has lost its relational significance and has either ignored or not

understood the essential significant change at the heart of Subject God’s relational response. By “give you” (*siym*), God is not acting as a mere benefactor, nor is it merely highlighting God’s good character to give. The deeper meaning of *siym* used in God’s response centers on the heart of what Subject God brings and gives: (1) to bring about a change, and integral to this change (2) to establish a new relationship. Thus, the Subject’s face-to-face response to subjects (not objects of his blessing) is to bring the significant change that establishes them in new relationships. The relational outcome is not a “new” normal but gives them the new order of relationships together in *shalom*.

Shalom is not just the absence of conflict but the well-being of persons constituted in wholeness, by which their relationships are determined. In God’s way of peace, the wholeness of God vulnerably enacts the blessing of God’s face (presence) for the primacy of face-to-face relationship with the persons primary to God. Yet, this relational outcome does not happen merely because the blessing states the outcome of peace. The relational outcome of wholeness in relationships together is contingent on bringing about change that is uncommon to human contexts, in which the old condition is eliminated so the new uncommon outcome emerges.

Uncommon change will open the way for the wholeness of persons to function in their new condition:

just-nection: the *right* order of relationship together, which was originally created by Subject God for subject persons to have the *right* relational connection in God’s relational likeness—the relational connection required for justice of the human order.

Only God’s relational outcome of peace brings this just-nection of creation. Therefore, God’s justice is distinguished and God’s peace is experienced just in this relational dynamic of just-nection.

Its Interdependence with Justice

This highlights the interdependence of Jesus’ way of peace and his love of justice. Peace and justice operate as interdependent variables, such that the variation in one directly affects the other, and conversely. Thus, in a context where the way of peace is not understood, there will be a lack of justice in the ways of those in that context—which always evokes God’s protest (Isa 59:8,15).

In the uncommon change, therefore, that God brings for the relational outcome of peace (“my peace”), justice is at the heart of God’s blessing, and thus cannot be minimized, ignored or displaced. Just-nection, then, is the unequivocal and irreplaceable antithesis that distinguishes justice from what encompasses **the common denominator of injustice:**

The relational distance, separation or brokenness that fragment the human order and reduce persons to outer-in distinctions, and thus to any and all relational disconnection contrary to their created likeness to God, which is consequential for preventing fulfillment of the inherent human need (as experienced in Gen 3:7-8).

On this irreducible and nonnegotiable basis of his way of peace, Jesus made it essential that his gospel is embodied and enacted as follows, and imperative to be claimed and proclaimed accordingly:

The bad news of the gospel unfolds on an intrusive relational path resonating in protest to expose the injustice of tradition and similar conventional practices, in order that the good news emerges ‘whole in justice’ and unfolds ‘uncommon in peace’; and the gospel’s intrusive relational path encompasses exposing the shame of the status quo composed by the dominant views of theology (or related ideology) and the prevailing norms of practice, both of which are under the shaping influence of the common.

Nothing less can constitute the gospel that Jesus embodied and enacted; and no substitutes can claim and proclaim the uncommon wholeness of his gospel. Anything less and any substitutes are unavoidably subjected to his gospel protest and subject to the lament of God’s whole heart. His protest notably includes the premature justice and immature peace prevailing among God’s people, which he lamented vulnerably before their biased eyes.

Premature Justice and Immature Peace

The dynamics involved in the whole and uncommon gospel enacted by Jesus are constituted only by the relational terms and process innate to the whole and uncommon (whole-ly) God. Therefore, the uncommon change intrinsic to his gospel only has significance by being relational, and the redemptive change he brings only transforms in the primacy of relationship. Thus, significant change always encompasses, involves and changes relationships, which unmistakably contrasts with common-conventional change. Any change that is not so engaged relationally falls short and, therefore, is insufficient to bring the significant change and give the significant outcome that transforms relationships in their primacy. Uncommon change is irreplaceable to bring the significant change necessary for justice and to give the significant outcome constituting peace.

Anything less and any substitutes, even with good intentions, at best result in premature justice and immature peace.

Accordingly, and invariably, when we call for justice, we have to know what indeed brings justice; and when we work for peace, we have to understand what truly gives peace.

The turn-around change in relationships from God's definitive blessing distinguishes those persons by their well-being in wholeness to constitute their just-nection as subjects in Subject God's family. Sadly, those associated with God's kingdom-family turned God's definitive blessing into a "new" normal by first transposing the uncommon change God brings to common change, and then by common-izing the uncommon peace God gives (cf. Isa 29:13). The pervasive consequence was to convert God's uncommon good into a prevailing common good. This conversion continues today, subtly shaping how we see and think about the gospel to counter the uncommon change Jesus brings and to contradict the uncommon wholeness he gives. Jesus had to clarify and correct this conversion throughout his embodied presence in order to expose the common-ization of what he brings and gives.

Notably, of course, his main disciples were common-ized in their identity (seeking to be the greatest, Lk 22:24) and gave priority to serving the common good over the primacy of relationship together (Mt 26:8-11). Also, the majority associated with God's family functioned in common peace to counter the *siym* of Subject God's relational response, and thereby contradicted the *shalom* he gives (Lk 19:41-42).

As evident in his post-ascension critique of churches (Rev 2-3), Jesus (together with the Spirit) continues to pursue us in any distorting conversion of the uncommon change he brings and the uncommon peace he gives. His relational purpose is always for the just-nection of all persons and relationships in the uncommon good. Furthermore, his ceaseless purpose in this vital process pursues us, so that any call for justice will not stop prematurely until just-nection is complete, and that all work for peace will not be engaged immaturely without wholeness and settle for common peace. Jesus knew all too well from his personal observations that common thinking, perception and action result in anything less than their maturity until they undergo uncommon change.

In the ordinary terms of the gospel, the sword of uncommon peace that Jesus brings and gives would seem to contradict peace and to function counter to it. That would only be true for our theology and valid in our practice when the focus is reduced to common peace—namely to the absence of conflict. The truth of Jesus' gospel, however, that invalidates other gospels using his name is this: Whenever common peace is used in place of uncommon peace, there is a contradiction of what Jesus gives; and whenever our work revolves around common peace, it functions counter to the uncommon peace that Jesus' sword brings.

The uncommon good of Jesus' gospel unfolds in his discipleship manifesto for all

his followers (the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5-7), emerging with their definitive identity formation (the Beatitudes, 5:3-10). Their identity as “peacemakers” is not merely a partial identity but their whole identity as the “children of God” (5:9). Yet, only those who are relationally involved with God with their whole persons from inner out relationally belong in God’s family (5:8), which emerges from only the uncommon-redemptive change of the who, what and how they are (5:3-6).

Therefore, in Jesus’ uncommon good, the uncommon change of peacemakers involves only whole persons who work just for uncommon peace. These daughters and sons in God’s family know that anything less is an immature account of their whole identity, and that any substitutes are an immature peace of the whole who, what and how they are and function for. Immature peace and uncommon peace are at the critical disjuncture composed between “the wide gate and easy road” and “the narrow gate and difficult road” (7:13-14). This disjuncture continues to create both fog for his followers’ theology and ambiguity confounding their practice, such that they stop prematurely without just-nection in their call for justice, and engage the work of peace immaturely without wholeness by settling for common peace. This describes the who, what and how of persons prevailing among those merely associated with God’s kingdom, whose reduced identity and function composed the religious status quo that Jesus required his true followers to go further and be deeper than, without stopping short (5:20).

Reductionism is always imposing its “knowing good and evil” on those functioning as objects shaped by the human context in reduced ontology. These are the sentinels (Eze 33:7-9) who all-too-easily claim premature justice and who all-too-widely profess immature peace—taking a wider trajectory and easier path than Jesus (cf. Eze 34). Yet, this bad news is redeemed and transformed by the good news: the uncommon good that Jesus brings with uncommon change and gives with uncommon peace. If we are willing to turn around from the assumptions in our theology and change the bias in our practice, then our just-nection can be completed to counter premature justice rather than countering what Jesus brings; and then our persons and relationships can be made whole to contradict immature peace instead of contradicting what Jesus gives. The common-good workings of reductionism always seeks to convert the uncommon good, so that premature justice will subtly pervade everyday life to enable injustice, and that immature peace will prevail over human life to disable justice and prevent just-nection.

Once again, the uncommon good Jesus brings and gives faces us with this persistent reality:

How we see and think about change will be the change we use, which will be the change we get...which will be the justice and peace we use, which will be the justice and peace we get—all of which will compose either the common good or the uncommon good...that we get as objects or experience as subjects, who serve as mere servants, or work for as whole persons in the Trinity’s likeness.

The common good is composed by reduced ontology and function that lacks just-nection regardless of the amount of premature justice and immature peace generated. The uncommon good is constituted by whole ontology and function in the *right* relational order for the just-nection of all persons and peoples in whole justice and uncommon peace. Jesus' gospel brings and gives nothing less and no substitutes.

To know what indeed brings justice and to understand what truly gives peace converge in **the integrating dynamic of just-nection** that Jesus brings and gives. As the conclusive extension of the definitive blessing of Subject God's face (2 Cor 4:6), Jesus' gospel embodies the primacy *of* God to enact the primacy of face-to-face relationship for the persons primary *to* God. The *right* order of relationship together, which was created by the Subject only for subjects in his likeness, is the whole-ly relational outcome of just-nection. God's justice is distinguished whole and God's peace is experienced uncommon by the integration just in *the relational dynamic of just-nection*. Jesus redeems, reconciles and transforms the relational connection required for justice of the human order in the integrally created and newly created whole-ly likeness of God (summarized by Paul in 2 Cor 3:18; 5:16-17; Col 3:10-11). Therefore, just-nection is the unequivocal and irreplaceable antithesis that distinguishes justice from **the common denominator of injustice**:

That which encompasses the common's prevailing relational distance, separation or brokenness that fragment the human order and reduce persons to any and all relational disconnection contrary to their created likeness to God; this is consequential for relegating persons to relational orphans, the relational condition that disables them to function in their vested and privileged rights, and thereby prevents fulfillment of their inherent human need, whereby their everyday function subtly enables injustice—reinforcing and sustaining injustice even as they exercise their permissible rights.¹

¹ Human need-rights emerge from the inherent human need in the following relational dynamic:

1. **Vested rights** from God that are inherent to all persons created in God's image, irreducible rights which cannot be revoked to prevent fulfillment of the human need.
2. **Privileged rights** unique to all persons created in God's image, who can claim these nonnegotiable rights just in their created uniqueness, unless the rights are withdrawn or denied only by God.
3. **Permissible rights** available to all persons to the extent that their enactment either doesn't disrespect, abuse and prevent the fulfillment of their and others' human need, or that isn't allowed access to that fulfillment by the normative enforcement of others.

The obscured reality, verified by existing facts, is this: Without just-nection persons fall into this *equation of injustice*. Contrary to any misinformed, distorted or fake news, this inescapable reality composes the human relational condition that pervades the existing human order with relational orphans—pervading even the church, countering and contradicting Jesus’ gospel (Jn 14:18). The disjunction between the common denominator of injustice and the integrating dynamic of just-nection raises questions about surrounding human conditions (past and present).

When we fact-check these various conditions, situations and circumstances in human life, they verify the existing reality of their premature justice and immature peace. In one way or another, to whatever extent, they all fall short of what Jesus brings and gives. Premature justice does not bring just-nection and immature peace does not give wholeness; and their premature and immature fruits expose the roots of the tree they come from. Moreover, while such prevailing premature justice and pervasive immature peace may serve the relative notion of the common good, they do not, will not and cannot *work* for the uncommon good of Jesus’ gospel. What *works* in Jesus’ gospel only brings justice by uncommon change and gives peace through uncommon peace. As a further qualifier, what Jesus brings and gives do not preclude the diversity exercised in efforts for justice and peace but rather are against the reductionism expressed in their lack of maturity. Thus, the uncommon good of Jesus’ gospel should not be confused with a common metanarrative that postmodernism opposes; nor should Jesus’ uncommon good be conflated with the grand narrative proposed by modernism, which has been adapted into traditional theology and the practice of the status quo.

The uncommon good Jesus brings and gives distinguishes only the uncommon, so that it is irreducibly incongruent with the common and, therefore, is nonnegotiable incompatible with anything common. Even a partial hybrid in theology or practice are indigestible for the uncommon’s integrity—as the church in Thyatira was corrected by Jesus’ critique (Rev 2:19-23). For the sentinels of human life to function in premature justice is to be misguided in their calling and to have misguided results. For the shepherds of God’s family to function with immature peace is to be misled in their purpose and to mislead others for the outcome. This immaturity creates a crisis of credibility about what sentinels and shepherds do bring and give, which directly applies to those claiming to be his witnesses.

In Jesus’ perception and thinking, this existing condition is encompassed in the bad news of his gospel, which apparently has not been received to clearly distinguish *whole-ly* in much theology and practice today. But, not surprisingly, nothing more than the common (change, peace, good) can result and should be expected whenever what Jesus brings is countered and what he gives is contradicted.

Therefore, we have to understand the uncommon good that Jesus brings and gives to know what justice is. We have to know what justice is from inner out to understand injustice; and we have to be aware of injustice to live daily in justice from inner out. Being aware of injustice, however, is an entangled problem when our understanding of injustice is biased. This has been an ongoing problem ever since “good” was commonized and “evil” was renegotiated, making injustice variable and relative. Therefore, we need to face these related questions: “Where are you—in your person from inner out?” and How has reductionism shifted your person to outer in and defined your identity by such distinctions?

The reality also facing us is the fact that how injustice is seen and thought of have varying understanding and relative ascription. This reality produces **benign injustice**, which promotes illusions of justice by dulling or obscuring awareness of existing injustice. And the distinctions used for persons and relationships are at the core of this reductionist process. When his disciples were entrenched in such distinctions and preoccupied with having the privilege of “the greatest,” Jesus corrected their thinking and lens by changing that so-called privilege into the *right* human order. Persons of privilege live in unequal relationships that are stratified by power relations or by those “called benefactors” (Lk 22:24-25). Jesus alerted them to the gray areas of the human order that make up benign injustice.

Benefactors are identified with distinctions of privilege, prestige and power, and how they have functioned in their distinction has varied—with mixed results and reviews. Consider how the default love of benefactors is composed by paternalism. Many recipients also consider God’s love as paternalistic and render God the ultimate Benefactor. This confuses common love for uncommon love, and many benefactors conflate their actions with God’s love. Paternalism, however, functions contrary to uncommon love and thus in contradiction to the uncommon good that Jesus brings and gives.

Any paternalistic action directed to others always emerges from an upper position in the relational order, whether that order is recognized as stratified or not. It is from this position of privilege, prestige and power that recipients receive, and thus by implication are relegated to a lower position—whether explicit or implicit in the so-called positive action. Intrinsic in this comparative process is the formulation of a **deficit model** to measure the recipients, which both measures all recipient persons as *less* than benefactors and also tells those deemed as less what they need to measure up to in order to rise higher in this human order. The deficit model has been imposed by those deemed as *more* to subtly subordinate those less and to maintain the inequality between them. Those less only reinforce and sustain such inequality when they accept the deficit model for their self-assessment.

This is the unavoidable result: the ongoing engagement in relationships and treatment of persons composed by personal, institutional, systemic and structural inequality; and this inequity is consequential for both preventing justice and enabling injustice however benign paternalism may seem.

Consider further: The paternalistic efforts of liberal ideology have promoted a deficit model in U.S. race relations, which has only maintained the reduced identity and function of minorities in the fragmentary human condition. Many would consider this progress from past use of a deficit model that categorized minorities as sub-human, less human, inferior humans, or simply unworthy persons. Yet, the label of second-class persists for any use of a deficit model for persons. Thus, in existing race relations, whether politically, economically, educationally or just socially, the *right* human order has not emerged to stop enabling injustice, much less bring change to stop disabling justice and turn to justice.

This state of paternalism has been exacerbated by the existing reality of *benevolent sexism*.² While benevolent sexism is certainly more benign than sexual abuse, all such paternalistic actions have relegated females to a deficit condition and related position on the comparative scale—which then must also be construed as sexual misconduct. This deficit has had exponential consequences for all persons of both genders and their relationships together and separate (e.g. comparative masculinity among males).

Christians have not been on the sidelines of paternalism or removed from its consequences. On the contrary, Christians have directly engaged in paternalistic efforts, strongly supported paternalism if not led it, and widely been complicit with its consequences. Christian missions from the West, of course, led the way with its paternalism (with colonialist variations) imposed on others with a deficit model. Western theology has been paternalistic with its views, insisting on (imposing) its so-called correct doctrine so that the rest of the world will be “correct” in its theology and practice. Even Christian justice and peace ministries have engaged in paternalistic efforts that by default reinforce a deficit model without bringing the uncommon-redemptive change that gives uncommon peace.

The bad news of Jesus’ gospel counters any good news used that contradicts the uncommon good brought and given by Jesus. Such misinformed, misrepresenting or fact-less news have been a critical issue for the prophets of God’s words, the shepherds of God’s family, and the sentinels of human life, including “my witnesses.” For example, there were false prophets who said “the Lord declares...” when the Lord had not spoken, and who proclaimed “Peace when there is no peace” (Eze 13:1-10, cf. Jer 8:11)—all acting with a benign sense of injustice that common-ized the peace the face of God gives.

² The sexist dynamics engaged in benevolent sexism (formerly known as ambiguous sexism) is noted by Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske, “Hostile and Benevolent Sexism: Measuring Ambivalent Sexist Attitudes toward Women,” in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, March 1, 1997. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/aba/10-1111/j.1471-6402.1977.tb00104.x>.

These signify the false hopes today that must be unmistakably contrasted from the distinguished relational hope placed in Subject God's relational response of love to bring just-nection and give uncommon peace. In ancient history, Israel erred in confusing the kingdom of God with nationalism, and they mistook their uncommon identity with the common distinction of exceptionalism—all conflated under the assumption of having God's favor (counter to Dt 7:7-9). In modern history, the U.S. also makes similar confusing and conflating assessments of itself, along with the false assumption of "one nation under God" as "God's chosen nation." Many evangelicals in the U.S. proclaim this news as the gospel. The bad news of Jesus' gospel, however, exposes this so-called good news as misinformed, fact-less or fake news, which misleadingly promotes illusions of justice by a lens of benign injustice that common-ize peace.

As long as we remain steadfast in proclaiming the gospel by *paltering* (selectively stating only part of the gospel) and persist in avoiding Jesus' bad news by *confirmation bias* (selectively using only that which supports our beliefs), then we are faced with the reality of his bad news—as objects of his gospel protest:

If how we see and think of injustice excludes benign injustice, then our understanding of injustice is deficient because we lack knowing justice from inner out. The consequence is having a bias in how we act in everyday life, which makes us inconsistent in our daily actions because justice has become relative for us—with permissible rights variably composed, enacted and enforced. Since this reflects not understanding the uncommon good of Jesus' gospel to know what justice truly is, how we act is limited to default love and is constrained to the common good. Under this limit and constraint, our actions then in reality subtly enable injustice and disable justice, and thus which reinforces and sustains the (our) human condition. Without uncommon change, therefore, this condition prevents just-nection and the enforcement of vested rights and privileged rights to fulfill the inherent human need of all persons. The reality of all this evidences both the influence of reductionism exerted on how we think, see and act, and the extent of common-ization in our theology and practice.

The Justice of Love

The sword Jesus uses penetrates human hearts in order to, on the one hand, expose humanity's condition from inner out, and, on the other hand, to make vulnerable human hearts to connect their whole person in the relational process and involvement of love.

In the uncommon relational terms of Jesus' whole gospel, he constituted a new dimension for his rule of law; and this dimension is defining for his followers (notably "my witnesses") to distinguish them in the contexts of the common: **reciprocating love**—a new commandment of relational involvement with each other based just on the face-to-face experience of his intimate relational involvement with them "just as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34-35). Jesus makes conclusive that reciprocating love is foremost what God desires from us in our relationship. That is, God doesn't desire what we have and do—which is the human identity of a reduced theological anthropology—but our whole person relationally involved with him (as in Ps 40:6-7; 147:10-11, cf. Jn 4:23-24). Reciprocating love illuminates the relational reality of just-ness and thereby qualifies the embodying, enacting and enforcing of God's rule of law condensed into love (Mt 22:34-40). This relational understanding composes *the justice of love*.

All too often, God's love has been highlighted commonly apart from the whole relationship context and process of the gospel, thereby rendering God's love without its full relational significance or its whole relational outcome. Jesus counters that in "just as I love you."

Contrary to common Christian thinking and perception, God's love has less to do with serving and even less to do with sacrifice. God's love (*agape* in the NT, *hesed* in the OT) certainly includes serving and sacrifice, but it involves more depth. In God's relational terms, love enacts the presence and involvement of the whole of who, what and how God is. That is, God's righteousness and love are inseparable (Ps 85:10,13; 89:14), and without their dynamic integration, God's presence and involvement are ambiguous, if not concealed. Deeper than serving and beyond sacrifice, love makes vulnerable the presence and involvement of the whole who, what and how God is, and anything less and any substitutes for God (even in sacrifice on the cross) no longer constitute the encompassing depth of God's love.

The pivotal enactment of God's love, which expressed the justice of God's love, emerged in the strategic shift of God's presence and involvement that clarified any ambiguity and corrected any distortion of God's relational response in the human context. When Jesus engaged face to face the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (Jn 4:4-26, noted previously), he extended God's whole presence and involvement to her (as in 4:10,14,23-26). His vulnerable relational response enacted the justice of God's love that openly countered the gender, racial-ethnic and socio-religious injustice this woman experienced from the pervasive discrimination of others. In this strategic moment of God's whole presence and involvement made vulnerable face to face, Jesus embodied, enacted and demonstrated for us the depth of relational involvement that constitutes the love he gives and the justice of love he brings, together with his protest. It is only on the relational basis of his relational involvement that his followers can understand his commandment to them, and thus also embody and enact reciprocating love from the vulnerable experience of his love face to face. This relational involvement is commonly confused with serving

or sacrifice, but such actions neither require this involvement nor have its embracing depth.

Just as the Samaritan woman experienced face to face with Jesus (in her vulnerability also, Jn 4:15-20), the justice of God's love brings just-nection, in which she enacted her vested and privileged rights to fulfill her inherent human need (Jn 4:28-30,39-42). Her just-nection emerged from the relational outcome of Jesus' whole person making relational connection with her person by his vulnerable relational involvement initiated by his protest. In other words, Jesus loved her—not by serving her or sacrificing for her—and the depth of his relational involvement brought the uncommon change necessary to redeem her from injustice and to transform her condition to just-nection in order to give her wholeness. Thus, by his vulnerable relational involvement she experienced the relational reality of the whole who, what and how Subject God is—the strategic shift of the face of God whose presence and involvement shined on her and brought the uncommon change for new relationship together in wholeness. This is the integration of *siym* and *shalom* (Num 6:26) unfolding in the integrating dynamic of just-nection. Without the embracing depth of Jesus' relational involvement that first protested her bad news, the justice intrinsic to God's love does not unfold and thus its whole relational outcome of just-nection does not emerge. At best, what unfolds is premature justice that counters what Jesus brings, and what emerges is immature peace that contradicts what he gives.

This key interaction modelled Jesus' ongoing vulnerable relational involvement that engaged his whole person with all persons, which he expressed also while on the cross (evident by his face-to-face involvement with diverse persons). The depth of his relational response and involvement face to face distinguishes (1) clearly how he loves us to constitute our involvement in reciprocating love, and (2) the whole relational outcome of just-nection that by necessity involves the justice of his love, which must be engaged for the *right* involvement in reciprocating love.

Stopping short of Jesus' relational involvement relegates our love to a default condition that can only bring the premature justice and give the immature peace of the common good; and such love would have had no relational significance to the Samaritan woman for significant change in her life filled with discrimination and injustice. Without the significant change of what filled up her life, how could she or anyone have their inherent human need filled to wholeness?

In his gospel, Jesus didn't proclaim the concept of justice (as Mt 12:18 is commonly misconstrued). He vulnerably lived and enacted the relational terms of whole justice in its embracing depth of relational involvement—the integration of love and righteousness with faithfulness (as discussed in Ps 85:10,13; 89:14). Without the experiential reality of this integration, the relational process essential for justice is reduced to the concept of justice, which has no relational significance in spite of its claim

for the common good. Jesus makes integral to justice the relational involvement of love, and this is primary over any other enforcement of the rule of law (as in Lk 11:42). For justice to have significance and to encompass the significant change needed for just-nection, it must be constituted by the justice of God's love. That's why he protested the neglect of "justice and the love of God" (Lk 11:42).

Jesus demanded that the righteousness of his followers go beyond and deeper than who, what and how the majority associated with the kingdom of God were (Mt 5:20). To function in God's kingdom-family involves living daily in the realm of the uncommon while in the surrounding context of the common (as Jesus prayed, Jn 17:13-19). This relational process requires the *right* order of persons as inner-out subjects, who are governed by Subject God not to merely conform to the rule of law but to be relationally involved according to God's integral 'rule of justice', as defined only by God's relational terms (laws) for relationship together. Therefore, contrary to common practice, to love our neighbor involves going beyond and deeper than doing something positive for them, even if that's what we would like ourselves (enacting the Golden Rule). The underlying thinking in just a positive response is that any such action is "good" and thus would also be *right* for the common good.

Jesus clarified and corrected such thinking and action with his ongoing vulnerable presence and relational involvement. The new dimension of reciprocating love that Jesus constituted for his rule of law *and* of justice encompassed the depth of God's relational terms for the *right* order of relationship together—the only human order for just-nection in wholeness. As Jesus prayed, however, God's relational terms are holy, distinguished uncommon from the common, and therefore cannot be confused or conflated with our human terms shaped by or enveloped in common terms. Yet, the line of distinction between the uncommon and common has blurred, become obscure or simply assumed to be insignificant or of little consequence.

When Jesus' disciples returned to find him interacting with the Samaritan woman, "they were astonished" (surprised, amazed, *thaumazo*, Jn 4:27). Given the discrimination prevailing that constructed the existing human order in their context, they assumed that Jesus would conduct himself according to such normative relations. They understood neither the embracing depth of his relational involvement with her that distinguished how he also loved them, nor the relational purpose of his involvement to bring just-nection that distinguishes the *right* involvement for their reciprocating love. Jesus challenged them to enact this embracing depth of relational involvement in order to extend the justice of God's love for the just-nection of all persons without making distinctions, and to build on its relational outcome of wholeness for all persons and relationships (4:34-

38). If they (we) do not make their whole person vulnerable for this depth of relational involvement with all persons without using distinctions—“just as I have loved you”—there will not be justice in their love. Rather their actions will be rendered to **default love**, whose reduced function even enables injustice and disables justice to prevent justice. This would have happened to the Samaritan woman if Jesus had not relationally involved his whole person vulnerably face to face with her person without distinctions.

To make unmistakably clear, the disciples used the gender, ethnic, social and religious distinctions of the Samaritan woman to not be involved with her. Likewise, Peter used the distinctions of Jesus as Teacher and Lord to avoid being vulnerably involved with Jesus; and he used the Gentile distinction to discriminate against them, even after learning that “God made no distinctions” (Acts 15:9). Their default love reflected their choice as objects to live by reduced ontology and function, whereby they defined their own persons by the valued distinction of “the greatest.”

Based solely on the primacy of persons from inner out involved in relationship together, Subject God corrected the value placed on such distinctions (Jer 9:23-24), and also clarified that God’s people are not responded to by Subject God based on any valued distinction they had (Dt 7:7-9). Moreover, he exposed the common influence of distinctions and how this creates bias that disables justice and enables injustice (Ex 23:2-3; Lev 19:15), and thereby contradicts the ontology and function of the whole-ly God (Dt 10:17; 2 Chr 19:7).

Counter to default love, God’s uncommon love is enacted so that the justice of love will unfold the whole relational outcome for persons and the *right* relational process, involvement, connection and order for their relationships. Since human distinctions are a prevailing reality for everyday life, the issue of this simple fact is “what do Christians choose to do about it?” Do we choose to allow it to define our persons or other persons? Do we choose to allow it to determine how we are involved in relationships? Or do we choose to assert our person as subjects and exercise who, what and how we are from inner out, and thus not allow human distinctions to influence or shape us in reduced ontology and function for our response of love?

When our relational involvement of love goes deeper than human distinctions, our relational response is freed from any bias that limits, constrains or even prevents relational involvement with persons we dislike and with our enemies. Default love could be nice, irenic or positive with those persons, but distinctions have already precluded the depth of vulnerable relational involvement. The justice of love is not about merely being *nice* and involves not just making friends and influencing enemies; and this love is not about being different but involves being uncommon. On the other hand, uncommon love shouldn’t be confused with common notions of ‘tough love’. Default love can act firmly and sternly but the level of relational involvement is not vulnerable to be hurt, to suffer or be anguished...“just as I love you.”

There are no shortcuts in the justice of love. Its difficulty is in the relational terms constituted by God, which are irreducible to the common and nonnegotiable to human terms. Therefore, “Do you love me?” is not answered by common love. Love each other, your neighbor and your enemies are not responded to by default love. Just-nection for persons and relationships does not emerge from premature justice, nor does their wholeness unfold with immature peace. Until the uncommon good of Jesus’ gospel prevails in our theology and practice, pervading the biases of our Christian traditions, church systems and ministry operations, we cannot and should not expect anything more. Anything less and any substitutes are rooted in reductionism, which operates subtly by the (over)simplification of human issues and then the common-izing of human responses to the human condition—all reinforced and sustained by Christians in default function.

Until we make the conscious choice as subjects to ongoingly engage the critical battle against reductionism as all sin, the shame of our status quo will continue. Without the uncommon relational involvement distinguished by Jesus’ gospel, only common change can occur at the most, with common peace the most optimistic result possible. And unless we expect from each other the embracing depth of relational involvement as Jesus loves us, our default love signifies a crisis in urgent need of the transformation emerging only from uncommon change.

The justice of love enacted vulnerably by Jesus in face-to-face relationship is critical for experiencing what justice is from inner out. This relational experience is the essential basis in order to protest injustice at its roots. From this basis, we have to be aware of injustice to proclaim the gospel by living daily in justice from inner out.

Jesus shared unequivocally, “my *uncommon* peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives...*as Israel gave...as the U.S. gives.*” Based on the fact-checked integrated bad and good news of what Jesus brings and gives, here we are at this critical juncture—which we need to resolve unmistakably or be relegated by default to the common alternative:

- We cannot claim the good news of Jesus’ gospel without receiving his bad news.
- We cannot have his uncommon peace until we turn around from common peace.
- We cannot experience uncommon-redemptive change unless we go beyond common change.
- We cannot embrace the uncommon good brought and given by Jesus if we have fallen into the common good.
- We cannot be relationally involved in the justice of love as long as we function in default love.
- We cannot mature just-nection and wholeness while we counter what Jesus brings and contradict what he gives.

The uncommon good of Jesus' gospel brings just uncommon change and gives just uncommon peace. Anything less and any substitutes in our gospel are on a wider theological trajectory and an easier relational path than Jesus'. This wide trajectory and easy path need to be turned around and transformed down to their common roots, so that uncommon good fruit will grow and mature to fulfill the inherent human need of all persons—persons distinguished from inner out, without distinctions, for their wholeness in equalized relationships together. But, don't be misled about this relational outcome, because it only unfolds from Jesus' gospel protest resonated by "my witnesses" in tune with his whole gospel.

"Woe to you...who *diminish* justice and the love of God!"

Chapter 6 The Inconvenient Meaning & Belonging Proclaiming the Gospel

**Listen, you *leaders of God's people!*
Should you not know, *understand and enact justice?***

Micah 3:1

**You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality....
Justice and only justice you shall pursue, so that you may live *whole and uncommon.***

Deuteronomy 16:19-20

When Christians, locally and globally, talk about the human condition, there are diverse viewpoints expressed, which may or may not be included in their proclamation of the gospel. The human condition envelops the full spectrum of human activity that is determined by the innate condition of humanity composed inclusively by its diversity. To what extent the news of the gospel addresses this human condition will determine the bias, naiveté or integrity of proclaiming the gospel. Christians are urgently faced with this issue in the theology and practice of their faith.

In the diversity of the global church, variable practice is the rule, even when there could be uniformity in theology. What's most common in these global contexts is the lack of being distinguished uncommon. This condition is also true for Christians in the U.S., notably among evangelicals. What is most consequential from and in our condition is the gospel we claim and proclaim.

Given the existential reality of the pervasive problem of distinguishing the uncommon from the common in our everyday life, it is critical that the tension and conflict between them be an open, ongoing and discomforting issue that confronts us for resolve. Hopefully, our further discussion will magnify this issue in our theology and amplify it in our practice.

Jesus' post-ascension critique of the majority of early churches (Rev 2-3) made apparent this defining reality:

Churches and ministries have their own agendas that are prioritized in their theology and practice, the existence of which composes the diversity of the global church.

However important those agendas might be, when Christians pursue their agendas at the expense (minor or major) of the whole picture (not just the big picture), they fall into

giving their agenda priority over the primary constituted by God's whole picture. Christian agendas are a disguised problem of immeasurable consequences, because they fragment God's whole, subtly by compartmentalizing it, thus by their human shaping (even inadvertently). This all reflects, reinforces or sustains common thinking, perception and action. As Jesus exposed in the churches, our agendas identify the gospel we use and further indicate our underlying theological anthropology and view of sin.

Therefore, at this point in our journey, we must face with basic areas of our faith since recurring issues necessitate that we ongoingly assess how we think, perceive and act. This ongoing process needs to be engaged with the relational involvement in *triangulation* with the Trinity and others in everyday life, while in *reciprocating contextualization* between God's relational context and our surrounding human contexts. In this relational process, we need to keenly assess basic matters with Jesus' axiomatic paradigm (Mk 4:24):

- The gospel we use or emphasize will be the agendas we get.
- Given our agendas unfolding from the gospel we use, that gospel first emerges from the measure of our theological anthropology, which is composed from our view of sin.
- Thus, the measure of sin we use is the theological anthropology we get.
- The theological anthropology we use will determine the measure of the gospel we get.
- Then, the gospel we use will determine the agendas we get, live by and serve.

The *right* (as in *best*) conclusions for these basic matters are indispensable for the call to justice and are irreplaceable for the work of peace. And these conclusions, therefore, are nonnegotiable to the premature justice and immature peace existing among Christian diversity.

Convenient or Inconvenient

With the evolving development of modern technology and the emergence of AI, the line between reality and augmented or virtual reality (e.g. human generated images) has become so blurred that it is often difficult to discern the truth from misinformation or fake representation of the truth. The latter represents an acceptable norm in postmodernist thinking, while the former represents the bad assumption in modernist thinking that has not recognized (or acknowledged) its own bias in shaping the truth. This distinct line is also concurrently blurred in relation to the gospel.

For example, more and more Christians appear to be embracing conspiracy theories instead of fact-checking for the truth. Why? These Christians mirror the common thinking and perception of those in the general population propagating conspiracy theories. Such scenarios have become more convenient in surrounding contexts than the inconvenience of truth. But even more convenient is the sense of meaning and belonging provided for those who hold these convictions collectively in a notion of community, however virtual that may be. Recent surveys point to the underlying human needs that conspiracy theory adopters have, which are a greater priority for them than the truth.¹ This reflects the human condition that determines the common in surrounding contexts, the shaping influence of which has permeated Christian practice, if not its theology.

The common's influence has led Christians to proclaim Christian nationalism for the U.S., whereby their human needs to be valued and to belong have subtly also shaped their thinking and perception of what composes the good news without the bad news: focused on "...given to us...and there shall be endless peace for his kingdom-*nation, the U.S.A.*" (Isa 9:6-7). Proclaiming such a gospel evolves from a bias or naiveté about the bad news that skews the good news for the sake of convenience. Even the protests generated by Christian nationalism conveniently overlook the extent of the bad news about the U.S. condition. And always underlying this process are the human needs of those proclaiming—notably the needs of white Christians who tacitly define the nationalism movement as white nationalism.²

Our view (picture or even video) of the gospel can be either partial or complete, either distorted or lucid, either virtual or real. Portions of that picture could be either-or, but to have the whole picture we cannot include any elements of both-and. That makes God's whole picture distinguished from any of our portrayals, and the tension and conflict between them needs to be magnified in our theology and amplified in our practice. This will certainly be an inconvenient process challenging our convenience. But, then, the Truth embodied by Jesus will always be inconvenient (as the gospel truth in Isa 9:6-7).

There are three pivotal issues that bring out the main composition of any picture of the gospel:

¹ Reported by Jesselyn Cook, *LA Times* OP-ED, July 28, 2024.

² David P. Gushee addresses some of the issues of Christian political ethics involved in authoritarian Christianity. See *Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023).

1. Who and what is the person created by God, and how are persons to function in their created human order, which constitutes their likeness to God? This issue is essential to understand the persons with whom God was involved in the beginning, and is vital for composing the theological anthropology at the heart of human life—the lack of which alters the picture of the gospel accordingly.
2. What changed who, what and how that person was, and thereby fragmented the human order between persons and reduced their likeness to God? This issue is pivotal to understand the sin that encompasses the breadth and depth of the human condition, and is critical for having the view of sin that gets to the fragmentary heart of the human condition—the shallow view of which composes theological anthropology accordingly.
3. How did the whole-ly God respond to this human condition, and what is the nature of God’s response? This issue is fundamental to understand who, what and how God is, and is definitive for embracing this whole-ly God’s gospel from the beginning—the reduction of which opens the gate wide, accordingly, to a diversity of agendas.

God’s whole picture is never complete until these interrelated issues are fully understood. And the key to this full understanding is the 2nd issue and our working view of sin in everyday life.

As composed by reductionism from the beginning, the human condition is in ongoing tension and conflict with God the creator and ruler of all life. In this overt and covert battle, God is routinely rendered (a) nonexistent in ontology/being (as in atheism), or (b) irrelevant in ontology and function (as in scientism), or (c) detached or removed in function (as in deism). With the reduction of God, the human order and its essential justice from creation are reconstructed, revised or simply ignored. Certainly, Christians don’t define their theology by (a) or (b), though in their practice they may live daily as if (b) were true. Less obvious, however, most Christians do practice (c) in one way or another, as if to live in a virtual reality. The subtle function of (c) is a functional substitute for God’s likeness and thus displaces the function of God’s creation justice with the human shaping of “good and evil”; and it is this distortion that has evolved from the primordial garden to entrench human life in this human condition. Without understanding reductionism, a shallow and weak view of sin has pervaded our theology and practice, and relegated the gospel to diverse portrayals, with a lack of redemptive significance for the breadth and depth of the human condition and no transforming significance for the wholeness of persons and relationships.

His Inconvenient Gospel

As we turn to what's inconvenient in Jesus' gospel, we have to always be aware of our own human needs and thereby factor our needs (such as having meaning, being valued and belonging) into any proclamation. Who, what and how we proclaim are always subjected to our needs and not just subject to the needs of those receiving our proclamation.

Very few Christians consider protesting the bad news of the human condition as part of evangelism, though Christian nationalists might assume that their protests are evangelistic instead of political. Regardless, that begs the question for evangelistic efforts then, why do you proclaim the good news? This challenges our theology, including questioning our defining culture and/or subculture, supporting our practice of proclaiming the gospel. Why so necessary now? Because we need to be changed (redeemed and transformed) from the biased or naive notion of the good news not being interconnected with the bad news constituted in Jesus' gospel.

The traditional proclamation of the gospel (*euangelion*) has revolved around the conventional practice of evangelism (*euangelizo*). The evangelism practiced, however, depends on the gospel used, which tradition has limited to a truncated soteriology of mainly being saved from sin—a shallow or weak view of sin lacking reductionism. This tradition of evangelism has been challenged not so much in its theological limits but to supplement its practice with social action. That is, many have called for a response to the various needs in the human context in addition to proclaiming salvation, with varying priorities given to each practice. A major consequence from this challenge has been the emergence of a false dichotomy in our theology and practice between evangelism and social action. Supporters of both sides have engaged in “holy debate,” and any conclusions that have evolved have only compounded the underlying problem and deepened the consequence.

It is critical for us to move beyond the misleading and misguided dichotomy between evangelism and social action. For the most part, both sides in this “holy debate” presume to speak for God—as in the “holy debate” about theories of human order—and thus push their agenda. Their biased agenda, however, fails to get to the heart of Jesus' gospel and, consequently, to the heart of human life and the human condition. Therefore, the hard reality and inconvenient truth is that both sides don't fully claim and proclaim Jesus' gospel of just-nection essential for our creation and salvation. With this underlying problem, any attempt in this “holy debate” to reconcile reduced sides or to synthesize fragmented positions neither resolves the problem nor composes the whole picture of Jesus' 3-D gospel (discussed in Chap. 4). Rather this well-intentioned effort only constructs a hybrid of fragmentary parts that do not add up to the *whole*. This whole

outcome requires that how we think, see and act go beyond these limits and constraints, and get to the depth of his gospel and thereby down to the heart of whole-ly God.

The inconvenient truth for the leaders of God's people is that they are accountable to know, understand and enact justice (Mic 3:1). This reality means that God's people "must not distort justice...must not show partiality," and that "justice and only justice you shall pursue" for our life purpose, meaning, value and related human needs, "so that you may live *whole and uncommon*" (Dt 16:19-20). This truth remains inconvenient more than ever today, especially for those with a bias or naiveté in proclaiming the gospel.

In the 3-D gospel integrally embodied and enacted by Jesus, "he will proclaim justice...until he brings justice to victory" (Mt 12:18,20); "there shall be endless peace for...*his kingdom-family*. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from *the present through the future*" (Isa 9:6-7). How does this unfold for our theology to be congruent with his gospel and for our practice to be compatible with who and what he embodied and how he enacted the 3-D gospel?

The whole gospel emerged in the beginning with the Word and unfolded from the beginning in God's whole response to what evolved from the primordial garden. The gospel centers on salvation (including redemption and deliverance), but unlike other portrayals of the gospel, this salvation is constituted only in relational terms and defined as follows:

Salvation is the shorthand relational term that integrates the whole relational response of uncommon grace from the Trinity to the inescapable human condition, in order to fulfill this relational purpose and outcome:

1. To redeem persons and relationships from the reductionism prevailing over them that has violated the created justice of human ontology and function and broken their just-nection.
2. To bring the uncommon redemptive change necessary to transform this human condition to restore persons and relationships to their whole ontology and function created in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the whole-ly Trinity.
3. To restore persons and reconcile relationships to the created wholeness of life and its essential order, the relational process of which must by its constituting nature involve the justice composed by God for human life to be whole.
4. To raise up the new creation of the whole-ly Trinity's family for all persons, peoples, tribes and nations to relationally belong both equalized without distinctions and intimately in uncommon peace.

Salvation, then, in Jesus' 3-D gospel is the distinguished relational dynamic that encompasses the whole theological anthropology from creation and its reduction as the depth of sin. The relational dynamic of salvation also embraces the existing human condition that disables justice and enables injustice at all levels of human life. Since salvation brings uncommon redemptive change to the human condition of reductionism, salvation is not, will not and cannot be claimed if justice is not the new relational order and if persons are not distinguished in everyday life by the image and likeness of God's ontology and function. That is, with the 3-D view of sin as reductionism, no one is saved *from* sin as long as reductionism shapes persons and relationships together. Therefore, in Jesus' 3-D gospel, by the necessity of sin as reductionism, salvation both saves *from* reductionism and saves *to* wholeness; no one is saved *from* reductionism alone because only wholeness emerges when reductionism is removed. If wholeness doesn't emerge, reductionism still remains and any saving from so-called sin doesn't encompass reductionism.

Salvation *from* and *to* are inseparable and integrate the relational response, purpose and outcome that Jesus fulfilled in proclaiming his gospel. Anything less and any substitutes neither claim nor proclaim this 3-D gospel, but rather fall into a default mode with a gospel on a different theological trajectory and an agenda on a different relational path than who, what and how Jesus enacted.

Default salvation is a *justice-less salvation* that centers on saving from sin that either doesn't include sin as reductionism or doesn't include saving to wholeness. In Jesus' 3-D gospel, justice is not merely the fruit of salvation but it *is* salvation. Those pursuing the social action agenda over evangelism engage in *whole-less justice* and thus fall into **default social action**, likely motivated by default love. In his gospel, this default mode does not "bring justice to victory" as Jesus proclaimed (Mt 12:20). Accordingly, evangelism revolving around justice-less salvation falls into **default evangelism**. Like default social action and love, this default mode neither encompasses the good news of what Jesus brings nor embraces what he gives, and thus neither claims the depth underlying his Great Commission nor proclaims the extent of it. Therefore, in their default modes of justice-less salvation and whole-less justice, both sides fail to restore the vested and privileged rights from creation justice that all persons require to fulfill their inherent human need for their everyday well-being. In so doing by not doing, both sides counter what Jesus brings and contradict what he gives.

Since salvation is justice in Jesus' gospel, Christians cannot be satisfied with the lack of justice or settle for any type of justice. For example, merely working within permissible rights, around them, or for changing them is inadequate, and it distorts the whole 3-D picture of his gospel. We are accountable for the justice by which God created all life and saved it with the wholeness of the new creation. Anything less and any

substitutes of God's justice are not what we are saved to *be* and called to share with others, as inconvenient as that may be. Therefore, the integrity of proclaiming Jesus' whole gospel integrates protesting the bad news of the human condition, so that his good news will be the relational outcome of his inconvenient gospel.

Belonging Together in Face to Face Justice

Proclaiming the gospel assumes that the gospel has been claimed first. Yet, what has been claimed cannot be assumed in the proclaiming of Jesus' gospel. Proclaiming his 3-D gospel is based on claiming what Jesus brings and gives. What Jesus brings and gives, however, also cannot be assumed in the claiming. Jesus' definitive paradigm (Mk 4:24) outlines this irrevocable equation for us:

- The measure used for what Jesus brings and gives is the measure of what we can claim.
- The measure of what we then have claimed is the measure of what we can, will and do proclaim.

This determinative equation unfolds in our practice from what emerges in our theology.

Peter struggled with what he claimed because the measure he used for Jesus was common. His common measure then determined what he proclaimed, which Paul protested face to face for the justice of the gospel inconvenient for Peter (Gal 2:11-14). When Peter was turned around by redemptive change (what Jesus gives, 1 Pet 1:3), he was able to distinguish the uncommon from the common and thus proclaim the integrity of what Jesus brings and gives (1 Pet 1:13-16). With the help of Paul's teaching (2 Pet 3:14-16), Peter clearly distinguished the uncommon identity of God's people belonging together in the primacy of face-to-face reciprocal relationship together as God's whole-ly family (1 Pet 2:9-10).

When God's definitive blessing initially enacted the gospel, an essential change (*siym*) was put into motion that reconstituted relationship in the wholeness of *shalom* (Num 6:26). In Jesus' intense protest cleaning out the temple for its redemptive change, he established the relational context for all nations, tribes and peoples to connect equitably in this wholeness of relationship together. This relational outcome extended the *siym* and *shalom* of God's definitive blessing. But, Jesus gives more! As he finished his defining protest on the cross, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to

bottom” (Mk 15:38). This opened direct access to holy God for uncommon intimate relationship together face to face, not just to pray, but for ongoing reciprocal relationship together heart to heart “as I have loved you.” With the veil over hearts and between persons in relationships removed, Jesus completed the *siym* initiated for *shalom* to transform persons for their just-nection in likeness of the Trinity (as Paul summarized, 2 Cor 3:16-18).

The human need to belong goes unfulfilled today perhaps more widely than ever. This need underlies what has become a prevailing human condition: loneliness. The subtlety of loneliness is not always recognized in human contexts where human contacts and associations exist (as on the internet). But, the loneliness experienced is an existential reality, which has become a health problem for a growing number of students. This relational condition underlies surrounding cultures, even among Christians in church culture.³

While Jesus was alone on the cross, he didn’t experience loneliness because of belonging together in the whole of God, the Trinity. In spite of the mystery of his lament (Mt 27:46), their relationship together in wholeness was never broken, fragmented or rendered to distance between their persons. Jesus extended the likeness of their whole relationship together to his mother Mary and his closest disciple John (Jn 19:25-27, discussed earlier). In a totally unexpected just-nection from redemptive change, the relational outcome of what Jesus brought and gave unfolds in his gospel’s culture as they would grow deeper in their new identity and function. By embracing each other in their new identity and function, his gospel’s culture unfolds in two essential ways that are nonnegotiable for distinguishing this culture as inseparably whole and uncommon. Based only on the gospel of what Jesus brings and gives, the two ways emerge:

1. Their new identity is not defined by the reduction of their person to merely an individual, but rather their persons are whole just in the primacy of relationships together as his family in likeness of the Trinity. Any individualism counters what he brings and contradicts what he gives.
2. Therefore, their new function is determined neither by individualism nor by their biological family, which is an uncommon change from existing function but indispensable to be distinguished from the common. In his gospel’s culture, the biological family is always secondary (not unimportant) to the primacy of his family—persons together as one in likeness of the Trinity, who relationally belong by their ongoing relational response and involvement of whole-ly faith (cf. Mt 12:48-52).

³ For further perspective on loneliness, see Susan Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic: Why So Many of Us Feel Alone & How Leaders Can Respond* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021).

These two ways are indispensable to define the identity and determine the function of persons growing in what Jesus brings and gives, and thereby irreplaceable for unfolding his gospel's culture. Anything less and any substitutes—which are typical in Christian cultures—no longer distinguish such a culture as whole and uncommon. The resulting ambiguity, conflict or contradiction in our theology and practice must be resolved, in order to be compatible with the theological trajectory of what Jesus alone brings and congruent with the relational path of what he gives without less or substitutes.

The whole-ly culture of Jesus' gospel unfolds in our midst when (1) it integrates persons and relationships in the wholeness of his new creation family (not our versions of church), (2) it encompasses the breadth and depth of the human condition in all its reductionism, and (3) it embraces all of human life and its diverse human order at all existing levels of the human context and its surrounding creation. The whole person from inner out functioning in the primacy of relationship together is at the heart of whole-ly culture—persons reflecting the heart of the Trinity—whereby this distinguished culture unfolds with those persons relationally involved to bring uncommon change in order to give uncommon peace. This vulnerable function goes beyond merely engaging in Christian ethics conforming to a moral code of justice,⁴ and it goes deeper than default love such as peacemaking with common peace for the common good (e.g. as in being irenic). How so? Because this distinguished function exercises Jesus' sword of uncommon change for the sake of creation justice to be enforced for the vested and privileged rights of all persons, in order to have their inherent human need fulfilled in the just-nection of uncommon peace. Christian culture becomes ambiguous, if not a contradiction, with anything less and any substitutes.

More than a counter-culture, the whole-ly culture of Jesus' gospel is always unequivocally *anti-reductionism* for this ongoing purpose: to *bring* uncommon change to human life and to redeem, heal, reconcile and transform the human relational condition in order to *give* it the uncommon wholeness that distinguishes the collective identity and function of persons belonging to Jesus' culture. If the Christian culture in our midst operates with anything less and any substitutes, it does not operate with whole-ly faith but some reduction or fragmentation of it. Furthermore, such Christian culture does not unfold the whole-ly culture from Jesus' gospel, but in the reality of its theology (not its theory) and its practice (not its ideal), this culture has been influenced by reductionism and common-ized accordingly, such that it counters the uncommon Jesus brings and contradicts the whole he gives. Sadly, these cultures proclaim a different gospel because they have claimed a different gospel from Jesus'. As Paul experienced with churches in

⁴ Claire Disbrey advocates for the Christian practice of “virtue ethics”—going beyond merely conforming to an ethical-moral code out of obligation and focusing on the virtues of being a good person—in *Wrestling with Life's Tough Issues: what should a Christian do?* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).

his day, he would continue to express about our pervasive conditions today: “I am astonished that you are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel” (Gal 1:6-7).

When the gospel we claim and proclaim is not the whole-ly gospel embodied and enacted by Jesus, we fall into the default modes of discipleship that practice justice-less salvation and whole-less justice. This disjunction pervades Christian culture and the global church’s mission to render our identity and function to an ambiguous condition challenging our faith (as Jesus does, Mt 5:13-16).

The creation justice Jesus proclaims to “bring justice to victory *in the new creation*” (Mt 12:18-21) can only be claimed by persons without the veil, in order to make face-to-face relational connection with the intimate presence of the Trinity. The integral theological truth and thus relational reality are that the Trinity’s presence and involvement were made vulnerable to us for this face-to-face relational connection when Jesus tore down the curtain—the truth for our theology and the reality for our practice needing to distinguish what we claim and proclaim. This face-to-face relational connection without the veil of human distinctions gives hope to all persons, peoples, tribes and nations to claim the uncommon Jesus brings and the wholeness he gives. Their hope fades when those who proclaim the gospel do not engage the face-to-face relational dynamic of Jesus’ gospel necessary to have the relational involvement to make relational connection with them. In any such proclamation, the face-to-face relational connection is not distinguished for them to claim the just-nection Jesus brings and gives, and whatever they may claim would only be a different gospel.

The reality keeps surfacing that how we live (individually and collectively) proclaims the gospel we have claimed; and this reality reflects both the image of God we bear and the God of our image. What Jesus proclaims is **face-to-face justice**, and he brings justice to victory only in the primacy of face-to-face relationship together to constitute persons and relationships in wholeness—the uncommon wholeness in likeness of the Trinity. The face-to-face likeness of the Trinity, therefore, is essential for defining our identity and determining our function. But it is critical to understand that this face-to-face relationship is neither unilateral nor relegated to a hierarchy. Rather, relationship together is ongoingly reciprocal between persons who have been equalized without distinctions in face-to-face justice.

We reflect this likeness of the Trinity by the ongoing vulnerable relational involvement (also known as love) of our whole person in the primacy of face-to-face reciprocal relationship. Consider then that any call to justice without face to face could only be incomplete and not bring the change for the just-nection of others. Consider further that any work for peace without face to face could only be fragmentary and not give the relational response and involvement of love for the relational connection that others need for their wholeness. Such a call is made on behalf of premature justice, and such a work is made for the sake of immature peace.

With creation justice, God didn't merely create life in what is right, as if to be lived within the limits and constraints of a mere moral-ethical code of justice. God created life in what is *best*, to which a mere moral-ethical code of justice is in contrast, and often in conflict with ever since. **God's justice is the superlative**, and anything less and any substitutes compose simply **comparative injustice**. The spectrum of injustice, which includes benign injustice, encompasses every consequence resulting from any lack of God's justice (consider Lev 19:15; Jas 2:1-10). The human struggle for justice centers on improving its comparative state of injustice, and addressing benign injustice is often not part of that struggle. Christian practice that is focused on what is right over what is *best*, also converges with the human struggle that conflates the superlative of God's justice with the comparative of injustice. This conflation of the superlative with the comparative is evident notably when Christians ignore or don't address benign injustice. In creation justice, the Trinity created human life with the superlative of just-nection for persons to be whole from inner out (without outer-in distinctions) in the primacy of face-to-face reciprocal relationship together in the Trinity's likeness—that is, only in what is *best*.

In the human relational condition among God's people, the psalmist cried out to his God for justice; that God would respond and “decree justice” by “*your* rule over them” (Ps 7:6-7, NIV). To rule (*yashab*) means to sit, dwell in their midst, not merely as a judge (cf. NRSV) but for the relational purpose and outcome of covenant relationship together distinguished in wholeness (the *tamiym* of Gen 17:1). In other words, this is the primacy of intimate involvement (as in Dt 7:7-9) in the relational response by God to bring peace to his people face to face (fulfilling God's definitive blessing, Num 6:24-26). This face-to-face justice is the sole gospel that Jesus embodied and enacted whole-ly. Therefore, the uncommon change he brings, even with his sword, and the uncommon peace he gives both emerge, unfold, grow and mature exclusively face to face. This primacy is irreducible from what is *best* and is nonnegotiable by merely what is right, even if it serves the common good.

The primacy of face to face is how the justice of Jesus' gospel is proclaimed with protest; and this primacy leads justice to victory face to face in the relational response and involvement of the Trinity's new creation family. Just as “*decaying* creation waits with eager longing for the *relational response and involvement* of the Trinity's family” (Rom 8:19-21), all human life and its human relational condition long for the redemptive change that the face-to-face relational response and involvement this new creation family brings and gives whole-ly. When our persons come together face to face without the veil, we make the relational connection necessary for our just-nection to belong together in the Trinity's new creation family. As the uncommon that Jesus brings and gives is claimed face to face, we are distinguished whole-ly to proclaim his gospel face to face just as Jesus did—to call for superlative justice face to face and to work for the peace of new relationship together in wholeness face to face as “my witnesses.”

This primacy of face-to-face reciprocal relationship together is how God created all life in what is *best*, and how the Trinity constituted the new creation in likeness with nothing less and no substitutes. Anything less and any substitutes in our thinking and perception of the gospel are challenged by Jesus' gospel face to face. Anything less and any substitutes in our actions are confronted by his face-to-face justice in protest, which exposes a different gospel we have claimed behind the gospel we proclaim.

Anything less and any substitutes for face-to-face reciprocal relationship together have become more complex in the modern context of technology. What is virtual has evolved into such realistic representation that it blurs the line with reality. What has simulated face-to-face connection or substituted for face-to-face involvement have become so pervasive on the internet and social media that they prevail for defining human identity and determining human function in everyday life. In this modern life lacking face to face, persons are experiencing the greatest lack of qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness witnessed in human history, which results in loneliness in the midst of what prevails. The accelerating consequence is reconstructing persons and relationships in a default mode that includes benign injustice, such that their practices in real reality further enable comparative injustice while they disable superlative justice.

The only hope to redeem anything less and any substitutes is the face-to-face justice of Jesus' gospel, which remains in disjunction with the prevalence of our gospel. Since that hope will not be realized until it is claimed face to face, those persons indeed proclaiming his whole-ly gospel will need to intensify their face-to-face relational response and involvement in order to deconstruct anything less and any substitutes—first in Christian culture and the church. This deconstruction includes exercising Jesus' sword of uncommon change that will expose the virtual reality of relationships (as in Mk 7:6-8), break apart the simulation of relationships, for example, in biological families (as in Mt 10:34-36), and will unavoidably involve the relational depth to clean out God's house in order to restore the primacy of face-to-face reciprocal relationships for all persons without any and all distinctions. Wherever anything less and any substitutes exist, at whatever level of human life, Jesus' gospel of face-to-face justice urgently needs to be proclaimed in protest by persons in the primacy of face-to-face reciprocal relationship together for the sole relational purpose to bring superlative justice to victory—nothing less and no substitutes.

Therefore, contrary to all that is convenient, those who claim the inconvenient truth of Jesus' whole gospel are vulnerably involved without a veil over their heart, thus living only in the primary pursuit of face-to-face justice, so that their daily identity is defined and everyday function is determined integrally whole and uncommon (Dt 16:20) as inconvenient peacemakers belonging together face to face as God's family (Mt 5:9).

Why would you proclaim any other gospel?

Chapter 7 “My Witnesses” Stand in the Breach

“I sought for anyone among them who would *deal with the human condition* and stand in the breach.”

Ezekiel 22:30

There was a *person* sent from God...*who was* a witness to testify to the light...the true light, which enlightens everyone.

John 1:6-9

“You are witnesses of *what I bring and give.*”

Luke 24:48

The bad news of the human condition is perceived, interpreted and thus reported diversely to reflect the surrounding context. Such diversity then determines variable measures taken, if any, to address the human condition. This is the fact even for Christians, which becomes an inconvenient truth for those not guided by the facts. The facts of Jesus, however, are invariable, even though they are subject to denial and subjected to misinformed testimony by Christians.

Christians in the U.S., as Christians, should be the most marginalized segment of the population. Yet, in reality, we collectively are the most assimilated into the American way of life. Christians in other countries could be marginalized just for their religious difference from the dominant sector, but not necessarily for their identity (being) and function distinguished as Christians. What should distinguish Christians in any country is *being* in likeness to the whole-ly Trinity—that is, being whole and uncommon in their identity and function in the common contexts of everyday life.

In the most globally visible period of human history, we live in divisive, fragmented and broken contexts of everyday life. The challenge for all Christians is not about the thinking of how “good” we adapt to this human condition, but how well we change it. When we have the knowledge of what Jesus brings and the understanding of what he gives in his gospel, this urgent challenge shifts to accountability. The accountability for us is inescapable if we have claimed his gospel. At that point, our accountability focuses less on *how* do we change the human condition and more immediately on *when* do we change the existing human (our) condition evident at all levels of everyday life. That is, when do we (both individually and collectively) bring to everyday life the uncommon change Jesus brings, so that we can grow and mature the whole-ly justice and peace of his gospel?

The invariable fact of what Jesus brings and gives to constitute his whole gospel makes unavoidable the existential reality of his sword of peace enacted in the arc of justice. The scope of his gospel protest, therefore, holds Christians accountable ongoingly for (1) their view of sin composing the human condition, and (2) their related theological anthropology defining the identity and determining the function of their persons and the rest of humanity. This accountability is also inescapable for those proclaiming to be “my witnesses,” who are often distinguished by a thin line separating them from those claiming to be ‘his witnesses’ without the relational significance of “my.”

The Irreversible Breach in Humanity

The human condition reduces, fragments, controls and enslaves human life at all its levels: individual, collective, sociocultural, institutional and structural. This condition is irreversible, causing a breach in humanity that is irreparable, which includes the breach in relation to God. Does this constitute bad news or what?

Any gospel that assumes that this condition will simply reverse itself when the good news is claimed, or that it will be repaired when the good news is proclaimed, is out of tune with the gospel embodied and enacted by Jesus to account for what he brings and gives. Such a gospel is misinformed by the common of human life, and thereby it becomes *commonized* to skew its good news with a bias diminishing the bad news. Thus, any proclamation of this gospel is a testimony by those who are competing with or contrary to the integrity of “my witnesses,” whereby they reflect, reinforce and sustain a weak view of sin underlying their human condition (cf. Mt 7:22-23). Coupled with their incomplete theological anthropology lacking wholeness, their condition mirrors the human condition of their surrounding context; this certainly then biases their perception and understanding of any breach in that context, in particular, and in the broader human context in general.

When the breaches in humanity are minimized or not even recognized, the need to proclaim the bad news has lost significance, or at least has become less urgent, perhaps unnecessary. With this thinking, Jesus’ sword of peace enacted in the arc of justice is directly countered to neutralize what is assumed to be objectionable or inconvenient for the gospel. That leaves the door open for the gospel to be proclaimed with only good news on a widely favorable path without the need to protest. The most significant problem with the variable theology and practice of these so-called witnesses of the gospel is that it does not testify as “my witnesses.”

“My witnesses” are accountable to “follow my whole person” and to be relationally involved “where I am” (Jn 12:26). “Where I am” follows his sword of peace enacted in the arc of justice. His early disciples struggled to be involved “where I am” or else they would have protested the Samaritan woman’s bad news together with his person (Jn 4:27). Whether in his tender protest with the Samaritan woman or his intense protest cleaning out the temple, whether in the larger human context or the context among God’s people, Jesus’ whole person vulnerably countered these breaches in humanity with the justice of love, in order to bring the face-to-face justice of his gospel giving the relational outcome of just-nection.

These breaches cannot be remedied or repaired as if to reverse them but require redemptive change, wherein the old condition needs to die so that the new condition can rise to replace it. Nothing less and no substitutes are capable of changing the irreversible breaches in humanity.

“My witnesses” are accountable to “follow my whole person” and be vulnerably involved face to face together in love in the breaches of humanity “where I am,” so that these breaches can indeed undergo redemptive change for humanity’s transformation. Throughout human history, the word of the Lord God “sought for anyone among *his people* who would *deal with the human condition* and stand in the breach before me” (Eze 22:30). The Word of the Lord continues to seek among Christians for “my witnesses to stand in the breach along side of my person.” Otherwise, who will deal with the human condition and what will bring about its redemptive change for humanity’s transformation?

The ARC of “My Witnesses”

Transformation is a misleading assumption that Christians frequently make about salvation. Related, many Christians calling for justice and working for peace are misguided to assume that their theology and practice are not composed by whole-less justice and peace. *Change* is the common issue here that calls into question what is the underlying change claimed and proclaimed.

The issue of change emerges distinctly from the gospel. If that change doesn’t encompass the human condition and get to the heart of human life, what significance does that gospel have? If that gospel encompasses this change but is not reflected in those who claim or proclaim it, what significance does that change have? Certainly, then, this significance revolves around the disjuncture between *our* gospel and *his* gospel, and the change that emerges from it. This disjuncture in our theology underlies the disjuncture in our practice between the wide gate-road and the narrow gate-road, which Jesus clarified

to distinguish his difficult relational path from other easier ways (Mt 7:13-14). Following his person is more complex, involving complex subjects, while easier ways are simplified to render persons to simple objects—whom Jesus corrected as those he doesn't know (7:21-23).

The change Jesus brings is difficult and never easy. Yet, when our view of sin doesn't encompass reductionism or ongoingly fight against it, the counter-workings of reductionism exerts its subtle *process of simplification* on our identity and function, on the gospel and its outcome. Hence, the simplification of change in our persons, churches, and other persons and contexts of human life neither gets to the depth of their heart nor down to the fragmentary heart of their human condition; and simply asking for forgiveness is insufficient. The process to initiate the change that Jesus brings unavoidably begins with two essential steps:

1. By the nature of the change Jesus brings, persons must start by making themselves vulnerable from inner out, so that the heart of their whole person comes heart to heart with their full human condition. This vulnerability necessitates removing any veils that keep them from facing their true, unembellished condition.
2. When faced with their reality, persons by necessity must not only face up to it but also own up to it. Taking **ownership** of a person's true condition keeps the door open to change, which being vulnerable with one's whole person opened.

When Christians are vulnerably involved to experience in their whole person the change Jesus brings, their persons (individually and together) are transformed to be “my witnesses.” Then, we are faced with another unavoidable reality of his gospel: If we do not speak out for the uncommon turn-around change Jesus brings, we are accountable for our complicity in their injustice (as in Eze 33:7-8).

The subtle simplifying of change becomes more evident when we examine the function of our theological anthropology. Consider this:

When our identity is measured by what we do and have, there is unspoken pressure to produce, progress, have achievements, and succeed in the work we do. The subtle influence of such pressure can cause strain and stress when we don't demonstrate progress, achievement or success—intensified in its persistent comparative process of measurement. Under such conditions, in situations or circumstances where change is difficult to accomplish and its prospect may not be on the horizon, we become susceptible to simplifying change for easier or quicker results—results critical also to our identity.¹

¹ Like social change, the way many persons tend to deal with climate change is typically based on how human brains are wired. That is, the brain has difficulty with complex issues that are more about the future

Our rationale for simplifying change may be that ‘any change is better than no change’, and understandably so given the difficulty. But, our underlying motivation for easier and quicker results often involves having something to show for our efforts that would affirm our identity and not be rendered *less* in the comparative process—perhaps be considered “the greatest” as Jesus’ early disciples pursued.

The testimony of those who enact Jesus’ gospel protest in the breaches of humanity are vulnerably involved with love on a distinctly uncommon trajectory. Beyond the common ways of evangelists, social activists or pacifists addressing the variable human condition, “my witnesses” will deal face to face with the polarizing effects of humanity being reduced, fragmented, broken and enslaved at all its levels of human life. This uncommon trajectory traverses the arc of justice with the sword of peace to embody “my witnesses” unequivocally in the uncommon function **agents of redemptive change**, the ARC of “my witnesses.”

Change is usually implied in any conversation for the common good; and change is always an explicit or implicit goal for those calling for justice and working for peace. Change, however, in the uncommon good of Jesus’ gospel is neither optional or temporary for human life, nor merely remedial for everyday life. The significance of change cannot be just a moment in time or involve just a movement of action. In Jesus’ gospel, significant change is the transformation of life (and lives), which is constituted by the redemptive change of both the *old* (i.e. the reduced, fragmented, bad, wrong, unfair, unjust) being terminated and the *new* (i.e. the whole, good, right, fair, just) raised up for the experiential truth and reality of the heart of human life and its essential order for all persons and relationships. Anything less and any substitutes for redemptive change reduce such change to conventional change. At best, the significance of conventional change is (1) temporary for the human condition because it doesn’t get to its fragmentary heart, and (2) fleeting for everyday life because it doesn’t involve the qualitative-relational heart of human life.

The uncommon good of Jesus’ gospel offers, involves and requires redemptive change of reduced ontology and function in all its variations and forms in everyday life and at all levels of human life (including institutional, systemic and structural). This redemptive change encompasses the ontological simulations and epistemological illusions that compose our default mode. When his disciples’ everyday practice made evident their reduced ontology and function centered on human distinctions from outer in (“the greatest,” Lk 9:46; 22:24), he told them the whole truth: “Unless you change *from inner out* like *vulnerable* children, you will never *belong to my kingdom family*” (Mt

and thus puts more emphasis on the tangible present; this reflects how the majority address climate change with easier alternatives. See David G. Victor, Nick Obradovich and Dillon Amaya, “Why our brains make it hard to grapple with global warming,” OP-ED, *Los Angeles Times*, 9/17/2017.

18:3). His truth, however, was not about **conventional change** merely from the outer in; outer-in change is the *metaschematizō* that even Satan promotes (2 Cor 11:14-15). The inconvenient truth of his gospel is the “turn-around change” (*strepho*) signifying the **redemptive change** of transformation from inner out (*metamorphoo*). *Metamorphoo* is the relational outcome constituting the uncommon good of Jesus’ gospel, which Paul, on the one hand, made conclusive (2 Cor 3:18; 5:17) and, on the other hand, made imperative as the ongoing change necessary in order to be distinguished from the common (Rom 12:2). And as Peter would testify about the good news, the uncommon good offers, involves and requires nothing less than redemptive change of reduced ontology and function, the condition he persisted in; and that no substitutes such as conventional change are sufficient or acceptable for redemptive change, such as Peter attempted until his transformation.

The need for change is basic to the human condition since the primordial garden. We all, then, need change, whether we seek, want or even recognize it; this need is innate to our human condition. More complex is the type of change required to meet this need. Since the beginning, however, the means for change utilized in the human context for changing the human condition have complicated both what is significant change and what brings significant change (e.g. the misguided tower of Babel, Gen 11:1-4). The gospel’s uncommon good clarifies and corrects what is needed for the human condition.

First, the terms are clarified to avoid confusion or conflation of terms. Conventional change is common change, and redemptive change is uncommon change. That which is common is distinct to the human context, human life and its persons. Uncommon (or holy) distinguishes God and God’s relational context and process unique to God. The common and the uncommon are mutually exclusive and thus should not be confused with each other. Moreover, the common and the uncommon are incompatible and therefore must not be conflated. Since conventional change is common change, the extent of this change does not and cannot exceed the common. While our desire for or pursuit of change may not go beyond the extent of conventional change, our hopes for change often exceed common change. Likewise, those working for justice and peace tend to pursue the limits of conventional change, while their hopes and expectations usually exceed common change—notably true for Christians. It is problematic for those needing, wanting or working for change either to not understand or to ignore the extent of that change; and it is disappointing, frustrating, angering or depressing when their hopes and expectations for change are not fulfilled. But, this process reflects how conventional change gets confused with redemptive change, and, more importantly, how uncommon change is conflated with common change to mislead those needing and wanting change, as well as to misguide those seeking and working for change.

Jesus clarifies for us: **The change we use will be the extent of change we get.** When his clarification is listened to, then his correction can be received.

This critical clarification and correction were initiated by God in Babylonia, where God deconstructed the tower of Babel for the corrective purpose to expose the false hope of a common good and to dispel the illusion of its expected outcome from common change (Gen 11:5-9). God's purpose wasn't only to clarify and correct but also to prepare the way for the uncommon good to be received; and further integrated in God's purpose, to enact the uncommon change necessary for this relational outcome to be whole and uncommon (whole-ly) as the experiential truth and reality in human life and its order for all persons and relationships.

The tower of Babel predates the hopeful change that has evolved in two prime examples of recent history. One example counters what Jesus brings and the other example contradicts what Jesus gives, both of which compete with uncommon change and its uncommon good. The first prime example has a conflict approach to change, which could be confused with the sword Jesus brought. This is the Marxist ideology and its dialectic (thesis-antithesis-synthesis), which communism has implemented under the assumption that it will result in the synthesis for the greater good of the people. On the one hand, a conflict approach to change is warranted because significant change requires the *old* to be terminated for the *new* to emerge—which is the unequivocal purpose of Jesus' sword. On the other hand, a Marxist-Hegelian dialectic does not merit affirmation of the means used for its end to bring about a synthesis. Its common thinking, explicitly or implicitly, is that the end justifies the use of its means, even if the means are wrong or unjust.

The systemic use of power relations to enforce change formally breaks just-nection and officially legitimizes its injustice. This common thinking about “good and evil” relativizes what is *right*, and thereby promotes, reinforces and/or sustains the disabling of justice while enabling injustice. Therefore, the conflict approach to change of Marxist ideology (and all its variations) cannot be confused with the sword of uncommon change that Jesus brings:

The common's conflict approach to change works variably to disable justice and to enable injustice, while the uncommon's redemptive change serves invariably for the just-nection of all persons and relationships in wholeness; the former works under the assumption of serving the common good, while the latter serves only the reality of the uncommon good and thus works for the only *good* that distinguishes justice by Jesus' gospel.

The verdict on the Marxist-Hegelian dialectic has not been concluded because the jury on communist history is still in session. But, the synthesis for a new human order has had no indications of being nothing more than a false hope—not only in falling short of

utopian expectations but with its dystopian consequences such as evolves from its forms of tyranny. Nevertheless, the anticipated victory for this hoped-for result has not stopped many from continuing to pursue this common change, likely in the absence of real hope for significant change. Variations of a conflict approach have adapted into many forms of protest (political, social, economic, religious, and the like) that have been aggressive (in both macro- and micro-aggression) and thus violent (even implicitly as Jesus defined in God's rule of law, Mt 5:21-22). Even knowingly in their common thinking, their approach to change has adopted the principle of the end justifies the use of its means. These varying conflict approaches to change—which includes the adaptation of the Marxist dialectic in liberation theology—are still simply common change that should not be confused with the uncommon change Jesus brings.

At the same time, this is not to say that the approach to change should be nonviolent. What does need to be said, however, is that when viewed through the lens of uncommon terms, the approach of nonviolence is an oversimplified notion of change, as difficult as this approach is to embrace and enact. Such change is unable to deal with the existing depth of the *old* even though it may address and confront the old, thus it merely acts as common change working for the common good. Consider this sensitive example, which various persons could have misgivings accepting. Though Martin Luther King's nonviolent approach to change eventually included the global injustice of the Vietnam War, it never encompassed the sexism within the Civil Rights Movement to change the gender inequality existing among themselves—notably those proclaiming and working for the common good. In other words, change became selective and likely protective for those who didn't want to be vulnerable from inner out.

This makes evident the fact that Christians who advocate for nonviolent change distort what Jesus brings with his sword, either by common-ly idealizing it or by simply ignoring it. The consequence has been that the redemptive change needed, for example, to clean out God's house has been absent, which has left the relational orphans populating churches without just-nection—leaving the church in the simulation of its practice and the illusion of its relationships together. This relational condition is not the uncommon good that Jesus' gospel brings. The sword of Jesus signifies the intensity (not the violence) with which the battle against reductionism (the full scope of sin) must be fought. Thus, Jesus' sword is the relational extension of God's wrath in the OT. Contrary to common perception and thinking about God's wrath, this intensity expressed the heart of God's grief in relational response to the scope of sin as reductionism, which reduced persons and relationships from their wholeness created in the image and likeness of the Trinity. The heart of God's grief first responded intensely to this reductionism with the flood, and only because of Noah's wholeness (*tamiym*) was he saved from God's intense battle against reductionism (Gen 6:1-9). This unfolds the trajectory of "my witnesses" from *'the ark to the ARC'*.

God's wrath and Jesus' sword express the heart of the Trinity's grief (as in Lk 13:34; 19:41-42) in the relational response necessary to bring the uncommon change for transforming the human condition and its fragmentary relational order. Therefore, the unavoidable reality facing Christian leaders and activists is this: The *old* is not eliminated without conflict and this conflict does not terminate without Jesus' sword of uncommon change for only the uncommon good. Accordingly, even nonviolent approaches to change should not be confused with the uncommon change required for the uncommon good of Jesus' gospel (not our variations of the gospel).

All the above approaches signify common change, which in one conventional way or another disable justice and enable injustice by reinforcing and sustaining the reduced ontology and function of the human condition. Moreover, any form of power relations at any level becomes an enabler of injustice and a disabler of justice (cf. Lk 22:24-26). Whether intentionally or inadvertently, these approaches counter what Jesus brings. The redemptive change brought by Jesus is the only good news to have integrally the whole and uncommon relational outcome for human ontology and function, and this whole-ly relational outcome is the uncommon good that Jesus gives.

Secondly, contradicting the uncommon good that Jesus gives is the second prime example in recent history: globalization, as it has evolved from colonialism and been adapted from the Enlightenment. Countering the uncommon good brought by Jesus and contradicting this reality that he gave are not mutually exclusive but interrelated in critical ways. They are both problematic in their underlying reductionism that promotes and generates results different from Jesus' gospel. Yet, it is one issue for conflict approaches to counter what Jesus brings by using a misleading or misguided hope, and a deeper, more complicated issue to contradict the uncommon good he gives by using a false hope.

Analogous to the global effort by Babylonia to "build ourselves a *global community*" (Gen 11:4), political globalization evolved in human history to "make a name for ourselves." The construction of this "name for ourselves" required (1) competing with the kingdom of God to rule the world, and (2) imposing its rule over others under the dominance of its sovereignty. This global process formed the dynamic of colonialism (or imperialism), which has been the prime political example that has disabled justice and enabled injustice—a dynamic generated often by the myth of the common good. As a subtle extension of the Roman Empire, Constantine (in the 4th century) justified this dynamic with a false hope of building Christendom; and the U.S. has intensified the colonial dynamic by common thinking that amplifies the myth of Manifest Destiny and/or the false hope of democratic ideology—both illusions having justified the enabling of injustice that contradicts the uncommon good given by Jesus. Many Christians in the U.S. would either disagree with this assessment or feel very uncomfortable accepting it. But, then, they have to answer to the type of change they advocate and be accountable for its effects on their own lives, the church, this nation and

the world. And the change they use and get from it have to be measured by the uncommon change for the uncommon good of the gospel that Jesus brings and gives.

From political globalization has evolved economic globalization. The modern development of the economy distinctly adapted from the Enlightenment (around the 18th century), which promoted two movements for human progress:

1. The reliance on rationalized thinking to supposedly enlighten human perception and action, which, on the one hand, would challenge human development beyond tradition but, on the other hand, would compete with the uncommon change that Jesus brings by substituting a secular worldview (**secularism**) to contradict the uncommon good Jesus gives.
2. The emergence of modern science, which challenged traditional beliefs and the limits of their conclusions (e.g. the order of the universe) to both (a) justify secularism for human development and (b) prioritize the development of technology for human progress—the primacy of which has pervaded modern life and preoccupies (even dominates) persons over the primacy of relationships together.

By adapting in this evolutionary process, the economy underwent pivotal change with the Industrial Revolution (starting from the late 18th century) and has since progressed (i.e. evolved) as energized by the natural (common) selection of the economy's fittest components to survive. The economy's survival of the fittest generates the economic colonialism necessary to empower the progress of the global economy, even over the objections of tribes and nations. Like political globalization, of course, this defining dynamic of economic globalization also contradicts the uncommon good that Jesus gives.²

Economic globalization, however, doesn't survive by colonialism alone. The survival of its fittest has a much more subtle basis. Earlier, Jesus alerted his followers to what contradicts what he gives (the scope of Mt 6:19-32). What he defined is the mentality and lifestyle of **consumers**. *Consumerism* drives the common everyday life and practice that fuels economic growth; and the subtle the-more-the-better mentality and the explicit lifestyle of greed intensify consumer drive as mere objects manipulated and forged by economic promotion (as Paul alluded to, Eph 2:3). Economic globalization survives only by the consumption of its common goods, which it multiplies by creating the subtle need for **convenience** and **efficiency**. These human-shaped needs consume consumers—even at the expense of fulfilling their inherent human need basic to all persons—which economic globalization has now substituted as the prevailing source for

² Further discussion on globalization, addressing the global church, is engaged openly by Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008).

the good life. Moreover, discordant clouds are forming over the expanding scenario of the global economy, darkening its optimistic basis (1) on the misguided assumption that the earth's natural resources can support unlimited economic growth, and (2) on the misleading assumption that all human labor benefits from capitalist development.

Therefore, Christians need to awaken to the consuming reality enveloping our everyday life. The priority given to consumption, plus the pursuit of convenience and the search for efficiency, all reinforce and sustain economic globalization, and thereby also enable the injustice of its colonial practices and disable the justice needed for the care of all creation. Since we are all consumers in one way or another, wanting convenience and desiring efficiency to varying extent, the priority we give to these, even if not excessive, will determine whether or not we also contradict the uncommon good Jesus gives—as well as also counter the uncommon change he brings.

Given these two prime examples of hopeful change and related variations of them on the personal or collective level, we are always faced with the significance of the change we use. This change is especially important for the goal of those calling for justice and working for peace. Significant change, however, is neither just a moment in time nor involving just a movement of action. How we think, see and act regarding change have to be challenged ongoingly by the distinction between common-conventional change and uncommon-redemptive change. All the issues about change converge in the vital difference between *metaschematizō* (outer-in change) and *metamorphoo* (inner-out change, as distinguished by Paul); and this critical distinction between the outer in and inner out cannot be confused with each other or conflated together, because they signify the incompatibility of human identity and function in either reduced terms or whole terms. The former involves common change and nothing more, and the latter involves uncommon change and nothing less.

It should be evident in how we think, see and act that the type of change is crucial for the outcome desired, hoped for and expected. The self-evident reality is:

The change we use will be the extent of change and related outcome we get—which either at best serves only a common good variably defined, or at the least works for the uncommon good of all persons and relationships in wholeness.

Metamorphoo distinguishes the uncommon change necessary by its nature (not by duty or obligation) for the whole (not partial or fragmentary) relational outcome of the uncommon good that Jesus brings and gives (as in 2 Cor 3:18). Only inner-out change unequivocally distinguishes the uncommon from the common (as in Rom 12:2), and thereby constitutes the uncommon-redemptive change of the gospel (as in 2 Cor 5:16-17)—which common-conventional change is unable to bring and give, yet may try to simulate (as reductionism does, 2 Cor 11:13-15) or create illusions about (as Peter attempted, Gal 2:11-14).

The agency of Christians has given witness to the world of an ambiguous gospel, a confusing faith and a suspect practice in everyday life. How much of this supports the reality of Christians reflecting, reinforcing, sustaining, or at least being complicit with the human condition is a fact yet to be acknowledged, much less embraced. Jesus, however, provides no room for negotiation of the trajectory of “my witnesses.” Even stating being ‘his witnesses’ does not confirm being in the trajectory of “my witnesses.” Only those enacting Jesus’ gospel protest in the breaches of humanity (including among God’s people), who deepen their involvement of love for humanity by functioning as agents of redemptive change, and who persevere through to its relational outcome of the **redemptive reconciliation** of just-nection, only these persons are vulnerably involved in reciprocal relationship together with Jesus’ person, thereby bringing justice to victory in the new relationships together of wholeness constituted by only “my uncommon peace I give to you” (Jn 14:27).

The Narrow Way of “My Witnesses”

Reconciliation is a prominent term in Christian vocabulary. It’s heard especially in the language of ministry, since Paul made definitive that we have been given the ministry of reconciliation by God through Christ (2 Cor 5:18-19). These ministries typically have served merely to bring people together or get them back together; this assumes that that would reconcile people, implying thereby that God reconciled us by just getting us back together. What is often underemphasized or overlooked, perhaps idealized as a heavenly outcome, however, is that the way of this ministry only unfolds when “the old has passed away and the new has come into being” (5:17). That is, only on the narrow path of redemption does the way of reconciliation unfold to constitute the relational outcome of redemptive reconciliation. Therefore, don’t be misinformed or misled on a wider path.

Since the old precedes the new in the transformation process to reconciliation, the old has primary priority for the new to emerge. This narrows down the course available for redemptive change, limiting the options. With this sharpened view, our perception, thinking and understanding get focused on the primary. Then, the old of our human condition is the bad news of Jesus’ gospel that requires protest in order for any and all *old* in us to be redeemed and thus changed for the new to unfold in its narrow way.

On the primary basis of his gospel’s narrow way, protesting the bad news is never optional but always upends the bad news, so that the good news will be able to take effect from inner out, make a difference in the whole person and prevail in their

relationships. Thus, protesting itself is nonnegotiable in its function but is accountable to be enacted in face-to-face justice for the just-nection of persons in reconciled relationships both equalized (thus redeemed from distinctions) and intimate together in the wholeness of relationships constituted by the peace Jesus gives integrally with God's definitive blessing. Accordingly, "my witnesses" can only fulfill their purpose on the narrow way in their function as the ARC.

In this relational context, on these relational terms and with this relational process, the integrity of proclaiming the gospel, Jesus' whole gospel, is embodied and enacted in likeness by "my witnesses" vulnerably involved with their whole person in reciprocal relationship together.

At his ascension, Jesus communicated to his shepherds and sentinels that "you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth"—that is, "when the Holy Spirit's *person is relationally involved with you*" (Acts 1:8). His witness (*martys*) is more than a common witness who has information or knowledge to confirm something. "My witnesses" possess the experiential Truth and relational reality of his face-to-face relational involvement with them in the primacy of relationship together that constitutes their just-nection. If this witness is limited to knowledge and constrained to referential information, such a witness has lost its substantive relational significance "just as I have loved you." To prevent that relational loss, the Spirit's person is present and involved in reciprocal relationship, in order to maintain, deepen and consummate the relational connection of Jesus' witnesses to have the substantive relational significance to be distinguished by the likeness of his love in all parts of the world, at all levels of human life.

Creation, the human condition, his gospel and salvation converge for just one and only one outcome. When they are fully understood, they integrate into the *whole* constituted by the Trinity. This integral picture of God's whole is unmistakably distinguished from the common, in order to compose unequivocally without comparison the uncommon wholeness of all human life and its human order in the whole-ly Trinity's image and likeness. This *radical* relational dynamic gets to the roots of life to embrace the heart of human life and encompass the fragmentary heart of the human condition in protest of its bad news. Only that which is radical gets to these vital roots. Yet, because of its nature, those who are radical can only be uncommon, and this is problematic for most Christians who follow an easier path than Jesus' intrusive relational path enacting the sword of peace in the arc of face-to-face justice. Since nothing less and no substitutes compose the inconvenient Word proclaiming the bad news-good news for human life and its order, the identity and function of "my witnesses" can only be distinguished by nothing less and no substitutes. The relational terms of his gospel are irreducible and nonnegotiable, even subtly with good intentions by 'his witnesses'.

Given that nothing less and no substitutes embodies and enacts Jesus' whole gospel, as well as claims it and proclaims it, who among us today will stand in the breach as "my witnesses"?

Jesus waits for our response—whether waiting to anoint our whole person (as promised in Acts 1:8) or to protest the fragmentary condition of our bad news.

Scripture Index (Primary Source)

Page numbers in **bold** indicate where the primary discussions can be found.

Old Testament

Genesis

2:1-3 47
2:16-17 38
2:25 39
3:1-5 19, **38-39**
11:1-4 82,85
17:1-2 14,74

Exodus

23:2-3 60

Numbers

6:22-27 14,20,47,74

Deuteronomy

4:37 14
7:7-9 56
10:17 60
16:19-20 63,68

Judges

21:25 1

Psalms

5:5 42
7:6-7 74
11:7 27
33:4-5 13,21,42
35:3,28 18
40:6-7 57
46:10 47
85:10,13 1,5,10,26,57
89:14 26,57
119:130 20

Ecclesiastes

3:11 18

Isaiah

9:6-7 65,68
28:17 23,26
56:1-8 13
59:8,15 45,48

Jeremiah

9:23-24 5,11,17,27,60

Ezekiel

13:1-10 55
22:30 77,79
33:7-9 51,80

Micah

3:1 63,68

New Testament

Matthew

5:2-11 26,46,51
5:13-16 73
5:20 51,59
5:21-22 84
6:19-32 86
7:13-14 51,80
7:21-23 80
9:9-13 43
10:34-36 33,46,75
11:7-15 46
12:18-21 33,35,58,68,
73
16:21-23 15,34
17:13-19 59
18:3 81
22:34-40 57

26:8-11 50
26:36-46 21
27:46 71

Mark

4:24-25 20,64
7:6-8 75
8:14-18 19
9:33-34 10,35
11:15-17 9,13
15:38 71

Luke

1:67-79 46
2:25-35 33,46
8:17-18 17
11:42 45,59
12:51 13,20,46
13:34 85
19:41-42 47,50
22:24-26 50,81,85
24:48 77

John

1:4-5,10-11,14 16,17
1:6-9 25,77
2:13-16 9
3:16 **6ff**
3:17 7
3:29-34 25
4:4-30 **28ff,57,59,79**
4:21-26 8
6:24-66 16,21
7:50-51 9
8:32-43 13,18
13:1-17 24, 34
13:34-35 57
14:6 18
14:9 10
14:18 53

14:23 8
14:27 20,47,88
17:3 11,23
17:6,26 11
19:25-27 71
21:15-19 24,42

Acts

1:8 23,89
6:1 27
9:4 15
10:13-14 34
15:9 27,60

Romans

8:19-21 74
12:2 87

2 Corinthians

3:16-18
43,52,71,82,87
5:16-17 43,52,87
5:18-19 88
11:13-15 82,87

Galatians

1:6-7 13,18,73
2:11-14 15,34,70

Ephesians

2:14 20

Colossians

1:19-20 20
3:15 46

James

2:1-10 74

1 Peter

1:3 70
1:13-16 70
2:9-10 70

2 Peter

3:14-16 70

Revelation

2:1-4 25
2:19-23 53
3:1-2 25

BIBLIOGRAPHY (Primary Source)

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