

*“Did God Really Say That?”*  
Theology in the Age of Reductionism

T. Dave Matsuo

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Contact:

[www.4X12.org](http://www.4X12.org)

tdavematsuo@4X12.org



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## **An Urgent foreWord**

Theology has occupied human minds from the beginning. Anyone, from old to young, who seeks to sort out their beliefs, gain their meaning or put them into practice has been engaged in the theological task. Yet, theological engagement never takes place in a vacuum, even when isolated from the surrounding context (e.g. as practiced in monastic theology). Theology and the theological task unfold inescapably within a formidable context, that is, in the age of reductionism. And unless we understand this context in which we all live—understand beyond the issue of contextualization as commonly considered—our theology and task are subject to its shaping. Until any and all theological engagement directly address and openly account for this unavoidable context, the theological task and its theology have been and continue to be rendered to a critical condition needing to be made whole. Is this the current condition of theology and theological education that occupies, even preoccupies our minds today?

This is an honest conversation overdue—not to be engaged in isolation or just among ourselves but vulnerably with the whole of God who has been ongoingly pursuing us for this vital engagement in the age of reductionism. “Where are you?”



## Chapter 1

## Introducing the Context

**Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?**<sup>1</sup>

Job 38:1

It seems ironic, paradoxical or contradictory to talk about the age of reductionism in a historical period when globalization increasingly determines and even dominates life in this world. The focus of sociology rightfully helps us understand that all of us as individual human persons are part of something bigger than self, though the experience of belonging to this larger context tends to be elusive. Nevertheless, sociology correctly contextualizes us in this collective structure and systemic operation of human life. Though this contextualization is necessary, however, it is insufficient to help us define and definitively understand the bigger picture or larger context of which all of us are part. The emergence of globalization points to this *whole* of human life, and in various ways it seeks to quantify the whole yet in efforts lacking wholeness. Economic globalization, for example, can be considered an ontological simulation of the whole shaped by a reduced perceptual-interpretive framework of human persons and relations, thereby demonstrating fragmenting practices which have exposed the limited interests of “the few” mobilizing the resources of “the many” at the latter’s expense. In the primary global efforts of today, the functional nature or character of globalization—perhaps not its intention—is not the development of the whole for wholeness, but rather the determination and even domination of the whole based on reductionist practices. Consequently, the whole of human life eludes even the most well-intentioned efforts.

The key factor needing to be addressed in the above efforts is that their contextualization is limited to only human contexts. The consequence on our epistemology and hermeneutics is a limitation or constraint that prevents being able to go further and deeper, thus beyond the human shaping and constructs of life and its processes. The life processes necessary for the whole to be whole and needed for the functional wholeness integral to the human context cannot by their nature be determined by human shaping and constraints if they are to rise above the human condition (e.g. consider the tower of Babel, Gen 11:1-9). This then prompts the question: What takes us beyond human contextualization?

### The Emerging Context of Theology

Most notably since the Enlightenment, science and its rationalistic basis, method and knowledge have been considered the key to unlocking the mysteries of life and what holds together the universe in the innermost. Yet now science is discovering that it is not a mere universe but the multiverse. Even this, however, is insufficient explanation for the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated differently, all Scripture is taken from the NRSV; any italics in Scripture throughout this study signify emphasis or further rendering of terms.

cosmos. We need the *wholeverse* to go beyond the self-referencing of human contextualization in order to understand what holds together all of life and reality in its innermost. Noted physicist Stephen Hawking realized the limits of human contextualization in his attempts to develop a “grand unified theory” (GUT) that supposedly would, in his words, “know the mind of God” and essentially make a creator God superfluous.<sup>2</sup> Hawking surprisingly gave up his quest for a complete comprehensive theory for knowing the world in its innermost parts because he concluded that this was not possible with the limited framework of science—that a physical theory can only be self-referencing and therefore can only be either inconsistent or incomplete. To state his conclusion in other terms, the whole cannot be achieved from mere parts (whatever their quantity or sum together), wholeness can neither be understood nor experienced from things which/who are only fragmentary.

Science and its knowledge are engaged in a heuristic process that exposes their limits and also inadvertently points to the source that takes them beyond those limits to the whole knowledge and understanding of reality and life. This heuristic process of science, when engaged honestly and openly, acts just as Paul said the law works to expose our limits and point us to the source of life (Gal 3:19,24). And as Paul clearly distinguished, on the one hand, the law should not be the primary determinant of human function while, on the other hand, it should not be disregarded but affirmed for what it is; likewise distinguished, science and its knowledge should have its place and role in our life.

Given its limits, science along with adherence to the law (both of nature and of God) cannot be the primary source of self-understanding to determine self (both human as well as divine), and subsequently for any self-justification. Such self-determination and self-justification are merely self-referencing and cannot go beyond the limitations of human resources, weakness and imperfection; nor can it adequately account for these limits in its knowledge and understanding of life. Epistemic as well as ontological humility are necessary in order for science and the law to engage the heuristic function of their nature. Without this humility, any heuristic function is constrained to the limits of human contextualization and thus to the ongoing defining and determining influence of reductionism. The dynamic of reductionism is inseparable from the human context and by necessity must be addressed unmistakably for the human condition to be redeemed.

Theology by definition should “take us” beyond human contextualization. Yet, the theological task often has been rendered to mere human contextualization, either by design (e.g. natural theology, liberalism) or by default (e.g. much of evangelicalism). Our perception of God and any related God-talk depend foremost on their primary source; furthermore, our interpretation of the source must emerge from an interpretive framework compatible with the source in order for our knowledge and understanding of God to be congruent with the source. Of course, if our primary source remains from human contextualization, our interpretive framework will vary with the human context, thereby allowing for a wide range of interpretations and theologies similar to multiculturalism or even pluralism. *How* we do theology determines if indeed our theology is beyond human contextualization. The wording “takes us” can be misleading or confusing. If our theology is the outcome formulated from human ideas, methodology and/or even

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted and discussed in Hans Küng, *The Beginning of All Things: Science and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 15-24.



experiences “taking us” to God, then our theology emerges (even unintentionally and unknowingly) primarily from human contextualization determining our interpretive framework—and what we pay attention to and ignore—that subsequently shapes our theological reflections and conclusions.

Our interpretive framework is the crucial key to the lens we use to focus on what we pay attention to and to filter what we ignore. Without understanding our working interpretive framework, the predisposition and bias in our conclusions cannot be accounted for—a process also true for science. In this critical process needing to be grasped, the biases of reductionism unify into our mindsets, which formalize into worldviews. At this level of development, these perspectives dominate or control our perceptions and thinking, just as a modernist framework has since the Enlightenment. In his classic work, Thomas Kuhn demonstrated how these form paradigms to shape our perceptions, the influence and bias of which direct even those who formulate scientific theories and models.<sup>3</sup>

## **What and Who Emerge from Theology’s Context**

If our source has been established from beyond human contextualization, then the following critical issue becomes unavoidable for compatibility of our interpretive framework and congruence of our knowledge and understanding: On what basis and terms did the primary source beyond human contextualization emerge in the human context? Two main responses to this critical issue have, knowingly or unknowingly, occupied theology, one prevailing and the other elusive: (1) God emerged in human context primarily on a quantitative basis in referential terms to dispense information about God and life; (2) God emerged distinctly on a quantitative basis yet is distinguished primarily on a qualitative level in relational terms for Face-to-face communication in order for us to know the whole of God in the primacy of intimate relationship together.

The first response prevails because the biblical text as interpreted in referential language is the common interpretive framework of human contextualization; and this reflects the influence of reductionism that has narrowed down the epistemic field for the sake of certainty, if not convenience. The *referentialization* of the Word specifically narrows down the embodied Word to referential knowledge and information about what God does (e.g. delivers, works miracles, teaches, serves) and has (e.g. attributes, truth, power and other resources), and likely aggregates these parts of God in a narrow unity for greater explanation and certainty of that information about God (e.g. in systematic theologies or explanatory theories).

Theological reflections and conclusions emerging from a common or prevailing interpretive framework do not and cannot distinguish the qualitative whole of God (cf. Lk 10:21). For the God beyond human contextualization to enter and connect with the human context required an ‘improbable theological trajectory’ that is irreducible to anything less and any substitutes from human shaping and construction. Additionally, for the whole of God to be ongoingly involved in the human context necessitates by God’s

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

relational nature an ‘intrusive relational path’ for the whole relationships together on God’s terms that is inseparable from God’s improbable theological trajectory, and therefore nonnegotiable to anything less and any substitutes in human terms. In other words, nothing less and no substitutes than God’s improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path distinguish the whole of God. All other theological reflections and conclusions are fragmentary at best and lack any significance both to God and for us.<sup>4</sup>

This was the hard lesson Job learned both in the limits and distortion of his knowledge and the hubris of his speculation about God—a frequent occurrence in the theological task: “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful [*pala*, distinguished] for me to know” (Job 42:3, NIV). Job implied acknowledgement of the distinguished God (Job 21:22) yet he attempted to speak for what is distinguished (*pala*)<sup>5</sup> from his view (and prevailing interpretive lens) inside the universe, and consequently he also reduced the face of God to obscurity in the *un*-distinguished (Job 42:3). This evoked God’s relational response: “Who *is this that* speaks for me *by words* without knowledge?” (Job 38:2) God’s question is less an epistemic issue than a relational issue that exposes Job’s lack of direct relational involvement Face to face in the relational epistemic process and its relational consequence; thus Job’s use of referential words for information only *about* God which he used as a substitute incorrectly for knowledge *of* God. Moreover, God’s question also reveals the necessary epistemic process to know relationally who, what and how God is, including the necessary interpretive framework to engage God in this relational epistemic process. Job turned from his shaping and responded to engage God in God’s relational context and process, thereby experiencing the relational outcome of intimate involvement with God in the theological task (Job 42:3-5)—a lesson we all need to learn to go further and deeper in theological engagement.

The human context created by God is not a closed context or system. This distinct context was created with the integrity to be whole, that is, open to the improbable and the whole of God, as well as with the freedom to receive outside influences—namely from

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<sup>4</sup> Much of what is expressed in this study initially emerged in my previous studies, namely on wholeness, Jesus, Paul and their integration. Refer to these studies for expanded discussion on various aspects of this study, particularly in relation to the whole of Jesus and Paul. *The Person, the Trinity, the Church: The Call to Be Whole and the Lure of Reductionism* (Wholeness Study, 2006). Online: <http://4X12.org>. *Sanctified Christology: A Theological & Functional Study of the Whole of Jesus* (Christology Study, 2008). Online: <http://4X12.org>. *The Whole of Paul & the Whole in His Theology: Theological Interpretation in Relational Epistemic Process* (Paul Study, 2010). Online: <http://4X12.org>. *Jesus Into Paul: Embodying the Theology and Hermeneutic of the Whole Gospel* (Integration Study, 2012). Online: <http://4X12.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Greek and Hebrew word studies used in this study are taken from the following sources: Horst Balz, Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce Waitke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980); Ernst Jenni, Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997); Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Harold K. Moulton, ed., *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978); W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1981); Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible* (Chattanooga: AMG Publ., 1996).

reductionism that narrows down the human context, closing the system and consequently separating from the improbable of God and being whole. This reduction and separation emerged distinctly in the primordial garden with the challenging question “Did God really say that?” (Gen 3:1, NIV)—an ongoing challenge in the theological task that remains basically uncontested. This critical challenge narrowed the epistemic field and closed it to the improbable and God’s revelation, though this may not be apparent in referential terms. Up to that critical moment in human history, the Creator had not closed the human context to only God’s determination and control (an issue for predestination, election, etc.) but rather allowed the human context to have freedom to be reduced from wholeness and make reductionist choices. This fragmentation continues in the history of human choices vis-à-vis God’s revelation (cf. Jn 5:39-40; Lk 10:21)—notably emerging with rationalism, science and modernism. In each example, the human context was reduced essentially to a closed context/system, thereby narrowing the epistemic field for greater certainty of knowledge and explanation; the consequence was increasing separation from the improbable and God’s revelation, and not surprisingly further establishing the human person as the arbiter of knowledge, along with shaping the truth and God while constructing them on human terms. This human shaping and construction have been ongoing issues in the theological task to one extent or another—the critical fragmentation from reductionism that has been ignored, not taken seriously or just not understood. These are variations all emerging from the uncontested challenge “Did God really say that?”

If God never did in fact really say that or indeed truly mean that, then of course the human context is free to be the primary determinant of its life without accountability of itself to another. If God does speak, share and self-disclose—that is, communicate in relational terms, not referential—then theology, the theological task and all who engage in it must by its basic nature account for God’s communication in order to have the theological significance that distinguishes the whole of God, not the fragmentation of God from reductionism in human contextualization. The latter is the prevailing conclusion from the referentialization of the Word.

If our theology is the outcome of relational connection and involvement with God’s communicative action in self-disclosure—not merely from an authoritative Word or an inerrant Bible—then we are contextualized beyond human contextualization to the further and deeper contextualization in the now-accessible relational context and process of the whole of God. That is to say, this distinguished contextualization is the trinitarian relational context and process into which the whole of Jesus—the embodied communicative Word who vulnerably came to us to “take us” experientially to the whole of God—not only intimately contextualizes us but whole-ly constitutes us in relationship together. This gospel cannot emerge whole in referential terms, only in the relational terms initiated by God’s improbable theological trajectory and determined by the embodied Word’s intrusive relational path. Anything less and any substitute of the whole gospel neither distinguishes God’s improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path, nor has significance for the human condition in our need to be made whole.

This is the theology which “takes us” beyond human contextualization and the human shaping of the gospel to the irreducible truth (read whole) of the gospel. Such truth has been problematic not only to establish with significance (not the same as

certainty) but also to understand without reduction. The gospel cannot be distinguished from human shaping if truth is perceived through a reductionist lens. Biblical truth is distinguished as the embodied Truth (Jn 14:6) in qualitative relational terms, not referential terms; and the embodied Truth cannot be reduced both in form and in substance. For example, when the Truth takes on propositional form, it tends to be disembodied by reducing truth to something we possess, subscribe to and live by as foundational beliefs having certainty. Such truth becomes disembodied because it is functionally no longer about the Person who is vulnerably present and intimately involved with us—that is, with those who must by the nature of God’s embodied self-disclosure respond reciprocally in likeness for relationship together. The embodied Truth is only for relationship, the relational outcome of which is to be contextualized and constituted in the trinitarian relational context of family and the trinitarian relational process of family love (as in Jn 8:31-36; 17:21-26). Anything less or any substitutes of this qualitative relational reality are reductionism of the Truth limited to human contextualization and shaping.

The incarnation is the ultimate expression of God’s communicative action. In relational terms, the incarnation does not consist of a series of events culminating at the cross. Moreover, the incarnation did not merely locate God in the human context. What unfolds in the incarnation is conjointly the qualitative and quantitative depth of the whole of God’s relational presence and involvement, which cannot be reduced merely to events and/or to mere propositional truths and doctrines (e.g. atonement). The relational context and process of God are distinguished in the whole life and practice of Jesus; his intrusive relational path established the relational context and process of the triune God in order to know and experience the whole of God in intimate relationship together—distinguished in Jesus’ formative family prayer (Jn 17:20-26). Without this contextualization that Jesus composed in the human context, any other contextualization (e.g. in missiology and theology) would only be reductions epistemologically and ontologically of God’s self-disclosure. The absence of the distinct integrating dynamic of *reciprocating contextualization* results effectively in both disembodiment of the Word made flesh to referential terms and failing to grasp the whole qualitative-relational significance of the gospel, reflecting incomplete Christology. Any incomplete Christology is insufficient to account for Jesus’ whole person and thus the whole of God’s presence and involvement (cf. 2 Cor 4:6). This is a critical issue in theology today that reflects the influence of reductionism of both God and the human person. And any gospel based on such a theology is not whole, at best proclaiming only a truncated soteriology that is inadequate to make the human condition whole—without the relational significance to warrant a claim of compelling good news.

## **Shaped by Our Underlying Theological Anthropology**

The reduction of both God and the human person unmistakably emerges in the theological process when, for example, our Christology is incomplete and our soteriology is limited only to what we are saved *from*. This reduction involves two major issues underlying all theological engagement that need to be clarified: (1) how we define the person, and on this basis, (2) how we engage in relationships. When Jesus the Truth

becomes about his teachings, principles or example in life, then those also tend to become disembodied by reducing his person to those things to do, practice and be guided by as truths for daily Christian living. Such truths are disembodied when they are separated or detached (often unintentionally or unknowingly) from his person of Truth, that is, the whole of Jesus; consequently, the substance of the truth has been reduced to things Jesus said, did or exemplified—thus to propositional statements and theological doctrines. This process of reductionism reduces the substance of Jesus' ontology to be defined by what he did and had from outer in, and not by the who and what of his person from inner out. This outer-in definition of the person interacts with how relationships are engaged; therefore, not only is Jesus' person reduced from being vulnerably present but also from being intimately involved in relationship, which then reduces the primacy of relationship and by its nature the necessity of our relational response in likeness as persons defined from inner out in order to ongoingly function in and experience the qualitative depth of relationship together.

The interpretive lens by which we define the person and engage in relationships is the lens we bring to the theological task, and this is the lens we use to perceive Jesus' person and interpret God's self-disclosure. The embodied Truth only vulnerably disclosed the whole of God to make accessible the transcendent God for relationship only on the whole and holy God's terms; the relational outcome of God's relational work is to be contextualized in the trinitarian relational context to know God Face to face and to be constituted in the trinitarian relational process to participate in God's life in relationship together as family (Jn 14:6-9). Anything less than Jesus' whole person and any substitutes of his relational process are reductionism of the Truth limited to human contextualization and shaping—which was why Jesus was so sad and frustrated with his disciples after all their time together (Jn 14:9). This speaks also to our theological engagement and the urgency to examine our interpretive lens by which we define the person and engage in relationships. The prevailing function and practice in human contextualization signify an anthropology that has reduced the human person from being whole and the primacy of relationships together in wholeness. This is the interpretive lens we bring to the theological task unless our theological anthropology is clearly distinguished with the whole of Jesus—not merely in ethical and moral terms but in the full relational significance that has distinguished God's self-revelation, from the words provoking "Did God really *say* that?" to the incarnation embodying the whole of God. When this trinitarian relational context and process converge in our theological task, then, and only then, what can emerge is whole theology, the theology of wholeness, that distinguishes the whole of God and on that basis distinguishes God's family in whole relationship together—nothing less and no substitutes in this age of reductionism.

Whatever self-disclosure God makes—from the primordial garden through the incarnation to Paul and the early church—God engages communicative action, the dynamic of which always is enacted *from* God's trinitarian relational context *in* God's trinitarian relational process. This dynamic of God's nature necessitates involvement Face to face, heart to heart, which cannot be engaged in referential terms as an observer in relational distance. To go beyond the transmission of information about God to the depth level of relational involvement necessary to truly know and understand God necessarily involves receiving God's communicative action in its given relational context and process in order for compatible connection to be made (cf. Jn 8:42-43). Relational

distance not only prevents the depth of relational connection but shifts the focus away from relational engagement Face to face and qualitative involvement heart to heart from inner out. This shift reflects the lens of reductionism influencing the two major issues of how the person is defined and on that basis how relationships are engaged. Relational distance, therefore, clearly indicates functioning within the limits of human contextualization, which opens the door to human shaping as the primary determinant for theology. Moreover, this means theology defined in referential terms, not the improbable and intrusiveness of God's relational terms.

Theology in referential terms redefines the improbable (and the whole) by the probable, and thereby determines theology based on the limits of fragmentary knowledge and related understanding. God's relational disclosures have been narrowed down and kept at a relational distance, which results in explanatory conclusions of narrowed-down theology (or hybrid theology), for example, of doctrinal certainty even of the Bible itself. This certainty circulates in a referential epistemic process—as emerged notably from the Enlightenment with the primacy of reason—that Jesus identified as characteristic of “the wise and learned” in contrast to the relational epistemic process of “little children” (Lk 10:21). Yet what compounds the limits of a referential epistemic process is less about reason and more about the human condition. This involves fragmenting the whole of Jesus' intrusive relational path to the less vulnerable probable terms of our shaping of relationship together. The absence or lack of involvement, or maintaining distance, in relationship with the improbable Word embodied in whole renders us to just referential terms with God, with only information about God to refer to within the limits of our self-understanding. The relational consequence is that we really don't know God, and the theological consequence is a hybrid theology which is fragmentary at best or misleading, distorted or incorrect at worst.

## **Hybrid Theology: Theology on Our Terms**

Peter clearly illustrates the theological problems we face when we try to reconcile the Jesus embodied in whole to a narrowed epistemic field, that is, within the limits of what we know or can rationalize. Of all the original disciples, Peter had the most opportunity to experience the more dramatic of Jesus' self-disclosures, which should have formed the integral basis for his knowledge and understanding of God, his theology (Lk 5:4-11; Jn 6:67-69; Mt 14:22-33; 16:16-23; 17:1-9; Jn 13:1-17; 21:15-22; Acts 10:9-20, 34-35, 44-48; 11:17). Yet, ironically, relational distance and its consequence for theology are clearly witnessed foremost in Peter among Jesus' first disciples. Peter's theological anthropology consistently interfered with his involvement with Jesus and in his discipleship. Besides jumping into the water with Jesus, his bold confessions of faith and his three-fold denial in the moments leading up to the cross, Peter's actions need to be understood in the prevailing interpretive lens they reflect. Three interactions in particular demonstrate how Peter defined the person and engaged in relationships to shape his theology.

First, when Jesus further queried his disciples about their personal opinion of his identity, Peter made this summary confession affirming Jesus' deity: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” a revelation which Jesus acknowledged Peter had

received from “my Father in heaven” (Mt 16:16-17). Yet, though Peter’s confession was theologically correct *about* Jesus, his theology could not translate into function *with* Jesus in relationship together because this would require going beyond his limits based on the probable in order to engage the improbable Jesus face to Face on Jesus’ relational terms—a relational position of vulnerability that Peter still avoided. This was clearly evident soon after his confession when Jesus vulnerably disclosed the painful course “he must” (*dei*, necessary, unavoidable) take to the cross and the resurrection (16:21). Rather than receive the face of Jesus (and God’s relational response of grace), however, Peter takes Jesus aside as if to counsel him (maybe partly from the confidence gained due to his confession; recall Job, Job 38:2), not to console Jesus. Peter acts boldly “to rebuke him” (v.22). The word “rebuke” (*epitimaō*) means to censure, blame, berate; it is an abrupt and biting charge sharply expressing disapproval, harshly taking someone to task for a fault (cf. Mk 1:25). The word implies that Peter expressed a warning as he confronted Jesus on this absurd disclosure. “God forbid it, Lord!”—the term (*hileos*) functions in such phrases as an invocation for overturning evil (cf. in our vernacular, “Heaven forbid!” or “Absolutely no way!”). We have to appreciate Peter’s honesty in sharing his feelings with Jesus. In this sense, Peter made himself vulnerable to Jesus. Yet, despite his honesty, was he really opening his whole person to Jesus? The answer involves why Peter had these feelings.

Jesus’ response to him helps us understand. He responds back even more strongly by identifying Peter as the enemy (v.23)—in contrast and conflict with moment’s earlier (v.17). Why? Because he was a “stumbling block” to Jesus; the term (*skandalon*) always denotes enticing or trapping its victim in a course of behavior which could ruin the person. Compared to earlier (v.17) when Peter was influenced by the Father’s revelation over human rationalizing, Peter shifted from God’s whole terms to his reduced function on the basis of the probable terms of his hybrid theology limited to “human things” and “not on divine things.” His focus “in mind” (*phroneo*) means to think, have a mindset—that which underlies one’s predisposition or bias. This is the activity of one’s perceptual-interpretive framework, which also involves the will, affections, conscience, therefore to be mindful and devoted to that perspective—the lens of Peter’s predisposition that emerged from his hybrid theology. In other words, his theological framework and lens defines what he pays attention to and what he ignores, thereby determining how he will function as a person and in relationships, most notably with Jesus. These theological and relational consequences are inseparable from Peter’s lens defining the person and engaging relationships, that which must be accounted for in any and all theological engagement.

The issue that has fully emerged for Peter in this interaction is not focused on being made whole and having a whole theology but on defining relationship with God and shaping it by his reduced terms on the basis of his hybrid theology. Peter had strong feelings against Jesus’ self-disclosure because that was incongruent with his perceived image of God and what God should do; for Peter, the improbable was incompatible with the probable. This is not merely about his messianic hopes and expectations but exposes a deeper issue. That is, Peter’s perceptual-interpretive framework reduced Jesus’ whole person and determined the terms of their relationship; this then redefined Jesus to function in Peter’s reduced context, not Jesus’ whole relational context, consequently to be something less than and some substitute for the One whom Peter professed Jesus to be

earlier. In contrast and conflict with the whole of Jesus and Jesus' vulnerable self-disclosure here of his relational work to constitute whole relationship together, Peter remains within the limits of the probable in which he can feel more certain and less vulnerable. By its nature, a hybrid theology invariably becomes a wide-gate-and-road theology. This exposes the relational dynamics engaged in a hybrid theology and its predisposition for a dismissive functional position to and a distant relational involvement with the improbable embodied in whole who intrudes his innermost.

These constraints on Peter's function shaping his hybrid theology keep emerging, as further evident in the next extraordinary self-disclosure of the whole of God. Six days after the above interaction, the face of Jesus is presented the most vulnerably of any other moment during the incarnation. This happens when Jesus is "transfigured" (*metamorphoo*, to transform, to alter fundamentally) before Peter, James and John (Mt 17:1-9)—a privileged experience for them that should be integral in taking Peter beyond his limits.

The transfiguration marks a pivotal point of Jesus' disclosure of God's glory, which these disciples have the unique opportunity to experience further and deeper: the "visible" heart of God's being, as Jesus is transformed to exalted form and substance (cf. Moses' face, Ex 34:29); the intimate relational nature of the whole of God, as the Father, along with his Son, communicates directly with them in relationship (cf. with Moses, Ex 24:15-16; with Elijah, 1 Kg 19:8-18); and the vulnerable presence and involvement of God, as illuminated clearly in this amazing experiential moment. At this reunion of key persons in God's family, the whole of God's thematic relational action coheres from the past (represented by Moses and Elijah) with the present (presented by the Messiah in God's glory embodying God's grace) to the future (by the present constituting reality of God's kingdom/family). In the Father's relational communication (an extension from Jesus' baptism, Mk 1:11) specifically directed to these disciples to build relationship together, two vital messages summarize all that God relationally has disclosed, promised and experienced with his people: (1) the full affirmation of his Son in the trinitarian relational context of family and by the trinitarian relational process of family love, and (2) the clear relational imperative ("Listen to him!") for all his followers to pay attention and respond to him in his relational context and process—imperative because Jesus' relational language communicates the whole of God, not only with his words but from his whole person, for the whole understanding (*synesis*) necessary to have wholeness in theology and practice (cf. Mk 8:17-18).

The whole of God's glory is vulnerably disclosed in the face of Jesus, as Paul later made definitive (2 Cor 4:6). Moses and Elijah responded to God's glory "face to face" on God's terms to build the covenant relationship together. What does Peter do with God's glory; how does he respond to the face of Jesus?

God's glory is not disclosed to observe for information, even to use to construct theology, or merely to behold in awe, but only for relationship—by the necessity of God's qualitative being, relational nature and vulnerable presence. When Peter wanted to erect three tents (for Jesus, Moses and Elijah) as the opportune purpose for him to be present (Mk 9:5), consider what this does to the whole of God's heart and intimate relational presence vulnerably presented to him. In the tension of this vulnerably improbable moment, Peter resorts to the past, both immediate and distant, which is still present in function for him. His old mindset (perceptual-interpretive framework and lens)



exposed by Jesus six days ago, quickly expressed itself further when he tries to constrain God's glory to a place—just like the OT ways of relating to God indirectly in the tabernacle (tent). Once again, Peter reduces Jesus' whole person and relates to the face of Jesus on his reductionist terms, not Jesus' relational context and process as the Father makes imperative for him. Peter's shift to the tents further exposes the relational dynamics in his hybrid theology: the reductionist substitute he uses for the face of Jesus; how reductionism diminished his direct relational involvement with God's glory embodied by Jesus' whole person; and as a result the relational distance he maintains from intimate relationship together with Jesus and the whole of God as family. The relational consequence is that how Peter functions directly prevents their relationship from functioning together in the relational significance of "Follow me."

Peter's function in these relational dynamics is inseparable from his theology; and the unavoidable interaction between function and theology was consequential for both his function and theology. By shifting away from the inner out to narrow down his epistemic field to more quantitative terms from outer in, Peter's theology cannot account for the qualitative and relational in God's ontology and function, and consequently cannot account for Peter's whole person created in the qualitative image and relational likeness of God. Once again, Peter's theological anthropology interferes with going further and deeper. Ontology and function have been reduced to fragmentary terms, which become barriers to vulnerable involvement in the primacy of whole relationship together. Peter's person struggled in this relational condition, as he was constrained within the limits of his reduced theological anthropology, the most notable indicator of a hybrid theology.

All of these relational dynamics converged at Jesus' footwashing (Jn 13:1-17), at which Peter's hybrid theology continues to emerge. In this key interaction, it is vital to see Jesus' engagement beyond referential terms of what to do in serving to its depth in relational terms of how to be involved in relationship ("he loved them"). The intimate depth of Jesus' relational involvement in footwashing was the most vulnerable self-disclosure of his whole person that emerged in the unique relational context of his table fellowship as family together. This depth of relational involvement unfolds in his relational process of family love to constitute his family in Communion together—that intimate table fellowship of worship indivisible from his footwashing. When Peter refused Jesus' footwashing, he fragmented both Jesus' person and his person to their roles and status, reducing the person to outer in by what one does—or in reference to Jesus, what he should not do. The function of Peter's theology merely extends from his earlier attempt to prevent Jesus from going to the cross (Mt 16:22). Consequently, in the limits of his hybrid theology the probable and secondary continue to prevail, and Peter simply rejected the most vulnerable presence and intimate relational involvement of the whole of God.

Seemingly incongruent with these relational dynamics at this pivotal table fellowship, moments later Peter declared without hesitation "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you" (13:37). Such a statement, however, along with his earlier confessions of faith, are not incongruent when made in referential terms from a hybrid theology that has reduced Peter's person to what he does—or doesn't do in the matter of footwashing. As the evening progresses and the weekend unfolds, even a lack of performance in what he does did not turn Peter from his reductionism and away from his secondary focus. This is indicated in the qualitative and relational significance

of Jesus' final words to Peter before his ascension: "Do you love me, Peter?" then "*don't focus on the secondary of your service but 'follow me' in the primacy of whole relationship together*" (Jn 21:15-19).

This lack and disparity in Peter's own theology and function reflect the fragmentation of his person, the extent of which had a reductionist influence on a segment of the early church—including Barnabas, as Paul exposed to Peter's face at Antioch (Gal 2:13-14). Even though Peter advocated for equality at the church council in Jerusalem, his advocacy likely still focused on an incomplete soteriology, with no indication of being saved *to* the primacy of whole relationship together as family (Acts 15:6-11). It is critical to understand, that in Peter's hybrid process (in anyone's hybrid process) there were limits to what could emerge both theologically and functionally.

What we see unfolding in Peter is a pattern of his reshaping God's self-disclosures on God's whole terms, fragmenting the whole of Jesus and redefining his person in a narrowed-down epistemic field for a hybrid theology based on the limits of Peter's reduced terms. Hybrid theology not only divides theology but also separates theology from function, such that its practice can be neither congruent nor even compatible with its theology, thus reducing both to a fragmented condition. This fragmented condition goes unrecognized as long as one remains within the limits of understanding from one's knowledge or rationalizing. As Peter demonstrated, this fragmentation of theology may have doctrinal certainty and appear to be united, yet it is not whole. These are the results of epistemological illusion and ontological simulation from reductionism and its counter-relational work, which inevitably can only be in contrast and conflict with the whole of God and the whole ontology and function improbably embodied in Jesus.

## **The Basis for Distinguished Theological Trajectory**

The need for certainty in our knowledge and conclusions is understandable, yet its pursuit must be understood as a need promoted by human contextualization in a narrowed epistemic field. On this basis, whoever speaks with authority warrants paying attention to—specifically the scholarship of "the wise and learned." The matter of authority has been foundational in theology, yet what has emerged from the foundation of authority has not distinguished the whole of God and God's whole for the human condition. This lack or gap in theology is not an authority issue. Though authority is a crucial issue, it is not the most critical for God's revelation. Most critical is God's relational grace, and the fact or not of God's initiative, presence and involvement such that the whole of God can be known, understood and experienced in relationship together without human speculation, shaping or construction. This relational dynamic of grace is the functional difference between deism and theism, and the necessary basis and ongoing base for the theological task and theological education. Theology and its practice can only be a relational outcome of engagement in the relational epistemic process initiated by God's grace; and this is the only engagement and outcome that have relational significance to God and, on this relational basis, that can be whole.

The critical necessity in the epistemic process and theological task is for God's relational grace to prevail. For God's grace to prevail, it must by its relational nature (*dei*, not by obligation, *opheilo*) be the ongoing experiential reality that defines and determines our person and relationships in all our "weakness" (cf. Paul, 2 Cor 12:9), situations and circumstances in the human context, thereby being responsive to and involved with God on God's terms to experience, know and understand his vulnerable presence and intimate involvement—the relational context and process of God's grace. This relational outcome emerges only from ongoing involvement with the Spirit in the relational dynamic of reciprocating contextualization—the interrelated interaction between God's context and our human context. Anything less and any substitutes of this relational process shift it to our terms of human shaping and construction.

Contrary to common perception, grace is not action by God for unilateral relationship—an implied position of some Reformed perspectives. Grace only creates the opportunity for reciprocal relationship together, for which the recipients of relational grace are responsible and thus accountable; and this is why God has gotten angry and would "hide my face from them" (Dt 31:17). Faith in the transcendent and holy God is possible only by the relational grace of the righteous God, who is vulnerably present and intimately involved only for the purpose of whole relationship together. Faith is the relational response that must (*dei* not *opheilo*) be compatible with the transcendent and holy God's vulnerable presence and intimate involvement in order for the relationship to be compatible (only on God's terms) and whole (nothing less and no substitutes). This is the inseparable challenge and accountability for both theology and practice.

The whole of God's thematic relational response of grace to the human condition unfolds in a theological trajectory and along a relational path that converge in the narrow gate and road of the incarnation—and that cannot be divided or fragmented to "widen" the gate and road. By the narrow gate and road, the improbable embodied in whole by Jesus was vulnerably disclosed (beyond *apokalypto*) in the distinguished relational context and process (to *phaneroo*) that fulfilled God's definitive blessing to his family to enact *siym* for *shalom*, that is, to bring the change necessary for new relationship together in wholeness (Num 6:24-26). The relational context and process distinguishing the Face of God involved the relational work of Face-to-face relationship that intruded on the probable (the common) and challenged them with the improbable (the Uncommon). For whole understanding—our indispensable and irreplaceable *synesis* (as Paul defined, Col 2:2-4)—it is necessary to follow this theological trajectory and relational path.

Crucial to understanding the theological trajectory of the distinguished Face of God now embodied in whole is understanding his relational language. For most persons, this initially requires a major shift away from referential language focused on quantitative information about God in order to receive Jesus' relational language involved in communicating qualitative knowledge and understanding of God only in relationship—a significant difference for the epistemic process that needs to be accounted for. This shift is unavoidable if we are to follow the theological trajectory of the Face of God, because without shifting we would not be on the same trajectory.

Referential terms puts God on a different theological trajectory merely as the Object to be observed and for faith. The information gained and conclusions formed about God in this common epistemic process are shaped by the limits of what we know or can rationalize, that is, shaped by our self-understandings. In contrast and even in

conflict, the relational terms of God's face unfolds in the theological trajectory as Subject (beyond a mere Other) to be involved in reciprocal relationship together Face to face, whose Face cannot be defined and whose relationship cannot be determined by our face. What we know and understand of God is distinguished in the relational epistemic process emerging from our involvement in reciprocal relationship with Subject-Face—whom the early disciples had issues distinguishing without *syniemi* (putting the pieces together) in its necessary relational epistemic process (Mk 8:17-18). The difference in these trajectories may seem unnecessarily nuanced when in fact the difference is immeasurable if knowing and understanding the whole of God are primary and therefore is composed by the relational Word. As Subject, God speaks for himself, and theology is contingent on God's communication in relationship. As Object, God's voice is mute and God's words are disembodied, fragmented and otherwise subjected to human shaping in the theological task. As Subject, relationship with God is only on God's whole terms. As Object, relationship and relating to God is negotiated by reduced human terms, shaped by the probable down to a fragmentary condition; this is how Christ becomes divided, as Paul exposed in the reductions by the fragmented church at Corinth (1 Cor 1:10-13). To follow Jesus' theological trajectory as the distinguished Face, we must, by his nature as Subject, be involved with him along his relational path (cf. Jn 12:26). Yet, as seen consistently in Jesus' interactions, the relational Jesus embodied as Subject is both improbable (uncommon) and whole, and that is problematic for the probable (common) and fragmentary—an unsettling intrusion on what prevails (the common, as 'the wise and learned' and would-be followers discovered) and a jolt to the status quo (distinguished from the uncommon, as Nicodemus learned, Jn 3:1-15).

The Creator (for science) and the whole of God (for theology) emerge only in reciprocating contextualization, engaged with respective epistemic and ontological humility. This theological task cannot be undertaken from the observation of a scientific approach or from the relational distance of the rationality of philosophy, both constraining the heuristic process leading to the whole knowledge and understanding of God's self-disclosure (as Jesus declared, Jn 5:39-40). This outcome is only the relational outcome of reciprocating contextualization engaged in the relational epistemic process of Scripture with the Spirit. This relational process brings us face to Face with the distinguished whole of God from outside the uni-multiverse to engage the improbable theological trajectory for direct involvement in the intrusive relational path of the embodied Word from and of God. Anything less and any substitutes put us on a different theological trajectory and relational path. If we maintain any relational distance to circumvent Jesus' intrusive relational path, we will find ourselves on a different theological trajectory—even if our doctrine appears to have certainty.

Evangelicals traditionally have deferred to the Word and its embodiment in Christ. Yet, *how* the Word was embodied goes further and deeper than objective history to compose the relational context and process distinguishing the whole of God and God's creative, communicative and salvific action. Unless the qualitative and relational *how* of the Word's embodiment defines our theology and determines our theological engagement and outcomes, our theology and practice will be on a conflicting theological trajectory and deviant relational path (as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Lk 24:13-32).

## The Coherence of God's Self-Revelation

Christian theology is distinguished when it understands the coherence of the triune God's creative, communicative and salvific action, and therefore makes definitive the whole of God's self-revelation vulnerably extended to us only for whole relationship together. Coherence in relational terms involves interrelating the whole (*syniemi*, as Jesus defined, Mk 8:17-18) for whole understanding (*synesis*, as Paul made definitive, Col 2:2-3), which is basically different from merely systematizing information in referential terms (characteristic of systematic theology). To understand God's action—not fragmented or piecemeal but with coherence—is to know the whole of God from a qualitative-relational interpretive framework that vulnerably engages in the trinitarian relational context and process necessary for the relationship to whole-ly know God on God's qualitative-relational terms, therefore on the basis only of God's grace (relational initiative) and not by human terms and effort (no matter how well-intentioned). Any determination by human effort (even in systematic theology) implies a shift from the primacy of God's grace for relationship, consequently substituting human terms for God's.

For example, the problem with depending on human reason in hermeneutics is that it minimizes the Other's (Subject-God) horizon and thus gets into denying (and often masks) the Other's terms by substituting one's own terms. Not receiving Jesus on his own terms effectively disembodies him as Subject (perhaps not as Object) and removes him from the relational context and process he composed in relational terms, consequently reducing a hermeneutical circle to a vicious circle revolved around self. God did not merely extend his revelation as an object (noted by only *apokalypto*) to be observed; if so, then this would warrant the scientific method as the best approach to the Bible. More importantly and significantly God communicated his self-revelations as Subject (distinguished by *phaneroo*, Jn 17:6) to be heard, received and responded back to in relationship together only on God's terms.

This vital distinction between *apokalypto* and *phaneroo* will determine whether God's revelation is separated from his given relational context and process, and consequently disembodied by reductionism to mere propositional truths or concepts, principles and other abstractions. In Luke 10:21, Jesus declared that the Father only *apokalypto* to children, yet God *apokalypto* to everyone and did not conceal from anyone. That is, Jesus is making the vital point that knowing and understanding God is not through human effort no matter the extent of God's *apokalypto*; rather this relational outcome is experienced (1) only on the basis of God's initiating grace in relationship, and (2) by our compatible relational response to his relational self-disclosure (*phaneroo*), which is symbolized in children. This epistemic relational process with the Spirit in reciprocating contextualization involves the hermeneutical cone (further and deeper than a circle) with God's Word—oral, written and embodied—that must by its nature involve the reflexive relational process of reading, listening, interpreting as well as responding back relationally to Subject-God, not to disembodied teachings, commands, propositions.

In contrast to Peter who struggled with reciprocating contextualization, Paul emerged to make definitive the theology integral for the whole gospel. Interestingly, Paul began on a contrary theological trajectory to Jesus; but he openly responded to the whole of God's intrusive relational path (more than a Christophany) that engaged him with

epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction. The relational outcome for Paul unfolded with whole knowledge and understanding of the triune God to constitute whole theology (e.g. Col 1:15-23)—the theology with which Paul confronted, exposed and corrected Peter’s hybrid theology (Gal 2:11-16).

With the recent success in 2012 of the Large Hadron Collider near Geneva, physicists are excited that the vexing mysteries facing human knowledge will soon be illuminated: specifically with the discovery of the Higgs particle (the so-called God particle) to explain why some matter (notably our bodies) has mass, that is, without which our bodies would not be held together to exist.

If Paul were walking in this context today, he would seize the opportunity to enter this conversation—just as he did in Athens when he addressed the vexing mystery of human knowledge facing the Athenians at the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34). And the light Paul shared to illuminate the gap (dark matter in physics) of human knowledge for the Epicurean (a likely forerunner to physics, tending at best, if at all, to deism) and Stoic (religious materialism which was pantheistic) philosophers would not be an anachronism in the halls of modern science because Paul was addressing the same epistemological and hermeneutic issues. Yet, modern science perceives the uni-multiverse through the lens of a quantitative interpretive framework from modernism; and it also perceives the same human species in enlarged context though still from outer in (as does neuroscience), and likewise constructs human knowledge from the bottom up (comparable to constructing the tower of Babel, Gen 11:1-4). All of these efforts engage in an underlying process of reductionism in a narrow-down epistemic field, the bias of which is ignored apart from the presence of the whole and thus without the benefit of its illumination—a deficit intrinsic to the human condition. If our theology is to be distinguished from prevailing knowledge and understanding—and have significance for the human condition—then we need to account unmistakably for God’s qualitative-relational terms in our interpretive framework and theological engagement.

Paul would have felt right at home today in these critical issues of cosmology, anthropology and epistemology. No doubt he would be saddened by how little has changed in these issues and by how much reductionism prevails. Nevertheless, this was the whole of Paul’s relational responsibility (his *oikonomia*, Col 1:25) and the functional purpose of the whole in his theology, which urgently continues in compelling relevance for today: to make whole (*pleroo*) the word of God’s revelation and to illuminate the mystery of the whole (*pleroma*) of God—God’s whole only from top down. This is the definitive whole in Paul’s theology which sheds light on the mysterious “dark matter” necessary to meet the same inherent human need and problem, both defined from outer in and hoped for from bottom up by neuroscience and physics.

When Paul highlighted the Athenians’ “unknown god” (Acts 17:23), he went beyond contextualizing the gospel in their culture. This opened the door to their worldview to address their epistemological gap (*agnostos*) and the related hermeneutic blind spot (*agnoeo*) in their perceptual-interpretive lens. Paul challenged the framework of their worldview with the whole (top down, inner out, 17:24-30) necessary for epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction—just as the whole of God’s theological trajectory and relational path revealed for Paul. Moreover, in this decisive challenge Paul points to the implied yet definitive framework of his theological discourse.

Paul's theology did not have a systematic quantity that could be collated for systematic information about God. Likewise, a systematic format to his theological discourse is nonexistent in his letters. I do assert, however, there is a *systemic* quality to his theology which signifies the systemic framework for the whole in his theology. It is this systemic framework that is necessary in order to understand the coherence of Paul's thought in his letters and to know this whole at the heart of his theology.

His theological systemic framework emerged from being rooted in revelation initiated by God (Eph 3:2-3) and thereby was based on whole knowledge from top down in the relational epistemic process (1 Cor 2:9-10), not on fragmented knowledge constructed from bottom up in, at best, a limited epistemic process (1 Cor 2:12-13). It was from this systemic framework that Paul addressed the Athenians definitively about epistemology, cosmology, theological cognition and anthropology, their nature and qualitative-relational significance, and the good news which sheds the Light on their unknown—which otherwise would remain mysterious dark matter without it. The outcome from this systemic framework in Paul's theological discourse made conclusive the theology of wholeness, without which the human species will remain reduced and fragmented, unable to realize their ontology in God's relational whole from top down, inner out.

Paul's address in the midst of the Areopagus challenged the assumptions of the Athenians' epistemology and their view of the *kosmos*. He also affirmed part of their knowledge (acknowledging an unknown god), yet Paul strongly implied the insufficiency of their epistemic process in not pursuing this course of knowledge further in the *kosmos*—for example, as in the heuristic nature of science. The epistemic dynamic to the universe reveals also its *systemic quality*, as it links the communicative dimension to the source intrinsic to and integral for the quantitative with all else that exists (as Paul illuminated, Acts 17:27-28). It is this source's qualitative systemic framework by which all things hold together (cf. Col 1:17). The qualitative communicative dimension of the epistemic dynamic to the universe can be responded to, ignored, rejected or denied—which has less to do with what can be observed than how it is observed, most commonly by the predisposed or biased lens of the observer embedded in a quantitative perceptual-interpretive framework.<sup>6</sup> The implications directly affect the extent and depth of human knowledge, ranging from the universe to the human person, including theological cognition. Paul deeply explained what those implications were.

What Paul clearly placed in juxtaposition, and thus in dynamic tension and conflict, signified the critical distinction between an anthropocentric model of the universe and a theocentric model. Paul's cosmology was unmistakably not of his own shaping or construction, nor defined by surrounding worldviews and mythology in his day. Distinguished from these sources, his cosmology was theological discourse from top down, thus based on God's revelation with early roots in Judaism (e.g. Ps 19:1-6). Yet his cosmological reflection went further and deeper than Judaism's theology to involve the whole of God and the systemic framework of God's thematic relational action. The universe was the work of the Creator alone, who is not the God of deism. God's creative work is always relational work, which signifies the relational ontology of the whole of the Creator. It is this relational God who is revealed to creation only for relationship

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<sup>6</sup> For an indispensable discussion on this process and development in modern science's perceptual-interpretive framework, see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

together, and whose likeness is created in the human person for relationships together to be whole. The relational work of the whole of the Creator was the functional purpose of Paul's cosmology; this was how he made known the unknown for the Athenians. Therefore, his cosmology also was not about natural theology.

Paul's cosmology is based on these revelations and thereby relationally rooted deeply in the whole of God. On only this basis, his cosmology is simply theological discourse for the sole purpose to definitively illuminate what otherwise would remain dark matter: the systemic framework of God's qualitative whole from top down constituting all life and function only on God's relational terms, that is, for the relationships together necessary to be whole in the image and likeness of the *pleroma* of God (cf. Acts 17:28-31; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 2:9-10; 3:10-11).

A corollary implication to the knowledge of God involves how God is perceived and his function is interpreted. Paul not only challenged the theological cognition of the Athenians and his readers but also their epistemic process used to that end. As this was addressed by Paul, his conjoint fight for the whole gospel and against reductionism becomes even more decisive. Moreover, by its nature this implication interacted with the counterpart implication for how the human person is perceived and human function is interpreted.

Knowledge about God shaped or constructed by human contextualization is no longer excusable, even with the best of intentions (Rom 1:20; Acts 17:30). Paul was unequivocal about the communicative dimension in the *kosmos*: "For what can be known about God is plain [*phaneros*, manifest, open, public] to them, because God has shown them [*phaneroo*, not merely *apokalypso*]" (Rom 1:19). What God has revealed is irreducible and thus not subject to reshaping, reconstruction (or deconstruction), any other revision or substitute from bottom up as well as outer in. Yet this was how the Athenians perceived God and interpreted how God functioned evidenced in Paul's critique of their practice: "God...does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is served by human hands...an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals" (Acts 17:24-25, 29). These were reductions and substitutes of God which fragmented the whole of God, thus keeping God in the mysterious unknown and embedding them in the human relational condition disconnected from God's whole.

Paul exposed the underlying issue of these persons described above with the clarity of his theological discourse fighting for the whole gospel, which then necessarily also amplified his fight to confront how they indeed functioned as inexcusable (Rom 1:20) and inescapable of accountability (1:24a, 26a, 28; Acts 17:30-31). In other words, these human persons engaged the nature of reductionism as unequivocal sin, functioning in the sin of reductionism by reshaping, reconstructing or redefining the qualitative whole of Creator-God, as well as the whole of human persons from inner out created in God's likeness. Consequently, they made substitutes by human shaping, construction and terms from bottom up which function in counter-relational work/practices from outer in—often signifying the ontological simulation and epistemological illusion of prevailing alternatives from reductionism.

Just as Paul demonstrated to the Athenians, the process to deeper knowledge and understanding necessitates first confronting the influence of reductionism in an indispensable but secondary epistemic dynamic of deconstructing and reconstructing the consequences of reductionism and its fragmented knowledge and understanding. His



definitive discourse equally applies also to Judaism and the Christian church, as unfolded in his letters. This interrelated secondary epistemic dynamic is conjoined with its counterpart, the primary epistemic dynamic of the universe, in order to vulnerably engage the relational epistemic process for whole knowledge and understanding. As Paul did this for them, and continues to do this for his readers, his theological discourse made definitive the systemic framework within which the relational dynamic of all life is enacted, engaged and thereby makes whole, nothing less and no substitutes.

## **The Unavoidable Challenge of the Face of Theology**

The contrast, and even conflict, between Peter's theology on his own terms and Paul's theology transformed by God's terms is no mere theological exercise. Theology today in the age of reductionism struggles to emerge definitively and, more important, flounders to be distinguished in its subject matter. Though Peter was in the ongoing presence of the face of Jesus, unlike Paul after the Damascus road, a veil functioned between Peter and Jesus to make the whole of God's Face elusive for Peter both to make face-to-Face connection and to distinguish from inner out—a consequence despite the reality that Jesus removed the veil for intimate relationship together (2 Cor 3:16-18). This qualitative perception of God's Face and relational experience with God Face to face eludes many in theological engagement today, essentially for the same reasons as for Peter. While Peter was not one of the two Jesus found on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-32), he was often on a conflicting theological trajectory and deviant relational path. Many Christians, both theologically and in the practice of faith, are also on this road to Emmaus, having lost the significance of the whole of God's presence and involvement. Reductionism ongoingly obscures God's Face and interferes with face-to-Face connection by diminishing the primacy of relationship together—all while promoting substitutes for epistemological illusion in theology and ontological simulation in practice.

This has become a crisis in theology distinguishing its subject matter and an identity crisis in practice having the significance in likeness of the whole of God. The underlying sin of reductionism has been consequential epistemologically, ontologically and relationally, such that nothing less than a turn around from the road to Emmaus, a turn back to the whole of God's improbable theological trajectory, and a return to the intrusive relational path of the embodied Word will provide the epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction necessary for God's whole (see *shub*, Ps 80:3,7,19; cf. Jer 31:18). The ongoing relational imperative for theology and practice is simply stated by the ancient poet: “seek his face always” (*paneḥ*, Ps 105:4, NIV), rendered also “seek his presence continually,” signifying nothing less and no substitutes of face-to-Face involvement (cf. Jer 2:27). ‘Face’ is how the whole of God is vulnerably present and intimately involved (Num 12:8; 2 Cor 4:6) as the relational outcome of God's definitive blessing to “make his face to shine upon you...and *bring the change [siym] for new relationship together in wholeness [shalom]*” (Num 6:24-26).

We cannot diminish or minimize this relational imperative without the consequence witnessed in Peter. In other words, the significance of the theological task cannot be defined for us until we engage the Face; and we cannot determine the significance of our involvement in the relational epistemic process with the Face until we

understand our reductionism (as on the road to Emmaus) and *shub*. Therefore, the initial major challenge in the task of theology today urgently surfaces for this discipline to distinguish its unique (and improbable) subject matter, that is, without becoming co-opted by other disciplines in its quest for scholarly status. Moreover, this distinguished subject matter is not information-based in referential terms but experience-based in relational terms, though not by observation. Accordingly, the epistemology emerging with the Face is inseparable from soteriology and converges with God's thematic relational response to the human condition. This relational dynamic connects irreducibly and makes integral Numbers 6:24-26 and Psalm 80:3,7,19—cohering in the summary text, Psalm 67:1-2—with the whole of God's strategic, tactical and functional shifts vulnerably enacted in the incarnation.

For evangelicals today, the most likely gap in evangelical thinking about the Word is the failure to understand the qualitative and relational significance of God's strategic shift in self-disclosure with the incarnation (as initially disclosed in Jn 4:19-26). The influence of reductionism underlies what unfolds, or doesn't unfold, in evangelical thinking. The insufficiency of a quantitative interpretive framework is consequential for reducing God's communicative action to referential terms, without the deeper qualitative and relational significance embodied in whole by Jesus, thereby inadequately distinguishing the whole of God—even if based on an inerrant Word. This referentialization of the Word necessitates a paradigm shift (more likely redemptive change) compatible with God's strategic shift that can make the connection in the relational epistemic process for involvement together “in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:23), that is, “with heart and vulnerableness” to intimately experience the whole of God in vulnerable self-disclosure. As Jesus made definitive, these are the persons “the Father seeks” in reciprocal relationship together.

God's improbable theological trajectory intrudes in these relational terms, and theology in the age of reductionism must by this relational nature involve a compatible relational response or be rendered incongruent with the Face's theological trajectory and relational path.

“Did God really *communicate* that?”

## Chapter 2      The Globalization of Reductionism

**You will not *be reduced*...your eyes will be opened.**

Gen 3:4-5

It seems ironic, paradoxical or contradictory to title this chapter as above. This, however, is distinctly how the dynamic of reductionism needs to be entitled to understand its presence, influence and working in our midst.

As a dynamic counteracting God's presence, yet often presented as a counterpart (exposed by Paul, 2 Cor 11:14-15), the presence of reductionism must be recognized in order to understand the breadth of its workings and the depth of its influence epistemologically, ontologically and relationally. Without this recognition and understanding, theology struggles with its subject matter to distinguish the vulnerable presence and intimate involvement of the whole of God.

Two issues will remain insurmountable in theological engagement unless adequately dealt with in the theological task and thereby defined in whole with its theology:

1. The view of sin and the strength of this view.
2. The anthropology determining how the person is defined and relationships are engaged.

These issues overlap and interact to identify the critical condition of *whose presence* is the primary determinant for our position on them.

The dynamic of reductionism at work and the question needing to be raised about 'whose presence' are well illustrated by a compelling cartoon vividly recalled from years ago. The scene takes place in hell where a junior demon is consulting a senior demon about his work in the human context on earth. The junior is somewhat confused about human behavior and asks the senior: "If they're all doing it, is it still sin?"

Of course, in the Screwtape tradition of C. S. Lewis, we can imagine the senior's response as something like this: "Well, it sure is, but don't let them know that, let them think it's OK—even that it's what and how it should be." The global appearance of some perspective and practice is certainly a defining condition, as the Internet keeps demonstrating. We need to recognize, for example, that the growing frequency and extent of any questionable practice create conditions for redefining those more favorably. Our perceptions of what is unacceptable are being redefined continuously—some for better but mainly for worse. With any relativism emerging from a postmodern context or a climate of indiscriminating tolerance—even with an attitude to be irenic—distinguishing sin, prominently the sin of reductionism, becomes even more difficult.

What we pay attention to and ignore about sin as reductionism are what we pay attention to and ignore about defining the person and engaging in relationships. They overlap inseparably and interact both unmistakably in the human context and undeniably in theological engagement. Therefore, a weak or insufficient view of sin is consequential for reductionism of the person and relationships. Conversely, any reduction of the person and relationships results in not paying attention to, ignoring or simply not understanding reductionism operating in the entire spectrum of human life and in its dynamic process fragmenting God's whole.

## **The Emergence of Reductionism**

The dynamic of reductionism was not part of the original design of the universe and God's creative action. The human person was created whole from inner out in the image of God (Gen 1:27; 2:7), and also made to be in whole relationships together in likeness of the relational ontology of the whole of God (Gen 2:18). Within this context of wholeness in the primordial garden—whether seen as history or perceived as allegory—the reality of reductionism first appeared undeniably and its presence, influence and working emerged as the counteracting dynamic to God's whole. Yet, the dynamic that unfolded from this context has been ignored, even denied, or not understood, even though it is unavoidably the most critical issue that is indispensable to address for theological significance in our theological task and for what our gospel looks like. To deny, ignore or avoid this dynamic reality, whether in the theological task or the practice of faith, ensures reductionism of our epistemology, ontology and relationships, consequently fragmenting us from God's whole and rendering our theology and practice anything less than whole.

The whole of life unfolded in the primordial garden, as did its reduction. Along with the critical challenge to God's communicative action ("Did God really say that?") came the distinct counteraction to God's creative action, and thus the reduced redefinition of the person and relationships that set in motion the counteracting dynamic reverberating through human history. We need to examine and understand this dynamic of reductionism or we will (continue to) fail to contest its presence, influence and working jointly in our theology and practice.

Eve was not created as an addendum to Adam, merely to supplement him and support his work. Both persons were created in God's image to be whole. Also signified in being created in God's likeness was Eve's creation for the primacy of whole relationship together (not merely marriage) in order to complete the human relational context ("not good for the person to be apart") by which their persons (from inner out) could now vulnerably involve themselves in the relational process constituted in and by the whole of God. Under this qualitative condition and these relational terms defining the whole person and relationship together in wholeness, the dynamic of reductionism emerges to counteract God's whole. The dynamic of its appearance now is ongoing, consistently pursuing opportunities to redefine personhood in less than whole terms.

Satan (the author of reductionism, cf. Jn 8:44) tempted or tested Eve with just such a reduction of her person, while claiming the opposite ("you will not *be reduced*," Gen 3:4) with the prediction of greater perception ("your eyes will be opened," 3:5) enhanced by complete knowledge ("knowing good and evil"). By appealing to Eve's

mind with knowledge—the defining characteristic of the modern information age—the dynamic of reductionism unfolds to redefine her person. Such an appeal subtly altered how Eve functionally defined her person, thereby shifting her from an inner-out qualitative focus on primary matter (i.e. the whole person from inner out and the primacy of relationships) to an outer-in quantitative focus on secondary matter (e.g. attributes about the fruit, “good for food and a delight to the eyes,” 3:6, including the outer appearance of their persons, “they knew that they were naked,” 3:7). What they paid attention to and ignored from this quantitative perceptual-interpretive framework—a reduced lens that was supposed to give them greater perception but did the opposite instead—essentially fragmented (1) what God created, by obscuring the qualitative, and (2) what God communicated, by narrowing the epistemic field (God did say that). All this was the result of transposing their perception from inner out to outer in and inverting their priorities from the primary to the secondary.

It is critical to recognize and understand:

For reductionism, the part(s) is primary over the whole, with any sense of the whole (if considered at all) determined only by parts; therefore, reductionism always counters the whole by fragmenting it.

These workings are consequential most significantly for the person and relationships, and this underlying influence shapes our theology and practice. The dynamic of reductionism initially appealed to Eve to pursue becoming a quantitatively better person (by gaining wisdom, intelligence, expertise, 3:6)—not to mention authority, erudition, perhaps the forerunner of scholarship in theological education—which clearly indicated the redefinition of the person based on what they possess and can do in human terms. Reductionism’s “complete knowledge” (as epistemological illusion) enhances many human identities and status today. Most importantly, even with any possible good intention to become a better person, the further consequence of this reduction and redefinition was how she functioned in her relationship with God and attempted to have this relationship on her terms (based on her response to Satan’s reductionist appeal).

It is further critical to recognize and understand:

Basic to reductionism counteracting God’s whole is its counter-relational work, with the shaping of relationship with God on our terms its most subtle practice (as will be demonstrated later in Jesus’ temptations).

Adam fell to and labored under this same reductionism, consequently setting into motion a theological anthropology redefining the person from inner out to outer in based on what they do and have, and on this reduced basis engaging in relationship lacking wholeness. This epistemological, ontological and relational fragmentation dramatically illustrates what underlies all reductionism and Satan’s ingenious counter-relational work—a presence, influence and working that cannot be denied, ignored or elude our understanding any longer. As God said, definitively indeed, “It is not good that the person should be apart *from the whole*” (Gen 2:18).

## The Scope of Reductionism

The initial appearance of reductionism is insufficient to understand the scope of this dynamic in both its breadth and depth. We need to recognize unmistakably and to understand entirely:

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

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

Referentialization of the Word is the most significant, and least understood, consequence emerging from the dynamic of reductionism. Moreover, this dynamic has unfolded, been long established and continues to extend itself in human contexts, even as the norm for the common notion of ‘the common good’. This addresses us both to the globalization of reductionism and the matter of globalization as a social phenomenon of growing reality.

If it is not apparent in your daily life, the influence of modernism as a worldview and its primacy of rationalizing in search of knowledge and truth have prevailed in determining the quality of life in most human contexts. We are all ongoingly influenced and shaped by the outcome of the modern enterprise of progress—whether from the physical and natural sciences or from related applied technologies, and even from theology. As noted in the first chapter, a most far-reaching outcome of this human project impacting humanity is the globalization of the economy; and we are only beginning to grasp the impact of media technology on persons and relationships.<sup>1</sup> Positive or negative, further development of globalization can be expected—and needs to be anticipated by those in the theological context—since, as sociologist Anthony Giddens states, “Modernity is inherently globalizing.”<sup>2</sup> Both how globalization is unfolding and why it has emerged are equally important to recognize and understand. And understanding this age we live in necessarily requires understanding the scope of reductionism.

Along with the economic impact globalization has on peoples of the world, there is a dual phenomenon somewhat paradoxically characterizing globalization. On the one hand, the process is distinctly reductionist, for example, reducing the whole of persons and people to cheap labor, disposable goods or market pawns. On the other hand, globalization is breaking down national boundaries and provincialism to give us a glimpse of the interrelated whole of humanity, albeit in a convoluted sense.

Systems theory (for example, in ecology and family process) has provided further understanding of a whole as a working system of interrelated parts. There is a general tendency to perceive the sum of these parts as determining the whole, without the need for further understanding; yet in a process of synergism the whole functioning together is greater than the sum effects from the function of its individual parts. Inherent to the whole, however, is not merely a quantitative effect greater than the sum of its parts but

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<sup>1</sup> See Sherry Turkle for helpful discussion on this impact in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequence of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 63.

more importantly a qualitative effect. Systems theory is a quantitative framework the use of which tends not to account for qualitative aspects. Thus its value is limited though nonetheless useful to help us understand the whole.

While philosophical postmodernism insightfully has exposed the reductionism in modernity and perhaps points to a holistic direction, postmodernity is neither instrumental in fully grasping reductionism nor significant in understanding the whole. Since the main voices of postmodernism do not speak of a definitive whole—only the need for it—a part (e.g. a person) cannot truly know the importance of *who* one is and is a part of, nor understand the primacy of *what* one is apart from, therefore never really understanding the full significance of *how* being apart from the whole reduces that part(s) to something qualitatively less (or as God said “not good”). In other words, we need a definitive whole in order to fully understand reductionism. At the same time, until we adequately counter reductionist practice in epistemology, theology or everyday Christian function both individually and corporately, we will “be apart” from the whole and thus not experience the reality of the whole of God constituted in the Trinity and in the new creation as God’s family.

The two issues of the strength of our view of sin and the qualitative-relational significance of our theological anthropology continue to interact to determine our theology; and reductionism shapes our theology in human terms with its influence toward a weak view of sin and fragmentary theological anthropology. These positions undermine the extent of theological engagement and accordingly preclude depth in theology. This results not only in obscuring theology’s subject matter but relegating Subject-God to the place of object (however honored)—object of doctrine and of faith in those doctrines. Such theology emerges further in the above interaction as it becomes embedded in globalization.

To understand our current age of modernism and postmodernism within the globalizing dynamic is to understand reductionism, that is, to recognize the age of reductionism and to understand its globalization. The conversation about modernism versus postmodernism needs to be placed within the ongoing historic context of reductionism in order to fully understand the narrowing-down process of reductionism and its scope of influence today. As a simplification of the issues of the modernity-postmodernity debate,<sup>3</sup> I suggest that it is more helpful to perceive both modernist and postmodernist efforts as the search for the whole in life and a consequent shift to reductionist substitutes in the absence of a reality of life’s whole or a lack of ability to grasp it. While modernity has made the shift to substitutes—either as a presupposition or postulated later—postmodernity (with no monolithic position) is still negotiating with this shift as it struggles for holistic alternatives. Yet the shift to substitutes for the whole predates the Enlightenment and even the ancient Greek philosophy in which the modernist worldview has its roots. The practice of reductionism’s substitutes was inaugurated by the earliest human persons in the primordial garden discussed earlier.

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of these issues, particularly as they have affected theology, various sources are available including: Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

To understand the full significance of Eve's encounter with Satan we have to examine further what they are both doing. Integral to the creation of human persons in God's likeness (Gen 2:18), Adam and Eve enjoyed being whole members of the whole of God (signified in 2:25). It was within the distinguished context of God's whole that reductionism emerged to challenge the integrity of the whole.

Satan's challenge of Eve to shift her focus from the whole to the parts ("eat from any tree," 3:1) in itself is only significant if it becomes a substitute for the whole. To her credit Eve engaged the conversation about the parts while still maintaining the relational significance of the whole as God's very own ("but God said," 3:3). Satan counters by redefining the whole of God as determined by what the parts do ("eat...and you will be like God," 3:5), rather than the whole determining the significance of its parts. This distinction is critical to make, conspicuously in the theological task.

This is where the process of reductionism can become obscure because logic and reason blur the line between the parts and the whole to confuse the issue of what determines the whole of God (or God's whole as the church) and how to perceive God's whole (both the Trinity and the person, individually and corporately, created in the triune God's image). This process is crucial to address because it forms the basis for *who* will determine *what* and *what* will determine *whom*. This then is about the issue of causation which, specific to Christian practice, involves either the effect of the whole of God on persons (top-down causation) or the effects of Christian behavior on the whole of God (bottom-up causation).<sup>4</sup> While Christian practice tends not to be either-or but a combination, the critical issue to resolve is who gets the primary function and who has only a secondary function, including how they will functionally interact together. Reductionism gives primary priority to the parts over the whole—an influence not always indicated in our theology but witnessed in our practice. Reductionism is further evident when the secondary becomes the focus over the primary.

Conjointly, reductionism's counter-relational work always involves human persons determining relationship with God on their terms in contradiction to God as sole determiner of the terms for the relationship. This happens in the functional practice of one's beliefs, not necessarily reflecting the beliefs themselves. How this gets ambiguous is when the outward forms and practices of those terms appear similar, yet in function are qualitatively different from God's terms—the critical distinction between our referential terms and God's relational terms. This becomes clearly distinguished in Christ's temptations to be discussed shortly.

By having her epistemic field reduced, Eve reasoned that the quantitative elements of a part ("good for food and pleasing to the eye") would not only enhance her place in the whole but also establish her as whole ("desirable for gaining wisdom" 3:6). Note the direction of causation. Furthermore, since Eve accepted Satan's redefinition of her person, this shifted her to a quantitative perceptual framework focused on the substitutes of the whole with secondary matter. With this new lens she no longer paid attention to the fact that the whole was also "pleasing to the eye and good for food" (2:9). She could not perceive the forest (and God's big picture) but saw only "the tree." By accepting the reductionist challenge to shift to the parts at the expense of the whole, both

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<sup>4</sup> For a further discussion on the general issue of causation, see Nancey Murphy, *Theology in a Postmodern Age* (Czech Republic: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003).



Eve and Adam reduced their whole person to define themselves by what they did. To assume this primary determination then necessitated their pursuit to be a quantitatively “better” person as a substitute for the whole person and thereby necessarily also involved attempts to have relationship with God on their terms (e.g. without the function of grace). Yet, we have to recognize that the significance of their actions went beyond the obvious sin of disobedience; we have to understand that the sin of reductionism underlies all sin. Understanding the scope of reductionism is basic for understanding the human condition, and for the nature of sin as reductionism necessary to be redeemed for the human condition to be made whole.

By definition and the reality of its dynamic, reductionism is always positioned against the whole. It has no significance without the presence of the whole. When God said it is not good for the person “to be apart” (a more wholistic rendering of “to be alone” Gen 2:18), God was referring to being apart from the whole created in the triune God’s likeness. Satan would have us reason that “it’s OK to be apart,” that priority should be given to the work that defines you. Whereas God engages ongoingly in the relational work to respond to the human condition to be apart and to restore us to the whole, Satan intently subjects us to his counter-relational work to reduce the whole and separate us from it. How does Satan go about his counter-relational work?

Reductionism tends not to be the blatant activity often associated with Satan but rather is usually an obscure process having the appearance of being reasonable, normative and even righteous (cf. 2 Cor 11:14-15). Any shift to reductionist substitutes for the whole may not be apparent because the overt forms may remain while the underlying or deeper significance is absent. For example, a shift may not involve a shift in basic doctrine and theology but what they are based on (e.g. a scientific paradigm and foundationalism), or it may not be a shift in basic types of Christian practice but how they function (e.g. without the significance of heart, as exposed in worship by Jesus, Mt 15:8), not a change in outward behavior but without the relational significance of intimacy (signified by “heart and vulnerableness,” Jn 4:23).

The process of reductionism therefore effectively formulates two influentially competing substitutes: one, an *ontological simulation* of the whole of God but without the qualitative significance of the heart, and, two, an *epistemological illusion* of the truth of God but without really knowing the triune God in intimate relationship. These substitutes counter God’s strategic shift and who and what the Father seeks in whole relationship together (as Jesus vulnerably disclosed, Jn 4:23-24). Without the qualitative significance of the heart and the intimacy of relationships together, there is no certainty (in spite of doctrinal certainty) of the whole of God constituted in the Trinity, only simulation and illusion. No created entity understands this more than Satan. Consequently, Satan initiated reductionism as an ontological simulation and epistemological illusion for life based on lies (false assumptions, inadequate methodologies, incomplete practices, cf. Rev 2:4; 3:2) he generates (as the author of lies, Jn 8:44) for his twofold purpose: (1) to distance or detach the whole of our person from our hearts and (2) to interfere with our relationship with God by reducing the primacy of intimacy necessary to be whole. His twofold purpose serves his ongoing goal for Christians to reduce our relational function—since he is unable to destroy our relationship with God—so as “to be apart” from the whole. Moreover, his counteracting influence and counter-relational work are

evident in theological engagement today when our hearts are distant and our involvement is less than vulnerable in the theological task.

The scope of reductionism makes it crucial for understanding our working theological anthropology implicit to all theological engagement and unavoidably underlying the theological task. Any diminishing of the ontology of all persons and the minimalizing of any and all relationships, which directly emerges from reductionism, are inseparable from our theological anthropology unless they are unmistakably accounted for and contested. The theological anthropology issue will remain insurmountable in our theological engagement unless it conjointly includes the strong view of sin necessary to fight against the scope of reductionism as sin. Therefore, the interaction of these two issues necessitates neither assuming nor neglecting either one because it will be at the expense of the other.

Returning then to the question raised by the junior demon: “If they’re all doing it, is it still sin?” There is a certain degree of validity in thinking that in our age it is much harder to deal with sin today than in the age, for example, of the early church. To the extent that this is true, two factors heavily contribute to this condition. One factor is contextual and the other is structural. They operate separately and in combination. The church today and those in theological engagement need to understand these operations if they expect to be distinguished in their practice.

The contextual factor is distinct in the increasing normative character of sin. As discussed earlier, it bears repeating that the growing frequency and extent of any questionable behavior or practice create conditions for redefining those more favorably. Our perceptions of what is unacceptable are indeed being challenged continuously and likely redefined. As the relativism of a postmodern context or a climate of indiscriminant tolerance continue, distinguishing sin becomes even more difficult. This process can also be seen as a reaction to forms of Christian legalism with its rigidity and dependence on constraints—particularly reactions from less conservative Christians. In this process Christian liberty is exercised, and somewhat abused, in a manner influenced more by its social context than its redeemed nature and purpose (cf. Paul’s polemic in 1 Cor 10:23-33).

The other factor that heavily contributes to a weak position on sin is less distinct because it is a structural factor. Being a structural factor, its effects on our understanding of, and subsequent dealing with, sin is much less obvious than the common moral and spiritual issues. In understanding that life is not merely operating under the total control or influence of the individual, there are broader operations which must be taken into account. These are found on the more systemic level of everyday life.

It is in this no-less-real area of human life that our understanding of sin must be further developed both in our theology and our practice. This is critical in the conjoint fight for the gospel to be good news indeed for the human condition to be made whole and the fight against the scope of reductionism.

Sin or evil can no longer be seen merely as the outworking only of the individual(s). It can also be found in the operations of institutions, systems and structures of a society, or the global community. In its more developed stages evil is not only manifested at this structural level but rooted in those very institutions, systems or structures such that they can operate quite apart from the control of the individual, or even the latter’s moral character. This is especially true, for example, when the very

infrastructure of a society obscures moral issues and legitimates such systemic operations.

Evidence of this process in U.S. society has been found historically, for example, in the development of racism from the level of individuals' prejudice to the systemic level known as institutional racism or discrimination. Contrary to common understanding, at this systemic level you don't need prejudice or racist intentions to have institutional discrimination. Such an operation, in fact, could be run by well-intentioned persons but still produce the outcome of racism. Complicity with discrimination could also be unintentional on the part of any person directly or indirectly involved.

Jacques Ellul commented back in the mid-20th century about such a systemic process: "A major fact of our present civilization is that more and more sin becomes collective, and the individual is forced to participate in collective sin."<sup>5</sup> This process continues today in increasing global conditions which broaden and compound our participation in sin and evil. Child labor and slave-like factory practices, for example, which would not be tolerated in the U.S. become tolerable overseas to serve U.S. consumer interests.

The net effect of this structural factor on Christians is the responsibility for directly or indirectly propagating sin by either knowingly or unknowingly being in complicity with the operation of such an institution, system or structure. Of course, it should be clearly understood also that this collective nature of sin does not take away the individual's accountability for sin. But it does reveal the extensive reality of sin and the church's need to address the full scope of sin as reductionism, both for the church's own transformation and for its redemptive purpose in the world—and this applies to the academy.

The development of the church's purpose in actual practice is directly related to the strength of its position against sin, which is the function of theology to provide this basis for the church's practice—which is the academy's responsibility. In prevailing conditions, the normative character of sin and its collective nature interact to confuse us of the presence of sin as reductionism, to distort its operation in everyday life and to create illusions about the benefits of its results. All the harm which has been incurred for the sake of "progress" is a prime example of this consequence. Yet, despite these conditions it is really immaterial whether it is more difficult to deal with sin today than before. We are accountable to recognize, address and work for the redemption of the scope of reductionism as sin. And our theology must be whole to underlie this whole practice.

## **Reductionism Exposed and Made Explicit**

The various epistemological, ontological and relational issues—notably about sin and the person—engaged by reductionism tend to be submerged until the dynamic of reductionism is sufficiently exposed. Given the ingenious workings of reductionism, its exposure has been difficult in the theological task. More important, however, than the disguised presence of reductionism (cf. 2 Cor 11:14-15) is the variable absence of the

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1. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), 13.

whole. Since reductionism has no significance without the presence of the whole, it is distinctly exposed and made explicit when the whole is present. The further issue then in recognizing, understanding and contesting reductionism is having or not having the functional presence of the whole, that is, God's whole.

The LORD's covenant relational terms to Abram were definitive: "walk before me and be blameless" (*tamiym*, Gen 17:1), that is, be *whole*. In a reduced anthropology, the person is redefined by what they do, which renders *tamiym* to blameless of sin—yet without including the sin of reductionism that counters the whole of who, what and how the person is from inner out. Blameless without wholeness is a key reductionist substitute to define the person from outer in without the significance of the heart and on this basis engage relationship with God on our terms (cf. Isa 29:13), consequently rendering us to the absence of the whole.

God's definitive blessing distinguished the Face who shines on us "and give[s] you peace" (*shalom*, Num 6:26). In relational terms, God's definitive blessing only has the outcome of peace as *wholeness*, that is, the relational outcome (from *siym*) of new relationship together in wholeness—the relationship in likeness of the relational ontology of the whole of God. The Face's presence and relational involvement are distinguished in the unequivocal presence of the whole, the whole of God. Yet, neither the covenant relational terms to be whole nor the definitive blessing of relationship together in wholeness were a relational reality for Israel to sufficiently expose reductionism in their theology and practice. In the variable absence of the whole, their theology and practice were often reduced, reflecting a weak view of sin and a fragmentary theological anthropology. Consequently, reductionism prevailed to be the dynamic ontological, relational and epistemological alternative (substitute) in all of creation to the wholeness (*shalom*) of God's created whole (*tamiym*).

### **Jesus, 'the Presence of the Whole', Exposes Reductionism**

The sufficient and necessary presence of the whole that distinctly exposes reductionism was distinguished in the incarnation by the embodied face of God (as Paul declared, 2 Cor 4:2-6). In reductionism, the underlying assumptions of the person and of their relationships—which include the divine person and relationship—targeted by its dynamic are based on incomplete or false understanding, which in reality are lies serving as epistemological illusions of the embodied Truth from God and as ontological simulation of the whole of God and their relationship together. The lies masking reductionism's counteraction and counter-relational work emerged clearly in three pivotal interactions with 'the presence of the whole' following his baptism.

While in the desert fasting for forty days, Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit...led by the Spirit" (Lk 4:1, signifying the trinitarian relational context and process), is hungry (Mt 4:2) and encounters Satan. In these three interrelated interactions (temptations, tests), the importance of heart function for the whole person and its significance in relationship with the whole of God definitively emerge in what are basic relational tests. Matthew's Gospel (4:1-11) has a different order than Luke's (4:1-13) but we will examine Luke's order for its progression in this relational process.

### **First Relational Test:**

In the first test (Lk 4:3), Satan's reductionist approach is apparent in what he tries to get Jesus to focus on: stones to bread. His test may appear to be about food and the circumstance of Jesus' hunger, or even a test of Jesus' deity ("if you are the Son of God...") to prove what Satan certainly already knew. These initial words ("if you are"), however, challenged not the factual truth of Jesus' whole person, the certainty of which Satan is incapable to diminish. Rather Satan's words seek to diminish the functional integrity of the presence of this truth by trying specifically to confuse the basis on which Jesus defines his person. Satan ingeniously uses this moment, influenced by Jesus' circumstances, to get at something deeper and more consequential. More implicitly then, Satan is trying to get Jesus to see his own person in a reductionist way, which Jesus exposes by responding: "*a person [anthropos, man or woman, which implies all of us] does not live by bread alone*" (4:4).

Since the tendency is to look at Jesus' response apart from its context, the usual interpretation of his words is merely to prioritize the spiritual aspect of life over the physical (material), thus inadvertently substituting dualism (e.g. from Platonism) for the whole person. That would be too simplistic and inadequate to meet the challenge of Satan's test. Jesus was neither reducing the whole of life nor the person into different aspects (parts) with the spiritual at the top of the priority list. By his use of reductionism, however, that is exactly how Satan was trying to get Jesus to see his person and function accordingly—which included the reduction of turning stone to bread as only a mere quantitative miracle without the qualitative significance of the person it points to (the purpose of miraculous signs). Satan was trying to reduce the whole of Jesus' person to only a part of himself because he knew the relational consequence this would have.

Satan cultivates this reductionism with the influential lie, which prevails as the human norm today: *the need and importance to see ourselves and therefore to define the person by what we do and have, as well as to define our life and practice by situations and circumstances*. This perceptual-interpretive framework gives priority to the parts (or aspects) of the person and relationships which functionally make up ontological simulation and epistemological illusion. The consequence of this process becomes a life and practice with reductionist substitutes focused on secondary matter, not the primacy of the whole person and the relationships necessary to be whole.

We need to understand Satan's main challenge to our life and practice. Yet, we will not fully understand the influence of his presence without qualitative awareness of and relational focus on 'the presence of the whole'.

Jesus connects us to the whole—for which there is no substitute—by the latter half of his response to Satan's first challenge: "...but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (recorded only in Mt 4:4). Rather than focus on situations and circumstances to define a person's life and limit that person, Jesus demonstrates the need to *focus relationally* by sharing these words from Deuteronomy 8:3. The original OT words were given "to *relationally* make known *and teach*" (*yada*, to understand personally, to know intimately) the Israelites in their hearts (8:2,4) that reductionist life focuses on situations and circumstances (parts like food in the desert), whereas, in contrast, wholeness in life involves the relational meaning of "on every word..." These relational words cannot be reduced to referential words, propositional truth or rule of faith, nor limited to the "spiritual" realm; that is, these words cannot be de-relationalized

from the whole of God. They are “every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (8:3). “Mouth” (*peh*, also used as the idiom *peh ‘el-peh* signifying direct communication, e.g. with Moses “face to face,” Num 12:8) signifies direct communication from God—a communicative act which is in a relational context involving a relational process of intimate connection in the same way that the embodied Word vulnerably discloses (*phaneroo*, not *apokalypto*) his whole person for his followers to experience as a relational reality.

Thus the person Jesus presents to Satan in this relational test is unequivocally making evident in his ontology and function ‘the presence of the whole’. And as Jesus clearly defines by these words, the whole of God constituted in the Trinity determines (top-down causation) the whole person and the relationships in life necessary to be whole.

### **Second Relational Test:**

As this encounter continues, the reductionist occupation and its relational consequence emerge in the second relational test (Lk 4:5-7). As an interrelated extension of the first test, Satan further offers status, authority/power, privilege and possessions to Jesus to use as a means to better define his person based on the quantitative criteria of reductionism (used in the first test). Modern scenarios of this offer would involve areas of education, vocation, economic security or even the “possession” of certain relationships. Yet the pursuit of these reductionist substitutes comes with a cost that intentionally or unintentionally compromises the integrity of who and what the person is, and thereby how that whole person functions in life and practice; this cost includes the relational consequence of less direct qualitative involvement, and thus intimacy, with God. This compromise and relational consequence were overtly presented to Jesus by Satan, and on this basis we are able to fully understand the reductionism intrinsic to “if you worship me” (4:7).

What is overtly presented to Jesus, however, is rarely presented as explicitly to us. If this compromise and relational consequence underlying this pursuit of reductionist substitutes are more obscure for us today, it reflects how Satan tweaks some truths with another major lie: *to have any of these resources will make me a better person, or at least enable me to accomplish more—even with the intention, for example, to better serve God and others*. While there is some truth that such resources can be helpful toward this purpose, in this process of reductionism we see the genius of Satan to blur the distinction between truth and lie. His influence is not accounted for when we give priority to defining the person by secondary aspects of what one does and has over the whole person—and consequently do not distinguish between the importance of the qualitative and the secondary significance of the quantitative, both in our person and our relationships.

In this second relational test, Jesus counters Satan’s challenge with “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him” (4:8). We tend to hear his words merely as a rule of faith, which we either perceive with only quantitative significance (e.g. in the activity of what we do) or often take for granted with their familiarity (e.g. as an obvious expectation or given obligation). Certainly we would worship God over Satan and serving Satan is not an option, that is, as long as these choices are always straightforward in our situations and circumstances, as it was for Jesus in this second test. We need to

fully understand the significance of Jesus' second response when he declared "worship" and "serve" in this response. Because Jesus is again connecting us to the whole, he wants us to focus relationally on the context and ongoing process these terms provide. "Worship" and "serve" are not about "doing something" before and for God but about the qualitative relational significance of *being involved* with God in intimate relationship. His response is not about a mere rule of faith but about the relational imperative necessary for reciprocal relationship together. Jesus is defining as well as exercising the relational work necessary to be whole in order to negate Satan's counter-relational work that reduces both the whole person from the heart and the intimate relationship necessary to be with the whole of God.

Satan does not necessarily displace all the forms of worshipping and serving God, he only substitutes their practice with ontological simulation and epistemological illusion. He has no need to contend with these practices if they have no qualitative and relational significance. When the qualitative whole of God (namely, God's heart and intimately relational nature) becomes secondary in our practice, we shift to the practice of reductionist substitutes for the whole. While this shift may not change our activity level related to God—but could even increase the activity—reductionist practices invariably create a shift in the relationship by displacing the functional centrality of God (not in doctrine or as the object of worship and servicing) with the relationship now functionally focused on us, that is, where the parts have priority over the whole. This becomes increasingly an inadvertent process of practicing relationship with God on our terms, which by implication is bottom-up causation, and is the major issue which emerges in Jesus' third relational test.

### **Third Relational Test:**

These three interrelated tests in Luke's order reveal a progression in Satan's counter-relational work and the comprehensive impact of reductionism. Since, at this stage, Satan has been unable to reduce Jesus' person by distancing him from his heart or to divert him from intimate relationship with the Father, he now seeks to disrupt directly how that relationship functions, though in quite the opposite way one might expect (Lk 4:9-12).

The dramatics of this scene at the highest point of the Jerusalem temple should not detract from the important relational work going on here. Satan quotes from the Scriptures, yet not in the convention of reductionist proof-texting (4:10,11). He uses this quote (from Ps 91) to challenge Jesus to claim a promise from the Father—a proposal suggested commonly by many in church practice. His challenge, however, is not about building trust and taking God at his word. We have to focus deeply on relationship with God and what Satan is trying to do to the relationship.

Jesus counters Satan with the response: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (*ekpeirazo*, test to the limits, see how far it can go, 4:12). How does this work? Sometimes the dynamics in relationships get complicated or confusing, and Satan uses reductionism to compound the relational process. God certainly wants to fulfill his promises to us; yet, we must go deeper than the typical perception of this process which puts it in a quantitative box of reductionism, thus imposing a shift on the relationship apart from the whole of God—and the functional centrality of God. We always need the whole (and the context of God's big picture beyond ourselves) to keep in focus that God

fulfills his promises only *on God's terms* (for the big picture). If Jesus tried to evoke his Father's promise in the manner Satan suggested, then he would be determining the relationship on his own terms (with the focus shifted to him). This is the real nature of this subtle relational test Jesus refused to do and the ongoing underlying temptation Satan presents to all of us: to test the limits of God and how much we can determine or even control (directly or indirectly) the relationship on our terms, even unintentionally. The false assumption here, of course, is the crucial lie, which functionally (not theologically) pervades our life and practice: *that the relationship is negotiable and that God accepts terms for it other than his own.*

These relational tests continue for Jesus in one form or another as the person he vulnerably discloses is now further presented to others. Yet this person Jesus presents is always whole and only for relationship, that is, on his terms. Consequently, reductionism and its subtle influence and substitutes will also persist to challenge Jesus, even to follow him in would-be disciples and in the early disciples themselves. Nevertheless, 'the presence of the whole' always exposes Satan's counter-relational work intrinsic to reductionism; and Jesus' ontology and function will clearly make evident for our life and practice how to partake of and participate in the whole of God—prominently for all theological engagement and by necessity for the theological task as well as integrally for theological education.

### **Paul Confronts Reductionism**

For the ongoing exposure of reductionism, we also need to keep emphasizing the reality that reductionism tends not to be the blatant activity often associated with Satan but rather is usually an obscure process having the appearance of being reasonable, normative and even righteous (as Paul exposed in theological contexts, 2 Cor 11:13-15). This means any shift to reductionist substitutes for the whole may not be apparent. The shift to the referentialization of the Word by the theological community is a most notable example that has yet to be understood as a reductionist substitute for the whole Word embodied in relational terms. The consequences have been far-reaching for the church and academy, which is a major discussion in the course of this study. Yet, what unfolds is a variable extension of what Paul confronted in the age of reductionism.

It is in the whole of God's family as church that Paul further made explicit the presence, influence and workings of reductionism, as he intensified his joint fight for the gospel of wholeness (Eph 6:15) and against its reduction. This is witnessed throughout his letters, especially as he dealt with the fragmented church at Corinth.

The whole of God's thematic communicative action converged for Paul in the experiential truth of the vulnerably embodied Word. The relational outcome constituted his new perceptual-interpretive framework and lens, the hermeneutic function of which was relationally signified in the integrating dynamic "Nothing [not to go] beyond what is written" (1 Cor 4:6). For us today, what is written is limited to the corpus of the biblical text. What was written for Paul seems to point back to the limits of the OT corpus for Judaism and of the Jesus tradition (if any texts existed), both of which Paul went beyond. What, then, was definitive for Paul that his interpretive framework would not go beyond?



The specific situation and circumstances Paul faced at Corinth provide the stimulus for his polemic and thought. This context and Paul's response also help his readers understand his theological discourse (explicit and implicit) on the human person and the relationships necessary to function as the church. The existing condition in that church was fragmented relationships created by the misguided competition of each person's claim to be either of Paul or of Apollos or of Peter or of Christ (1 Cor 1:12). The underlying dynamic of these divisive relationships (3:3,21) reduced the persons involved to being defined from outer in (1:13) based on fragmentary knowledge (3:1-5). What Paul addressed in the church at Corinth—and continues needing to be addressed in the church today—exposed the human shaping of the gospel and the human construction of theological cognition from human contextualization. Both this human shaping and construction went “beyond what is written”—that is, beyond the definitive source of subject-*theos* in God's communicative action (1:19,31; 3:19-23). Paul only used what was previously written (e.g. Isa 29:14; Jer 9:24; Job 5:13; Ps 94:11) to illuminate the communicative action of God's revelation on God's terms—which Paul himself continued to receive further and deeper—as well as to expose anything less and any substitutes, distinctly epistemological illusions and ontological simulations.

In other words, for Paul the only conclusive theological discourse is limited to vulnerable involvement in the relational epistemic process of God's revelation, namely embodied by the Word who makes definitive the whole knowledge and understanding of God's whole only on God's terms, and thus “nothing beyond what is *conclusive revelation from God*.” God's terms are irreducibly qualitative and nonnegotiable relational involving the whole person in reciprocally vulnerable relationship together. Anything less and any substitutes, including of persons and relationships, are from reductionism and its counter-relational work. This was at the heart of what Paul fought against in the church at Corinth and at large: “so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you *from inner out, not outer in*? What do you have that you did not receive *from God's initiative*? And if you received it, why do you boast *of human reasoning, shaping and construction*?” (4:6b-7).

Paul was definitive, bold, uncompromising, yet loving, in his theological dialogue because his theology was unmistakably first his experiential truth of *theos* as Subject in relational response to his own relational condition. When Paul answered the penetrating question “Who has known the mind of the Lord?” his answer was not just epistemological. His answer confirmed the vulnerable involvement of his person from the inner out in the relational epistemic process with the Spirit to relationally know the mind of Christ, more deeply that is, to relationally experience the heart of Christ and thus the whole of God in reciprocal relationship together to be made whole and to live whole, nothing less and no substitutes. This relational outcome ‘already’ for Paul was jointly his relational responsibility to integrally witness of the *pleroma* (fullness, i.e. whole) of God and his family relational responsibility (*oikonomia*) to *pleroo* (complete, make whole, Col 1:19-26) the word of God. These were basic, nonnegotiable functions for who Paul was and whose he was—not Pauline nuances—and therefore by their nature, irreducibly at the heart of his theological dialogue.

Paul's explicit countering of reductionism did not unfold without the retrospective of *tamiym*'s epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction of his own reductionism in his theology and practice. Accordingly, his conjoint fight for the

whole gospel and against reductionism was not mere theological discourse but what emerged from his experiential reality of the whole of God in relationship together. Experiencing ‘the presence of the whole’ in relational terms (not referential) is a necessary and sufficient condition to distinctly expose and make explicit reductionism’s presence, influence and workings in our theology and practice. Yet, to learn from Paul, there is the critical underlying problem (both epistemologically and hermeneutically) that ongoingly needs to be addressed for God’s self-revelation in general and Paul’s theology in particular, the age of reductionism as we have been discussing.

The whole of God, which had eluded Paul prior to the Damascus road, will remain elusive in theological, biblical and Pauline studies as long as this pervasive condition is not addressed. Until the eschaton, God’s whole ongoingly has positioned against it the workings of reductionism. The significance of reductionism is contingent on the presence of God’s relational whole because reductionism’s only function is to interpret, understand and effectively redefine the whole by its mere parts, thereby fragmenting the whole—essentially parts which are apart from the whole. Reductionism promotes nothing more and provides no alternative framework.

As witnessed in the primordial garden, reductionism most certainly redefines the human person by utilizing only a quantitative perceptual-interpretive framework for a level of knowledge and understanding of the person merely from the outer in; namely, the person is defined quantitatively by what one does or has without any accounting of the whole person from the inner out signified by the qualitative function of the heart. This fragmentary view of the person is basic to reductionism. Neuroscience today illustrates this reductionism in its limited knowledge and understanding of the human person gained by observations interpreted from brain activity.<sup>6</sup> Yet persons of faith throughout history, both in the church and in the theological academy noticeably since the Enlightenment, have also labored under the influence of reductionism in their interpretation, understanding and identity of the whole person, not to mention of God; this reductionism includes redefining the relationships together necessary to be whole, God’s relational whole on God’s relational terms. The latter reduction is a relational consequence directly from the counter-relational nature of the workings of reductionism, the scope of which extends further and deeper than most recognize or understand.

Like Paul, we can only come to a full understanding of reductionism because of ‘the presence of the whole’, who is present only because of the qualitative-relational significance of God’s self-disclosure. This relational outcome is contingent on what Paul made imperative: “Nothing beyond what is written” (1 Cor 4:6). Going beyond what is written (or said) is inseparable from the reductionist challenge “Did God really say that?” Both take liberty with God’s self-disclosure to speculate, shape or construct knowledge about God on one’s own terms. Such efforts in the theological task lack epistemological and ontological humility—lacking what Paul defined, “so that none of you will be puffed up”—therefore precluding or minimizing theological engagement on the basis of God’s relational response of grace, prompting Paul’s question for all involved in the theological task: “What do you have *epistemologically and ontologically* that you did not relationally receive? And if you received it *relationally by grace*, why do you boast *about your efforts and resources* as if it were not a gift” (1 Cor 4:7).

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<sup>6</sup> For a recent discussion of these limits, see Hans Küng, *The Beginning of All Things: Science and Religion*, trans. by John Bowden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 179-91.

When our theological anthropology defines the person by what they possess and can do, then boasting is both expected and necessary to establish our identity, worth and comparative standing in relation to others, including God. This is the expected self-determination and the necessary self-justification which ongoingly emerge from the scope of reductionism's presence, influence and workings unless recognized, redeemed and transformed in our theological engagement by 'the presence of the whole' for the relational outcome of whole theology and practice. Moreover, this relational outcome emerges in the presence of the whole only from the relational imperative of epistemic and ontological humility—just as Paul functioned in his practice and made definitive in his theology.

The whole of God's improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path has embodied and illuminated 'the presence of the whole' in Face-to-face relationship, so that we can humbly "boast in this, that they understand and know me," (Jer 9:24)—not the reductionist boast that necessarily highlights what we possess and can do (9:23).

If there is no present reality from beyond the observable parameters of the unimultiverse, then the whole in fact is not present to distinctly expose reductionism and make explicit its narrowed epistemic field for our understanding of its fragmentary knowledge. We essentially, then, become relegated to the senior demon's response: "Let them think...it's what and how it should be" (noted earlier). In these narrowed terms and on this fragmentary basis, any globalizing search for the whole can only be self-referencing, therefore only reductionist. On this supposed basis, physicist Stephen Hawking rightfully gave up his search for a grand unifying theory (noted in chap. 1). It should become apparent also, that any construction in theology is problematic without the understanding and accounting of reductionism because such construction becomes inseparable from human shaping and thus merely self-referencing. This is the extent of what can be expected from reductionism since its limits imposed on its practitioners allow for nothing more, with no alternative epistemologically, ontologically and relationally. In contrast and conflict, the relational dynamic of the whole of God necessitates by its nature nothing less and no substitutes.

"You will not *be reduced*...your eyes will be opened...with *complete* knowledge." Is this the promise and workings of theological education prevailing today? In his conjoint fight for the whole gospel and against reductionism, Paul asks the critical question to make explicit the reductionism of the church at Corinth, and of all his readers (most prominently those engaged in the theological task): "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" (1 Cor 2:16, echoing 'the presence of the whole' in Isa 40:13).

Like Paul, Job was confronted with his reductionism in 'the presence of the whole', and thus turned from his narrowed-down epistemology to experience the whole of God in the relational epistemic process (Job 42:3-5). Their experience is the only relational outcome of significance that distinguishes the whole of God in the theological task—the relational epistemic process of which requires the vulnerable theological engagement of our whole person from inner out, nothing less and no substitutes.

For theology not to be fragmentary, its trajectory must be able to navigate and rise above the age of reductionism. In order for theology to be whole, its path of engagement must go beyond the scope of reductionism and the limits imposed by its globalization to be involved ongoingly in the intrusive relational path with 'the presence of the whole'.

## Chapter 3      Theological Formalization of Reductionism: Negative and *Positive* Theologies

**I have *declared* what I did not understand,  
things too distinguished for me, which I did not know.**

Job 42:3

When Peter was hungry, he had what might be considered a similar experience to Jesus in his first temptation: “Get up, Peter; kill and eat” (Acts 10:13). This test to partake of a smorgasbord was not tempting to Peter, who considered this unclean (common, *koinos*) food that he never eats in adherence to his primary context, Judaism (10:14). On appearance Peter could be considered to have passed this test. ‘Appearance’, however, is the critical problem that Peter has consistently demonstrated with his hybrid theology shaped by his human contextualization. His narrowed epistemic field, quantitative interpretive framework and fragmentary lens could not look beyond the ‘common’ to distinguish the whole of God and God’s uncommon creative and salvific action (10:15-16). In other words, like Job, Peter declared what he didn’t understand—things too distinguished for him, which he really didn’t know yet in qualitative and relational terms.

Peter’s critical problem epistemologically, ontologically and relationally, and his related hybrid theology, is not an isolated example that no longer unfolded in historical theology. This problem will be illuminated by Jesus’ post-ascension discourse for ecclesiology to be whole (Rev 2-3, discussed in chap. 6). In the previous chapter we discussed various crucial issues converging to narrow the epistemic field and consequently cloud our interpretive lens to obstruct going further and deeper in theological engagement—both beyond to God’s relational context and free from primary determination by the human context. Failing to address by necessity this convergence and to sort out sufficiently these issues in the theological task have resulted—alongside Peter’s hybrid theology—in a ‘theological fog’ with the historical formalization of both negative and *positive* (not the opposite of negative) theologies, along with contemporary formulations of certainty, unity and inclusion for further construction of theologies critically needing to be examined.

The explicit or implicit assumption underlying Christian theology is knowing and understanding God. This assumption applies to all levels of theology. Every Christian occupies the function of a theologian (despite its professionalization) with an assumed theology by reflecting on their belief in knowing and understanding God (cf. Mt 21:15-16). The process of knowing and understanding has been based either on God’s specific relational terms (signified by the open interpretive lens of children, Lk 10:21), or on general referential terms (signified by the narrow lens of “the wise and learned,” and perhaps the dominance assumed by the left hemisphere of the brain). The process used is critical to theological engagement and must be recognized in the theological task because

the resulting explanations and conclusions will be different. The difference may not always be clearly apparent in the theology itself but will be unmistakable in its function. Peter, of course, learned this the hard way about his theology and function in the early stages of church development (as witnessed above), which Paul confronted and exposed in his conjoint fight for the whole gospel and against reductionism.

Negative theology, with the likely good intention to avoid any epistemological illusions (prominently due to anthropomorphism), could only construct explanations and conclusions of ontological simulation. That is, it made God's theological trajectory so improbable that its declaration has essentially become insignificant, and therefore unable to distinguish the whole of God to know and understand in relationship together. *Positive* theology(ies), with the inadvertent effort to construct what amounts to ontological simulation of God's whole, has labored in epistemological illusion. Quite the converse of negative theology but with similar results, positive theology has made God's theological trajectory so probable that its declaration has lost its significance distinguishing the whole of God, and consequently God's whole that it presumably seeks to construct.

Both negative and positive theologies are the distinct substitutes from reductionism, whose presence, influence and working continue to be determinative of theology in this age of reductionism. This applies also to contemporary formulations of certainty, unity and inclusion in theological construction. Further examination will help us in this understanding.

## **Negative Theology**

One skillful method to narrow the epistemic field is to expand the concept of uniqueness. This is accomplished by creating distinctions in categories such that some distinction stands alone (a unique or new category) and cannot be compared to others in that original or common category. For example, modern science made a distinction in the category of what exists by creating the category of the improbable, whose uniqueness then could no longer be compared to what else exists; and the improbable no longer needed to be accounted for because it could not be known, therefore the conclusion follows that it didn't exist—presumably based on probability but a conclusion shaped more by a perceptual-interpretive framework from human contextualization.

Prior to the scientific method, the concept of uniqueness was expanded by Greek philosophy in the category of being. In contrast to our changing world of existence, Plato maintained there is a realm of being which is eternal and unchanging. A revised form of Platonism, known as Neo-Platonism, focused narrowly on the ultimate transcendence of God, all of which influenced early Christian thinking that there is one supreme transcendent God.<sup>1</sup> This philosophical lens was certainly congruent for the monotheism of Judaism and Christian theology but the use of reductionism made it incompatible epistemologically, ontologically and relationally for the whole of God's revelation—most notably God's improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path. This narrow monotheism was unable to account for the triune God, and made it inconceivable to speak about the Trinity.

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Lane provides an overview of this development in *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, completely revised and expanded edition (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

In a narrowed epistemic field the uniqueness of God's being cannot be accounted for and thus spoken about, much less known. The essence of that being, what it is and perhaps why, is beyond knowing and understanding—it is simply unique. Yet, this result was not only by design in making this distinction; underlying this method is the consequence from the epistemological, ontological and relational limits imposed by reductionism. The interaction between so-called designed results and the consequence of imposed limits cannot be ignored if we are to sufficiently address the various critical issues converging to narrow the epistemic field and cloud our interpretive lens, and then adequately sort out these issues in the theological task in order to emerge clearly from any theological fog.

In classical philosophical theology, God was made distinct in the category of the divine and was relegated to it without direct connection to our changing world. This view addresses the basic issue of the knowability of God and has engaged this conversation by seeking to define concepts with precision and rigor of argumentation. Concepts historically attributed to God—such as omnipotence, omniscience, simplicity, immutability and impassibility—may appear to describe the God outside the universe, but in essence they tell us more about the unknowability of God. This fragmentary epistemology emerged in the formalization of negative theology.

When theologians speak of God with negations, they say, for example, that God's goodness, power and wisdom are not the goodness, power and wisdom of created realities or persons because God's are perfect and without any limits. As notably emerged from Aquinas, with roots in Aristotle, this forms the basis for philosophical theology. Diogenes Allen summarizes this development:

First Philosophy concentrates on the study of being in its most perfect form. It has its culmination in a knowledge of the attributes of the First Unmoved Mover, or theology as Aristotle calls it. But, Aquinas' ingenuity is such that he can by his five ways arrive at a characterization of the primary being that is far more than the First Unmoved Mover and above all not a being among beings. In Aquinas our knowledge of God is nonetheless limited. God is far more than we can grasp because God cannot be *defined*. Created beings have a genus of being. Being, however, is not a genus. A genus is *determined*, or made specific by those differentiae which are not contained within it. Nothing, however, can be added to being since outside being there is nothing. Or, put in another way, God is not *a* being but being itself. The divine essence is not that God is this or that sort of being, but God is an act of independent existence. So we have no categories by which to define God.

Even though we cannot define God, we may have *some* knowledge of God. But our characterizations do not apply *univocally*. That is they do not mean the same thing when applied to God and to creatures. We must *negate* any characterization we give God in order to emphasize that these characterizations are not what the divine nature or essence is.<sup>2</sup>

In Aquinas' doctrine of divine simplicity, those within the universe cannot know the essence or being of God, nor are our words basically capable of speaking of the

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<sup>2</sup> Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985).

creator. This gave rise to the voice of negative theology. We can only make statements of negation, saying just what God is not or cannot be, thus avoiding the limitation of language that is susceptible to falsifiability. In other words, Aquinas' doctrine is not a description of God because it consists entirely of negations or attempts to declare what God *cannot be*. It does not ascribe any attribute or property to God since it explicitly denies that God has any attributes or properties.

For Aquinas the matter of divine simplicity depends on the notion of God as Creator. Simply stated: If there is a God who creates, then there have to be irreducible differences between God and creatures. Such differences, for example, cannot be distinguished by anthropomorphism. Thus, God cannot be perceived rightly in our terms—neither thought of as being one of a kind of which there could be others, nor thought of as owing his existence to any thing. In Aquinas' words: "Now we cannot know what God is, but only what He is not; we must therefore consider ways in which God does not exist, rather than ways in which He does" (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia. 2, Conclusion). In support of Aquinas' thinking on divine simplicity, Brian Davies responds to contemporary theologians who do not agree:

Could it be that they are mesmerized by the formula "God is a person"? I suspect that many of them are, and that by God is a person they mean that God is an invisible being (like Descartes's "I"), very like a human one, though lacking a body. If that is what they do mean, however, they are seriously out of step with what might be called the traditional Jewish/Islamic/Christian concept of God. If that is what they mean, perhaps we might also ask them if there is any reason at all to believe that God exists? You and I, corporeal things, things the essence of which does not guarantee our existence, things able to change in various ways as time goes on, things with attributes that come and go, are all, surely, things which raise the question, "And how come they exist at all?" The doctrine of divine simplicity is part of a complicated answer to this question.<sup>3</sup>

I readily acknowledge my lens focused on the person, yet in a reverse dynamic than what Davies points to. The 'person' essential to God and distinguished in the Trinity is embodied by Jesus, who—as Paul made definitive theologically—is the exact and whole "image of God...in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:4,6). The person of Jesus is not a concept or anthropomorphism imposed on him but his vulnerable function as "the image of the *transcendent* God...in *his person* all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:15,19). His person as the image of God—along with the person of the Spirit, Jesus' relational replacement (Jn 14:16-18; 16:13-15; 2 Cor 3:17-18)—is essential for the human person both to know the qualitative significance and to have whole understanding of what it means to be and function as the person created in the image of God. There are certainly irreducible differences between God as Creator and creatures. As Jesus vulnerably disclosed (e.g. in his formative family prayer, Jn 17:21-23), however, there is also an irreducible likeness between the persons of the Trinity and the human person created in the image of the whole of God (cf. Col 3:10; Eph 4:24). Anything less and any substitute of God or humans has been reduced.

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Davies, "Simplicity" in Charles Taliaferro and Chad Meister, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2010), 45.



It is certainly correct that the difference of God is irreducible to human terms; and it is a necessary intention for any theological task to clearly distinguish this difference in order not to fall into any epistemological illusion by being defined or determined by any anthropomorphism from human contextualization. The subsequent issue, however, of insufficiently knowing and understanding God is a critical condition for theology to confront—given God’s declaration for human boast in Jeremiah 9:23-24—or be rendered to a different theological trajectory from God and consequently, at best, to ontological simulation of God’s being and human being.

In response to the implication of the unknowability of God, Colin Gunton makes this statement:

One consequence of this for our language is that, as they stand, our words are simply incapable of speaking of the creator. That is the truth underlying what is known as the negative theology: that God can best be characterized by thinking away the limitations inherent in words designed—or so the theory goes—to speak of created things. However, what might appear to be a proper human modesty before the divine can turn into the supreme blasphemy of denying revelation. There is a fine line between a proper humility and believing that so long as we do not say anything positive we have somehow laid hold of, or come nearer to the truth about, the divine reality.<sup>4</sup>

This refocuses on the whole of God’s improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path. There is a necessary dynamic interaction between the transcendent God and the embodied Word. The *breadth* of God is his transcendence and the *depth* of God is his vulnerable presence in the human context and intimate involvement with human persons—that is, the depth constituted by the whole of who, what and how God is, the Trinity. Both the breadth and depth of God are necessary and inseparable, thus ignoring one or emphasizing one over the other results in an incomplete or distorted view and understanding of God, certainly inadequate to define the whole of God. This is evident most noticeably with the depth of God and God’s action in human context, which consistently has been reduced of its qualitative and relational significance such that God’s intrusive relational path is not accounted for, even if God’s improbable theological trajectory is. The consequential lack of relationally knowing God was the primary concern that Jesus addressed in his disciples, highlighting his primary purpose (Jn 14:9; cf. Mk 8:17-18). Without the embodied Word in whole, theology is rendered speculative (Jn 1:18). A God of breadth without depth becomes functionally deistic; a God of assumed depth without breadth is anthropomorphic—with both resulting from human shaping and construction.

It is more than admirable not to speak of matters that we don’t understand, most notably of God. Yet, we cannot claim to be unexposed to the Other distinguished from beyond all creation and the now assumed *multiverse*. That is, this claim is unacceptable except in a narrowed-down epistemic field that does not account for the improbable. In this sense, we also are unable to speak of anything too distinguished (even by negation)

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<sup>4</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 36.

since we don't know of it. Yet, epistemic and ontological humility are not witnessed here. The critical problem continues, in likeness of Job and Peter: Declarations are made of God who is not understood, and are made to distinguish God who is not known, that is, declarations by default emerging from human contextualization and the human shaping and construction signifying the epistemological, ontological and relational workings of reductionism. This problem continues in a negative form of hybrid theology until the epistemic field is opened to the whole of God. Moreover, Gunton discusses why this negative way is not as negative as it claims.<sup>5</sup> The key is understanding the way of causality by a process of analogy to construct from below a hierarchy from the lower levels of reality to the higher until its final cause is declared—a being who is totally other than it. As with Job and Peter, however, such declarations say more than they suggest, that is, speaking for this being who is not known and understood, therefore speaking more about oneself than the Other. This process is a precursor for *positive* theology, the counterpart to negative theology in the age of reductionism.

Ancient or modern, our methodology is critical for the epistemic means used for our knowledge and understanding of reality and life together. To go further and deeper in the epistemic process by necessity involves turning our focus to revelations from outside the universe—neither assuming beforehand a reality exists beyond the universe nor assuming such reality cannot exist. Along with eschewing these two assumptions, the assumed superiority of the scientific method that privileges sight over other means of perception is chastened. Thus this epistemic process involves paying attention to disclosures which are “heard” more than seen—in a similar sense of purpose, perhaps analogous, to scientific monitoring of outer space to listen for any signs of alien life. That is, these disclosures are communicative action from the Reality beyond the universe, the access to which cannot be gained by any effort from within the universe, however sophisticated, dedicated or convicted the effort. Therefore, we have to assume that any disclosure is a self-disclosure initiated from a personal Being, whose “discovery” can only be known in the relational epistemic process constituted by the relational context and process of this personal Being’s self-disclosure from the beginning. Anything less and any substitute of this relational context and process reduce the relational epistemic process to, at best, conventional observation, which becomes self-referencing (as physicist Hawking concluded) and thus is consequential for the relational outcome for which these self-disclosures have been communicated to us. This reduction applies equally to scientific, philosophical and theological observations, including those by biblical exegetes.

In the philosophy of religion, such an omnipotent, omniscient, perfect God took creative action in the beginning to form the universe and all in it, after which this Being either left it on its own (deism) or continued to be involved with it—the extent of which varies with each specific view of theism. Both deism and theism depend on a particular interpretive framework which determines the epistemic process it engages. Perhaps deists need to return to monitoring the universe to listen to the signs of life coming from outside the universe. Yet, the classical theistic picture of God—as self-contained and all sufficient, impassible, etc.—is also not the God of thematic relational action found in the self-disclosures of the Word in and from the beginning. The interpretive framework from human shaping and construction has dominated philosophy’s voice in this conversation.

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<sup>5</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being*, 60-66.

In part, this speaks to the Copernican shift in astronomy (the earth revolves around the sun) and its influence on philosophy: theocentricity was replaced by anthropocentricity. The direction of influence was no longer from certainty of God to certainty of the self but now from self-certainty to certainty of God. Küng identifies this *methodical beginning* emerging from the human being, the subject, one's reason and freedom, as a paradigm shift that culminates in a radical critique of the proofs of God.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, if we account for reductionism, it would be evident that human contextualization had previously been well established as the primary determinant; this formalization is just a later consequence of further narrowing the epistemic field to what we know and can rationalize. In spite of this history, philosophical theology will hear a clearer voice to respond to for engaging this conversation. This is demonstrated, for example, by current scholarly efforts to clarify how many voices from outside the universe there are.<sup>7</sup> That work addresses the issue of the "threeness-oneness problem" and involves the theological and hermeneutic issues of the Trinity.

The narrowing of our interpretive lens—limiting what we can see—for the cause of certainty and, of course, for the sake of self-determination always prevents any knowledge and understanding of the whole since it restricts the whole from emerging. This whole is not some idea of a whole from inside the universe itself but the whole interposing from outside the universe. Unfortunately, this restriction does not prevent the illusion of the whole since creating any epistemological illusion and ontological simulation of the whole are the genius of reductionism.

This process and the issue of epistemic humility urgently apply to theology. If theology is indeed directed by revelation from outside the universe, its formulations should be other than self-referencing; and its understanding needs to be more complete by the nature of the knowledge available from outside the universe. Yet, theology has long labored under a counteracting dynamic: between what God reveals and what we attribute to God; between what God says for and of himself and what we say for God and impose on him; between God's terms and reduced terms of human shaping and construction. Some may locate this dynamic in the hermeneutic circle. But the former is whole and the latter is not just some part that can be interpreted into the whole of God; the latter is fragmentary and from reductionism, which is always incompatible with the whole. And comfort should not be taken in the latter's place in tradition, prominence in the academy and acceptance in the church.

For example, if the Bible is read through someone's idea of what the perfect being outside the universe *must* be like, as in classical theism, whose words become primary for theology, ours or God's? The philosophical influence on theology, which still exists today, has shaped or constructed a different picture of God than the God of thematic relational action and response in Scripture, conclusively embodied by the Word. The classic doctrine of God, existing in systematic and biblical theologies, does not fit the image of God embodied by the face of Christ, as the monotheist Paul "discovered" and whole-ly understood (2 Cor 4:4-6). This reshaping emerged when concepts from Greek philosophy were used as the framework, which was later refined by the epistemological

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<sup>6</sup> Küng, *The Beginning of All Things: Science and Religion*, 43-53.

<sup>7</sup> A descriptive overview of this work, in interaction with systematic theology, is found in Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?: Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

program of foundationalism to establish a basis for certainty. The quest for certainty emerges again with the consequence of narrowing the words of Scripture. Most importantly, the reshaping of God emerges when interpreters of Scripture end up listening to themselves talk about God rather than listening to God speak for himself. Nicholas Wolterstorff defines this as ‘dogmatic’ interpretation: dogma governs our interpretation of Scripture for our divine discourse, not God’s communication of God. Interpreting Scripture in light of itself involves the hermeneutic circle: that is, interpreting the parts/words in the light of the whole and the whole in the light of the parts/words.<sup>8</sup> In the hermeneutic process, however, the whole of the Word in relational language is primary, or else the hermeneutic circle becomes self-referencing in a narrowed-down Scripture. Just as the ancient poet said, “The unfolding of your words gives light” (Ps 119:130), which includes understanding of the whole to those who listen carefully and do not speak prematurely “of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know,” just as Job learned (Job 42:3).

Yet, this counteracting hermeneutic practice continues to be a critical issue. When theology does not listen to the words of Scripture in the relational context and process composing the relational epistemic process, then theology assumes an interpretive framework to engage a limiting epistemic process that leaves theology on its own to speak prematurely “of things it did not understand, things too wonderful for it to know on its own.” This condition of theology in its actual function also directs us away from and not toward the whole. This epistemic view of God only functions to limit or even prevent the understanding of God’s whole on God’s terms, that which is necessary for us to rise above epistemological illusion and be whole, and to be transformed from ontological simulation and live whole. This reductionist direction is further illustrated in evangelical theology, despite its doctrine of the authority of Scripture and emphasis on the gospel of salvation—by those known as “people of the Book”, who apparently often lack the whole Christology of the Word.

This leads us to the counterpart of negative theology, that which I call *positive* theology.

## ***Positive Theology***

Whereas negative theology was unwilling to say enough to distinguish God but nevertheless overstated itself about God, positive theology willingly overstates itself about God yet never says enough to distinguish God. The positive theology designated here is not the opposite of negative theology but becomes its counterpart in the theological task—emerging also from a narrow epistemic field, namely within the limits of what we know or can rationalize.

To remain within the limits of what you know (the probable) engages a process of reductionism—whether epistemologically, hermeneutically, theologically, ontologically and/or relationally—that necessitates dividing the improbable Christ embodied in whole into fragments which can be shaped and aggregated down to the limited understanding of

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Promise of Speech-act Theory for Biblical Interpretation” in Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, Karl Moller, eds., *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 73-90.

our knowledge. In other words, if we do not perceive the improbable who emerged from outside the universe and receive this improbable Subject vulnerably present and relationally involved, we have to give some basis for a substitute, which leaves us with only one alternative: human shaping and construction in referential terms which are limited to self-referencing theories and conclusions. This alternative also provides us with a basis for not being vulnerable to the improbable whole of Jesus and his intrusion on his terms.

Self-referencing is a critical issue in theology because its defining process—as demonstrated by those who define Jesus on their terms, as noted above—relies on (intentionally or unintentionally) a perceptual-interpretive lens that does not process beyond the limits of self-understanding to determine the shape of theology. This process certainly then includes depending on (knowingly or unknowingly) what we know within the relative limits of the probable. The application of a narrowed epistemic field, even with assumptions subscribing to God’s revelation, can only result in a narrowed-down theology (or hybrid theology) that is fragmentary at best or misleading, distorted or incorrect at worst (cf. Peter’s theology, Mt 16:15-17, 21-23). Only such theology can emerge because its understanding does not basically go beyond referential terms and thus can only reference the self-determining perceptions, interpretations and resulting knowledge from the probable, even entitled as revelation. No further and deeper theology emerges since its formulating epistemic process is unable (and unwilling) to go beyond self-referencing in order to distinguish the unlimited (and uncommon) improbability of whole *theology* from the prevalent common limits of *egology*—the human shaping of which may claim to be distinct from natural theology but whose function still operates in the primacy of reason.

Yet, what compounds the limits of this epistemic process is less about reason and more about the human condition. Even as we may affirm the improbable God from outside the universe in referential terms, we still could keep God’s vulnerable presence and intimate relational involvement from intruding our innermost. This lack of vulnerability remains problematic for the improbable and thereby an ongoing issue for whole theology. The whole of God’s improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path are inseparable, integrally composing the unique Subject uncommon to the human context. The improbability of this Subject’s revelation cannot be affirmed, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, avoiding the Subject’s relational intrusion as if merely observing results in knowledge and understanding of the Subject. The whole of the Subject cannot be narrowed down to Object to fragment his intrusive relational path to the less vulnerable probable terms of our shaping of relationship together. This reductionism of relationship signifying the human condition is incompatible with God’s whole presence and relational involvement, and this relational condition needs to go beyond merely declarations of *positive* theology to the depth of whole understanding and knowing God on relational terms.

Nathanael demonstrated these limits and going beyond them. After Philip received his call from Jesus, he told Nathanael of the messiah, Jesus of Nazareth (Jn 1:43-51). Nathanael spoke honestly of his skepticism, displaying his bias of a prevailing stereotype disparaging Nazareth: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael asked a logical question based on the common knowledge of Jesus’ human context. While Nathanael had this bias, he remained open to the epistemic challenge from Philip

to “Come and see.” By openly engaging the relational epistemic process even with his bias against Jesus, Jesus did not rebuke him but instead affirmed Nathanael’s relational involvement (“in whom there is no deceit”) by further presenting his own relational involvement with Nathanael (“I saw you...before Philip called you”). The person and presence Jesus presented to Nathanael connected him to the deeper relational context that was necessary and sufficient for Nathanael to know who and what Jesus was (“You are...”). The shift in Nathanael’s declaration signified a qualitative difference from other declarations of “You are the Son of God” emerging from positive theologies which have yet to go beyond the limits of their epistemic process (cf. Peter’s declaration and epistemic process, Jn 6:68-69).

Ostensibly it may appear that positive theology has expanded the epistemic field. Yet, examining its explanations and conclusions unmasks the underlying limits of reductionism. On this basis, as a counterpart to statements of negation, positive theology attempts to declare one or more of the following statements:

1. affirmation, assertion, even dogmatism
2. systematization
3. inclusion

## **Statements of Affirmation, Assertion, even Dogmatism**

Interpreting the whole of God’s self-revelation and the Word embodied in whole is problematic when our interpretive lens pays attention to only certain things while ignoring other things. This selectivity could be unintentional or we could be selective by design. To the extent that our lens is defined and determined by human contextualization, our theological engagement and reflections are shaped and our explanations and conclusions in the theological task are constructed by the human context. No one is immune from this influence; even Jesus was exposed to it. Yet Jesus consistently countered the human lens and redefined what to pay attention to and what to ignore, thereby distinguishing what is primary from the secondary. It becomes problematic interpreting God’s revelation and the Word when our primary lens is either incongruent or incompatible with Jesus’ lens. One interaction Jesus had clearly distinguished his lens from the common lens.

Who would question the definition of biological family or family of origin? Yet, when addressed about paying attention to his family, Jesus raised the question defining what is primary to constitute his family: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” (Mk 3:31-35). While this is only one example among many in Jesus’ life, it illustrates the critical lens necessary to interpret not only the improbable theological trajectory but, equally important and more vulnerably necessary, also the intrusive relational path of the embodied whole of God. Selectivity in paying attention to certain aspects of Jesus (teaching, miracles and ethics) and ignoring the intrusive aspects of Jesus’ disclosures (vulnerable presence and intimate involvement) allow us to stay within the limits of our epistemic process and be less vulnerable in the relational involvement necessary to know and understand God in relational terms, not referential. Consequently, the issues involved here are not only epistemological and hermeneutical but unavoidably ontological and

relational. These are the issues underlying positive theologies which remain relatively uncontested today.

Unlike the qualitative difference of Nathanael's declaration—which was the relational outcome of his open engagement in the relational epistemic process with Jesus—positive theologies declare affirmations about God, assertions of belief and even dogmatism in doctrine while still within the limits of human contextualization—limits not unlike Nathanael's bias signified in his first declaration “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” How can these declarations be made? How are they possible with the place and authority of the Word?

Declarations can be made either in general referential terms common to the human context,<sup>9</sup> or in the deeper relational terms distinguished in God's relational context and process. Declarations in referential terms transmit information about God that may sound the same as communication of God in relational terms, and can even have the same content. A qualitative difference, however, distinguishes God's relational terms that cannot be observed, replicated or experienced merely on the quantitative level in mere referential terms—as Jesus exposed in some believing in him (Jn 8:43). The difference then is not only a matter of epistemology and hermeneutics but is more deeply ontological and relational—as Jesus made paradigmatic for receiving God's revelation (Lk 10:21; cf. Lk 8:18). In other words, affirmations, assertions and dogmatic statements about God can never exceed in significance beyond their source—as Jesus made definitive, “Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Mk 4:24).

The imperative in Mark 4:24 needs to be integrated with Luke 10:21. The difference in the perceptual-interpretive framework between the child-person and the wise and learned (of Lk 10:21) is the difference between the qualitative and the quantitative, the relational and the referential. This difference is critical for defining which epistemic process we engage (relational or referential) and critical for determining how we engage in that epistemic process (vulnerably or measured, distant, detached). In relation to God's self-disclosures, this difference means the epistemological, ontological and relational gap between the relational outcome of knowing God more deeply and the relational consequence of merely having fragments of information about God, that is, of not truly knowing God. The former is whole knowledge and understanding (*syniemi*, as Jesus highlighted, Mk 8:17-18) while the affirmation, assertion and dogmatism of the latter can only be some form of reductionism, even when aggregated and generalized.

The “measure” (*metron*) we give and get that Jesus refers to involves our perceptual-interpretive framework that we use, which determines (measures, limits) the level of participation in the epistemic process for God's self-disclosures. The above difference in frameworks signified by the child-person and the wise and learned is clearly made definitive by Jesus for “the level of relational involvement you give will be the extent of reciprocal relationship you get, both in the relational epistemic process and in relationship together”—for either a relational outcome or relational consequence (Mk 4:24-25). Therefore, the relational context and process—that Jesus embodied for our participation in the relational epistemic process to the whole of God, God's whole and

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<sup>9</sup> Iain McGilchrist also identifies this generalizing process in the dominance of the brain's left hemisphere, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

our wholeness—cannot be diminished or minimalized by human shaping and construction without the loss of whole knowledge and understanding, as well as what it means to be whole. Nothing less and no substitutes are the irreducible and nonnegotiable terms the whole of God embodied.

Philip's challenge to Nathanael to "Come and see" necessarily continues to extend to all of us, yet necessarily rendered for us today "Come and *listen*." This is the relational imperative antecedent to any affirmation, assertion and dogmatic declaration of God. To meet this challenge our "ears" have to have priority over our "mouths." As the Father made imperative, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him" (Mk 9:7); and as Jesus made imperative for his followers: "Then pay attention to how you listen" (Lk 8:18), and "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Mk 4:24). In other words, it is imperative to listen before we speak, giving priority to the sounds from Subject-Other, which is a necessary relational dynamic in all communication; unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, this dynamic has been reworked in the human condition. Quietly, for example, 'method' in scholarship imposes concepts on what we seek to know, giving priority to its own perception (view of Other), thus it essentially speaks before it listens.

Furthermore, in this epistemic process our "eyes" are even a higher priority than our "ears" and must antecede both our "mouths and "ears" as the determinant for their function; this was the lesson Job deeply experienced (Job 42:3-5). This has less to do with the function of sight and critically involves how and what we see (as in Paul's concern, Eph 1:18). When Jesus defines "the measure" (*metron, metreo*) used above, he identifies his followers' perceptual-interpretive framework and lens, which determines what we will pay attention to and ignore and, therefore, what we see, hear and listen to. That is, to listen carefully and to understand what Jesus says, we not only need to understand the horizon of where Jesus is coming from, but in this process we also need to account for the horizon of where we are coming from—and the defining and determining influence our own context may exert as it converges with Jesus' context.<sup>10</sup> Without knowing our own horizon and its influence on the framework and lens we use, we cannot listen to Jesus (and later to Paul) to speak for himself on his own terms. 'Method', as noted above, signifies a generalizing bias of rationalizing from a scientific paradigm rooted in the Enlightenment, which reduces reality by narrowing down the epistemic field for better explanation. This modernist framework "speaks" before it listens, thereby defining the terms which determine the outcomes.

As these two horizons converge, the primary determinant of how the words communicated are to be understood for the listener/reader must always come from the context of the speaker. Certainly, some secondary influence still remains from the listener's side. Yet, in the relational epistemic process the hermeneutical dynamic involves successive interactions between listener and speaker, reader and text, in the reflexive process of a 'hermeneutical cone'<sup>11</sup> for further and deeper understanding.

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<sup>10</sup> See a discussion on two horizons by Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 42-46.

<sup>11</sup> This composite term is taken from what more accurately defines the process not as a circle but as a 'hermeneutical spiral', which James D.G. Dunn describes as a 'three-dimensional cone'. "Criteria for a Wise Reading of a Biblical Text" in David F. Ford and Graham Stanton, eds., *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 51.



Throughout the process, however, the speaker's context emerges as the primary determinant without negotiation with the listener's side. And Jesus' context cannot be limited to historical human contextualization but needs to include "in the beginning" and his relational context from outside the universe. His horizon is both nonnegotiable to human terms and irreducible to human shaping and construction.

In his imperative for his followers, Jesus makes it clearly conclusive: our perceptual-interpretive framework and lens will define our reality and determine how we function in our life ("the measure you give"). On this basis alone, we should not expect to experience anything more or less ("the measure you get"), notably in relationship together. Implied further in his words, Jesus defined the outcome of a qualitative perceptual-interpretive framework and the consequence of a quantitative perceptual-interpretive framework, both of which are directly correlated to the epistemic process: "For to those who have *a qualitative framework and lens*, more will be given; from those who have nothing, *that is, no qualitative framework and lens*, even what they have *from a quantitative framework* will be taken away or rendered insignificant" (Mk 4:25).

The early Church Fathers variously struggled with the influence of Greek philosophy to establish the Church's theological identity, yet the contextualization of basic Greek thought continued to shape its declarations. The formalization of human contextualization in the church came in the fourth century with Constantine, who made Christianity a state religion, the birth of Christendom; theology was institutionalized and its declarations were contextualized accordingly. Under these conditions Augustine emerged on a theological path to become the prominent Father of the Western church—whose footprints charted the steps for the Reformation—yet not without some of the "baggage" of his context. As prominent as his declarations were, and were to become, they were insufficient to distinguish the church as God's whole on God's relational terms—in spite of even his declaration of 'the invisible church' as distinct from a state church. However, after the fall of Rome in 410, his apologetic work, *The City of God*, pointed in the right direction beyond human contextualization and shaping.

In the first half of the Middle Ages (500-1500 CE) until 1000 (called the Dark Ages), the theological task mostly took place in monasteries and thus is called monastic theology. As Tony Lane describes it:

The goal was not the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but edification and worship. The approach was one of contemplation and adoration. The theologian was not a detached academic observer studying his material from outside, but a committed, involved participant.<sup>12</sup>

In the eleventh century, philosophy further shaped a new approach to theology: scholastic theology or scholasticism.

Theology came to be studied outside of the cloister—in the university, and in other 'secular' (non-monastic) settings. The goal was objective intellectual knowledge. The approach was one of questioning, logic, speculation and disputation. It was more important for the theologian to have a philosophical training than to be godly.

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<sup>12</sup> Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, 88.

Theology had become a detached objective science. This approach did not eliminate the older monastic approach, but it displaced it from the front line of theology.<sup>13</sup>

It was in this context that Aquinas emerged to attempt to synthesize faith (theology) and reason (philosophy from Aristotle).

The obscurities of scholastic theology and the struggle to reconcile philosophy with theology eventually led to renewed interest back to the primary sources (the Hebrew and Greek Bible and the early Church Fathers). This return was the Christian Humanism led by Erasmus, whose effort to reform the contemporary church of its abuses laid the groundwork for the Protestant Reformation. Yet, Erasmus' return to primary sources was a scholarly approach, rather than, for example, the approach of monastic theology. The Reformers who followed had a similar lens, and their declarations eventually became codified into detailed dogmatic systems—certainly with great impact on doctrine (at least in referential terms) but with mixed results in practice, notably in how relationships were engaged and thereby how church as God's family was practiced. To the extent that this is accurate, what this demonstrates about the return to the Bible as the primary source is that there is no guarantee of the following:

1. It distinguishes the whole of God and God's whole self-revelation.
2. Its affirmations, assertions and dogmatic statements of God have direct significance to God, therefore theological significance.
3. Its declarations are based on whole knowledge and understanding resulting from qualitatively understanding and relationally knowing God.

Based on what Jesus said, "the measure you give will be the measure you get," we cannot and should not expect to experience anything more than our interpretive framework and lens allows, even from the primary source of the Bible. The two-fold relational imperative that Jesus conjoined to his irreplaceable declaration above qualifies what we can expect and what is guaranteed from God's self-revelation: (a) "pay attention to how you listen" (Lk 8:18), and (b) "pay attention to what you hear" (Mk 4:24); and with this relational response and involvement in the primacy of relationship with Subject-Source, "still more will be given you."

All affirmations, assertions and dogmatic statements of God must give account of their source (human contextualization or God's relational context and process) and, equally important, must account for how they relate to this source. This accountability applies also to the positive theologies which emerged from the Reformation. This necessarily applies to any theological engagement and any aspect of the theological task, not as an obligatory methodology but by the nature of the epistemological, hermeneutical, ontological and relational presence, influence and workings of reductionism. Without this epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction, plus related humility, the epistemological illusions and ontological simulations from reductionism are not recognized, exposed and contested; and theology continues to be fragmentary.

None of the declarations from the Reformation were sufficient to meet the challenges to come with the Enlightenment and the predominance of reason and the determination of science. From the 1700s, the truth of Christianity has been questioned

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<sup>13</sup> Lane, 88.

(e.g. by Deism and rationalism) and the authority of its source challenged (e.g. by science and historical criticism). Influenced by this climate of human contextualization, some Christians (most notably neo-evangelicals from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> C) attempted to meet this challenge with the search for certainty. As discussed previously, the search for certainty is pursued on referential terms based on a narrowed-down epistemic field, that is, the referentialization of the Word. In general, referential certainty is based on the fragments of information known (for science, information known within the universe), therefore any certainty assumed can only be fragmentary certainty—partial at best and misleading if taken as complete. This has not been recognized, understood or addressed by most in the theological community.

More importantly, their search for certainty epistemologically included implicitly the underlying quest for identity both ontologically and relationally—an identity based on a theological anthropology defining the person by what one does (scholarship) and has (certainty of belief system), thus an identity that must be significant enough in a comparative process to be distinguished in relation to others (namely their critics in science and the academy). Here again, any certainty of identity assumed is only fragmentary certainty, not whole certainty. This approach is certainly not compatible with what Jesus made paradigmatic for the ‘certainty’ of God’s revelation (Lk 10:21); nor is it congruent with the underlying assumption for all Christian theology of knowing and understanding God.

The search for certainty also led to the misguided attempt to establish the inerrancy of the Bible; this effort was not unexpected since the authority of the source was being questioned. There is an important issue here that has been inadequately understood and consequently inappropriately addressed, with resulting unnecessary (even unfortunate) declarations. By overstating itself about God’s revelation, the inerrant declaration never says enough to distinguish God but unfortunately even obscures the whole of God and reinforces a theological fog needing to be lifted to illuminate who, what and how God is.

The inerrancy position is an unnecessary rationalization with a limited quantitative focus for the purpose to ensure the certainty and maintain the integrity and authority of the Bible. Yet, this is referential certainty only about the text in referential terms, not about God’s revelation as communicative action in relational terms. Though with apparent good intention—in reaction to a modernist critical framework—inerrancy is not only unnecessary but it also does not fulfill its purpose to preserve God’s Word, that is, from the most damaging and basic underlying issue that undermines its authority: reductionism. In the effort to establish the fact that “God did say that,” the lens of inerrancy has paid less attention to *what* God said and, equally important, has ignored *how* God said it; consequently, it has not contested reductionism’s original challenge (“Did God really say that?”) but rather further reinforced reductionism and its counter-relational work. That is, inerrantists commonly disembodify both God’s communicative word and embodied Word from the whole of God’s relational context and process by reducing God’s relational language and terms to a narrowed referential language and terms, and thereby de-relationalize the Word.

Any apparent certainty from this narrowed framework must be examined next to the cost for this certainty. This and any referentialization of the Word often are declared by an incomplete Christology (even overly christocentric), a truncated soteriology

(neither saved from reductionism nor saved to God's relational whole), an immature pneumatology (without the ongoing relational involvement of the Spirit) and renegotiated ecclesiology (without whole relationships together in likeness of the Trinity), thereby making fragmentary declarations that reduce both the whole of God and God's relational whole only on God's relational terms. These doctrines, propositions and related practices, in fact, "go beyond what is written" (countering Paul in 1 Cor 4:6) and functionally violate the intent and purpose of inerrancy. Therefore, inerrancy does not go far and deep enough to get to the heart of the issue and concern, and as a consequence its affirmation, assertion and dogmatism tend to be constructed with the epistemological illusion and ontological simulation from reductionism, shaped by its counter-relational work.

A qualifying note about the text of Scripture. No doubt there is human agency in the text of Scripture that needs to be accounted for to understand a particular human context giving shape to the text. Human agency of the text, however, just gave shape to the text at that point in time when Scripture became textual, that is, secondary shape. Human agency neither defined the form of language God used in self-revelation, nor determined the content of that language. Hence, human agency existed in only a secondary process of shaping the text and its eventual canonical form. The primary determination always remained with God, who alone both speaks for God and is accountable for the language and its content—human shaping notwithstanding.

Therefore, there is a necessary alternative to inerrancy. In our quest for epistemic certainty (and underlying ontological and relational identity)—rather than the inerrancy of the Bible as text in referential terms that has narrowed down the epistemic field of God's Word—we need the deeper significance of Scripture as God's revelation with communicative action in relational terms. This constitutes the qualitative depth of God's self-disclosure in vulnerable relational action that unmistakably distinguishes God irreducibly in the whole of who, what and how God is as revealed. The significance of God's Word is not in the certainty of the text in referential terms (fragmentary certainty) but the certainty of God's revelation in relational terms (whole certainty), that is, relational certainty distinguished from referential certainty. Some may contend that this reliably emerges only from the referential certainty of the text. That assumes the primacy of referential words and content in determining the significance of communication in relationships over the speaker/author of the communication. This too is a narrowed epistemic field that ignores, even precludes, the relational messages and content signified only by the qualitative presentation of Subject-speaker/author. These relational messages from any subject are the critical aspect conveyed in all communication that qualifies the meaning or significance of the words.

This distinguished significance constituted only by Subject-God emerges in the function (not concept) of 'righteousness', God's righteousness—not as an attribute of Object-God but as the dynamic function of the whole of who, what and how God *is* that can be counted on in relationships (namely in self-disclosure) to be nothing less and no substitute, that is, whole-ly with certainty. On this basis, the ancient poet celebrates God's righteousness because "the LORD is righteous in all his ways" (Ps 145:7,17). Likewise, we can celebrate that Scripture is nothing less and no substitute but the righteousness of God's communicative action, whole-ly with certainty. This relational certainty by necessity must qualify all communication for the communication to be significant. It is only the righteousness of Scripture as the Word in God's relational terms

that can be counted on to compose the self-disclosures of God. Anything less and any substitute (namely in referential terms) reduce God's righteousness and fragment the whole distinguishing who, what and how God is directly in relationship.

Therefore, *inerrancy* is rightly understood not in narrow referential terms and language to base certainty of the comparative *place* of the Bible in human context. Rather inerrancy comes in whole relational terms and language to distinguish the *function* of Scripture: as the communicative words God defines them to be and constitutes with his righteousness, and on this basis alone can be counted on in relationship that God determines these words to serve. Nothing less and no substitutes of what God defines, constitutes and determines can be whole and thus inerrant for the qualitative basis necessary for irrefutable relational significance. There is, of course, a certain aspect of faith in this process, just as even scientists exercise faith while operating in the scientific method. This faith, however, is not a unilateral assumption but the reciprocal relational response engaged in the heuristic epistemic process from outside the universe, which then also exceeds that faith of natural theology.

Moreover, we need to recognize that certainty and inerrancy in referential terms is based on probability. Such certainty and inerrancy is distinct from improbability, thus does not distinguish the whole of God's improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path—the vulnerable relational action of God's self-revelation from outside the universe. If the improbable is not possible, then any reality beyond the universe does not exist and any faith in such a reality is only a unilateral assumption. Conversely, if the improbable is not impossible, then any denial of this reality is also a unilateral assumption of faith. Certainty and inerrancy in referential terms must account for its faith.

We also must understand that certainty and inerrancy distinct from improbability has more to do with distinguishing our identity than distinguishing God's revelation. That is to say, a position of certainty and inerrancy seeks to be heard in the human context, along with the desire or need for one's identity to have distinction (if not also acceptance) in the comparative process of human contextualization. This underlying quest is prominent in the theological academy; and apologetics perhaps has been an expression of it. While apologetics has been needed in theological discourse, the same issues above exist and must be accounted for. Whenever, for example, apologetics becomes more of an end in itself, it is less a means to distinguish the whole of God and more a means of distinction for acceptance (the lack of which diminishes one's person in comparative relations). Acceptance is understood further in the dynamic of marginalization. As a discipline theology has been marginalized by science, if not rendered insignificant. Part of its insignificance has been the result of theology's own doing. If our theological anthropology defines the person by what one does (theology) and has (significance), then to be marginalized in one's discipline is to be marginalized as a person. On this basis, acceptance (or to be heard) is less about one's theology and more about one's person.

In the theological fog of uncertainty (and referential certainty), the ancient poet provides the hermeneutic key to certainty of God's self-disclosure: "O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth" (Ps 78:1, NIV). The certainty is not in the details—for example, in the quantitative aspects of *torah*, to which Israel consistently narrowed the covenant. Rather this certainty emerges unmistakably with three major issues:

1. the significance of the person-Subject presented,
2. the integrity (righteousness) of this person's communication,
3. the depth level of relationship this person-Subject engages in the above communication of the person presented.

Like *torah* when it is disembodied or de-relationalized—that is, removed from the primacy of relationship together—the Word de-relationalized becomes merely information. “Listen to *the qualitative and relational depth* of the words of my mouth,” “Listen to my Son” (Mt 17:5), “pay attention to how you listen” (Lk 8:18), and “pay attention to what you hear *directly from the words of my mouth*” (Mk 4:24), in dynamic interaction together, define the relational context and determine the relational process necessary for all theological declaration to fulfill theology's underlying assumption “that they understand and know me” (Jer 9:24).

What we witness in the unfolding of historical theology since the Church Fathers is a pattern in the hermeneutical circle of recurring cycles:

Initial theological clarity→emerging theological fog→dissatisfaction and a search for more→partial shift back to the primary source→limited theological clarity→return of theological fog.

And what underlies the recurring cycles is both a consistent and further narrowing of the epistemic field that results predictably from a limiting interpretive framework. This hermeneutical pattern has become a vicious cycle, with the prospect of no significant change on its horizon. Significant change, however, will require redemptive change from the influence and workings of reductionism and its counter-relational activity. This redemptive change can only be the relational outcome of vulnerably engaging the horizon of the triune God, that is, only on God's relational terms through ‘the narrow qualitative gate and relational road’ to knowing and understanding the whole of God and God's whole. Nothing less and no substitutes will break the recurring cycle of theology and remove the theological fog.

## **Statements of Systematization**

It is one matter to summarize Scripture in a biblical theology. It is a further matter to give coherence to God's self-disclosures. Yet, it is another matter to systematize the Bible in some foreign, arbitrary or artificial structure imposed on God's Word, commonly found in systematic theologies. This latter effort seeks to provide a unity to the various facts, themes, propositions and doctrines perceived in the Bible. The common results from such efforts have been some *form* (shaping or construction) of unity without having the *substance* (theological significance) of its content to support its unity. The underlying assumption of systematization is that the above parts determine the whole, and that the sum of these parts defines the whole. The aggregate of parts, however, has constructed only some illusion of unity or a simulation of the whole in Scripture. Such results are to

be expected because “the measure you give will be the measure you get,” that is, a quantitative interpretive framework with a narrowed epistemic field in referential terms only formulates a semblance of wholeness signifying the epistemological illusion and ontological simulation from reductionism; and on this basis formalizes this illusion or simulation in systematic theologies. For example, this process can be observed in an encyclopedic approach that organizes the Bible according to topics; another example is the concordance approach that systematizes the facts of Scripture, just as the natural sciences do with the facts of nature. Whatever arbitrary, foreign or artificial structure on a quantitative basis is imposed, it does not distinguish the whole of God and God’s whole.

This is a bold critique to make. Yes, indeed. Yet, the burden is on systematic theologies to account for the basis of its structure providing so-called unity to its parts. Furthermore, they have to account for why their parts are the ones identified, and how those parts are interrelated, if they are at all.

God’s revelations are not fragmentary even though they are disclosed at different times and contexts. They certainly need to be put together for depth of understanding, as Jesus expected of his followers (*syniemi*, Mk 8:17-18) and as Paul made definitive for the church (*synesis*, Col 2:2-3). Yet, “the LORD is righteous in all his *disclosures*,” that is, the whole of who, what and how God is can be counted on in each of God’s self-revelations. God’s whole defines the parts of this whole body of communicative actions and determines how the parts are interrelated. On the one hand, God’s whole becomes fragmented in a narrowed epistemic field, thereby God’s revelation becomes fragmentary. Yet, on the other hand, God’s whole does not emerge in an apparent broadened epistemic field in generalized terms, and God’s revelations remain fragmentary. Either approach can apply to the efforts of systematic theology. Jesus illuminated the process for us to clarify this critical issue by making a vital distinction.

The coherence of God’s self-revelation “that leads to *whole* life” (*zoe*, not mere *bios*, Mt 7:14) is composed on “the narrow gate and road,” which is only constituted on God’s relational terms (in contrast, e.g. to the road to Emmaus in the opposite direction). In Jesus’ definitive declaration, he distinguishes the relational context and process of God’s theological trajectory and relational path from all human contextualization. The latter’s distinction is often unrecognized because it has become so generalized that its application tends to be ignored, prominently in the theological task. Systematization is a generalized attempt to organize or systematize the facts, themes, propositions and doctrines of the Bible based on the referentialization of the Word. These generalizing systematic theologies point to and have taken essentially “a wide and easy road” to formulate their explanations and conclusions, construct their unity and formalize their statements, all of which signify what Jesus identifies as their *apoleia* (loss, ruin, Mt 7:13), that is, reductionism. Jesus makes this vital distinction of human contextualization to help us recognize and understand the prevalence of reductionism and the implications of its illusions and simulations—which he exposed in the rest of his definitive discourse in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7).

Notably absent or lacking in the above systematic theologies are two defining issues: (1) the strength of sin as reductionism (either ignored or not understood), and (2) an anthropology of the whole person in whole relationship together in the image and likeness of not fragments of God but the whole of God (both illuminated in the Sermon on the Mount). The *zoe* of the whole of God is distinguished only through and on “the

narrow *qualitative* gate and *relational* road,” therefore “few find it.” The “wide and easy road” is the prevailing narrow epistemic process in referential terms that may organize information about God but only with fragmentary explanation and conclusion that lack wholeness. Without accounting for the sin of reductionism and its counter-relational work diminishing the person, any unity is the expected epistemological illusion or ontological simulation from reductionism. These are the unavoidable consequences that systematization continues not to recognize, at least adequately, and thus not to contest, at least sufficiently, but likely may have become further embedded in—noticeably since postmodernism’s rejection of a metanarrative and its hermeneutic of suspicion.

## Statements of Inclusion

In contrast to dogmatic declarations from systematic theologies, yet still in likeness of their unifying process, there are statements of inclusion. Challenged by postmodernism to situate all theological discourse in their human contexts and spurred by globalization, theologies of inclusion (e.g. multicultural, pluralistic and global theologies, plus related peace theologies) are increasingly formalized as the unifying basis for God’s people as well as for understanding God and the gospel. These declarations have made any use of a metanarrative difficult, unnecessary or inappropriate; and its dogmatic expression rightly calls for a hermeneutic of suspicion. In its place, inclusive theologies have increased the aggregate of parts to define more inclusively and determine more broadly what can be declared as God’s whole both in creation and with salvation. How can many of these declarations be considered the theological formalization of reductionism?

In a climate of globalization within the age of reductionism, we have to exercise our own hermeneutic of suspicion—not as in postmodernism to deconstruct a metanarrative but in order to distinguish God’s whole from reductionism, which then may necessitate a means of deconstruction to be whole. Globalization, thankfully, has expanded our lens to vistas beyond any provincialism (as the early church experienced by being scattered, from Acts 8). Unfortunately, the quantitative lens of globalization focusing on secondary matter has also narrowed what we pay attention to and ignore (consider Peter’s lens in Acts 10, that needs to be seen in the context from Acts 8). This has a direct impact on what is taken into consideration to determine the whole and what can be distinguished as whole (notably God’s whole, as Peter learned from Paul).

The plurality of peoples, cultures and faiths visible in the expanding global community cannot be ignored. Yet how we pay attention to them is the critical issue facing Christian theology today. How we consider them (e.g. in a comparative process), relate to them (e.g. from a hierarchical structure with distinctions of more and less), and are united with them (e.g. by a deficit model) will determine the depth and significance of any theology emerging from global conditions. Necessarily factored into this process of determination—though likely not considered, understood or even perceived (or discerned)—include the strength of our view of sin (e.g. its normative and collective nature) and our theological anthropology (defining both persons and relationship).

For example, global theology today which is not contextualized further and deeper into the whole of Jesus’ relational context and process merely becomes a



multicultural (or intercultural) compendium of theologies giving their unique human shaping to the gospel, while seeking a unity of faith or a whole among God's people with the good intention of giving each of them a voice. Such a multicultural compendium, like social multiculturalism itself, does not provide unity or lead to the whole; it merely tends to become relative degrees of tolerance, thus essentially not significantly different from pluralism. And it is imperative for our understanding to realize: the tolerance, or even acceptance of pluralism, becomes invariably a stratified process and system, therefore not unifying for the whole—though illusions of harmony may exist to simulate wholeness—but in reality further fragmenting with the counter-relational work of reductionism making comparative distinctions from human contexts. These comparative distinctions of global contexts are fragmenting because the underlying theological anthropology defines them from outer in by a reduced ontology and function. For global theologies (including the West or global North) to be redefined in the deeper contextualization of Jesus' whole relational context and process, they must willfully let go of the primacy given to their contexts for their self-determination. Integral to this change is addressing the influence of reductionism for their theological anthropology to be transposed to inner out with wholeness in ontology and function.

We can learn from Paul that defining persons in a plurality by what they do and have unavoidably fragments the basis for God's whole and the embodied Word (1 Cor 1:13; Eph 1:22-23), including also the persons and relationships necessary to be whole (1 Cor 1:10-12; 4:6-7). In Paul's fight for this gospel of peace (cf. Eph 6:15), his theology and function were not shaped by his Greek context and its concept of peace. Paul's framework of peace was from the Hebrew *shalom*: the well-being constituted by the relational condition of wholeness. The lens he used for this wholeness came from Jesus. And it is from Jesus that we need to learn the determining process for theology in a plurality.

Basic to Jesus' involvement in the human context with all its plurality is his confrontation and exposure of reductionism. This was witnessed in his three temptations and more significantly demonstrated in his intrusive relational path, which certainly can make us uncomfortable relationally. Yet, beyond the discomfort of being made vulnerable, Jesus' approach to the plurality in human context is a major jolt to the theological status quo, if not also disturbing to those declaring any theology of inclusion. How so?

For Jesus, it was irreplaceable and nonnegotiable in determining theology in a plurality to directly make distinct the presence, influence and workings of reductionism in order to distinguish God's whole. His jolting and disturbing declaration was made clearly for this distinction: "Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division (Lk 12:51, "but a sword," par. Mt 10:34). How do we reconcile Jesus' words with our notions of peace and its distinction in theologies of inclusion? Certainly the human condition and its human relational problems need all the help they could get. The issue theologically is neither about foregoing help for the human condition, nor about what and who can help. The issue foremost in God's salvific response is to make the human relational condition whole, not about some mere help (or merely deliverance). Furthermore, the interpretive framework for the whole is qualitative not quantitative. Theologies of inclusion assume that the greater the plurality brought together, the greater God's people will be; this assumption operates only with the

underlying false assumption that the parts define the whole and the aggregate of parts determines the whole.

For Jesus, mere notions of peace can compound the human problem if they construct illusions and simulations of wholeness. The wholeness Jesus embodied to make the human condition whole is clearly distinguished from all other peace in human contextualization (Jn 14:27); and on this basis Jesus wept over the human context when he saw it: “If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace” (Lk 19:41-42). The strength of Jesus’ lens against the sin of reductionism and for whole anthropology were demonstrated soon after when he forcefully cleared out the temple to make it whole for the plurality of people groups—yet distinguished on a qualitative basis, not the quantitative basis signified in the existing temple. In Jesus’ lens of hermeneutical suspicion, his seemingly contrary dynamic is a means of deconstruction to make whole the human condition. Therefore, the division and conflict Jesus came to cause are by nature needed both to distinguish the wholeness he embodied for the human condition, and to make distinct that any other declarations of peace and related theologies of inclusion simulating or illusory of wholeness are on a different theological trajectory and relational path than Jesus.

Perhaps such illusion and simulation of wholeness can be witnessed in the contemporary context with the plurality of faiths (and also the diversity of Christian faith). Interfaith dialogue (and the ecumenical conversation) today is either (a) a function primarily of relationship and secondarily of ideology, or (b) primarily of ideology and secondarily of relationship. If it is the latter (b), then such dialogue requires compromise ideologically (i.e. reduction of Christian beliefs) in order to have relationship. If the former (a), this involvement in the primacy of relationship necessitates understanding and acceptance of persons (not affirmation of their beliefs) in order to have relationship—which may include mutual disagreement of beliefs but not the rejection of their person, and thus does not require compromise, only love. The latter (b) compounds the human problem if it is an illusion or simulation of wholeness. The former (a) must also be intrusive (not irenic) with *agape* involvement in order to distinguish the wholeness embodied by Jesus to make whole the human condition.

The nature of God’s whole and the sin of reductionism demand this determining process in the theological task, not just for theologies of inclusion but for all theological declarations. The determining issue is compatibility and congruity with the theological trajectory and relational path of the wholeness Jesus gives, that converges in the narrow qualitative gate and relational road of the uncommon, improbable and whole, and therefore that cannot be determined by incomplete notions of peace to widen the gate and road in the common, probable and fragmentary.

All positive theologies, whatever their statements, are challenged in their interpretive frameworks to distinguish both their view of sin and their theological anthropology from human contextualization, and thus from the influence and workings of reductionism. Without meeting this challenge of their basic assumptions in these two critical areas, their theological trajectory becomes rendered to the theological formalization of reductionism. What constitutes Jesus’ inseparable theological trajectory and relational path and what emerges are irreducible and nonnegotiable.

The bottom line for theology and what emerges from the theological task reflects our theological engagement:

Have we declared what we did not understand,  
things too distinguished for us, which we did not know?

Or are we declaring what we do indeed understand,  
because the things too distinguished for us have been vulnerably revealed  
in relationship together for us to know whole-ly?



## Chapter 4      The Theological Task Made Whole

**God knows that when you *incorporate...your perspective will be like God's and have the knowledge to be theologically significant.***

Gen 3:5

The pursuit of theological significance has defined theological engagement since back in the primordial garden. We need to understand what unfolded there in its larger context. Since the lens of those persons “saw” that some parts of the surrounding context were a “good” means for this pursuit “to make one wise,” they incorporated it into their theological task.

Basic to what emerged from this beginning to shape theological engagement was their lens: the interpretive lens refocused from the inner out to the outer in by a quantitative interpretive framework that reduces the epistemic field from God’s whole relational terms to fragmentary referential terms. Even if God did really say that, ‘what did God really mean by that’ became the issue. 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. This replacement language—signified by “you will not die for God knows that when you...” (Gen 3:5-6)—(re)defines ‘what God really means by that’ and thereby determines what God says. In other words, referential language speaks for God rather than God speaking for God. How does this dynamic from referential language work?

### Accounting for the Theological Task

It has become increasingly apparent to modern scientific research that the language we speak shapes the way we see the world and even the way we think (not necessarily producing thought).<sup>1</sup> This points to the function of language not merely as a means of expression but also as a template imposing a constraint limiting what we see and the way we think. In his study of neuroscience, Iain McGilchrist states about language:

It does not itself bring the landscape of the world in which we live into being. What it does, rather, is shape that landscape by fixing the ‘counties’ into which we divide it, defining *which* categories or types of entities we see there—how we carve it up.

In the process, language helps some things stand forward but by the same token makes others recede.... What language contributes is to firm up certain particular

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<sup>1</sup> Reported by Sharon Begley in “What’s in a Word?” *Newsweek*, July 20, 2009, 31.

ways of seeing the world and give fixity to them. This has its good side, and its bad. It aids consistency of reference over time and space. But it can also exert a restrictive force on what and how we think. It represents a more *fixed version* of the world: it shapes, rather than grounds, our thinking.<sup>2</sup>

This modern awareness provides us with some understanding of the dynamic of referential language—how it works and what effect it has—that was set in motion from the primordial garden. The origination of referential language unfolded as God’s relational language is narrowed down and God’s command (*sawah*, Gen 2:16) is redefined from communication in God’s relational terms to the transmission of information in referential terms. Detaching the command from Subject-God (or *de*-relationalizing it) removes God’s words from their primary purpose only for relationship together. The command was clearly God’s communication for the wholeness of their relationship together, not the mere transmission of information (the purpose of referential language) for humans to know merely what to do (the focus of referential terms). This inaugural referentialization of God’s words (command) was extended later by the people of Israel whenever they transposed the commandments from God’s relational language to referential language, and consequently shaped the covenant in narrow referential terms—essentially *de*-relationalizing the covenant from ongoing relationship with Subject-God.

The shift to referential language opened the door to shape, redefine or reconstruct the information transmitted by God to narrowed-down interpretation (what God really meant by that, “your eyes will be opened”), that is, to reduced referential terms that implies speaking for God on our own terms (signified in “to make one wise”). 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—as modern science is rediscovering about language. Conjointly and inseparably, referential language also puts a constraint on our lens, thereby restricting what we see of God’s revelation and limiting how we think about God’s words (“you will not...”). This dynamic from referential language obviously redefines the subject matter in the theological task, and certainly continues to constrain its theological engagement. Any explanations and conclusions that emerge from the theological task in referential terms merely reflect the theological reflections of referential language. Any such theological statements have no theological significance; they only attempt to speak for God—most prominently with the illusion or simulations from reductionism (“you will be like God”).

This pursuit of theological significance that was put into motion in the primordial garden needs to be accounted for. In referential language, theology’s subject matter is narrowed down to terms that are disembodied (*de*-relationalized), fragmentary or elusive, without distinguishing the whole Subject. This is the designed purpose of referential language, and its use in the theological task has unavoidable consequences epistemologically, hermeneutically, ontologically and relationally. This dynamic of referential language was illuminated by Jesus in a crucial interaction with those “who had believed in him” (Jn 8:31-45).

In this highly visible text—yet consistently seen with limited understanding—Jesus distinguished between those following him in relational terms and those believing him in referential terms. The defining issue for the latter group was exposed in Jesus’

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<sup>2</sup> Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 110.

question to these believers” “Why do you not understand my *speech*” (*lalia*, v.43), that is, “Why is my language not clear to you?” (NIV) The answer was not simply “because you cannot accept my word” (as rendered in NRSV). The underlying issue is the constraint of referential language restricting their ability “to hear my word *in relational language*.”

Jesus had just made definitive to them what distinguishes his followers in relational terms: “If you continue in *the relational language of my word*, you are truly my *followers, involved with me in relationship together on my relational terms*; and you will know the *embodied truth* [not de-relationalized, generalized and propositionalized], and Subject-Truth will free you” (8:31-33). Redemption interpreted through the lens of referential language is fragmented to deliverance from situations, circumstances and sin—which these Jewish believers no longer *saw* their need for (v.33)—and also is refracted neither to see the sin of reductionism nor to include the relational significance of what we are redeemed for: to be freed to become permanent members of God’s family as his very own daughters and sons (vv.34-36). The restricting limits of referential language inescapably makes us unable to understand the Word’s relational language in the theological task, and this has far-reaching consequences epistemologically (not knowing the Truth), hermeneutically (unable to interpret his words to understand God’s revelation), ontologically (not to be free from reductionism and made whole) and relationally (not to experience whole relationship together in God’s family). And Jesus unmistakably connected this dynamic of referential language directly to its originating source in the primordial garden (8:44).

Accounting for the referentialization of the Word in the pursuit of theological significance is both needed today and problematic. Three other examples help us understand how this skewed pursuit has shaped all levels of the theological task and also exposes our need for redemptive change in any theological engagement, as illuminated above by Jesus.

The first example involved Jesus and a rich young ruler (Mk 10:16-22, par. Lk 18:18-23). After this man presumably *saw* the significance of Jesus’ blessing of the children, he pursued Jesus for eternal life, that is, for his own theological significance. He certainly went to the right source to validate his pursuit. However, when he wanted to have this theological significance, he focused on the task of ‘what to do’ to gain theological significance: “What must I do?” (v.17) Jesus answered him in relational language but the rich young ruler responded back in referential language according to the constraints of a theological anthropology defining him by what he did and had. The relational consequence was no theological significance based on ‘what to do’.

In the second example, a lawyer tested Jesus in theological engagement (Lk 10:25-29). He wanted to be distinguished in theological discourse so he asked Jesus a question similar to the rich young ruler. Jesus refocused him on the law but only in relational terms, not the referential terms of the lawyer’s tradition. Since the lawyer wanted to establish his significance (“justify himself,” v.29) in the theological conversation, he asked Jesus for more information, that is, for referential knowledge to use in his theological task. In other words, when the lawyer wanted to be theologically significant, his lens focused on having ‘knowledge’ to demonstrate his theological significance. Jesus’ response identified the existing gap between the convention of theological conversation (discourse) that depends on fragmentary knowledge, and the relational terms of his words that involve wholeness in both theology and practice (10:30-

37). In the context of this commonly known text, Jesus illuminates for the theological task the theological significance of relational language that is clearly distinguished from the epistemological illusion of theological significance based on ‘knowledge’.

The third example involves a magician named Simon who converted to Christianity (Acts 8:9-19). After becoming a Christian, Simon *saw* the significance of Peter and John’s impact on the people by laying their hands on them to receive the Spirit. In spite of Simon’s past of amazing people with his magic, his action now to secure the means to impart the Spirit needs to be understood more broadly. Certainly, Simon wanted the significance of Peter and John. Whether or not it was for the primary purpose for others to receive the Spirit, Simon misguidedly pursued theological significance. Consequently, when he wanted theological significance, he focused on technique/method (“lay my hands”) to have this theological significance. As Simon learned in his theological effort, with the narrow lens determining any theological task there is no theological significance based on ‘methodology’.

These three examples summarize what has traditionally constituted the theological task: (1) based on ‘what to do’, (2) based on ‘knowledge’, and (3) based on ‘methodology’. In one way or another, separately or jointly, these all reflect a variation of what emerged in the primordial garden. The influence and workings of reductionism (including its counter-relational activity) put into motion, prominently in the dynamic of referential language, consistently raise two critical, undeniable and inescapable issues needing ongoing accountability in the theological task:

1. The strength of view of sin necessary to address sin as reductionism and to account for any sin of reductionism; therefore, having a lens of sin irreducible to human contextualization and nonnegotiable to human terms.
2. Basic to the theological task is our theology. Ironically, as demonstrated in the primordial garden, the critical key to significance in the theological task, and to the nature of our theological engagement, is our theological anthropology defining the person from inner out (with the functional significance of the heart) based on *who* the person is in the qualitative image of God and *what* persons are in the primacy of whole relationships together in the relational likeness of the whole of God—not reducing the person to outer in defined by what one does and has, and on that basis limiting engagement in relationships to secondary function, noticeably with relational distance in the epistemic process.

In the midst of what was put into motion in the primordial garden was God’s voice in relational language pursuing those persons for the sake of theological significance: “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9) God’s voice continues to resound today, pursuing us for theological significance. Our response must not follow the relational distance found in the primordial garden, with its weak view of sin without reductionism and fragmented view of the person from outer in. Those who do not vulnerably account for *where* we are in the theological task—*where* in relational terms, not the referential terms of what we do, our knowledge and methodology—will continue in the contrary flow set in motion from the primordial garden, on a different theological trajectory and relational path than the vulnerable presence and intimate involvement of the whole of God.



Given God's presence and involvement, in addition to the question of 'Where are you?' God's voice in relational language further pursues us, perhaps in our theological fog: "What are you doing here?" (just as he pursued Elijah in his theological fog, 1 Kg 19:9,13). We need to account not only for *where* we are in our theological engagement but also be accountable for *what* we are doing in the theological task and *why* we are doing that. What are we doing here indeed!

## Clarifying the Theological Task and Its Terms

To help locate where we are and need to be in the theological task in terms of relational language, we can establish a working definition of theology. With the convergence of the various words, statements and declarations from God highlighted throughout our discussion up to now, the definition of theology has been unfolding. Not to be confused with 'process theology', the formation of theology emerges with the following:

Theology emerges from the intimate reflection (not a quantitative analysis) on the outcome of receiving and responding to God's communicative action in relational terms (cf. *theaomi*, Jn 1:14), not from measured consideration of mere information in referential terms (e.g. *eraunao*, search, look into, try to find out, Jn 5:39)—the most significant reflection of which involves and implies the further relational outcome of knowing and understanding God in qualitative relational terms. On this basis, theology needs to be understood beyond the task of formulating doctrines and constructing systems informing us about God in order to get to the depths of theology's relational significance: making definitive the coherence (*synesis*, cf. Col 2:2-3) of God's self-revelations vulnerably communicated to us as God's Word in relational language only for the primacy of relationship together.

If this is the integrating basis for the subject matter of theology, then the theological task by necessity requires the relational context and process of the Subject, not the mere information about the Object. Therefore, the task of making definitive the coherence of God's revelations in relational language involves conjointly the ongoing congruence with God's theological trajectory and compatibility with God's relational path.

The initial task of theology is to clearly define its own subject matter without the influence from human contextualization to fragment (or distract it from) its subject matter, and without the shaping from human contextualization to obscure its subject matter. Integral to distinguishing its subject matter, the theological task necessitates engaging the definitive (not conventional) epistemic process made accessible by the Subject that will have the relational outcome of knowing and understanding the Subject (not merely the Object) of its subject matter. This epistemology is indispensable for the theological task and essential for theology. Basic to this (and any) epistemology is our qualitative interpretive framework and the relational hermeneutic used to engage God's relational epistemic process only on God's relational terms, in contrast to (and even conflict with) a limited epistemic process with a narrowed epistemic field in referential terms. For too long, the dynamic of referential language has fragmented or obscured the

subject matter of theology, and consequently relocated many in the theological task to a different theological trajectory and relational path than the whole of God.

The existing gap between the convention of theological discourse in referential language and theological engagement in relational language is insurmountable. That is, the whole of God from beyond the universe is not distinguished by the limitation of terms within the universe. Even though physicist Stephen Hawking ostensibly has given up his search for a grand unifying theory due to the limits of self-referencing, efforts in the theological task continue in referential language—further prompting God’s question “What are you doing here?”

Since the emergence of referential language, the dynamic of its influence and workings has permeated even human development (including the brain) along with its primary purpose to construct substitute developments in theology. As discussed, referential language is fragmentary and disembodies the Word into parts (e.g. teachings, doctrine), which it attempts to aggregate into some unity or whole (e.g. in a systematic or biblical theology). This fragmentation and disembodiment are further evident in textual criticism (historical, form, literary), which embeds us in the secondary without understanding the primary (as defined by God). For George Steiner, this secondary critical reflection is the interpretive crisis that results in the loss of God’s presence—a condition he identifies as ‘a Secondary City’.<sup>3</sup> More critically, the use of referential language in the quest for certainty (e.g. in foundationalism and philosophical theology), which presumably would more accurately describe and represent the Word (e.g. in propositionalism and criticism), cannot be more than self-referencing, inconsistent and incomplete; that is, this is the consequence once it disembodies the Word and hence disengages from the Word’s relational context and process vulnerably disclosing the whole of God.

A qualifying note is necessary for the further distinction between referential language and relational language. The depth of relational language also includes propositions in the communication of vulnerable self-disclosure. Such propositions, however, are only for the qualitative significance of relationship together, not for mere quantitative knowledge and information. Therefore, in contrast to their use with referential language, these propositions must not by their nature in communication be reduced from this primary relational context and process, fragmented from the communication in relationship, and disembodied from the communicator, the Word. The primacy of relational language that qualifies the presence of propositions in communication clearly is heard in Jesus’ “I am” statements (e.g. Jn 6:35; 8:12; 10:7,11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1), which Paul heard, received and responded to only in relational terms (Acts 9:5).

Essentially, it can be said that referential language was not “designed” for the further development of qualitative communication in relationship but in reality went in the opposite direction which takes us away from qualitative relational connection. Historically, the referential language of prose evolved after poetry, and early poetry was sung, the qualitative significance of which was basic to communication in relationship and not the mere transmission of information.<sup>4</sup> This speaks further to the significance that

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<sup>3</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> See Oliver Sacks for a discussion on perfect pitch, tonal communication and protolanguage, *Musophilia: Tales of Music and the Brian* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008); see also Edward Foley,

many portions of the canonical Word are poetry; communication is the key, not transmitting information, which in the Bible singing and music also constitute in the innermost (e.g. Judg 5:3; Ps 27:6; 30:12; 108:1; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). This raises the issue of the effectiveness of prose in theological discourse. Perhaps contrary to Steiner's own use of prosaic language, he states the following conviction:

It is, I believe, poetry, art and music which relate us most directly to that in being which is not ours. Science is no less animate in its making of models and images. But these are not, finally, disinterested. They aim at mastery, at ownership. It is counter-creation and counter-love, as these are embodied in the aesthetic and in our reception of formed meaning, which put us in sane touch with that which transcends, with matters 'undreamt of' in our materiality. ...All good art and literature begin in immanence. But they do not stop there. Which is to say, very plainly, that it is the enterprise and privilege of the aesthetic to quicken into lit presence the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and 'the other'.<sup>5</sup>

While Steiner rightly identifies poetry and music as a qualitative link to the other beyond our being, he only appears to make discourse about this being without the relational connection constituted by communication. McGilchrist further identifies this difference in the qualitative use of words with music and poetry only *for* communication, which he locates in the function of the right brain hemisphere. This qualitative function of the right hemisphere, and its related view of the world, is in contrast to the quantitative reduction of words to the referential language of prose by the left hemisphere for its function not of communication in relationship but to merely make discourse about something.<sup>6</sup> This critical difference between discourse about the Word or from the Word of God to transmit information, and the qualitative communication by the Word in relationship is not the gap of Lessing's 'ugly broad ditch' but rather the relational distance Jesus made definitive in Luke 10:21 for the presence or absence of the communicative God in relationship.

The hermeneutic of a child that Jesus makes definitive for the theological task is a challenge, and likely threat, to most in theological engagement. Yet, this necessary hermeneutic for relational language does not eliminate reason but rather puts rational thought into its rightful created context of relationship; for example, not disembodied (de-relationalizing) the words about Object-God from the relational words from Subject-God. The prevailing dichotomy between reason and faith is a construction from referential language, whose distinction-making in referential terms has narrowed the lens giving definition to both reason and faith. Lessing's 'ugly ditch' reflects this dichotomy.

As a child engages the rightful created relational context with the relational process of trust (not blind faith or fideism), that is with vulnerable relational involvement, this person engages a heuristic epistemic process to learn, understand and experience whom he or she can count on in reciprocal relationship to extend that trust (cf. Ps

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*From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 226-27.

<sup>6</sup> McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 105.

119:130). The hermeneutic lens of this person ongoingly counts on who, what and how God says of himself to *be* in relationship (as in righteousness), nothing less and no substitutes, thus removing the need for speculation about God. In addition, this hermeneutic also rightly holds God accountable to *be* God in relationship together (e.g. in the relational epistemic process), to be whole-ly with certainty. In the dynamic of the hermeneutic of faith, the epistemic field and process are openly engaged in reciprocal relationship; on these relational terms, neither God does all the work nor do we in the theological task. Therefore, it is vital to understand that accountability in the theological task is by necessity both ways. As God pursues us for theological significance with ‘Where are you?’ and ‘what are you doing here?’ there are times in the relational epistemic process when we need to ask God ‘where are You?’

This lens of faith is in critical contrast with the narrow lens of reason that limits the epistemic field and process (cf. Dt 30:11-14). In assuming the theological task unilaterally, such reason alone consistently fragments the Object from its relational context and process, thereby reducing the Object to its parts (e.g. commandments, teachings, even attributes) without knowing and understanding the Object as Subject. To know and understand this Object as Subject is the unrestricted knowing and understanding of the whole of God (Subject-Object) intrinsic to theology and necessary to distinguish theology’s relational significance, wholeness, and thus theological significance. The absence or lack of this relational knowing and understanding is identified by Jesus as operating in “the wise and learned.” Just as Jesus made paradigmatic for theological engagement, the resulting gap in the theological task between the hermeneutic of a child and the interpretive lens of ‘the wise and learned’ is insurmountable no matter the latter’s level of scholarship, extent of referential knowledge and rigor in methodology (as Jesus further identified in Jn 5:39-40, and as Paul clarified for the church in 1 Cor 3:18-21).

The tension and conflict between the hermeneutic of a child and that of ‘the wise and learned’ is reflected in the theological task described in Deuteronomy 30:11-14. The wise and learned, on the one hand, narrow the epistemic field to manage the theological task within the limits of their own understanding, while, on the other hand, they complicate the epistemic process (e.g. with the growing body of information from theological-biblical studies) to limit the theological task to the wise and learned (consider the implications of the complaint by the temple elite, Mt 21:15-16). Epistemic humility is problematic for those entangled in the dynamic of referential language because its related reduced theological anthropology defines them by the self-determination of what they do and have—making any humility ontologically self-defeating. The simplicity of relational language described above that the child-person’s lens counts on—“the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to *respond*” (30:14)—has no benefit for self-determination; it’s too easy, everybody can do it. This is the expected and necessary thinking of reason separated from its rightful created context—the lens of the wise and learned that emerged from the primordial garden.

This lens of self-determination in the theological task is indispensable to understand because it redefines the purpose of the theological task and also determines our identity in ‘what we are doing here’. Self-determination is the underlying dynamic that needs to be understood in human shaping and construction. The presence of self-determination may be apparent in an individualistic context like the United States but

how is this relevant in collectivistic contexts? The reality is that self-determination is never pursued in a vacuum or in isolation from the self's surrounding context; it is always a process in relation to others outside of oneself, thus self-determination can be both by an individual and a collective. The underlying dynamic of self-determination is made definitive by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6, which overlaps with self-autonomy in Mt 5 and self-justification in Mt 7). This prevailing effort, which constitutes human shaping and construction (cf. the tower of Babel, Gen 11:1-4), focuses our interpretive lens on what to pay attention to and what to ignore (cf. Gen 3:4-6). Moreover, it also signifies an outer-in ontology and function, the process of which depends on rationalizing in its acts of determination and consequently defines self and relationships by quantitative parts, aspects or things for easier determination. In further understanding, the quest for self-determination is inseparable from a search for identity, which conjointly leads to the quest for certainty. Here is when the underlying dynamic becomes more obscure. With the elusive nature of certainty in the universe and in the absence of wholeness, the definition of certainty by necessity becomes reduced and narrowed down to what we can control and thereby be certain about. Then, of course, this dynamic engages the variable of fear, which easily becomes the driving force behind human effort—extending self-determination into self-justification.

This process is further seen in the theological task for certainty. The need for certainty in doctrine, notably among evangelicals influenced by modernism's scientific paradigm of foundationalism or by postmodernism's rejection of any metanarrative, has often been driven by fear in its quest for self-determination in a surrounding context which is, at best, adversarial and, more likely, hostile to and in reductionist conflict with the whole of God. Yet, we must count the cost for the theological task and our identity to be defined by human contextualization and determined by its measures (*metron*). This need, quest and related fear have narrowed the focus of theology, and by referentialization the theological task has constrained the Word from God to speak for himself. As Jesus made conclusive, "the measure you *use* will be the measure you get *in return results*" (Mk 4:24).

These interrelated epistemological, hermeneutical, ontological and relational issues confuse the subject matter of theology, and they diversify (i.e. fragment and partition) the theological task (e.g. into multiple and separate disciplines). If the primary purpose of our theological task is no longer focused on making definitive the coherence of God's self-revelations vulnerably communicated to us as God's Word in relational language, then our subject matter will not be distinguished. Moreover, our identity in 'what we are doing here' remains subject to the distinction our self-determination achieves in the comparative process. These are the relational consequences because self-determination undertakes the theological task unilaterally, with the burden of its work solely on us. Yet, the presence of self-determination in the theological task is often clouded by epistemological illusion or ontological simulation—the genius of reductionism that has captivated the theological community in much of its history. In reality, however, this is what we are doing in the theological task, and any theological fog is also the result of our own doing.

As we address these interrelated issues in our theological task, our subject matter will be unmistakable and the purpose of our theological task will become congruent with God's theological trajectory and compatible with his relational path. The relational

outcome will be knowing and understanding God for the formation of whole theology and practice—clearly in contrast to and in conflict with any other definition and determination in the theological task. This leads us to the heart of the theological task.

## **The Heart of the Theological Task**

The pivotal point in God’s improbable theological trajectory was the strategic shift of God’s thematic relational action when the Word embodied God’s intrusive relational path. It is distinguished as intrusive because up to then in the human context God’s heart dwelled primarily in the temple (1 Kg 9:3). When Jesus vulnerably disclosed the intimate presence of God to the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:6-26), this pivotal theological engagement emerged in relational language to illuminate the theological task for her. How can we say she was involved in the theological task? In reality, when anyone (even children) seeks to sort out their beliefs, gain their meaning or put them into practice, they are engaged in the theological task. She demonstrated this involvement (4:12, 19-20,25); and she also challenged others in their theological task (4:28-30, 39-42).

Jesus’ disclosure of “God is spirit” (v.24) cannot be distinguished in referential language. Philosophical theology could be satisfied with rendering the transcendent “God is spirit” to the self-existing spirit distinct from all his creatures, who alone has life within himself and is the life-giver. Yet, this referential explanation would neither be significant for this woman’s theological task nor be significant to God and for the whole of God vulnerably disclosed here. Throughout the incarnation Jesus’ whole person vulnerably disclosed the transcendent “God is spirit”, that is, the whole of God’s glory, therefore who, what and how God is. This self-disclosure was jointly nothing less and no substitutes of God as well as only for relationship together, the whole of which then had theological significance to the woman and to God. If the incarnation embodied anything less or any substitute, it would not have theological significance. As Jesus embodied God’s intrusive relational path with his whole person, he directly opened access for her to the transcendent “God is spirit” in vulnerable relational terms, not in constraining referential terms.

The incarnation makes accessible the presence of the holy and transcendent God. The glory of God in Jesus’ whole person makes evident the heart of God’s being, the core of the whole of the triune God, functionally for relationship (cf. Jn 1:14). In the incarnation the righteous God embodies the righteousness of God, whole-ly with certainty. That is, the vulnerable presence of the very heart of God is the truth of who and what God is, and the functional significance of nothing less and no substitutes; and the intimate involvement of the very core of the whole of the triune God is the truth of how God is, and the relational significance of nothing less and no substitutes. The incarnation embodies this ‘dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes’. In conflict with the dynamic of referential language, the heart (core) and truth of God in Jesus are not revelations (*apokalypto*) of mere information in referential language but vulnerable self-disclosures (*phaneroo*) in relational language only for the intimate involvement necessary for relationship together to be whole. Therefore, “God is spirit” is disclosed by Jesus exclusively in relational language, the terms of which are unavoidably vulnerably present and intimately involved. For her to be compatibly engaged in the theological task also

required her vulnerable presence and intimate involvement for reciprocal relationship together. This was her experience in the theological task as she responded back to Jesus with the heart and truth (honesty, Jn 4:16-18) of her own person (“in spirit and truth”). Both as a woman and a Samaritan, she made her person vulnerable culturally, religiously and most important relationally. In contrast to her vulnerable engagement in the theological task, Jesus’ disciples kept their hearts at a distance (4:27,31-33); and their lack of vulnerability in their theological task resulted in not whole-ly understanding Jesus (*syniemi*, Mk 6:49-52; 8:17-21). “In spirit and truth” are the persons who make compatible relational connection with the whole of God at the depth-level of God’s heart; and theology’s relational significance is contingent on having this congruence (4:23-24).

The heart (core) of the person is the “spirit” disclosed by Jesus, which is necessary and intrinsic to “God is spirit” in order to be involved with the Father (Jn 4:23-24). By vulnerably disclosing the heart of God’s being, the core of the triune God, Jesus made evident the transcendent “God is spirit” as the present and involved “God is heart” (cf. Ps 33:11, *leb*, heart). This does not redefine the ontology of God but distinguishes the strategic shift of God’s thematic relational action. By embodying the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes, Jesus is *the hermeneutical key* that opens this ontological door to the whole of God.

The heart of God’s being is the qualitative aspect of God’s glory made accessible (vulnerably present) to us with which we can functionally connect for relationship together by God’s relational nature. This relational connection is possible (not improbable), however, only because of the ontology of the human person Jesus implied in “spirit,” which God seeks. That is, the God of heart, who was vulnerably disclosed to us, made us in the image of the whole of God. Simply stated, the God of heart made us persons of heart (cf. Ps 33:15, *leb*).

As Jesus distinguished in the above practice of worship, Scripture consistently makes the functional (not ontological) distinction between the outer person and the inner, the distinction between what we are doing in outward behavior and what truly exists inwardly, and the importance of fully understanding the significance between them (see Deut 4:29, 1 Sam 16:7, Ps 51:16-17, Acts 15:8-10, Rom 2:28-29). This necessarily takes us back to creation.

When God created the human person, an aspect of God was “breathed” into the person constituting the “inner person” (*nepes*, Gen 2:7); *nepes* has a quantitative aspect in which God created all living creatures (Gen 1:30) and a qualitative aspect created only in human persons. Though a defined “inner person” implies an “outer person”—which may appear to employ a dualism in defining the human person (inner and outer, spiritual and physical/material)—they are not substances to be perceived separately as in classic dualism from a Greek philosophical framework (notably from Platonism). Rather the inner (center) and outer (peripheral) aspects of the person function together dynamically to define the whole person from the Hebrew concept. Thus one functional aspect should not be seen apart from the other, nor should either be neglected; this invariably happens in an outer-in approach to defining the person—which is why the worship practice Jesus rejected only paid attention to the outer, ignoring the inner (Mt 15:8-9). Hence, the theological issue regarding human ontology and the functional issue in life and practice converge critically in this integral question: which aspect of the person has more

significance and thus needs to have greater importance—though not at the neglect of the other aspect?

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

This illuminates that the function of the heart signifying the “inner person”—which then is inclusive of the outer—involves two critically irreducible and irreplaceable functions:

1. As the definitive aspect for personhood that qualitatively integrates the whole person, the heart’s presence signifies the presence of the whole person and constitutes the involvement of the whole person in one’s life and practice.
2. The heart is the basis of the person that whole-ly determines the significance of a person’s relational involvement with the vulnerable heart of God, specifically for intimate relationship together with the Trinity (in whose image and likeness the human person is created), the experience of which is constituted in only the whole of God’s relational context and process on just God’s relational terms (signified by “in spirit and truth”).

These two interrelated functions of the heart are integral to theological engagement in order to distinguish and make coherent God’s vulnerable self-revelations.

The function of the intellect apart from the heart may be able to provide quantitative unity for the person—for example, the association of human parts and function described by scientific research. While this knowledge may be necessary at times, the function of the intellect is never sufficient by itself to define the whole person or to experience the relationships necessary to be whole, particularly with God. Reason alone can never describe the ontology of the person, human as well as Divine, nor does it define the qualitative function of relationships between persons. Only the heart provides the qualitative integration of the whole person made in the likeness of the God of heart; only the compatible heart provides the functional basis for experiencing intimate relationship (hearts coming together) with the whole of God, which is why the Father seeks those persons of heart for the primacy of relationship together.

This makes definitive why the “God is spirit” (heart) is disclosed exclusively in relational language to those “in spirit” (heart)—just as illuminated by the faith of a child, Lk 10:21), who by nature must function in likeness of heart to be involved in the theological task to distinguish the heart of God. The strategic shift of God’s thematic action just in relational terms makes intrusively evident that the whole of God’s desires are to be directly involved with the whole person for intimate relationship together in wholeness. Since the function of the heart constitutes the relational involvement of the whole person, God cannot count on the whole person for this relational outcome until it



involves the heart with nothing less and no substitutes. In this reciprocal relationship together, the compatible relational response is composed just by the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes. Accordingly, referential terms cannot establish the theological engagement necessary for what can be only a relational outcome.

The heart of the theological task involves nothing less than the reciprocal response to the heart of God vulnerably disclosed in the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes. Compatibility and congruence in this reciprocal relational process is constituted first by God's heart and then by our heart in likeness. By the nature of 'heart' this always involves the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes, which is ongoingly challenged, reduced and substituted for by the dynamic of referential language. Therefore, the heart of the theological task demands embodying nothing less and no substitutes of heart; and integral to the theological task is the presence and function of our heart, signifying the vulnerable involvement of our whole person from inner out. This is the hermeneutical key to theological engagement—just as Jesus vulnerably embodied with the Spirit, from the Father—without which the theological task is unable to open the ontological door to the whole of God and the relational door to the theological significance of knowing and understanding God in whole relationship together.

Tepid results in the theological task signify a critical condition of the heart needing an urgent response. This composes Jesus' ongoing post-ascension response to our heart to open the barrier to reciprocal involvement in theological engagement (Rev 3:20).

## **Doing *Egology* or Living *Theology***

The task of theology and its results have shared a common history ever since the primordial garden. A common pattern has shaped much of its effort and results, emerging after the introduction of the relational words communicated from God in the beginning. This pattern redefines all references of God-talk in different terms, and thereby establishes doing theology over-and-above those words from God.

When the persons in the primordial garden sorted out their beliefs and their meaning, they initiated the theological task. After taking into consideration their surrounding context, they went over-and-above God's words and redefined God-talk in referential language in order to gain the wisdom to construct their theology.

When Moses dealt with his frustration about the people's complaint in their critical situation of no water, he received specific words from God to put into practice (Num 20:2-12). In his theological task to put this belief into practice, Moses went over-and-above those words in specific relational language and separated them from Subject-God's relational meaning and intention in the communication of those words. By doing so, the practice Moses put into action was then shaped by the situation and his frustration about it ("Listen, you rebels, shall we [Moses and Aaron] bring water for you out of this rock?" 20:10). In other words, Moses' theological task was self-determining once he separated God's words from their relational meaning and intention to communicate the relational messages of God's righteousness and faithfulness in covenant relationship together. The relational consequence was that Moses disengaged his direct involvement with God in the theological task and redefined God-talk in his own terms; therefore, he

highlighted his self-determination (“shall we”) in his theology and practice, with major relational consequences (v.12).

Essentially, it can be said that Moses initiated the interpretive lens of ‘intentional fallacy’: the fallacy that meaning must be connected solely with what a speaker or author meant or intended to assert by their words. Consequently, the meaning of God’s Word for its readers becomes separated from Subject-God; this opens the door for the autonomy of self-determination to go over-and-above the words from God to redefine God-talk, determine the theological task on one’s own terms, and shape and construct theology accordingly.

Paul directly confronted this autonomy of self-determination in the theological task of many in the church at Corinth with the theological imperative: “Nothing beyond what is written” (1 Cor 4:6, discussed previously in chap. 2; cf. Ecc 12:12). That is, nothing beyond the communicative words from God in the canonical text of Scripture; moreover, what is written neither in part (as a proof-text for human shaping) nor in fragmentation (as a biased selectivity for human construction) but entirely in its whole. Only this source in whole establishes the definitive basis for operation in epistemology, hermeneutics, and thus theology. Without this determining source the theological task is opened to self-determination. The underlying goal of self-determination in the theological task is not always apparent; but when theological effort goes over-and-above what is written, Paul makes the goal unmistakable by adding “so that none of you will be puffed up” (cf. 1 Cor 8:1b). Paul illuminated the indivisible interdependence between theology and Scripture for this fragmented church with their self-determined (and self-promoting) theology.

Furthermore, the primacy of the Word is the antecedent determining all theology for it to be significant, not the converse. Therefore, what determines what and who determines whom is contingent on whether or not the theological task goes over-and-above the words from God. Moreover, going over-and-above God’s words can be enacted even after initial primacy is given to the Word (e.g. with survey or even exegesis) as only the introductory stage in the theological task; this is followed by what is considered the main task separated from the introduction of words from God, and that is now in function or practice (if not clear in theology) self-determined. From the point of view of historic Christian thought and life from its inception, Markus Bockmuehl comments that “to read Scripture is never some jumping-off point from which to abstract or develop the ‘real’ intellectual or theological task.”<sup>7</sup> As noted above and discussed later, Paul established conclusively the constituting source needed for the theological task to be of significance to God, not to us, and to be defining God’s Word, not ours. Doing theology over-and-above is not only self-determining but fragmentary, as Paul further illuminated for the church.

A new form of doing theology over-and-above has been institutionalized in the theological academy today for the determination of modern theology. When theological literacy is discussed for the twenty-first century, its complexity makes attaining this literacy nearly a life-time enterprise (at the least, years of theological education). Robert Neville explains that the reason for this complexity of theological literacy is that in our modern context an unusually large (or newly large) number of perspectives need to be

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<sup>7</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 90.

incorporated into one's own theological perspective.<sup>8</sup> That is, today's complexity means incorporating many perspectives into our theological task in order to emerge with results of any distinction. Bockmuehl comments further about this library of information from human construction: "By any standard it is now impossible to keep up with the sheer quantity of publications, increased exponentially by two and a half decades of word-processing technology."<sup>9</sup> Neville adds further:

Theological literacy is complex regarding truth.... The contextualization of interpretation is enormously complex, and is hard to press beyond hermeneutics. The existential reality of engagement is equally complex, and not to be read off theological expressions considered by themselves. The identification and sorting of the interweaving of iconic, indexical, and conventional reference in interpretation is mind-boggling in its complexity. And yet all these complexities must be in hand before adequate formulations of questions of theological truth are possible.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, literally, what is meant by theological literacy today is less about being well-versed in God's words but more versed in the words of others. However one composes theological literacy in the contemporary climate, it shapes the current process of doing theology into going over-and-above the words from God—even if the words are the primary focus, yet transposed to referential language (e.g. by 'intentional fallacy'). The complexity of theological literacy today is more complex than identified above because it neither recognizes nor accounts for the complications due to the influence and workings of the dynamic of referential language. How do we need to understand this today so that we return to and continue in those words from God communicated exclusively in relational language? Paul helps us to distinguish this process.

Doing theology over-and-above God's words in relational language emerges from human contextualization—whether it involves incorporating some aspect of the surrounding context (e.g. by persons in the primordial garden), giving primacy to situations and circumstances (e.g. by Moses), or deferring to prevailing practices (e.g. the church at Corinth) and convention (e.g. the theological academy). The alternative is not to be removed from human contextualization.

In my opinion, Paul did not intentionally engage in what is conventionally considered doing theology, though he clearly undertook the theological task (according to the definition noted earlier). Paul was otherwise engaged in reciprocating contextualization between his involvement in God's relational context and process constituting God's vulnerable relational action, and his involvement in the human condition of human contextualization. Paul's ongoing involvement in the latter was always to make definitive, on the basis of his involvement in the former, God's relational response to make whole the human relational condition. This constituted, for example, his involvement with those to whom his letters were addressed. This making-definitive purpose necessarily included a form of theological discourse, yet in effect Paul was too

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Cummings Neville, "On the Complexity of Theological Literacy" in Rodney L. Petersen and Nancy M. Rourke, eds., *Theological Literacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 39-54.

<sup>9</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Cummings Neville, 51.

involved mutually with God's life and human life to consider a separate task of doing theology, that is, as traditionally defined. In this sense, Paul was involved in the dynamic relational process of *living* theology rather than in the static (and also isolating and fragmenting) activity of merely "doing" theology.

In the tradition of doing theology various issues emerge about its practice which need to be held accountable for with the questions God raised earlier. We learn from Paul that engaging in theology must not be done in isolation or in a "spiritual vacuum," even as one is reflecting. Though monastic theology rightly shifted the theological task from a quantitative interpretive framework to a qualitative one, its isolating context tended to preclude God's intrusive relational path, thus resulting in its theology lacking relational significance. We should not be misled by such a perception of Paul, notably when he went off to Arabia following his Damascus road experience without consulting the other apostles (Gal 1:16-17). Such isolated or private theology likely becomes one's personal theology (which some have interpreted about Paul and his gospel), or more of a sense of theology on "my terms," that is, more accurately described as '*egology*' not '*theology*'. The implication of Peter's contrary behavior with Jesus points to such a theology formulated on his own terms (see Mt 16:21-22, Jn 13:6-8)—even after confessing a fundamental truth-claim of faith revealed to him by the Father (Mt 16:15-17). These efforts justify a postmodern hermeneutic of suspicion and deconstruction.

Likewise, engaging theology only in human contextualization, even as one is in conversation with the Word as Peter was, becomes theological discourse determined by human shaping (individual and/or collective). This also is theology on my/our terms, not God's terms, thus has more the sense of anthropological theology or sociocultural theology, all of which have relational consequences. This also can be seen in Peter's (and collective Judaism's) theology about purity (Acts 10:13-14). The human shaping of Peter's theological discourse in this situation demonstrated that his theology was not determined by his dialogue with Jesus earlier, when Jesus emphatically declared what is unclean and defined the whole of human ontology from inner out signified by the heart (Mt 15:10-20). Even after this interaction with the embodied Word, Peter continued to shape his own theology based on a reductionist interpretive framework. Moreover, even after the above Christophany corrected his theology, Peter continued to be shaped by his human contextualization with the Jews, thus affecting his relationships with Gentiles.

The issue of human contextualization shaping how we do theology continues to emerge today in the context of the global church. The distinction between 'doing' theology and *living* theology is no mere conceptual distinction but critical for distinguishing their function: the theological task for 'doing' theology is a monologue in referential language about Object-God; the theological task of *living* theology is a dialogue with Subject-God in only God's relational terms. The former's theological engagement is unilateral, leading to a monologue; the latter's theological engagement is reciprocal, requiring a dialogue. This dialogue was demonstrated by the Samaritan woman in her theological task (Jn 4:12,15, 19-20,25), in contrast to a monologue taking place among the disciples in their theological engagement (4:27,31-33; cf. Mt 8:23-27; Mk 9:30-32; 10:26). On this basis, 'doing' theology results in the distinction of *egology*; the relational outcome of *living* theology is distinguished by *theology*. The dynamic of a theological monologue needs to be addressed today both in the context of the global church and in the process of its theological formation, so that theology can rightfully be

restored to the function of dialogue and its conversation jointly engaged by the whole of God and God's whole family.

For theology to be truly *theology* and not the human shape or construction of *egology*, then *theos* must be a separate entity from *ego* (individual or collective). Certainly, it is problematic if there are more than one *theos*. That was not a theological issue for Judaism in general and Paul in particular where monotheism prevailed, if not always in practice. Yet, monotheism did not preclude the function of *egology* which limited or distorted their understanding of the one God—namely, the God of covenant relationship whose thematic relational action was only for relationship together in God's whole on God's terms. Prior to the Damascus road Paul was embedded in the kind of monotheism reduced by human terms, in which Paul became an admitted extremist (cf. Acts 26:11).

If the *subject* of theology is not functionally distinct (*theos* or *ego*) and the context of the subject matter is not functionally delineated (God's terms or human), then theological cognition becomes a fragmentary adventure at best, mysterious, esoteric or an illusion at worst. Paul's theological cognition has been described with all of these by his readers mainly because they have not fully perceived both the subject and context of his theology. Essentially, theological cognition either involves intentional reflection in dialogue with the Spirit in a relational epistemic process, or it is simply engagement in intentional or unintentional self-reflection (reflection in monologue with oneself/ourselves) shaped just by human terms. The latter cognition is not of God in God's terms but of only human contextualization without the definitive presence and involvement of God, just speculative thought about God.

Generally speaking, the flow of Western theology has been from the academy to the church. In the global South theology is considered to flow from the church to the academy, though institutionalizing may be changing the flow. This somewhat paradigmatic flow in the West has created a hermeneutical problem biasing who does theology (perhaps not unlike the temple elite discussed earlier, Mt 21:15-16)—even though the theological task is the rightful engagement of all God's people (notably the child-person as Jesus illuminated, Lk 10:21). Analogous to the hermeneutical circle that reflexively converges the two horizons of past and present, the theological hermeneutical circle needs to reflexively converge the horizons of the present church and the academy. Yet, it must not stop there if this hermeneutic is to be theologically significant. Both of these current horizons also need to be contextualized not only in human contexts but more importantly in the further and deeper relational context and process of the whole of God's theological trajectory and relational path. This is where and how Jesus contextualizes those who follow him in the vulnerable relational path to the Father to constitute us in the relational primacy of life together in the whole of God's family. In the theological task, this requires the functional convergence of the following:

Conjoined with the two-dimensional (past and present; church and academy) hermeneutical circle is the most important third dimension—the reality of the context into which Jesus contextualizes us to be whole, God's whole.

This three-dimensional hermeneutic is engaged in the theological task through the process of reciprocating contextualization (in dialogue namely with the Spirit) by which

all human contexts can be understood and become secondary in their particular distinction. Therefore, any *one* and all human contexts can no longer be justified as the primary determinative factor for theology, the shape of the gospel, and the life and practice of the global church in likeness of the relational ontology of the Trinity, the whole of God.

Accordingly, if global theology does not engage this reciprocating contextualization in its theological task, its two-dimension hermeneutical process will merely formulate either (1) a convergence of voices in a skewed theological conversation (or collective monologue), whose efforts fall short in an epistemological illusion and ontological simulation of unity (or an intercultural compendium) to leave them fragmented (as in the tower of Babel, Gen 11:1-5,9), or (2) a collection of voices from a postmodern-likeness of theologies situated in various human contexts that form a multicultural theology in the likeness of an inadequate multiculturalism from human contextualization (discussed earlier in chap. 3). Either one emerging from a two-dimension hermeneutic does not result in an integrated theology of God's whole, but rather only in the diversity (of fragmenting) of human shaping and construction of theology, the gospel and the church. Either is the consequence from and further consequential of reductionism of both human ontology in the whole image of God (Col 3:10-11) and the ontology of the church in the whole likeness of the Trinity (Eph 1:22-23; 2:22; 2 Cor 3:18).

The conventional understanding and practice of the hermeneutical circle in modern theological-biblical studies is distinctly only two-dimensional, converging past and present horizons. Yet, in spite of the value of this lens, the two-dimension hermeneutic neither distinguished the whole of God nor leads to understanding God's whole. The third dimension that Jesus contextualized in only relational terms is irreplaceable to distinguish the whole of God for *theology* and indispensable for understanding God's whole in the theological task. Without this third dimension we are 'doing' theology in unilateral theological engagement, disconnected from the theological conversation to a monologue, thereby left to our speculations in the theological task, with the growing results of *egology* to shape and construct theology, theological literacy, the gospel and the church in the twenty-first century. At the same time, without ongoing reciprocal contextualization in the human contexts of life and practice, this third dimension becomes merely information in referential terms that has no functional, relational and thus theological significance.

For theology to be of significance, both relationally and functionally, it must by its nature be within the context of its distinguished subject matter, Subject-*theos* and not just object-*theos*. It is therefore always insufficient (or incomplete) for theology and the gospel to be placed just within human context, though human context is necessary. For example, it is inadequate to fully understand Paul's theology from the lens of the historical Paul. To be contextualized with God, as the whole of Paul was, is to be in God's relational context and process of God's communicative action. This is the relational nature of God's terms, in contrast to and in conflict with a dynamic shift to human terms which increasingly obscures the line of distinction between *theology* (defined on God's terms) and *egology* (defined by human terms).

In the relational context and process of God's terms, theology emerges in the intimate reflection on the outcome of vulnerably receiving and responding to God's

communicative action. This outcome then can only be a relational outcome of a person(s) who is involved reciprocally in God's relational context and process, not an observer (e.g. only as an exegete) or a collator of information (e.g. only as a systematic theologian). Therefore, theology is essentially a *vulnerable conversation*—that is, a dialogue with the vulnerably revealed God, not a monologue with oneself or even with others about God. Conventional theology, and thus what prevails as theology, is inclined not to be involved in this relational context and process, at least in terms of actual function. In this way, even though God's theological trajectory may be paid attention to, God's intrusive relational path is ignored, avoided or not understood—the designed limits of a referential lens.

We need to learn from Paul about what constitutes significant theological engagement and process on God's terms. To the penetrating question first raised in Isaiah, “who has known the mind of the Lord?” (1 Cor 2:16; cf. Isa 40:3, *ruah*, “the spirit of the Lord”), Paul claims theological cognition from his involvement with the Spirit in the relational epistemic process (1 Cor 2:9-13). Moreover, Paul is unequivocal in the agency of the Spirit as the basis for his theology, for all *theology* (cf. Eph 1:17; 3:3-5). His polemic here is between human contextualization and the Spirit's reciprocal relational work (not unilateral) to constitute us further and deeper in the relational context and process conclusive of *theos* as Subject.

While in relational involvement with the Spirit, Paul's theological reflection was not done in isolation or in a spiritual vacuum—despite, for example, his time in Arabia following the Damascus road without consulting the other apostles (Gal 1:16-17). Paul was set apart with God but he was not apart from human contexts. Ironically, an isolated or private theology easily crosses the line of distinction into self-reflection and cognition based on human contextualization. How Paul maintained the integrity of his theological engagement and the process necessary for his *theology*, even while in human contexts, was only by the process of reciprocating contextualization—using the primacy of contextualization with God to determine his engagement in human contexts (discussed in chap. 1). To make reciprocal contextualization functional required Paul's primary involvement to be with God in the whole of God's relational context and process made vulnerable to him by the embodied Word and the Spirit. It was in this ongoing relational process of his reciprocal vulnerable involvement in conversation (reflection) with God that Paul established the definitive paradigm needed for theological discourse (dialogue) to be of significance to God as well as of God, not to us (in monologue), and to be defining the Word of God's communicative action, not ours (in self-reflection).

Theology, by its very nature that truly signifies a word from above, as Paul's does, is a function of relationship only in God's relational context and process. Hence, for theological discourse to speak definitively of God, it must, by the revealed nature of its Subject, always be involved in relationship with this Subject, not as if this Subject were impersonal subject matter such as a mere text, propositional truths and doctrine. This is a vital distinction for Paul's readers to maintain. In Paul's face-to-face experience, this is the context and terms (process) of God's revelation—conclusively self-disclosed in the embodied Word and further constituted by the Spirit.

Since Paul's theology was first his experiential truth, theology for Paul was inseparable from function and can never be reduced to conventional theological discourse engaged in simply a the task of doing theology. It likely never occurred to Paul to engage

in the latter. For this reason, the discourse in his letters often does not appear clearly theological, at least through a conventional lens, which leaves his theology elusive to many of his readers. Paul's functional concerns may be apparent to readers but are often perceived without his theological basis necessary to understand the functional significance of his concerns and their theological coherence (e.g. his prescriptions for women and slaves). This has further left Paul an enigma to such readers. Nevertheless, Paul's discourse, jointly theological and functional, put together (*syniemi* for *synesis*) the theological basis for the truth of the whole gospel (Eph 3:4) integrated with the deconstruction of ontological simulations and epistemological illusions from reductionism (cf. Gal 1:6-7, 11-12; Col 2:2-4, 8-10) and, when possible, their reconstruction into the whole gospel (e.g. in his confrontation with Peter, Gal 2:11-14).

Paul's theological discourse in human contexts was based primarily on the whole of God's discourse to him in the relational context and process initiated by Jesus and deepened by the Spirit. This is the paradigm for theological engagement in human contexts on God's terms to which the whole of Paul witnessed deeply with the Spirit—and critically speaks to us today. Whether the issue is construction, deconstruction or reconstruction, as a quintessential premodernist Paul puts both modernism and postmodernism into the full perspective of the whole of God, just as he himself was by the embodied Word from God, the *pleroma* (fullness, whole) of God (Col 1:19; 2:9). Past and present, this was Paul's relational responsibility for God's family (*oikonomia*) to *pleroo* (complete, make whole) the word of God (Col 1:25)—that which was vulnerably embodied by the *pleroma* of God in relational response to the human condition (Col 1:15-20). The relational outcome of this process for Paul is what signified his theology (e.g. Eph 3:2-12). Contrary to conventional theology, Paul was only involved in *living* theology.

The only purpose emerging from Paul's discourse (jointly theological and functional) in his letters was to complete and make whole the words of God; it was clearly not about Paul's words:

That is, the words of God's communicative action in relational language vulnerably embodied by the Word to make conclusive the good news of the whole of God's relational response of grace for the human condition to be made whole, God's relational whole on God's relational terms.

Therefore, following Paul's lead in the theological task, theology and its task find their direction and identity. The functional purpose and relational responsibility of *theology* is discourse to illuminate God's communicative relational action in terms which are not conceptual, esoteric, about mysticism, or reduced from qualitative function and relational involvement in human life, notably disengaged from the inherent human relational need and problem. Though our knowledge and understanding of the whole and holy God are never complete, our conversation of God can be whole based on the whole knowledge and understanding received from God (cf. Paul's *synesis*, Eph 3:4-5) in the relational epistemic promise fulfilled by the Spirit (Jn 15:26-27; 16:13-15) and the relational epistemic process engaged with the Spirit (1 Cor 2:9-10,16; Eph 1:17). Theology accordingly is a relational word received from God self-disclosed in communicative action and the relational outcome of responding back to God. By its



relational reception and response, theology involves the relational function of simply telling God's self-disclosed story, not propositional truths and systematic information about God. This is the relational story God disclosed (*phaneroo*, not merely *apokalypso*) only in thematic relational response to the human condition for the relationships together necessary to be God's whole. Anything less or any substitute revises God's story, historically and/or relationally, by reshaping or reconstructing it on human terms.

What this means for the theological task is a likely shift in its theological trajectory and a new (renewed) vulnerability in its relational path that will make it compatible for engagement with Subject-God and congruent with the Word in relational terms. Theology which truly signifies a word from above is a function of relationship in God's relational context and process. For engaging theology to have this significance, it must, by the revealed nature of its Subject, always be engaged in relationship with this Subject, not with impersonal subject matter. This is the context and terms (process) of God's revelation—conjointly self-disclosed in the embodied Word and further constituted by the Spirit. Thus, unlike the static activity of merely 'doing' theology, *living* theology is first and foremost the personal engagement of God in relationship, not on my/our terms but only on God's relational terms—the only terms which constitute God's revelation/communication in the text of Scripture. Reciprocally, involvement with God in the whole of God's relational context and process also includes *living* theology in relationship with God's people for wholeness in theology and practice. These functional relationships together provide the qualitative relational context and process for God's people to know God in communion whole-ly, and thus to grow in the relationships together necessary to be whole (one) in likeness of the relational ontology of the whole of God. This is the nature of Paul's theology that he made consummate in the ecclesiology of the whole.

Moreover, this experiential truth from the relational involvement in *living* theology further extends theological discourse by reciprocating contextualization in relation to all humanity and creation. It is this relational context and process in which *living* theology becomes truly '*logos* of God', that is, theology which speaks of God's whole on God's relational terms for the human relational condition—thus discourse more relational than theological. For Paul, this is the experiential truth and whole of the gospel—the only gospel his person ongoingly witnessed to and his theology increasingly made definitive in its functional and relational significance.

Based on the above discussion, anyone engaged in the theological task—that emerged from the primordial garden and continues to emerge into the twenty-first century—is inescapably faced with those penetrating words in relational language: "Where are you?" and "what are you doing here?" and moreover "why are you doing that?" and "talking about that?" (Mk 8:17) It is no longer adequate just to focus narrowly on the task, however widespread and acceptable this has become. We need to take responsibility for our own theological engagement. *How* we engage the theological task will determine its significance; and its underlying theological anthropology defined by what we do, the knowledge we have and the methodology we use, is neither sufficient nor necessary to establish theological significance.

It's time for us to honestly ask ourselves if we are just engaged in the referential task of 'doing' theology, or if we are vulnerably involved in the dynamic relational

process of *living* theology. As witnessed in Paul, living theology by its nature demands unavoidably an integrated functional and relational significance which nonnegotiablely involves the reciprocal relational process of conjointly engaging God and being engaged by God. Therefore, integral to the process of theology is becoming vulnerable with our whole person (signified by the function of our heart) to the whole of God's self-revelation vulnerably communicated in relational language to us for whole relationship together, so that emerging from our theological task is this *theology*:

1. having the relational significance of intimately knowing and whole-ly understanding the triune God, whose thematic relational action further coheres in the inseparable experiential truth of this communion in whole relationships together as the fullness of God's family in likeness of the Trinity;
2. and including the function of relationally witnessing to this experiential truth and the whole of the gospel for the human condition to be made whole.

Accordingly and irreplaceably, living theology is simply and entirely a relational outcome of reciprocal relational engagement—just as Jesus illuminated and made paradigmatic for the theological task (Lk 10:21)—therefore, which never disconnects the significance of theology from the text of God's communicated Word in relational language, and which makes indivisible the integrated relationship between theology and practice. The relational outcome for living theology emerges in the significance of 'wholeness in theology and practice'. This is the relational outcome that emerged from Paul.

Paul was vulnerably confronted by his God on the Damascus road and given the qualitative relational (not mystical) opportunity to "be still [*rapah*, i.e. cease his human effort] and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10) in the "face to face" relational context and process of the one yet whole God. By ceasing from his human effort engaged even in the name of Judaism's God, Paul made himself vulnerable to receive and respond to *theos* as Subject. In this relational process the theology of Paul emerged from the relational connection of Paul, who was now whole-ly involved in relationship together with the whole of God. If Paul had not ceased from his own effort in the theological task, this relational outcome would not have been his experiential truth. And his relational responsibility to complete and make whole for the church those relational words from God would not have been fulfilled.

*Rapah* is the relational imperative for our theological task—to cease our unilateral engagement, our monologue, our efforts of self-determination—so that we can indeed "know that I am God," and, on this basis alone, in dialogue make definitive the coherence of God's relational action communicated vulnerably to us in relational language for the relationships together necessary to make whole the human condition. God's relational terms are irreducible for theology and nonnegotiable for the theological task.

## Chapter Five      The Outcome of Whole Theology

**The LORD make his face shine on you...and give you *wholeness*.**

Numbers 6:25-26

**My *wholeness* I give you.**

John 14:27

When the Samaritan woman encountered Jesus, she had been fragmented culturally and religiously as a Samaritan (Jn 4:9,20), relationally (4:17-18, and likely ostracized), and as a person (given her gender in the 1<sup>st</sup> century). When she left Jesus, she was qualitatively different: she “left her water jar and went back to the city,” where she had been fragmented, and boldly claimed before those people to have theological significance (4:28-29). Though the depth of her response to Jesus is not explicitly stated, implicit in her relational action and words is that she was no longer fragmented but becoming whole. The strategic shift of God’s theological trajectory to vulnerably embody the Word in the intrusive relational path was enacted for only this purpose and has just this outcome: to make whole the fragmentary human condition, conjointly for the wholeness of the person from inner out and for the wholeness of relationships together to be with the whole of God in God’s whole—made conclusive theologically by Paul for the church (Col 1:19-20; 2:9-10).

Going from fragmentation (whether the person and/or their theology) to wholeness is not a transition by the will. The process to wholeness is a transformation from inner out that unavoidably requires change, that is, redemptive change: the inner-out process of the ‘old’ dying and the ‘new’ rising. Jesus introduced the Samaritan woman to the redemptive change (“the hour is coming...and is now here,” 4:21,23) necessary for the transformation to be whole from inner out: “those who *relationally respond* to him must (*dei*, by its nature, not *opheilo*, out of obligation) *respond vulnerably* in spirit and truth” (v.24). She continued to engage the relational epistemic process with Jesus for this wholeness (v.25). Then came those conclusive words in relational language: “I am”—he, the whole of God, God’s whole. She embraced “I am” in the transforming change to be made whole—the outcome both in her person and theology.

This narrative is a summary account for those in theological engagement to have wholeness in their theological task and their theology to be the outcome of whole theology. While the Samaritan woman could go from fragmentation to wholeness only by transformation, her willingness to vulnerably engage the theological task was critical for the necessary transition to be open to this redemptive change. This critical issue of willingness to change in our current ‘old’ ways always remains the deciding factor (not the determining process) for our person and our theology to become whole. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the Samaritan woman, this necessitates being open and responsive to both the improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path of the Word.

## Divided Theology

The revelation of the Word emerged integrally from the improbability of God's theological trajectory as well as the intrusiveness of the Face's relational path. They are inseparable for God's self-revelation to be complete. Merely focusing on one without the other does not distinguish the transcendent whole and holy God or God's vulnerable presence and intimate involvement in the human context.

When Paul asked "Has Christ been divided?" (1 Cor 1:13), he pointed directly to the fragmented state of the church that resulted from a narrowly focused theological task, further resulting in a divided theology. How we perceive the improbable theological trajectory of the embodied Word and approach the intrusive path of Jesus' whole person will determine how probable (as in certainty) or improbable (as in whole) our conclusions will be epistemologically, hermeneutically, ontologically and relationally. The critical issue of the distinction between probable and improbable, certainty and whole, involves how deeply our conclusions hold together and as a result how complete they are. The transcendent God beyond the universe is both holy and whole. Yet, we can only know this beyond our self-understanding by the improbable revelation of God's trajectory from outside the universe that interposed the human context to vulnerably intrude in our personal space—intrude on us from inner out. We cannot have the transcendent God without the personal God, or the converse, and expect our conclusions about God to be other than fragmentary.

The implications of remaining within the limits of the probable—within its narrowed epistemic field and process—are constraining for theology, the consequences of which continue even to this day to separate, divide, fragment and otherwise reduce the integrity of whole theology constituted by the improbable. These consequences are evident today in the disjointed relationship between theology and Christian ethics, as well as with other practical functions, consequently requiring separate disciplines for ethics, practical theology, missions and spiritual formation.<sup>1</sup> For Stanley Hauerwas, "the task of the theologian is not to deny that for certain limited purposes ethics can be distinguished from theology, but to refuse their supposed ontological and practical independence."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this fragmenting includes a disconnect between theological and biblical studies. What Paul critiqued in the Corinthian church (noted below) speaks to dividing theology from its determining source in Scripture—"Nothing beyond what is written" (1 Cor 4:6). This interdependent and indispensable relationship has been separated, treated as distant or casual in significance, and its function between biblical and theological studies essentially absent. Markus Bockmuehl further observes today: "Much theological and biblical scholarship does not now pay even lip service to the once universal conviction that Christian theology is at its heart an *exegetical* discipline.... For its [early church] theologians, the study of Scripture was both source and destiny of their reason and wisdom."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on how theology and ethics have been disjointed and the need to restore their unity, see Stanley Hauerwas, "On doctrine and ethics," in Colin E. Gunton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 21-40.

<sup>2</sup> Hauerwas, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 88.

Any division or separation, however, should be expected and cannot be sufficiently addressed until the underlying reductionism is confronted. This involved Paul's integral fight both for the whole gospel and against reductionism. Since Paul did not distinguish his theology from his function, he never separated theology and practice. This is why his theology often does not appear to be theology in conventional terms of a prevailing theological framework, yet Paul communicated a knowledge and understanding of God to complete (make whole, *pleroo*) the word from God (Col 1:25); and his undivided theology essentially both extended and exceeded the relational work that Jesus started (Jn 14:12). So, when Paul raised the question "Has Christ been divided?" he exposed a critical issue involving both theology and practice. The issue is twofold:

1. To divide theology from practice in their inseparable relationship is by implication to reduce both to a fragmented condition (1 Cor 3:16-17, 21-23; 14:33).
2. In their disjointed condition, both theology and practice become narrowed-down to the limits of what persons know, so that each of them becomes shaped by the probable apart from their whole constituted by the improbable (1 Cor 3:18-20; 4:6-7; 8:1-2).

The critical issue Paul exposed also implies conversely: To remain within the limits of what you know (the probable) engages a process of reductionism—whether epistemologically, hermeneutically, theologically, ontologically and/or relationally—that necessitates dividing the improbable Christ embodied in whole into fragments which can be shaped and aggregated down to the limited understanding of our knowledge. In other words, if our theological engagement does not perceive the improbable theological trajectory of Subject-God or is unwilling to receive the Subject in the intrusive relational path, we have to have some basis for a substitute to give account for our theology. And this leaves us with only one alternative in the theological task: to go over-and-above the Word in relational terms to human shaping and construction in referential terms, which are limited to self-referencing theories and conclusions. The referentialization of the Word is an ingenious alternative that also provides us with an implicit basis for not vulnerably engaging the theological task to be directly congruent with Jesus' whole theological trajectory and relationally compatible with his relational path on just his relational terms.

Many, of course, would not affirm the dividing of Christ. Yet, subscribing to the mere idea of it is often evident even as it is practiced knowingly or unintentionally in the theological task. The consequence is still that dividing Christ irreversibly results in divided theology, the fragmentary condition of which is evidenced in the elusiveness of whole theology, the absence of the whole gospel, and the lack of wholeness in persons and relationships together, noticeably practiced in both the church and academy. Peter's confessions of faith certainly did not subscribe to dividing Christ. His theological formation, however, was a prime example of this fragmentary condition in his divided (hybrid) theology, as we discussed previously.

Even though Peter had multiple interactions directly with Jesus, the influence of human contextualization on Peter shaped his lens of Jesus to a narrowed epistemic field

in referential terms. Thus, for example, his messiah could not incur the improbability of the cross (Mt 16:21-22), and his Lord could not bear the indignity of footwashing (Jn 13:6-8) that intruded on the vulnerability of both Jesus' person and Peter's. The referentialization of the Word accomplishes two critical functions in the process of dividing Christ:

1. It narrows down the perception of the embodied Word's theological trajectory from the improbable to the probable, so that it is more explainable in the certainty of referential terms based on what we know; such a theology is more neatly packaged without a lot of loose ends, yet it is a fragmentary—perhaps in multiple packages—construction of divided theology. As the goal of the modernist method, for example, certainty is based on an incomplete grasp of data that has an aversion for the improbable, and thus imposes that bias on any appearance of the improbable to dismiss it.
2. Referentialization not only narrows down the Word but it also generalizes the Word's relational language to referential language in order to impede (intentionally or unintentionally) the embodied Word's intrusive relational path in the human context—that is, making it less relationally vulnerable and demanding—so that it would be redefined in general teachings, values, ethics and practices; generalizing the Word in referential language not only disembodies these areas from Jesus' whole person but also de-relationalizes him from his primary function, thereby diminishing the whole person from inner out and minimalizing the primacy of relationships together in wholeness. Such a generalized theology (with its reduced theological anthropology) has no relational significance to God and to God's people, or to persons in the human condition—though it may gain distinction in the academy and even in churches.

The dynamic of these two functions in the referentialization of the Word unfolded in Peter's response to Jesus' person—initially in his improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path—and to their relationship together during their interaction walking on water (Mt 14:22-23). Seeing Jesus in this context challenged Peter to expand his epistemic field to test the improbable. Various dynamics converge in this experiential (and perhaps experimental) moment. Peter initially engages Jesus' whole person (“if it is you...”) in Jesus' relational context (“...command me to come to you”). The situation is only the secondary matter to pay attention to here whereas the relational process of their involvement together is primary. Peter is making his whole person vulnerable to Jesus on Jesus' relational terms—though there is some element of “prove it” contingency to Peter's faith, yet not in a passive sense without Peter's full relational involvement. Unfortunately, Peter only pays attention to Jesus' person and the relationship for a brief significant moment. His focus soon shifts to the situation, which then produces the fear causing a plea to Jesus only in the role to save him *from* his circumstances. The significance of this shift, in contrast to the beginning of this interaction, involves a critical dynamic: Jesus' person is reduced to what he can do and the primacy of relationship is replaced by the secondary matter of the situation and circumstances. That is, as Peter's focus shifted to the secondary, his epistemic field quickly narrowed back to the probable

of his perceptual lens that defined the limits of his theology. Obviously, then, ‘certainty’ became an urgent matter for Peter, yet walking on water was not an issue until the secondary became primary. While the matter of Jesus’ self-disclosure on the water becomes obscured here, Peter’s theology—shaped by his function and not his earlier confession—can no longer account for the improbable. Based on a theology of the probable, Peter had no business walking on water; and his theology could only include being saved *from* trying to do so, in spite of the reality of Jesus’ self-disclosure on the water to signify what Peter is saved *to*: “to come to you”—“Come” in the primacy of relationship together. This reduced their relationship together and attempted to renegotiate it to Peter’s terms. And the fragmenting process that Peter engages becomes the basis for his unfolding hybrid theology. Moreover, the above process also describes many who enter theological engagement relationally focused on God but then get distracted from the primary by the secondary in the theological task, with an equivalent result of formulating their own hybrid theology.

In further review of Peter in the early church, his ministry was still problematic as long as he engaged in a fragmenting process with his hybrid theology. Despite the successful beginning of his ministry, Peter still functioned from a reduced theological anthropology that fragmented persons with outer-in distinctions. In contrast and conflict, Jesus, in post ascension, corrected Peter’s hybrid theology (Acts 10:9-20, 34-35, 44-48; 11:17), which Peter should have processed into his theology earlier if he had listened to Jesus’ relational language of the primacy of the qualitative and relational signifying Jesus’ theology from inner out (Mt 15:15-20). Yet, even a redefined theology from inner out did not make Peter’s function whole from inner out—that is, the redemptive change of *metamorphoo*, not the outer-in change of *metaschematizo* (cf. Rom 12:2). Peter remained engaged in a fragmenting process and ignored Jesus’ warning about functioning in reductionism, which Jesus clearly indicated signifies *hypokrisis* (Lk 12:1). Consequently, he still divided his theology from practice and thereby engaged in the outer-in function of role-playing (*hypokrisis*), that Paul exposed to Peter’s face for the sake of the whole gospel (Gal 2:11-14). In contrast and conflict, Peter continued to ‘divide Christ’ and practiced a gospel that was consequentially in both a dismissive functional position to and a distant relational involvement with the improbable Jesus embodied in whole. His early ministry was characterized by proclaiming the gospel of salvation *from* sin. Yet, his message of repentance did not adequately include the sin of reductionism; therefore his gospel lacked the qualitative and relational depth of what Jesus saved *to*. This lack was initially indicated by a disparity in the early church (Acts 6:1), that Jesus later corrected in Peter’s theology and that Paul confronted in Peter’s practice. Despite his early boldness to proclaim the good news (e.g. Acts 4:18-20), his soteriology was fragmented (i.e. truncated) and lacked the wholeness of being saved *to*. In this sense, Peter’s ministry can also be characterized by—what the writer of Hebrews exposed and boldly challenged (Heb 5:11-6:2)—a focus on milk (“the basic teaching about Christ”) without the substance of meat (“for the mature,” cf. 1 Cor 3:1-2).

What unfolded in Peter is the expected pattern from any reshaping of the theological trajectory of God’s self-disclosure in relational terms and fragmenting the whole of Jesus in his relational path; this reshaping and fragmenting narrows down the epistemic field to formulate a hybrid theology based on the limits (and even convenience) of referential terms. Hybrid theology not only divides theology but also separates

theology from function, such that its practice can be simply neither congruent nor even compatible with its theology, consequently reducing both to a fragmented condition. This fragmentary condition goes unrecognized in theology or practice as long as one remains within the limits of understanding from one's knowledge or rationalizing. Reductionism always requires 'the presence of the whole' to be fully exposed. Yet, the referentialization of the Word involves an incomplete, selective or otherwise distorted view of the Word that can only be fragmentary in a divided theology, and therefore cannot be complete and whole—and cannot adequately expose reductionism.

The hybrid process of dividing Christ is also evident in Jesus' further post-ascension communication with various churches. In his relational discourse for ecclesiology to be whole, Jesus' family love exposed reductionism in church practices to hold them accountable for engaging in a fragmenting process in order to be whole as his church (Rev 2-3). We will discuss one church now with further discussion following below.

A hybrid process emerges clearly in the church in Thyatira (Rev 2:18-29). Thyatira's economy emphasized trades (including brass-working) and crafts (cf. Acts 16:14). In the Greco-Roman world of that time, trade guilds organized the various trades and were necessary to belong to if one wanted to pursue a trade (much like unions today). These guilds served various social functions as well, one of which was to meet for common meals dedicated to their patron deities, thereby engaging in activities of pagan worship and immorality. For Christians not to belong to a guild and participate would generally mean becoming isolated economically and socially,<sup>4</sup> which may suggest a pragmatic approach to church practice in Thyatira.

In the nature of this surrounding context, Jesus acknowledged this church's extensive "works" (*ergon*, work that defined them, Rev 2:19): "love" (*agape*), "faith" (*pistis*), "service" (*diakonia*, service, ministry that benefits others, especially compassion to the needy), "patient endurance" (*hypomone*, enduring and not giving in to bad circumstances, in contrast to *makrothymia* which is patience with respect to persons), and that their "last works are greater than the first," indicating not a status quo situation but actually doing more *ergon* than before. Yet, their practice also "tolerated" (*aphiemi*, to let pass, permit, allow, v.20) Jezebel's teaching. What they let pass, permitted or allowed is important to understand in the above context.

Jezebel (probably a byword symbolizing the OT character of Jezebel, cf. 1 Kg 18:19) appears to be a woman (or possibly a group) accepted within this church fellowship. The practice associated with her teaching probably refers to compromise with prevailing activity related to trade guilds prominent in the city which "misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols" (2:20, NIV). What is significant to understand here is not the obvious disparity of this teaching and practice with the desires of God. What is more significant is how these prevailing influences of the surrounding context were absorbed into the practices of this church along with all its other so-called good works acknowledged above. This is not simply an issue about syncretism, synthesizing competing ideologies, or even pluralism, but goes beyond merely maintaining doctrinal purity to the deeper issue about participation *in* a surrounding context having the prevailing presence of reductionism and its subsequent

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<sup>4</sup> For further contextual information, see Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).



influence on their perceptual-interpretive framework. This is the lens which determined what they ignored and paid attention to, thus the lens by which they practiced their works. When reductionism is not negated, its influence then affects how those other works would be engaged with something less and some substitute for the whole of persons and relationships, therefore raising critical issues of their qualitative and relational significance, and their wholeness since the fragmenting process is not disengaged.

Theologically, Thyatira demonstrated a weak view of sin, namely without sin as reductionism which was the normative character of their surrounding context and was embedded in its collective order. Functionally, they also lacked relational involvement with, or maintained relational distance from, God in the process of reciprocating contextualization needed to distinguish their identity in that surrounding context without being determined by it; and any pragmatism in their practice became a euphemism for reductionism—the rationalizing composing ‘a wide gate and road’. Their tolerance was essentially a fragmentation of both their theology and function in a hybrid process, consequently they reinforced the counter-relational work of reductionism and functioned incompatibly to being whole, God’s relational whole on God’s whole terms. The influence of reductionism is usually more subtle than that observed in the Thyatira church.

As long as our perceptual-interpretive framework is reductionist—most notably with a reduced theological anthropology—our lens’ view of the qualitative, the ontological and the relational will not discern the extent of the surrounding influences reducing the whole of church practice. The underlying issue critical for our understanding is the ontology and function of both the person and persons together as church; and the challenging question remains: Is it reduced ontology and function or whole ontology and function? The relational demands of grace, however, clarify for church ontology and function that nothing less and no substitutes than to be whole is the only practice which has any significance to God (as Jesus made definitive about worship, Jn 4:23-24). Additionally, Jesus’ lens of repentance (the turn-around in relational terms of the whole person) in conjoint function with a strong view of sin makes no assumptions to diminish addressing sin as reductionism, first and foremost within church practice and then in the surrounding contexts—in other words, holds person and church accountable for nothing less and no substitutes. This is the ontology and function that composes ‘the narrow gate and road’ leading to whole life (*zoe*) and its theology. And Jesus wants “all the churches” to clearly “know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts” (Rev 2:23, as he did with Peter); that is, he examines the qualitative significance of persons from inner out, whom he holds accountable to be whole in the relationships that hold together in the innermost as the whole of God’s family (2:25; 3:11). In their effort to be relevant and possibly pragmatic in the surrounding pluralistic context, by engaging in a hybrid process the Thyatira church overlooked (knowingly or unknowingly) in their many admirable church practices what was necessary to be whole and to make whole (cf. a similar error by the church in Pergamum in a reductionist context, Rev 2:12-15).

The issue about being whole is that it is always subject to reductionism, whether it is reductionism of our theology or our function. What Jesus made definitive in his formative family prayer (Jn 17:13-23) is crucial for our whole understanding (*synesis*) of this issue. What prevails in (*en*) any context of the world is reductionism. Jesus calls his

followers relationally out of (*ek*) these contexts in order to be whole together as his family, then also relationally sends them back into (*eis*) those surrounding contexts to live whole together as his family and to make whole the human condition. Without the reciprocating dynamic of this *ek-eis* relational involvement, church ontology and function become defined and shaped based on the narrowed-down terms *en* (in) the surrounding context. This relational condition is problematic because of the relational barriers or distance it creates for the ongoing relational involvement necessary with the whole of God on God's relational terms to constitute the whole of who we are as church and whose we are as God's family. Without this reciprocating contextualization, our identity in the world becomes fragmentary and, therefore, is rendered ambiguous as the light and/or shallow as the salt (Mt 5:13-16). This is not the embodied whole of his family and the gospel that Jesus prayed for the world to see, receive and respond to.

It is insufficient for churches to be a mere presence, or even merely to function, *en* the world; their only significance is to function *eis* (relational movement into) the world both to be relationally involved with others as God's whole and, by the nature of this function, also to confront all sin as reductionism of the whole. Jesus teaches us about ecclesiology in his relational discourse, and the lesson we need to learn from the hybrid process of the Thyatira church is indispensable: to let pass, indifferently permit or inadvertently allow—"tolerate," which other churches also did more subtly—the influence of reductionism in any form from the surrounding context proportionately diminishes the wholeness of church practice and minimalizes their relational involvement with God, with each other in the church and with others in the world, consequently rendering its relational condition to a level no longer distinguished for, and perhaps from, the human relational condition. For churches to get beyond practice merely *en* the world, they need a different dynamic to define and determine their practice.

By searching hearts Jesus communicates the relational message to us that church ontology and function are about being whole in the innermost, not merely doing correct ecclesial practices. And the *eis* relational engagement of church function has to be conjoined with the *ek* (movement out of) relational involvement with the whole of God as its defining antecedent in the *ek-eis* dynamic, or else church ontology and function remain susceptible to engagement in a fragmenting process. This reciprocating relational process negates the continuous counter-relational work of Satan and its reductionist influence (Rev 2:24) by ongoingly engaging, embracing, experiencing and extending God's whole, that is, the irreducible whole in the qualitative significance of the integrated ontology of both personhood and the church constituted in and by the Trinity, the whole of God. The relational outcome is the theology of wholeness, the only alternative integrally in contrast and conflict with a hybrid theology.

It is vital for our whole understanding (*synesis*) to learn from Peter and the early church (notably in Thyatira) that the irony of a hybrid process and a wide-gate-and-road approach is that these in fact impose critical limits on what can emerge from our theology and function.

The critical issue that Paul exposed with his original question continued to be of importance—whether paid attention to or ignored—throughout church history; and it continues today to be no less important. The twofold issue, however, currently has less to do with the quests for the historical Jesus and involves more the theological trajectory and relational path of those engaged in biblical study and theology. In relational terms of

the Word, can Christ be divided? No. Of course, this was Paul's point in his rhetorical question because he was congruent with Jesus' theological trajectory and relational path. By engaging the Word in any reduction of these terms, namely in referential terms, is Christ divided today? Yes, indeed.

Anything less and any substitute of the whole of God's theological trajectory as Subject disembodies the Word from his relational path. Likewise, de-relationalizing the Word from his relational path deflects Subject-God's theological trajectory. The consequence for either is that the whole of God is obscured and God's whole is elusive. With such a trajectory and path taken in theological engagement, Jesus then is observed for the transmission of information in a narrowed epistemic field shaped by the limits of the probable of what is more familiar to our knowledge, thereby making us less vulnerable to uncertainty, error or simply our human shortcomings. Much of this process goes unnoticed due to the predispositions from our tradition, yet mostly because of our underlying theological anthropology incompletely determining our ontology and function in the epistemic process and in relationships, notably with God. These limitations were clearly demonstrated by temple leaders after Jesus deconstructed the temple from their tradition and reconstructed it for the primacy of God's family (Mt 21:12-16). Part of the relational outcome for the temple involved children crying out "Hosanna to the Son of David." Certainly in our tradition we have no problem with this but within the limits of those leaders' epistemic field they strongly objected to the improbable. The improbable was twofold for them: (1) the whole of God's theological trajectory as Subject embodied by the vulnerable presence and relational involvement of Jesus, who to them—within the limits of their tradition—was a mere object transmitting information about God that they disputed; (2), and by implication equally improbable to them—yet based more on their ontology and function rather than their tradition—was essentially that these children knew better than the leaders what they were saying—improbable because the leaders had the key knowledge about God in general and about the messiah in particular from their rabbinic education. Based on an ontology and function defined by what they did and had, there was no way children could make definitive statements about the probable with certainty and without error, much less about the improbable; and they needed to be kept in their place in the socio-religious order based on reduced ontology and function.

Jesus' response to them redefined the person and transformed the existing relational order. He pointed them to God's relational action having "prepared praise" from children (*katartizo*, 21:16). *Katartizo* connotes either to complete or to repair and restore back to completion (cf. Eph 4:12), which in this context points to God's relational action to make whole the person reduced to outer-in distinctions and the relationships necessary to be intimately involved together in God's whole family. This wholeness is signified in the vulnerable openness of these children involved with Jesus in their relational response of trust. This more deeply connects back to when Jesus leaped for joy over his Father's "good pleasure" (*eudokia*, righteous purpose) to disclose himself to the intimate relational involvement of "little children" and not to the "the wise and learned" in what integrally constitutes the whole ontology and function of the new relational order (Lk 10:21, NIV). Jesus' action at the temple fulfilled God's thematic relational response to reduced persons and their relationships "to be apart" to restore them to God's whole. Therefore, any ontology and function defined by what a person does (particularly, performance of roles) and has (namely, resources and those roles) both remain within the

limits incompatible with Jesus' action and are essentially complicit with the temple leaders, even though one's tradition may affirm the children's behavior. What unfolds in this process of reductionism selectively divides Christ to the parts which fit into our limits, and consequently fragments our theology and disjoins theology and function.

The issue of dividing Christ is intensified as Jesus' actions continue. The relational response and relational outcome of Jesus' involvement at the temple cannot be separated, and thus to divide Jesus, days later from his vulnerable relational involvement in footwashing and the conclusive sacrifice behind the curtain to make whole the "temple" without the veil in the primacy of whole relationship together as God's family. Our tradition today would certainly not separate Jesus from this theological trajectory (at least in part); regardless, we still could disembody (and de-relationalize) Jesus as Subject from his relational path by maintaining an ontology and function that is neither vulnerably involved with the whole of Jesus in intimate relationship together—the qualitative-relational significance of "Follow me," as Peter struggled with—nor ongoingly engaged with the whole of God (notably the Spirit) in the relational epistemic process (as Jesus and Paul made a relational imperative, Jn 16:12-15; 1 Cor 2:13,16). As Jesus made conclusive, the ontology and function of 'the relationally distant' determined the limits of "the wise and learned," in contrast and conflict with the whole ontology and function signified by children who were vulnerably involved in Jesus' relational path.

Relational distance emerges from an ontology and function that has not been relationally involved with Jesus in his sacrifice behind the curtain for the relational outcome to have the veil removed (as Paul clarified, 2 Cor 3:16-18). Ontology and function with the veil is a critical indicator that our theological trajectory has shifted from Jesus' trajectory, consequently dividing Jesus and fragmenting our theology. Understanding this shift makes explicit this process: the presence of the veil separates Jesus' theological action from his function, such that we can practice relational distance within the limits of our theology without needing to address our incompatibility with the relational path of Jesus' function (e.g. the intimacy of his footwashing). In other words, relational distance disconnects Jesus' theological trajectory from his relational path, and this separation allows us to function in relationships with the veil. Does this relational condition exist, perhaps even prevail, in church and academy today?

Furthermore, when our theological interpretation disembodies Jesus' teachings and behavior from the theological trajectory and relational path of his ontology and function as Subject, then Christ is divided into these parts—resulting in an incomplete Christology no longer distinguishing the Jesus embodied in whole. An incomplete Christology has two critical repercussions, whose consequences have reverberated through church and academy today:

1. An incomplete Christology tends to be overly christocentric because it has diminished or minimalized the whole of God, that is, God's whole ontology and function vulnerably present and relationally involved not only distinguished as Subject but integrally distinguished as Son, Father and Spirit in the relational ontology of the Trinity.
2. Moreover, an incomplete Christology renders Jesus' theological trajectory to a truncated soteriology that may necessarily include what Jesus saved us *from* (sin, yet without sin as reductionism) but insufficiently involve what he saved us *to*—

the whole relationship together as God's family in likeness of the relational ontology of the Trinity, whose primacy is 'already' in function only with no veil.

Therefore, an incomplete Christology assumes a reduced ontology and function for both Jesus and those who have claimed this fragmentary gospel. Consequently, what emerges from the Word and unfolds in the incarnation do not go beyond the hermeneutic impasse shaped by the limits of our human terms from the influence of reductionism—the sin of reductionism that a truncated soteriology is insufficient to save us from. If soteriology saved us from the sin of reductionism, by its nature this would necessitate being saved to wholeness.

The uncommon and improbable Jesus embodied in whole interposes in our human context and does indeed challenge us, confront us, pursue us to redeem and transform us epistemologically, hermeneutically, theologically, ontologically and relationally—from inner out to be held together whole in the innermost. Conjointly, the undivided Jesus together with Paul in whole relationship integrally present, communicate and relationally engage us with the *synesis* (whole understanding) necessary to take us beyond our critical limits—limits which constrain what can emerge from our theology and function—in order to be whole, theologically, ontologically, functionally and relationally. Whole theology is nothing less and no substitutes, and composes only whole ontology and function both for the persons of God together and for human persons together.

Yet, before we can further discuss the outcome of whole theology, we need to fully understand what God's thematic relational action responded to. The outcome of whole theology unfolds conclusively in God's whole response to the human condition and its inherent anthropology.

## **The Human Condition and Anthropology**

The major consequence from a weak view of sin is a critical gap in our understanding of the human condition, and perhaps a failure to take the human condition seriously. Conjointly, a reduced theological anthropology not only fails to address the depth of the human condition but in reality obscures its depth, reinforces its breadth, or even conforms to this inescapable and unavoidable condition. The repercussions for us, of course, are that we do not account for our own sin of reductionism, and, interrelated, that we do not address our own function in the human condition. Our function manifests in three notable areas, which are three interrelated issues of ongoing major importance:

1. How we define the person from outer in based more on the quantitative terms of what we do and have, and thereby function in our own person.
2. On this basis, this is how our person engages in relationships with other persons, whom we define in the same outer-in terms, to reduce the depth level of involvement in relationship together.
3. These reduced persons in reduced relationships together then become the defining and determining basis for how we practice church and consequently how church functions.

A modern example of the breadth of the human relational condition pervading human life on a global scale is found not only on the Internet but *in* the Internet itself to increasingly obscure our condition. This is the reality according to Jaron Lanier, a computer scientist known as the father of virtual reality technology who has worked on the interface between computer science and medicine, physics, and neuroscience.

Something started to go wrong with the digital revolution around the turn of the twenty-first century. The World Wide Web was flooded by a torrent of petty designs sometimes called web 2.0....

Communication is now often experienced as a superhuman phenomenon that towers above individuals. A new generation has come of age with a reduced expectation of what a person can be, and of who each person might become.... We make up extensions of your being, like remote eyes and ears (webcams and mobile phones) and expanded memory (the world of details you can search for online). These become the structures by which you connect to the world and other people. These structures in turn can change how you conceive of yourself and the world.

How so?

The central mistake of recent digital culture is to chop up a network of individuals so finely that you end up with mush. You then start to care about the abstraction of the network more than the real people who are networked, even though the network by itself is meaningless. Only the people were ever meaningful....

The new designs on the verge of being locked in, the web 2.0 designs, actively demand that people define themselves downward.... The deep meaning of personhood is being reduced by illusions of bits [b(inary) (dig)its].<sup>5</sup>

What goes into the constitution of the human person and holds the person(s) together in her/his/their innermost in order not to be fragmented but whole?

Attempts by modern science to answer this more specific question have shifted notably to neuroscience along evolutionary terms. And the insights gained from neuroscientists' hypotheses and findings should not be ignored or dismissed. If anything, they likely challenge our theological anthropology and perhaps chasten, or even put to shame, our practice of faith. While their work does not provide hermeneutic correction for us, it does offer important secondary epistemological clarification about the human person that is helpful to further understand what is primary.

Two interrelated functions appearing to be integral to the human brain are remarkably qualitative (i.e. in terms of feelings) and social (about relationships). In his explanation of how consciousness (a mind with a self) develops, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio promotes the following:

Feelings are often ignored in accounts of consciousness. Can there be consciousness without feelings? No.... I hypothesized that feeling states are generated largely by

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<sup>5</sup> Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 3-20.

brain-stem neural systems as a result of their particular design and position vis-à-vis the body.<sup>6</sup>

In conjoint function with the qualitative, there is the relational that emerges for neuroscience to explain what it means to be human. Consider the social function of the brain in neuroscientist John Cacioppo's research on loneliness:

To understand the full capacity of humans, one needs to appreciate not only the memory and computational power of the brain but its capacity for representing, understanding, and connecting with other individuals. That is, one needs to recognize that we have evolved a powerful, meaning-making *social* brain.

Because early humans were more likely to survive when they stuck together, evolution reinforced the preference for strong human bonds by selecting genes that support pleasure in company and produce feelings of unease when involuntarily alone. Moreover...evolution fashioned us not only to feel good when connected but to feel secure. The vitally important corollary is that evolution shaped us not only to feel bad in isolation, but to feel insecure, as in physically threatened.

Our brains and bodies are designed to function in aggregates, not in isolation. That is the essence of an obligatorily gregarious species. The attempt to function in denial of our need for others, whether that need is great or small in any given individual, violates our design specifications.... Social connection is a fundamental part of the human operating (and organizing) system itself.<sup>7</sup>

The integration of mind and body by neuroscience, of course, is still from an outer-in framework; consequently its notion of the qualitative is determined by the limits of the quantitative. This is certainly insufficient to answer what holds together human persons in their innermost. Hans Küng is correct to critique the limits of neuroscience.<sup>8</sup> Yet these qualitative and relational aspects observed by neuroscience help draw attention, if not point us, to what is primary in holding together persons in the innermost. At this stage in human life, we, whether in the theological academy or the church, need any helpful support or assistance available, even if only secondary. And if neuroscientists make these observations of the evolutionary development of the human person, what are we doing with the unfolding of God's words from the beginning? David Brooks, author of *The Social Animal*, a recent thought-provoking book about the human longing for contact and community, does not think we are doing much of any significance: "Philosophy and theology are telling us less than they used to. Scientists and researchers

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<sup>6</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 242.

<sup>7</sup> John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), x, 15, 127.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Küng, *The Beginning of All Things*, 179-91.

are leaping in where these disciplines atrophy—they're all drilling down into an explanation of what man is.”<sup>9</sup>

We can and also need to be more specific: the qualitative and relational aspects necessary for whole ontology and function are neither sufficiently addressed nor deeply accounted for when discussed in theological and biblical studies. This suggests a status quo in theology and function above which we rarely rise, and thus from which we need to experience redemptive change (the old dying and the new rising). This also may raise a further question from some of those readers of such studies: On what basis then is the human condition defined and its resolution determined?

As discussed in part previously, the surrounding context (namely culture) commonly establishes the priorities of importance for life and practice. In the current global context, this larger context is having a further effect in reducing the priorities of local contexts by increasingly shifting, embedding and enslaving persons in secondary priorities and away from qualitative and relational priorities. And, as neuroscience would confirm, this development is taking its toll on the minds and bodies of those affected.

Interestingly, the globalizing dynamic could be a metaphor for the actions of Jesus' theological trajectory and relational path, although with deeper implications and effects for the qualitative and relational. This emerged in the significant connections Jesus made throughout the incarnation. The current period of globalization in human history, though in greater proportion, is neither unprecedented as commonly perceived (cf. humanity in the beginning) nor sufficient to expect significant changes as some propose (cf. the tower of Babel). Jesus, however, ongoingly connected us to the definitive largest context and deepest change necessary for human identity and function to become involved in the qualitative-relational whole, and therefore in what is primary and not merely secondary. For example, the primacy of relationship is inseparable from discipleship as defined and determined by Jesus. This necessarily involves the call to be redefined from outer in to inner out, transformed from reductionism and made whole in relationship together—the full significance of the call to “Follow me” that Peter's person struggled with to be vulnerable for. If our identity and function are not clearly distinguished in the primacy of relationship constituted from inner out by Jesus, we have shifted to the secondary, whether globally or locally.

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

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in an interview about his book, *Newsweek*, March 7, 2011, p.47. For an integrated account of these issues, see David Brooks, *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* (New York: Random House, 2011).



this secondary certainty without the primacy in relationship (Jn 5:39,42) and the substitute identity without the qualitative depth of relational involvement (Mt 5:13-16; cf. 15:8-9).

After Paul's own epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction, he further extended the ongoing fight against the primacy of the secondary and its counter-relational work in the church. This is evident notably in his Corinthians and Galatians letters. The shift from inner out to outer in, and the preoccupation with the secondary over the primacy of relationship together, can be summarized in Paul's relational words: "So let no one boast about *persons from outer in*...so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you *from inner out*? ...But when they measure themselves *from outer in* by one another, and compare themselves *accordingly* with one another, they do not *understand the whole* [*syniemi*]" (1 Cor 3:21; 4:6-7; 2 Cor 10:12); "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for *the primary*; the only *primary* that counts is *the relational work of faith working through distinguished love*" (Gal 5:6).

The shift to the outer in and the secondary is always made at the expense of the qualitative and relational, as evident in Jesus' and Paul's critiques. Moreover, the qualitative and relational are interdependent and integral to the process to be whole, both for the person and persons together in relationship. The reduction or loss of either also results in the reduction or loss of the other. That is, they are inseparable. We cannot function in the qualitative from inner out apart from the involvement in the primacy of relationship; and we cannot be involved in the primacy of relationship without the function of the qualitative from inner out. The focus and occupation on the secondary are consequential for reducing, if not preventing, the primary by (1) the focus narrowed to referential terms of the quantitative having primacy over the qualitative and (2) the occupation reduced to functional terms of what essentially becomes counter-relational work. In addition, when the primacy is given to the secondary, there are certainly repercussions theologically and for the gospel, as further evidenced in the critiques of Jesus (e.g. Mk 7:5-8, 14-23) and of Paul (e.g. Gal 1:6; 3:1-5).

Either too much is assumed about the human condition or too little discussion takes place about it. And not enough is said when discussion does focus on the human condition. Yet, the human condition is not as complex as frequently considered, nor can it be oversimplified (narrowed) down to sin as sin is commonly perceived. In God's strategic shift with the Samaritan woman, he connected her to God's whole. Yet, when he addressed her human condition, he did not point out her moral-ethical sin. Rather he focused on her fragmentation culturally, religiously, as a person and in her relationships needing to be made whole.

If the gospel involves the fulfillment of God's thematic relational response to the human condition, then in order to fully receive, whole-ly claim and completely proclaim the gospel, we need to understand the human condition. If we do not, or cannot, account for the human condition, what exactly is our good news and to what is it significant? Certainly, the human condition remains unchanged without the gospel; but the gospel is not good news without the human condition. God's response is relationally specific so it cannot be generalized. What then is God responding to in his thematic action? Just as the gospel antecedes the incarnation, the whole of God's relational response emerged from the beginning.

Adding to our previous discussion on creation, we cannot address what holds the person and persons together in the innermost without defining persons from both the inner out and the qualitative function of their heart in the primacy of relationships. This constitutes the whole person created in the qualitative image of God and in the relational likeness of the whole of God. Therefore, by this created nature the person must not be seen in fragmentary parts (soul, mind, body) or the whole person is reduced, which is the inevitable consequence of an outer-in approach to defining the person. This distinction is critical to make in our theological anthropology and irreplaceable to distinguish the human condition that God responds to. Without the function of the heart, the whole person from inner out created by God is reduced to function from outer in, distant or separated from the heart. This functional condition was ongoingly critiqued by God and responded to for the inner-out change necessary to be whole (e.g. Gen 6:5-6; Dt 10:16; 30:6; 1 Sam 16:7; Isa 29:13; Jer 12:2; Eze 11:19; 18:31; 33:31; Joel 2:12-13).

The fragmentation of the person to outer in emerged from the beginning. In the primordial garden a critical dynamic took place that is insufficient to understand merely as the sin of disobedience. Along with being created as a whole person with a qualitative heart for integral function from inner out, the human person in the qualitative image of God was not created to be isolated, separated, alone from other persons, that is, to be apart from the whole of relationships together in likeness of the relational ontology of the whole of God—the condition of which God made conclusive “is not good, pleasant, beautiful, delightful, precious, correct, righteous” (all meanings of *tob*) for the person to be and function in (Gen 2:18). God responded at creation to create wholeness in human persons by the inseparable and integral function of the whole person from inner out in the qualitative image of God and of whole persons in the relationships together necessary to be whole in the relational likeness of God. Wholeness is the irreducible and nonnegotiable created ontology and function of both the qualitative and the relational. And anything less and any substitute for the human person and persons together are reductions of creation and contrary to God’s creative action, as well as in conflict with God’s relational response for the whole of persons. This condition is what unfolds in the primordial garden.

The persons in the primordial garden redefined their theological anthropology and reduced their whole persons (from inner out with the qualitative heart in the primacy of relationship) in order to substitute an identity from outer in based on the secondary of what they have and do, and thereby reshape relationships. The consequence was the loss of wholeness in both the qualitative and the relational. In further understanding these critical dynamics, since their action to give priority to the secondary was made apart from the primacy of relationship, by implication the person (self) acted autonomously in the relationship based on one’s own terms. Of further significance then, having assumed an identity apart from the primacy of relationship necessitated being involved in the effort of self-determination. If they had functioned inner out focused on the primary, they would have engaged the above situation by the primacy of relationship. This would have avoided the fragmentation of wholeness in relationship created by their self-autonomy and made unnecessary their attempt to construct an identity in the human context by self-determination, efforts which necessarily involve their shaping of relationships. Their loss of whole relationship together was evidenced in the relational consequence: “the eyes of both were *refocused to outer in* and they knew that they were naked and they *covered*

*their person*.... I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself” (Gen 3:7,10). These dynamics were extended further with the overlap of self-determination into the need for self-justification: “The woman whom you gave to be with me [in the primacy of relationship], she gave me fruit...I ate” (3:12). For the person to be defined from outer in and determined by what they have and do, always necessitates a comparative process with human distinctions of ‘better’ or ‘less’, which then inevitably will involve efforts of self-determination.

All these dynamics converge to define the human condition and its engagement in the sin of reductionism. We need to broaden and deepen our understanding of sin to fully account for the human condition in our midst, notably efforts of self-determination and the human shaping of relationships. If we think that the human condition is about sin but understand sin only in terms of conventional moral-ethical failure (e.g. disobedience in the garden), then we do not account for the loss of the qualitative and the relational in everyday human life (even in the church and academy) that God clearly distinguished in created ontology and function of human persons—that qualitative image and relational likeness distinguishing the whole of God. The relational consequence “to be apart” unfolding from the primordial garden is the human condition of the loss of the primacy of whole relationship together and its prevailing relational distance, separation, brokenness, and thus loneliness—which even threatens the integrity of the human brain (per Cacioppo) as further evidence that this condition “is not good, pleasant, beautiful, delightful, precious, correct, righteous for persons to be apart from whole relationship together.” How we tend to do relationship and what prevails in our relationships today are reductions of the primacy God created for whole relationships in his likeness; and the human shaping of relationships composes the human relational condition, which then is reflected, reinforced or sustained by any and all human shaping.

Furthermore, the whole person from inner out signified by the qualitative function of the heart needs renewed focus for understanding the human condition and needs to be restored in our theology and function. We cannot avoid addressing the human heart (our own to start) and the feelings associated with it because the whole of human identity is rooted in it—along with the consciousness of self noted by Damasio—and the depths of the human condition is tied to it. If neuroscience can talk about feelings as integral to the human function, why doesn’t the theological academy discuss feelings as at the core of the human person? A major part of the answer relates to our theological anthropology having redefined the person without the primacy of the qualitative and relational; but interrelated, the main reason involves the human condition, that is, our intentional, unintentional or inadvertent engagement in the reductionism composing the human condition—notably in the self-determination preoccupied in the secondary (“good for...a delight to...desired to”) and in the shaping of relationships (“unexposed and distant,” cf. Gen 2:25). Consciousness as a person necessarily involves feelings—even for the whole of God (e.g. Gen 6:6; Jn 11:33,35; Eph 4:30)—which Damasio defines as essential for the self but locates feelings only in brain function to integrate mind and body. We, however, can and need to go deeper to inner out for the qualitative function of the heart to distinguish the whole person. Jesus clearly declared that the heart is innermost of the person, who when not whole emerges in the fragmented function of reductionism (Mk 7:20-23).

Therefore, a turn from the heart in any context or function has an unavoidable consequence of the human condition. The qualitative loss signified in the human condition emerges when we become distant from our heart, constrained or detached from feelings, thereby insensitive or hardened—just as Jesus exposed (Mk 7:6; Jn 5:42) and Paul critiqued (Eph 4:17-19). This increasingly embeds human function in the outer in and reduces human ontology to ontological simulation. This is evidenced in the function of “hypocrites” (*hypokrites*, Mk 7:6). In referential terms, *hypokrites* and *hypokrisis* (hypocrisy, cf. Lk 12:1) are limited to pretension or falsehood, in acts to dissemble or deceive. In relational terms, the dynamic involves the person presented to others that is only from outer in and thus different from the whole person distinguished from inner out. Just as ancient Greek actors put on masks in a play, *hypokrites* engages in ontological simulation not necessarily with the intent to deceive but from what emerges by the nature of function from outer in. In other words, whatever the person presents to others, it is not whole and consequently cannot be counted on to be who and what the person is, which is not about the outer-in issue of deception but the inner-out issue of righteousness. This dynamic engages a pivotal issue involving the ontology of the person and its effect on relationships. The consequence of such function in relational terms is always a qualitative relational consequence which may not be apparent at the quantitative level from outer in. The outer-in simulation masking its qualitative relational consequence is exposed by Jesus notably in the relational act of worship: “This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me” (Mk 7:6). Paul also later confronted Peter and exposed his outer-in simulation (*hypokrisis*) by the role-playing he engaged in focused on secondary matters, which even influenced Barnabas and others to function outer in (Gal 2:11-14).

The qualitative function of the heart is irreplaceable and inseparable from the primacy of whole relationship together. They are the irreducible and nonnegotiable outworking of the creation (both original and new), for whose wholeness they are integral—and therefore the keys for being whole which cannot be ignored or diminished. Anything less and any substitutes of the qualitative and the relational are reductions which signify the presence, influence and operation of the human condition. Any reductions or loss of the qualitative and relational renders the person and persons together in relationship to fragmentary terms of human shaping, the condition of which cannot be whole and consequently function in the “not good to be apart” from God’s whole—in spite of any aggregate determination made in referential terms. The reduction to human terms and shaping from outer in—signifying the human person assuming autonomy apart from the primacy of relationship—prevail in human life and pervade even in the church and the academy, notably in legitimated efforts of self-determination and self-justification (functionally, not theologically). The interrelated issues of self-autonomy, self-determination and self-justification are critical to understand in terms of the sin of reductionism if we are to pay attention to the human condition in our midst.

If the view of sin in the human condition remains limited to the parameters of moral-ethical failure, then salvation of the human condition merely becomes saving *from* this sin. Defining sin, however, in its complete nature and function as reductionism, which Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount, necessitates a complete soteriology for the response to the human condition to be significant in its innermost. In the nature of a significant saving dynamic, we cannot be saved just *from* sin if sin is reductionism. That

is, reductionism, and its counter-relational work, by its design and purpose always has fragmenting repercussions on wholeness, the whole, God's relational whole. Therefore, to be saved from this reductionism of the whole, and the human condition existing relationally apart from the whole, needs to involve, by its very nature, being restored to wholeness—what a complete soteriology saves *to*. Any saving from reductionism has no meaning and functional significance if wholeness and God's relational whole are not restored in the innermost; such salvation is in itself reductionism, no matter how normative theologically or sincere in practice. 'Saved to' constitutes the primacy of relationship together in wholeness, in the beginning of which God created human persons in the innermost likeness of the triune God, and from the beginning, for which the distinguished Face turned to us in the whole of God's definitive blessing to bring the necessary change from inner out to restore.

In the creation narrative, human ontology was never about one's self (or the individual) nor designed "to be apart" from the whole (Gen 2:18). The person was never created to function as if in social isolation, thus the individual has neither the functional freedom for self-determination nor the relational autonomy to determine meaning in life and practice and to constitute wholeness, that is, in mere self-referencing terms. The ontology of the person is only a function of relationship in likeness of the relational ontology of the triune God—in whose qualitative image the human person is created and apart from whom there is no determination of self, meaning and wholeness in the innermost. Since creation, God's thematic action throughout human history has been to respond to the human relational condition "to be apart." For example, while persons like widows and orphans were at risk in their situations and circumstances in the ancient Mediterranean world, it was their relational condition apart from God's whole to which Jesus responded as fulfillment of God's thematic relational response to restore whole relationship together (as demonstrated in Lk 7:11-16).

Not understanding the depths of what and how the human condition is certainly then necessarily diminishes our understanding of the whole of God's thematic relational response to it. This has significant implications critical for Christians who supposedly have been saved *from* the human condition but lack the theology and function necessary for what they are saved *to*—that is, to that which is the sole definitive replacement to the human condition: the primacy of relationship together in wholeness, God's relational whole in the innermost, thereby fulfilling the Face's definitive blessing and response (Num 6:24-26; 2 Cor 4:6). This lack is certainly consequential for the experiential truth of the good news and the experiential reality of its outcome for the human relational condition—the whole relational outcome constituted by Jesus' prayer for his family to experience and thereby illuminate for the human condition to be made whole (Jn 17:20-23).

Anything less and any substitute in our theology and function either ignores or reinforces the human condition in the innermost, and therefore either sustains or even conforms to its breadth. This state of our theology and function counters the Word's theological trajectory and relational path, the integrating thematic dynamic of which unfolds conclusively in Jesus' formative family prayer (Jn 17).

## Theology without the Veil

As we transition from the human condition to what makes theology whole, there are intervening dynamics that need to be understood in their contrary interaction and addressed for the flow to this outcome. These contending dynamics converge in the inescapable issue symbolized by ‘the veil’. The veil represents a twofold condition:

1. The human condition in reduced ontology and function that fragmented the person and relationships to the outer in; and this condition emerged in the primordial garden when those persons put ‘the veil’ not merely to cover their bodies but to construct a barrier for their person and relationship, signifying the fragmentation of the whole person and relationship together in wholeness (Gen 2:25; 3:7,10). Their coverings need to be given the importance that set in motion the contending dynamic of the human condition composing the presence of the veil to represent reduced ontology and function. To minimize this process directly diminishes the contending dynamic that God initiated in response to this condition represented in the veil.
2. The condition that God initially established for the terms of covenant relationship together in order to distinguish the whole and holy God from the reduced human ontology and function (“the curtain,” Ex 26:31-34; 40:33-34). The dynamic of God’s thematic relational response to the human condition contended with the dynamic represented by the veil to reconstitute the terms of covenant relationship (the curtain, Lk 23:45; Heb 10:19-20) and conclusively removed the veil for human ontology and function to be whole in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the whole of God (as summarized by Paul, 2 Cor 3:12-18).

Both of these contending dynamics must be fully accounted for in our theology and function in order to have the outcome of their wholeness. Therefore, when God said during creation “it is not good for the *human person* to be apart,” he focused on the whole person created in God’s image (Gen 2:18). At that stage of creation, the person created was not less than whole in God’s image but apart (i.e. incomplete) from the whole in the relational likeness of the triune God. To complete the wholeness of creation, God created another person (not about gender) for their relationship together (not about marriage) to be in the exact image and the relational likeness of the Trinity, God’s whole. Ever since the primordial garden, for human persons to be apart from God’s whole is “not good” because these persons and their relationships become fragmented—no longer ontologically and/or relationally functioning in the image and likeness of the whole of God. And the presence of the veil represents the definitive indicator of the human condition in reduced ontology and function, even as the veil exists still among God’s people.

The Face of God relationally responds conclusively to this ontological and relational condition ‘to be apart’ to bring the change necessary for new relationship together in wholeness, thereby fulfilling God’s definitive blessing (Num 6:26). A weak view of sin, however, that does not include sin as reductionism (and the presence of the veil), cannot adequately understand this condition and, consequently, both skews

theological anthropology apart from God's whole and truncates God's relational response needed to make this condition whole.

The whole of God's thematic relational response of grace unfolded from the beginning. God's vulnerable presence ongoingly has been distinguished by the qualitative from inner out—the innermost of God's heart, beyond any kind of quality in the universe. Even from before the beginning, God's involvement ongoingly has been distinguished by the relational in wholeness, and only for relationship together in wholeness: God's direct relational response to constitute covenant relationship together (Gen 17:1-2), and God's definitive blessing in the theological trajectory and relational path of the distinguished Face discussed above. Therefore, God's relational response of grace prevails not theologically in referential terms but only in the primacy of whole relationship together—defining human ontology and determining human function in his qualitative image and relational likeness. Otherwise God's grace is constrained in classic doctrines, and the results are fragmentary for ontology and function, both human and divine.

If we do not have whole understanding (*synesis*, as did Jesus, Lk 2:47, and Paul, Eph 3:4; Col 2:2) of the primacy of relationship, we essentially do not understand the integral composition needed for theology to be whole and not fragmentary:

1. Who, what and how the whole of God is as the Trinity.
2. Who, what and how human persons are created in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the whole of God.
3. The depths of what and how the human condition is and the whole of God's thematic relational response to it.

The whole gospel is contingent on this whole theology, which Jesus relationally embodied from inner out as the hermeneutic key for the gospel. Conversely for Paul, the embodying of his *pleroma* theology emerged from the whole of the gospel whom he experienced in the primacy of Face-to-face relationship.

The heart (innermost) of the whole gospel is the depth required 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). Our beliefs or notions about the gospel tend either to make major assumptions about it so as to render the good news merely to a headline composed with only a sidebar and obituary in the news, and consequently a gospel without full significance for the human condition. Or we take liberties with the gospel in autonomous efforts to shape the gospel for our (individual and collective) determination and justification so as to render the good news merely to another op-ed article in the newspaper, and, as a result, not really a gospel for the human condition. The former composition reduces the gospel and the latter renegotiates it, both of which perceive the gospel in referential terms through a myopic lens—the prevailing interpretive framework and perceptual lens.

In referential words and language—as noted in the news above—the gospel becomes an announcement that transmits information about what God did and what people can do because of it. Such a gospel in referential terms has been reduced to quantitative information describing God's outer-in function (what God saves *from*) in fragmentary parts, though the results for human persons have spiritual nuances and

implications which have been negotiated on human terms. In such a so-called gospel, the ontology and function of both God and the human person have been reduced and fragmented by being defined and determined on the basis of what they do, and thus what they have: a referential gospel. This, however, *misre*-presents the whole gospel that emerged from the beginning in relational response to the human condition, which Jesus embodied to fulfill, and which Paul embodied to complete. We therefore need to challenge any of our assumptions and shaping of the gospel which are anything less and any substitute.

In relational words and language, the gospel is a relational dynamic beyond the proclamation of a static proposition; and it is simply irreducible to referential terms or else the significance of its relational response is fragmented and its wholeness is lost. When this happens, the distinguished Face does not turn and shine to bring new relationship in wholeness but becomes an ambiguous or elusive Face needing human shaping. Moreover, then, the whole gospel is a relational dynamic solely on God's relational terms, which are nonnegotiable to human terms, or else its relational response is no longer to make whole the human condition but becomes determined by the human-shaping influence of the human condition. From the beginning, the gospel is the distinguished Face's relational outworking and fulfillment of *siym* and *shalom*, nothing less and no substitutes (Num 6:24-26)—as the ancient poet wanted from God, “Lord, say to my innermost, ‘I am your salvation’” (Ps 35:3).

‘Face to face’ is the distinguishing nature of God's relational response to the human condition to make it whole. In the highlight of Israel's history (liberation from Egypt), Moses affirmed that the LORD “has become my salvation” (Ex 15:2). In a low point in his personal history, the ancient poet above wanted the distinguished Face to turn to his innermost to experience the same affirmation. Both of them expressed their feelings in the most qualitative form (and the earliest) of human communication: song and poetry. Referential words in referential language (a later development in human communication) were inadequate to express the depth not only of their hearts but the qualitative-relational depth of God's salvation. Moses' song was a prelude to the communication in their relationship together in which God spoke directly to Moses, Face to face (Num 12:6-8). Their direct relational involvement together was a precursor of what God saves *to* conjointly with saves *from*. These early experiences capture the initial relational significance, if not always the qualitative significance, of the dynamics of God's thematic relational response signifying the gospel. The dynamic that unfolds from these experiences, along with others like Abraham's, has even further and deeper qualitative-relational significance which distinguishes the gospel unmistakably in wholeness (the *shalom* of God's definitive blessing) and thus inseparably from the whole, God's relational whole. As we fast-forward, the distinguished Face's relational outworking and fulfillment of *siym* and *shalom* intensify.

Moses' face-to-Face involvement with God was distinguished (Num 12:6-8) but limited (Ex 34:29-35; 40:35), and its qualitative and relational significance was transitory, which Paul later summarized in the context of the whole gospel (2 Cor 3:7,13). The qualitative and relational significance of the gospel were still unclear until the incarnation. Yet, understanding both its qualitative and relational significance in relational terms remained an issue throughout the incarnation and Paul's time, and remains an issue in referential language for us today. This lack of understanding remains



until congruence is made with the embodied Face's theological trajectory and compatibility is experienced with his relational path, both of which constitute the qualitative and relational significance of the distinguished Face's vulnerable response to make whole the human condition.

Until the incarnation, the heart of God's presence and involvement revolved around the tabernacle/temple (Ex 40:34; 1 Kg 9:3), namely vulnerably present and directly involved behind the curtain in the most holy sanctuary (Ex 26:33; Lev 16:2). Thereafter, the new temple of qualitative and relational significance (1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:19-22) would be the heart of God's presence and involvement. This outcome, however, emerges only when the embodied Face's theological trajectory vulnerably completes his intrusive relational path to transform the old temple. This relational dynamic unfolded while Jesus was on the cross and during the outcome witnessed in the temple (Mt 27:50-51, cf. Ex 26:31-33; Heb 9:3,6-8). If we interpret God's action in the temple to a narrowed-down event in referential terms, then it has lost the qualitative and relational significance of the gospel. The embodied Face's atonement sacrifice behind the curtain transformed the 'old' and brought forth the outcome of the 'new' without the curtain to constitute its qualitative and relational significance (Heb 10:19-20; cf. 6:19). This provides the essential view of the cross with the curtain and veil removed. In his theology, Paul made the significance of this outcome functional for the church in the experiential truth of the new covenant relationship (2 Cor 3:16-18). No doubt, this outcome emerged from the complex theological dynamics converging on the cross. Yet, these dynamics cannot be narrowed down to traditional doctrines of atonement—namely the classic view of *Christus Victor* (i.e. Christ's victory over sin, death and the powers of evil) or the Latin (or Western) view of penal substitution (i.e. Christ's sacrifice satisfying to God for the consequences of sin)—and expect to have the same relational outcome. That is, in one way or another, these doctrines have taken a more probable theological trajectory or a less vulnerable relational path than Jesus'.

The outcome of new covenant relationship with the veil removed integrally unfolded from the distinguished Face's theological trajectory extended from the Face's definitive blessing to bring change for a new relationship (*siym*) together in wholeness (*shalom*). This new relationship together in wholeness is constituted only vulnerably behind the curtain, that is, to be congruent with the embodied Face's theological trajectory and compatible with his intrusive relational path in order to remove the veil for vulnerable face-to-Face relationship together in wholeness. If the 'old' condition is not understood with the sin of reductionism, that sin remains in front of the curtain in a truncated response of atonement behind the curtain—essentially then keeping the curtain in place in the condition of the 'old' for an incomplete atonement that maintains the relational distance/separation to prevent being new and whole (Heb 10:1). Historically, this relational condition has been kept in place or maintained by the doctrines of *Christus Victor* and penal substitutionary atonement, thereby indicating the influence of the veil on their interpretive lenses that limits the whole embodied by Jesus to an incomplete Christology. The 'new' cannot take place in front of the curtain and does not emerge in theology and the church until the relational barrier (or distance) signified by the curtain is removed—as Paul made functionally conclusive for the wholeness of the church (Eph 2:14-22). These dynamics may appear to be only technical, yet they are essential for the theological anthropology intrinsic to God's creation, the human condition, the gospel and

its outcome. The persons God created whole and who were then fragmented by reductionism are not defined sufficiently by a reduced theological anthropology skewed by a weak view of sin ignoring reductionism (and the veil); nor are they restored (save *to*) adequately by a gospel whose lens of the person is less than whole (e.g. as practiced by Peter, Gal 2:14).

Theology without the qualitative and relational significance of the whole gospel is then formulated only in front of the curtain in the limits of referential terms, with a constrained view of persons and relationships. The curtain obscures the theological lens epistemologically, hermeneutically, ontologically and relationally from what is distinguished entirely behind the curtain with the Face in relational terms—resulting in theological fog. Theological discourse in front of the curtain speaks only in referential language, which constrains what we see and how we think, for fragmentary discourse. The relational language behind the curtain opens up the whole and the new (cf. 2 Cor 3:16-18). If our theology does not clearly distinguish the whole, then we have not connected with the Face behind the curtain for our theology to be whole-ly significant.

Whole theology is the outcome of vulnerably receiving and responding to the Face behind the curtain to have the veil removed for the intimate heart-to-heart communion of face-to-Face relationship together (Heb 10:19-22); this relational outcome is distinguished in qualitatively understanding and relationally knowing the whole of God, thereby being transformed to the new creation in the image and likeness of the Face (2 Cor 3:18; 4:4,6; 5:17; Col 2:9-10; 3:10). Whole theology and function are constituted entirely in face-to-Face-to-face relationship solely in relational terms only without the veil. Therefore, wholeness in theology and function demands both our vulnerable engagement of the Face's theological trajectory behind the curtain and our vulnerable involvement of the Face's relational path with the veil removed. And our theological anthropology can no longer legitimately define anything less of the person or acceptably determine any substitute for relationship together.

The fact of God's dwelling without the curtain is no mere theological notion that can be reduced to referential information. Indeed, complex theological dynamics converged behind the curtain to make God's improbable theological trajectory more improbable and the Face's intrusive relational path more intrusive. This cannot be reduced or fragmented to referential information without incurring major relational consequences. The whole gospel depends on the integral dynamic unfolded in the temple that illuminated the qualitative and relational significance of God's thematic relational response to the human condition and its outcome to be made whole. The gospel and its theology and function cannot be whole in front of the curtain, that is, without the limits of the veil removed. As the theological and functional keys to the whole of God, Jesus opened the door (curtain) to the vulnerable presence and intimate involvement of God to be whole-ly Face to face in relationship together. No more relational separation in the sanctuary, no more cloud to distinguish the whole of God within the limits of God's earlier relational response to Moses and the tabernacle. And being vulnerable in the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes is the essential nature of God's complete relational response constituting the qualitative and relational significance of the gospel; and this inseparably includes the same vulnerable nature of its outcome of wholeness for persons and relationships and their function and theology. There is no way to avoid being vulnerable in these areas except to replace the veil and remain in front of the curtain to

signify relational distance or separation. In other words, the lack or absence of being vulnerable is to stay in the ‘old’—the relational condition ‘to be apart’ that has become normative and collective—which accordingly includes the lack or absence of wholeness for persons, relationships, their function and theology.

For theology to be theologically significant, it must be on the same theological trajectory and relational path as the Face. For theology to be whole, it must follow the Face’s trajectory and path through the curtain in order to vulnerably distinguish and engage the whole of God to have the veil removed for the relational outcome to be new and whole, God’s whole. Yet, the referentialization of the Face continues to divert this theological trajectory and the dynamic of referential language ongoingly impedes this relational path. Moreover, the conventional wisdom of the ‘old’ supported by a fragmenting theological anthropology continue to challenge the emergence of the ‘new’ and resists the redemptive change to raise it up whole. Even unintentionally or unknowingly with good intentions, any theology on a more probable theological trajectory or a less vulnerable relational path is counter-relational to the Face’s relational work. Nevertheless, the veil has been removed (or the relational barrier broken down, as Paul declared, Eph 2:14) for ‘the presence of the whole’ to expose all reductionism and to be “our wholeness” by vulnerably “proclaiming wholeness” and “making wholeness” in new relationship together as God’s whole—just as Paul made conclusive for the church to be new and whole (Eph 2:14-22), and thus for the human condition and all creation (Col 1:19-20; Rom 8:19-21).

## **Theology Made Whole**

The tension and conflict between reductionism and God’s whole, between the old and the new is ongoing and remains unresolved until clearly distinguished by the new of God’s whole—‘the presence of the whole’. Complex theological dynamics converged vulnerably behind the curtain to constitute this new in God’s whole. This presence of the whole is distinguished entirely by whole theological dynamics, thus an incomplete Christology in referential terms, a truncated soteriology overlooking reductionism, and a renegotiated ecclesiology lacking whole relationship together—including an underlying immature pneumatology misunderstanding (if not missing) the Spirit—are theologically insufficient, fragmentary and incapable for completing this theological task.

When Jesus relationally responded with “my *wholeness* I give to you” (Jn 14:27), this can be interpreted in referential language or received in the relational language as given. Referential language, however, narrows down wholeness and limits it to notions of peace, most of which have neither qualitative significance for the Face’s definitive blessing (Num 6:26) nor relational significance for Jesus’ relational response. On the other hand, crucial to understanding the theological trajectory of the distinguished Face of God now embodied in whole is understanding his relational language. For most persons, this initially requires a major shift away from referential language focused on quantitative information about God in order to receive Jesus’ relational language involved in communicating the conclusive peace distinguishing the new of God’s whole. This shift is indispensable to be on the theological trajectory and relational path having the outcome of whole theology. God’s thematic involvement is illuminated entirely by

the relational language that unfolds the whole of God's communicative action in relational response to the human condition 'to be apart' for the wholeness needed to be redeemed from reductionism and transformed to the new, nothing less and no substitutes. The outcome of whole theology likewise can be nothing less and no substitutes.

In the context of the pivotal table fellowship when Jesus made the above relational response, he also declared moments earlier "I will not leave you as orphans" (Jn 14:18, NIV). In referential language, his words have been interpreted in various ways, mostly situationally and chronologically, yet without the significance of the primacy of relationship together. In relational language, Jesus communicated the direction his theological trajectory and relational path were heading and the relational outcome of not being left as orphans. Moments later in this table fellowship, the integrating thematic dynamic for this relational outcome unfolded conclusively in Jesus' prayer for the whole constitution of his family (Jn 17).

Paul understood the relational language of Jesus' words and the trajectory and path of his relational response, because this is what Paul vulnerably experienced initially on the Damascus road and later in the relational epistemic process with the Spirit (1 Cor 2:9-10,13); and, on this basis, Paul made definitive theologically for the church (Eph 1:3-14; Col 1:13-22).<sup>10</sup> Paul's theological discourse was therefore also in Jesus' relational language, not the conventional referential language; and this presents his readers with the same issues for interpreting Paul as understanding Jesus. Thus the complex theological dynamics summarized in Ephesians 1 can include, but should never be limited to, doctrines that have come down to us as classic theological categories. Such categories constrain God's thematic relational dynamic in response to the human condition to static propositional truths. In his summary, for example, Paul did not advocate for determinism as a theological template that would lay the foundation for Reformed theology; nor did his relational language distinguishing the reciprocal relational process give support in favor of the doctrine of free will over determinism. Paul was, rather, unfolding the whole ontology of God's qualitative being and whole function of God's relational nature in relational response to the human condition to make whole human ontology and function in reciprocal relationship together. Static doctrinal categories traditionally tend to be disparate conceptual oversimplifications of complex relational dynamics, thus signifying the influence of reductionism. God's relational dynamic is crucial to grasp in its wholeness, which necessitates theological engagement unconstrained by any limits from

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<sup>10</sup> Both Ephesians and Colossians are commonly regarded as disputed letters of Paul mainly because they did not follow the form, language and thought in his undisputed letters. I contend, however, that they reflected the further development of his thought and theology—though they may have been penned by another hand. In view of this, Ephesians closely followed Colossians and Philemon—most likely also written from prison around the same time period—with Philemon as a functional bridge to Ephesians (in the Pauline corpus), in which Paul makes definitive the theological basis for Philemon's relational function to be whole. While the Colossian text included Paul's most detailed cosmology, it is a less detailed summary of Paul's theological forest compared to the Ephesian text. Ephesians reflects Paul's further development, suggesting his deeper theological reflection with the Spirit while in prison for conclusive *synesis*, the whole knowledge and understanding of God outlined above. Paul's unfolding relational function to *pleroo* the word of God (Col 1:25) for the church family to have *synesis* in its ontology and function (Col 2:2-3) is expressed in this development.

what serve as the templates of doctrine, even if doctrine compels conformity by its truth-claim.

The relational dynamic constituting God's purpose to selectively engage those who would relationally respond in trust back to his relational response of grace, for Paul, whole-ly involved this vital relational outcome for them: "to be holy [*hagios*, set apart from common usage, i.e. from reduced ontology and function] and to be whole [*amomos*, unblemished, cf. *tamiym* for Abraham, Gen 17:1] before him in love [*agape*, Eph 1:4, i.e. not the limits of sacrificial love but family love]...for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ" (1:5). This relational outcome emerged on the basis of God's preplanning (*proorizo*) for the purpose (*prothesis*) of his deep desires (*eudokia*) to have the wholeness of reciprocal relationship together as family (vv.4-5). In other words, God's preplanned purpose of the whole of God's (Father, Son, and Spirit) relational response of grace was solely to redeem them (vv.7-8) from the common function of reductionism in the human condition in order to be reconciled in God's uncommon (holy) relational context and to be made whole in the reciprocal relationship necessary for God's family. This relational outcome necessitates the redemptive change in order for this relational process of redemptive reconciliation to have compatible relationship together which is whole in likeness of God, not fragmented and reduced to human terms negotiated by free will. That is, the issue of compatibility for Paul is not focused on persons having free will but on persons being able to function in reciprocal relationship together. The theological dynamics involved are complex yet should not be reduced by the limiting effects of doctrines which signify conformity to templates of human terms to diminish or minimize God's relational dynamic constituting Paul's whole theology.

This corporate dimension of family—the identity of those who belong to God by "adoption as his children," (Eph 1:5) and who are "marked with the seal of the Spirit...as God's own people," (vv.13-14)—is no mere metaphor. Family clearly is the relational outcome of God's deeply desired purpose in Christ (v.9) to fulfill the family responsibility (*oikonomia*, v.10) to bring together all as one 'in Christ' (*anakephalaioo*, v.10, cf. Col 1:19-22). The relational outcome of the whole of God's relational dynamic constituted the whole of their qualitative-relational ontology—which God originally created whole in human persons in likeness of the relational ontology of God (cf. Gen 2:18). This ontological identity integrates the intimate relational involvement of God's family relationships together, which is constituted conjointly both in nonnegotiable function in the reciprocal relational response ("believed in him," v.13) to God's desires, and in irreducible function in the ontology of God's likeness. Thus, the ontological identity of family is irreducible for church ontology and nonnegotiable for church function, which Paul makes definitive in his ecclesiology unfolding in Ephesians.

Furthermore, the individual dimension of family identity "as his children" (v.5), that is, as God's very own sons and daughters are not insignificant titles which can be deterministically decreed without fully engaging the irreducible relational process of God's relational nature. The theological dynamics involved here include "adoption as his children." Adoption may also appear to be just a metaphor, used by Paul to parallel a practice of adoption that was familiar in Greco-Roman context. Rather, the dynamic of adoption was already familiar in Judaism's history, as Paul sadly reviewed earlier (Rom 9:2-4; cf. Ex 4:22; 6:6-7; 2 Sam 7:23-24; Jer 3:19). Beyond human contextualization (even Israel's), adoption involves the necessary relational functions (viz. redemption,

reconciliation, transformation) to constitute any person in the human condition to belong to God's family. In other words, adoption is Paul's shorthand relational language in which the relational dynamic of the whole of God (Father, Son and Spirit) converges for relationship together.

Adoption involves by its nature this relational process: (1) By necessity, adoption first redeems a person from enslavement or constraint by the payment of a ransom ("in Christ we have redemption through his blood," Eph 1:7) to be freed from any debt or obligation to a master, benefactor or parent; atonement and justification are also involved yet they should not limit the full depth of God's relational dynamic. Then, (2) the person is not simply freed (redeemed, saved) *from* enslavement in a truncated soteriology, which is limited to deliverance from the struggles and evil of the world, or from one's own sin. Full soteriology conjointly entails saved *to* adoption, made official with the seal of ownership, "marked with the seal of the Spirit," (1:13, cf. Rom 8:16). Thus a person is reconciled into God's family as his very own family member by "the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us" (1:7-8), now with all the rights and privileges of a full family member, "our inheritance...as God's own" (1:14, cf. Gal 4:5-7; Rom 8:17)—not restricted as a family slave, servant or even guest. Therefore, completion of these necessary relational functions wholly constitutes, both forensically and relationally, any person in the human condition to belong ontologically to the whole of God's family "brought together as one in Christ" (1:10). For Paul, adoption was never a theological construct but the experiential truth constituting his ontological identity—not as a mere citizen of God's chosen nation or as just a part of God's elect people, but only as God's very own son to be whole together.

Paul makes definitive this deeply involved relational process of the whole of God—from the Father to the Son to the Spirit—and God's thematic relational response to the inherent human relational need and problem. This was necessary to clearly illuminate for the human need and problem their complete fulfillment and resolution in the experiential truth and whole of the gospel: "the gospel of your salvation" both saved *from* and *to* (1:13), in order to be whole in ontology and function together in God's family 'already' as the church (1:14,23; 4:30). These are the complex theological dynamics of God's relational desires integrated in the whole of God's relational context and process which emerge in Paul's whole theology.

Returning to that pivotal table fellowship, as the relational dynamic of Jesus' improbable theological trajectory unfolds to fulfill the whole of God's thematic relational response to the human condition, his first disciples continue to shift to be compatible for relationship face to Face in their reciprocal fellowship. Not understanding Jesus' relational language, one of them asks him, "Lord, how is it, *what has occurred*, that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" (Jn 14:22) The question was in response to Jesus outlining his theological trajectory and relational path for them with the whole of God (the Father and the Spirit along with the Son) and the relational epistemic process necessarily involved for this relational outcome (14:15-21). The issue is that Jesus discloses his person as Subject who is improbable and whole, which neither the probable can process nor the fragmentary can compatibly engage to understand. The disciple's question focuses on seeing Jesus as a quantitative Object, that they themselves often related to without knowing (14:9) and had relationship with on their reduced terms (14:5-6, and particularly Peter). The relational words of Jesus' relational language involve the

qualitative experience of him as Subject in relationship together. Therefore, the theological trajectory of Jesus' disclosures of the whole of God involves only his relational work as Subject (14:1-11)—the relational work that his disciples, in reciprocal relationship, can also extend and exceed (14:12-14), as was fulfilled in the relational dynamic of Jesus *into* Paul.

Without responding to the referential question, Jesus continues in his relational language to compose conclusively the relational outcome of his theological trajectory and relational path: whole relationship together as family, with its primacy established 'already' in relational progression to 'not yet' (14:23-28). The distinguished Face's trajectory and path which emerged from God's definitive blessing now converges in this pivotal table fellowship for nothing less and no substitutes of this relational outcome, which is composed by the further relational language of Jesus' formative family prayer (Jn 17:20-26).

The primacy of whole relationship together as family in the already is the peace from God's definitive blessing fulfilled by Jesus that "I leave you; my peace I give to you" (Jn 14:27). The theological trajectory and relational path of this peace, however, should not be confused with the common, probable and fragmentary notions of peace shaped by the world—"I do not give to you as the world gives"—but clearly distinguished as from the Uncommon, by the improbable, and as whole. Here again the critical difference between a referential God as Object and the relational God as Subject emerges with further clarity and depth. Historically, Christian peace movements and peacemaking have often taken a different theological trajectory than the one Jesus as Subject fulfilled relationally from God's definitive blessing. The theological trajectory and relational path of the peace Jesus enacts converge in the narrow gate and road of wholeness and its uncommon and improbable relational outcome of whole relationship together in the very likeness of the relational ontology of the whole of God—"that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one" (Jn 17:22-23).

Moreover, the wholeness Jesus gives in relationship together as family in likeness of the Trinity is the experiential truth 'already' that "I will not leave you orphaned" (Jn 14:18), and that determines our whole ontology and function both as church family and in the world: "so that they may be one, as we are one...that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (Jn 17:22-23). This is the integral basis for the theological anthropology of whole ontology and function in critical contrast and conflict to reduced ontology and function. The roots of this ontology and function go back to creation, and its theological trajectory and relational path emerged in covenant relationship with Abraham when God directly communicated the clear relational imperative to him: "walk before me and be *tamiym*, not merely blameless but be whole" (Gen 17:1). If our theological anthropology does not have this theological trajectory and follow this relational path, then the ontology and function of the person and persons together as church family will not be *tamiym*. The relational consequence is that persons essentially become relational orphans and their gatherings become more like orphanages, in contrast and even conflict to the wholeness Jesus gives them in relationship together (cf. Jn 16:33).

During their pivotal table fellowship together—integrally involving his footwashing and Lord's Supper—Jesus made conclusive the whole theology that his

theological trajectory and relational path vulnerably embodied and relationally disclosed (Jn 13-17):

1. The whole of who, what and how God is; the whole of Jesus by nature is unable to be divided (“you still do not know me?”) nor can the whole of God be separated (“seen me has seen the Father,” “we are one”); Jesus embodied and disclosed only God’s whole ontology and function, nothing less and no substitutes.
2. The whole of who, what and how the person is; our ontology and function are whole in his qualitative image (“not *of* the world just as I am not”) and relational likeness (“one as we are one”); and we are whole together as God’s very family (“make our home with them,” “*the Father’s* love...in them, as I in them,” “they become completely one”); this is the definitive identity of both who we are and whose we are.
3. The whole of God’s relational response of grace to the human condition to make persons whole in relationship together as God’s family (“*the Father* sent me into the world,” “I am the way...to the Father,” “to give eternal life...that they may know *the whole of God*,” “I will not leave you orphaned,” “we will come to them and make our home with them,” “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me”); nothing less and no substitutes constitute the gospel.

Grace and peace—that is, the whole of God’s relational response of grace and the relational outcome of wholeness—are relational dynamics integrated in Jesus’ theological trajectory that are integrally enacted and fulfilled along his relational path in the primacy of whole relationship together in God’s family (cf. Col 1:19-20). Wholeness in relationship together involves the primacy of whole persons (from inner out, cf. “in spirit and truth”) in intimate involvement to *know* the whole of the other person, as signified by Jesus’ footwashing and as constituted by participating in Jesus’ sacrifice (his body and blood) behind the curtain in the temple in the intimate presence of God (cf. Heb 10:19-20). In Jesus’ theological trajectory and relational path, grace and peace emerge without the veil in the primacy of intimate relationship together with the whole of God and the whole of each person as family—the primacy of wholeness with the veil removed that Paul clarified theologically and functionally (Eph 2:14-22; 2 Cor 3:16-18). Therefore, whole theology—whether of God, the person or the gospel—involves the vulnerable involvement and relational intimacy in the primacy of whole relationship together with no veil. This primacy of relationship is irreducible and nonnegotiable in Jesus’ theological trajectory and relational path.

The reduction or renegotiation of this primacy was the critical issue for two other churches which Jesus exposed in his post-ascension relational discourse, along with the church in Thyatira discussed earlier. The church in Ephesus was exemplary in maintaining its church identity and doctrinal purity in the surrounding context (Rev 2:1-3,6). Their church ontology and function, however, had become a substitute for the



primacy of relationship together: “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first *in the primacy of relationship and renegotiated what’s primary*” (v.4). The church in Sardis was a successful church with a prominent reputation in the surrounding context (Rev 3:1). Yet, their ontology and function was a mere simulation of the primacy of wholeness, so Jesus jolted them in their illusion because “I have not found your works *pleroo*” (v.2), that is, complete, whole “in the sight of my God’s *perceptual-interpretive lens*” (*enopion*, before, in the presence of, cf. Abraham before God, Gen 17:1). In spite of their high level of church performance, both churches were on a different theological trajectory and relational path than Jesus.

In his relational messages to the churches in Ephesus, Sardis and Thyatira, Jesus teaches us a critical lesson that delineates a simple reality of life about the human person and the surrounding social context—matters we either pay attention to or ignore depending on our assumptions of theological anthropology and the human condition (e.g. the church in Thyatira). His lesson is integrated with his formative family prayer (Jn 17:9-19) and addresses the issue of contextualization defining us. Since we do not live in a vacuum, our ontology and function (both individual and corporate) are either shaped by the surrounding context we are *en* (v.11, thus “of the world,” v.14), or constituted by what we enter *eis* (dynamic movement “into”) that context with. In the latter constituting process, for the dynamic of *eis* to define and determine our ontology and function in congruence with Jesus (v.18) necessitates the *ek* (“of” indicating source) relational involvement to negate any defining influence on us from a surrounding context (“not of the world”) in order to determine us by our primary source in the whole of God’s relational context and process, therefore constituting the whole ontology and function in the primacy of relationship together for the *eis* relational movement back to the world (vv.16-18). Human contextualization, though neither disregarded nor necessarily unimportant, is clearly secondary to God’s in this process that integrally distinguishes our primary identity of who we are and whose we are (v.9). This reciprocating relational process (*ek-eis* relational dynamic, cf. reciprocating contextualization discussed previously) signifies the relational demands of grace for reciprocal relationship conjointly compatible with the theological trajectory of Jesus’ coming *eis* the world and congruent with his relational path of wholeness for all of life with which he engaged the world. Nothing less and no substitutes can distinguish the whole ontology and function of Jesus and of those in likeness who indeed follow him in the primacy of whole relationship together as family without the veil.

The clearest indicator that we have not shifted from Jesus’ theological trajectory and veered from his relational path is our theological anthropology. Our ontology and function reveal if we have, on one side of the coin, reduced and renegotiated the primacy of relationship and, on the other, kept the veil—both of which have the same relational consequence. The ontology and function in *shalom* and *tamiym* that emerge only in the primacy of relationship are what confirm that we are compatible with Jesus’ theological trajectory and congruent with his relational path (as the ancient poet anticipated, Ps 37:37). *Tamiym* was critical for Paul’s life. He was on a different theological trajectory when he entered the Damascus road. Then the whole of Jesus intruded on his ontology and function and jolted his theological anthropology, causing a retrospective for Paul in which he received *tamiym*’s epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction. The relational outcome was that the distinguished Face shined on him to bring change for

new relationship together in wholeness—without the veil. The Paul who emerged from the Damascus road was now not on a reshaped variable theological trajectory parallel to Jesus’—though his congruence has been questioned—but his theological trajectory was integrally compatible and whole-ly congruent with Jesus’ theological trajectory and relational path. Paul was vulnerably involved in ongoing reciprocal relationship with the whole of God (the Son and the Spirit, together with the Father), who composed the whole of Paul and his witness, as well as the whole in Paul and his theology. The relational dynamics that unfold are the relational work of Jesus’ theological trajectory extended *into* Paul and exceeded by him with the Spirit—just as Jesus promised for those relationally involved with him (Jn 14:12-13) and defined for Paul (Acts 26:16).

Jesus’ theological trajectory extended into Paul to continue its progression on Jesus’ relational path in relational response to the human condition to make it whole. Jesus’ focused concern for the human relational condition is also the focal point in Paul’s theological lens—and should be the core and sustaining function for all theological discourse—because this is what concerns the whole of God and involves God’s whole disclosures as Subject to constitute the theological trajectory vulnerably embodied by Jesus. Paul embodied this whole theology in likeness of God’s whole disclosure as Subject who confronted the historical Paul on the Damascus road, and because God’s relational concern for Paul’s and the human relational condition is what the relational Paul experienced in whole relationship together with God without the veil to integrally constitute the theological Paul. The relational path of function, inseparable from Jesus’ theological trajectory, was always antecedent to Paul’s theology. Therefore, the hermeneutic key to whole theology, and to the whole in Paul’s theology, is the integral interaction of the human relational condition “to be apart” from God’s relational whole with God’s thematic relational response of grace to this human condition. The sum total of God’s actions revealed post-creation were initiated and enacted to fulfill God’s concern to restore human persons to be whole in relationship together—the good news for the human need and problem. This is what Paul clearly proclaimed as the gospel, not of his shaping but only directly revealed from Jesus (Gal 1:11-12). No other theological discourse speaks of God and thus can distinguish the whole of God, nor speaks whole-ly for God’s vulnerable presence and intimate involvement.

This is signified in Paul’s standard greeting in his letters, “grace and peace,” his shorthand for the relational dynamics of God’s relational response of grace and its relational outcome in the primacy of whole relationship together as family with the veil removed. In the theology of wholeness, Paul purposefully stressed the necessary epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction by which his own person was confronted to be whole (*tamiym*), and by which he confronted Peter to be whole. This epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction were critically signified with the simple address in the beginning of each of his letters: “grace and peace” (both of Timothy’s letters add “mercy”). He also closed most of his letters with a greeting containing these terms. The simplicity and frequency of this greeting should not define its significance as formulaic and thereby ignore his distinguishing purpose (*semeion*, 2 Thes 3:17). These terms are critical to Paul’s thought and theology and basic to his gospel— aspects his closing greeting further emphasized.

“Grace and peace” were not combined by Paul as referential theological concepts but as a relational theological paradigm. They integrally compose part of his shorthand theological discourse for the functional convergence of the interdependent relational action and relational outcome directly from God the Father and Christ—whom Paul identified as “the God of peace” and “the Lord of peace” (1 Thes 5:23; 2 Thes 3:16; 2 Cor 13:11; Rom 15:33; Phil 4:9). The relational dynamics involved between relational action and outcome was an interaction Paul never separated nor assumed to be in operation.

This unfolding relational dynamic of “grace and peace” establishes the integral flow which outlines Paul’s theological framework to wholeness:

1. The *relational context* of the whole of God and God’s family, only from top down.
2. The *relational process* of the whole of God and God’s grace (family love), only from inner out.
3. The *relational progression* to the whole of God as God’s whole family, only on God’s qualitative-relational terms.

Paul’s theology of wholeness makes functional the qualitative and relational significance of this relational outcome.

Interrelated with “grace and peace” in Paul’s letters is “blameless and holy,” or a variation (1 Thes 3:13; 5:23; 1 Cor 1:8; Col 1:22; Eph 1:4; 5:27; Phil 2:15; 1 Tim 6:14). This composes his further shorthand discourse for a functional paradigm to supplement his theological paradigm above. Paul did not emphasize “blameless and holy,” for example, for the church at Thessalonica’s eschatological concerns, merely for the sake of purity when Christ returns. It is critical to pay attention to his shorthand language in order to have whole understanding of his relational message. Paul builds on “blameless” (*amemptos, amomos, anenkletos*) only from *tamiym* and deepens it: (1) what it means for the person to be whole qualitatively from inner out (“holy,” *hagios*, uncommon function), and (2) what it means for whole persons to live in relationship with the holy (uncommon) God together to be whole, the relational whole of God’s family only on God’s relational terms. Therefore, “holy and blameless” signify function only “uncommon and whole”.

To summarize what unfolds in Paul’s thought and theology: the functional paradigm of “holy and blameless” converged with the theological paradigm of “grace and peace” to signify being whole in relationship together (peace and blameless) only on the ongoing basis of the whole of God’s relational response and terms for the relationship (grace and holy). This integrally summarizes the irreducible gospel of peace for which Paul so lovingly fought, while necessarily fighting against reductionism so uncompromisingly (Col 2:8-10). Despite the reality that longing for wholeness was a given and was intuitive for the human person in Paul’s theology, the function of wholeness was never merely assumed by Paul and, more important, never left to the interpretation from human terms.

Paul made definitive this wholeness ‘in Christ’ (both ‘already’ and ‘not yet’) as the integrated function of two inseparable and nonnegotiable aspects of life:

1. “Let the peace of Christ rule *to be the only determinant* in your hearts” (Col 3:15a). The first aspect of wholeness involves by necessity the whole person from inner out constituted by the qualitative function of the heart restored to the qualitative image of God (Col 3:10; 2 Cor 3:10). This whole person is the qualitative function of the new creation (2 Cor 5:17), which Jesus made whole from above (Jn 3:3-7). Consequently anything less and any substitutes defining the person and determining one’s function are reductionism (Gal 6:15). Wholeness ‘in Christ’, however, is neither the whole person in isolation nor the whole person merely associated with other persons.
  
2. “...to which [peace] indeed you [pl.] were called in the one body” (Col 3:15b). The second inseparable aspect of wholeness is the integrated function of whole persons from inner out vulnerably involved in the relationships together necessary to be whole. By its very nature, this relational dynamic necessitates the qualitative function of the restored heart opening to one another (“Do not lie to each other...” Col 3:9) and coming together in transformed relationship as one (“In that renewal *according to the image of its Creator there is no longer Greek and Jew...*” Col 3:11, cf. Gal 3:26-29), thereby constituting the integrated function of equalized persons from inner out in intimate relationships of “love which binds everything together [*syndeo*], *the inseparable and nonnegotiable relational bonds* in perfect harmony” (*teleitos*, completeness, Col 3:14) for definitive wholeness. This integrated function of whole persons in whole relationships together constitutes the qualitative-relational significance of new covenant relationship together, which Paul made further definitive for the ecclesiology necessary for the whole (2 Cor 5:18; 13:11; Eph 2:14-15; Col 2:10; Rom 8:6) in relational likeness to the relational ontology of the whole of God (just as Jesus prayed for his family, Jn 17:20-26).

Paul’s paradigm, conjointly theological (“grace and peace”) and functional (“holy and blameless”), makes definitive the wholeness and its function for human life in the cosmos (Col 1:19-20). In his systemic framework composed by God’s creative and communicative action, this theology of wholeness conclusively integrates all knowledge and understanding into the wisdom and experiential truth of the whole, that is, the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes of God’s qualitative-relational whole embodied by the undivided Jesus—the experiential truth of the whole gospel for the inherent human need and problem. This relational epistemic process and theological discourse do not stop here, however. While Paul’s theological systemic framework always involves an eschatological trajectory, there is much more ‘already’ to unfold further and deeper on this adventure as sojourners together in relational progression to ‘not yet’—as Paul shared intimately of his own journey (Phil 3:10-16, cf. Jn 17:3) and kept praying for the church (Eph 1:17-18; 3:14-19). His latter prayer in the context of Ephesians whole ecclesiology echoes and extends in the church Jesus’ formative family prayer (Jn 17:20-26). As Paul whole-ly understood in relational language, this prayer can only be fulfilled in the whole ontology and function of the church as God’s family.

## The Seeds of New Wine Theology

As the new of God's whole is distinguished, we could assume that it will be openly received given our human condition. That would not be a good assumption given the redemptive changes required theologically, ontologically and relationally to receive the new.

The new has always been unsettling in human history, particularly in a comparative process with a limited epistemic field (cf. Lk 5:39). This was the issue for Nicodemus when Jesus introduced him to the new born from above—from outside the universe and human contextualization (Jn 3:1-13). What Nicodemus was introduced to is what Paul distinguished in his Galatians letter (see Gal 6:15): that is, the *new* is distinguished from what exists or prevails in human context, and therefore cannot be compared or confused with that. Beyond what can be compared in a limited epistemic field, Paul earlier defined this new reality as emerging from Jesus (2 Cor 5:17) and later clarified it theologically as those relationally involved with Jesus in his theological trajectory and relational path (Rom 6:4). What interposed the original creation and its existing life—from outside the universe in the relational action of God's strategic, tactical and functional shifts—was a new creation and its new life for the human condition, yet not without controversy for those remaining within the limits of the old.

In God's relational action there are complex theological dynamics which converge in Jesus' theological trajectory and relational path to constitute the whole of God's thematic relational response of grace to the human condition. The roots, growth, outcome and maturing of the new creation were integrally signified in a metaphor used by Jesus about the new wine (Lk 5:33-39). The focus of new wine provides us with an integral understanding of the new creation and its related issues.

When Jesus initiated the Lord's supper for the pivotal table fellowship, the "cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk 22:20). The disciples had yet to understand the significance of the new covenant for relationship together in the context of God's kingdom, since immediately after the supper they disputed about which of them was the greatest (Lk 22:24-30, cf. 13:29-30). While Jesus exposed their reductionism and constituted their relationships in the relational wholeness of his kingdom, the disciples evidenced their need to be changed (cf. Mt 18:1-4)—that is, the process of redemptive change in which the old dies so the new rises. This is the significance of the *new* that Jesus anticipated at the earlier table fellowship with the parable of new wine. This parable tends to be used incorrectly to emphasize new forms and practices, but the new is about changed persons experiencing new relationship together (the focus in Lk 5:34-35). Perhaps, at that stage, the disciples only practiced ontological simulation of the new by following Jesus' example but without relational involvement with his whole person. Yet, redemptive change was soon available for them when Jesus fulfilled his salvific work, as the Lord's supper pointed to, signifying his sacrifice behind the curtain for the new covenant relationship. Redemptive change is inescapable to be new and whole. This always raises the issue of vulnerability and how willing our person makes our heart vulnerable (as "in spirit and truth") to engage God.

In this new wine table fellowship, Jesus addresses the juxtaposition of "eat and drink" (the new) and "fast and pray" (the old). The shift from the old to the new is more than a paradigm shift but the transformation that emerges from Jesus' anticipated

sacrifice behind the curtain for the relational outcome of new relationship together in wholeness with the veil removed. Their new wine table fellowship anticipated their new covenant relationship without the veil such that they could enjoy the vulnerable presence and intimate involvement of Jesus without the constraints of the old. The veil can be understood as follows: the gap between the universe and that which is beyond, the barrier between human limits and the transcendent God, the qualitative distance between the human heart and the heart of God, and the relational distance between the human person and the whole of God. The absence of the veil, therefore, is critical for new covenant relationship together; and the new wine table fellowship is solely a function of this new creation.

In his emphasis of the gospel for all people, Luke's Gospel further highlights this process. Various table fellowships Jesus had with persons (Levi, Lk 5:27-31, a prostitute, Lk 7:36-50, Martha and Mary, Lk 10:38-42, Zacchaeus, Lk 19:1-10) disclosed this process of the new wine, yet it also brought controversy. Why all the controversy about the new wine table fellowship that fulfills the human condition? This is a question that needs to be addressed even today amongst ourselves. The answer necessarily involves both how the new is defined and the old is perceived.

While the source of the new creation is clearly from outside the universe, the seeds of the new wine are planted in the innermost of human life (Eze 11:19; 36:26). Therefore, the new wine emerges only from inner out and not from outer in (Jer 31:31-34; 2 Cor 3:3). A foretaste of the seeds of this relational dynamic was given when Moses summoned all the Israelites back to covenant relationship together with God (Dt 30). Understood in relational terms, this is a key dynamic underlying either the unfolding of God's blessing (30:16,19) holding life together in the innermost ("heart," from inner out, vv.1-2,6,10,17) for the wholeness in the gospel ("life," vv.15,19-20), or the only alternative of reductionism ("death," "curses," vv.15,19). In this underlying relational dynamic, we are accountable to distinguish ourselves ("choose life," v.19) in reciprocal relational response from inner out in the primacy of relationship together ("loving the LORD your God," v.20). This is a foretaste not only of the new wine but the unsettling it brings: accountability to distinguish ourselves in reciprocal relational response as whole persons in relationship together face to Face with the whole of God.

The unfolding of the blessing from God's face to bring change for new relationship together in wholeness (*siym* for *shalom*) is the integrating dynamic for the new creation. What then unfolds in the OT is not a history of events, or the narrative of situations and circumstances of a people. Rather what unfolds is the primacy of relationship and the relational progression of God's thematic relational response to the human condition, and the whole of God's involvement with the people of God in relationship together (as evident in Moses' summons above). An outline of God's thematic relational action and response includes the following:

1. The creation and fragmentation of God's whole (Gen 2:18; 3:1-7).
2. The human effort to restore and shape God's whole (Gen 11:1-9).
3. God's response for whole relationship together (Gen 17:1-2; cf. Ps 25:16; 68:6).
4. Redemption necessary only for relationship together (Ex 6:1-7).
5. Summary of God's response (Num 6:24-27).

God's definitive blessing integrates the relational progression unfolding in the OT to the NT. This is what is embodied and fulfilled in the NT; thus the OT is not only about the past or simply old (e.g. superseded) but inseparable in the relational dynamic of the OT *into* the NT. Therefore, the whole gospel is not an NT phenomenon emerging with the incarnation of Jesus and developed by Paul. The whole gospel originated even before creation and has unfolded in relational progression since (Eph 1:4; Mt 25:34). This outline continues in the NT:

6. Jesus fulfills (*pleroo*) the whole of God's relational response (Col 1:19-20).
7. The Spirit is sent to complete (*pleroo*) God's relational action (Jn 16:13; 2 Cor 3:18).
8. Paul makes whole (*pleroo*) God's word for the ontology and function of God's new creation family—in the relational dynamic of Jesus *into* Paul (Col 1:25-26; Eph 3:2-6).
9. The Spirit completes God's eschatological relational conclusion for the new creation (Jn 16:13; 2 Cor 1:22; 3:17; Rev 21:1-5,22).

As God's relational dynamic unfolded from the OT *into* the NT, it extended from Jesus *into* Paul. Yet, this process cannot be limited to their historical human contexts, for example, that Jesus and Paul were both Jews. Here in human contexts, of course, their stories neither end nor, just as important, did their stories begin. This is certainly obvious for Jesus, though this is usually not the focus for the origin of Paul's story. Jesus and Paul extend us further than their prevailing human contexts to the divine (divine and deity used interchangeably) person of Jesus and Paul's primordial human person; therefore, they take us deeper to the innermost whole of both God's divine being and human being, of which Paul was not merely a Jew but more importantly a human person in the image of God. The story of the divine person and being integrally unfolds in the story of Jesus, and Paul's story is the reciprocal emergence of the human person and being. These are seeds of the new wine that cannot remain buried in their narratives. While each person lived in human contexts, they cannot be limited to those historical frameworks and thus be defined by them. The new wine emerges only from inner out and, at best, can only be simulated from outer in. Paul's story unfolds whole-ly as the person and being God created from inner out because it converged with Jesus' story to be redeemed, *recreated* and made whole. These are their integral stories for the gospel of wholeness further constituted by Jesus *into* Paul.

God's relational dynamic of both the OT *into* the NT and Jesus *into* Paul always unfolded integrally from inner out with nothing less and no substitutes. The reciprocal response of nothing less and no substitutes for the inner out is the critical issue that creates controversy about the new wine and that confronts the old in us. God's relational dynamic from inner out with nothing less and no substitutes gives primacy to the qualitative and relational and, therefore, renders all else secondary—not necessarily unimportant but nevertheless secondary. Anything less and any substitutes from us, even with good intentions (e.g. Peter), make the secondary primary, thereby reducing the primacy of the qualitative and relational and, unintentionally or intentionally, reinforcing the old, that is, embedded further in reduced ontology and function. By its nature, the seeds of the new wine are planted in the innermost of human life for the germination of

the new wine from inner out in the primacy of new relationship together in wholeness with no veil. What sprouts from these seeds is irreducible and nonnegotiable, notably to secondary matters and the old of human contextualization.

As we shift our lens to perceive the convergence of Jesus and Paul along with the Spirit, and understand the relational dynamic that not only integrated them in the gospel but also further unfolded and extended them in the new creation family of God (the church) to the eschatological relational conclusion of the whole of God's thematic relational action, then we gain whole understanding of the human relational condition and the whole of God's thematic relational response since creation to make whole his creation in the innermost. Jesus is the integral person in the relational process to the new wine but not the central figure around which all this revolves theologically and functionally. As the embodied whole of God, Jesus fulfills the Face of God's relational response; Paul is transformed by it and thereby extends its relational dynamic, and the Spirit brings it all to completion. Fragmenting any of their persons or all of them together has critical consequences for the relational outcome of the new wine—namely for the new wine table fellowship in the primacy of relationship together without the veil (signified in Jesus' parable, Lk 5:36-37). When the distinguished Face of God is embodied in whole, and vulnerably present and intimately involved, then his family "eat and drink" in face-to-face relationship together, not by maintaining relational distance in "fast and pray."

In spite of any controversy, the seeds of the new wine sprout to grow the new wine, whose qualitative and relational expansion cannot be contained in the old (Lk 5:37-38); and those who try to shape it within the old only dispel the new and fragment the whole—an elusive issue for Jesus' early critics that continues to be problematic today. The outcome from these seeds is new wine theology, and what sprouts from new wine theology is the relational outcome of wholeness conjointly in theology and practice—just as Jesus' relational response conclusively gave us nothing less and no substitutes in contrast to what prevails in human contexts, even in churches and the academy (Jn 14:27). And Jesus continues to challenge and encourage those on his theological trajectory and relational path, "who *deepen their relational involvement with me* will also *enact the relational work that I enact* and, in fact, will *enact greater relational work than this*" (Jn 14:12).



## Chapter 6                      **The Relational Outcome of Whole Theology and Practice**

***Walk together with me and be whole.*** Gen 17:1  
**And let the *wholeness* of Christ rule in your hearts.** Col 3:15

Theology in the age of reductionism will emerge from the theological task as either a referential outcome in various forms of referential terms or a relational outcome solely in God's relational terms. These results unfold in a process of time, not a singular moment, and are not always neatly either-or, sometimes going back and forth in formative interaction (e.g. as in Peter) or a dialectic process (e.g. as in Paul). Yet, these two outcomes are clearly in competition and their determining processes counter each other in any aspect of theological engagement.

With the mutual assumption of Scripture as God's revelation, each approach unfolds in a different outcome. In referential terms, the information from Scripture is gathered for a narrow knowledge and understanding about God that can be formed into incomplete doctrines as the basis for faith. Nothing more emerges because the extent of the information in referential terms is gathered in a narrow epistemic field of Scripture seen only in referential language; consequently, this narrowed-down process limits the extent of knowledge and understanding about God available (cf. Jn 5:37-39). These limits then become the basis for shaping and constructing conclusions (notably doctrines of faith) that can unfold in just a referential outcome and nothing more, no matter what else is expected or desired (cf. Jn 6:14-15, 24-28,60,66; 1 Cor 3:4,18-22). This referential outcome may have theological similarities of doctrine (however incomplete) to the relational outcome, and thus may be sufficient for the faith of many. In reality, however, a referential outcome is counter to the relational outcome in both theology and practice.

### **The Relational Outcome Unfolds**

In relational terms, Scripture is not only God's revelation but more important God's communication in relational action that is initiated by God's relational response of grace. Yet, God's response cannot be reduced to a purpose of transmitting information about God, however useful the information could be. God communicates for the sole purpose of having whole relationship together. Scripture cannot be approached in a narrow epistemic field and be expected to reveal God's relational purpose. This epistemic limit of referentialization creates a barrier (veil) to obscure God's purpose, and, consequently, it cannot distinguish the relational outcome of whole relationship together contingent on having the veil removed. In contrast to narrowing down Scripture to incomplete doctrines for faith, Scripture in relational language opens up the whole of

God's relational response of grace to the human condition. The relational outcome unfolds beyond mere doctrines of faith to nothing less and no substitutes of being whole, living whole and making whole—God's whole in ontology and function.

In relational terms, God's revelation emerges and unfolds in the whole of God's ontology and function in both creative and communicative action for the necessary relational response to the human relational condition. When the purpose of God's relational response is clearly distinguished, then the focus shifts by necessity to the reciprocal nature of God's relational terms: *who* and *what* God seeks for whole relationship together.

Three persons discussed previously (Samaritan woman, Peter and Paul) give us an overview of what and who God seeks in relationship within the context of competing referential-or-relational outcomes. The definitive revelation of the strategic shift embodying God's relational response was vulnerably communicated to the Samaritan woman (as discussed previously). What was equally distinguished to her was what and who God seeks in relationship together: the whole person from inner out distinguished by the heart in vulnerable involvement (“in spirit and truth”)—God's irreducible and nonnegotiable relational terms for reciprocal relationship together in compatible ontology and function.

Who and what the embodied Word seeks was an ongoing challenge for Peter in their relationship together as he vacillated between a referential and relational outcome; and it also was an ongoing tension and overt conflict between Peter's referential terms and Jesus' relational terms, with Peter seeking to shape on his own terms what Jesus seeks in relationship. His referential outcome evoked Jesus' final demand to Peter in relational language for the relational outcome: “You must follow me *vulnerably with your whole person in relationship together entirely on my relational terms*” (Jn 21:22). Who and what God seeks is our *face* for face-to-Face relationship that by its nature involves heart to heart for compatible ontology and function. The relational outcome eventually emerged for Peter but not before further redemptive change from his ‘old’ to the new of God's whole solely on God's relational terms.

Paul clearly entered the Damascus road on a theological trajectory different than the embodied Face, who confronted Paul about both the conflict of his theological trajectory and the ontology and function of his relational path. Paul's referential outcome unfolded from a collective-journey with Israel (as early Judaism and Second Temple Judaism in referential terms) and emerged from a shared-journey with all human persons—the outcome in reduced ontology and function from both journeys.

Details of Paul's biography are very sketchy and we have only general references to his life prior to the Damascus road. From a partial rewind of Paul's collective-journey, we do know from his roots back to Abraham the following: From childhood Paul was certainly foremost a part of Israel (“the tribe of Benjamin”) and a Jew (“a Hebrew of Hebrews”) to the core as signified by observance of torah (“a Pharisee,” Phil 3:5), who was educated strictly according to the law of their fathers (Acts 22:3; 26:4-5), and perhaps advanced to the top of his class (Gal 1:14). Yet, to go even deeper than this primary identity for Paul, we need to rewind further back to creation to locate the origin where Paul was *first* a human person. This is the shared-journey which Paul shared in common with all human persons. It is the shared-journey of this person who—as the Paul subsequently shaped, defined and determined by the above details—needed to fully

understand the meaning of *what* was indeed foremost about his person, and as a result would be able to experience *who* was indeed primary of his person. This necessitated going deeper than his collective identity to involve the roots of his *ontological identity*—the identity integrating both *what* as well as *who* Paul was.

This shared-journey of Paul's person is in part the reason why it is inadequate to attempt to understand Paul only from human contexts such as Judaism (which in itself was diverse, even for Pharisees) and the Greco-Roman world, or even in the early church. There is a deeper context defining and determining Paul only by which Paul's whole person can be understood.

This retrospective journey that focused Paul on the origin of his person must have been difficult for Paul the Jew to face because it got to the heart of the matter, both theologically and functionally. On the basis of this reality from his own Scripture, he had to examine his life and practice and openly face the difficult reality of his person subsequently shaped, defined and determined by the reductionism in his collective-journey as well as personal-journey. He had invested his whole life to this perceptual-interpretive framework and in this quantitative system of religious practice, and now he had to account for what he profited from this investment (cf. Phil 3:7-8). Surely he recalled "Circumcise your heart" (Dt 10:16), and that "the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendents, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live" (Dt 30:6). Did this describe him, wasn't he dedicated in his faith-practice? As a Pharisee, was he not blameless before God—rigorously observing purity law to the letter? Could he not then assume the same covenant as Abraham and claim his birthright as his descendent? Yes and no.

Given the theological basis for the gospel which Paul later makes conclusive in his Romans letter, he apparently questioned strongly the validity of his own participation in the collective-journey from Abraham (Rom 2:28-29, cf. Jn 8:39-40). This was not about the dedication or even sincerity of his faith-practice. Rather, where indeed was Paul's heart in his life and practice? The heart signifies the ontology of the person from inner out. Thus the heart signifies the qualitative function of the whole person, the qualitative nature of which has been created in the image of God. The heart's inner-out function of the whole person is what and who God seeks to be involved with for relationship together (see Ps 40:6-8; Isa 29:13, cf. Mt 15:7-9). David understood this and thus prayed for this inner-out function for God's people (1 Chron 29:16-18), of which Paul had to be aware. The Psalmist also asked the Lord to "judge me...according to the integrity that is in me" (Ps 7:8). 'Integrity' (*tom*) is an inner-out function denoting completeness, fullness, which Paul also had to examine in his life and practice.

In contrast, the person based on an ontology from outer in is signified by less substantive function measured primarily in quantitative terms, by which the person is defined by what one does and/or has—for example by circumcision, observing food laws and the Sabbath (Israel's identity markers), or by quantity of words and mere forms of worship without the substance of the heart (as Isaiah noted in the above prophesy). In such function the heart remains distant, detached or even closed, thus rendering the most significant aspect of the person uninvolved. A person defined and determined by this quantitative function becomes fragmented into these measured indicators or parts; these parts, even their sum, are insufficient to account for the whole person as created in the

image of God. Therefore the ontology of the human person from outer in is always a reduction of the person God created. This reduced person is essentially, at best, an ontological simulation and epistemological illusion of the whole person; moreover, any attempt to construct the whole from outer in is analogous to the human effort to construct the whole from bottom-up demonstrated by the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-4). This is not the person God seeks for relationship together. And any such reduction of the person must be understood as the sin of reductionism, not simply positioned against God's whole but countering the whole of God's relational involvement—for example by diminishing God's involvement only to situations and circumstances, and by minimalizing God's presence only to a particular place or time. This would emerge as the defining issue underlying Paul's life and practice.

The heart signifies the unmistakable function of what God seeks: the whole person, nothing less and no substitutes. When God made conclusive to Abraham the terms for covenant relationship together, the LORD appeared to him directly and said clearly in order to constitute Abraham's relational response: "Walk before me, and be blameless" (Gen 17:1). That is, "be involved with me in relationship together by being blameless (*tamiym*)." The tendency is to render "blameless" as moral purity and/or ethical perfection (cf. Gen 6:9), notably in Judaism by observance of the law (cf. 2 Sam 22:23-24). With this lens, even Paul perceived his righteousness as "blameless" (Phil 3:6). Yet *tamiym* denotes to be complete, whole, and is not about mere moral and ethical purity. Beyond this limited perception, *tamiym* involves the ontology of being whole, namely the whole person from inner out involved in the primacy of relationship together.

The focus on purity, however, was problematic. In Israel's history purity often was measured functionally by a code shaped by human contextualization, and thus focused more on what persons were responsible to do rather than on the primary function of being involved in relationship together (cf. 1 Sam 15:22; Jer 7:22-23; Hos 6:6; Mic 6:6-8). When such practice was in effect, this demonstrated a redefinition of human ontology from inner out to outer in, thereby reducing persons to the measured indicators of what they did and had. Moreover, in this reductionist process Israel became more about land and nation-state rather than about a people and covenant relationship together, more about religious culture (e.g. ethnocentrism with quantitative identity markers) and politics (e.g. nationalism) than about relational life and practice (both corporate and individual) in the image and likeness of God and having theological significance as God's relational whole on God's relational terms. In other words, Israel's history became the frequent narrative of God's people diminishing the covenant relationship and getting embedded, even enslaved, in the surrounding human context (cf. Jer 3:10; 12:2; Eze 33:31). This also applied to the tradition of Pharisees during Paul's time (see Jesus' penetrating analysis, Mt 15:1-20, cf. the Qumran Essenes' critique<sup>1</sup>).

These reductions all fragmented the integrated functional and relational significance of *tamiym* which God made conclusive to constitute Abraham in covenant relationship together. To be "blameless" by its nature must be fully integrated with *what* and *who* God seeks to be involved with. Therefore, "blameless" is both inseparable from the qualitative function of the heart and irreducible of the ontology of the whole person from inner out. As a Pharisee who rigorously observed the law, Paul had considered his righteousness to be "blameless" (Phil 3:6). Yet Jesus previously had exposed the

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<sup>1</sup> See 4QNah 1:2,7; 2:2-3; 3:3,8.

reductionist practices of Pharisees of Paul's day and their underlying ontology of the person from outer in without the significance of the heart (Mt 15:1-20, cf. 5:20). The critical assessment of one's faith must account for the ontology of the whole person. That is to say, to be blameless is nothing less and no substitutes for being whole as created in the image and likeness of the whole of God. For Abraham, this was the integrated functional and relational significance of his involvement with God signifying his faith, and therefore constituting the necessary relationship together of the covenant on God's relational terms.

For Paul, this retrospective journey was not about going back merely to his birthright as a descendent of Abraham but more importantly about reclaiming his "creation-right" as the person in full created significance. And what *tamiym* signified in Paul's Damascus road experience was indeed the needed epistemological clarification and hermeneutical correction from his shared-journey—a journey also shared by all his readers. Any perception of his own blamelessness was an epistemological illusion since his practice only signified an ontological simulation from reductionism, that is, a person functioning only from outer in without accounting for the integrity of his heart. As Paul faced the reductionism in his life and practice, this turned him back to the pivotal juncture of his journey, confronted by the Face on the Damascus road.

This Christophany was an extension of God's embodied relational response to the human condition (Paul's condition) in relational terms and thus cannot be narrowed down to a conversion event or even limited to the lens of Jewish mysticism. The Face's relational response pursued Paul's face entirely for Face-to-face relationship together in the context of the conflict between them. Yet, the situation and circumstances are secondary in this interaction and should not shift the focus from the primacy of relationship together. The peace between them in Face-to-face relationship does not emerge from a mere conversion—Paul did not turn from his Jewish faith but redefined it; rather, it can emerge only from the transformation of the person from inner out to make whole Paul's ontology and function for compatible heart-to-heart relationship together. The relational outcome for Paul was the experiential reality of wholeness in their reciprocal relationship together and, on this basis alone, was his experiential truth of the gospel of wholeness that extended Jesus' relational language and terms from Jesus *into* Paul.

This relational outcome of Paul's whole person is *who* emerges from his journey on the Damascus road. This experiential truth is the basis for *what* emerges and unfolds in Paul's life, practice, thought and theology. From this experiential truth, for example, in his Galatians letter Paul will establish the functional clarity of the truth and whole of the gospel from any alternatives of reductionism, and thus to be distinguished from any alternative gospels. In Romans, Paul will make definitive the theological basis for the truth and whole of the gospel, thus providing the theological clarity necessary to be integrated with the functional clarity in Galatians to constitute the truth and whole of the gospel only as the whole of God's relational context and process in response of grace to the human condition. All of this unfolds of course only because it was first Paul's experiential truth with the embodied whole of God.

Moreover, the relational significance of Paul's response constituted the functional significance of Paul's further response to the content of Jesus' other words on the Damascus road: obedience, in relational response to the embodied Word's call to be

vulnerably involved with him also in relational response to the human condition of reductionism apart from God's whole (Acts 9:6; 22:10; 26:15-18). Obedience to God must by its nature be a function of relational involvement; otherwise obedience becomes rendered to some reductionist function defining what a person does, for example, merely from duty or obligation without any deeper relational significance in response to God (cf. Gal 5:3). That type of obedience could not signify the change Paul was experiencing. What emerged from Paul's obedience was only the outworking of his relational response to and ongoing relational involvement with the whole of God—namely to the embodied Word and notably with the Spirit. And his relational outcome further extending to us is that Paul becomes the definitive bridge (both theologically and functionally): between the Old Testament and the New Testament, between original creation and the new creation, between reduced ontology and function and whole ontology and function, that is, between the 'old' and the 'new' of God's whole church family.

This is the good news of God's whole ontology and function in relational response to our condition and *why* the whole of God seeks *who* and *what*—only nothing less and no substitutes for reciprocal relationship together to be God's whole on God's relational terms. We need to give account in our gospel and our theology and practice for what God seeks, that is, without reductionism and renegotiation to our terms.

## The Gospel of Wholeness

Any gospel heard and received in referential language can only have a referential outcome. This was not the theological trajectory and relational path of the gospel that the Samaritan woman experienced. This was, however, the outcome with which Peter struggled until his gospel became congruent with Jesus' improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path, in order to determine his vulnerable involvement in reciprocal relationship together necessary to be whole. Since Paul experienced the gospel directly in relational language and terms ("Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*... *I am* Jesus, whom you are..." (Acts 9:4-5), his gospel was and had entirely the relational outcome of the whole gospel: the dynamic of 'nothing less and no substitutes' making vulnerable the whole of God's ontology and function in relational response to our condition to make whole our ontology and function in reciprocal relationship together in God's family. Many of Paul's readers do not clearly understand Paul's gospel—some even making a distinction between his and Jesus' gospel—because their interpretive lens focuses on referential language in his theology for a referential outcome in his practice, consequently not understanding Paul's relational language extending directly from Jesus' relational language.

For Paul, this relational outcome was "the gospel of *wholeness*" (Eph 6:15), and anything less or any substitute was "a different gospel which is really no gospel at all" (Gal 1:6-7). Paul fully understood when he identified 'the gospel of wholeness' that it was ongoingly challenged by and in conflict with reductionism. Therefore, the gospel of wholeness is qualified in this context by its ongoing contention with reductionism (Eph 6:10-18) and necessitates this unavoidable and nonnegotiable theology and practice: In contrast to what has become the conventional way of proclaiming the gospel, Paul defines in relational language the conjoint fight *for* the whole gospel and *against*

reductionism, while in reciprocal involvement with the Spirit in triangulation (cf. navigation) with the situations and circumstances of human contextualization for the reciprocating contextualization ongoingly needed to be whole from inner out, to live whole in qualitative and relational significance, and thereby to make whole the human condition, even as it may be reflected, reinforced or sustained in church and academy. Indispensable, and thus irreplaceable, for this theology and practice is both the strong view of sin as reductionism and the complete theological anthropology for persons in ontology and function to be what and who God seeks in compatible reciprocal relationship. A gospel that does not vulnerably address the sin of reductionism with the relational outcome of whole ontology and function is an incomplete gospel at best, not whole but fragmentary.

The theology and practice of the gospel of wholeness in Paul's relational language required this relational imperative: "let the *wholeness* of Christ rule in your hearts, into which *wholeness* indeed you were called in the one body" (Col 3:15). As discussed previously, Paul made definitive this wholeness of Christ in the integrated function of two inseparable realities unfolding from the relational outcome of the gospel:

1. The whole person from inner out constituted by the qualitative function of the heart restored to the qualitative image of God (Col 3:10), the person who is the qualitative function of the new creation (2 Cor 5:17), which Jesus made whole from above (Jn 3:3-7), and therefore their ontology and function cannot be defined and determined from outer in without fragmenting the whole person to reduced ontology and function (Gal 6:15).
2. The integral function of whole persons from inner out vulnerably involved in the reciprocal relationships in relational likeness of the whole of God (as Jesus prayed, Jn 17:20-26; Col 2:9-10; 3:10), which are constituted by transformed relationships vulnerably both equalized as well as intimate (Col 3:11,14; Gal 3:26-29; 5:6).

From Paul's own experience, if the wholeness of Christ is the only determinant ("rule," *brabeuo*) in our hearts, then the relational outcome will be the integral function of whole persons in whole relationships together. This integral function is a nonnegotiable for the gospel or its outcome is reduced. This relational outcome is conclusive of the qualitative and relational significance of the new creation 'already', which composes the new covenant relationship together of God's whole church family (Gal 4:28-31; Rom 8:6,15-17; 2 Cor 5:18; Eph 2:14-22). As Paul made definitive the ecclesiology for the wholeness of the church, he theologically and functionally bridged this new creation with the original creation, this new covenant relationship with the covenant relationship distinguished with Abraham—who was given God's terms for relationship together in only relational language (Gen 17:1-2), not unlike Paul. God's relational terms are always 'be whole' (*tamiym*) as we are involved ongoingly with God in undivided reciprocal relationship together, which the who, what and how of Abraham enacted to warrant the relational function of righteousness—not what he did in referential terms in order to be considered righteous. Paul clearly knew the difference in this critical

distinction (Gal 3:6-14; Rom 4) because he once credited himself in reduced righteousness while he labored in a covenant in referential terms (Phil 3:4-6).

Therefore, vital to the issue of righteousness in the whole gospel is our theological anthropology. Abraham and the new Paul were not credited with righteousness for what they *did* (various forms of works, including serving) or even what they *had* in referential terms (faith); that would be a referential outcome of defining persons in reduced ontology and function, which is merely a gospel in referential terms. Abraham was credited with righteousness for who, what and how he was in reciprocal covenant relationship with God. This is the necessary hermeneutical lens for righteousness that constituted both the whole of God's presence and involvement and also the whole person God seeks in compatible reciprocal relationship together—"the new self created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness" (Eph 4:24). This is the relational outcome that unfolded in the gospel of wholeness, which can emerge only from complete, whole (*tamiym*) theological anthropology.

Moreover, God's relational terms for reciprocal relationship in the relational function of *tamiym* ("whole," not the referential condition of "blameless") is inseparable from *shalom*. By their nature in relational terms, *tamiym* and *shalom* unfold in God's relational dynamic of the gospel from the beginning, and thus they must be integrated for the gospel to be distinguished—yet not in the incomplete narrow terms of being irenic and without blame. The good news is incomplete unless the 'wholeness' of *shalom* composes God's relational response and its relational outcome. Inseparably, the relational outcome of the gospel is incomplete until 'to be and live whole' of *tamiym* composes our reciprocal relational response to and experience of God's relational response of grace to our human condition. And this wholeness and being whole emerge only from the relational response and outcome of the definitive blessing that the Face initiated from the beginning, vulnerably embodied and ongoingly enacts: "...make his face shine on you and *relationally respond* in grace to you...and *bring the change necessary for the new relationship (siym) together in wholeness*" (Num 6:24-26). The integral relational function of *tamiym* and *shalom* makes definitive the reciprocal relational nature of the whole of God's ontology and function, and thereby conclusively discredits any notions of unilateral relationship in God's blessing, salvific action and the gospel.

Eliminating unilateral relationship from God's blessing, salvific action and the gospel does not imply in any way that God's actions are dependent on human actions. The inescapable implication of reciprocal relationship, however, is that God's whole ontology and function is present not as Object in referential terms but entirely involved as Subject in the relational terms of God's nature for the sole purpose of relationship together in likeness of God's relational ontology. On the basis of God's relational ontology and function, God's relational actions seek persons in the ontology and function that will be compatible for relationship, that is, nothing less and no substitutes for our whole ontology and function in the vulnerable involvement of reciprocal relationship together without the veil. God's whole gospel has no relational significance, and therefore no relational outcome, if it involves a theological anthropology of reduced ontology and function that fragments persons into the parts of what they do and have—even if what they have is faith as an identity marker, and what they do is serve (cf. Jn 15:15; Jam 2:23-24). To paraphrase Jesus: "the theological anthropology you use will be the gospel and outcome you get" (Mk 4:24). The relational imperative for Paul is that



“the whole of Christ be the only determinant for the person from inner out and their relationships together.”

In the gospel of wholeness, Paul illuminated unmistakably the relational outcome of whole ontology and function (both God’s and ours, Col 2:9-10; Eph 1:22-23), and further extends its intrusion (with Jesus *into* Paul by the Spirit) on the referential outcome of reduced ontology and function to make it whole, and thereby bridging the ‘old’ with the ‘new’ (Col 3:9-11; Eph 4:20-24). Paul’s illumination is conclusive because this also was the relational outcome of his direct engagement with the Spirit in the relational epistemic process (2 Cor 4:4,6; Eph 3:2-6). His epistemic conclusion should not be confused with mysticism or reduced to the esoteric knowledge of early gnosticism. This was simply the relational outcome of Paul’s ontology and function vulnerably in face-to-Face, heart-to-heart involvement with God’s ontology and function relationally initiated to him for reciprocal relationship together in wholeness. God’s ontology and function was nothing less and no substitutes in relational response, therefore Paul’s ontology and function could neither be anything less nor any substitute in compatible reciprocal response. This is *who* and *what* God seeks to compose indeed the good news for our condition.

Yet, this distinguished relational outcome is persistently reduced to a referential outcome, such that the gospel is consistently perceived merely in referential language and terms—much to Jesus’ frustration (Jn 6:26; 14:9) and Paul’s astonishment (Gal 1:6; cf. 2 Cor 11:4). The persistence reflects the influence of sin as reductionism that is still unaccounted for. The consistency exposes the presence of fragmentary ontology and function that still need to be made whole. To what extent does this presence and influence exist or even prevail today? Understanding the answer necessitates returning to the new wine table fellowship with the veil taken away. Most important, resolving the answer requires vulnerably involving ourselves in Jesus’ intrusive relational path. The gospel of wholeness relationally embodying nothing less and no substitutes of God’s ontology and function demands by its qualitative relational nature our compatible reciprocal relational response, not an obligatory response in conventional referential terms.

“The terms you use will be the outcome you get.”

## **Sprouting New Wine**

In my opinion, the most significant contribution from postmodernism is its critique of underlying assumptions (mainly of modernism) that challenges any templates (most notably a grand blueprint or metanarrative) imposing a narrowed view of the world to which human life necessarily conforms. The postmodern hermeneutic of suspicion helped expose such templates which were based on bad or false assumptions. We need to learn from this process and initiate our own hermeneutic of suspicion, yet for a different outcome than postmodernism. It is not the presence of a metanarrative—that is, the metanarrative from beyond the universe distinguished from a grand blueprint from within the universe—that is the issue but rather the notion of a template imposing a narrow view epistemologically, hermeneutically and theologically, and on this basis constraining what and how we are ontologically and functionally. Such a template can exist in the Christian

religious community in the form of its tradition or in a less formal pattern of its status quo. The presence and promotion of either need our hermeneutic of suspicion.

As the hermeneutical key to the ‘new’, Jesus initiated this needed hermeneutic of suspicion to expose a template of tradition while introducing the new wine table fellowship (Lk 5:33-39, cf. Mt 15:1-20), and also to jolt the religious community from its status quo in a pivotal interaction with Nicodemus (Jn 3:1-16, cf. 5:39-40). In each interaction, the ‘old’ was maintained at the expense of the ‘new’, therefore tradition and the status quo needed redemptive change for the ‘new’ to be born, raised up in the new and lived whole in relationship together without any template signified by the veil.

The ongoing tension and conflict between the new and the old clearly rises when the new’s presence is constrained, shaped or conformed to the limits of the old. Of course, this increased level assumes the presence of the new, which is distinguished by the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes in our person and relationships, that is, from inner out in the primacy of relationships together. The seeds of new wine that Jesus planted at their defining table fellowship are cultivated in the innermost of human life, not in secondary matter prevailing in human contexts. With relational language serving as a hermeneutic of suspicion, Jesus addressed their religious tradition by engaging the ontology and function of those present (both his critics and disciples), thereby challenging the assumptions of their theological anthropology. In his concern for who they were and how they lived, Jesus addressed their identity. Since Jesus did not separate theology from function, he defined the inseparable interaction between their theological assumptions and identity formation. That is, who we are emerges from our theology, and the identity formed determines how we will live. This underscores the three major issues emphasized in this study: (1) how we define ourselves, which then determines (2) how we function in relationships, which together further determines (3) how faith and church are practiced. By interposing the new wine into the process, Jesus discloses the theological dynamic that redefines who we are and transforms what we are and how we live. Therefore, both our identity and its relational outcome are contingent on the theological dynamic we assume with Jesus.

Theological anthropology and Christology converge at table fellowship with Jesus, as Peter experienced in Jesus’ footwashing. The clarity and depth of the identity emerging from this theological interaction is contingent on the completeness of Christology and its integral influence on theological anthropology. This completeness and integral influence are inseparable from Jesus’ own identity—signified as “the bridegroom” at the new wine table fellowship (Lk 5:34). Yet, Jesus’ own ontology and function are identified further and deeper than this.

While the embodied Jesus was distinctly Jewish, and his predominant surrounding context was Jewish Galilee and Judea, the person Jesus presented (who and what) and how he interacted at the various levels of social discourse were a function of a *minority identity*, not the dominant Jewish identity. That is to say, Jesus functioned in a qualitatively different way than prevailing Judaism, yet he was fully compatible with OT faith and the teaching of Scripture—not as a religious code but as a relational process with God. What emerged from Jesus was the presence of the new clearly distinguished from their tradition and from the prevailing assumptions defining their ontology and determining their function.

One advantage of his minority identity was to clearly distinguish his significance from the prevailing majority—including from the broader context pervaded with Greco-Roman influence. A major disadvantage, however, was to be marginalized (i.e. considered less, or even ignored if not intrusive) by the majority or dominant sector. This disadvantage is problematic at best for his followers and can precipitate an identity crisis, that is, if his followers are not experiencing the truth of who, what and how they are. Yet, the experiential truth of his followers' identity is a relational outcome of embracing Jesus in his identity, the clarity and depth of which become a christological contingency. In other words, the specific identity of who Jesus is (or perceived to be), determines the nature of their involvement together, and will be definitive for who his followers are or become. This further challenges our assumptions of discipleship in a conventional servant model and even our view of the cross with a conventional lens of sacrifice (discussed shortly).

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

Directly related to the above questions are questions such as "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9) and "What are you doing here?" (1 Kg 19:9,13). These are questions from God involving our theological anthropology, and related theological assumptions of Christology, that are critical for identity formation. Both sets of questions need to be answered to define the depth of our theology (as signified in "Do you also wish to go away?" Jn 6:67), and to determine the depth of our reciprocal relational response (as signified in "do you love me?" Jn 21:16). Our response emerges from the primary identity of who we are, and the identity we form emerges from our theology, that is, the interaction between our theological anthropology and Christology. The ontology and function that result are contingent on this theological process.

If our tradition narrows the epistemic field of God's self-revelation down to referential terms and limits our theological anthropology to constrained ontology and function (e.g. "fast"), then the outcome will not sprout the seeds of new wine planted in our innermost. This new wine identity is not distinguished from the old by merely having a belief system in Jesus the Christ, no matter how strong the tradition. In referential terms, tradition had already been constrained, shaped or conformed to the reductionist influence and pressure on belief systems exerted by human contextualization. This consequence is most evident in the theological anthropology used for our identity formation.

As Levi learned leading up to their new wine table fellowship (Lk 5:27-32), he had a critical identity issue to address in the vulnerable presence of Jesus' whole person. Jesus relationally presented the ontology and function in contrast and conflict with Levi's, as well as any who follow Jesus with a less ontology and function. The underlying theological anthropology of this reduced ontology and function is based on the *ontological lie* rooted in the human condition: the value or worth of persons measured by what they do and have is always relative in a comparative process that otherwise renders persons to a social position of *less* (cf. 1 Cor 4:6-7), thereby defining their condition in ontological deficiency (cf. Gen 3:5). In other words, this is human identity based on a *deficit model* of being *less* than the prevailing standard, unless one can assume a position of *more* that would only be relative to an inevitable comparison to someone else having more (cf. 2 Cor 10:12). The deficit model is the prevailing human alternative for identity formation and shaping relationships together that ongoingly needs to make up for an *identity deficit*—the ontological lie for human ontology and function signifying reductionism and its counter-relational work, both of which are in contrast and conflict with Jesus' identity of whole ontology and function. His disciples clearly demonstrated this deficit dynamic by arguing among themselves over who was the greatest (Lk 9:46), even at their pivotal table fellowship (Lk 22:24), by asking Jesus for the answer (Mt 18:1), by the request of James and John (Mk 10:35-37) and their mother (Mt 20:20-21), all of which caused further tension among the disciples (Mt 20:24; Mk 10:41). Whether or not Levi participated in this later, he openly addressed his critical identity issue by responding to Jesus' whole person in reciprocal relationship together, therefore engaging the theological process that redefined who he was and transformed what he was and how he lived. Levi's ontology and function was no longer relegated to an identity deficit based on the ontological lie, and clearly became the identity of the new wine.

If we do not pay attention to this influence from human contextualization and address its consequences on our own ontology and function, then unlike Levi we remain subject to this ontological lie and continue to construct our identity from a deficit model, which shapes our relationships accordingly. With the lack or absence of a theological anthropology that is whole-ly compatible with Jesus' ontology and function in reciprocal relationship together, our ontology and function cannot be distinguished from our human context and thus are subject to wide interpretation or determination. Such results would be compatible with postmodernism and its hermeneutic of suspicion but incompatible to address a template imposing its narrow view epistemologically, hermeneutically, and theologically that constrains ontology and function. This would be insufficient for the hermeneutic of suspicion Jesus initiated to challenge our assumptions of theological anthropology. He continues to confront this condition in its need for redemptive change and also jolts the religious community in likely its most implicit condition limiting or precluding this change: the status quo and its underlying epistemological illusion of confidence or certainty and its interrelated ontological simulation of stability and permanence.

Nicodemus represented his religious tradition and the effects of being embedded in the status quo of his religious community. Yet, Nicodemus apparently was dissatisfied with his knowledge and perhaps unsettled in his messianic expectations, such that he ventured out of this status quo to explore expanding his epistemic field to query Jesus (Jn 3:1-15). This epistemic process is critical to understand in this familiar encounter because

it demonstrates the template imposed by the status quo to constrain any change beyond its conformity. No doubt Nicodemus knew that Jesus was a dissonant voice to the status quo, nevertheless he encountered much more than his lens limited by the status quo could understand epistemologically, hermeneutically and theologically. This implicit condition creates a hermeneutic impasse that makes it difficult to recognize the new much less embrace it.

In order to establish this interaction's larger context, it seems reasonable to assume some matters about Nicodemus. He came to Jesus that night for answers to questions which were framed by his Jewish identity, by his involvement as a ruling member (Sanhedrin) in Israel (v.1) and as one of her teachers (v.10); thus he came with the expectations associated with their Scripture, which were shaped likely by an interpretive framework from Second Temple Judaism and no doubt by a perceptual lens sociopolitically sensitized to Roman rule. While Nicodemus came to Jesus as an individual person, his query was as the collective identity of Israel and the corporate life and practice of a Pharisee's (of whatever variation) Judaism.

Apparently stimulated by Jesus' actions and perhaps stirred by the presence of "a teacher who has come from God" (v.2), he approached Jesus respectfully, if not with some humility. Yet, he very likely engaged Jesus with the framework and lens which Jesus critiqued elsewhere of "the wise and the intelligent" (Lk 10:21). This would be crucial for Nicodemus. Though his position represented the educated elite of Israel, his own posture was about to be humbled and changed.

Jesus understood Nicodemus' query and anticipated his questions that certainly related to God's promises for Israel's deliverance (salvation), the Messiah and God's kingship in the Mediterranean world. Therefore, Jesus immediately focused on "the kingdom of God" (v.3), the OT eschatological hope, about which Nicodemus was probably more concerned for the present than the future. Yet, the whole of God's kingship and sovereign rule is integral to the OT, and thus a primary focus of Nicodemus' query, however provincial. And he was concerned about it strongly enough (and perhaps inwardly conflicted) to make himself vulnerable to initiate this interaction with Jesus; his query appeared genuine and for more than referential information or didactic reasons. This suggests that Nicodemus stepped out of his probability box to pursue the *more* of 'eternity substance' in his heart.

The conversation that followed evidences a purpose in John's Gospel to clearly distinguish and make definitive the whole of God's thematic relational action of grace in response to the human condition—first, in continuation to Israel and then to the nations—that is, to unfold the history of God's salvation. Yet, the language communicated in this conversation became an issue, and this proved to be revealing not only for Nicodemus but for all he represented—as well as for all who would follow, even through a postmodern period.

The notion of membership and participation in the kingdom of God being contingent on a concept "born again" was taken incredulously by this "wise and learned" leader, whose sophisticated reason was unable to process and explain in referential terms from a narrowed epistemic field. "How can" (*dynamai*, v.4) signifies the limits of the probable. Then to be told "you [pl] must *by its nature*" (*dei*, v.7, not *opheilo*'s obligation or compulsion), as if to address all Jews, was beyond the grasp of his reason. *Dei* points to the nature of the improbable. Even after Jesus made definitive ("I tell you the truth")

*gennaio anothen* as “born from above,” that is “born of the Spirit” (*ek*, indicating the primary, direct source, vv.5,8), Nicodemus was still unable to process the words of Jesus; the status quo continues to prevail (“How can,” v.9). Why? This brings us back to the interpretive framework and perceptual lens of “the wise and the intelligent.” He was unable to understand Jesus’ language because the words were heard from an insufficient interpretive framework limited to the prevailing assumptions of his knowledge and an inadequate perceptual lens constrained in focus only on the secondary in referential terms.

Jesus exposed this as the conversation continues: “Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand *the improbable and the primary?*” (v.10). How is Jesus’ question connected to Nicodemus’ question since “born again” (or from above) is not in the Hebrew Scriptures? With this rhetorical question, Jesus implied that from a valid OT perspective (namely “the covenant of love,” Dt 7:7-9) the thematic relational action of God’s covenant relationship would be understood; moreover, the relational outworking of *siym* for *shalom* from the LORD’s definitive blessing would be expected and apparent. Jesus was vulnerably extending this covenant relationship of love in wholeness together directly to Nicodemus (and, by implication, to all Jews) by communicating openly what he, himself, knew intimately by witnessing as a participant (*martyreo*, not merely by observation, v.11) in the life of God (v.13, cf. Jn 1:18). His communication was not with ethereal (*epouranios*) language but discourse (*lego*) in the human context (*epigeios*, v.12), yet with relational language. It was the qualitative nature of relational language that Nicodemus was unable to understand with his perceptual-interpretive framework. Nicodemus remained incompatible for relational connection, unable to engage Jesus with his conventional epistemic process.

The movement of God’s thematic relational action in the covenant relationship of love had been consistently reduced to quantitative situations and circumstances throughout Israel’s history—despite the fact that “the Lord set his heart on you and chose you” was not on a quantitative basis (Dt 7:7). In functional similarity, Nicodemus paid attention to the quantitative limits of human biology in probability terms reducing the person while ignoring the qualitative primacy of whole human ontology. Thus he demonstrated the same framework focused on the quantitative situations and circumstances probable for the covenant, whereas Jesus focused on the ontology of the whole person and the qualitative relationship signifying the covenant of love and wholeness together. The establishment of nation and national identity formation were the prevailing quantitative expectations of any messianic hope in the kingdom, with which, most certainly, Nicodemus came to Jesus that night. In contrast and conflict, Jesus focused on the whole persons necessary in new covenant relationship in wholeness to constitute the kingdom in its innermost—nothing less and no substitutes.

The prevailing perceptual-interpretive framework that Nicodemus represented made some critical assumptions about the kingdom besides the quantitative situations and circumstances probable for the covenant. The two most critical assumptions were relational barriers to understanding Jesus’ relational language:

1. Membership in the kingdom was based on generational descent and natural birth in quantitative referential terms; to understand the qualitative functional significance of Jesus’ relational language, his relational message (v.7) must be

integrated with the incarnation's fulfillment of God's thematic action in relational terms of the covenant relationship of love (as summarized by the evangelist in Jn 1:10-13; cf. his discourse on those redeemed in Jn 8:31-36,42).

2. In addition, participation in the kingdom was based on what one did from outer in, and, accordingly, adherence to a purification code of behavior was imperative, especially for national identity maintenance; to understand the whole relational context and process of Jesus' relational language, his message (v.6) needs to be embodied in the vulnerable relational context and process of his whole person from inner out intimately disclosing the whole of God in the innermost (made evident in his further disclosure of the improbable, Jn 6:54,63).

In this latter relational disclosure, would-be followers came to a similar conclusion as Nicodemus: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (Jn 6:52) and "This *improbable* is difficult; who can accept it?" (6:60), compared with Nicodemus' "How can *this improbable* be?" (3:9)—all of which reflected these assumptions in quantitative referential terms from outer in that limited both their knowledge to the probable and their learning of the improbable. This is the implicit condition of the status quo.

What Nicodemus and the others were predisposed to by their perceptual-interpretive framework, and were embedded in as their practice and expectation within the limits of the status quo, was essentially a *salvation of the old*—a quantitative outcome of reductionism. What Jesus vulnerably engaged them in and with went beyond the status quo to the *salvation of the new*—the qualitative relational outcome of the whole of God's relational response to not only Israel but to the human condition. God's thematic relational work of grace embodied in Jesus for covenant relationship of love constituted the new covenant from inner out, the relationship of which was now directly and intimately involved together with the Trinity in the innermost to be the whole of God's family (kingdom of those born of the Spirit, of the Father, of the Son). This is the whole gospel vulnerably disclosed by Jesus in relational language which jolted the status quo of *the old* represented in Nicodemus that night.

Nicodemus came to Jesus as "the wise and learned" in *the old*. He was now humbled by Jesus' intrusion on his status quo condition with the improbable "born again or from above," and by the necessary transition from old to new Jesus distinguished unmistakably in its relational language. Though that term itself is not in the OT, it is clearly evident that "a new heart" and the Spirit's work for "a new covenant" and Israel's kingdom (Eze 36:26-27, Jer 31:31-34) would not be unfamiliar to Nicodemus as Israel's teacher. The meaning of Jesus' relational message to Nicodemus (and the status quo) defined the needed transformation of human ontology for this new covenant relationship of love, which for Nicodemus functionally involved the transition from "the wise and learned of the old" to the qualitative framework and function of "the little children of the new" (cf. Mt 18:3-4)—undoubtedly a jolt to Nicodemus and the status quo. Yet, apparently, Nicodemus humbly transitioned to "a little child of the new": first, to receive the whole of God's self-disclosure embodied in whole by Jesus with a new perceptual-interpretive framework (Lk 10:21, cf. his vulnerability in Jn 7:50-52), then to relationally respond to God in qualitative involvement (Lk 18:17, cf. his involvement in Jn 19:39-42).

John's Gospel clearly illuminates the relational process of salvation from old to new in Nicodemus and what he is saved *to*. In this relational context, the evangelist almost seems to give a metaphorical sense to Nicodemus. Certainly, for all who follow, it is the whole relational context and process, necessary by the nature of salvation, to which to respond and by which to be involved in order to belong to the whole of God's family. Unfortunately, we never hear if Nicodemus became one of the teachers of the old covenant and new, who relationally experienced following Jesus in the relational progression to the family (kingdom) of God, as Jesus defined for such teachers (Mt 13:52).

Jesus made it imperative for Nicodemus and the status quo that the redemptive change to be born from above was the only recourse available to be freed from the constraints imposed by any templates from tradition, the status quo and the 'old' prevailing in human contextualization—that which constrains, shapes or conforms the new's presence to the limits of the old, as Peter did (Acts 10:13-15, cf. Jn 15:18-20). This is where epistemological clarification and hermeneutical correction are needed, both for Nicodemus as well as for us today. Jesus was not pointing to a new belief system requiring Nicodemus' conversion. Nicodemus could not grasp the meaning of Jesus' words because his quantitative lens (*phroneo*) focused on the person from outer in ("How can anyone be born after...?"), and because his reductionist interpretive framework (*phronema*) was unable to piece together (*synesis*) his own Scripture (e.g. "The Lord your God will circumcise your heart," Dt 30:6). This evidenced that Nicodemus was too embedded in the status quo influenced by reductionism to understand—"How can these things be?"—even after Jesus said, "Do not be astonished...", which implied that a teacher of God's Word would comprehend God's whole if not fragmented by reductionism. Now the embodied Word from God (whom Nicodemus initially came to engage) made conclusive the epistemological clarification and hermeneutical correction essential for Nicodemus, Peter, Paul, Jews or Gentiles, for all persons: *be made whole from above or continue in reductionism*.

The sprouting of new wine necessitates addressing without exception all templates that constrain function ontologically and relationally. Such templates ("old wineskins") are signified in the veil not being removed, thus preventing the new wine table fellowship from inner out in the primacy of relationships together, and thereby rendering all theology and practice to the old condition in front of the curtain—as if Jesus never went to the cross on God's relational terms. We need to exercise a hermeneutic of suspicion on our own theology and practice to expose and challenge any assumptions that essentially have constrained, shaped or conformed the new to the limits of the old.

Not only is the cross inescapable for the new wine but our view of the cross and *what* and *who* we see are indispensable for sprouting the new wine. Moreover, the functional nature of our discipleship needs to be challenged integrally for *who* and *what* we follow and for *how* we follow, in order for the new wine not only to emerge and sprout but also flow. Without the necessary epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction, our theology could bear the burden of epistemological illusion and our practice may suffer in ontological simulation.



## The Challenge of *What* on the Cross and *Who* to Follow

Just as Nicodemus asked “How can these things be?” and other would-be followers raised in monologue “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (Jn 6:52), there are issues for us to address. In the skewed theological task of these would-be disciples (6:28,30,34), we see the evidence of a narrowed-down epistemic field and the hermeneutical impasse of its limits (6:41-42, 52,60). What appeared improbable to them raises underlying issues beyond Jesus’ improbable theological trajectory to his intrusive relational path that converged on the cross to constitute it—issues raised for all of us. Our view of the Lord’s Supper notwithstanding, we likely would not ask “How can Jesus give us his flesh to eat?” yet we need to ask this question in relational terms and challenge our assumptions of the cross in this age of reductionism. If not reduced to a symbol, it can be said that Jesus’ death on the cross has been grossly exaggerated. Simply stated, we need whole understanding of *what* converged on the cross and *how* it was composed, in order to know the whole *who* of the cross and *why* he engaged it.

Whatever position we have on the atonement sacrifice becomes the lens that tends to skew our view of the cross. With this lens *what* we associate with the cross is sacrifice and *who* we see is the one who made the ultimate sacrifice. Yet, the atonement sacrifice is just one part of *what* converged on the cross. This sacrifice is insufficient to explain the full relational dynamic involved in *how* the cross was composed, and thus is inadequate to understand the *who* of the cross and *why* his relational path vulnerably involved it. Moreover, idealizing the cross creates a hermeneutical impasse that keeps us at a relational distance to go deeper into the cross *with* Jesus, not simply affirming this cross of Jesus.

### New View of the Cross

Who, what, how and why are integral to God’s relational dynamic that unfolds on the cross. This relational dynamic cannot be narrowed down to one of its parts (namely atonement) without fragmenting God’s whole relational action that constitutes that part; the consequence would reduce atonement to referential terms with the loss of its relational significance and no relational outcome to experience in the new wine relationships together with the veil removed. Jesus clearly defines the whole of God’s relational dynamic: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” (Jn 15:9, cf. 17:23,26). What he said next may confuse the dynamic of love if heard in referential language: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13). Jesus was certainly pointing to the cross, yet his relational language for “lay down” (*tithemi*) signifies “to put or place one’s person” in vulnerable relational involvement with others. At times, this vulnerable involvement of love may include sacrifice but not be defined by sacrifice, which Paul’s language may confuse if seen in referential language: “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Yet, God’s relational dynamic of love does not revolve around sacrifice. How the Father loves the Son is not about sacrifice but the depth of the Father’s involvement with the Son; and this is the relational dynamic of love Jesus

extends to us, notably on the cross and throughout the incarnation and even prior to the embodied Word. And God's love also cannot be idealized or this keeps both God's involvement at a less intrusive relational distance and our response to "amazing love" at a less vulnerable relational distance.

When we think of *agape* love, the primary thought to emerge is about sacrifice. Then, of course, the ultimate *agape*-sacrifice is seen in Jesus' death on the cross. The functional significance of *agape* (and *hesed* in OT), however, is focused on involvement in the primacy of relationship—without letting any other matter take away from this primacy (cf. Dt 7:7-9). Sacrifice tends to have the focus on that individual and what one does in the sacrifice, though intended ostensibly for the sake of others. In contrast, *agape* functions in the relational significance of *how* to be involved with others in relationship—"as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you"—not about *what* "I" do, notably with sacrifice; the latter is how Jesus' death gets grossly exaggerated. Therefore, the focus in *agape* must by its nature (*dei* in contrast to the obligation of *opheilo*, as Jesus acted, Mt 16:21) be involvement with others in the primacy of relationship together—neither on me nor what I do, even intended for the sake of others (as Jesus illuminated, Jn 13:34-35). Yet, this is not the prevailing understanding of love in theological discourse.

In prevailing referential terms, love is narrowed down to positive works that God *does* and an attribute that God *has*, thereby defining God by what he does and has. Such love essentially constrains God's ontology and function and has relational consequences, the repercussions of which continue to have dominant influence in theological discourse today. The results of this kind of works is certainly good but this limited outcome does not go to the depths of who, what and how God is in ontology and function; nor does it get to the relational significance of the whole and holy God's vulnerable presence and intimate involvement with the reduced ontology and function of human persons. Israel often labored in their focus on the limited outcome of deliverance from their situations and circumstances rather than on the primacy of their covenant of love with God (Dt 7:6-9). Love (both *hesed* and *agape*) defines God's relational work that determines the depth of relational involvement God has with us (including but not only on the cross) entirely for the relational outcome of the gospel of wholeness—new wine relationship together as God's whole family (Jn 17:21-23). Relational work is clearly distinguished from referential works which mainly focus on situations and circumstances for positive results, not the primacy of relationships in relational work. Any relational involvement that may take place in referential terms is regarded as only secondary to what happens—not the primacy of "put or place one's person" in vulnerable relational involvement (*tithemi*, Jn 15:13)—and often is not paid attention to by the lover or the recipient over the positive results. Consequently, with love in referential terms, persons and relationships are defined from outer in and thereby determined by what they do and have in their situations and circumstances. This is a critical distinction that Paul learned from his personal experience with God (2 Cor 12:7-9; Phil 4:11-13). Yet, even the positive results of such love can merely reflect, reinforce or sustain the human condition, results which our theology and practice must account for. This is not the love enacted on the cross. We need a deeper experience of *agape* than sacrifice, and a new view of the cross takes us deeper than sacrifice.

The nature of *agape* as constituted by God's ontology and function is relationship. As disclosed by Jesus and the Father along with the Spirit, *agape* relationships are

signified by the extent of involvement directly in the relationship—and not indirectly through a situation or circumstance (Jn 17:21,23,26)—the depth of which necessitates increasing vulnerability by the person enacting *agape* (cf. Jn 12:27-28; 13:1-5; 14:9-10). The ultimate enactment of *agape* disclosed to us is signified in John 3:16, in which the relational significance of the incarnation was Jesus relationally embodying the whole and holy God to be vulnerably present and intimately involved with us for relationship together in wholeness. ‘God with us’ (Immanuel) is neither a mere name nor event but the relational context and process of God’s whole relational action. *Agape* is the integral function of both God’s grace and wholeness, nothing less and no substitutes. Therefore, this *agape* relationship initiated by the holy God’s relational grace is the gospel of wholeness. The experiential truth of this ‘good news’ relationship (not mere positive results) was composed by Jesus in his *agape* involvement with us on the cross—the vulnerably embodied extension of the Father’s love for him (Jn 15:9). What the cross signifies entirely in relational terms, hence, is the depth of relational involvement Jesus engaged conjointly with us and the Father (along with the Spirit), and not about what Jesus did even though it by necessity involved the sacrifice of atonement to remove the veil.

What the cross composes theologically in terms of atonement must by its nature be understood in the relational dynamic of love to distinguish Jesus’ involvement in his intrusive relational path. That is, Jesus’ whole person vulnerably involved himself with the whole human person, thus he involved his person with persons’ sin (namely as reductionism) as well as creation in the image of God. His involvement with persons’ sin was fully vulnerable and intimate (*tithemi* of love, Jn 15:13) such that he took on and incurred the consequence of that sin—which also involved the relational consequence of separation from God the Father (Mt 27:46)—and integrally prevailed over the human condition by removing the veil to make whole human ontology and function. The wholeness of persons and relationships together is the relational outcome which unfolds from atonement that is integrally determined by Jesus’ relational involvement of love. If this is not the outcome from atonement, then atonement has been fragmented from God’s whole relational action for a reduced outcome in a truncated soteriology of what persons are saved *from*: sin, yet without sin as reductionism, which, if it were included, would require the above relational outcome of saved *to* wholeness. Simply stated, if what we get from the cross is just salvation from sin, we are being shortchanged; and either God needs to be held accountable or our theology and practice are incomplete. In the theological task, as Jesus declared unmistakably, “the atonement you use is the salvation you get.” And “the cross you see is the outcome you get in theology and practice.”

Therefore, what the cross represents is no mere event (even idealized), as many refer to it, albeit a salvific event; and it cannot be *represented* in these terms without *representing* God in salvific action. *What* converged on the cross is entirely God’s relational dynamic of love extending throughout the incarnation, and *how* the cross was composed unfolded from the relational outcome of the whole of God’s involvement with us. This was Paul’s direct relational experience and therefore his major emphasis on the cross, yet only on God’s relational terms and not as mere event in referential terms. While the cross as event likely presents the body of Jesus such that the cross is not disembodied from Jesus—for example, as his teachings get disembodied—the Jesus

presented on the cross is disengaged, that is, not relationally involved in *agape* relationship. This de-relationalizes Jesus with the consequence to maintain the veil that limits both knowing the whole *who* of the cross and experiencing the relational outcome of *why* he engaged the cross.

This provides us the new view of the cross and the Jesus on it for the what and who, how and why that are congruent with Jesus' intrusive relational path to fulfill the whole of God's improbable theological trajectory. The lens from the relational significance of *agape* enacted by Jesus on the cross necessarily shifts our focus from Jesus to his relational involvement with others. To only see Jesus on the cross (e.g. a crucifix) is to reduce Jesus' whole person, consequently to truncate the salvific function of the cross without what Jesus saved *to*, and to render John 3:16 and the gospel without its relational significance. With this consequential lens, such a narrow view of the cross and of *agape* fragments God's relational dynamic to mere sacrifice, not relationship together in wholeness. If the cross is not whole and who is on the cross is not whole-ly embodied by the whole ontology and function (*pleroma* as Paul made definitive, Col 1:19; 2:9) of God, then the salvific outcome cannot be the whole relational outcome but at best a truncated soteriology in referential terms limited to only saved *from*.

## **The View *from* the Cross**

Jesus does not in fact give us such a reductionist view of him on the cross that fragments his relational action and diminishes his *agape* involvement. There is no legitimate option to *represent* him in other than the terms Jesus presented in his whole person. God's thematic relational action of grace and dynamic of love are intimately communicated and vulnerably consummated by Jesus' ultimate discourse on the cross. Again, this certainly included atonement but is not limited to it, so that the relational outcome of complete soteriology unfolds with Jesus' ultimate salvific discourse.

This discourse is understood as his seven statements integrated with his actions on the cross, though each of the Gospel narratives provides a different part of the discourse, with Mark and Matthew including only the most important fourth statement to formulate a structure somewhat analogous to an OT chiasm (two halves framing the key point placed between them). Taken together they evidence the thematic relational message of God, and this composite message's theological interpretation constitutes it as the ultimate salvific discourse consummating the whole of God's thematic action for the new covenant relationship together as family. Thus, no aspect of this discourse can be fully understood separated from the context of the whole; nor can any aspect be reduced and still constitute its relational significance in the whole of God's thematic action.

This was Jesus' discourse on the cross, in which the language of his words and actions communicated with the ultimate relational clarity and significance—nothing less than relational language.

First Statement: “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” (Lk 23:34).<sup>2</sup>

In his initial words, Jesus clearly established his full relational context with the Father, thus pointing to the source of salvation. His initial action also disclosed the full relational process of grace necessary for salvation: forgiveness (*aphiemi*, to remit sin, dismiss indebtedness toward God, cf. Mt 26:28; also its function in Lk’s emphasis on salvation, Lk 5:20-26; 7:47-50; 24:46-47). How Jesus engaged *aphiemi* was less about the situation and full of relational significance, which was constituted only by God’s relational grace.

As they killed Jesus, this destruction was the paradoxical relational process necessary for new relationship with the whole of God (cf. Lk 22:20). That is, it is ironic that *aphiemi* denotes, on the one hand, the forgiveness for their sin and broken relationship with the triune God, which in this moment led to the necessary cost for redemption fulfilled by his death on the cross (cf. Mk 10:45). On the other hand, *aphiemi* signifies the transformation to the new covenant relationship together constituted by the Spirit, who is Jesus’ relational replacement so he would “not leave [*aphiemi*] you as orphans” (Jn 14:18). In other words, Jesus enacted *aphiemi* entirely for relationship together and completely fulfilled the whole of its relational significance by his relational work of grace.

Jesus’ discourse was interjected with challenges to his salvific claim (Mt 27:40, Mk 15:29-30), as well as with mocking of his salvific authority and power as the Messiah King (Mt 27:42, Mk 15:31-32, Lk 23:35). Another detractor was one of the criminals executed with Jesus, who demonstrated a prevailing messianic expectation of salvation in existing quantitative situations and circumstances (Lk 23:39). His derision was about deliverance from his circumstances, not about relationship together; thus, he represented a majority position of those with a reductionist reaction to Jesus.

The other criminal looked beyond their own circumstances and made a qualitative shift to see Jesus’ person (though also as King) and to pursue him in his relational context, despite Jesus’ situation (Lk 23:40-42). Thus, he represented those with the qualitative relational response necessary to receive the vulnerable self-disclosure of God in Jesus for salvation. He received the following relational response from Jesus.

Second Statement: “*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise*” (Lk 23:43).

In the relational clarity of his family love, Jesus clearly made definitive the relational outcome and conclusion for anyone and all who relationally respond to his vulnerable relational work of grace for new covenant relationship together. This relational response necessitates reciprocal vulnerability in engaging Jesus in his relational context and by intimate involvement with him in his relational process, as signified by the second criminal’s relational response of trust in Jesus.

The relational conclusion of being “with me in paradise” should not be reduced. Paradise, despite images and notions, is not about a place, that is, about aspects of *bios*; Jesus’ statement here should be compared to his statements with the churches in Ephesus

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<sup>2</sup> While some early manuscripts do not include this statement, it is important to include this to establish the relational flow of the discourse.

and Laodicea (Rev 2:7; 3:21). Rather, paradise is about sharing together intimately in the ultimate relational context of God, and thus complete involvement in the ultimate relational process of participating in the *zoe* of the Trinity. “With me” is only about relationship together at its ultimate (“Paradise”)—to which Jesus could have added “nothing less and no substitutes,” yet was absolutely definitive in prefacing his statement with “Truly I tell you.”

In the next part of his discourse, Jesus points to what he saves us *to*, which the first criminal was predisposed to ignore by reducing salvation merely to being saved from bad situations and circumstances.

Third Statement: To his mother, “*Woman, here is your son,*” and to the disciple, “*Here is your mother*” (Jn 19:26-27).

With the relational significance of his family love communicated in this statement, Jesus gives us a partial entrance into what he saved us to by opening the functional door to salvific life and practice.

There are many aspects for us to reflect on here: circumstances, culture, family, Jesus’ promise to his disciples (viz. Mk 10:29-30). All of these factor into this extraordinary interaction, the outcome of which forms the experiential roots of what he saved us to and the functional roots for the development of his church as family. Building with the persons who truly constituted his family (see Mt 12:47-50), Jesus demonstrated the functional significance of being his family in what should be understood as a defining interaction, yet is often underemphasized or overlooked.

Apparently, Mary had been a widow for a while. In the Mediterranean world of biblical times, a widow was in a precarious position (like orphans), and so it was for Mary, particularly when her eldest and thus primary son (culturally speaking) was about to die. Their culture called for the eldest son to make provision for parents when they could no longer provide for themselves. The kinship family (by blood and law) had this responsibility. Though a widow, in Mary’s case she still had other sons and daughters to care for her (Mk 6:3). Why, then, did Jesus delegate this responsibility to someone outside their immediate family?

Though circumstances, culture and family converge on this scene, they do not each exert the same amount of influence. We cannot let contextual considerations limit our understanding of this defining point in the relational progression of his followers. In relational terms, Jesus was neither fulfilling his duty as the eldest son nor bound by the circumstances. As he had consistently demonstrated throughout the incarnation, Jesus was taking his followers beyond culture and circumstances, even beyond family as we commonly view it. As the embodied whole of God, his relational path (including on the cross) was composed by his ontology and function beyond reductionism, which he expected also of his followers in order to participate in his new covenant family (Mt 5:20).

Jesus’ whole relational context of family and relational process of family love was made evident in his painful condition yet sensitive relational involvement with Mary and John, which should not be reduced by the drama of the moment or the obligation of the situation. Though Jesus was in anguish and those closest to him were deeply distressed, this unimaginable interaction took place because Jesus functionally embodied the family

love of the whole of God. This dramatically demonstrates the inseparable relation between theology (of the cross) and function (in the relational involvement of love). In the most touching moment on the cross, Jesus teaches us what being his family means: how to see each other, how to be involved with each other and how the individual is affirmed in submitting to him for it.

For Jesus, family involvement was based on *agape* relational involvement, so being his family cannot be understood from our conventional perceptions of family involvement or by our conditioned feelings of obligation. Despite his circumstances, Jesus focused on Mary and John with the deepest *agape* involvement and affection (*phileo*, cf. Jn 5:20, Dt 7:7): “*Here is your son,*” “*Here is your mother.*” How was he telling them to see each other? How was he saying to be involved with each other? How was the individual affirmed in submitting to him?

Jesus gave his followers *new eyes* to see each other from inner out—beyond circumstances, culture, blood and legal ties, social status. He redefined his family to be relationship-specific to his Father (Mt 12:47-50). This is how he wants us to see each other, and how he saw Mary. It seems certain that Mary was not merely Jesus’ earthly mother but increasingly his follower. She was not at odds with Jesus (though she certainly must have had mixed feelings) during his earthly ministry, as were his brothers. She was always there *for* him in her role as mother but more importantly she was now there *with* him as one who did the Father’s will—thus, as follower, daughter, sister. This was the Mary at the crucifixion.

Just as Jesus didn’t merely see Mary as his earthly mother, a widow, a female, he didn’t merely see John as a disciple, a special friend. They were his Father’s daughter and son, his sister and brother (cf. Mt 28:10; Heb 2:11), his family together in the relational progression. This is the nature of *agape* family love that extended from the Father to the Son to his followers, and how he wants his family to be involved with each other in likeness (Jn 15:9; 17:23). This deeply touching interaction clearly distinguished Jesus’ relational involvement with and response to *his family*. It was the beautiful outworking of family love in the reciprocal relational process together of *being* family and building it. Nothing less and no substitutes, just as Jesus lived and went to the cross. This is the function of salvific life and practice in the present, what Jesus saved us to.

On this relational basis and unequivocal relational purpose, Jesus’ action was just as much for John’s benefit as it was for Mary—both in provision and opportunity. In response to Jesus, John acted beyond being merely a disciple, even a friend, and took Mary into “his own” (*idios*, one’s own, denotes special relationship, v.27). He didn’t just take her into his house; he embraced Mary as his own mother (or kinship sister). She must have embraced him also as her son (or kinship brother). Earlier in response to what each of his disciples let go of in order to “Follow me,” Jesus promised them an even greater family (Mk 10:29-30). True to his words as ever, he partially fulfilled his promise to them. This is the relational outcome ‘already’ for each person who submits to him to participate in his family. No greater satisfaction of being accepted, no fulfillment of the person’s self-worth, no certainty of one’s place and belonging can be experienced by the person from inner out without the relational significance of his new wine family in relational involvement without the veil (cf. Jn 15:11).

As the functional key, Jesus' action here demonstrated the relationships of love necessary to be the whole of God's new covenant family with family love (both *agape* and *phileo*), and this initial experience composed the roots of his church as family. Moreover, this experiential reality signified the ongoing fulfillment of his covenant promise to his followers (i.e. Mk 10:29-30, which becomes functional in the present as his church family), and thereby established the experiential truth of the gospel for all to experience (cf. Jn 17:21-23).

And as the hermeneutical key, Jesus used not only relational language but also his family language to compose his words as the whole of the Word from God embodied vulnerably for just this new covenant relationship together. This scenario statement, therefore, must be understood in the whole of his salvific discourse and made definitive for the function of his church in its ongoing life and practice.

Keep in mind that his first three statements happened while he was dying a physically painful death. Thus, having clearly and vulnerably communicated God's thematic relational action of grace in the first half of his discourse, Jesus continued in the second half to intimately consummate his salvific work for the new covenant relationship together of God's family. The cost for redemption to complete this salvation to the new creation was immeasurable. In unsettling contrast to his previous statement as the most touching moment on the cross, his next statement is the most heartbreaking—while also the most important statement disclosing the relational significance on which the whole of God's salvific action hinged.

Fourth Statement: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34).

Familiarity with these words must not predispose us to minimize Jesus' relational language, and thus to diminish the depth of relational significance involved here. Such reductionism can only have a relational consequence of promoting relational distance (however unintentional) from God or of reinforcing the relational condition “to be apart” (however inadvertent) from the whole of God. Moreover, I affirm, nothing will help us understand the distinction between the qualitative (e.g. element of *zoe*) and the quantitative (e.g. aspects of *bios*) more than this pivotal relational statement by Jesus.

Beyond the prolonged physical pain (nearly in its sixth hour), Jesus' words vulnerably exposed his relational pain—which was initially experienced in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26:37-38) in anticipation of this ultimate relational pain. The Son's relationally painful scream not only further expressed his honesty and vulnerableness with his Father, but now even more significantly demonstrated the relational wholeness by which their life together is constituted (Jn 10:38; 14:10,11,20; 17:21). Therefore, we are exposed intimately to what is innermost to the *zoe* of God: the whole of the relationship of God.

Since God is the Trinity, the whole of the triune God is constitutive of the Trinity's relationships, while the Trinity's relationships together constitute the whole of God—apart from which the *zoe* of God does not function. It was the *zoe* of the Trinity, the whole of the relationship of God, which was the issue in Jesus' statement (relational scream).



While Jesus' physical death was necessary for salvation, that quantitative death of *bios* was not his ultimate sacrifice. The ultimate was his loss of the qualitative relationship of the whole of God. As a consequence of absorbing our sin, in that inexplicable moment the Son was no longer in the Father nor the Father in him. In this nothing-less-and-no-substitutes action of grace by the whole and holy God, the mystery of the "brokenness" of the relational ontology of the Trinity in effect happened. We can have only some sense of understanding this condition by focusing on the relational reality in distress, not the ontological. With this qualitative focus on Jesus' pain, we become vulnerable participants both (1) in the painful relational consequence involving any degree of the relational condition "to be apart" from the whole of God, and (2) in the fullness of God's ultimate response to redeem us from this condition as well as to reconcile us to the whole of the relationship of God, the *zoe* of the Trinity.

For this wholeness with God to be experienced, however, the relational barriers "to be apart" have to be removed. When the Son screamed out in relational pain, all those barriers had converged on him to evoke the Father's separation. I assert that it was also the moment the Father cried, and the Spirit grieved. This was their relational work of grace; and nothing less and no substitutes could have consummated this relational consequence, which was necessary by its nature to overcome the relational consequence of sin. Furthermore, nothing less and no substitutes can constitute the family love involved in the relational process and relational conclusion of salvation. Therefore, though in a figurative sense the whole of God was broken, nevertheless the relational significance of this paradoxical moment was functionally specific to wholeness, that is, in order that we (necessarily both individually and corporately) will be whole in new relationship together with the veil no longer between us.

This is how the whole of God indeed "so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." Nicodemus apparently would understand this more deeply from this ultimate salvific discourse than he understood from Jesus' first discourse with him about salvation (see him after Jesus' death, Jn 19:38-39).

If we understand whole-ly the relational significance of the Son's relational pain from being forsaken by the Father, this goes beyond relational rejection to the deeper relational condition of being apart from the whole of God. In this sense, what is taken away from the wholeness of the Trinity affects the wholeness of each trinitarian person. Not only are they no longer *in* each other but they are not one—whole. To be forsaken or to forsake is to be separated from this dynamic whole. Certainly the mystery of this pivotal moment has no ontological understanding; God never stopped being God. And there is also the paradoxical aspect of the Son declaring he will not forsake us as orphans apart from the whole of God's family (Jn 14:18), who is now himself separated from this whole. Yet, the relational significance of this both signifies the dynamic whole of the Trinity as well as establishes the means for relationship necessary to be whole in likeness of the Trinity. This is *the whole of the relationship of God* that Jesus not only prayed for his followers to have (Jn 17:20-23), but also paid the cost for the redemptive change necessary to be adopted into his family, and further provided his Spirit to help us grow in this experiential reality and ongoingly function to mature in his new wine family in wholeness together.

As the whole of God's salvific action nears fulfillment, Jesus' qualitative relational involvement remained fully embodied in the historical context of the cross. What transpired necessarily involved his whole person, just as indicated in Hebrew Scripture (Jn 19:24,28,36,37). After the heartbreaking interaction, Jesus made this evident in his next statement.

Fifth Statement: "*I am thirsty*" (Jn 19:28).

John's Gospel began with the eternal state of Jesus the Christ as the Word who was always God (Jn 1:1-2, contrary to Arianism). When the whole of the Word became flesh also, Jesus the Christ became fully human while still fully divine to constitute his whole person (Jn 1:14, contrary to Apollinarianism). In this expanded Christology (beyond the Synoptic Gospels) the evangelist's narrative included this part of Jesus' salvific discourse. With the words in this statement, we are reminded that Jesus' person was also human. Yet, this brings us face to Face with his full humanity and the human toll involved in his action necessary for salvation. This "I am" is the counterpart to the other "I am" statements the evangelist developed in this Gospel for a more complete Christology (see Jn 6:35,51; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7,11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1). In conjoint function, these "I am" statements are his relational work of grace fulfilling God's thematic action and the Face's definitive blessing for new relationship together in wholeness.

Jesus' thirst was not merely the dehydration from physical exertion and trauma, but more importantly points to the depletion of his full humanity completely extended in intense vulnerable involvement in his relational path. This thirst signified that his relational work of grace was both the divine action of his deity disclosing the whole of God and also the relational involvement of his full humanity; and this conjoint function cannot be diminished in either function without reducing Jesus' whole person for an incomplete Christology. Any reduction of Jesus' whole person has theological and functional implications for soteriology, resulting in fragmenting what Jesus saved us from or saved us to, or both, thus a truncated soteriology. Such reductionism is always consequential for relationships, whether it is relationship together with God or within Christ's church as family, or both.

In these fourth and fifth statements of his discourse, we are openly exposed to (even confronted by) this functional picture of Jesus' whole divine-human person: He who was vulnerably present, intimately involved and completely fulfilling the whole of God's thematic relational action of grace only for new covenant relationship together.

Thus, "when he had received the drink, Jesus said...."

Sixth Statement: "*It is finished*" (Jn 19:30).

"Finished" (*teleo*, complete, not merely ending it but fulfilling it to its intended conclusion), that is, his relational work for redemption to free us from the old and its relational significance "to be apart" from the whole of God (ultimate death). With these words, his ultimate salvation discourse was being brought to a close. Essentially all had been said and done, except for the concluding chapter in the history of salvation by the whole of God's thematic relational action responding to the human relation condition.

As Jesus completed his redemptive work for the original covenant (cf. Ex 24:8 and Mk 14:24), the transition to *the new* conjointly begins. In Luke's Gospel, the

evangelist is concerned about a gospel accessible to all, thus he narrated the temple being reconstituted for the new covenant (Lk 23:44-45). Mark and Matthew's Gospels also included the temple curtain event (Mk 15:38, Mt 27:51), yet they appeared to include this only as part of the narrative detail of events during the crucifixion without pointing to its relational significance (cf. Ex 26:31-33, Heb 10:19-20). Luke apparently changed the order of this event to precede and thus directly connect with this closing statement in Jesus' salvific discourse—no doubt in further emphasis of Luke's concern for an accessible gospel for all, which the relational significance of the torn temple curtain constitutes and Jesus' next and last words both point to and will consummate.

Seventh Statement: "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*" (Lk 23:46).

With his final words in this ultimate salvific discourse, Jesus engaged the furthest and deepest in the trinitarian relational context and process. This relational cry to his Father contrasted with his earlier scream from relational pain (fourth statement), yet these cries for relationship were also conjoined in the mystery of the relational dynamic enacting the Trinity's salvific work of grace.

Jesus said, "I commend" (*paratithemi*, to entrust, i.e. to relationally entrust) "my spirit" (*pneuma*, signifying the very core of his person), yet his relational language did not compose a dualism here implying he did not entrust his body; rather, he entrusted his whole person. His last words evidenced the submission of his whole person for relationship together in the transitional journey to complete the redemptive work of the old and to raise up the new. By his intimate involvement in this vulnerably present and ongoingly involved relational context and process of the Trinity, Jesus was fully constituted in the final salvific action necessary for this ultimate relational conclusion: the resurrection and the birth of the new creation in the new covenant relationship together as family constituted in and by the Trinity, which the Spirit ongoingly transforms from the old to the new and brings to maturity for the eschatological completion.

Immediately after Jesus' discourse, various responses from those who witnessed his death were recorded (Mk 15:39-40, Mt 27:54-55, Lk 23:47-49). By the nature of his ultimate salvific discourse, however, compatible relational response back to the whole of Jesus is necessary (*dei*) for the experiential truth and relational reality of this new covenant relationship together. This nothing-less-and-no-substitutes relational response is thus irreducible and nonnegotiable, just as Jesus vulnerably embodied and intimately involved his whole person only for this relationship together to be whole with the veil removed—the new wine relationship of God's whole family. His ultimate salvific discourse is a summary of the relational words that the Father makes imperative not only to "listen to my Son" but also to relationally respond to the whole of the Word embodied for nothing less and no substitutes.

What we hear and see from this cross are not only about Jesus and sacrifice. This view of the cross cannot be distinguished through a narrow lens that reduces the complete context and process of Jesus' involvement. This narrow lens was used by the first criminal to see Jesus in a reduced way and consequently to seek salvation (deliverance) merely from his negative circumstances. As Jesus further involved his whole person in the third statement, he defined what he saves us *to*, which the first criminal ignored and could not understand because he was predisposed by his reductionist lens. Yet many

Christians are also predisposed with a similar narrow lens and thereby can just view the cross essentially as the first criminal without whole-ly understanding what they are saved *to*. There is no forgiveness in relational terms (statement 1), however, unless it emerges from the relational consequence of the depth of Jesus' *agape* involvement (statement 4) to constitute the relational outcome for statements two and three to be the experiential truth of this relational reconciliation in God's whole family.

The Lord's Supper cannot partake of this view of the cross without participating in this view from the cross. The Lord's Supper, on the one hand, celebrates Jesus' *agape* involvement, which cannot be narrowed down to partaking of quantitative symbols of the quantitative aspects of Jesus' sacrifice. More deeply significant then, on the other hand, the Lord's Supper is participating in the qualitative relational involvement of Jesus' *agape* action, and therefore having communion (intimate relational connection) together person to person, heart to heart as God's family—the relational outcome 'already' of statement three. Anything less and any substitutes for engaging Jesus' whole person in his deep relational involvement is to engage merely in ritual flashback of his sacrifice, and therefore not to be involved *with* Jesus in his vulnerable relational path on the cross. When Paul instructed the church on its communion practice, his relational language focused on the relational distance in their gatherings; the relational consequence simultaneously fragmented the new wine communion instituted by Jesus and countered the relational involvement embodied by Jesus to compose the new covenant relationships together necessary to be his church family (1 Cor 11). For Paul, to have relational distance in the Lord's Supper is to participate "in an unworthy manner" that nullified "the new covenant in my blood" (11:25-27).

The set of words and actions communicated in relational language by Jesus on the cross define the whole *who* and determine the *what* of the cross, and *how* it was composed and *why*. The depth of God's whole relational action and dynamic of love constitute the integral relational context and process for sacrifice and make conclusive the relational outcome of atonement for persons and relationships together to be the whole and holy God's family. This new view of the cross, however, makes relationally imperative Jesus' intrusive relational path in the new wine relationships without the veil, and therefore holds us accountable—the *who* and *what* God seeks—for this ongoing vulnerable involvement in our theology and practice in order to be congruent with the view from the cross. Our relational distance is no longer acceptable and cannot distinguish the ontology and function unfolded on and from the cross. Who and what did not end with the cross but rise to be followed in compatible reciprocal relationship in nothing less and no substitute of whole ontology and function.

## **Who to Follow**

The theological task may not always start out with a focus on discipleship—which is unfortunate since this puts 'the cart before the horse'—yet that is its essential engagement if its outcome is distinguished with theological significance. In the age of reductionism, for the theological task to be in relational terms it must by the nature of its relational epistemic process be engaged in the relational context and process of discipleship. That is, to be distinguished the theological task follows the whole *who* of the

cross in his intrinsic relational path of vulnerable involvement; this is inseparable from the theological trajectory distinguished fully in its process. If not on this basis, the theological task is engaged by default down to referential terms, the limits of which render theology and practice fragmentary, in reduced ontology and function of both God and us.

This default position and epistemic limits were evident in the struggles of Peter's theological task, despite having started out with discipleship, that is, based on his narrow understanding of *who* to follow. Hence, Jesus made conclusive in his last words to Peter implied in his relational language: "your discipleship will be determined by the depth of your *agape* relational involvement with me and my family—in the primacy of relationship together and not the secondary of serving and sacrifice" (Jn 21:15-22). The primacy of discipleship could be confused with the secondary since earlier Jesus identified himself as "the good shepherd *who* lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11). Yet, as in John 15:13, *tithemi* defines putting one's person in the vulnerable dynamic of *agape* involvement; in the shepherd metaphor this explains why the sheep know *him* (Jn 10:2-16). To follow Jesus is to be *agape* relationally involved with him on his vulnerable relational path ("where I am," Jn 12:26). Nothing less and no substitutes unfold in the relational outcome of whole theology and practice, which Peter eventually learned the hard way in the early formation of the church.

In their time together even leading up to the cross, Jesus clearly defined for his followers *who* to follow, *what* to follow and *how*. When he disclosed the imminence of his death, his relational language was not focused on sacrifice but distinguished between what was primary and secondary (Jn 12:23-27). It was in the primacy of relationship with his Father that Jesus made definitive his discipleship in the primacy of relationship together—contrary to discipleship in the rabbinic tradition—and thereby conclusively distinguished this relational involvement from the secondary of serving (v.26). Though serving is not unimportant, the servant model illuminates neither Jesus with the Father nor his followers with him (Jn 15:15). What determines this involvement in the primacy of these relationships is entirely by the depth of *agape* in relational involvement, not in sacrifice and serving. The immeasurable depth of *agape* involvement intimately manifests between the Father and the Son, "As the Father has loved me," and then proportionately overflows between Jesus and his followers, "so I have loved you" (Jn 15:9). Only *agape* involvement flowing from the whole of God in the primacy of relationship together constitutes his followers ("that they may be one, as we are one...and have loved them even as you have loved me," Jn 17:22-23), and on this relational basis alone distinguishes his followers ("Just as I have loved you...by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have *agape relational involvement with one another*" Jn 13:34-35). Note that even as Jesus makes definitive the vulnerable relational process of the relational path to follow him, Peter asked for information to process in his theological task (v.36, cf. 21:20-22).

In contrast and even conflict with the limits of serving and sacrifice, therefore, Jesus clearly distinguished his followers by two relational imperatives of discipleship which can only be whole-ly understood in relational terms: (1) "follow my whole person in the primacy of relationship" (Jn 12:26) based entirely on (2) "remain, dwell, abide (*meno*) vulnerably in the intimacy of my *agape* relational involvement with you that flows from the Father" (Jn 15:9). These relational imperatives make unavoidable the

primary engagement of the theological task in the vulnerable relational path of Jesus, and not just with his theological trajectory. The relational outcome of discipleship is the emergence ‘already’ and the ongoing unfolding of whole ontology and function in relational likeness to the whole and holy God, which is based not on mere knowledge about God but on the *agape* relational involvement (Jn 17:23,25-26). Likewise, the relational outcome of whole theology and practice is based on just this *agape* relationship.

Yet, the experiential truth of relational involvement with the whole and holy God is distinguished only when discipleship is clearly distinct from the influence and shaping from human contextualization (the common or ordinary usage distinct from the uncommon, holy). When his followers receive the communicative word from God in relational language, they are distinguished from the world and its prevailing referential language, “just as I am not of the world” (17:14). This discipleship is crucial for the theological task to have the relational outcome of whole theology and practice. The whole and holy God’s communicative word in relational language is the experiential truth that makes Jesus’ followers distinct from the common and ordinary of human contextualization, and thus distinguishes them in the world with their whole ontology and function “just as you Father sent me into the world, so I have sent our family into the world” (17:17-18). And with the relational outcome ‘already’ of the whole theology and practice of his family in relational likeness of the Trinity, “the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (v.23).

Without discipleship in the primacy of *agape* relational involvement together in the whole and holy God’s family, the relational outcome of whole theology and practice does not emerge and ongoingly unfold. Anything less and any substitutes in the age of reductionism are insufficient to distinguish theology and practice from the common shaping of human contextualization, and are unable to prevent their fragmentation by reductionism and its counter-relational work. This default position in referential terms yields only a referential outcome in reduced ontology and function of both God and us. Theological discourse in referential language can be rigorous, eloquent and profound, but when in relational language there is a qualitative distinction of the relational messages it communicates (without the quantity of words) in significance to the whole and holy God and for the whole ontology and function of God’s family—the critical difference between the quantitative outer in and the qualitative inner out. Theological discourse in referential language speaks to “the wise and learned” whom Jesus critiqued consistently for their narrow epistemic field and limited engagement (Lk 10:21; 17:20-21; Jn 5:37-40). Theological discourse in relational language speaks to the vulnerable heart of a “child”; this is not just about the relational nature of faith but integrally also involves what is human ontology in the qualitative image of God and human function in God’s relational likeness.

“The discipleship you use will be the ontology and function you get, both as a person and persons together as church.”

## The Relational Outcome of Church in Likeness

The primary motivation underlying the discipleship of many is the pursuit of self-determination (even unknowingly or inadvertently); and this implicit condition is difficult to recognize since it is constructed by epistemological illusion (e.g. in Bible study, Jn 5:39) and ontological simulation (e.g. in worship, Mt 15:8-9). Self-determination, notably as engaged both in church and academy, is consequential for human ontology and function in two primary, and unavoidable, ways:

1. It demands a reduction of the person from inner out to outer in which fragments one's ontology and function to be defined by the parts of what one does and has primarily from outer in—necessary because such determination is unable to be composed from inner out merely by one's self. Jesus exposed the reductionism in self-determination conclusively in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6).
2. Self-determination also demands a comparative process in order to determine one's value, worth or standing (better or less) always in relation to others (likely with a deficit model) and never in isolation with oneself, thereby rendering those relations to implicit, or even explicit, competitive relationships that also define others from outer in, even in church and the academy—necessary because such determination is unable to engage others in deeper relationship without becoming vulnerable to the inner out that would preclude this determination by one's self (cf. disciples' relationships with each other, Lk 9:46; 22:24). Paul exposed these competitive and fragmenting relationships that reduced the ontology and function of the church at Corinth (1 Cor 4:6-7; 2 Cor 10:12).

For any success in self-determination for the person and the church, the need to control the results is critical. This control necessitates a shift to the secondary and away from the primacy of *agape* relational involvement that goes deeper than what one can control. This focus on the secondary makes the person and the church susceptible to reductionism, rendering their results to the shape of fragmentary ontology and function from human context. In his struggles, Peter eventually shifted from the secondary to the primary for the whole ontology and function of the church (cf. 1 Pet 1:22-23; 2:9-10). Similarly, the church has struggled with the secondary throughout church history in its attempts to establish its ontology and function, consequently forming merely ecclesial or missional identities rather than its definitive ontological identity distinguishing the church in the world—the ontological identity made conclusive by Jesus in his formative family prayer (Jn 17:21-23).

In further discourse in relational language about the process of *agape* relationship for the person and persons together as his family, Jesus used the metaphor of the vine and the branches (Jn 15:1-8). The metaphor neither signifies a static state nor describes merely an organic condition, but only the relational context and process of God's *agape* involvement as family together. "To abide or remain" (*meno*, 15:4-7) involves the dynamic process of reciprocal relationship together, with its reciprocating contextualization and triangulation to be whole, live whole and make whole in the human context (not be shaped by it)—the fruit of discipleship. This metaphor does not define an

ontological union with God, or this union would be the deification of persons in an ontology and function that goes beyond the image and likeness of God to the ontology and function distinguishing God exclusively. Nor should this metaphor be considered the structural arrangement for God's family; this structure would shift the church family to a more unilateral relationship in contrast and conflict with the relational imperative requiring the primacy of reciprocal relationship together in *agape* involvement—the reciprocal response to God's relational terms that Jesus further defines in this context (15:9-11). Both the ontological union and the structural arrangement lenses (or variations) of Jesus' metaphor narrow down his relational language to secondary interpretations that do not determine church ontology and function in the primacy of the primary. Even with good intentions, the results emerging from such lenses are limited to a church's self-determination over the relational outcome unfolding from “the Father's *agape* relational involvement with the Son, who extends this *agape* involvement with us to be God's whole family, who extend *agape* involvement with each other and the world.”

Moreover, it is important to understand the experiential truth that in Jesus' claim that seeing him was seeing the Father, he vulnerably disclosed in this twofold ontological and relational reality (ontological One and relational Whole) the importance of both what constitutes God's triune being as well as what matters most to God. God's self-disclosure embodied in Jesus was the who and what of the whole of God, and of how God only does relationships to be Whole. It is in this trinitarian relational context by this trinitarian relational process that the whole of God's thematic action is extended in response to the human condition for relationship together as family in family love. While those who respond back cannot experience ontological oneness (*heis eimi*) with the whole of God, they can have in reciprocal relationship the experiential truth of relational oneness (*en eimi*) together with the Trinity. The experiential truth of *en eimi* with the Trinity unfolds in the relational outcome of Jesus' formative family prayer; and this experiential reality composes the integral relational basis and ongoing relational base for Jesus' followers to have *heis eimi* with each other together as his church for the ontological oneness to be whole in likeness of the Trinity (*kathos*, in congruence with the Trinity, Jn 17:21-23). The whole of Jesus embodied nothing less than who, what and how the whole of God is in his relational work of grace only for relationship together and to make relationships together whole, God's whole on God's terms. His formative family prayer constitutes his followers together in this qualitative relational significance that matters most to God. Therefore, his church lives ‘ontologically one’, *heis eimi* together, *en eimi* the relationships with each other necessary to function to be ‘relationally whole’ (“one”) in likeness of the relational ontology of the Trinity.

These relational dynamics of God's thematic response are critical to pay attention to as they converge for this distinguished relational outcome. The distinguished Face continued to turn to his family not only to bless but necessarily to challenge for the new relationship together in wholeness that distinguished his church. We need to look back into his face to understand this ontology and function of the church. Jesus' composing for ecclesiology to be whole did not stop with the end of his formal earthly ministry; that was only the prelude. He had other defining interactions specific to his church, which can be considered his post-ascension discourse for the ecclesiology definitive for his church to be whole.



## Jesus' Post-Ascension Discourse for Ecclesiology to Be Whole

After the Spirit came to his church for its development and completion, the face of Jesus shined on Paul to engage him in relationship for his transformation and called him to be whole to clearly distinguish the church's wholeness for the experiential truth of the gospel (Acts 9:1-16, Gal 2:11,14). Then Jesus challenged Peter's perceptual-interpretive framework for making distinctions about persons/peoples, in order to redeem his bias in relationships which created barriers in his church preventing all persons from coming together in transformed relationships as God's family without the veil (Acts 10:9-36; 15:7-9). In family love Jesus clarified the full significance of his relational work of equalization to establish the function of his church also as equalizer, and thereby the ecclesiology of the whole was being made definitive. Yet, what was formed (and reformed) theologically was not always made functional in practice, which was the reason Paul later had to chasten Peter in family love for him to practice the relationships together necessary to be whole as God's church family congruent to the truth of the gospel.

Jesus' post-ascension discourse for ecclesiology continued when his family love exposed reductionism in various church practices to hold them accountable for the integrity necessary to be whole as his church (Rev 2-3). The skewed emphasis of the secondary over the primary in churches was clearly evident in his post-ascension discourse. We need to continue this discourse started previously. Examining his discourse with these churches will help us fully understand the functional and relational significance of Jesus' continued involvement in the ecclesiology needed for churches to be whole—God's relational whole only on God's qualitative relational terms.

Being whole always involves the issue of reductionism. That is because what prevails in (*en*) any context of the world is reductionism. Jesus calls his followers relationally out of (*ek*) these contexts in order to be whole together as his family, then also relationally sends them back into (*eis*) those surrounding contexts to live whole together as his family and to make whole the human condition (as defined in his formative family prayer, Jn 17). Without the reciprocating dynamic of this *ek-eis* relational involvement, church practice is functionally based on just *en* (in) the surrounding context and thereby shaped in its influence. This is problematic in function for the ongoing relational involvement with the whole of God and God's terms to constitute the whole of who we are as church and whose we are.

Without the ongoing function of the reciprocating *ek-eis* relational involvement, there is no engagement of a culture's life and practice in the surrounding context with the necessary process of reciprocating contextualization. In conjoint function with triangulation, reciprocating contextualization provides the relational process imperative for the qualitatively distinguished identity of a church to function in the surrounding context without being defined or determined by what prevails in that context. That is to say, without this reciprocating relational process in church practice, there is no consistent functional basis to negate the influence of reductionism. This leaves church practice susceptible to subtle embedding in the surrounding context, or engaging in ontological simulation and epistemological illusion, despite the presence of apparent indicators of important church practices illuminating its identity. This is illustrated in the various

churches Jesus addressed, each notable for its own variation of church practice. The influence of reductionism is usually more subtle than witnessed in the Thyatira church (Rev 2:18-29, discussed previously). This is evident increasingly in the other churches Jesus addressed, as we look next at the church in Laodicea (3:14-22).

Laodicea was a rich city, the wealthiest Phrygian city, ten miles west of Colossae. It was known as a prosperous banking center, for its textile industry and its renowned medical school. Their residents had great pride in their financial wealth, fine clothes and famous eye salve. But Laodicea lacked a natural water supply. Hot water was piped in from hot springs and cold water came from the mountains. Both were lukewarm by the time it reached Laodicea. Since hot water was preferred for bathing and cold for drinking, there were frequent complaints about their water as inconvenient to their exceptionally comfortable lifestyle. This background gives important context for Jesus' discourse and helps us understand further the significance of his concern for ecclesiology to be whole.

To Jesus, how the church in Laodicea functioned was just like their water: lukewarm. Though tepid does suggest that their church practice was "hot" earlier, church life and practice was now comfortable, self-satisfied and complacent, essentially status quo of what prevailed (3:16). Their self-assessment reflected the perceptions of the surrounding city: that they were rich and had everything they needed (3:17a)—relatively speaking, of course, since the comparative process always makes such self-definition provisional. More importantly for those whose self-definition is based on what they do and have, Jesus addressed the illusion of those perceptions and exposed their reductionism (v.17b). They functioned in the epistemological illusion of reductionism, consequently their church practice was without functional substance and relational significance. For Jesus, their lukewarm practice was not only inconvenient but distasteful ("I am about to spit you out of my mouth"), which Laodiceans could readily identify with given their water condition. Moreover, their neither-cold-nor-hot practice was a lie of reductionism implying their fragmentary theological assumptions. First, there is no intermediate condition of church practice between being God's whole as family or not, that defines its existence. Jesus held this church accountable for their integrity—even "cold" was better than a lie—which is how family love functions with its working assumption. Then there was the assumption of their theological anthropology that defined them by what they did and had, which determined their church practice. Both assumptions involve reduced ontology and function.

The Laodicean church practice should be familiar to Western churches, notably in the U.S. Yet, this is not merely about relative affluence and comfortable lifestyles. This is about the first major issue of what defines the person, and how this eventually determines how church practice functions. The surrounding context of Laodicea defined itself by what it did and had. The human person was perceived from the outer in, thereby functionally reducing the importance of the whole person from the inner out signified by the heart. In this quantitative process, both the importance of the whole person and the primary priority of whole relationship together are replaced by secondary areas of interest and concern. Substitutes are made for the functional substance of our heart and for the quality of our relationships. Substitutes involve any alternative that reduces the qualitative and functional significance of being whole as persons in relationship together. These substitutes from reductionism are what the church in Laodicea accepted

(intentionally or inadvertently) from its surrounding context of the Greco-Roman world to determine its church practice, consequently creating the illusion (the epistemological illusion of reductionism) about the well-being of their existing condition. This false sense of self-understanding is ongoingly promoted, reinforced and developed by Satan, who encourages churches with Christian substitutes in ontological simulation (cf. 2 Cor 11:14-15)—which Jesus addressed further in two other churches.

While Jesus exposed the Laodicean church's reductionist substitutes and deconstructed their illusion, he also extended further family love by making his whole person vulnerable to them for the redemptive change imperative in relationship together to be whole (3:18-19). He was clarifying for them that relationship together on God's terms is incompatible with any reductionist practice. As family love always functions, he redefined them to pursue their whole persons from the inner out to be redeemed to come together in transformed relationships. This is signified in Jesus' well-known words which followed—an intimate relational message of family love for his church, usually taken out of this context. The classic image of Jesus knocking at the door (v.20) is a metaphor of these deep desires of the whole of God to have intimate relationship with his family—signifying the new wine communion together. The change they needed, therefore, must (by its nature as signified in the Trinity) be a relational change transforming their practice from a mere gathering without relational belonging (church as orphanage) to whole persons intimately involved in relationships together as family (signified by “open door,” hearts coming together in intimate communion). This metaphor clearly illuminates that redemptive change is *the relational imperative* for his church.

This metaphor is helpful to locate the ongoing involvement of Jesus with his church: pursuing his followers for transformed relationships together as family with the veil removed. We cannot continue to reduce Jesus' intimate relational message of family love for his church in this metaphor by perceiving it only for the individual, as is Christian convention. This metaphor of Jesus' relational work of grace needs to be returned to its full context for use in ecclesiology. Therefore, the significance of Jesus still knocking should not be lost on even the most mature Christian because it is a relational key in Jesus' involvement for ecclesiology to be whole (cf. 3:7-8). This metaphor functionally interacts with the metaphor of church as orphanage to make whole his church.

Any church practice “to be apart” continues to function with the veil. This misrepresents the gospel and is a contradiction of God's desires specifically for the new creation family in likeness of the Trinity, which Jesus constituted earlier with his defining family prayer. Since what integrally reflects the life of the Trinity is church practice only in likeness of the Trinity's relational ontology of intimate interdependent relationships as family, any alternative to the relationship of God's whole always becomes church practice shaped as an orphanage, notably operating as an organization or as a voluntary association (cf. church in Thyatira and trade guilds). This either-or defining process is an ongoing tension for church practice. For churches to address the influence of reductionism, even in pragmatic practice, they need the presence of the whole, God's whole. This is the whole that the relational function of the Trinity ongoingly provides as the church's integral relational basis and ongoing relational base, by which Jesus knocks on church doors. Therefore, embracing the relational function of the Trinity emerges as

the primary issue facing churches to define and determine how they will function both within themselves and in the world.

This relational issue was involved in two other churches Jesus addressed. The next church, the church in Sardis (Rev 3:1-3), had “a *reputation* of being alive” apparently in the prevailing perception, although the city hosted many pagan cults whose practices pervaded the surrounding context. The implication here is that this church lived behind their “reputation” (*onoma*, used as the substitute of what a person actually is). Even with their reputation of being alive, Jesus made no such assumptions about them. Rather he examined how they functioned through the qualitative lens penetrating inner out with family love. Uninfluenced by the surrounding bias, he exposed what existed beneath the outer layer of “being alive”: “you are dead” (*nekros*, the condition of being separated from the sources of life, thus being unaccompanied by something) based on the fact that “I have not found your works *complete* in the sight of God”—that is, incomplete or fragmentary based on God’s terms, not as defined by the surrounding context. With the perceptual-interpretive framework Jesus makes definitive here for ecclesiology, their “works” (*ergon*, works denoting what defined them) were not “complete” (*pleroo*, to fill up, make full, complete or whole). In other words, what defined them was not whole. What was missing in their church practice?

Since no explicit sins such as idol worship and sexual immorality were mentioned (as in Thyatira), their incomplete deeds point to something more subtle or lacking. Their activity was perceived as alive, yet likely in the quantitative aspects of *bios*, not the qualitative function of *zoe*. Their reputation signified only a substitute (*onoma*) of the integral identity of who, what and how his church is, consequently lacking the integrity of wholeness. While Jesus’ polemic about soiled and white (*leukos*, bright, gleaming) clothes described those incomplete and a remnant who weren’t incomplete respectively, bright clothes symbolized those who participated in God’s life (3:4). This is about relationship and involvement together, which soiled clothes symbolized a barrier to, precluded or maintained with relational distance. Any type of “soiled” clothes—whether stained by blatant sin or dirtied from subtle incomplete work—would have this relational consequence. I conclude this all implies the following: their deeds were not whole because they were substitutes from reductionism; and they were not whole because what defined them was based on reductionist practices; thus how they practiced church was separated or distanced from the relational involvement of God’s life, unaccompanied by the vulnerable presence and function of the Trinity, because of their sin of reductionism—in what defined their persons and determined their relationships together, and thereby in how they practiced church.

The issue of not being complete and being whole started back at creation and the purpose to “fill the earth” (Gen 1:28). The Hebrew term for “fill” (*male*) generally denotes completion of something that was unfinished. When God declared “not good for human persons to be apart,” God started with Adam and Eve the relational context and process of the function to be God’s family. This was now fulfilled by Jesus—as he declared “I will not leave you as orphans” and sent us the Spirit for completion—in the trinitarian relational context of family by the trinitarian relational process of family love. This relational context and process were not the primary function of the Sardis church’s involvement and ministry, so Jesus critiqued what they “filled their church” with, as he does all churches.

In spite of how well the Sardis church presented itself (its appearance) and how well it was perceived (its image), qualitative substance was lacking. This reflected a shift in how they defined themselves from the inner out to the outer-in aspects and functions (*metaschematizo*). Their lack of deeper qualitative substance exposed the credibility of their reputation as essentially meaningless—though worth an image in comparative reductionists terms—while the validity of their work (apparent service and ministry) was relationally insignificant because they were separated (“to be apart”) from the substance primary to wholeness of life. These are severe critiques Jesus made of a church which at least was doing something to earn that reputation of being alive—unlike the Laodicean church’s lukewarmness. The choice essentially of style over substance is not unique to the church in Sardis. In fact, the distinction between style (for appearance and image) and substance is blurred in many current church practices. Yet, the credibility gap between what appears to be and what actually exists is not readily apparent to a church and observers, when a church relies on what it does to define itself. Reputation becomes one of those valued indicators of success which many churches depend on for feedback to evaluate their work—or value to validate their position in God’s kingdom. Jesus asks, “What are we filling our churches with?” The above is not the dynamic of *pleroo* that distinguishes the *pleroma* of Christ (as Paul illuminated, Eph 1:23).

Family love functions for the integrity of relationship together to be whole, and for accountability for anything less and any substitutes. Thus, Jesus’ critiques were ‘a critique of hope’ in his call to be whole—a functional key in his involvement for ecclesiology to be God’s whole. When Jesus confronted them to “wake up,” the sense of this two-word combination (*gregoreuo* and *ginomai*, v.2) is to emerge as new, whole persons. This was not about self-determination but redemptive change—the relational imperative. They needed to be transformed in the inner-out aspects and functions (*metamorphoo*) of a person, while being redeemed from the outer-in aspects and functions (*metaschematizo*) that did not give full importance to the qualitative function of the whole person (signified only by the heart). Their outer-in over inner-out way of defining themselves determined what they paid attention to in how they did relationships and how they practiced church—which were not complete but fragmentary and thus without wholeness. This certainly diminished their relationships both with God and with each other, though they were unaware of this condition due to the simulation and illusion of reductionism that critically reduced their qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness; consequently they ignored the lack of qualitative relational substance.

With the lens of repentance by the function of family love, Jesus called them back to what they had “received” (*lambano*, v.3) in relationship from the beginning: his whole person, not just his teachings. As disclosed in John 1:12, *lambano* means to embrace and follow him as person-teacher—that is, be his disciples not as students in the rabbinic tradition but as adherents in relationship together in progression to be whole as God’s family, thereby pointing to his formative process in the ecclesiology necessary to be whole. In other words, Jesus called them back to be whole in the qualitative function of relational work inherent in who, what and how the Trinity is, and therefore who his followers are and what his church is: the whole of God’s family distinguished by whole relationship together. For nothing less and no substitutes of this relational reality, they needed to become transformed persons from the inner out who vulnerably engage in the

relational work necessary to integrate equalized and intimate relationships together to be his church family in the new relational order.

The rigorous nature of this relational process makes church practice more susceptible to reductionism; church practice accordingly is also tempted to use the easier (also read pragmatic) alternatives of reductionist substitutes—notably with a less vulnerable shaping of relationship together. The lack of primary involvement in this definitive relational work for church practice becomes even more acute with the church in Ephesus (Rev 2:1-4).

Jesus consistently disclosed knowing these different churches’ “works” or deeds (*ergon*, what defined them). The list of the Ephesian church’s deeds is impressive: their “toil” (*kopos*, denotes not so much the actual effort but the weariness experienced from that effort); their “endurance” (*hypomone*, endurance as to things and circumstances, in contrast to patience toward persons; signifies character that does not allow losing to circumstances, cf. church in Thyatira); they maintained the doctrinal purity of the church under trying circumstances and did not tolerate falsehood, unlike the Thyatira church and its hybrid theology; they even suffered repercussions for Christ’s name and yet endured the hardships to remain constant in their faith. This list forms a composite picture describing how they were, what they did and were involved in, which essentially was extremely dedicated in major church work, and which can also describe a number of successful churches today.

Jesus knew not merely the information about their deeds but also knew (*oida*) the nature of them, and the extent of their functional significance. It may seem somewhat perplexing that Jesus was not impressed with this church and even felt to the contrary about their church practice: “You have abandoned the love you had at first” (v.4). As noted previously, if this was not Jesus’ own critique, we would easily discount this as a misguided conclusion or uninformed allegation. Yet, his discourse here for the integrity of ecclesiology raised a serious issue of church function, which is crucial to account for in how we practice church ourselves. His critique makes conclusive the very heart of his desires for ecclesiology to be whole.

The term “abandoned” (*aphiemi*) means to forsake, abandon persons, to leave, let go from oneself or let alone—which would include functionally maintaining relational distance even while in close physical proximity or in mutual activity. *Aphiemi* is the same term Jesus used in his promise to “not leave *his followers* orphaned” (Jn 14:18). Connecting these relational messages provides the context and process for the function of ecclesiology to be God’s whole. In the church context at Ephesus this strongly describes not paying attention to the whole person and not giving primary priority to whole relationship together. They worked hard doing things *for* God but the relational process necessary for their functional significance was deemphasized or misplaced in their effort. This often happens as churches develop and the goals of church growth become the priority of church practice. In the process, as the Ephesian church demonstrated, there is a subtle shift in which the *means* become the *end* and its primary purpose for relationship together to be whole is abandoned or made secondary.

As the term *hypomone* for “perseverance” denotes, they were so focused on circumstances and situations such that persons (especially God) unintentionally were ignored in relationship, inadvertently left in relational distance or emotionally forgotten. Their *hypomone* was in contrast to the Philadelphian church’s *hypomone*, which was a

reciprocal relational response to Jesus' desire ("you have kept my word") for relationship together (3:8,10). What distinguished them from the Ephesian church was the latter's referentialization of the Word. Enduring "for the sake of my name" (2:3) narrowed down "my name" to "name without my person," that is, apart from relationship together. By "abandoning" their involvement in relationship together (however unintentional or inadvertent), their focus shifted to their persevering character of not giving in to bad circumstances. Thus, their endurance for the sake of "name without my person" also stands in contrast to *makrothymia*, which is patience, endurance, longsuffering with respect to persons; the former is about dedication in hard work (characteristic of the Ephesian church) while the latter involves relationship with mercy, grace and family love (cf. Mt 18:21-22, Rom 2:4).

Despite what would usually be defined as significant church practice reflecting sound ecclesiology, there was distance in their relationships leaving them in the condition "to be apart," indicating a well-run orphanage and not ecclesiology of the whole. They did not have the relational involvement of family love, which is the only involvement having relational significance to God (cf. Mary's anointing of Jesus as a priority over ministry to the poor, Mt 26:8-13, par. Jn 12:1-8). This is further evidenced by their reduction of the truth to mere doctrinal purity. They forgot that the Truth was vulnerably disclosed only for relationship together on God's terms, which they were effectively redefining on their terms. Essentially, their referential terms reversed the priority order of Jesus' paradigm for serving (Jn 12:26) that clearly defined the first priority of discipleship as intimate involvement in relationship together, not focused first on the work to be done for serving (*diakoneo*). Consequently, they also compromised their identity as the light, which is rooted in their relationship with the Light (Rev 2:5b, cf. Mt 5:14-15); this was also contrary to Paul's relational imperative for the church to "live as children of light" (Eph 5:8). Since they focused primarily on what they did—indicating their theological anthropology in how they defined themselves—they paid attention to related situations and circumstances and less important issues, while ignoring the primacy of relationship together in family love. Functioning with this perceptual-interpretive framework of a reduced theological anthropology resulted in the relational consequences of forsaking their first love that reflected the lack of relational involvement in their church practice and signified their renegotiated ecclesiology.

This was the relational involvement Jesus called them to turn around and get back to for them to be whole: "Repent, and do the *relational* works you did at first" (2:5). Jesus was restoring their misplaced priorities and more deeply made discipleship definitive by further illuminating the relational significance of his paradigm for serving. This involved the first priority of discipleship, which is ongoing vulnerable involvement with Jesus in the relational progression to the whole of God's family—the *formative process* in Jesus' involvement for ecclesiology to be whole. His ecclesiology is the ongoing relational outcome of discipleship in this relational progression to the whole of God; and this by necessity vulnerably engages reciprocal relationship with the Trinity and conjointly is intimately involved in reciprocal relationships together as church family in likeness of the Trinity.

The basic complaint Jesus had against this church is the primary issue facing all churches for defining their ontology and determining how they will function: embracing the whole ontology and relational function of the Trinity, and embodying church practice

in likeness of the Trinity's relational ontology, therefore in congruence with and ongoing compatibility to Jesus' defining prayer for his family (Jn 17:20-26). In all that the Ephesian church was doing (which was a lot), they were not directly involved in the relational context and process of the whole of God and did not function in the context of family and process of family love constituted in the Trinity. They demonstrated a direct correlation between the priority we give relationships and the extent to which we are loving, as defined by relational involvement, not as doing something, however dedicated. For Jesus, this correlation is irrefutable for ecclesiology to be whole. Whether Jesus' complaint against this church included both their relationship with God and with each other is not clearly indicated in the text. Yet we can strongly infer that it included all their relationships, because their primary emphasis on their work reflected the three major issues ongoing in life: (1) how they defined themselves, which further determined (2) how they did relationships and thus (3) practiced church. These three major issues are always deeply interrelated, and also in integral interaction with the primary issue of the Trinity, noted above, thereby together they need to be accounted for in ecclesiology in order to be whole.

The practices of both the churches in Ephesus and Sardis were contradictions in function that reflect the subtle influence of reductionism. What they focused on and engaged in were reductionist substitutes for the trinitarian relational context of family and the trinitarian relational process of family love. The relational consequence was to become embedded in ontological simulation and epistemological illusion. Moreover, the relational function of the Trinity cannot be understood in theological propositions nor experienced in church doctrine, even in its purity. By reductionist practice, these churches demonstrated how their practice ("abandoned the love you had at first" 2:4) and their understanding ("a reputation of being alive," 3:1) became *decontextualized* from what was primary, and embedded in human contextualization. In their ironic struggle to remain distinct in a pluralistic Greco-Roman context, the Ephesian church stopped paying attention to the greater context which defined them and distinguished their significance. In their effort to be significant (or popular) in their surrounding context, the Sardis church ignored the primary context which constituted them. That is, they were removed, diminished or deemphasized from the relational context and process of the Trinity and needed to be recontextualized in the relational nature of the Trinity. This is the function of reciprocating contextualization in the *ek-eis* relational involvement that Jesus made imperative to distinguish his family in the ecclesiology to be whole and to make whole. Without this reciprocating relational dynamic, church practice increasingly finds its functional basis only *en* (in) the surrounding context, in which reductionism prevails.

Whatever a church's surrounding context may be, we can expect the prevailing influence of reductionism to affect the whole of church practice. It will, that is, unless there is the ongoing function of the reciprocating *ek-eis* relational involvement to definitively distinguish church purpose and function from beyond merely its position *en* the world. Jesus' church's purpose and function in the primacy of relationship together to be God's whole necessitate nothing less and no substitutes for this whole, as the terms of God's relational grace demand. Without function in the relational terms of grace in reciprocal relational involvement, reductionism is able to shift grace's demand for nothing less and no substitutes than the whole in church practice to anything less and any substitute (cf. "Did God really say that?"). The shift entails the following: (1) This shift is



qualitative, thus cannot be observed in quantitative terms, as the Thyatira church's increased amount of "good deeds" demonstrated and the Laodicean church's wealth, fine clothes and medicine illustrate; (2) This shift is ontological, away from the inner-out whole person, thus cannot be understood by an outer-in ontology of personhood, as evidenced by the Sardis church's inability to understand its true condition; (3) This shift is relational, thus cannot be experienced in any other human activity than the primacy of intimate relationships together, as signified by the unawareness of the Ephesian church's diminished experience in their level of relational involvement together.

As long as our perceptual-interpretive framework is narrowed down, for example, to referentialization, our lens' view of the qualitative, the ontological and the relational will not discern the extent of the surrounding influences reducing the whole of church practice. The relational demands of grace, however, clarify for church function that nothing less and no substitutes to be whole is the only practice which has significance to God. Additionally, the lens of repentance in integral function with a strong view of sin makes no assumptions to diminish addressing sin as reductionism, first and foremost within church practice and then in the surrounding contexts. And Jesus wants "all the churches" to clearly "know that I am he who searches minds and hearts" (Rev 2:23)—that is, examines the qualitative significance of persons from inner out, whom he holds accountable for their integrity to be whole in relationships together as the whole of God's family (2:25; 3:11). In their effort to be relevant (and possibly pragmatic) in the surrounding pluralistic context, the Thyatira church forgot in their many admirable church practices what was necessary to be whole and to make whole (cf. a similar error by the church in Pergamum in a reductionist context, Rev 2:12-15).

These churches were not unique in church formation and they cannot be considered exceptions in church history. Each church has a counterpart in the contemporary church that must be taken seriously because of Jesus' critique for his church to be whole:

1. Church at Ephesus—the theologically orthodox or doctrinally correct church
2. Church at Sardis—the successful "mega" church
3. Church at Thyatira—the activist, service oriented, or missional church
4. Church at Laodicea—the consumer church.

All these churches have in common what continue to be critical interrelated issues needing epistemological clarification and hermeneutical correction: a weak view of sin not including reductionism, and a fragmentary theological anthropology reducing ontology and function.

It is not sufficient for churches to be a mere presence, or even merely to function, *en* the world; their only significance is to function *ek-eis* (whole relational movement into) the world both to be relationally involved with others as God's whole and, by the nature of this whole function, also to confront all sin as reductionism of the whole. That is, the church's whole ontology and function makes whole the human condition; the church does not reflect, reinforce or sustain it. Jesus communicates directly to us about the whole of ecclesiology in his discourse, and the relational message we need to learn to listen to and receive him in about the Thyatira church is clearly illuminated: to let pass, indifferently permit or inadvertently allow—"tolerate," which the other churches also did

more subtly—the influence of reductionism in any form from the surrounding context directly diminishes the wholeness of church practice and minimalizes their relational involvement with God, with each other in the church and with others in the world. For churches to get beyond practice merely *en* the world, they need a different dynamic to define their life and determine their practice.

By searching hearts Jesus communicates clearly to us that church function in its innermost is about being whole, not merely engaging in correct ecclesial practices. And the *eis* relational engagement of church ontology and function *en* the world must by its nature be integrated with the *ek* (movement out of) relational involvement with the whole of God as its defining antecedent in the *ek-eis* dynamic. This reciprocating relational process negates the continuous counter-relational work of Satan and its reductionist influence (Rev 2:24) by ongoingly engaging, embracing, experiencing and extending God's whole in the qualitative significance of the integrated ontology of both personhood and the church constituted in and by the Trinity, that is, only in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity.

In his relational discourse Jesus communicates a critical relational message to us that delineates a simple reality of life about the human person and the existing social order—matters we either pay attention to or ignore depending on our working assumptions of humanity and society. Since we do not live in a vacuum or in social isolation, our practice is either shaped by the surrounding context we are *en* (thus embedded) or constituted by what we enter *eis* that context with. In the latter function, for *eis* to define life and determine practice necessitates the *ek* relational involvement to disembed us from a surrounding context in order to transplant us into the whole of God's relational context and process, hereby integrally constituting God's whole for the *eis* relational movement back. This reciprocating relational process signifies the relational demands of grace compatible with the working assumptions with which Jesus came *eis* the world and his assumptions of humanity and the existing social order with which he engaged the world. On this basis, Jesus (as well as Paul) ongoingly challenges both our theological anthropology and our ecclesiology for the only purpose of wholeness.

For our practice both as person and persons together as church, disembedding from the influence of reductionism to transplant into God's whole is the issue we need to understand in relational terms and not in conventional referential terms. Without the function of nothing less and no substitutes, which grace demands for person and church, wholeness is diminished and the whole is minimalized—that is, functionally no longer whole. For church practice to fulfill its divine purpose and function, it must account in its function for being relationally transplanted in the whole of God and God's theological trajectory and relational path for its globalizing commission “sent to be whole” in integral relational function with its “call to be whole and holy” (as Jesus pointed the Thyatira church to, 2:26-29).

Jesus' post-ascension discourse is not merely an addendum for his church; it is what in pre-ascension he vulnerably embodied with nothing less and no substitutes of the whole of God and ongoingly accounted for within the whole of God's intimate response for whole relationship together. After his church had opportunity to establish its practice in his integrated call and commission, his relational message communicated in family love the critique of hope necessary for all churches also to embody in its practice the qualitative relational function to be God's whole in likeness of the Trinity. Now in deeper

reciprocal relational responsibility, his church is ongoingly accountable for the whole of God's whole with compatible relational response back. And his post-ascension discourse for ecclesiology is clearly definitive for his church's response to be whole as God's new creation family, and for his church to live and make whole as equalizer for God's new relational order in response to the human condition. His relational communication for ecclesiology composes church function—necessarily by the nature of the church's whole ontology—only in relational congruence with his embodied function as the equalizer in the trinitarian relational context of family by the trinitarian relational process of family love, nothing less and no substitutes but the triune God's irreducible whole on God's nonnegotiable relational terms.

For the church to have this relational outcome in likeness of the Trinity, it has to emerge and flow from the redemptive change that constitutes the new wine relationships together in wholeness without the veil. As demonstrated by the inauguration of the new wine table fellowship (Lk 5:33-39), redemptive change requires an ontological and functional change from inner out that is distinguished from what shapes human contextualization. Paul continues this primary focus by making redemptive change functional for the church.

## **Paul's Basis for the Ecclesiology of the Whole**

In the systemic framework of Paul's theology, God's creative and communicative actions are always relational actions only for whole relationship together. God's relational action does not impose a template on the human person to reduce human function. By God's relational nature, relationship is never unilateral but necessitates compatible reciprocal response and involvement. On this relational basis, Paul never assumed that the function of wholeness would simply emerge, nor did he leave wholeness' function to the interpretation of human terms. Therefore, as Paul made definitive the integrated function necessary for wholeness, he also made imperative the ongoing redemptive change vitally necessary to turn from reductionism to wholeness, and transition to be whole, live whole and make whole—God's irreducible relational whole on God's nonnegotiable relational terms (Rom 12:1-2).

In the first eleven chapters of Romans, Paul provided the theological clarity for the whole of God's thematic relational response of grace to the human condition. Paul now concentrates on the functional clarity (building on his Galatians letter) necessary to function whole. Based on his theological discourse in the previous chapters, "therefore" (12:1), Paul issues to his family ("brothers and sisters") a nonnegotiable call (*parakaleo*, "appeal to") "to present" (*paristemi*) their persons to God in the necessary reciprocal relational response to God's relational response of grace ("by the mercies of God"). What is this necessary reciprocal relational response?

A variation of this call was first issued to Abram: "I am *El Shaddai*, walk before me and be *tamiym*" (Gen 17:1). Just as Abraham was not reduced to being defined by the perfection of what he did ("blameless"), *paristemi* ("to present," stand before) also should not be reduced to 'what to do' (i.e. "sacrifice") according to religious norms (e.g., *torah* or a reduced popular gospel)—which would essentially be done in front of the curtain. Rather Paul's call to *paristemi* was only about 'how to be involved in relationship'

according to the whole gospel constituted by God's relational response of grace that removes the veil. Then, "to present, stand before" God in what necessary way? How?

This involves the three basic interrelated issues integral for determining all practice:

1. The integrity and significance of the person presented before others.
2. The quality of what that person communicates to those others in relationship.
3. The depth level of involvement that person engages with those others in those relationships.

These issues are implied in Paul's discourse. In his nonnegotiable call, he is making definitive a further functional paradigm to extend his earlier functional paradigm of "holy and blameless." This added paradigm is necessary both to be whole in reciprocal relationship with God and to live whole in transformed relationships together as God's church family—which is a functional requisite to make whole in the world, just as Jesus prayed about relational wholeness together (Jn 17:21-23).

By defining the significance of the person presented with "your bodies as a living sacrifice," Paul is expanding on his earlier discourse when he used a slave metaphor (Rom 6:13,16,19). Now he shifts to an offertory metaphor, yet the significance of human ontology from inner out is the same for the person presented, involving the whole person ("present yourselves," 6:13,16) which includes all the outer parts of the body ("present your members," 13,19). The relational dynamic is vital to understanding the integrity of the person presented and the quality of what that person communicates by the sacrifice (*thysia*). The act of sacrificing tends to be perceived as presenting some part of what we have or some aspect of what we do, thus communicating to God some fragmentary quantity from the presentation of our person, that is, whose integrity has been reduced. While this type of *thysia* is compatible with the conventional servant paradigm prevailing in Christian practice, it is not compatible with the relational paradigm to be whole in reciprocal relationship with God that Paul is making functional (cf. Jesus' paradigm for serving, Jn 12:26). In Paul's theology of wholeness, *thysia* is only a function of whole relationship together and this reciprocal relational act cannot be reduced to a secondary function like sacrifice.

The depth level of involvement with God in relationship is contingent on *who* is presented before him and *what* is communicated to him. Nothing less than the whole person and no substitutes for the qualitative function of the heart are significant to the whole of God or compatible with God's whole function ("...holy and acceptable to God"). In Paul's call, this relational dynamic is reasonable, rational and logical (*logikos*), not a template imposed unilaterally by God for adulation ("worship"). By its very nature, only this dynamic constitutes what is involved and thus necessary in the function of wholeness (cf. Col 3:9-10). A reductionist interpretive framework (old *phronema*) with a quantitative mindset (old *phroneo*) turns this *thysia* into 'what to do', signifying the presentation of a person defined from outer in, rather than the call to 'how to be involved in relationship together' by the whole person uniquely from inner out, communicating and involved by the qualitative function of the heart. This is the ongoing tension and conflict reductionism generates with being whole and the function of wholeness in order

to diminish its significance to fragmentary terms and to substitute ontological simulation and epistemological illusion. Paul also addressed this opposing dynamic in his call.

The quantitative ‘appearance of things’ (without qualitative substance) conforming to templates of the world is the norm in human contextualization shaped or constructed by human terms on the basis of human ontology from outer in; this essentially signifies the human condition. The limited knowledge and understanding gained from what only appears reasonable, rational and logical for further knowledge and understanding are the ongoing lure of reductionism pervading the epistemic process of theological cognition, the *kosmos*, and human life and function. By its nature, this reductionist process necessitates God’s whole to expose, deal with and make whole the influence of reductionism on God’s offspring and family (cf. 2 Cor 11:13-15). Paul thus provides the functional key to address reductionism by making it imperative to directly deal with the issue by a two-fold process in conjoint function.

1. On the one hand, “Do not *conform* any longer to the pattern of this world” (Rom 12: 2, NIV, emphasis added). The term *syschematizo* means to conform to the same pattern outwardly, directly linked with *metaschematizo* (outward change only), as Paul exposed in the primary source of reductionism (2 Cor 11:13-15). This points to the reductionist templates of the world which impose a definition of human ontology and determine human function to be conformed to. Paul is unequivocal that in human contextualization we are exposed to, influenced in and even shaped by the sin of reductionism, which is the essence of the human condition as Paul discussed earlier in Romans. Conforming to reductionist patterns/templates is a common function, determining even function in the church. Paul’s imperative in the Greek passive voice makes further unequivocal the need for the subject (God’s family, individually and collectively) to take action upon itself (the Gk reflexive passive as opposed to passively waiting) for the changes needed. That is, Paul holds God’s family accountable for the reciprocal relational responsibility of functioning in the qualitative significance of who they are (the *who* presented) and in the relational depth of whose they are (the deep level of involvement with God). This accountability is imperative in order for God’s family not to make choices to engage in the normative/common practice of reductionism by conforming (*syschematizo* and *metaschematizo*) intentionally or unintentionally to the patterns/templates of their surrounding human contexts. In cooperative work with the Spirit, this is God’s family’s shared-portion of the relational work necessary for reciprocal relationship together to be whole on the holy (uncommon) God’s terms—that is, relationally compatible to the whole of God’s ontology and function, thus irreducible and nonnegotiable as Paul’s call involved.
2. The above imperative is in conjoint function with Paul’s second imperative, also in Greek passive voice. At the same time, on the other hand, “but be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind.” The term *metamorphoo* means to transform, to alter fundamentally, which involves a change in one’s very nature or an internal change implying the whole person from inner out. *Metamorphoo*’s change is in direct contrast to change just of appearance or outward forms/practices of a

reduced person from outer in, as signified in *metaschematizo*. The change Paul makes imperative is being restored in human ontology to the qualitative image and in human function to the relational likeness of God's glory (qualitative being and relational nature) vulnerably embodied in the face of Christ (2 Cor 3:18; 4:6). The change of *metamorphoo*, however, is not a transformation human persons can enact on themselves (as in Gk reflexive passive); this change is the relational outcome entirely of further receiving God's ongoing relational action of grace—that is, the imperative in Greek regular passive necessitating deeper involvement with God to receive the change of *metamorphoo*, not the mere *metaschematizo* persons enact on themselves. Yet, this imperative necessitating deeper involvement with God is partially contingent on enacting the first imperative, which acts as a functional key to further open the relational door to deeper involvement with God. These imperatives, on the one hand and on the other, interact together always in cooperative reciprocal relationship with the Spirit (whom Paul clarified theologically in Rom 8).

Furthermore, this inner out change necessarily involves “the *renewing* of your minds.” The term *anakainosis* (from *anakainoo*) involves the process and work of restoring something back to a new condition. This change needs to include the basic change of making new (*anakainoo*) their mindset (*phroneo*, i.e. their lens determining what they pay attention to or ignore) and its perceptual-interpretive framework (*phronema*, i.e. the basis for their lens)—changing from a quantitative *phroneo* and reduced *phronema* to the qualitative *phroneo* and whole *phronema* of God's qualitative-relational whole, the *phroneo* and *phronema* constituted exclusively by the Spirit (Rom 8:5-6). This signifies the ontological change which turns from the outer in of *syschematizo* and *metaschematizo* to the inner out of *metamorphoo*. In other words, *anakainoo* is nonnegotiable and cannot be partial, selective or some hybrid because “to make new” is to be made whole in human ontology restored to the qualitative image of God and in human function restored to the relational likeness of God (cf. Col 3:9-10; 2 Cor 5:16-17; Eph 4:23-24).

Taking this process deeper for God's family, Paul provides this functional paradigm to engage the relational dynamic necessary for the process of redemptive change to wholeness, the change which he clarified theologically in Romans 6. This integrated functional-relational paradigm in conjoint function fully embodies the involvement of God's family from inner out to be compatible for the experiential truth of the whole of God's relational context and process for whole relationship together. One relational outcome of this experiential reality is the relational involvement necessary “to test, discern, distinguish and affirm” (*dokimazo*) the intimate (“good and well-pleasing”) and complete (*teleios*) desires (*thelema*) of God. In no other context and by no other process is the whole of God vulnerably disclosed; thus nothing less and no substitutes than the whole person presented at the depth level of vulnerable involvement in God's relational context and process can constitute God's family in the transformed relationships together necessary to be whole. As Paul illuminates this wholeness imperative clearly in relationship with God, he extends his dialogue for this wholeness to be definitive in relationship together in the church, “which is his body, the *pleroma* of

him who completes all in *pasin* [the whole]” (Eph 1:23). The only existing alternative is reductionism.

Paul’s nonnegotiable call to his family was simply nothing other than the relational call to be whole, congruent with Jesus’ call to his followers first and foremost to be whole. And congruent further with Jesus’ prayer for this wholeness for his family (Jn 17:20-26), Paul prayed for the church family (Eph 3:14-19). This was the qualitative significance and relational nature of his theology of wholeness embodied in Jesus’ theological trajectory and relational path. This integral theology illuminated from inner out (“has shone in our hearts”) the whole knowledge and understanding of the qualitative being and relational nature of the whole of God (“to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God”) vulnerably revealed relationally “in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6), the *pleroma* of God (Col 1:19), of whom were created human ontology in the qualitative image and human function in the relational likeness (Acts 17:28; Col 1:15-16), and by whom human persons are restored to whole ontology and function (Col 2: 9-10; 2 Cor 3:18; 5:17), nothing less and no substitutes (Gal 6:15; Col 3:9-11). Therefore, what Jesus constituted *in* the incarnation of his own person and, likewise, constituted for our persons (both individually and collectively) *by* his incarnation is the irreducible and nonnegotiable dynamic of wholeness: *the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes* for all life and function that holds them together in their innermost.

Yet, for the church to experience the reality of this relational outcome of wholeness in its theology and practice required unavoidably and inescapably the ‘old’ in itself—notably its worldview-interpretive framework and mindset-interpretive lens—to die before the new creation relational framework and lens with the veil removed could emerge. This redemptive change is the relational outcome of reciprocal relational involvement with the Spirit, which Paul also made definitive theologically and imperative functionally.

What clearly emerges from ongoing relationship together with the Spirit is the functional wholeness that is incompatible, incongruent and discontinuous with reductionism pervading human context, as Paul clarified functionally and theologically (Gal 6:14-16; Rom 8:6). When Paul boasts of the cross of Christ through whom he has been crucified to human contextualization (“to the world,” Gal 6:14), the *soma* of the *pleroma* of God and the *pneuma* of the whole of God are integrated and resurrected for the whole embodying of the new creation. That is, this is the embodying in qualitative *zoe* (not quantitative *bios*) and wholeness (“life and peace,” Rom 8:6), in which the *Pneuma* inseparably dwells also in mortal *soma* for whole relationship together as God’s family (Rom 8:11, 14-16; cf. Eph 2:22). The theological dynamics Paul illuminates have only functional significance for this relationship together (Eph 2:18). Apart from the function of relationship and its relational embodiment Paul’s theological clarity has no significance, both to God and to human persons for the fulfillment of the inherent human relational need and the resolution of its relational problem (Eph 2:14-16). The Spirit is present and relationally involved for the whole ontology and function necessary for the ongoing relationship together to be God’s whole—the embodying as the *pleroma* of Christ ‘already’ in relational progression to its completion in the relational conclusion ‘not yet’ (1 Cor 12:13; cf. Jn 7:37-39).

The Spirit's relational involvement notably emerges in the resurrection, in which the Spirit's dynamic interaction also involves us wholly (*soma* and *pneuma*) to be embodied in the new creation (new person, new life, new covenant, Rom 8:11). Involvement together in this relational process is also defined by Paul as being baptized in the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13; cf. Mt 3:11; Acts 1:5; 11:16). The theological dynamic of baptism is complex and mysterious but the relational process involved is uncomplicated yet rigorous: death to the old and raising of the new (Rom 6:3-8). Being baptized with the Spirit makes functional the redemptive change from reduced ontology and function (consequential of the sin of reductionism) necessary for the emergence of whole ontology and function (cf. Ti 3:5). The relational outcome of this relational process is the redemptive reconciliation of whole persons embodied in relationship together as the new creation family of God (Col 1:19-22; Eph 2:14-22)—“baptized into one body” without false human distinctions from reductionism (1 Cor 12:13). This *zoe*, the embodying of the new creation, emerges specifically from the relational work of the Spirit (Rom 8:11; 2 Cor 3:6; cf. Jn 6:63; Rom 8:6)—“we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13; cf. Jn 7:38-39). On this basis, Paul declares unequivocally: “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.... For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Rom 8:9,14); furthermore, “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). Therefore, the experiential truth of the theological dynamics of wholeness, relational belonging and ontological identity functionally emerge from reciprocal relational involvement with the Spirit for their experiential reality.

The dynamic interaction of the Spirit and the *pleroma* of God always constitutes ontology and function in the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes. Accordingly, the reciprocal relational involvement by the Spirit is neither with only the human *pneuma* nor with just the human *soma*. Such involvement would create a duality which fragments the person. Human *soma* without *pneuma* is a critical condition because it is a reductionism focused on the outer in that the person cannot distinguish unequivocally from *sarx*, consequently is rendered to the sin of reductionism notably in ontological simulation (as discussed earlier about Paul's polemic beyond the situation to the underlying reductionism in 1 Cor 6:12-20). Likewise, human *pneuma* apart from involvement of *soma* becomes disembodied, which is also a reductionism focused on a subjective part of a person, not the whole person qualitatively integrated from inner out. The focus of such a person cannot distinguish from subjectivism, esoteric individualism or self-centered separatism—as often found in spiritualism, mysticism and asceticism—thus rendered to the sin of reductionism notably in epistemological illusion (cf. Paul's polemic about reductionism in spiritual practice disembodied from the church in 1 Cor 14). The Spirit is relationally involved only with the whole person (*soma* and *pneuma* inseparably) from inner out signified by the function of the heart and embodied in the primacy of relationship together (2 Cor 1:22; Gal 4:6; Rom 5:5; 8:16; Eph 1:17-18; 3:16-19). Additionally, the Spirit's relational involvement with the whole person from inner out includes both the person's mindset (*phroneo*, Rom 8:5) and its basis, the person's perceptual-interpretive framework (*phronema*, 8:6). In this involvement, the Spirit transforms quantitative *phroneo* and reduced *phronema* and composes the qualitative



*phroneo* (interpretive lens) in its whole *phronema* (interpretive framework). Both of these changes are necessary for the Spirit to embody persons in qualitative *zoe* and wholeness together (“life and peace”), and to function ongoingly in this new embodiment (1 Thes 5:19,23; 2 Thes 2:13; Rom 15:16).

Paul is clear about the experiential truth of the Spirit’s relational involvement. Yet, it is important for his readers to understand that by God’s relational nature the Spirit is involved in reciprocal relationship, not unilateral relationship. The Spirit’s reciprocal relational involvement implies a necessary compatible reciprocal relational response to and involvement with the Spirit—not as contingency limiting God’s relational nature but as the condition/terms for relationships together according to God’s relational nature (cf. Paul’s conditional sense in Phil 2:1; 2 Cor 13:13). Therefore, in relation to the Spirit, Paul always assumes the presence of the Spirit (e.g. 1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 1:21-22; Gal 5:5), but he does not assume that the Spirit has the opportunity to engage in reciprocal relational involvement and work, as he implies in his ongoing relational imperative (not moral imperative) “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thes 5:19). Certainly, the Spirit can and does act unilaterally; yet his primary concern and function is in reciprocal relational involvement with persons who “belong to Christ” (Rom 8:9) to extend and complete the whole relationship together constituted by the embodied *pleroma* of God—all of whom the Spirit also raised up together in order to functionally embody the *pleroma* of Christ as Jesus’ relational replacement.

This is the depth and breadth of the Spirit’s relational involvement with persons belonging to Christ, and the likeness of involvement necessary from those persons to be compatible, congruent and continuous in reciprocal relationship together with the Spirit. The dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes constitutes the ontology and function of the Spirit and needs to constitute the ontology and function of those in whom the Spirit dwells. In Paul’s theological forest, anything less and any substitutes of the Spirit’s ontology and function are an immature pneumatology still undeveloped and needing to be whole; anything less and any substitutes of human ontology and function are a deficient theological anthropology, the assumptions of which for Paul always need to be challenged in order to be made whole. That wholeness, however, is made functional solely by the relational dynamic of *pleroma* pneumatology.

In the dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes, the relational involvement of the Spirit’s whole ontology and function makes functional the theological dynamics of wholeness integrated with relational belonging and ontological identity for the experiential truth of their embodiment in those belonging to Christ. The emergence of the new (wine) identity for these persons is functionally constituted only by the reciprocal relational work of the Spirit; human terms from human contextualization cannot establish the identity formation of who they are with Christ and whose they are in Christ (Rom 8:9-11). Paul is definitive that this identity is not formed by a social process but by the relational dynamic of the Spirit in reciprocal relationship together (Rom 8:12-17; Gal 5:16-26). The new creation identity constituted in this relationship together as family is neither a static condition nor a contextual characteristic, but a dynamic process of relationship together necessitating by its nature ongoing reciprocal relational involvement with each other without the veil. Paul also describes this reciprocal response as “we are debtors” (*opheiletes* from *opheilo*, Rom 8:12), that is, not in human terms and

contextualization but to God's favor (indebted to a benefactor). Yet, *opheiletes* in this context should not be reduced to an obligation (*opheilo*) to fulfill. Paul is not defining an ethical mandate but illuminating, by the nature (*dei*, not *opheilo*) of God's relational response of grace, the reciprocal relational response necessary for whole relationship together. Moreover, when Paul further defines this reciprocal response by "Live by the Spirit" and "are led by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16,18), he is also not defining a moral imperative for our conduct (outlined in 5:19-24). Rather this is another relational imperative by which he further illuminates the reciprocal relational involvement with the Spirit necessary for functionally constituting the new identity distinguishing who we are with Christ and whose we are in Christ (5:25).

What this reciprocal involvement with the Spirit constitutes is the ontological identity and embodying of God's new creation (Gal 5:6; 6:15; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:10-11; cf. 2 Cor 3:17-18). Just as *pneuma* and *soma* are inseparable for the whole ontology and function emerging from the Spirit's involvement, ontological identity and embodying of the new creation are also inseparably integrated for the wholeness made functional by the Spirit (examine Paul's relational connections: 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:26-28; 4:6-7; Rom 8:14; 12:5; Col 3:15; Eph 2:14,18,22). And this ontological identity and embodying of the new creation are integrally based on the functional reality of relational belonging to God's family as definitive daughters and sons, the experiential truth of which only emerges from the reciprocal relational involvement of the Spirit (Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 1:21-22; Rom 8:14-16; Gal 4:6-7). Without the Spirit's reciprocal involvement and relational work, this identity and new creation are rendered, at best, to only ontological simulation and epistemological illusion of wholeness—simulation of whole relationship together with illusions of the whole of God (Gal 6:16; Col 3:15; cf. Rom 12:3-5; 1 Cor 3:21-22).

'The veil' is a defining issue for both the church and academy in their theology and practice. The relational outcome of whole theology and practice does not emerge and cannot unfold until "the veil is removed" (2 Cor 3:16). This primary outcome (usually ignored as secondary) is a necessary aspect of the transformation from inner out (*metamorphoo*) constituted by the whole of God (Lord and Spirit inseparably) in reciprocal relationship, so that we are changed into whole relationship together without the veil in relational likeness of the triune God (3:17-18). Theologically, only the whole of God removes the veil (*periaireo*, to take away, abandon). Yet, functionally in reciprocal relationship, we also are accountable for our compatible response "to abandon the veil" for vulnerable *agape* relational involvement together as God's whole family. The veil is a nonnegotiable contingency for the relational outcome of whole theology and practice.

As Jesus decisively exposed in the church at Ephesus (Rev 2:4), the relational path that the church operates on will define its ontology and function, which will determine whose likeness the church lives in. This is the reality also for the academy determined by the likeness of its God.

## The Academy in Likeness of Its God

Jesus' defining statement "the measure you use will be the measure you get" (Mk 4:24) was not expressed as a propositional truth, though it should be paid attention to with that significance. More importantly, his relational language communicated this relational statement that is directly connected to his relational imperative "Pay attention to the words you hear from me"; this extends the Father's relational imperative "listen to him" (Mt 17:5)—the embodied Word from God. Later, while everyone was amazed at what Jesus did, he qualified these relational imperatives to listen to the Word with the use of *tithemi* (to set, put one's person, Lk 9:44, cf. "lay down one's life," Jn 15:13, discussed previously). In referential language *tithemi* would be about putting Jesus' words "into your ears" (NRSV) to complete the transmission of information. Yet, in this context his disciples did not understand his words (i.e. have a frame of reference, *aisthanomai*, 9:45, cf. Heb 5:14) even though Jesus said *tithemi*. Why? Because Jesus' words are in relational language that cannot be recognized, perceived, understood (*aisthanomai*) to distinguish his relational words without the interpretive framework of his relational language (cf. Jn 8:43). The disciples only heard referential words to put in their ears which had no significance to them. They did not put their whole persons into the relational involvement necessary for the relational epistemic process to have the hermeneutic to understand Jesus' relational language; and their relational distance evidenced their lack of vulnerable involvement in *tithemi* with the Word ("they were afraid to ask him").

This demonstrated some critical interrelated issues for those who "hear" the Word, notably in the academy:

"The language you use will be the Word you get," and "the interpretive framework, lens and hermeneutic you use will be the knowledge and understanding of the Word you get"; thus, "the epistemic process you engage will be the theology and practice you get"—nothing less and nothing more, though Jesus further qualified this process in relational terms, not quantitative referential terms (Mk 4:25).

His defining statement is decisively the determining process for the academy.

### **"The language you use will be the Word you get":**

If the academy is able to distinguish its primary subject matter from the secondary, then the above dynamic is also the defining process for the academy's God. The embodied Word illuminated the whole of God entirely within his improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path which are not subject to variation—as two of his followers learned conclusively on the road to Emmaus. Therefore, the whole and holy God is distinguished from the common (what prevails) of human contextualization and cannot be narrowed down to conventional referential terms. To do so engages in the prevailing referentialization of the Word that reduces the vulnerable

presence and intimate involvement of God's relational ontology and function, thereby fragmenting God's ontology and function to the parts of what God does in situations and circumstances and has in attributes. Furthermore, the whole and holy God cannot be distinguished by the determination of scholarship—namely as defined by the secular academy, the explicit or implicit criteria guiding self-determination in the theological academy while engaged in the comparative process of competing relationships. The above engagement shifts the focus of the theological task to secondary matter and contains its primary involvement to the quantitative level from outer in.

As the key to the theological task, the Word embodied the relational language to illuminate the Word from God (Jn 5:19-20; 10:37-38; 12:49-50; 17:6-8,14,26). Only the Word in relational terms distinguishes the whole and holy God—the relational basis for the Father's imperative to listen to the Word. Yet in this relational process, God is also clearly distinguished from human contextualization (as Jesus addressed) and in likeness distinguished those who receive the Word also from human contextualization (as we encounter): "I have given them your word, and the world has hated, *discredited, dismissed and ignored* them because they do not belong to the world *in ontology and function*, just as I do not belong to the world" (Jn 17:14). This constitutes God and those who receive the Word in the minority contrary to what prevails in human contexts.

The minority (or uncommon) dynamic also composes their ontology and function in the primary and not in secondary matter. On this basis, listening to the Word in relational language is problematic for the theological task when engaged in a comparative process for its significance. Besides needing to have epistemic humility, it requires the vulnerability of being defined from inner out and of relational involvement on these terms. In other words, the unavoidable decision for the academy is either to be distinguished in likeness of the whole and holy God illuminated by the Word in relational language, or to have some distinction in likeness of the God in referential terms who would be less contrary to what prevails in human context(ualization). Though the referential God could have doctrinal certainty in the Word's improbable theological trajectory, this does not assume a minority position but still pursues acceptance in human contexts on prevailing terms; consequently, it is incongruent with the Word's primacy in his intrusive relational path.

This divides the Word, separating his theological trajectory from his relational path. This fragmentation is consequential for the academy in its theology and practice. To disembody and de-relationalize the Word as Subject from his relational path engages an ontology and function that is neither vulnerably involved with the whole of Jesus in intimate relationship together—the full significance of "Follow me" that Peter struggled with in his theological task—nor ongoingly engaged with the whole of God in the relational epistemic process. This ontology and function composes the relational distance that determines the limits of the wise and learned, as Jesus made conclusive (Lk 10:21). Relational distance fragments the Word's theological trajectory from his relational path, and this separation maintains the veil that obscures recognizing, perceiving and understanding the Word from God communicated entirely in relational language. Indeed, the language used by the academy will determine the Word that delineates its God. And the academy's theology and practice can be distinguished only to the extent in likeness of its God.

**“The interpretive framework, lens and hermeneutic you use will be the knowledge and understanding of the Word you get”:**

The early disciples failed to recognize, perceive and understand (*aisthanomai*) Jesus in his relational words in the above interaction. Their lack was not a singular moment of incomprehension or due to unintelligence, but an ongoing condition with the relational consequence of not knowing Jesus in relational terms even after intense years together (Jn 14:9). Their lack evidenced a condition that the writer of Hebrews identified as involving our *aistheterion* (from *aisthanomai*, Heb 5:14): that is, our organ of perception, capacity of recognition, sense of discernment—the faculties needed to know and understand what we see and hear, including being able to distinguish God’s whole from reductionism (“good from evil”) in our theology and practice. These faculties are made definitive by Paul as our *phronema* (the perceptual-interpretive framework of the mind) and our *phroneo* (the related perceptual-interpretive lens and mindset, Rom 8:5-6), both of which form the basis for our working hermeneutic. Both these writers address the tension and conflict between wholeness and reductionism, and the outcome from our *aistheterion*, *phronema* and *phroneo* (Heb 5:11-14; Rom 8:5-6). This directly determines the level of involvement with the Word while in the theological task and the interpretive process, and the outcome of that engagement.

Conjoined with Paul’s first relational imperative—“let the wholeness of Christ *be the only determinant* for your ontology and function, both individually and corporately” (Col 3:15)—he adds a second relational imperative: “let the word of Christ dwell in you *whole-ly...*” (3:16).

From the beginning the Word emerged from the innermost of God and improbably intruded from outside the universe to illuminate what is innermost for human persons in response to the human condition (Jn 1:1-5). As the unfolding of God’s communicative word of definitive blessing (Num 6:24-26), the distinguished Face shined on us to bring change (*siym*) for new relationship together in wholeness (*shalom*) with his vulnerable presence and relational involvement. Nothing less than the whole of the Word, the *pleroma* of God, in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6) was embodied in the innermost to compose ‘relationship together involving the whole person’. This is “the word of Christ” that Paul made the relational imperative to “dwell in you” (*enoikeo*, Col 3:16), denoting to indwell us, inhabit by special presence (as in Rom 8:11; 2 Cor 6:16).

For the word of Christ to indwell us whole-ly and inhabit by special presence raises three critical issues that are integral for our knowledge and understanding of the unfolded Word in the innermost:

1. The hermeneutic used to know *how* the Word unfolded to understand *what* unfolded.
2. The qualitative level of engagement in the theological process.
3. The relational level of involvement in the epistemic process.

These issues overlap and interact for either the relational outcome with the unfolded Word that Paul made imperative, or something less and some substitute.

The hermeneutical question emerges as the initial issue but this matter will soon be indistinguishable from the other issues. Underlying the horizons of reader and author-text in hermeneutics is the lens from theological anthropology that either allows for the improbable Word to speak for himself, or that narrows down the Word to better explain it with more certainty in probable terms. The latter involves the referentialization of the Word.

The distinguished Face's theological trajectory and relational path emerged from the whole of God's definitive blessing and converged irreducibly and nonnegotiablely in the intimate communion of whole relationship together. *Who* came and *what* has come cannot be experienced in the innermost on referential terms. The unfolding of the Word from God illuminating the innermost is only the relational Word, solely in relational language just for 'relationship together involving the whole person', the referentialization of whom deconstructs the whole of the Word, redefines the language and reshapes the relationship—all narrowed down to human contextualization and renegotiated to human terms.

Paul's relational imperative for the relational word of Christ to indwell our innermost is inseparable from and contingent on his relational imperative to "let the wholeness of Christ rule in your hearts" (Col 3:15): *brabeuo*, preside, direct, govern, be predominant, that is, Christ's wholeness be what is primary to define and determine us from inner out, our whole person and our relationships together involving the whole person. Without this primary determination, the word of Christ is known and understood without his qualitative and relational significance that are necessary to indwell qualitatively and inhabit relationally by special presence in our innermost. Paul's relational imperatives, therefore, are neither separable nor negotiable, and to diminish or ignore them signifies not knowing *how* the Word unfolded and not understanding *what* unfolded, and thereby to distort the unfolded Word and to misrepresent his gospel of new relationship together in wholeness.

The hermeneutical question of how the Word unfolded antecedes the theological question of what unfolded. Yet, the integral interaction between hermeneutics and theology composes our understanding of *who* came and *what* has come. This leads us to the second critical issue, the qualitative level of engagement in the theological process. The qualitative issue involves the whole person from inner out, signified by the primary function of the heart. This becomes a major issue when the level of engagement not only in the theological process but also in life turns from the primacy of the heart and consequently disengages the whole person.

Later, Jesus clearly distinguished for all the churches the primacy of the heart in their ontology and function (Rev 2:23). This primacy is *what* unfolded and *what* has come that distinguishes the innermost of God. The roots of this primacy go back to creation, in which the human heart was implanted with eternity ('*olam*, Ecc 3:11)—not about a quantitative element or chronological sense but a qualitative depth from the innermost of God that is fulfilled, completed and made whole (*pleroo*) by the *pleroma* of God (Col 2:9-10) in eternal life (Jn 3:16). Eternal life is composed in the innermost only by the Word unfolded, but this notion has been narrowly shaped in referential terms such

that, for example, classical theism has viewed God as everlasting in time, and philosophical theology has disputed God's changeability implied in time and views God as timeless (cf. Jn 3:31-32). Time, however, can refer to either the quantity of *chronos* or the quality of *kairos*, and life as either quantitative *bios* or qualitative *zoe*. The eternal of eternal life in relational terms is not either-or but both-and—both *chronos* and *kairos* in the endless season of opportunity (timeless) to know God (Jn 17:3) by participating in the *zoe* of God through the *bios* of Jesus for intimate relationship together in God's family (Jn 3:16; 6:68). The qualitative of *kairos* and *zoe* is primary over the quantitative of *chronos* and *bios* while also inseparable from its secondary counterpart, which as both-and, not either-or, constitute integrally the whole of God who came and the whole in God that has come, and hereby the wholeness from and with God in relationship together. This primacy, however, must not be displaced by the secondary or this wholeness will be fragmented.

If John 3:16 is basic to our belief system, then we need to understand who brought it and what he brought. Eternal life as either-or is neither eternal nor life signifying the whole ontology and function of God embodied by the Son for new relationship together in wholeness. As either-or, the truth of the gospel has been reduced and salvation has been truncated; and the consequence leaves both without the outcome of wholeness in human ontology and function that is innermost by necessity to the nature of the whole gospel and *pleroma* soteriology. Eternal life composed by the Word unfolded is whole knowledge and understanding of the Trinity in relationship together, as clearly illuminated in the Son's prayer (Jn 17:3). This relational outcome 'already' is the whole ontology and function of the church family in likeness of the Trinity, who holds them together as one in their innermost (Jn 17:20-26). The turn from the heart is to turn away from both the innermost of God and the distinguished Face who brought change for new relationship together in wholeness.

The loss of the primacy of the heart and the absence of the heart's engagement create an insurmountable gap with the innermost of God to know and understand the qualitative whole of *who* came and *what* has come. The primacy of the qualitative in the innermost of God unfolds to illuminate unmistakably that 'relationship together involving the whole person' is irreducible and nonnegotiable for God, and thus is irreplaceable for direct engagement with God even though perhaps temporarily evaded. The embodied Word vulnerably disclosed God's whole ontology and function in relational terms entirely for reciprocal relationship together in compatible ontology and function. The dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes distinguishing the Word embodied the *who* and *what* of God, and whole ontology and function is *what* and *who* God seeks in relationship. This is the Word whom Paul encountered just in relational terms ("why do you persecute me?"), and the who and what Paul responded to vulnerably and thereby compatibly.

As discussed earlier, the relational significance of Paul's response composed the functional significance of Paul's further response to the content of Jesus' other words on the Damascus road: obedience, that is, the reciprocal relational response to the embodied Word's call to be vulnerably involved with him also in relational response to the human condition of reductionism apart from God's whole (Acts 9:6; 22:10; 26:15-18). The

reciprocal relational response of obedience to God must by its nature be a function of relational involvement; in the primacy of relationship obedience cannot become a reductionist function defining what a person does, namely from duty or obligation without any deeper relational significance in response to God (cf. Gal 5:3). What emerged from Paul's obedience was only the outworking of his reciprocal relational response to and ongoing relational involvement with the whole of God—namely to the embodied Word and notably with the Spirit. With a transformed *phronema* (interpretive framework) and *phroneo* (lens) the Word became his hermeneutic key to whole knowledge and understanding (*synesis*) of the whole of God, thereby composing Paul's whole monotheism—no longer his former incomplete monotheism in referential terms of the Shema (Dt 6:4).

The Word in relational language confronted, challenged and transformed Paul's interpretive framework, lens and hermeneutic of covenant relationship and God's terms for reciprocal relationship together ("walk with me and be whole." Gen 17:1); this transformation by necessity involved the epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction of *tamiym* (being whole, not about mere blameless). God's relational terms included the law, which was joined with *tamiym* for compatible relationship together from the inner out (heart) of the whole person (cf. Ps 119:1-4), but that Paul previously merely observed in referential terms from outer in with his underlying self-determination (Phil 3:6). The process of defining the law in referential language and determining its practice in referential terms—for example, 'letter of the law' that Jesus exposed in the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5:21-28)—emerges from a narrowed-down epistemic field of Scripture from a quantitative interpretive framework that limits or constrains the lens for practice. The law as God's relational terms, however, was crucial to Paul's transformation. He now clearly recognized, perceived and understood the law's heuristic function to expose our reduced ontology and function and lead us to the necessary relational connection for whole ontology and function (Gal 3:19,24; Rom 3:20; 5:20). For Paul, the shift to relational language reconstituted the covenant to the covenant of love (Dt 7:9), and the Shema in whole monotheism now included by necessity his reciprocal response of love's relational involvement by his whole person (Dt 6:4-5). This was the relational outcome of Paul's hermeneutic correction.

Therefore, when recognized, perceived and understood in relational terms, the law defines conclusively: on the one hand, how we cannot be involved in covenant relationship with a reduced ontology and function incompatible for reciprocal relationship, and, on the other hand, how we need to be relationally involved ongoingly for compatible reciprocal relationship in whole ontology and function. This is the knowledge and understanding of the Word that Jesus vulnerably embodied for new relationship together in wholeness without the veil.

When Jesus was asked to quantify the greatest commandment, he responded in relational language with the wholeness of the Shema and the whole ontology and function of reciprocal *agape* relational involvement both with God and others (Mk 12:28-31). The person cannot be fragmented into its parts, most noticeably the mind, because this reduces ontology and function, namely to the intellect and human rationalizing. Such a theological anthropology is incompatible with God's wholeness and relational terms for reciprocal relationship together. The noteworthy response to Jesus' relational words from his inquirer (an expert in the law) surprisingly recognized its relational significance over



any “burnt offerings and sacrifices,” that is, over the secondary (12:32-34, cf. Heb 10:1). The Word illuminates in the commandments only God’s relational terms for the covenant relationship of love and how to be vulnerably involved in reciprocal relationship together, not what to do in observing the law in an obligatory mode. On these relational terms, Jesus communicated his relational words to his followers, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (Jn 15:10). This was not a contingency to be loved, which is easily misunderstood in referential terms and further misperceived by self-determination. Rather this is the relational terms for reciprocal relationship together in the compatible response of *agape* involvement, in the relational likeness of the Son’s reciprocal response to the Father. His relational words in *agape* involvement illuminate God’s vulnerable terms for the relational outcome to intimately know God (“my joy in you”) in whole (*pleroo*) relationship together (“your joy be complete,” 15:11).

The Word in relational language is the only Word that Paul made the relational imperative to be vulnerably involved with “as you teach and contend with reductionism in one another in all wisdom” (Col 3:16)—the Word in whole of the wholeness in Christ. Referentialization divides Christ and fragments the Word, both of which are incapable of composing the “whole wisdom” (*pas*) needed to teach and critique one another (as Paul clarified in 1 Cor 3:18-21)

In a common concern by a group of biblical scholars and theologians for wisdom in the interpretation of Scripture, David Ford and Graham Stanton share their working view:

More widely, wisdom is about trying to integrate knowledge, understanding, critical questioning and good judgment with a view to the flourishing of human life and the whole of creation. Theological wisdom attempts all that before God, alert to God, and in line with the purpose of God.<sup>3</sup>

Kevin Vanhoozer takes us even further by defining wisdom as an understanding of the whole. He says contemporary epistemology needs to recover two notions that have been neglected: (1) understanding (a grasp of meaning) and (2) wisdom (an understanding of the whole).<sup>4</sup>

Daniel Hardy points also to the primacy of the Scripture for a ‘density of meaning’ in which the texts open a new depth of meaning beyond other focuses in biblical interpretation. This density of meaning for Hardy conveys more than simply a quantitative ‘extensity of meanings’ found in the Scripture but suggests a qualitative ‘intensity of meaning’ in which “both God and humanity are joined, both heaven and history, not simply by way of assertions about them, but as dynamically interwoven and mutually operative.”<sup>5</sup> For the intensity of meaning, Hardy recognizes the need for the academy to be freed from the constraints of a merely quantitative interpretive framework,

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<sup>3</sup> David F. Ford and Graham Stanton, eds., *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 340.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel W. Hardy, “Reason, Wisdom and the Interpretation of Scripture” in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom*, 72-76.

as well as from the reductionism of both the text and in practices/projects which distract from the text.

Yet, the qualitative significance of understanding wisdom in Scripture needs to be distinctly addressed in the integrated relational context and epistemic process, which can only be engaged with epistemic humility. This is why Jesus jumped with joy when the Father's self-revelation made relational connection with vulnerably engaged "children," not with the detached or measured engagement of "the wise and intelligent" (Lk 10:21). We today are challenged by this same process. That is, Jesus points to the necessity of the "hermeneutic of a child" who is vulnerably engaged essentially in a relational epistemic process. This hermeneutic certainly does not eliminate reason but puts rational interpretation into its rightful whole created context of relationship; thus in doing so, it does not disembodify the text (the revelation of the Other) from its subject matter (the communicator as Subject in relationship); otherwise, the Subject is de-relationalized. Just as a child vulnerably engages this relational context by the relational process of trust (not to be confused with fideism), this relational involvement with epistemic humility opens up outcomes of learning, understanding and experiencing whom/what we can know, count on, and be defined and determined by—as well as provides ongoing feedback of the significance of these aspects.

Rational interpretation alone tends to disembodify the object of the text from its relational context and process, ironically, for example, by a quantitative framework embedded only in history. This reduces the ontology of the object of the text in effect by fragmenting the whole object into component parts without understanding the object-Other as communicator-Subject self-disclosed for relationship together. However, engaging the Object of the text also as Subject is a function only of relationship, the relational involvement of which is irreducible and essential in order to understand integrally both meaning and the whole. The fragmentation by rationalistic thinking signifies the human shaping or construction of the text, knowledge of God and understanding the whole, by efforts essentially of self-autonomy, self-determination and even self-justification. This is the hermeneutic of "the wise and intelligent" exposed by Jesus, which still challenges us today. Paul also addressed this reductionist function in wisdom and its perceptual-interpretive framework when he echoed Psalm 94:11 to counter reductionism in the early church (1 Cor 3:20) and its relational consequence (1 Cor 4:6; 8:1; 14:36).

This points to the limits, if not impasse, in the hermeneutical process which prevent further flow to deeper outcomes beyond merely what we know, to more significantly whom we know. Understanding and wisdom involve more than acquiring knowledge (even as so-called truth and moral imperatives) and must involve a deeper epistemology to have whole understanding (*synesis*) of the meaning of God's self-revelation, and thus an understanding of the whole, the whole of God and God's relational whole.

The experiential truth of the gospel was what deeply affected Paul on the Damascus road, that is to say, the gospel of 'the embodied Truth for relationship'. The Truth cannot be reduced to mere propositional truth claims, for such reductionism would essentially disembodify the Word made flesh and de-relationalize Jesus from his relational path, and thus render the gospel devoid of its integrated functional and relational significance of the whole of God. Again, this Truth was vulnerably disclosed in order to

constitute the whole of God's thematic relational response to make whole the human condition in relationship together. Such reductionism then is not the gospel Paul encountered on the Damascus road. Paul experienced only the embodied Truth for relationship together because the Truth is only for relationship, nothing less and no substitutes. This relational outcome was the experiential truth of the whole gospel through which Paul's hermeneutical process flowed to understand the whole as God's relational whole only on God's relational terms.

Reflecting on the flow and outcome of this hermeneutical process helps us to further formulate a working view of wisdom, which we can experience with Paul during the course of this study:

Wisdom signifies the relationally reciprocal *means* both to know the whole, that is, of God's intimate desires as disclosed to us, as well as to act on those desires only in the relational response desirable to God; wisdom ongoingly involves the relational means to both, for which it is accountable. Therefore, wisdom is not an *end* in itself which we can claim as an attribute in our possession; nor is wisdom a source of knowledge and behavior which, in effect, become self-determining or self-promoting, regardless of ethical and moral value. Rather, wisdom is a function in relational significance which witnesses to and highlights the whole of God, who initiates vulnerably disclosing himself relationally with us as the source of all wisdom composing our wisdom by reciprocal relationship. Thus by its relational nature, unmistakable wisdom functions only with epistemic humility to illuminate the whole of God.

Any significant accounting of wisdom in the interpretation of Scripture must involve this function. And the relational outcome from the Word in relational language can only be 'whole wisdom' that distinguishes the epistemological, hermeneutical, theological and relational significance of knowing and understanding the whole of God. Nothing less than this relational outcome was the focus of Paul's prayers (Eph 1:17; Col 1:9; Phil 1:9).

This is the Word in whole and its whole wisdom that Paul makes the relational imperative for the academy to teach and contend with reductionism in one another to make whole, be whole and live whole as God's church family in new wine relationships together without the veil (Col 3:9-17, cf. 2 Cor 5:16-18). When the academy has whole knowledge and understanding of the Word, it can fulfill this relational purpose in likeness of its whole and holy God. On this relational basis, business as usual in the academy has to be primary involvement in church "business" for the ontology and function of both to be whole in likeness of their God.

This ongoing relational outcome will require redemptive change in the academy and the maturity to be vulnerably involved in the primary (the *tithemi* of *agape*) without getting distracted, displaced or disengaged by the secondary. This change involves the new interpretive framework (*phronema*) and lens (*phroneo*) necessary for the hermeneutical means (*aistheterion*) to have the relational clarity (*aisthanomai*) for even further and deeper whole knowledge and understanding (*synesis*) of the Word. And the maturing of the academy further involves its epistemic process.

**“The epistemic process you engage will be the theology and practice you get”:**

Theological cognition has been an (mis)adventure since the primordial garden—attempting to define ‘what did God say’ and to determine ‘what did God mean by that’. The pursuit of theological cognition in the primordial garden “knowing good and evil” is contrary to the theological cognition of “the mature whose hermeneutical means have been developed in the relational epistemic process to distinguish good from evil” (Heb 5:14). The key difference in theological cognition is the epistemic process used. ‘Good’ (e.g. the common good) has been narrowed down to prevailing terms such that it has lost its theological significance. Even Jesus challenged being called “Good teacher” by the rich young ruler when he responded with definitive theological cognition: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Mk 10:17-18). The epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction by the Word should not be ignored by the academy in order for its theological cognition to mature to the depth of the primary (“solid food”) over the secondary (“milk”), so that it can conclusively “distinguish God’s good from evil” (Heb 5:13-14)—that is, to distinguish God’s whole (“the wholeness of Christ”) from all reductionism. Anything less and any substitutes of theological cognition is a misadventure guided by the age of reductionism.

Job uttered his theological cognition based on a conventional epistemic process in a limited epistemic field (“I had heard of you by the hearing of *information in oral tradition*,” Job 42:3-5). His epistemic process resulted in a theological cognition that did not really know and understand God, even though he uttered the limited information heard about God as if he did—a common position taken by those engaged in self-determination (Job 32:1). The LORD involved Job in the relational epistemic process (“Listen *carefully* and I will speak *in relational language*”) with the relational outcome of whole-ly knowing and understanding God (“but now my eye sees you *directly face to Face*”). In this relational epistemic process Job turned from his referential theology and practice and demonstrated the epistemic humility signifying his reciprocal involvement for this relational outcome (42:6).

Job’s experience makes evident the need for the three-dimensional hermeneutic (previously discussed) that converges the horizon of the past (his tradition) and the present (his hearing) with the primacy of the relational context and process of God’s self-revelation (Scripture in relational language). The three-dimensional hermeneutic requires the relational epistemic process and relational involvement in it that is not constrained by a limited epistemic field narrowed down to referential terms.

The absence of this relational epistemic process and relational involvement were exposed among the educated elite by Jesus, which is noteworthy for the academy’s approach and methodology. For those who were threatened by Jesus’ theology and practice (Jn 5:18), he simply addressed their approach, including the assumptions of their interpretive framework: “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life...yet you refuse to *engage me in the relational epistemic process for the relational involvement necessary to have life*”—*zoe* in qualitative terms, not *bios* in quantitative terms—“*and in your traditional epistemic process you have never heard the Father’s voice or seen his form, and you do not have his relational word abiding in you for your theology and practice*” (Jn 5:37-40).

When Jesus was asked for quantitative indicators of the emergence of the kingdom of God, he simply addressed their methodology and underlying assumptions: “The kingdom of God is not coming with *secondary matter* that can be carefully observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘That’s it!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you *in the primacy of relationships together in wholeness without the veil*” (Lk 17:20-21). Relational distance in the epistemic process is retained by a limited epistemic field in referential terms with a narrow hermeneutic lens, the methodology of which imposes a template for only a referential outcome for theology and practice. The relational outcome of God’s whole family emerges from direct relational involvement with the Spirit in the relational epistemic process and unfolds in maturity with ongoing reciprocal involvement with the Spirit in relationship together for whole theology and practice.

This may raise a legitimate question by the academy to process further about Paul, especially since he is presented as the definitive model for all theological engagement: *How important was methodology to Paul’s theology, given his approach to the Word?*

Paul’s theological engagement cannot be described in conventional terms but is better defined in function as a process of living theology—in which theology was never separated from function and the priority was always function over theology for Paul. Thus, Paul was involved in communicating God’s story of thematic relational response to the human condition, a story with which Paul earlier had had only historical association. He now, however, has directly experienced the truth of God’s story relationally and continues in that experiential truth to illuminate God’s story theologically. This relational process is vital to theological engagement and was Paul’s basis for it.

The theological Paul was able to distinguish the fact of God’s story from fiction, and to grasp God’s definitive relational action without speculation, unequivocally on the basis, and thus to the extent, of God’s direct revelation to him. That is to say, the theological Paul was not whole-ly constituted by the limited historical Paul but most significantly by the vulnerable relational Paul. Theological engagement, then, involved implicitly a *relational “methodology”* for Paul. His readers need to understand that this theological process is a function of relationship, not a quantified theological task without that qualitative involvement even if it included biblical exegesis.

In his theological process, Paul made a further claim to “have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). If his claim is understood in only epistemological terms, then what Paul possessed was further knowledge (albeit inside) about God. For Paul, however, having the mind of Christ was the relational outcome of reciprocal relationship with the Spirit (1 Cor 2:9-10; cf. Jesus’ claim, Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:12-15). To have the mind of Christ from the Spirit signifies the new *phroneo* and *phronema* with the Spirit (Rom 8:5-6), which are necessary for the whole knowledge and understanding (*synesis*) to engage unequivocally in conclusive theological discourse of God’s story and definitive theological dialogue of the whole of God’s thematic relational action. This theological engagement for Paul further implies a *qualitative “methodology”* of having the mind of Christ for the needed interpretive framework and lens, which provide the relational awareness and qualitative sensitivity to wholly grasp the relational extent and qualitative depth of God’s vulnerable revelation (cf. Paul’s imperative, Rom 12:2). This qualitative methodology emerges in function entirely from reciprocal relationship with the Spirit,

the outcome of which is by its nature a relational outcome and not from a subjective self-consciousness. Therefore, Paul's qualitative methodology is inseparable from and in ongoing interaction with his relational methodology.

Paul never engaged in theological discourse beyond God's self-disclosure (as he demonstrated, 1 Cor 4:6) in order to construct any fictional parts of God's story or to speculate about God's thematic relational response to the human condition. He did not need to be engaged in such theology from bottom up because he was relationally involved with the mind of Christ ongoingly with the Spirit in the relational epistemic process to extend the theological dialogue of the Word from top down. The relational outcome of Paul's reciprocal relational response was from "him who...within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can *do* or imagine *by our own theological reflection*" (Eph 3:20): "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"—those things God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:9-10).

Listening to God became a relational function for Paul and not merely a pronouncement of moral obligation from the tradition of Jewish Scripture. Relational connection and involvement with the whole of God was nonnegotiable for Paul and the relational imperative for both his function and his theology. Therefore, Paul was able to complete (*pleroo*) the communicative word from God and to illuminate whole (*pleroma*) theology only on the basis and to the extent of his relational and qualitative methodology; this compatible process clearly signified his reciprocal relational response to God's vulnerable revelation and Paul's ongoing relational involvement with the whole of God. And by his reciprocal relational involvement in the whole of God's relational context and process, Paul's theological engagement is paradigmatic for all who are involved in the theological task, particularly in the academy.

Paul's approach and methodology in the relational epistemic process are inseparable from his relational imperative above to have the word of Christ in relational language vulnerably received by our person ("dwell in you") whole-ly in the ongoing relational context and process composed by the Word (Col 3:16). Relational involvement with the Word in the relational epistemic process is indispensable particularly for those who teach and critique one another both in the academy and the church (cf. Elihu with Job, Job 32-37) in order to have whole wisdom to be, live and make God's relational whole as church family. This necessarily integrates the relational imperative of the Word with the relational imperative of Christ's wholeness (Col 3:15) for the relational outcome of whole theology and practice, thereby whole-ly responding to Paul's relational purpose. As Paul demonstrated in his whole practice and illuminated in his whole theology for the church, I contend that the academy is responsible for the theology necessary for the church's practice and is accountable for both the academy's and church's theology and practice to be whole. Therefore, when Paul made conclusive for the theological task, "Nothing beyond what is written" (1 Cor 4:6), this equally implied "Nothing *less than* what is written." That is, nothing less than the Word in relational language communicated from God that integrally distinguishes the whole and holy God's presence and involvement. Accordingly, this communication from 'nothing less than the Word in relational language' is not recognized in a narrowed-down epistemic field; nor is it understood in a conventional epistemic process. 'Nothing less than the Word in relational language' requires vulnerable relational involvement in the relational

epistemic process in order to be distinguished in the relational outcome of whole theology and practice. This is the minimum relational level of involvement required to engage the relational epistemic process with the Spirit, which certainly is contrary to any level of relational distance maintained in both the epistemic process and the theological task.

In Paul's approach to the Word and his theological methodology, the ongoing interaction of the primacy of the qualitative with the primacy of the relational is integral to knowing and understanding *who* came and *what* has come, the Word entirely in relational language. Consequently, any loss of the primacy of our heart (our person made vulnerable from inner out) and any lack of our relational involvement from inner out (relationship together involving the whole person) create an insurmountable gap with the innermost of God's ontology and function for an impasse to know and understand the whole and holy God. This is *who* and *what* God seeks in compatible reciprocal relationship together. Therefore, our relational level of involvement in the epistemic process is an unavoidable issue that the academy is accountable to address.

The relational issue centers on 'relationship together involving the whole person' and therefore converges inseparably with the qualitative issue. While the qualitative issue involves the turn away from the heart, the relational issue involves a turning to the human shaping of relationships. The Word unfolded and *how* the Word unfolded cannot be reduced to only the Object revealed for mere observation in a conventional epistemic process, notably shaped by modernity. Such a hermeneutic and theological approach to the Word disembodies the Subject unfolded, whose distinguished presence is involved in relationship. How the Word unfolded was as Subject only in relationship, and this conjointly signifies the primacy of the relational and necessitates the relational epistemic process to know and understand the *pleroma* of God who came and the *pleroma* of Christ that has come. Without this relational level of involvement in the epistemic process, all that remains is the Object to be observed through a quantitative lens on referential terms; and such observation, as Jesus clarified, is unable to perceive the qualitative in the innermost of God and the relational in the whole of God. The referentialization of the Word engages a fragmentary process characterized by human shaping of relationships that reduces the relational level of involvement to a distant or detached condition, whether in the epistemic process or in life. Underlying this process is a theological anthropology of reduced ontology and function. This underlying issue was Paul's deepest concern for the church family when he declared "Has Christ been divided?" (1 Cor 1:13), and was the focus of Jesus' post-ascension critiques of churches turning away from the primacy of the qualitative and relational.

When Paul clearly distinguished the *pleroma* of God who came as "in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17), this has significance in the innermost just within the primacy of the qualitative and relational; and this has significance for our ontology and function in the innermost only when *who* came and *what* has come emerge from the qualitative and relational's primacy. Therefore, turning away from the heart and turning to the human shaping of relationships are consequential decisions that reflect, reinforce and sustain the human condition in its innermost. These are consequences that the church and academy must account for in their own practice. For related accounting, both critical issues of the qualitative and the relational directly involve three inescapable issues and three unavoidable issues.

Three inescapable issues for our ontology and function needing accountability:

1. How we define the person in general and our person in particular (Mt 18:1-4; Rom 2:28-29; Rev 2:23; Gal 6:15).
2. How this definition becomes our framework for defining relationships and our lens for determining how we engage relationships (Lk 10:41-42; 1 Cor 4:6-7; 2 Cor 5:16; 10:12; Gal 5:6).
3. How this defining and determining process underlies our ontology and function of the church and its ongoing practice. (Mt 15:8-9; Jn 13:8; Eph 2:19; Col 3:10-11,15; Jn 17:21-23).

These inescapable issues are present ongoingly, knowingly or unknowingly, and operate with or without qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness. They decisively address our theological anthropology and consistently challenge our assumptions of ontology and function. Furthermore, they are interrelated to and in interaction with the following.

Three unavoidable issues for all practice, necessary to account for in all moments:

1. The integrity of our person presented to others (Mt 5:20; 6:1; Gal 6:15).
2. The qualitative integrity of our communication in the presentation process with others and how integral our communication is to the relationship (Mt 5:37; Col 3:9).
3. The depth level of involvement engaged in the relationship (Mt 5:48; Gal 5:6).

These unavoidable issues are directly correlated to God's relational righteousness, whose presence and involvement can be counted on to be who, what and how God is in relationship together, and who expects reciprocal relational response in compatible righteousness to be who, what and how we are (Eph 4:24; cf. 2 Tim 3:16). This is unavoidable in relationship together and is accountable for nothing less and no substitutes in whole relationship together, as Jesus clearly made his family accountable for in relational terms (Mt 5:20).

The whole of God who came and the whole of God's whole relationship together that has come are at issue here in the innermost. Though this whole is clearly present and continuously active—as evidenced in Jesus' family prayer and Paul's echo of it—both Jesus and Paul never assumed the function of wholeness in the church family, including the theological community, given the ceaseless challenge from reductionism. These critical, inescapable and unavoidable issues address to what extent the Word unfolds for us in the innermost, and thus to what extent there is wholeness in our theology and practice.

The whole knowledge and understanding (*synesis*) of God and its relational outcome of whole theology and practice can emerge, unfold and mature only in the relational epistemic process with the Spirit. This process by its given nature can neither be reduced to just the quantitative, nor function with assumptions of human ontology



from outer in. Jens Zimmermann concludes also from his examination of our hermeneutical heritage:

Knowledge in general and knowledge of God in particular are existential and relational. Knowledge, in other words, is not defined according to a modern scientific model of detached, neutral observation, but knowing requires that the knower be involved with the thing known.<sup>6</sup>

A qualitative *phroneo* from a whole *phronema* by its new nature has to involve a relational epistemic process with the Spirit because *synesis* is not a human construction. God makes possible this whole understanding (cf. *synesis* in 2 Tim 2:7) as an outcome of revelation, namely self-disclosure, which God reveals not in a vacuum, nor posts on the bulletin board of humanity (contrary to natural theology), but only in the context and process of relationship (cf. Lk 10:21). Therefore, this whole knowledge and understanding is only a relational outcome, which makes *synesis* a function only of relationship, not human effort regardless of its good intention. And from knowing and understanding the whole and holy God, we can be distinguished together in whole theology and practice. Our relational epistemic process with the Spirit will unfold and mature nothing less and no substitutes.

## **The Nature of Old Wineskins and the Flow of the New Wine**

The relational outcome of whole theology and practice is a unique experience (not common but *uncommon*) in the age of reductionism, both within the church and academy. In spite of their good intentions in these interdependent contexts, this relational outcome continues to strain to emerge, struggle to unfold and have difficulty to mature. On the one hand, this is not unexpected with the ongoing presence and pervasive influence of reductionism and its counter-relational work. It should, on the other hand, be surprising given the gospel of God's whole presence and involvement. The issue involves what happens to the new wine, as Paul contends (Eph 4:14, 20-24).

For the whole of Paul and the whole in his theology, there is no other relational outcome from the gospel of wholeness; “the new creation is everything” (Gal 6:15) for those who follow the whole of Jesus' theological trajectory and relational path in the new wine relationships together with the veil removed (Eph 2:14-22). The seeds of new wine have been planted in our innermost and have sprouted ‘already’, yet the good news of its flow has not been accurately reported. There is just something missing to announce. The gospel has lost its significance without this relational outcome, reduced to what Paul defines as “no gospel at all.” What does remain prominent, if not prevailing, in this condition is both a weak view of sin not dealing with reductionism—and thus inadequately understanding the human condition—and a fragmentary theological anthropology reducing the ontology and function of the person and the church and for the

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<sup>6</sup> Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 131.

academy. Consequently, various templates have formed in theology and practice that have constrained the outcome of the gospel to their limits—the function of old wineskins (Mk 2:22).

Old wineskins are implied in the alternatives of anything less and any substitutes discussed above. Certainly then, old wineskins both constrain the flow of the new wine and reduce it of its qualitative and relational significance. The nature of old wineskins emerges with any reduction of our ontology and function, thus from an ambiguous or shallow personal-collective identity with relationships still having the veil—for example, who we are without *what* and/or *whose* we are—in contrasting and conflicting function with Jesus' new wine table fellowship.

Jesus disclosed the new wine when the issue of fasting was raised to him. His response is inseparable from his major discourse for his followers in the Sermon on the Mount. Focused on efforts of self-determination, Jesus exposed trying to get closer to God through fasting from outer in (Mt 6:16-18). This effort to establish one's righteousness (*dikaiosyne*, 6:1) assumes a reduced ontology and function that constrains the person in an outer-in discipline having no qualitative significance from inner out, and consequently has no relational significance to God. For Jesus, this fasting is an old wineskin that cannot contain the new wine. In Jesus' relational language, reduced ontology and function are both incompatible and incongruent with whole ontology and function; and the nature of old wineskins is reduced ontology and function, defining the person from outer in and determining relationships still with the veil—unable to be vulnerably involved heart to heart with God face to Face in the nature of the new wine, the new covenant, and with persons together in the new creation family.

Old wineskins are the relational consequence of becoming embedded in an ontological lie from reductionism that imposes an identity deficit, in which a person (or together as church or academy) struggles to erase any deficit by efforts of self-determination in what one can do (e.g. fasting). The more control one can exercise over this process, the more certain the results of one's efforts can be expected. The pursuit of certainty, however, requires a reduction epistemologically, ontologically and relationally in order for the control needed to succeed in self-determination—notably narrowing the epistemic field to the probable and minimizing vulnerability in relationships. This is how God's terms for covenant relationship outlined in the *torah* have been reduced to a behavioral code, how persons seek to become justified by what they do, how Jesus' teachings become disembodied to mere principles to follow, how the new wine gets put into an old wineskin. The nature of old wineskins, therefore, is the nature of the human condition *in* its reduced ontology and function, seeking self-determination and self-justification *by* its reduced ontology and function in order to overcome the deficit *for* its reduced ontology and function. And, accordingly, old wineskins emerge from an ambiguous or shallow identity necessitating the veil in relationships, because it fails to engage the integral identity formation outlined by Jesus in the beatitudes (Mt 5:3-10) and pursues a reduced righteousness from outer in rather than whole righteousness from inner out (contrary to Mt 5:20 in Jesus' major discourse for his followers).

Old wineskins first emerged in the primordial garden in the form of the fruit for self-determination and then with their loincloths for self-justification, and most significantly in their relational distance (Gen 3:6-10). The ontological lie from reductionism imposed an identity deficit to create an illusion of climbing the ontological ladder to a higher status: “you will not be *reduced*...you will become like God” (3:4-5). Constructing the tower of Babel was another old wineskin of reduced ontology and function seeking to climb the human contextual ladder for self-determination and justification (Gen 11:1-4). These examples demonstrate that old wineskins can have the appearance of something new (the fruit), innovative (loincloths) and a new venture (the tower); yet their reality is merely an illusion for reduced ontology and function.

The influence from human contextualization for innovation and new ventures has accelerated in the modern world of science and technology. At the same time, these efforts have also required a reduction epistemologically, ontologically and relationally in order to produce results. For example, the illusions of new skins developed by the recent changes in media technology are consequential for diminished involvement in relationships and minimalizing the quality of life, even though they have greatly increased our information, productivity and other quantities in life. As noted previously, such innovation stemming from modern technology has only reduced the primacy of the qualitative and the relational. These results, however, witness to the limits of what can emerge from reduced ontology and function. The new wine does not emerge and flow from the changes of innovation but only with transformation from inner out of whole ontology and function.

Shifting from innovation and its ambiguity of function and usefulness, we turn to a more practical approach. Pragmatism is another old wineskin constraining the new wine that needs more attention if the concern is for the flow of new wine. While a pragmatist may have significance by not separating theology from its practical function—in this sense Paul can be considered a pragmatist—pragmatism has a purpose and concern of less depth. Contextually, pragmatism should not be confused with pragmatics in linguistics that concerns understanding the meaning of messages in the relational context of the speaker—an ongoing necessity for Jesus’ relational language and messages. In a more limited concern, even with good intentions, pragmatism involves the effort in discipleship that focuses primarily on situations and circumstances, and concerns what is most practical in those contexts. With this narrowed-down focus and concern, pragmatism essentially reduces the relational involvement of the whole person with God by shifting this primacy to the situations and circumstances. Often unknowingly, this limits the relational process of discipleship to outer-in engagement by redefining one’s person from inner out to outer in, thereby renegotiating relationship with God on our terms. By reordering the primacy of relationship, pragmatism unintentionally promotes the counter-relational work of reductionism and reduces the whole ontology and function constituting both the new wine and its discipleship, therefore disregarding Jesus’ relational imperative for his followers.

Jesus’ conflict with the reductionist segments of Judaism involved their pragmatism in contrast to their needed relational function in the covenant relationship together, the covenant of love. Pragmatism also emerged at another new wine table fellowship to try to constrain the new wine (Mt 26:6-13; Jn 12:1-8). The new wine flowed from Mary with her vulnerable involvement in relational response to Jesus. The

expensive perfume was secondary to the primacy of relationship together but the disciples made it an issue of discipleship in primary response to the situation of the poor. By rebuking Mary harshly (par. Mk14:5), they demonstrated the limited concern of their pragmatism, therewith exposing their continued reduced ontology and function that still had not tasted the new wine but indeed tried to constrain it. In contrast and conflict, Jesus fully experienced the primacy of Mary's involvement and the depth of her discipleship—celebrating the new wine together and anticipating her flow of the new wine to give clarity and depth to “wherever this gospel of *wholeness* is proclaimed in the whole world” (Mt 26:13).

The new wine distinguishing God's whole on God's terms always involves making choices. Choosing what we will pay attention to and what we will ignore. Choosing what is a greater priority, what is primary or what is secondary. Choosing what will define our person and what we will not let define us. Choosing how we will define others and how we will not define others. Choosing how we will be involved in relationships and how we will not do relationships. Choosing the uncommon (holy) over the common. Choosing *zoe* over *bios*, the qualitative over the quantitative. Choosing to live more by the opportunities of *kairos* than by the constraints of *chronos*. That is to say, choosing to be whole, to live whole and to make whole. Yet, these choices are not about human agency but about involvement in reciprocal relationship together in response to God's relational grace, the basis and ongoing base for relationship together to be whole.

Making these choices signifies celebrating the whole, signified in the new wine table fellowship. With each choice, we celebrate God's whole and being whole in communion together. Making the choice may be difficult but what also emerges in making it is celebrating the whole of God's new creation family together. This is the family responsibility which we humbly submit to and thankfully account for in the relational process of family love because we are “not left as orphans” but have been adopted into God's family. Therefore, we celebrate our redemption to be free to make these choices. We celebrate our transformation to make these choices in family love. We celebrate our reconciliation to make these choices for relationship together in God's new family. And we celebrate making these choices in relationship together without the fragmenting presence of the veil. In other words, by making these choices we celebrate being made whole to be whole in order to live whole and to make whole, God's whole on God's terms.

The critical choices made by persons in the first new wine table fellowship and then by Mary involve not choosing the secondary (fasting and the old wine, ministry to the poor) over the primacy of whole relationship together from inner out. The choice to live vulnerably in relationship together to be whole is what the Father seeks (Jn 4:23) and the Son searches for (Rev 2:23b) and pursues in post-ascension (Rev 3:20). The choice of the primacy of relationship together and building intimate communion together as family is the choice of God's relational whole on God's relational terms. Making this choice, as Mary beautifully made with Jesus, is the experiential reality of having *good news*, in which Mary's whole significance has yet to be established today because of a fragmentary gospel. By making this choice in the primacy of God's relational terms to live whole in vulnerable relationship and to build intimate communion together as the new creation family, even at the expense of ministry, they celebrated God's relational whole—which is indeed the experiential truth and functional significance of the gospel.

Accordingly, in this choice and the celebration signified with it, they experienced even greater depth of living whole. This is the flow of Mary's new wine that needs to distinguish our gospel today, indeed for the whole world.

These two new wine table fellowships clearly demonstrate the importance of making these choices and celebrating God's whole in integral function in order both to enjoy the breadth of being whole and to experience the depth of living whole—the *makarios* (fully satisfied) from the beatitudes and from the relational outcome of the Face's definitive blessing, vulnerably constituted by the whole of God's *agape* relational involvement (Jn 15:9-11). Making the choice and celebrating God's whole converge most definitively for his church family in relationship together when they function in Eucharistic worship. Celebrating in Eucharistic worship is the most integral opportunity of God's new creation family to build intimate communion together. Yet, this distinguished opportunity is not a mere spiritual tradition and practice of faith merely engaged *before* God; such practice may signify still being in front of the curtain. Tradition easily becomes a substitute for deeper involvement in relationships without the veil, and hereby serves as an old wineskin. Thus, *what* we participate in and *how* we participate are vital; that means even the logistics are important to help us build God's relational whole that holds us together in our innermost. This communion is a qualitative function only of relationship, intimate relationship together *with* the whole of God, therefore relationship not embedded in the past or simply anticipating the future but relationship vulnerably functioning in the present. By removing the veil with his sacrifice, Jesus constituted the new creation family 'already' (Lk 22:20; Jn 17:21-23). In Eucharistic worship, when his church functions in vulnerable relationship to build intimate communion together, his church family in whole ontology and function experiences the height of relational involvement with the whole of God.

Together with the presence and reciprocal relational work of the Spirit (the Son's relational replacement), Jesus' transformed followers are theologically and functionally reconciled together to be the new creation whole of God's family in likeness of the Trinity, ongoingly in the trinitarian relational process of family love. At this integral new wine table fellowship *with* the whole of God, his church can celebrate God's whole only as church family together without relational distance, not as relational and emotional orphans functioning as orphanage (as Paul illuminated, 1 Cor 11). Without this relational celebration of God's whole, our Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, pneumatology and eschatological hope become merely narrowed-down referential doctrine essentially disembodied and de-relationalized with nothing qualitatively distinguished to practice and relationally significant to experience both with God and with each other together. The only alternative left to practice and experience in this relational condition is "old wine," about which some say "The old is good *or enough, even better*" (Lk 5:39).

Jesus raised up Paul to extend and exceed his relational work of the new wine fellowship (Acts 26:16; Jn 14:12). Vulnerably involved with the whole of Jesus and in reciprocal relationship with the Spirit, Paul became the hermeneutical key for the theological and functional clarity of the church as God's family in whole ontology and

function. Therefore, even traditional, conventional and prevailing distinctions such as circumcision and uncircumcision became old wineskins for the new wine fellowship in his perceptual-interpretive framework—“neither...is anything” (Gal 6:15). For Paul, himself as a reduced person made whole, the new covenant and new creation were indispensable for the gospel, irreplaceable for its relational outcome, and irreducible for its emerging ontology and nonnegotiable for its ongoing relationship together—“the new creation is everything.” Nothing less and no substitutes either defined Paul or determined his theology and function. The flow of the new wine in the new covenant and creation constitutes the relational dynamic of Jesus *into* Paul, and the who, what and how of Paul embodying the theology and hermeneutic of the whole gospel for practice to be, live and make God’s relational whole.

As God has called us to “walk with the whole of God’s vulnerable presence and intimate involvement, and be whole,” this reignites God’s questions for all of us in the church and academy: “Where are you?”—“What are you doing here?”—“Why are you...?”

And to extend the flow of new wine today, Jesus *into* Paul *into*...?

## Chapter 7 Theological Education in the Age of Reductionism

**Do not boast in *your wisdom...your abilities...your resources*  
but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me,  
since I am vulnerably present and intimately involved in relationship together.**

Jeremiah 9:23-24

If you were to form today a seminary or graduate school of theology, what would be your primary purpose? Integrally important to *what* is *who* would be selected to teach and *how* would this pedagogical process be engaged to fulfill your curriculum and purpose? *What, who* and *how* are inseparable for the academy; they are integral for the academy to be distinguished in its theology and practice so that it has both theological and relational significance to God and to those participating.

If you have been to a theological academy or currently are part of one, which of these integral components (what, who, how) is emphasized, ignored or even neglected? This also applies to theological education in the church.

When I went to seminary, I was stimulated in my mind (mainly with philosophical thought) further than ever before. At the same time, it was also the driest period of my Christian life that some would describe as lacking spirituality. Yet, this is an inadequate explanation that only reinforces fragmenting the person by seeking to balance the prominent intellectual emphasis with the spiritual. The reality was that I had shifted away from my person from inner out signified by the function of my heart—the *who* and *what* God seeks and that stirred me the most in our early relationship together. Ironically, I didn't rediscover this person until further graduate study in social science, not because of those disciplines themselves but by being challenged to go deeper into my person and thus into God and our relationship together. My ongoing journey has necessitated epistemological clarification and hermeneutic correction to redirect me from an Emmaus (contrary to Jesus' theological trajectory) or Damascus (in conflict with Jesus' relational path) road by challenging my assumptions of theological anthropology defining persons and relationships from outer in, and my underlying view of sin without reductionism. These two critical assumptions were never challenged in my formal theological education, and the subtle consequence was unknowingly being on a different theological trajectory and relational path than Jesus, whom my life was openly dedicated and rigorously committed to follow. Even with the investment of years in theological engagement, Jesus' question was as penetrating as originally asked of his disciples: "Don't you know me yet?" (Jn 14:9).

Whatever your experience with theological education has been (including in the church), it has resulted in a referential outcome or a relational outcome that is vital to examine, even with a hermeneutic of suspicion. The what, who and how of theological education are unavoidable for both those who teach and who study. These components are essential for our theological education—even to clarify and correct from the past—to be integral with Jesus' improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path in the age of reductionism. The embodied Word disclosed what, who and how God *is* to go

beyond theological education's mere subject matter and the object of its study in order to distinguish the Subject necessary to be engaged at all levels of theological education.

## **The *What* of Theological Education**

The singular boast at the top of this chapter must be defining for the primary purpose of theological education and determining of its curriculum. That is to say, the *what* of theological education is distinguished only by knowing and understanding the whole of God in relational terms and, therefore, by its relational nature converges with the what, who and how of God vulnerably present and intimately involved in reciprocal relationship in order to be known and understood. This good news makes this boast a simple reality, yet its experiential reality is made difficult by competing boasts commonly expressed explicitly or implicitly, directly or indirectly, in the academy: boasts of knowledge, insights, theories, abilities and resources.

No matter what the purpose and curriculum of theological education are, if they are not congruent with what, who and how God is embodied by Jesus' theological trajectory and relational path, then that *what* does not signify knowing and understanding the whole of God in relational terms. There are likely other referential outcomes about which to boast but not this relational outcome. This uncommon boast is composed entirely from the primacy of vulnerable involvement with the Word in relational language. Contrary to the relational outcome of knowing and understanding God as distinguished only in relational terms by the Word are the common boasts resulting from the referentialization of the Word. Understanding the nature of the Word has been problematic for defining the primary purpose of theological education, and knowing the identity of the Word has been elusive for determining its curriculum. Both understanding the nature of the Word currently used in theological education's primary purpose and knowing the Word's identity used in its curriculum need to be examined with a hermeneutic of suspicion.

## **Understanding the Nature of the Word Used for Its Primary Purpose**

Consider the following statement of purpose from a major Western seminary:

Fuller Theological Seminary is dedicated to the **mission** of *equipping men and women for the manifold ministries of Christ and his Church*. Under the authority of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit, Fuller pursues this mission by providing

- discipline-leading research and publications,
- first-class graduate and professional development programs, and
- widely valued spiritual formation resources,
- all in the context of a vibrant learning community that is evangelical, multidenominational, and multiethnic in character.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from a document describing Fuller's search for a new president in 2013, "The Fuller Presidency: Opportunity Profile," 2-3.



It goes on to define “its unique character and distinctive contribution” by listing academic excellence, thoughtful evangelicalism and its three schools, multiple centers and institutes for its creative engagement with church and culture and for its regional and global influence.

In all its boasts there is no mention of knowing and understanding God. This absence is a critical matter that cannot be assumed or implied in its above statement. Its purpose and curriculum have shifted from the primary of God’s relational terms to the secondary in referential terms. Since it claims to pursue its purpose “under the authority of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit,” their focus and emphasis indicate the referentialization of the Word and an immature pneumatology assuming the Spirit’s unilateral work. Such engagement cannot have the relational outcome of knowing and understanding God in the primacy of reciprocal relationship together but only its substitutes signified by the secondary in a referential outcome.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this referential outcome is most evident in an honest memoir by one of Fuller’s celebrated professors.

When asked of his plans after retiring from Fuller, Lewis Smedes (d. 2002) revealed the following:

I told them that I was going to develop a closer friendship with God. They usually chuckled. But I was serious. Abraham was God’s friend. Jesus made friends of his disciples. In all honesty, I had never known God as a friend, not the way I know my other friends. Now, after seven years into retirement, God and I are still not what you would call close friends. What is taking us so long?

For one thing, good friends like each other...it has to be reciprocal. If I like you but you don’t like me, we are not likely to be friends. So if God is to be my friend, he must like me, which is just what is hard to believe. For years—most of my life in fact—I have not found it easy to think that God could like me.

...Here is something else that makes it hard to be God’s friend: He never, well almost never, talks to me. From what they tell me, I gather that he talks to other people.

...I walk and talk [with God], but God hardly ever says a word to me...when I am with God, I do all the talking. Most of the time.

...Maybe the highest obstacle that, for far too long, kept me even from thinking about God—or Jesus—as my friend was this: good friends admire each other. ...But the admiration has to be reciprocated.

...There is ever so much about God to admire and there is nothing about him not to admire. But is there anything about me that he can admire? As a child and for years beyond, I believed that there was nothing in me that anyone, certainly not God, could admire. Today, in my old age, I have begun to believe that I am someone whom God does admire.

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<sup>2</sup> TiteTienou, dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, identifies knowing God as basic to their core values: “there is no possible doubt that we must have recourse to the Bible if we want to know God.” He adds, “At Trinity we believe that knowing God is essential for all aspects of life” (*Trinity Magazine*, Fall, 2012, 10). Yet there is no indication in their focus that this is distinguished from merely knowing information about God in referential terms, however personal, as a substitute for the primacy of knowing God in reciprocal relationship together. Unless clearly distinguished, a hermeneutic of suspicion would conclude that their focus is not distinguished.

...I am still more comfortable kneeling before the Lord my Maker than I am looking him straight in the eye and calling him my friend.

...Growing old has not brought me much closer to God or much wiser in his ways. I once thought that when I retired from a regular job and had no pressure to go here and there and do this and that, I would spend much more time with him. Hasn't happened. And I thought that, with more time to think about him, I would come to understand him better. Here, I think, I have made some progress—not much maybe, but enough to nudge me to work at it some more.<sup>3</sup>

Smedes wanted to experience the relational outcome composed in the primacy of relationship together after all his years serving faithfully in the secondary for a referential outcome. He labored in a comparative process under the ontological lie of a deficit model making him 'less' and not under the Word in relational language and reciprocal relationship with the Spirit; yet his practice signified his congruence with Fuller's purpose and curriculum "under the authority of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit." Therefore, there was no apparent epistemological clarification and hermeneutical correction to challenge his assumptions most notably of both a fragmentary theological anthropology defining him and determining relationships from the outer in, and a weak view of sin not addressing his and his context's reductionism. Consequently, the gospel and the human condition were inevitably narrowed down, the former without its depth and the latter without its breadth.

This demonstrates the referential nature of the Word used to define theological education's primary purpose, which is so critical to understand and address. This limited Word is contrary to Paul's relational imperative for the Word embodied in relational terms to vulnerably engage us whole-ly in relationship as we teach and contend with reductionism in each other. On this relational basis, Paul's ecclesiology for the church's wholeness becomes a needed hermeneutic of suspicion for any purpose statement like "the **mission** of *equipping men and women for the manifold ministries of Christ and his church.*"

With application also to the academy and its theological education, Paul challenged the renegotiated ecclesiology of churches in reduced ontology and function, and also challenged the assumptions of theological anthropology underlying the definition of the person and its determination of relationships together in reductionist terms. Both of these conditions existed in churches apart from, in contrast to, or in conflict with the qualitative image and relational likeness of the whole of God. Paul's challenges to such reductionism are summarized in his response to make relationally specific the functional significance of *pleroma* ecclesiology (complete, whole, Eph 4:14-25). His theological-functional clarity of this functional significance is directly connected to and emerges from his relational discourse on the theological dynamic of church ontology (4:7-13).

For the ontological identity of the church and academy to be of functional significance, they cannot be shaped or constructed by human terms from human contextualization. In Paul's ecclesiology, the church in wholeness is the new creation by the whole of God's relational response of grace ("was given grace") from above top-down, the dynamic of which ("descended...ascended") Christ relationally embodied to

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, *My God and I: A Spiritual Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 160-65.

make each one of us together to be God's whole ("he might fill all things," *pleroo*, make complete, 4:7-10; cf. 1:23). This is the church in wholeness embodying the *pleroma* of Christ. In God's relational response of grace, Christ also gave the relational means to church leaders for the dynamic embodying of the church (4:11), which Paul previously defined also as part of the Spirit's relational involvement to share different *charisma* from the whole of God (not a fragmented source) for the functional significance of the church body (1 Cor 12:4-11). Paul illuminates this further to make definitive the functional significance of embodying of the church in relational likeness to the whole and holy God.

Church leaders are given the relational means for the purpose "to equip the saints" (*katartismos* from *katartizo*, to put into proper condition, to restore to former condition, make complete, 4:12). This directly points to the dynamic of transformed persons reconciled and relationally involved in transformed relationships together in relational likeness to God, and integrated in interdependence of the various church functions ("work of ministry") necessary for the dynamic embodying (*oikodome*, 4:12) of the church's whole ontology and function of "the *pleroma* of Christ" (4:13). This means unequivocally: For church leaders to be of ontological significance, their persons must be defined by the wholeness of the new creation in the qualitative image of God from inner out, not defined by their gifts, resources or the roles and titles they have which reduce their persons to outer in; and for their leadership to be relationally significant as transformed persons, their function must be determined by *agape* relational involvement in transformed relationships together (both equalized and intimate) as God's new creation family in the relational likeness of the whole of God, not determined by the titles and roles they perform (even with sacrifice) that make distinctions, intentionally or unintentionally, creating distance and stratification in relationships together. The latter practices by church leaders renegotiate ecclesiology from bottom-up based on a theological anthropology from outer in, which also apply to the practices of the academy.

In Paul's *pleroma* ecclesiology, church leaders in reduced ontology and function are not created or living new in the image and likeness of God and, therefore, cannot equip others according to *katartismos* in the interdependence necessary to be of functional significance for embodying the church in relational likeness of the whole and holy God. Nor can they proclaim the experiential truth of the gospel of wholeness (Eph 6:15). Only transformed leaders—whose persons are ongoingly being restored to the image and likeness of God (*anakainoo*, Col 3:10-11; cf. *ananeoomai*, Eph 4:23)—vulnerably involved in transformed relationships together with the Spirit can help make complete the saints; that is, *katarismos* emerges from integral interaction with *anakainoo*. Only whole leaders relationally serve to make complete the saints in the interdependence that is functionally significant for the church's whole function integrally in the following: to dynamically embody (*oikodome*) the *pleroma* of Christ until all those relationally belonging to God's family come to (*katantao*, reach, arrive) be together as one (*henotes*, unity), that is, whole in their relational response of trust in reciprocal relationship together and whole in specifically knowing (*epignosis*) the Son of God in intimate relationship. The relational outcome is persons without distinctions (beyond *aner*) who are whole-ly complete (*teleios*) in the qualitative depth (*helikia*, stature) of the *pleroma* (fullness, whole) embodied by Christ, therefore who together with the Spirit can embody

the *pleroma* of Christ in functional significance of the relational likeness of the whole of God (4:12-13).

Paul is not outlining an ecclesial function of church growth models, missional models or any other ministry techniques of serving for the quantitative expansion of gatherings shaped or constructed by human terms. Paul makes definitive the theological paradigm for the whole function embodying the church's ontology and function of who the church is and whose the church is as God's new creation family in his qualitative image and relational likeness. This paradigm composes the theological dynamic of church ontology, whose function is entirely relational; and, on this basis, whose whole ontology and function is the relational significance of transformed persons *agape*-relationally involved in transformed relationships together in interdependence—the definitive paradigm especially for its leaders and those in the academy equipping these leaders.

It is unequivocal in Paul's *pleroma* ecclesiology that the church in relational likeness of the whole of God is irreplaceable for the functional significance of its ontology and function. For the church's ontology and function to be whole as God's new creation family, it must (*dei* not *opheilo*) be the functional significance of both transformed relationships reconciled together and intimate interrelations integrated together in interdependence; and both of these are functionally significant only in *agape* relational involvement.

Church whole relationships together are reconciled together by Christ with the Spirit, thus are by their nature irreducible; and the integrated relational outcome of church interdependence in relational likeness to the whole of God is nonnegotiable. Interdependent is how God created his new creation family, as well as created the whole human family in relationship together (cf. Gen 2:18) and integrated all of creation (cf. Col 1:20; Rom 8:19-21). Just as modern neuroscience affirms this interdependence and acknowledges the influence of reductionism to counter it, the whole ontology and function of the church embodies the functional significance of this new creation to fulfill the inherent human relational need and to solve the human problem—which neuroscience can merely identify without having good news for its fulfillment and resolution. Yet, the church in renegotiated ecclesiology is also without both the functional significance of the good news of what persons are and its relational significance of what persons can be saved *to*. And those in the academy must also bear this responsibility and be accountable for their ontology and function as persons and community.

Paul's relational imperative of the Word in relational language is integrated with his relational imperative for 'the wholeness of Christ' to be our only determinant from inner out. Only the nature of the Word in whole ontology and function can constitute "the manifold ministries of Christ and his church," and thereby compose theological education's "mission of equipping" us to be and live whole as God's new creation family and to extend the depth of the whole gospel to make whole the breadth of the human condition. Anything less and any substitutes are fragmentary, incapable of wholeness, and rendered to reduced ontology and function.

## Knowing the Word's Identity Used in Its Curriculum

The ideal curriculum in theological education can be perceived as a synthesis of faith and learning that results in expanding and developing our faith-practice. The theology engaged in this process needs to be sufficiently significant to produce this outcome, yet this theological significance is contingent on the source of the theology: the specific identity of the Word.

Evangelicals have long assumed an identity as people of the Word, adhering to its integrity and authority. Yet, the identity of the very Word that evangelicalism assumes needs to be called into question. The issue is not about the embodiment of the Word that reveals God; this unequivocal identification of the Word is common to evangelicalism. Thus, when Fuller defines its character of “thoughtful evangelicalism,” it describes its biblical orthodoxy and rigorous scholarship uniting in the service of truth—in a curriculum grounded in this assumed Word. The issue for evangelicalism, however, is its Word's identity: simply stated, either the embodied Word used to transmit information about God in referential terms, or the Word embodied to communicate the whole of God in only relational terms.

Evangelicalism itself emerged as a basic identity issue, namely regarding the Word and the gospel and clearly distinguishing the theology and practice of the Word and gospel from human shaping. However, inadequate interpretive frameworks (notably among neo-evangelicals with a modernist lens) have prevented distinguishing the theology and practice necessary by the nature of the Word and its gospel from evangelicalism's own human shaping (including a Western template). This has resulted in not only inadequately resolving evangelicalism's original identity issue but even further embedding many evangelicals in an identity problem. The identity problem is twofold:

1. Evangelical theology is not *defined* by the relational context of the whole of God's revelation in the Word and thus evangelical theology is not distinguished by the relational significance and outcome of the whole gospel, rendering its theology fragmentary and not whole.
2. Evangelical practice is not *determined* by the relational process of the whole Word and the gospel of wholeness, therefore evangelical practice is not distinguished by the relational process required for reciprocal relationship to be followers of Christ in compatible whole ontology and function, rendering its practice to reduced ontology and function.

This resulting identity problem emerges from any interpretive framework that narrows the epistemic field of the Word and thereby reduces the relational context and process of the whole of God's self-disclosure. The unavoidable relational consequence diminishes God's vulnerable presence and minimalizes God's relational involvement—the human shaping of which and whom fragments both God's distinguished revelation to the referentialization of the Word as well as God's ongoing thematic relational action to a truncated gospel. This narrowing, fragmenting process has left evangelicals in a shallow or ambiguous identity, which the embodied Word communicated conclusively is an overriding problem of major consequence in the age of reductionism (Mt 5:13-16).

Such an identity problem is unable to distinguish the Word and gospel necessary in order to distinguish evangelical theology and practice from the influence and shaping of human contextualization. This leaves evangelical theological education both with an identity problem and an identity crisis because the identity of the Word used in its curriculum is unknowingly different from what it assumes—a Word insufficient to fulfill its statement of purpose.

In another context but with similar issues, Richard Hays attempts to identify the Word not only for the curriculum of theological education but for the university having lost its Christian roots.<sup>4</sup> He describes a faculty meeting at Duke Divinity School where they were debating a report on a proposed new curriculum that focused on the qualities and abilities to nurture in their graduates. One item in that curriculum list raised strong objection: “A commitment to living a life ordered toward holiness, justice, peace, and reconciliation.” Hays describes the objection of some faculty members.

They did not necessarily disapprove of holiness, justice, peace, and reconciliation; they just questioned whether it was the job of a *university divinity school* to inculcate a commitment to such things. As one of our theologians put it, the committee’s list of goals mixed together intellectual aims with moral and religious ones in a way that he found problematic; better to stick to purely intellectual goals and leave the moral and religious elements out of it.

Despite my great respect for the colleagues who raised this objection, I believe that their comments are symptomatic of the church’s loss of its own proper intellectual tradition, and at the same time symptomatic of the spiritual captivity of the modern university. The truth is that we cannot divide the intellectual from the moral and religious. Or if we do, we will have created universities that are—paradoxically—no longer “intellectual *communities*.”

In his attempt to compose the formation of ‘intellectual community’, Hays turns to the identity of the Word needed for theological education’s curriculum to fulfill this purpose in the academy. For Hays, this identity of the Word

is a *palpable* Word, a Word that has become embodied and has given itself to be felt, concretely and physically, by our clumsy fingers. To know this Word rightly, we do not have to ascend to heaven, we do not have to escape our time and space, we do not move in Platonic fashion from illusory physical appearances to disembodied reality. Rather, we see and touch this Word with our hands.

Hays concludes from this palpable Word the following:

First, an intellectual community grounded in the palpable Word will value concreteness over abstraction, particularity over generality, engagement over objectivity. The “epistemology of love” suggests that we know best and most truly by loving and by forming committed relationships with the community in which we

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<sup>4</sup> Richard B. Hays, “The Palpable Word as Ground of *Koinonia*,” in Douglas V. Henry and Michael D. Beaty, eds., *Christianity and the Soul of the University: Faith as a Foundation for Intellectual Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 19-36.

are engaged in service. This runs counter to Enlightenment assumptions about the objectivity of knowledge, the task of *Wissenschaft*. That is why I believe that in our curriculum at Duke Divinity School we should seek, precisely as part of our *educational* task, to form our students in lives ordered toward holiness, justice, peace, and reconciliation. We should seek to teach our students to do the truth. Inculcating such commitments and character formation should be the aim of all Christian institutions, not just seminaries.

Second, an intellectual community grounded in the palpable Word will be a community that tells the truth, confesses its sins and weaknesses, lives without pretense, bears one another's burdens. (This is a hard act for us!) It will be a community of those who know themselves to be sinners under grace. Precisely for that reason, it will also be a community in which there is a meeting of *persons*, not of disembodied intellects. It will be a *koinonia*, not just an institution.

Third, an intellectual community grounded in the palpable Word will be a community wary of the power of idols and the lure of the world's idol-makers. Such a community would be discerning and critical of the culture in which it finds itself, testing the spirits to see whether they are from God.

Fourth, the revelation of the palpable Word is the culmination of the story of God's gracious initiative. Therefore, a university that seeks to ground its common life in this Word is necessarily locating itself within the highly particular story of the people Israel, to whom God chose to reveal himself distinctively. ...It is not sufficient simply to acknowledge the university's cultural history; rather, the university must reckon with the fact that it lives and moves within a story in which the God disclosed in Scripture is still actively at work. An intellectual community grounded in the palpable Word is not simply a political society based on a shifting equilibrium of competing interests and power games; instead it is a manifestation of the life of God in the world, and its effectiveness depends on its receiving the gift of the embodied Word.

The alternative is that a "pluralistic" university will seek to live apart from any story and will therefore be, quite literally, incoherent; with no story, it has nothing holding it together. In such cases, the university will surely be co-opted into the story of Western capitalist "progress" and human autonomy, in short, into the Enlightenment metanarrative, which has had such destructive consequences for human wholeness.

Thankfully, Hays correctly expands the epistemic field of Scripture to identify the Word in more qualitative relational terms. Yet, the results he anticipates from the palpable Word can only be a relational outcome; and this relational outcome emerges not merely from the Word's theological trajectory but by necessity from the whole Word's vulnerable relational path. This vulnerable relational path composes the relational context and process for reciprocal involvement in the relational epistemic process embodied by the whole Word with the Spirit, which is lacking in Hays' focus. Thus, he also needs to vulnerably engage this relational epistemic process with the Word, inseparably with the Spirit, in ongoing reciprocal relationship together in order for (1) this relational outcome to be clearly distinguished from a referential outcome, and (2) the relationships together

of *koinonia* to be whole as the new wine fellowship relationships without the veil, with nothing less and no substitutes of the relational likeness of the Trinity.

In the age of reductionism, epistemological illusion is a continuous problem in the identity of the Word used by theological education; and ontological simulation is a common substitute for the outcome from this Word. This condition is what Jesus exposed in the religious community (*hypokrisis*, Lk 12:1), Paul exposed in the church (*metaschematizo*, 2 Cor 11:14-15, cf. Rom 12:2) and in Peter (*hypokrisis*, Gal 2:13). What this condition also exposes is a fragmentary theological anthropology that reduces ontology and function to the outer in, which includes the Word's identity and thus the Word's ontology and function. Any reduction of ontology and function is an inescapable issue needing to be addressed (1) because "the Word used in the academy will be the theological education you get," and (2) in order for the *who* of theological education to be congruent integrally with the Word's theological trajectory and relational path.

### **The *Who* of Theological Education**

Who teaches, along with who studies-learns, in the academy (or church) is integral to fulfilling the purpose and curriculum of theological education. The criteria used to select the *who* cannot be separated from its primary purpose but integrated with its curriculum. Certainly, the selection process becomes problematic when its purpose and curriculum are not clearly distinguished in what is primary to God. Equally important, *who* gets selected is incompatible (perhaps even incompetent) when the criteria highlights distinctions apart from the primary purpose and curriculum of theological education.

After Jesus unfolded God's thematic action to birth the new creation that Nicodemus could not comprehend, he challenged Nicodemus' interpretive framework: "Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand *God's whole*?" (Jn 3:10) When the early disciples had trouble integrating what they saw and heard from Jesus, he challenged their interpretive lens and hermeneutic: "Do you still not perceive and understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?... Do you not yet understand *God's whole*" (*syniemi*, Mk 8:17-18,21). These interactions illuminate Jesus' concern for who teaches and learns.

The whole of God's theological trajectory and relational path vulnerably embodied by the Word unfolds for our understanding of God's whole not in referential terms requiring scholarship (or academic excellence), but entirely in relational terms necessitating reciprocal involvement of the whole person from inner out signified by the function of the heart (not excluding the mind to fragment the person) in the primacy of relationship together. This critical distinction illuminates the definitive distinction that Jesus made paradigmatic between the framework of the wise and learned and the hermeneutic of a child-person (Lk 10:21). Therefore, what the above teacher and students demonstrated and had in common in their theological education were a lack of heart signifying the involvement of their whole person from inner out—who the dependence on the mind fragments—and, on the basis of this lack, the practice of maintaining relational distance in the educational context and process, which also becomes fragmented by imbalanced use of the mind. In other words, as teacher and students they merely engaged



in a conventional epistemic process that focused on the quantitative from outer in and the secondary in referential terms—the extent of which cannot be sufficient to understand the whole and holy God and God’s relational whole, and consequently is insufficient to be whole as teachers and become whole as students.

How closely does the above describe teachers and students in theological education today? Both for those who teach and who study, I think it’s fair to say, the prevailing state of theological education can be described as those minimally involved (if at all) with the whole of God’s (Jesus, the Spirit or the Father) ongoing vulnerable presence and intimate involvement. This relational condition ‘to be apart’, even unknowingly or inadvertently, exists whenever our hearts (the whole person from inner out) have become distant in relationship with God, and likely in relation to our own self. One unmistakable indicator of our level of heart involvement is a preoccupation with secondary matter—which includes the details, nuances and references composing theological literacy and excellence—that should not confuse the heart with dedication and passion. Such focus on the secondary means a corresponding loss of the primary, namely knowing and understanding God in the primacy of relationship together (cf. Lewis Smedes).

Underlying any secondary preoccupation is the primary occupation of self-determination (individually and collectively) seeking distinction in the comparative system of the intellectual community and/or the community-at-large. Such distinction only results from what we do and have based on the standards of those contexts. This measurement exposes the template of a fragmentary theological anthropology that reduces our ontology and function. This unknowing or ignored reduction fragments our person and distances our heart clearly in the following interrelated process: (a) priority given to the secondary at the expense of the primary—necessary for greater control—therefore resulting in the loss of both (b) the qualitative over the quantitative—needed for greater distinction—and (c) the primacy of relationship together—a less vulnerable engagement than inner out. The emerging ontology and function is a reduction conjointly of the person (re)created in the image and likeness of God in wholeness and of the new creation relationships together in wholeness, both of which compose the who needed for theological education to be whole and not fragmentary.

The use of knowledge in order to construct needed status or worth for self-determination is a prevailing dynamic (notably in the intellectual community)—with roots in the primordial garden—that has pervasive relational consequences. Paul helps us understand this process among God’s people in his first Corinthian letter, which made clear his epistemology and its functional and relational significance (1 Cor 8). Though the situation was about food sacrificed to idols, the underlying issue was about knowledge and its use. In this situation Paul addressed the two basic approaches to human knowledge to get to the source of all knowledge and understanding, as well as to identify each approach’s distinguishing character and the functional significance of their difference. He did this in order to clarify the implications for negative consequences or positive outcomes which the use of that knowledge can have.

Interestingly, Paul put conventional knowledge into juxtaposition with love (*agape*)—“Knowledge puffs up but love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1, cf. 14:4)—and identified for each two vital matters to fully understand for human living. The first vital matter is distinguishing the character of love from conventional knowledge. Knowledge tends to

revolve around the knower and thus becomes an end for oneself to be better defined—that is, “puffs *me* up”; love rightly engaged (not about *what* the lover does but about *how* to be involved with others) focuses beyond the lover and the lover’s action to the persons with whom the lover is involved for their sake, not the lover’s—that is, “builds *others* up.” The difference in the character distinguishing love from conventional knowledge creates both tension and conflict in human life and relationships; ‘me versus others’ is a human problem that affects us all.

The other vital matter Paul identified is the functional significance of their difference in character. With the attention (even unintentional) on ‘me’ (even unknowingly), whatever the human context is, the knower assumes the primacy of the individual over the whole in human life, and thus assumes the freedom for such pursuit, which is pervasive even in collective-oriented contexts. That the individual’s interest and concern are the priority is the knower’s position by functional implication, despite any contrary intentions or beliefs—that is, “puffs *me* up” because the individual is more important than the whole, or at least “puffs *me* up first,” and sometimes even “puffs *me* up only”. Love functions in clear distinction from conventional knowledge since the lover assumes the primacy of the whole over the individual, yet neither at the expense of the individual nor by reducing the importance of the whole person created in the image of God. Moreover, the lover affirms persons created in the likeness of the relational ontology of the triune God, therefore also affirming the primacy of the relationships necessary for the person and persons together to be whole—that is, love “builds *others* up” in these relationships which then will also build the lover’s person up to “build us up together to be whole,” God’s whole on God’s terms. The functional significance of the difference between knowledge and love not only creates tension and conflict in human life and relationships but also with God. The inescapable dynamic of ‘the individual versus the whole’ signifies the human relational condition which involves us all; and those in collectivist contexts should not have any illusions that this human condition does not exist within their midst.

Paul used this juxtaposition of knowledge and love to expose illusions about the epistemic process and to chasten the working assumptions and simulations of human ontology. Additionally, in his polemic Paul necessarily implied that the ontology of the human person was created whole conclusively for two interdependent primary functions: (1) the person was created whole from inner out to constitute *the qualitative function* of the person (signified by the primary importance of the heart), who cannot be reduced to outer-in definition and function and still be whole; (2) and interrelated, those whole persons also were created for *the relational function* not “to be apart” essentially from one another in qualitative function but only in the primacy of relationships together necessary to be whole. That is to say, God’s created whole on only God’s terms—not by human shaping or construction—is the integrated qualitative-relational function of both person and interdependent relationship together to constitute wholeness. And Paul was confronting the epistemological illusions and ontological simulations from reductionism which had influenced life and practice in the church—the necessity of which certainly continues to be relevant for the church today with application to the academy.

Part of the epistemological illusion involved failing to acknowledge the quantitative limits of one’s knowledge (“Anyone who claims to know something,” 1 Cor 8:2, cf. 13:8,9,12). Such knowledge must not be used to define the person and determine

human life and practice because it “does not yet have the necessary knowledge” (*dei*, by its nature) to go beyond ontological simulation; in other words, because such a person does not know sufficiently to claim the knowledge that by necessity requires to know whole-ly. Knowledge and human ontology cannot be reduced to mere quantitative information, facts and practice that impose templates for conformity to their limits. The necessary wholeness of knowledge and human ontology is by its nature always in the context of relationship with God, the creator of all life and the source of its knowledge, which Paul clarified theologically and functionally by affirming monotheism in a pluralistic context as the conclusive source of whole knowledge “through whom we exist” (8:4-6).

As the determinative source, God is the only one who, on the one hand, reveals conventional knowledge (*gnosis*, common to everyone) within the quantitative limits of creation and, on the other, reveals further and deeper whole knowledge in its qualitative significance of relationship. Without engaging this relationship to receive the whole knowledge from God (*synesis*, relationally specific of God, *epignosis*), the epistemic process is limited to conventional knowledge from creation (essentially knowledge without understanding). From this limited basis human persons can only make assumptions or speculations at best to shape and construct human life, and even ideas of God. Paul addressed the liberties taken with such limited knowledge as well as how all knowledge affects others. Yet there is often a thin line between God’s whole and the human efforts amounting to epistemological illusion and ontological simulation. For this purpose in his polemic, Paul put knowledge into juxtaposition with love to expose the dynamics of reductionism in clear distinction from the qualitative-relational function of God’s whole.

To understand Paul’s thought in his corpus, Paul needs to be kept in the deeper relational context with God, which then always locates the existing situation into further and deeper context. Knowledge from God did not come to Paul in informational form, nor did the truth come to him in propositional form. The embodied Truth was always for relationship to be involved in together (as in Jesus’ definitive disclosure to his disciples, Jn 14:6), thus always functioned qualitatively and relationally for experiential truth. As discussed previously, this was what emerged, and progressively continued, for Paul from the Damascus road. Therefore, for Paul, knowing something (even whole knowledge as truth) which God revealed (e.g. 1 Cor 8:7-8) must by its nature be understood as the relational outcome of God’s relational response of grace for relationship together. This knowledge (notably as truth) then was given in love (*agape* family love), because the Truth embodied is always for relationship and any truth given is only about relationship together, not mere information even in propositional form. Thus, this knowledge-as-truth, or wisdom-as-experiential-truth, comes with the reciprocal relational responsibility to use this knowledge in the qualitative-relational way it was given by God—and not, as in the context of the situation (8:9-13), for one’s individual use (“this liberty of yours”) or gain (“puffs me up”). If not used in the way given, its use will have relational consequences: “others see you who have this knowledge” and influenced by that a “brother is *fragmented* by your knowledge.” Such use of knowledge, even if unintentional, is sin, the sin of reductionism.

Paul made clearly unmistakable the relational reality that we know by the saying: “A little knowledge can be dangerous,” which Paul would add “and its use can be

deadly,” thereby reducing God’s relational whole and fragmenting the relationships together necessary to be whole. The above situation about food only highlights the issue about knowledge and its use, for which only the further and deeper relational context and process of God can provide understanding. Paul’s thought and polemic then applies to any use of knowledge in any situation, notably in the church and the academy, where knowledge is used to puff up individuals at the expense of or substitute for building up in love the whole of God’s family—where the use by the former implicitly becomes primary making the latter secondary.

We need to take to heart the two vital matters usually ignored about epistemology that Paul made conclusive in his thought and polemic:

1. The epistemic process for acquiring knowledge is never done in a vacuum, that is, in isolation from the presence or influence of others; the contextual source of one’s interpretive lens (what is paid attention to or ignored) exerts defining influence on the extent of the knowledge acquired.
2. Moreover, what happens to that acquired knowledge, and its implied use, remains in the context of others; any acquired knowledge always engages either a negative dynamic (e.g. comparative to others signifying more or less, cf. 1 Cor 1:12; 3:3-4; 2 Cor 10:12) or a positive dynamic (e.g. edifying of others to build wholeness, cf. 1 Cor 13:1-2,8), that exerts determining influence further involving others (including God) and how others will be affected (intentionally or unintentionally) simply by the knower assuming possession of that knowledge.

With compelling clarity for human contextualization, Paul made it a functional reality for any epistemology and epistemic approach: *Knowledge involves a social process with relational implications which affect all of us in one way or another.* And Paul held the church, along with any formal or informal context of theological education, accountable for these relational implications.

This raises an unavoidable issue about who teaches (including who studies) in the academy (and even in church). We have to eliminate self-determination (individual and collective) in theological education. This demands: (1) a tough view and stance against sin as reductionism, regardless of identity distinctions establishing our reputation both past and present, and (2) an uncompromising theological anthropology of God’s created whole ontology and function, regardless of the costs needed to maintain the integrity of our person and to address our human condition—both of which are indispensable to bring about the redemptive change currently needed to transform persons from inner out (*metamorphoo*, not the outer in of *metaschematizo*) and relationships together to wholeness in likeness of the Trinity. Nothing less must define the who and no substitutes must determine who teaches in theological education in order for the relational outcome of knowing and understanding the whole of God, so that we can be, live and make God’s relational whole on God’s relational terms.

In Paul’s ongoing integral fight for the gospel of wholeness and against its reductionism, he always confronted reduced ontology and function and challenged the underlying assumptions of theological anthropology. Earlier when he made definitive the theological dynamic of church ontology (Eph 4:7-13), he clearly illuminated the process necessary “to equip the saints” (i.e. make complete, *katartismos*, v.12) for the dynamic

embodying of the church's whole ontology and function. This directly addresses all teachers in theological education and challenges our qualifications "to make complete the saints." For teachers to be of theological significance, the ontology of our persons must be defined by the wholeness of the new creation in the qualitative image of God from inner out, and not defined by our scholarship and resources or the roles and titles we have which reduce our persons to outer in. And for teachers to be relationally significant in the educational context and process as persons in whole ontology, our function must be determined by *agape* relational involvement in new wine relationships together without the veil—the whole ontology and function of God's new creation family in relational likeness of the Trinity—and not determined by the titles and roles we perform (even with dedication and sacrifice) that make the comparative distinctions creating distance and stratification in relationships together with the veil still in place. There was no doubt for Paul that teachers in reduced ontology and function were incapable of making complete the saints. Nor can such teachers illuminate the truth of the gospel of wholeness (Eph 6:15), as Peter struggled with. This can only be the ontology and function of teachers made whole and ongoingly living whole, and therefore able in reciprocal relationship with the Spirit to make whole students to grow the new wine *koinonia* for church and academy in whole ontology and function.

Any lack of whole ontology and function in theological education always reflects the nature and identity of the Word used, whether by teachers individually or collectively by the academy and church. This brings us back to Peter's struggles with the Word and the relational terms the Word made conclusive for Peter's (and thus our) function to teach for the growth and maturing in wholeness of God's new creation church family.

"Do you love me?... Feed my sheep.... Follow me!" (Jn 21:15-22) "Feed" (*bosko*) points Peter to teaching his family but beyond merely with limited knowledge in referential terms; Jesus qualified *bosko* with the whole process of *poimaino* (tend, shepherd by guiding and leading). In this conclusive prospectus for all teachers, Jesus defines God's relational terms that fulfill this whole process for teaching in theological education.

Teaching is a function of two integral relational imperatives: (1) "Follow *me*," that is, discipleship of his whole person in ongoing reciprocal relationship, not merely adhering to his teachings and example; and (2) "Do you love me?" that is, following his person in the vulnerable reciprocal response of *agape* relational involvement by our whole person from inner out, thereby signifying heart-level involvement. The ongoing relational outcome is knowing and understanding the whole of God further and deeper.

Since Peter was focused on secondary matter (21:20-22), his compatible relational response did not readily emerge. Could this be the basis on which Paul became our main theological educator—not because of his intellectual credentials but because his response of following the Word in compatible relational involvement burst forth from inner out?

These integral relational imperatives illuminate unmistakably the nature and identity of the Word whom teachers must follow and be vulnerably involved with in reciprocal relationship for their ontology and function to be whole. This by necessity constitutes teachers, and thereby qualifies them, in order to teach a curriculum that also

makes students whole—a process in which teachers and students likewise integrally live whole in relationships together so that they can further make whole the human condition, even as exists in the academy and church.

This is the criteria that Jesus established for teaching theological education; and his relational terms provide us with the qualifications needed to be teachers who are whole, who teach whole and accordingly who make whole. Nothing less and no substitutes qualify to be the *who* of theological education. Therefore, this gets us back to the three major issues (discussed through the course of this study) indispensable and thus unavoidable for the practice of teachers:

1. The whole integrity of the teacher from inner out *who* is presented in theological education.
2. The qualitative integrity of this teacher's communication in relational terms and not narrowed down to referential terms to transmit fragmentary information.
3. The depth level of *agape* involvement engaged without the veil in this teacher's relationships both with God and others—integral with who is presented and what is communicated.

As a theological educator, Peter certainly had his ups and downs (as Paul exposed) but the key always involved his eventual willingness to make vulnerable his whole person from inner out in *agape* involved relationships together. We need to learn from Peter, yet mostly from his struggles and mistakes, so that we follow the Word in his uncommon theological trajectory and are *agape* involved in his vulnerable relational path. And on this basis alone, we can qualify to teach the whole Word, the Who who defines the Subject of theological education and determines the significance of its outcome distinguished entirely in relational terms.

## **The *How* of Theological Education**

Another major assumption made in theological education is an implied approach that learning takes place however the pedagogical process is engaged. There is a benign neglect of how teachers teach and students learn, operating on the assumption that teachers teach and students learn. The apparent thinking is that teaching and learning are achieved by the transmission of and exposure to a high level of content—and the higher the level the better the achievement. This is a pedagogical model composed in referential terms by the wise and learned that Jesus exposed as incompatible to know and understand God (Lk 10:21-22), and that Paul identified as being embedded in an endless process of learning without knowing the truth (2 Tim 3:7), that is, the embodied Truth who frees us from such referential constraints (Jn 8:31-32).

If the truth of theological education is the embodied Truth and the primary purpose of theological education is to know and understand God according to the Truth in relational language, then theological education can no longer adhere to the referentialization of the Word and depend on (even by default) a referential pedagogical model for its teaching and learning. The *how* of theological education is not optional on

the agenda of the academy or church but integral for the irreducible and nonnegotiable relational outcome of knowing and understanding God in whole theology and practice.

It was no mere event of transcendence when the Father communicated directly to Jesus' followers: "Listen to my Son" (Mt 17:5). The Father's relational imperative clearly illuminated the nature and identity of the Word entirely in relational language, and the whole of God's relational terms set in motion the final phase of the relational epistemic process that distinguishes theological education in God's whole ontology and function. To be so distinguished, theological education must compatibly engage this relational epistemic process and be congruent with the Word's improbable-uncommon (not probable-common) theological trajectory and vulnerable relational path for its pedagogical model of teaching and learning. For this reason, Jesus extends the Father's relational imperative with two interrelated relational imperatives: "pay attention to *how* you listen" (Lk 8:18), and "pay attention to *what* you hear" (Mk 4:24) because "the pedagogical model you use will determine the teaching and learning you get." Of course, our interpretive framework (*phronema*) and lens (*phroneo*) determine what we pay attention to and ignore, what we make primary and only secondary, thereby determining our pedagogical approach and composing our teaching and learning. Certainly then our *phronema* and *phroneo* are critical to the pedagogical process, which, as Paul distinguished conclusively, makes the Spirit the key for theological education to be distinguished with the necessary *phronema* and *phroneo* in order to engage the pedagogical process in the primacy of wholeness and the qualitative (signified in *zoe*, not merely *bios*, Rom 8:5-6).

Jesus embodied what to pay attention to for the how of theological education to be integrally (1) determined by the primary over the secondary, and thus (2) distinguished by the qualitative in whole relational terms and not the quantitative in fragmentary referential terms. When the core of theological education returns to the Word unfolded in whole (cf. Rev 2:4-5), it is face to Face with the relational Word who, by the nature of the Word, must be taught in his relational language with relational words by his relational process. Teaching in only his relational terms and not referential terms challenges the prevailing pedagogy in higher education. Therefore, theological education also needs to turn to Jesus for how to teach its innermost core.

The most consequential non-issue issue in theological education involves its Christology, which routinely separates Jesus' teachings from his whole person, leaving only disembodied teachings. Contrary to prevailing views of discipleship, both in the ancient Mediterranean world and the modern world, Jesus did not merely embody teachings to follow, examples to emulate, even principles to embody, and subsequently for followers to teach. Accordingly, current theological students must be in contrast to rabbinic students in the past, which also necessitates a qualitative relational difference in theological teachers.

### **The Three "AREs" of Jesus' Pedagogy:**

The whole embodied by Jesus was clearly distinguished both in *what* he taught and *how* he taught. Jesus' approach to teaching *the whole* was not about revealing (*apokalypto*) key knowledge and critical information in referential terms because the relational content (qualifying word-content) distinguishing God's whole involved only

the whole person in relationship. What this involved for Jesus is vital for us to understand both to more deeply experience his embodied whole and to further extend God's whole to others within the church and in the world, the antecedent of which emerges from the quality of theological education and not its quantity. Jesus' pedagogical approach to teaching and learning, integrated into the relational progression of discipleship in his theological trajectory and relational path, not only needs to inform and reform theological education in the academy and all levels of Christian education in the church but also to transform them.

When Jesus told the Father that he disclosed him to the disciples (Jn 17:6), he used *phaneroo*, which refers to those to whom the revelation is made, and not *apokalypto*, which refers only to the object revealed. This is not an artificial distinction to make but a critical one to distinguish God's revelation as Subject engaged in relationship in contrast to only the Object to be observed. *Phaneroo* signifies the necessary context and process of his disclosure of the whole of God and God's whole, whose relational content would not be sufficient to understand merely as *apokalypto* of the Object observed in referential terms. How did Jesus constitute this key context and process to fully disclose this wholeness?

John's Gospel provides the initial overview of Jesus' pedagogy, which is the functionally integral framework for the qualitative significance of his disclosures. In the narrative of a wedding at Cana attended by Jesus and his disciples (discussed earlier), Jesus used this situation to teach his disciples about himself (Jn 2:1-11). This initially evidenced the three dynamic dimensions basic to his approach to pedagogy.

As a guest, Jesus participated in the sociocultural context of the wedding (an event lasting days). In response to his mother's request, Jesus appeared reluctant yet involved himself even further than as guest. In what seems like an uneventful account of Jesus' first miracle unrelated to his function and purpose, John's Gospel also provides us with the bigger picture illuminated in his introduction (Jn 1:14). John's is the only Gospel to record this interaction, and the evangelist uses it to establish a pattern for Jesus' ministry. The miracle was ostensibly about the wine but its significance was to teach his disciples. Both what and how he taught is vital for the wholeness of theological education.

When Jesus responded to his mother and got further involved, he made the whole of his person *accessible* to his disciples. Jesus was not just approachable but vulnerably accessible. This involved more than the quantitative notions of accessible language or words in teaching, or of making accessible one's resources. This deeply involved making directly accessible the whole of his person and the qualitative significance of who, what and how he was. In this social context Jesus did not merely reveal (*apokalypto*) his resources but most important vulnerably disclosed (*phaneroo*) his functional glory to his disciples, not a mere theological glory lacking functional significance (2:11, cf. 2 Cor 4:6). The first aspect of his glory that Jesus made accessible to them was God's being, the innermost of God signified by the primacy of the heart. It was Jesus' heart, composing his whole person, whom he made accessible to them. The whole person, composed by the function of the heart, distinguishes clearly the depth level of significance necessary to be *accessible* in Jesus' pedagogy. Anything less and any substitutes are inadequate for this accessible-level to teach the whole further and deeper than referential terms. A turn from the heart is consequential for the qualitative engagement needed to be accessible. It is



incongruent to be helping others understand wholeness while one is not functioning to be whole in the process. Therefore, *Accessible (A)* is the first dynamic dimension in Jesus' pedagogy necessary by its nature to be whole in order to teach the whole.

*Phaneroo* illuminates the irreplaceable context and process for making his whole person accessible. The miracle, self-disclosure, being accessible, all are not ends in themselves but in Jesus' purpose and function (even in this apparent secondary situation) are always and only for relationship. More specifically then, *phaneroo* distinguishes the integral *relational* context and process involved in his teaching. When Jesus disclosed his glory, he did not end with making accessible God's being, the heart of God. The second aspect of his glory involved God's nature, God's intimate relational nature, witnessed initially between the trinitarian persons during his baptism and later at the transfiguration. In this teaching moment, Jesus disclosed his whole person to his disciples for relationship together, thereby disclosing the intimate relational nature of God—that is, his functional glory, in his heart and relational nature, communicating in the innermost to make relational connection with their human ontology as whole persons created in the image of the heart of God for relationships together in likeness of the relational nature of the Trinity (as in Jn 1:14). This also provides further understanding of the relational context and process of God's thematic relational response to the human condition and what is involved in that connection, which integrally composes the innermost core of theological education.

In this seemingly insignificant social context, Jesus qualitatively engaged and relationally involved his whole person with his disciples in the most significant human function: the primacy of whole relationship together. As he made his whole person accessible in this relational context and process, his disciples responded back to his glory by relationally “putting their trust in him” (2:11). Their response was not merely to a miracle, or placing their belief in his teaching, example or resources—in other words, a mere response to the Object observed. The context of his teaching was *relational* in the process of making accessible his person to their person, thus deeply connecting with the heart of their person and evoking a compatible relational response to be whole in relationship together Subject to subject, Face to face, heart to heart. This relational process also illuminates the intrusive relational path of Jesus' ‘relationship together involving the whole person’, which anticipates his improbable theological trajectory to remove the veil for intimate relationship with God. If his teaching content were only cognitive, this qualitative relational connection would not have been made. Anything less and any substitute from Jesus would not have composed the relational context and process necessary to qualitatively engage and relationally involve his whole person for relationship together to be whole, consequently not fulfilling God's thematic action in relational response to the human relational condition. Therefore, *Relational (R)* is the second dynamic dimension in Jesus' pedagogy necessary by its nature to live whole in relationships in order to teach the whole, only God's relational whole.

When Jesus turned water into wine in this secondary social situation, he did not diminish the significance of his miracle or his glory. His disclosure was made not merely to impart knowledge and information about him for the disciples to assimilate. *Who* he presented and *what* he communicated are major issues. His disclosure was made in this experiential situation (albeit secondary) for his disciples to experience him living whole in this and any life context, not in social isolation or a conceptual vacuum that a theology

divided from function signifies. For Jesus, for example, merely giving a lecture/sermon would not constitute teaching—nor would listening to such constitute learning. That is to say, his teaching was *experiential* for their whole person (signified by heart function) to experience in relationship. For this experience to be a reality in relationship, the whole person must be vulnerably involved. This involved the third major issue of the depth level he engaged in relationships. When Jesus made his heart accessible to be relational with his disciples, he also disclosed the third aspect of his glory involving God's presence, God's vulnerable presence. In the strategic shift of God's thematic relational action, the whole of Jesus embodied God's vulnerable presence for intimate involvement in relationship together, therefore disclosing God's glory for his followers to experience and relationally respond back to "put their trust in him." The embodied Truth is experiential truth vulnerably present and involved for the experiential reality of this relationship together. If this is not the qualitative relational significance of the gospel at the heart of theological education, its core is not in the innermost.

Human experience is variable and relative. For experience to be whole, however, it needs to involve whole persons accessible to each other in relationship by vulnerable involvement together. For this relational dynamic to be a functional reality, it must be the relational outcome of Jesus' theological trajectory that removed the veil in relationship together. This was Jesus' purpose in his teaching and his pedagogical approach, which also was intrusive with 'relationship together involving the whole person'. This was *who*, *what*, and *how* Jesus was ongoingly in his glory: *who*, as his whole person signified by the qualitative function of his heart; *what*, only by his intimate relational nature; and thus *how*, with vulnerable involvement only for relationship together to be God's whole. The reality of relationally knowing (not referential knowledge about) the whole of God and relationally participating in God's whole only emerges as experiential truth. Jesus' teaching remains incomplete, and our learning is also not complete, unless it is *experiential*. Therefore, to complete the three-dimensional approach, *Experiential (E)* is the third dynamic dimension in Jesus' pedagogy necessary by its nature to integrate the other two dimensions of *Accessible* and *Relational* for the qualitative depth of the whole in order to teach the experiential truth of the whole for its experiential reality in new relationship together in wholeness.

The three *AREs* of Jesus' pedagogy form a definitive three-dimensional paradigm to be whole and to live whole in order to teach the experiential truth (not merely a propositional truth) of the whole. That is, this three-dimensional paradigm is to teach the whole as God's relational whole on God's qualitative relational terms, just as Jesus vulnerably embodied, relationally disclosed and intimately involved his whole person with other persons. From this overview, Jesus ongoingly demonstrated his three-dimensional pedagogical approach. His most notable embodying unfolded in the last table fellowship he had with his disciples (Jn 13:1-17).

As the Master Teacher (13:13-14), Jesus took his pedagogical approach to a whole new level. His footwashing is commonly narrowed down to serving, thus fragmenting Jesus' whole person to a part (in this case a secondary act) that is perceived with the lens of a theological anthropology in reduced ontology and function. This is the *phronema* and *phroneo* Peter had in this key interaction, which contrasted and conflicted with the pedagogical approach Jesus relationally embodied—that is, who vulnerably intruded on traditional and conventional pedagogy. Beyond the norm and what would be

considered reasonable, Jesus made his whole person vulnerably accessible to them without the veil of his title and role in order to reach the depths of *agape* involvement for the relational connection necessary for them to experience the intimate reality of relationship together in wholeness. Since Peter defined his person from outer in focused on secondary matter, he defined Jesus' person by the title and function of Master Teacher. Consequently, reduced ontology and function prevented Peter from learning experientially the primacy of whole relationship together embodied by his Master Teacher's vulnerable relational path in whole ontology and function. And Peter's fragmentation should not be ignored in theological education since the limits in his theology and practice were consequential for the fragmentary formation of the early church.

Jesus' pedagogy contrasted with the prevailing teaching practices in the ancient Mediterranean world; and it conflicts with any reductionist teaching approaches, notably in the modern Western world with its primary focus on referential knowledge and rationalized understanding through the narrowed-down quantitative lens from reductionism (predating the Enlightenment)—further exposing a theological anthropology of reduced ontology and function. The learning process of Jesus' pedagogy necessarily involves whole knowledge and understanding (*synesis*), which engages the primacy of the qualitative and the relational for the outcome of whole ontology and function. Therefore, Jesus' teaching of God's whole involves redemptive change and transformation to the *new*—not only for the whole person to experience as an individual but most importantly to experience in relationship together to be the whole of God's family. God's relational whole on only God's qualitative relational terms is this new creation family 'already'—the new wine communion with no veil—relationally progressing to its ultimate relational communion together 'not yet', which Jesus made imperative to be taught after he discussed a series of parables about the kingdom of God and the last things (Mt 13:52). Anything less and any substitutes of this new in whole constrain the flow of the new wine and reduce the planting, cultivating, growth and taste of the new wine in its full qualitative relational significance.

John's Gospel gives us this big picture from the beginning, in which Jesus ongoingly functioned in his theological trajectory yet remaining vulnerably involved in his relational path for intimate relationship together. The whole of Jesus' teaching only had significance in this definitive relational progression for this relational outcome 'already' and relational conclusion 'not yet'. And this is how any teaching of the whole of God's family needs to be theologically and functionally contextualized—and all the "trees" of life put into the "forest" of God's thematic relational action for the eschatological big picture and the ultimate relational communion together, just as Paul composed in his theological forest and systemic framework. For Jesus, and Jesus *into* Paul, the only embodying of theology that has qualitative relational significance is nothing less and no substitutes for the whole. To embody God's whole, therefore, any theological enterprise by necessity functions in the *pleroma* of God's improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path; and this trajectory and path involve irreplaceably the primacy of the qualitative and relational needed to be God's new family together in wholeness with no veil—the fulfillment of God's definitive blessing that embodies *siym* for *shalom*.

Both Jesus and Paul intrude on theological education today to challenge integrally *what* composes its core and *how* it teaches this core. In teaching God's relational whole, its engagement must involve the three *AREs* of Jesus' pedagogy to be compatible with the trinitarian relational context of family and to be congruent with the trinitarian relational process of family love that compose the new creation family. At the heart of this relational context and process is 'relationship together involving the whole of persons', and this clearly involves both teachers and students being accountable for our whole ontology and function with the veil removed. The new wine is composed by and is contained in only this whole ontology and function.

## The Competing Dynamic of Theological Education

The ancient poets illuminated the primary for theological education. Psalm 67:1-2 is the summary text of the primary: The whole of God's thematic relational response to the human condition in the innermost of the global picture for the primacy of new relationship together in wholeness—the relational outcome of the Face's definitive blessing from the beginning. Psalm 46:10 is the functional key to theological education: "Be still, and know that I am God" in the context of Psalm 46 is to stop and cease preoccupation with the secondary, relax the hands of human effort in self-determination and don't allow the influence of our human contexts to define and determine who we are in God's image and likeness and whose we are as God's whole family, thus being freed from referential constraints so that we know and understand God in relational terms. This opens up the pedagogical process beyond innovations in a conventional epistemic process to the vulnerable reciprocal response in the relational epistemic process with the Spirit. Simply stated in relational language, this reciprocal response is the relational function of "Pay close attention, O my people, to my teaching *in relational language*; open wide your ears *from inner out* to the *relational* words of my mouth, *not merely a text*" (Ps 78:1).

This relational dynamic, however, has extensive competition in theological education (as witnessed in Judaism's history) that fragments God's integral thematic response, that diverts us to the secondary embedded in a self-determining process, and that limits the pedagogical process to variations of the 'old' or the status quo. In this competing dynamic, anything *more* that goes beyond our cognitive understanding and/or what we can control is suspect or threatening, and consequently met with resistance in one way or another. Peter demonstrated his resistance, reflecting a competing dynamic in his theological education that limited his pedagogical process to the templates of the old.

Based on the experiential truth and reality of the new wine constituted 'already' by Jesus, this further raises the question for theological education today: Has it become an old wineskin that constrains the flow of new wine and reduces the new wine of its qualitative and relational significance in the present?

It is unlikely that Jesus and Paul would survive in the prevailing framework of education today in churches and the academy. Though both of them taught in the temple-synagogue contexts, they were in ongoing conflict in those contexts. Their conflict was not with the faith they had in common, but with the prevailing *phronema* and *phroneo* and with a reduced ontology and function. In the primacy of "zoe and wholeness" (Rom

8:5-6), therefore, Jesus and Paul intruded on those engaged in self-determination and shaping of relationships, and they would also intrude on and likely threaten theological education today. For Jesus and Paul, even well-meaning intentions in those contexts are insufficient to compose theological education, and inadequate to clearly distinguish its function and ongoingly sustain its practice—as evidenced in the churches Jesus critiqued in post-ascension (Rev 2-3).

The divide between theology and function and the increasing fragmentation of theological education into multiple theological disciplines are normative for the academy today, lacking a sense of the whole even when stated intentions seek coherence. Theology and function were inseparable for Paul, with function the priority from which his theology emerged. Function without theology does not determine whole function. Theology without function cannot constitute whole ontology. For Paul, wholeness in theology, ontology and function are determined only by the primacy of the relational Word both indwelling and inhabiting us from inner out with his qualitative presence and relational involvement (Col 2:9-10; 3:16). Anything less than the innermost and any substitute for it in theological education would no longer have the wholeness of Christ as its primary determinant (Col 3:15); nor would it have the whole of God holding it, the academy, church and the universe together in the innermost (Col 1:17; Eph 1:23; cf. Lk 9:32). Any loss of *synistemi* and lack of wholeness raise the basic question of what is at the core of theological education, which the academy can no longer assume to be valid.

The core of what holds together the human person, the church and theological education depends on one's interpretive framework and lens. That is, 'core' may either be merely the center (what is central to) of a person's, church's, theological education's perspective/position, or be the innermost of what holds all else together in the whole. The latter necessitates the primacy of the qualitative and the relational. Therefore, to go from what is merely at the center of theological education to its innermost exposes the need for decontextualization and deconstruction of two primary issues facing theological education in the church and academy today:

1. The explicit primary issue is the referentialization of the Word, which is the influence of human contextualization—from distant past, recent past, present or perhaps from left-hemisphere brain dominance—resulting in narrowing down the epistemic field of the Word for the purpose of (further) explanation and certainty on the basis of more probable referential terms; this requires decontextualization in order to return to the whole Word unfolded in the primacy of the qualitative and relational, while deconstructing any epistemological illusions of the Word shaped by listener-reader response.
2. The implicit primary issue is one's theological anthropology with a reduced ontology and function that converges with human contextualization to promote both a turn from the heart in efforts of self-determination and a turn to human shaping of relationships—all of which reflect, reinforce or sustain the human relational condition—thereby reducing the primacy of the qualitative and relational; this requires the 'cease and desist' (Ps 46:10) by deconstructing both the efforts of self-determination (notably of the Word) and the shaping of relationships (notably with the Word), while conjointly decontextualizing any

When theological education makes this shift of its core from merely what is its center to the innermost of what holds theological education together to be whole, it can address the innermost composition of its core. This exposes a further relational issue facing theological education, particularly in the academy and accordingly in churches. Most problematic in the academy has been a growing (even established) lack of “paying attention to how you listen *to the Word*” (Lk 8:18) and an increasing (even self-sustaining) inability to “pay attention to what you hear *from the Word*” (Mk 4:24)—each disregarding the Father’s relational imperative. In any discussion of the Word it is important to distinguish between ‘what is heard’ and ‘what is seen’. Modern perspective (or worldview) gives priority to sight over sound. Yet sound is more basic than sight. In anthropological study, most traditional societies regarded sound as more important than sight, and those societies tended to be more personal and relational. The Father’s imperative to “Listen...” gives priority to sound over sight because sound is more qualitative than sight and can account for that which is not seen and for mystery. The significance of the Word is both qualitative and relational, therefore the written Word needs to point to the sound of the communicated words from God’s mouth. But if the sight of the Word has primacy over the words from God’s mouth, then the Word becomes disembodied and thereby disconnected from the qualitative relational significance of the whole of God’s self-disclosure for the sole purpose of whole relationship together and knowing God intimately, not merely having referential information about God.

This relational problem in the academy has been consequential in the decrease of qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness—in both theology and function for persons, while in the academy, the church or in the world—that has rendered interpreting the Word to a hermeneutical vicious cycle of human contextualization and shaping, consequently reducing the composition of theological education in its core and at its edges to self-referencing. Its edges include attributing the human shaping of ministry and mission to what God is doing in the world. The self-determining efforts and shaping engaged in self-referencing is further evident in the identity of the academy’s various institutions, whose primary identity highlights its self-referencing—centered on the primacy of what *it* does and has (cf. 1 Cor 4:7)—and not the qualitative relational significance of the Word unfolded *from* and *by* the whole of God (1 Cor 2:9-10; 4:6).

Jesus keeps knocking at the door of the academy to intrude on its self-determination and its shaping of relationships with ‘relationship together involving the whole of persons’ to get to the innermost to hold the academy in whole relationship together. For this innermost core to emerge in theological education, there is needed not a mere central truth centered on doctrine but rather solely the primacy of the qualitative embodying the primacy of new relationship together in wholeness—the relational outcome ‘already’ of the whole of God’s definitive blessing. From the beginning of his theological trajectory to the current relational progression of his relational path, we need to listen to the *pleroma* of God whose wholeness composes the core of theological education with nothing less and no substitutes. Theological education is unable to address the functional and tactical issues (challenges, needs, opportunities), much less strategic ones, facing it within the academy, the church and in the world, until it has whole

understanding of the strategic, tactical and functional shifts of the whole of God's theological trajectory and relational path. Without this understanding, it is inevitable to become preoccupied with the secondary over the primacy embodied by the Word in whole.

A further challenge needs to be raised directly at the academy's common engagement in theological education. The academy's prevailing identity is a clear indicator that theological education today is not distinguished as holy, sacred (*qados*, *hagios*), that is, clearly distinguished from the common and ordinary of the secular academy and its education. Rather the theological academy has been co-opted by the secular academy, whereby it has looked to and shaped its identity in the common and ordinary of secular education and its scholarship templates. The relational consequence is that the theological academy with its education has lost or struggled with its distinguished identity, including its distinguished Subject if not even its primary subject matter. God is distinguished as holy (Ps 99) and any theological context distinguished with God is also holy (Col 1:19-22; Eph 2:21-22). Such a theological context (academy or church) and its education must by its nature (*dei*) distinguish this God, who can only be known and understood in the relational context of the Uncommon (in the uncommon theological trajectory) and beyond the relational terms of the ordinary into the whole and holy God's vulnerable relational path. To be distinguished as holy-sacred is neither an adjective nor a static attribute or condition. Sacred-holy composes the distinguished relational context and process of the whole of God in which God is vulnerably present and intimately involved for new relationship together only on the whole and holy God's terms, nothing less and no substitutes. Therefore, the whole of God cannot be known and understood (the unique boast of Jer 9:23-24) or exalted (the compatible response of Ps 99:5,9), much less be the distinguished Subject of theological education, in the common and ordinary of our limited terms shaped by the prevailing influence in our human contexts—that is, by that which is distinctly of reductionism, the competing dynamic to God's whole and its theological education.

Wholeness is not optional or negotiable for both the academy and the church. Paul made conclusive that 'the wholeness of Christ' is our only gospel and the sole determinant (i.e. "rule" of faith, Col 3:15) for our ontology and function as persons and theological community. To state it simply, yet not to be confused with dogmatism, anything less and any substitutes will be insufficient to be whole and to live whole in order to teach the whole and holy God's whole. Any such alternatives, even with the best of intentions, impede the relational dynamic of God's thematic response to make whole the human condition, the relational consequence of which then includes preventing our ontology and function from being whole in likeness of the Trinity—whereby our theology and practice starts to reflect, reinforce or even sustain the human condition.

Therefore, to challenge and address the assumptions and existing practices of theological education in the academy and the church requires inevitably to confront the breadth of the human condition in the age of reductionism with the whole lens of sin as reductionism. Additionally and integrally, requires us to respond vulnerably and intrusively in *agape* involvement with the depth of the gospel of wholeness that composes our theological anthropology in whole ontology and function. This is the what, who and how that Jesus in post-ascension holds his church and his so-called academy

accountable for: God's relational whole as the new creation family on the whole and holy God's qualitative relational terms, the *who* came and the *what* has come to constitute whole-ly what holds us (individually and collectively) integrally together in our innermost 'already' in spite of any contrary dynamic from the age of reductionism.

***God really did say that!*** Moreover, God clearly speaks for himself, without needing our theoretical shaping and speculative construction along with hermeneutical assistance 'in front of' or 'behind' the text. Contrary to *egology*, the truth of *theology* emerges from the relational epistemic process with epistemic humility listening to God. Hence the Word, "Don't you know me yet?"

Indeed, we, our theology and our practice are accountable for every word from God's mouth communicated in relational language without reduction and negotiation—nothing less and no substitutes, and thus including being accountable for contending with whatever pervades and prevails in the age of reductionism. Therefore, with clarity of speech, "pay ***whole*** attention to the Word who speaks because the measure you use will be the measure you get!"

### **Ongoing Reciprocal afterWord**

In relational response to the Word embodied and distinguished whole-ly, my wife and I lift up our persons from inner out to the whole of God who continues to be vulnerably present and intimately involved in reciprocal relationship together without the veil. Join us to share together in this ongoing relational response that we composed for the primacy of new relationship together in wholeness. (See next page.)



## Hallelujah Whole

Mt 15:8-9, Jn 4:23-24, Col 1:19-20

*Freely*

- 1 Hallelujah! nothing less  
Hallelujah! no substitutes  
The whole of God be present  
The whole of God **be praised!**  
Nothing less no substitutes

Chorus:

Hallelujah, hallelu, hallelu  
Hallelujah, hallelu, hallelu  
Praise to You, to You, to You  
Praise You holy! Praise You whole!  
All of You—all of You!

- 2 Hallelujah! nothing less  
Hallelujah! no substitutes  
The whole of God be involved  
The whole of God **responds!**  
Nothing less no substitutes  
(chorus)
- 3 Hallelujah! nothing less  
Hallelujah! no substitutes  
The whole of God be embraced  
The whole of God **exalted!**  
Nothing less no substitutes  
(chorus)
- 4 Hallelujah! nothing less  
Hallelujah! no substitutes  
The whole of God highlighted  
The whole of God **give thanks!**  
Nothing less no substitutes  
(chorus)

Ending: All of You!

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# Hallelujah Whole

Mt 15:8-9, Jn 4:23-24, Col 1:19-20

T. Dave Matsuo & Kary A. Kambara

Freely  $\text{♩} = 100$

A D A D/F#

1

**Verse:**

1. Ha - le - lu - jah!	no - thing less	Hal - le - lu - jah!	no sub - sti -
2. Hal - le - lu - jah!	no - thing less	Hal - le - lu - jah!	no sub - sti -
3. Hal - le - lu - jah!	no - thing less	Hal - le - lu - jah!	no sub - sti -
4. Hal - le - lu - jah!	no - thing less	Hal - le - lu - jah!	no sub - sti -

D D/F# G A A

5

tutes	The whole of God be pres - ent,	the whole of God be praised!	<i>(hold)</i>
tutes	The whole of God be involved -	the whole of God re - sponds!	_____
tutes	The whole of God be embraced -	the whole of God ex - alted!	_____
tutes	The whole of God high - light - ed	the whole of God give thanks!	_____

G A D D/A G A/E

8  $\text{♩} = 108$

no - thing less, no sub - sti - tutes	_____	<b>Chorus:</b>
no - thing less, no sub - sti - tutes	_____	Hal - le - lu - jah, hal - le - lu, hal - le - lu Hal - le -
no - thing less, no sub - sti - tutes	_____	
no - thing less, no sub - sti - tutes	_____	

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Hallelujah Whole

D/A G A/C# A2 A G  $\bullet = 92$

12

lu - jah, hal - le - lu, hal - le - lu! Praise to You, to You, to You! Praise You ho - ly

D/F# A G  $\bullet = 88$  D/F# G A7 G  $\bullet = 74$  A7

17

4th time skip to Ending

(Hal - le) **Ending: slowing**

praise You whole! All of You, all of You! \_\_\_\_\_ all of You

A D D/A D

22

\_\_\_\_\_ all of You \_\_\_\_\_



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