

## **Essay Challenging Our Identity & Function:**

*Warning!!! This essay may be hazardous to your current identity and function,  
As well as threatening to your church. Read it at your own risk.*

## **Where Is God in the Human Drama Today?**

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## **Essay Challenging Our Identity & Function:**

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### **Where Is God in the Human Drama Today?**

This past month the U.S. has observed the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to its Constitution, which finally gave women the right to vote. This August was also the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end to World War II. Yet, our celebration is chastened by the reality of how little has changed in our human condition since these events. Gender equality has yet to become a significant reality today, with inequity existing in gender as much as in race. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) making gender discrimination unlawful still has not been passed after nearly a fifty-year effort to make it constitutional law. Moreover, it was highly debatable whether the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945 was the key to ending the war; top U.S. military generals were against taking such horrific action, stating it was unnecessary. That key, however, opened the door to nuclear acceleration for our current condition of uncertainty about human annihilation—the anxiety over which is not virtual but a growing reality of international instability.

The above conditions only compound our current human condition centered on the coronavirus pandemic, and revolving around racial inequality and inequity in our justice system. Most certainly, our human condition encompasses even broader conditions, which has left no one in the human race unaffected and thus consequential globally. Ironically, in the midst of far-reaching consequences, those most affected by current conditions are Christians. Yet, this effect has little to do with churches being unable to have physical worship gatherings. Rather, in all that's happening in current human conditions, Christians and churches are responsible to the world for answering: Where is God in this human drama today? More so, all Christians and churches are accountable for distinguishing clearly to others also affected, who in their need must know unmistakably: “Where is *your* God today?” (cf. Ps 42:3,10)

This essay focuses on our responsibility and accountability to answer these legitimate questions; in order to do so meaningfully, we must begin by focusing on how Christians and churches are affected by our current human condition to define our answer and determine our responsibility.

## Understanding Our Context Today

All persons are faced with, influenced and/or shaped by the surrounding context in which they live. With globalization, our context has expanded beyond immediate surroundings, and the internet has amplified our context exponentially. The influence of globalization and the internet are unavoidable; and how much they shape us is an open question, with their effects only initially understood at this time. Yet, even more urgent is the need for us to directly face up to our context and the effects and consequences it has on our human condition.

It is imperative for all Christians and churches to face up to the specific surrounding contexts in which we live. This is inescapable in order to (1) understand the effects and consequences contexts have on our human condition, and (2) understand what responsibility and accountability we have in that context to change the existing condition of human life. Having this understanding is irreplaceable for explaining where God is in the human drama today, and for distinguishing where our God is specifically.

In Jesus' pivotal prayer formative for his family of followers (Jn 17), the embodied Word made it imperative for us to understand our context. There are three dimensions of his followers' context, and the integral measure of this 3-D context is essential to understand in order to face up to their surrounding context directly on the basis of only his family. Each dimension is constructed exactly after the three dimensions of the embodied Word's context, so that there is no ambiguity, confusion or mistake about what specific context defines the identity of his followers and thereby determines their function. His prayer made these three dimensions neither optional nor negotiable but imperative.

No doubt, most Christians have heard the words in Jesus' prayer to his Father:

"I will remain **in** the world's context no longer, but they are still **in** the world's context.... I have given them your Word and the world has *rejected, reduced or marginalized* them, because they are **not of** the world's context any more than I am **of** the world's context.... As you sent me **into** the world's context, I have sent them **into** the world's context" (Jn 17:11,14,18, NIV).

The three dimensions (**in, not of, into**) were integrally embodied by the Word, whereby his followers' context is constructed in exact likeness. Therefore, these three dimensions of Christian and church contexts must be integrated in likeness of the embodied Word, in order for us to understand the nature of his followers' context, so that no ambiguity, confusion or mistake renders our identity and functions according to the wrong context. Again, according to the Word, this is neither optional nor negotiable for Christians and churches.

Jesus' early disciples lived in the ambiguity, confusion or mistake of the primary context that defined the identity and determined the function of persons who truly "Follow me," and who are vulnerably involved relationally with "where I (my person) am" (Jn 12:26). The three dimensions of Jesus' context eluded them, even as they interacted with the embodied Word; consequently, their context **in** and **of** the world became primary to define their identity (e.g. Lk 9:46; 22:24) and determine their function (e.g. Mt 26:8-9; Jn 13:8; 14:9).

Ironically, but not surprisingly, these early disciples begged the question from even the casual observer: "Where is your God today?" They had to face up to the context **in** which they lived and **of** which they were part; that is, face the subtle dynamics that influenced and shaped their discipleship, even with their good intentions assuming to follow Jesus. Consequentially, until they truly turned around **in** and **of** their context in order to be compatible with and congruent in the three dimensions of Jesus' integral context, they could not distinguish the vulnerable presence and relational involvement of their God. The Word only embodied the whole-ly (whole & uncommon) God **into** the world's context to enact the uncommon gospel of peace (wholeness) **in** the world, in order to constitute his family in wholeness of identity and function **not of** the world, so that they would distinguish **into** the world where their God is in the human drama today.

The condition of the early disciples also begs the following questions for all Christians and churches today:

- Where are we **in** the world context today?
- Who and what **of** the world have we become—that is, who defines our identity and what determines our function?
- How relationally distant or disconnected have we become from the whole-ly God **into** the world, even though our theology may profess a God **not of** this world?

Our surrounding contexts have affected us, if not infected us with the human condition, whereby far-reaching influence and shaping commonly render our identity and function **of** while **in** the world context. The effects have been more far reaching on Christians and churches, because both our presence in the current human condition is called to be more encompassing than others in the human population, and thus our involvement is designed to be deeper than anyone else's. It is consequential whenever our surrounding contexts subject our presence and involvement to limits and constraints that contradict our identity and counter our function as followers of the embodied Word.

Therefore, how well do you understand the effects and consequences that your contexts have had on your current human condition? If you understand at least some of this, are you facing up to your contexts to turn around from being **of** the world as you live daily **in** it? And as you turn around, how much do you understand the responsibility and

accountability you have **into** those contexts to change the existing condition of human life?

One of the major symptoms of the influence and shaping from our surrounding contexts is the *dilution* of our identity and function **in** the world. When dilution takes effect, the integrity and substance of our identity and function are diluted from being **not of** the world, and thus they become increasingly indistinguishable from **of** the world. Obviously, this was problematic for Jesus, whose 3-D context rejected those so diluted (Mt 7:21-23; Lk 13:24-27; Mt 5:20). Yet, the diversity of churches and Christian practice today demonstrate how diluted our identity and function have become, even in spite of having orthodox theology assumed to be based on the Word. What has become normative (a new normal) for our identity and function reflect the norms of our surrounding contexts more than our professed theology. The reality of our Christian practice is not exposed until we understand our surrounding context and face up to its effects on us.

The history of Israel and the church as God's people has reflected periods of faith that have mirrored the shape of the surrounding context. The commonality of being *contextualized of* the world exerts shaping influence on how faith is practiced **in** the world (cf. Mk 7:6-9). Diluted faith today is illuminated for us living in a modern world by this cartoon: Moses returns from the mountain with the commandment tablets held above his head, whereby he declares "Behold! Now thinner and lighter" (*Cartoon Parade*, 12/8/2013). The often subtle process of becoming context-ualized by the world has commonly become the *rule* of faith more than the exception—a condition that the embodied Word exposes.

Contrary to the three dimensions of the embodied Word of God's context, this contrary contextualized condition then raises the question whether there is any difference between faith and culture in our existing condition today.

## **The Dividing Line between Faith and Culture**

We tend to take our culture for granted, notably until we encounter a different culture from ours. In the limits of our discussion, let me define culture simply as the way we are in everyday life. Our culture composes our primary identity and function according to certain values and beliefs that structure how we live, and which has explicit or implicit limits and constraints on how we define our identity and determine our function.

Jesus' 3-D context vitally addresses culture in the practice he distinguished. Critical for us to understand is the interaction between the place of cultural assimilation and the role of counter-cultural action. This is crucial for the practice of our faith.

When a culture from our surrounding context prevails in defining our identity and determining our function, that culture pervades the practice of our faith. This process is not readily apparent, and rarely so when we don't understand our surrounding context.

When that culture's values and beliefs partially appear to overlap with some of the values and beliefs of our faith, a hybrid culture is composed that makes the huge assumption of being a valid basis (or at least justified) for defining Christian identity and determining Christian function. When we don't face up to (i.e. discern and critique) our surrounding context, its culture then prevails in our faith. For example, in the U.S.'s fragmented condition intensified by its divisive partisan politics, how much of these respective cultures has influenced your identity and function? Its effects are inseparable from our practice of faith.

At this point in the human condition today, you may raise the question: If there is really overlap of values and beliefs between our faith and culture, what is the problem? Isn't this better than culture without faith? We might want to make such a comparison, but we also have to understand what we're comparing.

While living **in** the world, the difference between **of** the world and **not of** the world is immeasurable. Jesus embodied, lived and distinguished these contexts as either-or; and he clearly delineated a dividing line between the common contexts **of** the world and his whole-ly context **not of** the world. The integrity of this dividing line cannot be compromised, nor does he allow room to compromise faith with a hybrid culture. In other words, the dividing line between contexts is nonnegotiable for those he sends **into** the world, because any compromise would redefine *his* identity and reduce *his* function by which the Father "sent me **into** the world" (Jn 17:18-19).

Jesus' identity and function are essential for answering "Where is God in the human drama today?" Our practice of faith is determinative for the answer to "Where is *your* God?" The answer to *our* God may not be the same God embodied in Jesus' identity and function. Two interrelated issues are involved in sorting out an unbiased view of the existing condition of our theology and practice: (1) the integrity of Jesus' 3-D context to determine our context, and (2) the integrity of the dividing line between contexts to determine our faith.

The integrity of Jesus' context embodied not only where God is but the who, what and how God is in the human drama. Jesus' identity and function cannot be compromised for the whole-ly God to be revealed **in** the world. Any such compromise directly involves and interacts with the dividing line between contexts being compromised. This is consequential for the identity and function of God being reduced by the shape of our faith, which then constructs God in our image rather than the converse. Once again, this was demonstrated by God's people, whose faith was diluted by not maintaining the dividing line with the culture of their surrounding contexts: In their practice of faith God said, "These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether *simply* just like you" (Ps 50:21, NIV).

A faith composing God in our image is not unique but in reality pervades common answers to "Where is *your* God?" This diluted faith prevails today as culture among Christians and churches, the distinction of which fails to distinguish where the

whole of who, what and how God is (constituting God's righteousness) in today's world. When the dividing line between faith and culture is not delineated, what can emerge is only a compromised faith coopted by the culture of the surrounding context. A compromised faith is most susceptible to infection by the human condition's pandemic, much like those with a compromised immune system are most susceptible to the COVID-19 pandemic. Any faith coopted by culture may not have clearly overt symptoms of being infected by the human condition, nevertheless the identity and function of its practitioners are unmistakably reduced from their wholeness constituted in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity—contrary to the “just as” wholeness that Jesus prayed to integrate his followers together in One family (Jn 17:20-26).

The faith of God's people needs to be vetted in order to determine the integrity of “your God.” This vetting is also necessary to determine the integrity of our identity and function **in** the world's human condition, and for exposing to what extent our identity and function have been influenced and shaped by the human condition. The prevailing human condition **in** the world pervades the life of Christians and churches until its infection is dealt with at the innermost of our identity and function. How would you assess the integrity of your primary identity and function in daily life? Consider again the current U.S. climate of partisan politics, how has this affected your relationships with other sisters and brothers in the body of Christ's family? Moreover, how has this affected your relational involvement of love with all others, which Jesus made imperative as the definitive identity and function distinguishing his disciples **in** the world (Jn 13:34-35)?

The inescapable reality of the human condition **in** the world has affected us as Christians beyond measure; and we are responsible and accountable to face up to the reality of our current condition. The pervasive condition of Christians and churches today reflects a **culture of faith** that no longer distinguishes their faith **in** the world from being **of** the world. In other words, the composition of faith has conflated with the composition of a surrounding context's culture to form variable ways how Christians are in everyday life. By not living according to the dividing line for faith constituted by Jesus' 3-D context, Christians and churches have resorted to composing virtual identity and function. This conflated composition merely serves as illusions of reality and simulations of following the Word. For example, without the dividing line, how do we discern in Christians music the difference between performance (or entertainment) and worship; and how do we determine if church brands merely cater to the consumer interests of their members? Contrary to the common practice of faith, the Truth of the Word is not open to negotiation with our terms, thus cannot be shaped accordingly. That's why Jesus clearly made definitive that the world's context is incompatible with those given God's Word (Jn 17:14).

Therefore, the Word, together with his whole gospel, is only embodied in 3-D context; and thus true faith in the Word emerges **in** the world only when **not of** the world, and only unfolds **into** the world on this irreducible and nonnegotiable basis. When the



faith of the Word's followers is distinguished in his 3-D context, then "the world will know where God is in the human drama today" (Jn 17:21). Furthermore, when our faith is clearly distinguished both in the Word's 3-D context and thus from the surrounding context's culture, then "the world will also know where your God is and how your God has been intimately involved with you just as the embodied Word" (17:23).

However, and this is the pivotal 'but', this relational outcome for our identity and function will neither emerge without facing up to our surrounding context, nor will it unfold without maintaining the dividing line for our faith. Without facing up to surrounding contexts, "your God" becomes context-ualized by those contexts, whereby who, what and how God is becomes diluted without the whole-ly significance as vulnerably revealed by the Word. Without the dividing line, where God is in the human drama becomes present only by the terms *common* to human life, which are the terms composed by the human condition. That is to say, the God claimed and proclaimed becomes "all together just like you" (Ps 50:21). Thus, what is *common* for all human life has been influenced and shaped by the human condition that is irreversibly composed by sin defined comprehensively as reductionism. Without the dividing line, on the one hand we become *common-ized* in our condition and, on the other, God is *common-ized* in this evolving human drama.

These far-reaching effects are increasingly consequential for our existing condition, which keeps adapting in the evolving human drama.

## ***Common-izing the Holy God and God's Holy Way***

Jesus was sent **into** the world by the Father to embody the gospel **in** the world with the full qualitative relational significance that could only be distinguished when **not of** the world. The incarnation of God and his gospel partially answers where God is in the human drama today. That answer assumes, of course, that the integrity of God's identity and function is whole, without being reduced or fragmented. Given the current condition of many Christians and churches today, this is not a good assumption to make.

The essential quality that distinguishes **not of** the world from **of** the world is the inner-out quality of *holy*. Holy constitutes the God revealed to us, embodied for us and ongoingly involved with us. Again, in the limits of our discussion let me define holy simply as the **uncommon** set apart from all that is ordinary to the human context and life, or the **common** prevailing **in** the world. Holy, then, is incompatible with all aspects of the common, and incongruent with any part of the common. Accordingly, holy is truly distinguished for us only in its incompatibility and incongruity with the common. Therefore, the holy God is revealed to us only as the Uncommon; and since "your way, O God, is holy" (Ps 77:13), God's holy way can only be uncommon—both in contrast to and in conflict with all that is common.

Does the answer to “*your* God” include without ambiguity that “my God is uncommon?” In a summary account of the human condition and where God is in it, the psalmist centers God’s response and involvement “in his holy dwelling [i.e. context]” (Ps 68:5). This illuminates that God’s response and involvement with the human condition today, in all its drama, is uncommon to what we may commonly think God should do. In contrast to and perhaps in conflict with such thinking, God’s uncommon way, for example, does not work for incomplete justice (i.e. premature justice) but only for complete justice; nor does God’s uncommon way engage in partial peace (i.e. immature peace) but only for whole peace uncommon to the common (as Jesus made definitive, Jn 14:27). Is this where and how you see God in the human drama today?

The contrast and conflict between the uncommon and the common intensifies the issue of how much the common has influenced and shaped Christians and churches today. Take the example of church practice today, notably during the two-fold pandemic of the coronavirus and the human condition. Who is the God occupying these churches, the uncommon God or the common God? Where God is in the human condition is uncommon, thus this God only dwells in the uncommon church (as Paul made definitive, Eph 2:19-22). *Your* God may dwell in your church, as all churches would claim, but your God should not be confused with the uncommon God if not clearly distinguished from the common.

As one of the key followers of Jesus, whose faith was diluted and whose identity and function were compromised by not facing up to his surrounding context and thereby common-ized, Peter personally experienced the consequences of not being clearly distinguished from the common. By not paying close attention and listening carefully to the embodied Word, he corroborated what Jesus made axiomatic (Mk 4:24): The measure of identity and function we use/give will be the measure of the disciple and discipleship we get. Therefore, after turning around from the common, Peter declared unequivocally: “Do not be conformed to the *common*. Instead, as he who called you is uncommon, be uncommon yourselves in your *identity and function*; for it is written *in the Word*, ‘you *need* to be uncommon, for I am uncommon’” (1 Pet 1:14-15).

To repeat emphatically, the effects of the current human condition impact Christians more than any other segment of the human population. It is consequential not only for Christians and their God but also for the entire human race. The issue of becoming and then being **commonized** makes the identity and function of such Christians incompatible and incongruent with the uncommon God and Way. Accordingly, this condition renders any of us insignificant to proclaim the whole gospel of truly good news (neither virtual nor fake) for those in the human condition. The consequences of common-ization cannot be overstated.

From his own experience of transformation, Peter understood that the stakes are high in being distinguished uncommon from the common. Therefore, he unashamedly distinguished the uncommon’s identity and function **in** the world:

“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, an uncommon nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who *redeemed* you out of the darkness of *the human condition* into his *uncommon light of relationship together in wholeness*” (1 Pet 2:9, cf. Num 6:24-26).

The stakes are high indeed, as well as the cost necessary to change any current common condition.

## **The High Stakes of Change Today and Its Cost**

Where God is in the human drama is not apparent in every chapter and all scenes of this evolving drama encompassed **in** the world. That lack of perception involves the lens used for this perceptual-interpretive process. God’s presence is always uncommon, therefore primarily qualitative and relational, as evidenced even when embodied. The common lens used for God, even used by Christians (notably church leaders and academics), is primarily quantitative, thus that lens lacks qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness to discern closely where God is. Consequently, the common lens looks for what God does in situations, circumstances and their related conditions, while overlooking God’s presence and involvement in the primacy of relationship during those conditions.

The common lens is indicative of a condition **of** the world, which exposes its incompatibility and incongruence with the uncommon. This directly indicates the change needed in order to address the human condition today—notably for Christians to address our existing condition before addressing the world’s. Foremost, the human condition is a **relational condition**, first with God and inclusive of others, which encompasses the condition of the human race that exposes the human racism underlying even anti-black racism today.

The human race’s relational condition was illuminated at creation when Creator God said: “It is not good for *the human person* to be alone” (Gen 2:18). “To be alone” is more fully understood as “to be apart,” that is, to be apart from the qualitative wholeness of relationship together in the qualitative image and relational likeness of God—the uncommon relational condition created by God for all persons (Gen 1:26-27). At that unparalleled point in human history, God completed the creation of human persons in the primacy of this qualitative relationship together (as demonstrated in Gen 2:25). Soon after, however, the human condition emerged when those persons reduced their primary persons from the qualitative to the quantitative, as well as fragmented the primacy of their relationship together in wholeness (indicated in Gen 3:7). From this pivotal point in human history, the beginning of the human relational condition evolved **in** the world to compose the common **of** the world. And the common lens of those in this common

relational condition (“the eyes of both were opened”) prevailed in the human race, all of which amplify the high stakes involved in changing the (including our) human relational condition.

Currently in the U.S., the stakes are high for bringing change in the November national election. Increasingly more want change while others want the present state of the union to continue. How much change proposed will affect the status quo is debatable, and that’s part of the cost for change at stake. Yet, progressives are intensifying the push for change at greater cost. Millennials have emerged at the center of progressive engagement; and their involvement for change should be of high interest to Christians and churches. It has been documented that most millennials now subscribe to no organized religious affiliation. Their experience with or perception of the church basically reveals that it has little or no significance for the meaning and well-being of their lives. This is vital feedback for Christians and churches, because it exposes our existing relational condition, as well as the high stakes and cost for changing our culture of faith and the common-izing of our practice.

In spite of all the changes millennials call for (explicitly or implied), given the common effects of technology prevailing in their everyday life, millennials may have the least awareness of their relational condition. This relational awareness is necessary to recognize both the underlying need of the human relational condition and thus the overriding change to address it. One aspect of the human relational condition, however, appears to be intensifying, notably during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing and isolation have exposed the loneliness persons are experiencing. Recent reports indicate that persons of Gen Z (born after 1996) are experiencing the most loneliness in the U.S., slightly more than millennials and more so than Gen X and boomers. All loneliness, however, needs to be qualified. Persons experience loneliness in the company of others and even in church gatherings; in these contexts they are distinctly not *alone* but they are lonely. How so? Because they lack the relational connections to be relationally involved in the primacy of relationships together. Therefore, they suffer in the relational condition “to be apart” (not “to be alone”) from God’s wholeness of relationship together in his qualitative image and relational likeness.

As U.S. Christians face the stakes and cost of the coming election, the global church soon observes the anniversary of the Reformation that initiated a pivotal change over 500 years ago. While the Reformation reformed the church’s culture of faith, it has not transformed the common-ized basis for Christian identity and function. In fact, it led to even further fragmentation that underlies the diverse cultures of faith shaped by surrounding contexts today. Nevertheless, the stakes and cost for change were high in the Reformation, which serves as a precursor (not model) for what the church faces today if indeed it is willing to change—change, that is, not merely with reforms but by transformation from the common to the uncommon.

Before Peter engaged the high stakes of turn-around change from the common to the uncommon, he had to incur the cost for his transformation. That is to say, he wasn't responsible for bringing about his transformation, but he had to willfully give up what he had invested as the basis for his identity and function. Based on the common's criteria for identity and function measured by what one does and has, Peter composed his identity and function; and that measure also exposed the level of his investment. Ironically, Peter still followed Jesus, whose uncommon identity and function were not measured by what he did and had, and thus were contrary to Peter's. Accordingly, this conflict emerged ongoingly in Peter's discipleship (e.g. Mt 16:21-23; Jn 13:6-8; 21:17-22; Acts 10:13-15, later in Gal 2:11-14). As Peter demonstrated, he had a lot invested in his identity and function composed by what he did and had. This was most clearly exposed when he refused to let Jesus wash his feet; how could he allow the identity of his Teacher and Lord to function as a lowly servant (Jn 13:12-14)? If anyone, Peter's identity and function should be the basis for him washing Jesus' feet, which couldn't compare to his cost for letting Jesus wash his feet.

However, Jesus' whole person vulnerably enacted that his uncommon identity and function were not based on his title and related roles, and that he should not be measured by what he did and had. By the primacy of his relational involvement, Jesus vulnerably shared his whole person with Peter, in order to expose Peter's common identity and function so that he would be transformed to the uncommon. When Peter finally gave up what he had invested in his common identity and function, thereby paying the cost for turn-around change, that transformation unfolded to constitute the new Peter to "be uncommon in all you *live everyday*" (1 Pet 1:15)—whereby he was distinguished uncommon **into** the world and "**not of** the common, just as I am not **of** the common" (Jn 17:16).

Like Peter, all Christians and churches need to understand the nature of our everyday identity and function; and we need to recognize how they are measured by the daily things we do and have. This common identity and function subtly emerged from the primordial garden in order to (1) give persons a so-called discerning lens, (2) assume to know good and evil just like God, and thereby (3) become wise persons based on this measurement (Gen 3:5-6). Identity and function measured on this basis add up to what we have invested to construct the best identity and function we can in our everyday life. Of course, the best identity and function is a measurement that can only be made on a comparative basis with others' identity and function. Though Jesus had the best identity and function as Lord and Teacher, the other disciples fixated on knowing who was "the greatest" among them (Lk 9:46; 22:24). This comparative process is unavoidable, which becomes our default mode that we ongoingly fall into unless willfully countered. Engaging this comparative process has relational consequences, the zero-sum nature of which Paul clearly illuminated: "But whatever was to my profit I now *realize as* loss for

Christ” (Phil 3:7). This further brings out what’s at stake for our identity and function and paying the cost of the investment made in them.

What is the nature of your everyday identity and function, and the working (not ideal or professed) identity and function of your church? What are the specifics by which they are measured? And how do you think they measure up to other Christians and churches? Perhaps you or your church don’t care about being “the greatest,” but I’m sure you don’t want to be considered the least or worst among them. What we need to be honest about is the investment we make to have an identity and function that are respected or even honored by others; don’t include God in ‘others’ because the common is always incompatible and incongruent with the uncommon.

As our honesty increases, the stakes and cost for change heighten, which brings us to a critical juncture: either affirming or justifying the pride in what we’ve accomplished, or humbly admitting the common nature of our identity and function, whereby we pay the cost for turn-around change in order to be constituted in the uncommon identity and function “just as the Trinity” (as Jesus made imperative for his true followers and made definitive for his family, Jn 17:16-26).

The human relational condition needs to be transformed. God is present and involved in this human drama to bring about this relational outcome. But, the uncommon God does not work unilaterally to appease a common way, which is how most perceive, want or expect God to act. The uncommon Way of the uncommon God engages in reciprocal relational work with God’s family in likeness of the Trinity. This is the reciprocal relational work between the persons (trinitarian and human) who are sent **into** the world, in order that the human relational condition **of** the world may experience God’s whole and uncommon (whole-ly) response (Jn 17:21) so that those common **in** the world may experience the same relational outcome as God’s family (17:23). However, this reciprocal relational work is contingent on the church family honestly (1) relinquishing our investment in common identity and function and (2) turning around from our existing relational condition for the redemptive transformation “into the likeness of the Trinity” (just as Paul made definitive for the church, 2 Cor 3:16-18).

Who besides Christians and churches have been more affected by the current human condition pandemic? To be clear, this has little if anything to do with COVID-19; our infection is deeper and more consequential. For whom, then, are the stakes higher for the change needed to heal the human relational condition’s infection **in** the world?

## **The Relational Outcome Unfolds Whole-ly**

The psalmist states confidently that “God will deliver/save you from the *consequential pandemic*” (Ps 91:3). A common lens views God delivering us from the negative situations, circumstances and related conditions **in** the world; this skewed view does not encompass the intractable human relational condition **of** the world, which

underlies all the conditions **in** the world. In contrasting perception, the uncommon lens sees God fully, and thus God saving us *from* the consequential pandemic of the human relational condition, yet also God saving us *to* the wholeness of our identity and function in the primacy of relationship together as God's family. "*Your* God" may deliver you from negative situations and circumstances, but the uncommon God saves us only for this whole-ly (whole & uncommon) relational outcome **not of** the world while still **in** the world.

The embodied Word in 3-D context clarified for his followers where the uncommon God is in the human relational condition. The qualitative wholeness of the Word, integrated as One with the Trinity, was challenged in his identity and disputed about his function as he was involved **in** the world (e.g. Jn 5:18; 10:30-33; 14:7-11). Doubt about where God is should not be surprising even among his followers, as the last text demonstrated. A common lens lacks the qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness to understand the qualitative presence of God and to experience God's relational involvement, which are consequential of the human relational condition. This was demonstrated by earlier followers of Jesus, who were challenged to fully embrace God's qualitative presence and relational response to heal the human relational condition. God's presence and response were whole-ly, that is, whole and uncommon, which these followers couldn't grasp because they were context-ualized **in** the world and common-ized **of** the world. Consequently, they wouldn't take up the embodied Word's challenge, and "no longer followed him" (Jn 6:51-66).

It is essential for Christians to have qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness in order to understand where God is in the human drama. Therefore, these are also irreplaceable both to know the qualitative presence and to experience the relational involvement of "your God." Before the embodied Word was physically relocated from the earth, he revealed to his uncommon followers how the whole-ly God responds to their human relational condition: "I will not leave you orphaned" (Jn 14:18). The roots of the human condition are "to be apart" from God's qualitative wholeness in the primacy of relationship together, therefore the human condition is innately a relational condition that inherently reduces all persons and relationships from their created wholeness. Orphans represent persons stuck in this relational condition, who don't *belong* in primary relationship together. Thus, orphans symbolize all persons in the human condition, whose identity and function are rendered to **relational orphans**.

The Word communicated the uncommon relational language to his followers that they will not be relational orphans **in** the world. How so, given the scope of the human drama? The condition of Christians **in** the world unfolds from their identity and function, whose integrity must be vetted. Our working identity and function are based on either one of the following:

1. Either they depend on a culture of faith in their surrounding context.

2. Or they are contingent on being sent **into** the world on the basis of **reciprocal contextualization**.

Reciprocal contextualization is the ongoing process for our identity and function, whose integrity is first constituted by direct vulnerable involvement with God in the Word's uncommon context **not of** the world, whereby persons whole-ly contextualized are then sent **into** the world in order to live in reciprocal context **in** the world without becoming infected **of** the world—the relational outcome of ongoing reciprocation between God's **not of** context and the surrounding context **in** the world to maintain the integrity in contrast to and conflict with **of** the world.

When the integrity of his followers' identity and function is constituted **not of** the world by ongoing relational involvement with the whole-ly God, they are united intimately in relationship together with the Trinity and integrally with each other so that they belong together as One family. This is not simply an ideal proposed by the Word, nor is it merely a hope to cling to in the human relational condition pandemic, neither of which has the relational outcome. This is the relational reality personally constituted by the persons of the Trinity (Jn 14:16-23), whose qualitative presence and relational involvement together make no longer being relational orphans irreversibly an experiential reality (as in Rom 8:15-17; Eph 1:5, 13-14).

What is the prevailing identity and function of Christians today? What identity and function pervade churches today? If comparisons are made with the discipleship of the original twelve disciples, and with the church in Ephesus (rigorously serving on the frontlines in the fight for truth, Rev 2:1-4), with the church in Sardis (with the acclaimed reputation of being alive, Rev 3:1-2), with the church in Thyatira (a highly activist church in the community, Rev 2:18-23), with the church in Laodicea (a very resourceful church with no needs, Rev 3:14-20), then according to the palpable Word (together with the Spirit) we are faced with this unbiased, unenhanced and unmasked reality:

The common condition amongst us unavoidably emerges in the vulnerable identity and function of relational orphans, whose practice may be filled with good intentions of measuring up in a culture of faith but remains “to be apart.”

This condition is rarely recognized because of a lack of qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness. Yet, when our faith is vetted, the existing integrity of our identity and function will expose the lack of depth in our relationships that is both incompatible with the qualitative presence and incongruent with the relational involvement of the whole-ly Trinity.

Whatever Christians and churches have claimed from the gospel, the embodied Word only constitutes the uncommon gospel of wholeness (as Jesus clarified, Jn 14:27, and as Paul proclaimed, Eph 6:15). While the common gospel may save us from sin, the



uncommon gospel integrally saves us *from* the human relational condition and saves us *to* the wholeness of relationship together belonging to the Trinity's family. On the unbiased basis of the embodied Word, this relational outcome is irreducible and nonnegotiable.

The Word's relational outcome for relational orphans unfolds whole-ly, that is, only whole and uncommon, with nothing less and no substitutes. That's why Paul made imperative that "the peace/wholeness of Christ be the only determinant" constituting our identity and function as one church family (Col 3:15). Anything less and any substitutes, as prevail among Christians and pervade churches, are incompatible with the uncommon and incongruent to be whole, thus still struggling or embedded in the human relational condition "to be apart"—still bearing the identity and function of relational orphans.

## Facing the Truth

In his biased thinking, Pilate dismissed Jesus with the question, "What is truth?" (Jn 18:38) Christians profess to know the truth, yet biased thinking has confused, misrepresented or even dismissed what is truth. Jesus told Pilate that "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (Jn 18:37). In his pivotal interaction with Pilate—in what amounted to answering where God is in the human drama—Pilate was staring at the Truth (the "I am" of Jn 14:6) before his eyes. But Pilate didn't *face* the Truth by making his person vulnerable from inner out (going deeper than his biased thinking) to make relational connection face to face with the Truth.

Pilate was not alone in avoiding or failing to follow the Truth, which is consequential for not having the relational connection necessary to "belong to the Truth." Most Christians (including church leaders and academics) don't listen carefully to the Truth's voice, because they are not paying attention to the specific language used by the Word for the Truth. What truth do we hear from the Word when our languages are different?

God embodied the Word in quantitative terms, but that was secondary (though obviously still important) to the Word's primacy of revealing the primary qualitative relational face of God (as Paul illuminated, 2 Cor 4:6). Accordingly, the qualitative relational Word disclosed definitively that "I am the uncommon Way, the relational Truth and the whole Life," whereby relational connection to where whole-ly God is becomes the relational reality (Jn 14:6). That is, this is the relational outcome for those who vulnerably face the Truth, because those who make face-to-face connection with the relational Truth by the uncommon Way "belong to the Truth's family." Solely on the basis of the qualitative relational Truth (not merely quantitative propositional truth), these persons become transformed from their human relational condition and therefore no longer are relational orphans.

This was the relational purpose that the Truth revealed to Pilate in order to clarify his vulnerable presence and relational involvement "**into** the world" (Jn 18:37). But, the

relational Truth also clarified that “my family is **not of** this world” (18:36), which makes unequivocal that those truly belonging to his family are constituted only on the basis of the uncommon Way and the whole Life of whole-ly God.

The integral dynamic of God’s identity and function constituted by the uncommon and the whole is integrated with the relational Truth—again, not by merely propositional truth about God—by whom God is distinguished **in** the world’s human relational condition. Therefore, it is essential for relational orphans to face the relational Truth and make vulnerable face-to-face relational connection with this Truth, in order to belong to the relational Truth, the uncommon Way and the whole Life. Propositional truth commonly does not engage this relational process. Thus, Christians who profess the truth don’t necessarily vulnerably face the Truth, such that they don’t have the relational connection necessary to indeed “belong to the Truth.”

Consider the dedicated followers of Christ who professed the truth: He was their Lord and they prophesied in his name, cast out demons in his name, and performed many miracles in his name. How would you assess their identity and function? Measured by existing cultures of faith, they would be respected and honored. The uncommon Word just responds: “I never knew you; go away from me” (Mt 7:22-23). In spite of professing the truth, they didn’t “belong to the Truth,” because they didn’t vulnerably face the Truth with their whole person in the primacy of face-to-face relationship together. They focused on and became preoccupied with the secondary. Their identity and function were composed by what they did (faith works) and had, rather than the qualitative primary and relational primacy; consequently, they remained relational orphans, who assumed they were saved from their sin.

*Belonging* is the function of relationship. Association with God and membership in churches compose the identity and function of many Christians, but this composition should not be confused with persons “belonging to the Truth and to God’s family.” The relational Truth challenged Pilate’s relational condition in order to belong by “listening to my voice” (Jn 18:37). Likewise, the relational Truth of the Word challenges our identity and function in order for us to go beyond our associations and memberships so that we will truly belong.

Like Pilate, no one can address their relational condition as orphans without vulnerably facing the Truth. In the same way, the uncommon Way, no one can make relational connection to belong to the Truth without “paying close attention and listening carefully to my voice” (cf. Mk 4:24; Lk 8:18). Merely paying attention to the Word should not be confused with “carefully listening to my voice.” The common lens in cultures of faith view the Word as truthful information and propositions about God by which Christians should live. The theology composed from this interpretation of the Word composes limited referential truth that informs Christian faith and practice. Based on his personal experience, Peter would testify to us today that followers of the Word belonging to the Truth are not distinguished by the referential information and

propositional truth of their faith—a faith that misguided him and initially misled the church (e.g. Mt 16:16, 22-23; Acts 10:14-15). Such persons don't carefully listen to the Truth communicated in relational language (not referential language), therefore they don't know the relational Truth embodied as the Word.

Listening carefully to the relational Truth is not a common engagement by Christians, because this requires uncommon involvement that often eludes our practice in an existing theological fog. "My voice" communicates the relational Truth of the Word only in relational language, which is irreducible to referential language for our theology and nonnegotiable to our terms for our practice—both of which having relational consequences (as witnessed in Jn 8:43). The Truth of the Word communicates for the sole purpose not to inform us but to make intimate relational connection with us face to face. The Word, therefore, communicates only in relational language for the sole relational purpose of our relational belonging in whole-ly relationship together. Accordingly, this relational connection unfolds when we "pay close attention and listen carefully to my voice communicating to you in relational language"—the irreplaceable language composing the relational Truth, the uncommon Way and the whole Life.

The early disciples possessed a lot of information about Jesus, which they professed in their discipleship. But, as the embodied Word exposed, they weren't making relational connection with the relational Truth to truly know the embodied Word, that is, his whole-ly person(s) (Jn 14:9). Anyone who doesn't experience the relational Truth's vulnerable presence and intimate involvement also cannot truly know him in the depths that he has shared his whole person. For them, the relational connection is lacking or even missing, in spite of any extensive referential information and propositional truths about the Word composing their theology. Consequently, these disciples don't experience the reality of Jesus' relational involvement of love for them, which is essential to be clearly distinguished **in** the world as his disciples. What whole-ly distinguishes Jesus' followers is their relational involvement of love ongoingly with him and others—the relational involvement constituted only by his relational involvement of love with them in relationship together (Jn 13:34-35). This is the whole relational significance of the love that Jesus asked whether Peter had for him (Jn 21:15-17). Love, contrary to common practice, is not about words, nor is it the things done for others. That's all secondary to love as enacted by the Word of Truth, whose primacy was always his vulnerable relational involvement with others in relationship together (cf. Lk 23:34, 42-43; Jn 19:26-27).

Sadly, Christians today also demonstrate not "paying close attention and listening carefully to my voice" to have the relational connection that constitutes belonging to his whole-ly person. This certainly affects the level of experiencing his relational involvement of love, which obviously affects the extent of being distinguished as his disciples **in** the world. The consequences are immeasurable when we don't vulnerably face the relational Truth.

The embodied Word made axiomatic the process involved in listening to his voice: “The measure you use/give, that will be the measure you get back” (Mk 4:24). For example, if the measure used for the Word is referential language, then the measure you get is referential information and truth about God; if the measure you use for faith is referential, then the measure you get has no relational significance. If the measure used for the Word is relational language, the measure you get is communication to you from God; if the measure you use for faith is communication with God, then the measure you get is relational connection. In other words, it is axiomatic: The measure we get on any matter of faith, theology and practice, will never go beyond or deeper than the measure we use/give. That’s why the relational Truth makes it the relational imperative for us to “pay close attention and listen carefully to my voice communicating in relational language, for the relational connection together in relationship necessary, so that you will relationally belong to the Truth in family together and not be relational orphans.”

On the basis of what the Word made axiomatic in listening to his voice, the following emerges:

**Facing the Truth is not negotiable.**

- The measure for truth we use (e.g. propositional or relational) is the measure of truth we get from the Word.
- This truth from the Word we use is the measure of theology we get for our practice.
- This measure of truth we then use for practice is the truth we face, nothing more.

That means the truth we are facing could actually dismiss the Truth, even as we are staring in the Word.

**How we face the Truth is nonnegotiable and irreducible.**

- The measure of face we use—that is, whether veiled or not—will be the face of God we get from the Word.
- How vulnerable the face from the Word is that we use will be the kind of relationship we get with the Truth.
- How vulnerable the person we use/give to face the Truth will be the extent of connection we have with the relational Truth.

Therefore, take to heart!

- The extent of connection with the Truth we use/give will be the identity and function we get, both for the Word and for ours.
- The identity and function we use/give will be the disciple and discipleship we get—as evidenced in Peter.

The Word embodied the Truth only in relational terms, which means we can only face the relational Truth by a relational process. Paying attention and listening to the relational Truth requires relational involvement in face-to-face relationship. This whole relational process is uncommon because it requires our person to be vulnerable from inner out, which therefore requires removing the mask manufactured in the primordial garden that frames our relational condition. Then, at that critical juncture, when the vulnerably penetrating voice used for the relational Truth communicates the Trinity to my vulnerable person, my whole person will make relational connection with the Trinity and belong in intimate relationship together as family. This is the only relational outcome that fulfills the Word's promise not to be relational orphans.

When the whole-ly Word communicates to us about not being rendered as orphans, the essential key for the new relational condition of belonging was revealed in the vulnerable presence and relational involvement of the Spirit. The Spirit's identity functions as the epistemological, hermeneutic, ontological and relational keys that are irreducible for theology and irreplaceable for practice to be whole. Here again, the measure used for the Spirit is the Spirit we get. How do you see the Spirit?

Many Christians see the Spirit as power or define him as love. Just like the Word, the Spirit's identity and function are not composed by what he does and has. Rather the Spirit's ontology and function are constituted only as *person*, integrated intimately as One with the Son and the Father. The Spirit as person is essential because the Son revealed the Spirit as his relational replacement to ensure we won't be relational orphans (Jn 14:16-18; 15:26; 16:5-15, cf. Rom 8:15-17). Notably for us to pay close attention to, the relational Truth defined his relational replacement as "the Spirit of relational Truth" (Jn 16:13, cf. 1 Jn 4:6). Furthermore, because of the Spirit's person—even though the embodied Word has ascended—by being One together the Word's presence and involvement are palpable. The palpable Word and the Spirit are inseparable, who constitute the transformation of our human relational condition into vulnerable whole persons (without masks) and relationship together in the Trinity's likeness (as in 2 Cor 3:16-18).

When vulnerable persons without the veil (masks) face the relational Truth, the uncommon Way and whole Life unfold in the relational connection belonging to the Trinity. This is the relational outcome that heals our human relational condition and whole-ly fulfills the embodied Word's prayer constituting his church family (Jn 17). Yet, the uncommon wholeness of those transformed from relational orphans becomes the relational reality only when two contingencies are fulfilled: (1) their whole persons are ongoingly involved vulnerably in face-to-face intimate reciprocal relationship together with the Trinity, and then (2) likewise involved vulnerably in face-to-face intimate relationship together as the church family to be whole-ly *one* in relational likeness of the Trinity. And the palpable Word together with the Spirit will give churches the feedback

necessary when their identity and function are not whole-ly (as in Rev 2-3). Relational orphans will persist when both contingencies are not fulfilled.

As our and the church's identity and function turn around to be whole and uncommon, where our God is will unmistakably distinguish where the whole-ly Trinity is in the human drama today. On this qualitative relational basis, our identity and function **into** the world can proclaim the good news to all persons, peoples, tribes and nations **of** the world—those to whom the Word made it our relational imperative to be his whole-ly witnesses (Jn 15:27; Acts 1:8; Mt 28:19)—that their human relational condition can be healed and transformed also from being apart as relational orphans, whereby they equally will experience the relational reality of being his whole-ly followers belonging to his family.

Yet, all this is based on us not having any illusions about “where *your* God” is, and on not being misguided and thus misled by diluted identity and function—both of which can reemerge from pushback by other Christians and churches. The Word sends us **into** the world only in his likeness **not of** the world, “just as” the Father sent him (Jn 17:18; 20:21). Therefore, learn from Peter's difficult turn around: “just as he who called you is whole-ly, ‘Be whole-ly in your identity and function as he is whole-ly’” (1 Pet 1:15-16).

Nothing less and no substitutes!!!

**My studies listed below can help you  
go further and deeper in your journey together:**

- *Interpretation Integrated in ‘the Whole-ly Way’: The Integral Education and Learning of Knowing and Understanding God* (Bible Hermeneutics Study, 2019). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- *The Disciples of Whole Theology and Practice: Following the Diversity of Reformation or the Wholeness of Transformation* (Whole-ly Disciples Study, 2017). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- *The Gospel of Transformation: Distinguishing the Discipleship and Ecclesiology Integral to Salvation* (Transformation Study, 2015). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.
- *The Person in Complete Context: The Whole of Theological Anthropology Distinguished* (Theological Anthropology Study, 2014). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.