

# The Person, the Trinity, the Church

The Call to Be Whole and the Lure of Reductionism

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## Introduction

In recent times we can observe various sociocultural, political, economic and religious movements which, I suggest, can be perceived with a commonality of direction. Developments such as pluralism, multiculturalism, the peace movement, environmentalism, globalization and universalism all have a concern—or at least an interest—for the interrelatedness of humanity. These efforts essentially of inclusiveness have an underlying search for wholeness.

While we may not agree with the philosophy, ideology, theology or methodology used as the basis for such movements, we need to affirm seeking *the whole* of humankind implicit in the common direction of their concern or interest. Christians need to affirm this search because God created this whole and desires its restoration—first among ourselves, then for the rest of the world, including physical creation.

Modernity has compromised this effort toward wholeness, making it difficult to pursue, or even be aware of, much less experience wholeness. While postmodernity challenges modernism's assumptions and practices in order to renew the effort to be whole, its various sentiments lack understanding of the whole and even confuse its development. What ultimately, however, has been the most detrimental to the whole—of the person, humankind and creation—and the experiential practice of wholeness is *reductionism*. The general process of reductionism essentially reduces the whole to its smaller parts (or secondary aspects) and, in turn, uses the behavior of those parts to determine what the whole will be, thus diminishing or minimalizing the integrity of the whole.

We can observe the influence of reductionism on social life in the following historical process: how the concerns of a village or region fragmented a tribe, nation or country, as witnessed in Balkanization; how the priorities of an extended family or kinship group fragmented a village or region; how the self-interests of the nuclear family fragmented the extended family, for example, since the Industrial Revolution; and how the prominence of the individual today fragments the nuclear family. In each of these developments reductionism focuses on a smaller aspect of social life (or part) to be the primary determinant for what it means to be whole. In what condition does this leave the human person?

This same process of diminishing or minimalizing the integrity of the whole can be observed in the Western church, which this study will address.

### A Window to the Whole

In a remarkable scene occupying a small place in the narrative of Jesus (Mt 12:46-50), we have a window to the narrative whole of God's desires—desires formulated even before creation (Eph 1:4, 5; Rom 8:29), enacted at the first creation (Gen 2:18) and fulfilled in Christ for an eschatological completion by the Spirit (Col 1:19, 20; Eph 1:9-14; 2 Cor 5:5). When Jesus said in response to his biological mother and brothers that his family is constituted by those persons who respond to the desires of his Father, we can begin to grasp what is involved to be *whole*: the whole of God and God's desires narrated throughout the Bible as the integrating theme of God's

response to humankind to be whole; the function of human persons in the *definitive whole* constituted by the whole of God as the Trinity; and the convergence of the trinitarian persons and the human persons in *the relational context and process of the whole of God's family* signified by the church. Whether this little scene serves as a significant window to the whole of God depends on how well the pieces of God's self-revelation are put together to define the whole big picture of eschatological dimension.

If this epistemic process for grasping the whole is to be complete, it needs to be relational. Understanding the definitive whole of the human person, the church and the triune God, and how the whole of the person and of the church must necessarily interact together with the Trinity in order to be whole, is the functional purpose of this study. Yet, reductionism presents a formidable challenge to a relational epistemic process.

God's most vulnerable self-disclosure was made in the incarnation of the Son. Jesus does not just provide us with a window but opens the door to the whole of God and God's desires for us to be whole. This study examines: how Christ is the hermeneutical key that opens the ontological door to the whole of God, and how he is also the functional key that opens the relational door to the ontology of the whole of God's family constituted in the Trinity, the Trinity qua family. Thus, how complete our Christology is will be critical for our understanding of the significance of the whole—be it of God, the person or the church. More specifically, examining how Jesus related to persons (foremost his Father) is important for understanding the relational significance of the whole.

For example, Jesus extended the above window in the relational progression to the whole of God's desires in an intimate relational moment on the cross when he bonded Mary and John to each other in family love to operationalize God's new family (Jn 19:26, 27). Moreover, Jesus' healing ministry was a clear demonstration of how he saw the person, involved himself with the whole person and acted to restore wholeness by taking them into his family. This was also a threat to reductionists (such as scribes and Pharisees) who used substitutes for wholeness and thus would have had to forego the benefits of a reductionist system that stratified others to their separation or exclusion. Therefore, in the whole of God's revelation, wholeness involves not fragmenting the person into parts—for example in classic dualism of body and soul, or by a reductionist quantitative focus without the qualitative significance of the heart—as well as not reducing the primacy of the relationships necessary to be whole. In the integrity of this revelation, God's design and purpose for the ontology of personhood are by nature both functionally whole and wholly relational.

Throughout God's self-disclosure, we need to grasp how the person is seen and related to in the relationships of the whole. This will help piece together the *who* and *what* of the whole of God, which will then engage by *what* and *how* the whole of God does relationships. To reduce, diminish, or minimize any of this has relational consequences which leave persons in the condition "to be apart" from the whole of their *self*, of God and the relationships necessary to be whole in the church as the whole of God's family.

This theological conversation needs to be engaged with the perspective that theology should not be the task of systematically informing us about God but about establishing the coherence of God's self-revelation vulnerably extended to us for relationship, so that we can intimately know the triune God and experience life together as the whole of God's family in likeness of the Trinity. Basing the whole in God's self-disclosure within the Bible, particularly in



the narratives of Christ, is both a necessary and sufficient process to formulate a definitive wholistic theology functional for our practice—not simply to inform our practice but to transform it. While Scripture is the primary source and priority used for this theological process, church tradition is helpful and necessary to appropriate also insofar as it reinforces or clarifies biblical revelation; where tradition deviates or conflicts with it, then tradition must defer to the priority of the Word.

In this relational epistemic process used for this study, I suggest the following working definition for a functional theology to give coherence to all the theological aspects of our discussion:

Christian theology is the biblically informed study of God providing the context and process for practice to intimately know the whole of God constituted in the Trinity, thus reflecting the vulnerable revelation of Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life—the relational Way for the epistemological Truth to experience the ontological Life of the whole of the triune God.

This is the door Jesus opens to the whole of God through which the person and the church must both enter together with the Spirit in order to be whole.

### **The Nonnegotiable Call and the Unavoidable Lure**

Our discussion necessarily includes Paul's life and teachings. He formulated his theology from Christ's revelations (both directly to him and indirectly from the Jesus tradition) and clearly established the truth of the gospel in the midst of reductionist substitutes and practices, even by Peter. In doing so, Paul was the most instrumental in operationalizing faith and church practice in the ecclesiology of the whole. When understood in this relational context and process, his teachings have deeper significance and coherence for our function and practice to be whole today. Indeed, we will come to understand, somewhat tensely no doubt, that Paul leaves us no option.

Since the Trinity constitutes and created the whole, wholeness was never designed to be a static attribute possessed by the individual. Wholeness is the dynamic function of persons intimately involved together in the interdependent relationships which constitute them to be whole in the likeness of the Trinity (and the mutual indwelling function of *perichoresis*) qua family. Moreover, as Jesus disclosed and Paul made operational, the call to be whole cannot involve merely an individual faith nor can it practice a private faith. To be whole is the practice of whole persons together as family in a public faith, which Jesus makes imperative in his formative familial prayer (Jn 17:15-26), qualifying his commission for his followers (Mt 28:18-20).

Yet, from the beginning the human person, the journey of God's people and the church in its history have had to struggle to be whole. Whatever situations and circumstances, personal and collective accountability, structural and systemic factors are involved in this struggle, the common underlying issue to all of them is reductionism. The influence of reductionism was, has been, and is today the most critical issue in diminishing and minimalizing the whole of God both

in the first creation and the new creation in Christ. We need to understand the unavoidable lure of reductionism on Christian practice (individual and corporate) while grasping the call and need to be whole—not only for the experiential reality of the church as the whole of God’s family but also for the world to see the significance of the definitive whole of God. We will discuss the issues involved in the call to be whole for our conceptions of the human person, our perceptions of the Trinity and our formulations of the church as well as the lure of reductionism for each.

## **Anticipating the Whole**

Despite the reductionist tendencies seen throughout the human narrative, what emerges clearly in the big picture is the divine narrative of God’s thematic activity to relationally respond to our human condition “to be apart” from the whole. It is the relational progression of the triune God’s ongoing relational involvement that provides the integrating theme for the whole of God and the study of it.

As you engage this study of the whole, the whole of God, it may not always be clear whether “the whole of God” is referring to the whole which the triune God is ontologically, or to the whole of which God created for us to be part. Hopefully, the context will adequately indicate whether it is the former or the latter, or both. Any ambiguity, however, is intentional because they both should be seen together, inseparable from the other. This is apparent for the latter since there is no created whole apart from the ontology of God’s whole—though not to be confused with pantheism. Moreover, the ontology of God is revealed not to inform us *about* God but for the relational context and process to respond to us in order to be relationally whole with God and for us to be relationally-ontologically whole with each other together in likeness to the Trinity.

Anticipating the whole for the church today, particularly in the West, may locate us in circumstances interestingly similar to the first human person and God’s response to be whole. When the call to be whole is neither diminished nor minimalized by the lure of reductionism, this call in our contemporary context suggests a unique response to develop the trinitarian relational context of family and trinitarian relational process of family love. This response would be similar to God’s response at the first creation to complete the relational context. Defining this unique response for church practice today will be the relational conclusion to this current study.

Furthermore, the definitive whole which the world needs and seeks in the various contemporary movements can be found in the relational significance of the whole of God, which experientially is reflected in the relational life and practice of the church as the whole of God’s family. Just as Paul at the Areopagus affirmed the commonality of “the unknown God” whom Paul wanted to make known to them (Acts 17: 22, 23), “the church as equalizer” today is called to be the experiential whole of God which then can be relationally made known for the world to embrace—anticipating the fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21-23, along with his complete formative family prayer for whom and for which this study is submitted.

Many Christians would rightly say that we were made to glorify God, to worship God, and that all we do should serve to this end. Yet, when *what we do* (however God-related or directed) becomes the primary emphasis and thus the defining focus for personhood, we have shifted to a secondary aspect of creation to reorder God's created design and purpose for the human person. We need to reexamine this focus and its influence on our practice as Christians (both individually and corporately), particularly in the three crucial interrelated issues of how we define the person, do relationships and thus practice church.

When God created Adam, God gave him "work to do" (Gen 2:15). We might consider this like a "job" in today's terms, but in doing so such a limited perception becomes problematic and is instrumental for setting into motion a series of interrelated alternatives from reductionism. These reductions have to do with Adam's person (and thus ours), his relationship with God, God's purpose for creating Eve (thus all women), the relationship between Adam and Eve, thus with God's design and purpose for them together with all creation. Reductionism essentially breaks into parts (or quantitative aspects) the whole of persons, relationships, creation, even God and fails to account for the necessary interrelations between them which make them whole. That is, it fails to go beyond merely a reductionist descriptive sum of their parts, which then is both mistakenly considered to be the whole of God created in God's image as well as commonly used as a substitute for this whole.

We need to examine each of these areas in succession and see whether they all add up to the whole of God—or whether our perception of them subtracts from God's self-revelation and the desires God expresses for the covenant people, the family of God, especially for a church shaped by modernism while entering a postmodern period. Throughout this process we will need to make critical distinctions between what is indeed whole according to the whole of God and what is only a reductionist substitute for the whole. Our conclusions will determine how the church is challenged today and who will significantly meet this challenge—the eventual conclusion of our discussion in the last chapter.

### **The Created Person**

After God created Adam, there was a quality about him (along with the rest of creation) that was defined by God as "good" (Gen 1:31).<sup>1</sup> Yet, this quality for personhood extended beyond and was further distinguished from the rest of creation because the human person was created in the image, the likeness of God (Gen 1:26, 27; Gen 5:1). In the creation narrative, this

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Scripture are taken from the NIV.

“living being” (or inner person as denoted by the Heb. term *nepes*,<sup>2</sup> 2:7) possessing the innermost life of God (“breath of life”) is the quality which defined the person—animals have *nepes* without this quality (1:30)—even though his work is immediately described next to the image of God in the first creation narrative (1:26b), along with the purpose human persons are to fulfill (1:28). Our perception of personhood becomes problematic if the above order is inverted (if only by emphasis) and the primary source of defining the human person becomes “the work”—that is, basing the person on what we do, no matter how God-related or directed. Such a focus is consequential for the whole person and the whole of God.

Adam’s disobedience of God precipitated conditions in life east of Eden which would make work difficult (Gen 3:17-19) and human purpose a struggle (3:15-16). Life as God created is not being redefined here; God’s created design and purpose remain unaltered. Yet, what is subject to redefinition is the human person’s self-perception, making it now problematic how the person functions; work, for example, was never to be done in any manner. Nowhere is the susceptibility to redefining the person and personhood greater than in relation to work (or what we do) outside the primordial garden. It is vital to reexamine this influence on our practice after the Fall and how it affects our perceptual-interpretive framework determining what we pay attention to or ignore, thus predisposing us even to inadvertent or unintentional practices. This is of critical importance for how we see the person today and what human activity determines personhood—the function of theological anthropology.

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

At the very least, defining the person by what one does conflicts with how God created us and thus defines us; and it inverts the created order by designating (even inadvertently) secondary matter (like work to be done, even if assigned by God) to the primary position, thus

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<sup>2</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); Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); 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).

reducing (even unintentionally) the primary matter of God’s design and purpose for the person to a lower priority in actual practice. This consequence can happen despite having a theology in place affirming the primacy of God’s design and purpose—a consequence often seen among Christian workers while doing Christian service. This not only reduces the whole of the life of God “breathed” into us but also conflicts with it.

The above reduction of the person also inverts the process of self-definition from the inner-to-outer focus on the person (the quality of the whole person, as God sees it) to an outer-in approach (the more quantitative attributes and categories about a person). When such attention becomes our concern (for example, in matters of work), what becomes subordinated, lost or sacrificed is the inner person (*nepes* in Gen 2:7) and its qualitative significance (as the image of God). While identifying an “inner person” implies an “outer person”—which may appear to employ a dualism in defining the human person (inner and outer, the more spiritual and the more physical)—they are not substances to be perceived separately as in classic dualism from a Greek philosophical framework. 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 is what happens in an outer-in approach to defining the person. The issue then in human ontology is which aspect has more significance and thus needs to have greater importance—though not at the neglect of the other aspect.

In Hebrew terminology, the center of the person is the heart (*leb*); that is, conceptually, the “inner person” (*nepes*) God “breathed” of himself into the human person (cf. Ecc 3:11b) is signified by the heart (*leb*). The biblical proverbs speak of the heart in the following terms: identified as “the wellspring” (starting point, *tosa’ot*) of the ongoing function of the human person (Prov 4:23); and, using the metaphor of a mirror, also determined to be what gives definition to the person (Prov 27:19); and, when not reduced or fragmented (“at peace”), as giving life to “the body” (*basar*, referring to the outer aspect of the person, Prov 14:30), which describes the integrating function for the whole person (inner and outer). This suggests the function of the heart signifying the “inner person”—which is then inclusive of the outer—involves both: (1) the qualitative integration of the whole person, and (2) the functional basis for relationship with the whole of God, specifically for experiencing the intimate relationship constituted in the Trinity. Both are realized, of course, only when the heart is not reduced and is necessarily transformed. The intellect may be able to provide quantitative unity (for example, by identifying the association of parts) for the human person. However, while this may be necessary and useful at times, it is never sufficient by itself to define the whole person nor to experience the relationships necessary to be whole, especially with God.

The priority of the inner person over the outer is illustrated in the selection of Saul’s replacement as king. When God sent Samuel to Jesse’s household to anoint one of his sons chosen to be king (1 Sam 16:1-13), Samuel thought for sure that Eliab was the chosen one. Yet, God clarified that Samuel based his conclusion on what he perceived of Eliab’s person through the lens of a reductionist framework using an outer-in approach (v. 7, “appearance,” *mar’ch*, signifying outward appearance). Samuel had shifted to an outer-in approach in contrast to God who “looks at the heart” using an inner-out focus of personhood. By returning to God’s perceptual framework, Samuel was able to perceive the deeper qualitative significance of the whole person from the inner out, thus understanding the significance of David’s outer features

(‘*ayin* and *tob*) reflecting his inner person (v. 12).

The qualitative significance of the heart only begins to define the image, likeness of God “breathed” into human persons, but it identifies why the heart is so important. God’s desires are to be involved with the whole person for relationship—intimate relationship. Since the function of the heart constitutes the whole person, God does not have the whole person for relationship until it involves the heart.

David certainly understood this since he was chosen by God based on his inner person, and he made his heart accountable and vulnerable to God (Ps 51:6, 10, 16-17; 139:23)—the reductionist substitutes of which from the outer in was understood to have no relational significance to God (cf. Ps 147:10). This is why David charged Solomon when he was chosen to build a temple dwelling for God: to respond to God and to be involved with your whole heart (*saalem, leb*) and the desire (*hapes*) of your inner person (*nepes*) because God wants your whole person for relationship (1 Chron 28:9). This intimate relationship symbolized by the temple was extended to the hearts of the whole of humanity for relationship together as the whole of God’s family (cf. Acts 15:8, 9)—the significance of which will be discussed in the chapters ahead.

Without the qualitative significance of the heart, all that is possible are ontological simulation and epistemological illusion. This is the significance we need to grasp more deeply in the divine narrative that God ongoingly pursues the heart and wants our heart (cf. 1 Sam 16:7c; Prov 21:2; Jer 17:10; Lk 16:15; Rom 8:27; Rev 2:23)—that is, the whole person for relationship. Therefore, the “inner person” signified by the heart has the most significance to God and, though not to the neglect of the outer, needs to have greater priority of importance for the person’s definition and function.

The alternative to the qualitative significance of the heart increasingly becomes more quantitative (things measured by quantity or identified only by rationality), secondary and substitutes for the qualitative significance of persons created in the very image, likeness of God, who is not quantitatively defined, though quantitatively given in the incarnation. This reduction not only conflicts with how God created us and defines us, it conflicts with how God relates with us, thus confounding relationship with God. We need to examine this relationship along with the whole person to more deeply understand God’s design, purpose and desires.

## **The Person’s Relationship With God**

From the beginning Adam was not created for what he could do and the activity simply of *doing something*, whether work related or not, though a part of his function was to work. We can essentially define work as what we connote by the function of making a living. In creation, however, work was not designed for this end in itself; thus it could not be done in any manner but was engaged on two distinct terms. When God “put the man in the Garden of Eden to work” (Gen 2:8, 15), it was clear the Creator established (“put” *siym*, establish, appoint) the creature in the work. Thus, the first term for work was that it was to be undertaken within the functional context as creature in relationship to Creator—that is, *the relational context*. Secondly, God was clear about the conditions (command, desires, 2:16) for engaging work in this context and that involvement in this necessary relational context was only on God’s terms—thus, *the relational process* defined by God, the sovereign God.

This relational context and process of creation are fundamental for a valid function of work and most importantly are intrinsic to the primary function of the whole person as created in the likeness of the triune God. Thus, how a person functions is determined by how the person is defined and perceived. This self-definition determines not only how we do work but even more significant to God also determines how we do relationships together. How we do relationship with God is about our relational involvement and response as whole persons to the whole being of God. The relational context and process of how we do relationship with God is signified by worship, not defined by how we do work for God, even though serving is part of our response of worship—part of a complete relational response.

It is not a coincidence that the term for “work” (*abad*, 2:15) is the same term used for worship in the OT denoting service. The authentic worship of God must also involve the relational response of service distinctly based on relational submission, adoration and praise. These responses together (forming the acronym PASS) constitute worship and signify how to do relationship with God; worship is the functional *pass* to the intimate presence of God. Therefore, *how* work (or service) is to be done must function by engaging in this primary relational purpose as designed by the Creator in relationship with the created person. Without involvement in this relational context and process, work (or service) has no relational significance to God and thus has either little meaning or no qualitative fulfillment for the person created in God’s image. Reductionism of any dimension of creation has far-reaching repercussions on our person today, on our relationships and consequently on how church is practiced.

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

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

The above narrative is usually rendered “to be alone” (2:18) but the Hebrew term (*bad*) can also be rendered “to be apart.” The latter rendering gives a greater sense of relationship and not being connected to someone else. This nuance is significant because for Adam it was not just the secondary matter of having no one to share space with, no one to keep him company or to do things with (particularly the work). “To be apart” is not just a situational condition but most importantly a relational condition. A person can be alone in a situation but also feel lonely in the company of others, at church, even in a family or marriage because of relational distance—

“being apart.” I thus suggest that this rendering is more reflective of the dynamic process of relationship in God’s created design and purpose—and needs to replace the conventional “to be alone” not only in our reading but in our theology and practice.

What the person Adam (thus all persons) needed in the above context had little to do with help for work but everything concerned with his primary function, the quality of which work cannot provide nor fulfill. This concern was God’s focus and provision for the first human person. This is about relationship fundamental to human make-up rooted in the image, the likeness of the triune God, about relationship basic to the function of the whole person (from the inner out), about relationship primary (above all else) to the created order of life. This is the primacy of the created context and process of interpersonal relationships: *the relational context and process*.

God created Adam initially without this human relational context, though the relational context and process existed between him and God. Yet, created life in the human context could not remain solitary because of the image, the likeness of this relational triune God. The human person was never meant “to be apart.” Eve completed the interpersonal relational nature of human life which was predicated on the intimate relational nature of the triune God, constituted first in the intimate relational communion between the persons of the Trinity and then by that same communion between God and human persons. Into this deeper context of interpersonal relationships we all were created and for this purpose our lives are designed. It is from this trinitarian relational context and by this trinitarian relational process that God is glorified, worshiped—not by the focus of what we do.

This communion with God which constitutes the relational context and process of life was broken by human disobedience and independence, with the relational consequence “to be apart.” Certainly, not only in relation to work but also in our relationships (especially with God) this condition “to be apart” underlies our reductionist tendencies, the substitutes we make in life and why we settle for less. In the human narrative, essentially every human activity since Adam and Eve’s disobedient independence has been to diminish, distort or deny the primacy of relationships in the created order. In the divine narrative, everything the Trinity has done is relational and is done to restore relationships to God’s original design and purpose. This created design and purpose is what Jesus came to restore us to—both with God and with others. Our theology and doctrine need to reflect this coherence.

As we reflect on creation and the relational context and process, we have to examine how we also “see” God and thus relate to this God. If we only see God as Creator, there can be a tendency to define God by what God did (past and present) and ignore God’s whole being. This is especially the tendency if our perceptual-interpretive framework is reductionist. To focus on and relate to God’s being is not only to engage the sovereign God (who commands) but also to be involved with the triune God (who is intimately relational). On the basis of this God the relational process is constituted. Any other God is a reduction of the God of creation and the God of revelation vulnerably shared with us.

Relationship with God cannot be engaged on reductionist terms, despite how much and well we may work *for* God. Such “engagement” even with good intentions essentially seeks relationship with God only on our terms. Jesus put this relational reduction into perspective for his disciples by defining what is important and thus primary: “whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be” (Jn 12:26). The Greek term “to serve” (*diakoneo*)



comes from the word for minister, deacon, servant (*diakonos*) and has the emphasis on the work to be done, not on the relationship between a master and servant. Note this distinction because the emphasis of “serve” is similar to the focus on work discussed earlier when God created Eve. Here Jesus is telling us emphatically that in order to serve him it’s not sufficient for Christians to focus “on the work to be done,” or on related situations, circumstances, no matter how dedicated we are or how good our intentions. Service (work) is not what being a follower of Jesus is all about. While service results from it, even being a disciple does not mean to focus on and emphasize service (what we do) first. As an aspect of worship, service emerges relationally from the other relational responses of praise, adoration and submission (PASS).

Here again, the necessary and more important priority is to be involved in the ongoing deep relational process of following Christ (discipleship), that is the intimate relationship of *being with him*. Being a follower of Christ *is* this relationship first and foremost; this intimate relationship is the true vocation of all his followers because Jesus restores us to God’s design and purpose.<sup>3</sup> This created order is purely relational, and the new creation in Christ fulfills this—the completion of which the Spirit is to continue. Therefore, the primary work God created us for is totally *relational work*.<sup>4</sup> All other work is not only secondary and subordinate to relational work but to be undertaken and engaged according to this primary work of relationship.

And relational work in our involvement with God is the foremost priority—and the greatest command from God, including relational involvement with others over which no other work has priority or more importance. Jesus further clarifies the ongoing functional perspective of relational work by defining what is necessary according to God’s desires (Mt 22:37-40; Mk 12:28-31). He refocused any reductionist perceptions (interpretations) of the commandments and summarized what has relational significance to God. The first priority is to love God and the second is to love your neighbor. In a reductionist framework “love” is defined essentially by doing something (what we do) and focuses on the work to be done, not relationship. Normative Jewish religious practice up to the time of Christ followed a code and defined righteousness by the extent of observing a code of conduct; Jesus was responding to such a mindset. Both these reductionist substitutes might practice “the letter of the law” (about following a code) but not “the spirit of the law” (about relational involvement of love), as Jesus outlined in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) making the inner person and relationships primary. This is why Jesus clearly expresses the need that our righteousness “surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law” (Mt 5:20)—that is, surpasses the reductionists.

Love—from *hesed* in the OT to *agape* in the NT—is not about an attribute of the individual but about the function of the whole person in relationship. *Hesed* presupposes the existence of a relationship between persons involved; and where no relationship has been established previously, the person exercising *hesed* has chosen to be involved with the recipient

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<sup>3</sup> I formulate a theology of discipleship in *The Relational Progression: A Relational Theology of Discipleship* (Discipleship Study, 2004); online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

<sup>4</sup> The process of relational work is developed in another study of mine, *Following Jesus, Knowing Christ: Engaging the Intimate Relational Process* (Spirituality Study, 2003); online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

and treat them as if such a relationship was existing. *Agape* often tends to be perceived outside of the relational context, thus focusing on the individual and doing something—notably sacrificial self-giving. This reduces the relational process of love to “what to do,” which makes love more about the individual than the relationship, more about giving something than about vulnerably involving self with another in relationship. Biblical love, however, is not about *what to do* focused on promoting the attribute of doing something positive, even sacrificially, but about *how to be involved* with others (foremost God) in relationship focused on them while promoting their well-being.

Unfortunately, when Christ’s *agape* love is highlighted, *agape* is often reduced to his sacrifice on the cross without the full relational significance of his life as the whole of God. When this incomplete Christology is used to determine our practice of love, the created function of our persons is reduced in a truncated soteriology without eschatological understanding of the whole of God’s desires. When God’s unfailing love is highlighted (cf. Ps 107), *hesed* is not merely about an attribute that does not change, fail or cease but about God’s ongoing involvement and treatment of us in covenant relationship. “God is love” therefore tells us less about *what* God is and more about *how* God is in relationship.

Love defining what God is and expressing how God is—specifically within God’s being as trinitarian and particularly in God’s revelation in the incarnation—is not about “what to do” (doing something) but about “how to be involved” (being a whole person in relationships). We cannot reduce the God of love to merely doing something and thus limit God’s qualitative being, intimate relational nature and vulnerable involvement with us to only what God does. Any reductions limit us to quantitative (outer-in) perceptions/interpretations which may inform us of some of God’s activity but do not provide us the framework to truly know the qualitative God and to intimately experience the significance of love intrinsic to the relational involvement of the Trinity’s communion. In the trinitarian relational context and relational process, the whole of God is always vulnerable to us in relationship and thus also accountable to us in this relationship.

God created persons for relationship and to be intimately involved with each other, the design and purpose of which is engaged by relational work. In his summary account of God’s desires, Jesus refocuses us on this relational God and the relational work needed to respond to God’s commands (desires) with relational significance. To love God is the intimate involvement of the whole person in ongoing relationship. Nothing is more important than this relational response (Mk 12:31), and all of God’s desires from throughout the OT “hang on” this relational response (Mt 22:40). It is this intimate relational involvement of love which functionally defines the qualitative difference of God, as in the Trinity which Jesus revealed vulnerably about his relationship with the Father (both *agape* Jn 15:9 and *phileo* Jn 5:20), and which functionally defines the relational design and purpose for human persons.

The second command is not to be engaged apart from the first because it is an extension of it. In a reductionist interpretive framework the predisposition is to interpret “love your neighbor” as the quantitative work of doing something positive rather than by the qualitative relational involvement with others. Yet, Jesus said “the second is like [the first]” (Mt 22:39). The term for “like” (*homoios*) denotes a correspondence in property or nature. That is, to love God is complete relational involvement by the whole person; this is the property that corresponds to God’s love and the intimate relational nature of God’s involvement with us. This is the relational response God desires (commands) back from us, and the relational involvement extended to

others which would witness to the property and nature of God's love both for us and from us. Alternatives from a quantitative reductionist framework cannot substitute for this qualitative relational significance, nor can they fulfill the created function for human persons.

This relational work became problematic for Adam as we can observe of his relational behavior in the Garden after his disobedience. First, he invented the "human mask" in relationships to cover up the true self ("fig leaves," Gen 3:7). Then he kept relational distance from God ("hid from," 3:8), only to experience the tension and fear of the disclosure of his person ("afraid," 3:10). To preserve his image or self-worth he deflected responsibility and would not be accountable to God for his person, even at Eve's expense (3:12). These four practices are counter to relational involvement and compound the relational work needed for relationship with God and with others. This is to be expected when the whole person is reduced and the primacy of intimate relationships is reduced in human action.

Yet these practices are common to all of us, and we rarely need special circumstances (as in Adam's case) to engage them. The operative word here is "common" because this is the common way we do relationships, even in the church. Relational work was problematic for Adam, for Israel, for the first disciples and in church history. And relational work has been particularly problematic since the Enlightenment and continues to be problematic today as compounded by modernity, and now has a renewed challenge in this postmodern period.

Relational work becomes further problematic for us when a reductionist interpretive framework misperceives God's purpose for creating Eve and the significance of her relationship with Adam. These are vital issues which our discussion needs to include in order to understand what adds or subtracts in the relational equation of God's created (original and new in Christ) design and purpose, particularly for the church.

## **Eve's Purpose**

Critical to our deeper understanding of the purpose for Eve's creation is the focus on the kind of work emphasized in the creation narrative. If you translate the Hebrew expression *'ezer kenegdo* as "a helper suitable for him" (Gen 2:18 NIV), thus interpreting the woman as an assistant or helpmate to the man (as complementarians do), then the focus is on the work in the Garden with the emphasis on "what they did." Or if you translate it "a power [or strength] corresponding to man"<sup>5</sup> with the interpretation of Eve corresponding to Adam in every way, even "be his equal" (as egalitarians do), the focus can be on any type of work with the emphasis still on "what they do." Both of these interpretations and perceptions minimize or even preclude the primacy of relational work in God's design and purpose for relationships between persons created in God's image, likeness. This is the consequence because an emphasis on "what we do" reduces the qualitative focus of how we function in relationships in order to be whole merely to performing a role.

It is also not sufficient to say that Adam was lonely and needed a proper counterpart

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

because he was living without community. While these conditions existed, community and its formation connote different perceptions to persons, the very least of which may not even involve intimate relationships as understood in the community (communion) of the Trinity. Yet, God did not create Eve for Adam in order to have simply a collective dimension to life called community or a social context within which to do their living. This has implications for church practice which will be discussed in later chapters.

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

Eve's purpose was not about working the Garden nor filling the earth, especially as we have come to define those purposes with the emphasis on "what we do." These would be quantitative reductionist substitutes which redefine the person from the outside in—for example, according to roles and our performance. Even though Eve was created as a person in God's image to complete the relational context and process, she was not immune from reductionism because she was free to redefine her person. While making this choice does not change the created ontology of personhood, it reduces how the person functions and constrains what the person experiences, thus effectively redefining personhood in human perception.

Satan tempted (tested) Eve with just such a reduction of her person. In their Garden encounter Satan redefined her person by appealing to her mind with knowledge (Gen 3:5)—the defining characteristic of the modern information age. Such an appeal subtly altered how Eve functionally defined her person, thus shifting her to a quantitative focus on secondary matter (for example, attributes about the fruit, 3:6a). From this quantitative perceptual framework, what she paid attention to and ignored became reordered from what God created and commanded, and inverted her priorities. This led to her pursuit to be a quantitatively better person (by gaining wisdom, intelligence, expertise, 3:6b). The further significance of this reduction and redefinition is 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, 3:5). Adam fell to and labored under this same reductionism.

This dramatically illustrates what underlies all reductionism and Satan's ingenious counter-relational work, which began with the first persons, extended to Jesus and continues with us today, even within the church (2 Cor 11:14,15)—a presence that should not be lost to us, which will be expanded on in Chapter 4.

It would be a further reduction of Eve's purpose, and thus an inaccurate interpretation, to perceive that women (gender and sexuality) were created primarily for specific relationships with men. Underlying Eve's function to work is the purpose God gave her and Adam to "fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). Obviously, this then involved the created function of marriage (2:24) and procreation (3:20). Yet our deeper understanding of marriage and procreation for God's purpose is also contingent on the kind of work emphasized in the creation narrative. If the work focused on is merely about making a living and extending it in raising a family (a dominant view), then our perceptions of marriage and family become reductionist (as previously noted about what we do) and our practice increasingly quantitative (as discussed about how we do relationships). This

was not the purpose for Eve's creation.

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

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

Yet these relationships started in creation were not simply any type of positive relationship, rather only intimate relationships as vulnerably revealed to us in the triunity of God (not tritheism). These intimate relationships then are further distinguished as intimate interdependent relationships signified by the relational work of the Trinity. It was God's purpose from even before creation (Eph 1:4, 5) that these intimate interdependent relationships function to build *together* persons after the whole of God's likeness—that is, the family of God. This original purpose—started again with Noah (Gen 9:1)—was formalized in the covenant God made with Abram (Gen 17:6), extended through Jacob (Gen 33:5) and is fulfilled in the church through the redemptive reconciliation of Christ and is being completed functionally and experientially by the ongoing relational work of the Spirit (Rom 8:14-16; Eph 1:13, 14). God's revelation and our theology cohere in this relational progression of God's created (original and new in Christ) design and purpose,<sup>6</sup> which are functionally whole and wholistically relational.

Jesus came to restore us to God's design and purpose started in creation. Yet, we often appear not to have this functionally whole understanding of God's vulnerable revelation in the incarnation and the relational work signified by the gospel. When we separate or subordinate the primacy of the relational work in God's purpose to build not just family (in all its forms) but the kinship family of God, marriage and procreation (thus the purpose of Eve's creation) take on a

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<sup>6</sup> This progression and coherence are developed further in *The Relational Progression: A Relational Theology of Discipleship*.

different purpose than God intended. Instead, they become a function of our purpose to make a living, to have a life and to build one's life (characteristics of *bios*, not *zoe*, cf. Jn 10:10). Consequently, what is only secondary to and a means for God's purpose becomes primary for and a means to one's own purpose. This reductionist framework for marriage and family certainly has had its consequences on building the family of God today. Despite the emphasis on marriage and family (and related values) which has "filled" many churches, we seem to have difficulty building the intimate interdependent relationships started in God's created design and purpose. Certainly, if we don't deeply understand what God started, it will remain difficult for us to complete ("fill") this purpose as God intends, regardless of our best intentions.

### **Eve's Relationship with Adam**

To understand Eve and Adam's relationship we have to look deeper than the notion of male-female relationships, thus beyond marriage and raising a family. The creation narrative gives us little account of their relationship prior to their disobedience and independence. As previously discussed, they both engaged in reductionism at Satan's urging. This suggests the beginnings of a paradigm shift in their perceptual framework which would shift the focus away from the qualitative (and from inner out) to the quantitative (and the outer in). This shift was significant not only in their relationship with God noted above but also significant in how they functioned in their relationship with each other.

Before the Fall, Eve was able to be "naked" before Adam and likewise Adam before Eve (Gen 2:25). Reductionism was not engaged at this point so this did not imply any sexual interaction. While the term "naked" denotes not wearing outer clothes, they were freely able to be with each other in the whole persons they were without having to mask any part of their person. Thus, "they felt no shame" (2:25). This is not without the deepest of significance and suggests the qualitative nature by which genuine intimate relationships are constituted. The Hebrew word for "shame" (*bos*) denotes confusion, embarrassment or dismay when things do not turn out as expected. Applying this to relationships, we all have been in a relationship situation where such feelings (ours or the other person's) were experienced because one (or both) of the persons did not turn out as expected. This goes beyond male-female relationships to any relationship where the person (again ours or the other's) does not function as expected, desired or hoped for.

For Adam, the issue in creation of "not good" was a qualitative-relational matter, not a quantitative condition "to be alone." The latter is often addressed in quantitative terms with reductionist substitutes (for example, to "fill a void"). Further, it is qualitatively good and quantitatively necessary "to be alone" (and quiet) at times, especially in today's Western lifestyle. The primary issue for Adam's person (and all persons), however, is that God did not want Adam "to be apart" from the qualitative significance of another person corresponding to his person in the image of God, which also involved the qualitative experience of intimate relationship together in the likeness of the Trinity (cf. Jn 17:21, 22). That person was Eve, a person for relationship who was embodied in female gender (a distinction not to be confused with the qualitative significance of her person, yet having a significance to be discussed later).

The introduction of Eve did not confuse Adam because they were both persons of the

same qualitative significance, despite anatomical differences secondary to their person. Adam was not disappointed with Eve's person nor Eve with Adam's; "they felt no shame." Nor did her presence embarrass him about his person or her person, and conversely for Eve. They were able to be the whole persons they were and "felt no shame." Furthermore, Adam was not dissatisfied with God's gift of Eve's person, nor Eve with Adam—at least prior to their reductionism (cf. Gen 3:12). They were fully able to enjoy the qualitative experience of each other's person; "they were both naked and they felt no shame." In other words, they each functioned in the image of God, participated together in the image of the triune God and experienced in relationship the very likeness of the whole of God constituted in the Trinity. This is our initial glimpse of persons in the image of God experiencing their created function, which lays the groundwork for our deeper understanding of the function of the *imago dei* to be discussed in Chapter 5.

The significance of this relational involvement was fundamental to God's design and purpose for them. This is not about marriage and raising a family but about relationship in which both persons would not "be apart" from the whole of God. "To be apart" was not the relational quality of God's likeness; to be less than the whole person God created was not the qualitative significance of God's image. These are conditions which marriage and family do not necessarily address nor guarantee. The ultimate quality of their persons and their relationship was not defined by nor experienced in marriage. If this were the ultimate of God's creation, there would be marriage in the new creation in heaven (Mt 22:29-30). In one sense, marriage can become a reductionist substitute that keeps us apart from the whole of God.

This intimate relational context and process is God's design and purpose for all persons and all relationships. They define the deep desires for these relationships God has and wants for us (cf. Gen 6:6). Yet, God counters the kind of relationships for us demonstrated by Adam and Eve after they engaged reductionism of their persons and their relationships (both with each other and with God). This established a course for the person and relationships which inverted the definition of the person (now from the outer in) and the priority of intimate relationships.

## **Shifting Function**

How deeply we understand God's design and purpose—which are functionally whole and wholistically relational—and how well we perceive the shift away from this intimate relational context and process taking place due to reductionism are both critical for Christian function and practice, individually as well as corporately. Yet, I doubt if we have adequately addressed the relational work necessary to deal with the reductionist influences on our practice "to be apart" in our relationships. We may have addressed in a limited way the issue of "to be alone"—at least to the extent that marriage and family may provide. Even within those traditional alternatives, however, "to be apart" is not adequately addressed such that it is our primary functional priority in order not to experience what Adam did before Eve's creation, nor what they experienced together after reductionism.

This also necessitates addressing functionally how we define the human person and personhood, thus ourselves in the context of everyday living. How we define ourselves is an antecedent issue because this determines how we function in relationships—both of which will determine how we do church. These issues (how we define ourselves, how we do relationships,

how we do church) are directly interrelated, inseparable as well as reflexive in influence on each other. And reductionism in one area will impact the other area(s), as noted in the creation narrative. Similarly, the transformation of one will necessitate or determine the transformation of the others. This is the ongoing conflict and hope human persons face in their created function.

The whole person and the relationship to be whole started by God in creation are for us to complete—not on our terms, however. The persons and the relationships between these persons created by God are taken directly from the whole of God’s being and nature. That is, they *reflect* who, what and how God is, and thus truly *represent* God only by living in the intimate relational context and process of this God. Yet, we make too many assumptions about God in our practice (not necessarily in our theology), often from a reductionist interpretive framework which predisposes us to perceive of God in a quantitative box.



In many of our experiences (not our belief system) the God of creation often becomes in effect somewhat deistic (uninvolved or detached) in function or is perceived as so awesome in nature making it improbable to have intimate relationship with—as in a classic monotheistic perception of a non-relational God. At the same time, in our Christian practice our notions of God can become overly personalized effectively perceiving God more in our anthropomorphic image, thus to our level and on our terms.

These perceptions come from reductionism which imposes a reductionist interpretive framework on God. Whether it perceives a transcendent, sovereign God without an intimate relational nature or perceives a personal God without much, if any, of a transcendent, sovereign being, they reduce God into a quantitative box—who either does not get involved in relationship or who does relationship on our terms. Consequently, what is not fully acknowledged, deeply addressed or openly dealt with is the vulnerable presence of God—that is, this transcendent God of qualitative significance with the intimate relational nature who sovereignly acted to be vulnerably extended directly to us. And what we do with this functionally out-of-the-box God depends on our perceptual-interpretive framework which filters what we pay attention to or ignore about God’s self-disclosure, God’s vulnerable revelation to us.

The vulnerable presence of God is revealed to us in more qualitative relational terms from the inside out than in quantitative propositional terms from the outside in, though certainly quantified in the incarnation. We need to understand this revelation as fundamental to how God does relationship. God’s revelation is not about information or things about God. This self-disclosure narrative is not done in a vacuum nor on a stage (for example, as a one-actor play); it is shared in relationship. And how God lives and practices relationship involves three interrelated-overlapping issues, which also apply to all human practice: (1) how we present ourselves, (2) the content of our communication, and (3) the level of relationship we engage. Biblical hermeneutics tends to concentrate only on the second area, often with a quantitative interpretive framework which reduces communication to limited content. We need to understand all three aspects of God’s self-disclosure to us.

### **The Face of This Triune God**

Throughout the biblical narrative God’s most vulnerable revelation was not indirect communication to be observed and quantified but rather direct vulnerable connection (“face to face”) to be embraced and experienced. This is about how God presents the divine Self and does relationship. This relational context and process of God’s self-disclosure is completely necessary to understand who, what and how the whole of God is, thus to know God from the inside out and to experience intimate relationship with this God. If God did not engage an intimate level of relationship in self-disclosure, we could not have this intimate experience of truly knowing

God—leaving us with only knowledge of some things about God.

Jacob and Moses were recorded as having interacted directly with God “face to face” (*paneh*, signifying direct access, Gen 32:30; Ex 33:11; and *peh* as an idiom signifying direct communication, Nu 12:8). The exact substance of the metaphor “the face of God” is not understood since, on the one hand, God does not have a quantitative face while on the other no one has seen God (Ex 33:20; Jn 1:18). Nevertheless, this does not diminish the qualitative significance of their direct intimate relations with God. However God was presented to them, it was direct, open and the communication substantive of God. Yet, they represent a very limited experience of God’s revelation on which we should not base our expectations for experiencing the triune God’s presence.

Even though the connections Jacob and Moses had with God’s self-disclosure were direct and intimate, the most vulnerable revelation of the whole of God came in the incarnation. In Jesus is where the relational context and process of God’s self-disclosure is totally fulfilled, and the who, what, how of God is revealed “in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). Here God is fully presented (how self is presented) with vulnerable sharing (content of communication), engaging intimate relationship (level of relationship engaged). It is this person Jesus (in complete Christology) with whom our persons need to come “face to face” in order to understand the qualitative significance of the Creator, to grasp relationship with the sovereign God and to experience intimate relationship with the transcendent “face” of God vulnerably extended to us in the persons of the Trinity. Yet, “face to face” requires a response compatible to how God does relationship in self-disclosure with the face of Christ.

## **The Experience of Knowing**

God’s general revelation (for example, in creation, Rom 1:20) points to God; and intelligent design may indicate a creator. These quantitative aspects are observable by human effort without any further involvement from God. Only God’s direct self-disclosure, however, gives us access to *know* God beyond these very general aspects. This special revelation is the sovereign God’s favor extended specifically to us, totally initiated by God without provocation, justification or negotiation by us—that is, only by the grace of God, which tells us a lot about how God does relationships. Therefore, God’s special revelation is not a response to us that we initiated or justified. God’s vulnerable self-disclosure, direct sharing and intimate involvement, however, require a compatible response from us (or any inquirer) in order to complete the relational dynamic necessary to know this God. That response is the intimate relational involvement from the qualitative significance of our person (the whole person signified by the heart), which then consummates the relational context and process started at creation and restored by Christ.

In other words, how God’s Self is presented to us is how we need to present ourselves in response. The qualitative-substantive content of God’s communication needs to be understood within this relational context and process, which goes beyond a cultural perceptual framework and deeper than a quantitative interpretive framework. As God engaged an intimate level of relational involvement in self-disclosure, likewise we need to engage God in intimate relationship in order to understand this revelation and know this God—not something less nor a

substitute. In Jesus, God presented the full person of God, nothing less and no substitutes (Heb 1:3; Jn 1:18; 14:9; Col 1:19). Therefore, God's self-disclosure necessitates the same relational response and involvement from us (nothing less from us and no substitutes for us) to be compatible for epistemic connection (the act of knowing). This inquiry is in contrast to a scientific paradigm of modernity (with so-called detached observation) and its reductionism (as represented in foundationalism), though not completely in conflict with the quantitative basis for truth (unlike postmodernism).

If we reduce or ignore the relational purpose for God's self-disclosing initiative, we will also reduce or ignore our relational response to God's revelation. A prevailing rationalistic approach or a totally subjective approach to the inquiry of truth and knowledge of God leave us respectively with a reductionist theology (usually lacking coherence) or relative notions of God (from one's own narrative or one's community narrative, which can even seem incoherent). God's self-disclosure was completely for relationship, not for objective knowledge and relative experiences.

Jesus demonstrated that the epistemic process (way to know) to understand God is relational, with a combination qualitative and quantitative perceptual-interpretive framework in this relational approach. This relational process is not a unilateral effort (that is, for us to find out about God) but a reciprocal effort. This requires a mutual process of the who, what, how of God vulnerably revealed to us and our involved response back to God in that revelation—a reciprocal relational process mediated by the Spirit (cf. Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-15). Without this ongoing relational response the epistemic process of knowing God is incomplete, no matter what effort God has made in self-disclosure.

Before we discuss how Jesus demonstrated this, we need to distinguish between “the experience of knowing someone” from “the knowledge of knowing *something* about someone.” At times we confuse the latter with the former; reductionism substitutes the latter as the norm for relationships, even in relation to God. We may have knowledge of God through biblical study, or be informed of God by theological propositions. Yet, as valid as they may be, these are only knowing something about God, not the same as knowing God “face to face.” Knowing someone is a function of relationship and not a mere noetic engagement; thus knowing God is the relational outcome of intimate response and involvement—which includes the trust exercised as the qualitative involvement of the whole person signified by the heart—in relationship directly with God. This relational outcome is the experience of knowing God “face to face,” not merely the knowledge of knowing something about God.

As a function of relationship, the relational dynamic of understanding and knowing God involves the convergence and connection of two necessary relational acts. First in progression, by necessity, is God's self-disclosing initiative; this relational epistemic process does not happen without God's grace. Second in this progression is our reciprocal relational response which necessarily must (by its nature, not out of compulsion or obligation) be compatible with the first relational act.

How did Jesus demonstrate this relational epistemic process which becomes the basis for the practice of his followers in spiritual formation, for church growth and in the theological task? Let's look at two interrelated examples.

The first example involved a group of followers pursuing Jesus with a passion after his feeding of five thousand (Jn 6:24ff). Yet, Jesus was unimpressed because of their perceptual-

interpretive framework. In other words, Jesus knew where they were coming from. What they paid attention to and what they ignored about Jesus exposed a reductionist framework. They defined Jesus' person by what he did (albeit miracles) and focused on quantitative secondary things (measured by economic interests and full stomachs). In exposing the reductionist nature of their following him, Jesus said "you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs" (6:26). They indeed paid attention to the miraculous acts but they ignored what those acts revealed about Jesus' person (from inside out), thus followed him for the wrong reasons. "Miraculous signs" (*semeion*) signify more than the quantitative act but have the purpose to reveal the significance of the person behind the act (cf. Mk 16:20).

Jesus challenged their perceptual framework by focusing them on the qualitative (6:27). However, since they also defined themselves by what they do, they inquired further about the extent ("works of God") of "what to do" (6:28). His response defines the qualitative process for authentic practice as his followers: the work (note only singular) of God is only about relational work and intimate relational response and involvement with God's self-disclosure (6:29).

Their epistemic process paid attention to quantitative things about Jesus and reduced his person to what he did. Such efforts to define his person totally missed understanding the qualitative significance of the person Jesus, this person God vulnerably revealed to them with the very face of God. Sadly, they would not engage the relational epistemic process by completing their reciprocal relational response to be intimately involved with God "face to face." Though using the same word as Jesus (*semeion*, 6:26), they inquired about only more quantitative "proof" (6:30), thus exposing their confusion of "the knowledge of knowing something about someone" with "the experience of knowing someone" and substituting the former in this relational process. As a result, many stopped following Jesus because they did not shift to the qualitative framework which is necessary to complete a compatible response to God's vulnerable self-disclosure (6:66). Despite the loss in numbers, this was in fact a positive development because it clearly distinguished genuine followers of Christ from those with illusions about relationship with God, illusions which we often labor under today.

Yet, the relational epistemic process was still problematic for the remaining disciples. This is clearly illustrated in a second example. As Jesus was nearing the end of his earthly life and ministry, he gathered with his disciples for their most significant interactions. Our second example focuses on two of these interactions (Jn 14:1-11). Jesus told them that "you know the way" (14:4). Speaking for the disciples, Thomas replied "we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way" (14:5). This is a reasonable, legitimate response—that is, from a quantitative perceptual framework which focused on secondary things such as location and directions there, that is, the situation over the relationship.

Jesus refocused them on the qualitative significance of his person and on the primacy of relationship signified in his intimate relationship with the Father, which constitutes the relationships in the Trinity. And he confidently added that his disciples "from now on, you do know [the Father] and have seen [the Father]" (14:6,7). How could Jesus make this claim given the data before them? Thus, Philip replied back from a quantitative framework essentially seeking Jesus to quantify this reality (14:8; cf. Jn 2:18; 10:30,31). For certain Jews, their inability to perceive the truth of Jesus might be attributed to the predisposition of sin. For his remaining disciples, however, we have to turn to their perceptual-interpretive framework.

"You know the way" converges with Jesus' next response "don't you know me . . . ?"

(14:9), in which he seemed to express frustration and sadness. Jesus understood what was missing from the disciples' epistemic process. Even though Jesus had been intimately involved with them and vulnerably revealed to them the face of God those past three years, the disciples clearly were not deeply connecting with Jesus' person and, as a consequence, they truly did not *know* him. They needed to change how they did relationships and shift to a qualitative framework to engage the deeper relational epistemic process compatible with God's revelation. Without this intimate relational response and ongoing involvement with the face of God, they would not know Jesus nor experience the persons of the Trinity. Without shifting from a reductionist perceptual framework, they would continue to pay attention to only quantitative and secondary things about God while ignoring the qualitative and primary of God, both signified by revelation and constituted in creation's (original and new in Christ) design and purpose.

The relational epistemic process also includes a quantitative aspect which is not in conflict with the qualitative but in support of it. As Jesus questioned Philip about not knowing him "even after I have been among you such a long time" (14:9), the word for time (*chronos*) perceives time quantitatively. Jesus affirms that his revelation of God took place in observable time and space, while contextualized in human culture and history. Yet, it was inadequate for Philip to be merely an observer to this quantitative aspect. Such observations may yield knowledge of knowing something about Jesus (which the disciples had) but not the experience of knowing the person Jesus in his qualitative significance. The quantitative aspect is *necessary* to support the validity of the qualitative yet is not *sufficient* to grasp the qualitative face of God.

The quantitative support of the relational quality of God's self-disclosure is further reinforced by Jesus when he used his "works" as partial basis to trust him (14:11). The NIV renders works as "evidence of the miracles." This is limiting since the term for work (*ergon*) involves the basic work of one's life (cf. work in Gen 2:15). Jesus' miracles only supported his primary work which was totally relational work. The sum of Jesus' works—primarily qualitative but partially quantitative—provide the complete basis for "believe me" (relational trust), which is incomplete without the intimate relational response and involvement with God's revelation in the face of Christ.

Likewise, when terms like righteous and faithful are used to describe God, these are not quantitative descriptions which merely inform us of something about God. These are qualitative terms revealing to us *what* and *how* God is; and the significance of righteous and faithful is their function in relationships. That is, the righteous God is always consistent with the nature of *what* God is, and the faithful God can ongoingly be counted on as *how* God is, thus we can expect this God to be in relationship together only by what and how God is. Further, we can expect and count on what God presents in self-disclosure, what God communicates and the level of relationship God engages to be the qualitative significance of the whole of God—nothing less and no substitutes. As signified by the incarnation and constituted in the face of Christ, this is how God does relationship. If we are to go deeper than the knowledge of knowing the righteous and faithful attributes about God (separated from the relational context and process) to the qualitative experience of knowing this righteous and faithful God, this is how we need to do relationship as a compatible response in relational reciprocity to how God does relationship.

The above two examples with Jesus demonstrate the necessary relational nature of the epistemic process which defines a qualitative process of the whole person in relational engagement with both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of God's self-disclosure. In the

second example in particular, Jesus is not only demonstrating to us what the mode of inquiry is for the experience of knowing God (and any person), but he is also clearly revealing to us what aspect (dimension) of reality, creation, life is the most significant to know and thus meaningful to experience: the qualitative significance of the whole person (notably the very heart of God's life in his image) and intimate relationship together necessary for the created design and purpose to be whole in God's likeness (as constituted in the Trinity). This is the nature of reality and the ultimate reality (ontology) which is basic to epistemic pursuit.

Reductionism in any form either stops short of this relational-epistemic process or provides substitutes for the relational function of God's self-disclosure in the face of Christ. Whether it is a reduction of our "face" or the "face" of God—likely both—it is less than "face to face." This way to do relationships always lacks relational significance to God, lacks the relational significance of the trinitarian persons of the Godhead, and ultimately leaves us (individually and corporately) lacking in the condition "to be apart" from the whole of God.

### **Convergence with the Trinity**

This condition "to be apart" from the whole is the central issue underlying God's purpose in the original creation and for the new creation in Christ. Whatever aspect or degree of "being apart" are considered, they are reductions of God's purpose. Even more importantly, "to be apart" is a reduction of God's image and likeness, thus a reduction of God as constituted in the Trinity (God's ontic Being) and as signified by the relational function of the trinitarian persons in the trinity of God. In other words, "to be apart"—any vertical or horizontal relational distance—is not who, what and how the whole of God is, it does not *reflect* God and it does not *represent* God—the out-of-the-box God.

Jesus said the one God is presented to us and communicates directly with us in three persons (not modes, Jn 14:10, 25, 26; 15:26; 16:13-15; 17:6-8) while engaging us in intimate relationship (Jn 14:16, 17, 23; 15:9; 17:26). The primary significance of Jesus' focus in this farewell narrative (Jn 14-17) is not about doctrine, service or mission but about the primacy of relationship together (both with the whole of God and with each other). This is who, what, how God is as the Trinity and this is the revelation of God seen in the face of Christ as the ontological and relational whole (oneness) of the Trinity.

God's presence with us is the triune God (again not tritheism). This self-disclosure of God is the disclosure of the Trinity and how the persons of the Trinity do relationships: by the qualitative significance of the whole person engaged in the primacy of intimate relationships. No person of the Trinity can be reduced or ignored and still have who and what God is. Nor can their intimate relationships be reduced and still have what and how God is; these relationships are necessary to be the whole of God. Without the Trinity we have no grasp of the likeness of God in function, and we have no understanding of God's design and purpose for us other than reductionist substitutes.

Jesus came as nothing less than God and with no substitutes for God. This ontological and relational oneness of the Trinity is the reason Jesus can confidently claim "from now on, you do know [the Father] and have seen [the Father]" (Jn 14:7). The sum of the data—with the quantitative supporting the qualitative—of Jesus' revelation allows for no reductionist

alternative. Yet, in the same manner, we need to distinguish the God-with-us God in the persons (not modes) of the Trinity and the God-in-eternity God of triune Being (known as the immanent Trinity). God's self-disclosure and relational work in Christ being brought to completion by the Spirit (called the economic Trinity) is nevertheless only partial revelation of God, thus only provisional for the whole of God's being. While the fullness of God is present and involved with us, the completeness of the transcendent God in eternity is beyond us and remains a mystery. God's self-disclosure does not exhaust this mystery. Any attempt to make the God-with-us (economic Trinity) the totality of the God-in-eternity (immanent Trinity) compromises the latter and becomes another reductionism of God.

Any reductionism of God is critical for the condition "to be apart" and for our practice in how we present ourselves, the content of our communication and the level of relationship we engage. We need to understand any such reductionism as essentially attempting to negotiate (or renegotiate) God's self-disclosure.

This negotiation can be seen in Peter's reductionism of God. In the example discussed earlier about those following Jesus who stopped, Jesus asked the remaining disciples if they wanted to leave also (Jn 6:67). Peter affirmed that Jesus spoke of life as the God from eternity and relationally responded to his revelation (Jn 6:68, 69). Later, when Jesus pushed his disciples for their personal opinion of who he was, Peter again affirmed Jesus as the very revelation of God—which Jesus said was revealed to Peter only by the Father (Mt 16:15-17).

Yet moments after Peter's confession of the Christ, he is rebuking Jesus for telling them of his necessity to go to the cross (Mt 16:21-22). Given God's self-disclosure, Peter is effectively renegotiating Jesus' purpose because that revelation did not fit into the perceptual framework Peter had of God. Peter put God in a quantitative box that would not allow this to happen to his God. This box was evidenced further when Jesus washed his disciples' feet but Peter refused to submit to this contradiction (Jn 13:6-8). Peter's God just could not do such things because of his reductionism of God. Essentially, this reflects a theological shift away from revelation.

As a relational consequence, Peter attempted to negotiate God's self-disclosure. This is a relational consequence because revelation is about how God does relationship. Peter tried to do relationship with God on his terms. Unlike Peter in his explicit attempts to renegotiate the cross, we may not make such attempts in doctrine or theology, yet we would still be renegotiating God's self-disclosure by defining ourselves by what we do. To base our person on what we do increasingly in function reduces the need for God's grace and Christ's relational work on the cross, thus negotiating the terms of how God does relationships. Our self-definition and God's self-disclosure determine how each does relationship; and in order to have relationship together and avoid relational consequences how each does relationship must be compatible with the other.

Both God's self-disclosure and how God does relationship with us, however, are nonnegotiable. Who, what and how the whole of God is cannot be reduced. Based on the qualitative significance and relational integrity of this God-with-us God, our relational response and involvement must by necessity be of like qualitative significance with each of the persons of the Trinity, as well as must converge with the communion of the Trinity in relational oneness—the process of which is all on God's terms. Converging with the Trinity is not ontological but only a function of relationship in the relationship of God.

## The Relationship of God

The relationship of God involves how the whole of God does relationship within the Trinity and the extension of that in how God does relationship with us. How God does relationship is indispensable for defining the person and for our practice of relationships and church.

Where we interpret the direction of God's focus during creation and how we define God's creative action will determine what status the human person needs to have today in actual Christian practice and how the human condition "to be apart" must be addressed, particularly in how church is practiced. Is God focused on the outside in of the person, paying more attention to quantitative matter (like characteristics and behavior) and secondary areas like "work" (what to do) and then taking further creative action to determine a reduced function for persons and how they will do relationships together? Or is God focused on the inner out of the person, paying more attention to the qualitative significance of the heart to define persons and thus taking creative action to establish the primacy of intimate relationships for those persons in the likeness of the Trinity?

To get beyond the mere situation of creation, both where God was focused during creation and how God's creative acts can be defined are only understandable to us by God's self-disclosure in the big picture or eschatological plan for creation. These matters are knowable in the revelation of the face of Christ and with the presentation of the Trinity. The directly related issues of the status of personhood and of the condition "to be apart" become resolved as we grasp God's self-disclosure vulnerably presented to us for relationship.

Since self-disclosure is about how God does relationship, we need to revisit the relationship of God. That is, we need to concentrate on the incarnation of Jesus (especially between the manger and the cross) to witness (as participants, not observers) God's relational progression; and we need to contemplate the Trinity with relational involvement to experience (without reduction) God's relational dynamic of communion and love. As we do, we engage the trinitarian relational context and process started by God at creation before the Fall and restored by Christ, while currently being brought to completion by the Spirit.

The relationship of God disclosed by Jesus in the relational progression is defined thoroughly in another study.<sup>1</sup> So I will limit comments on this aspect only as needed. The most significant aspect of God's self-disclosure in the incarnation is Jesus vulnerably revealing his relationship with the Father. (In the relationship of God the significance of the designation "father" is only to be relationship-specific, not gender-specific.) Ontologically, they are one and their persons are equally the same (consubstantial, Jn 10:38; 14:11, 20; 16:15; 17:21), thus inseparable (never "to be apart" except for one unfathomable moment on the cross, Mt 27:46) and in a limited sense hypothetically interchangeable (Jn 14:9), though there are important issues of trinitarian uniqueness to be discussed in the next chapter. For us, however, it is their relationship, the relationship of God, that has the most significance.

As trinitarian persons (not modes of being) in the qualitative significance of the whole of

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<sup>1</sup> T. Dave Matsuo, *The Relational Progression: A Relational Theology of Discipleship* (Discipleship Study, 2004); online at <http://www.4X12.org>.



God, they are intimately bonded together in relationship and intimately involved with each other in love (Jn 5:20; 14:31; 15:9; 17:24). This is the relationship of God. This relationship is most vulnerably revealed to us in the way Jesus did relationships during the incarnation—within the intimate relational context constituted in the Trinity and by the intimate relational process of love constituted by the Trinity’s relational life together. Jesus’ revelation came with only one way he does relationship—the relationship of God, nothing less and no substitutes.

How Jesus did relationships with various human persons was an extension of how Jesus does relationships with the trinitarian persons of God because Jesus did not engage in reductionism by reducing his person and how God does relationship. Nor did he reduce human persons who are an extension of God’s image and likeness created with the relational design and purpose of the relationship of God. Reductionism is counter to the function of God’s self-disclosure as “nothing less and no substitutes.” What characterizes these relationships in God’s self-disclosure is without reduction: the communion in the intimate involvement of love at the deepest level of qualitative significance (both the heart of God and the human heart created in likeness).

The communion of God (in the Trinity) and our communion with God (with persons in the Trinity) is revealed to us as a function of relationship. The relationship of God, the relationality of the Trinity (social trinitarianism), is critically revealed vulnerably in Christ—to be discussed in the next chapter. This self-disclosure provides us with the fundamental understanding of who, what, how the whole of God is in significance as God of the heart and God’s intimate relational nature. And the most significant function of relationship emerging here is signified by God’s love, which constitutes the Trinity’s relational oneness (communion) reflecting the ontological trinity of God.

Yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, love (*agape*) should not be perceived in reductionist terms. God’s love of each other in the Trinity is not about what to do—as if the persons in the Trinity needed to do anything with each other to demonstrate or prove their love (cf. Jn 15:9,10). The Trinity’s love is only about how they are involved with each other’s person. The synergistic (and perichoretic) mystery of this qualitative involvement is so intimate that though three disclosed persons yet they are one Being, though distinct in function yet they are indistinguishably and indivisibly one together—without relational horizontal distance or vertical stratification.

The relationship of God extends this same love to God’s people (Jn 17:20-26) in the relational process of family love that makes us relationally one with God (not ontologically) without relational distance and one with each other (both relationally and in ontological wholeness) without vertical stratification, just as the Trinity is. This is about family only as God is, the Trinity qua family, and only on God’s terms, family qua the Trinity. As God’s very own in family, the whole person loses unique identity defined from what the individual does or has (reductionism) but gains the special identity of being a part of the whole of God’s family in the relationships necessary to be whole—though each person remains unique in the function of God’s family in the eschatological big picture, just as in the economic Trinity.

By its nature, then, the relationship of God ongoingly engages us in this relational progression and constitutes us (individually and corporately) in the relational progression to the whole of God as family in likeness of the Trinity. Yet, reductionism influences us to stop in

function at points along this progression to relationally diminish or minimize the whole.

### **To Embrace and Experience**

God's relational dynamic of communion and love cannot be reduced or redefined, yet that often happens inadvertently in our practice, keeping us in relational distance from the whole. This is what God started at creation for Eve and Adam to complete. The relational bond of intimate communion in love between the persons of the Trinity and the oneness of their triunity are the resolution for "to be apart" (Gen 2:18) and the basis for "fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). This is about intimate relational involvement in the very life of the whole of God and together in family love building God's family in the likeness of the Trinity—which is a function of relationship, not "work." God's very triune Being is invested and extended in creation; and we cannot reduce this reality without the relational consequence of "to be apart" in whatever degree of relational distance, even in church practice, thus not truly knowing the whole of God (cf. Jn 14:9).

This relational dynamic is what Jesus vulnerably shared with his disciples that when practiced would distinguish them as his followers (Jn 13:35). This is what Christ fulfilled and God's family will bring to completion with the Spirit (Jn 17:22,23). But bringing God's family to completion must (*dei*, necessary by its nature) be a function of relationship and not a reduced function of service, ministry or mission as is our tendency to practice (Jn 12:26).

When not reduced, the relationship of God is relationship of the *whole* (person) in the *whole* (of the Trinity) for the *whole* (of God). This relationship—as the very trinitarian relational context and process of the who, what and how of God—was created in human persons. The relationship of God is how the whole of God is revealed in the face of Jesus for us to understand and is recreated anew in Christ for us to embrace and experience in relational life intimately together with the Trinity and with each other as God's family signified by the Trinity (Jn 17:26; 2 Cor 5:16-18; Rom 8:15, 16, 19-21). This forms not only the narrative truth of the whole of God but also the basis for the truth of the gospel which we embrace and proclaim.

As we consider the status of the person in how we function and the condition of how we do relationships and practice church, the relationship of God is the only practice that has relational significance to the triune God. We need to grasp further the relationship of God as the Trinity functions in order to develop and deepen our understanding of God's desires for our practice.

Since the Trinity is the key for determining the whole person and the relationships necessary together to be whole as God's family, we need to better understand the Trinity, to further grasp the trinitarian persons and the depth of their relationships together as the whole of God. This discussion will be interrelated to current conversation of the human person and human relationships, specifically as it involves distinctions like gender.

When we talk about trinitarian uniqueness distinguishing the Father, the Son and the Spirit in their persons, the ongoing central issue (along with past concerns about tritheism and modalism) is some variation of subordinationism, particularly as it formulates gender relations. Yet we need to reconsider this issue more deeply in the relational context and process of how God does relationship, first within the Trinity and then in relation to us.

Two related theological issues to keep in mind throughout this discussion will be helpful for our understanding. One involves reducing the persons of the Trinity (intentionally or inadvertently) into the whole of God's being such that they lose their uniqueness or personhood (the loss of which becomes susceptible to modalism); on the other hand, overstating their uniqueness opens the possibility of shifting into tritheism. The other issue involves reducing the whole of the Trinity (beyond us in eternity called the immanent Trinity) into the economic Trinity (directly involved with us in revelation) so that the eternal God loses mystery; yet God's self-revelation is only partial (i.e., incomplete) and provisional. Reducing the whole of each trinitarian person or the whole of God's being are consequential not only for our understanding of the triune God but also for understanding what is important about our persons and our relationships in order to be whole in the likeness of who, what and how God is.

We can rely only on God's self-revelation to properly understand the Trinity and their relationships. Anything about God and how God does relationship beyond this revelation is mere speculation. While revelation is only a partial picture of the totality of God, we have sufficient parts of the picture (or pieces in a puzzle) to provide us understanding of the whole of the triune God, the persons of the Trinity and their relationship together. The key, however, is properly putting the pieces together. Jesus confronted his disciples about their lack of understanding in putting the pieces together (*syniemi*, Mk 8:17, cf. Mk 6:52). Paul stated that it was his purpose for us to have this understanding of the whole (*synesis*, Col 2:2) in order that we would specifically know (not just be informed about, *epignosis*) the full significance of the various parts of the mystery of God revealed in the face of Christ.

### **Function, Uniqueness, Subordination**

The main area of disagreement between complementarians and egalitarians over subordination in the Trinity (thus in marriage and the church) involves authority and the roles

signified by authority. Whether differences in function also mean differences in being (and essence) or only role differentiation (for example as argued by Wayne Grudem<sup>1</sup>), subordination is seen as the basis for the differences revealed in the Scriptures. These differences in function God disclosed to us about the trinitarian persons certainly establish their uniqueness. Whether this includes subordination depends on putting the pieces together. We need to more deeply understand the significance of their uniqueness and what it means for their relationships as the whole of the triune God. For this, I suggest not the primary focus of further exegesis of the specific biblical passages in question (which has not resolved our disagreement nor deepened our understanding) but the need to see them in the extended and deeper relational context of God's desires for the eschatological big picture. As noted earlier, this involves a relational epistemic process.

God's self-revelation (which is partial) is about God and about how God does relationship. Yet the relational context and process of God's self-disclosure are always related to us, directly or indirectly. Though revelation is about God, God is focused on us. In other words, revelation is about how God does relationship *for* us and *with* us. This is true before creation (for us) as well as after (with us)—a point of disagreement over functional differences within the Trinity which egalitarians tend to affirm only during the incarnation. The various references to functional differences prior to creation cannot be ignored but they are clearly about God in relation to us (Jn 1:3; Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 1:4; Heb 1:2; 1 Pet 1:2).

Whether before or after creation, God's activity in relation to us is how God does relationship. This suggests how God is throughout eternity because God cannot be inconsistent with the revelation of how God does relationship. This does not, however, define or describe the totality of the immanent Trinity, which cannot be reduced to the economic Trinity—a distinction which is important to maintain. We can only talk about God in terms of how the Trinity is with us—both before creation in anticipation of us and after.

## **In Two Relational Contexts**

Yet, we also need to distinguish further that God does relationship in two distinct relational contexts. One context is totally within the Trinity and their relationships together. The other context is the Trinity's relational involvement with us. How God does relationship is consistent for both contexts, though the relational process is different for each context. Understanding the different relational processes is critical for our understanding of the Trinity and trinitarian uniqueness, as well as for grasping how to do relationship with God and with each other.

For God to do relationship with us involves a very distinct relational process which tells us what matters most to God and thus how God does relationships. In ultimate response to the human condition "to be apart," God extended his love to us in the person of Jesus, the Son (Jn 3:16, 17). Yet, unlike how the trinitarian persons love each other in a horizontal relational process between equals, the natural inequality between Creator and creature necessitates a

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sister, OR: Multnomah Publishers: 2004), 405-433.

vertical relational process. The incompatibility between the holy God and sinful humanity compounds this difference between us. In a quantitative framework, we can say God reaches down from the highest stratum of life to the lowest stratum of life; but, more importantly, God pursues us from a qualitatively different context (holy or uncommon) in a qualitatively different process (eternal and relational). In other words, God had to initiate loving action downward to us in response to our condition “to be apart” in order to reconcile us back together to the whole of God.

This response of God’s grace can only be understood in a vertical relational process, which must be distinguished from the horizontal relational process of how the Trinity loves among themselves. Without God’s loving initiative downward, there would be no compatible relational basis for God to connect with us or for us to connect with God.

In this qualitative process, God cannot love us in a horizontal relational process just as the trinitarian persons love each other. God can only do relationships as God and never on any other terms. For God to be compatible with us and us with God, the connection needs to be a vertical relational process because of the inherent inequality between us. Nevertheless, in spite of God’s obvious superior position and authority, in loving us downward the Son came neither to perpetuate nor to expand the quantitative and qualitative differences between us. Nor did he come to put us down or to condemn us to those differences (Jn 3:17). In the qualitative difference of God’s love, Jesus revealed how God does relationship, which the Spirit’s relational work extends for us to experience. It is vital for us to understand the implications of this qualitative process engaged by God—both in our relationship with God and in our relations with others, as we will discuss later.

## **Subordination in Context**

For the eternal and holy God to be extended to us in loving action downward required the mystery of a quantitative-like reduction (not qualitative) of God. God’s loving action downward underlies the basis for the functional differences in the Trinity revealed to us in the Scriptures. The Son, of course, undertook the most significant aspect of subordinating himself to extend love downward (Phil 2:6-8). This subordinate action of love is further extended downward by the Spirit as the Son’s relational replacement to complete what the Son started (Jn 14:16, 18, 26). God’s initiative downward in the Son, however, must be distinguished from a view that the transcendent God needed an intermediary (that is, Christ) to do this for him—a form of Arianism which claims Christ is less than God in deity, being or substance (*ousia*). The incarnation was the nothing-less-and-no-substitutes God revealing how God does relationship in love.

The relational context and process of God’s focus on us (even before creation) and involvement with us (during and after creation) constitute the functional differences in the Trinity in order for God to love us downward. Each of the trinitarian persons has a distinct role in functioning together as the whole of God to extend love to us in response to our condition “to be apart.” Thus it is in this relational context and process that the Trinity’s functional differences need to be examined.

As we consider trinitarian uniqueness, there are two approaches to the Trinity’s differences that we can take. One approach is a static and more quantitative descriptive account

of the different functions and roles in somewhat fixed relationships. Complementarians use this to establish the primacy of an authority structure within the Trinity that extends to marriage and usually to church. Many egalitarians take the same static-quantitative approach but come to different conclusions about the meaning of functional differences—sometimes even to deny them—yet the primacy of leadership and roles remains.

The other approach is more dynamic and qualitative, focusing on the relational process. While it fully accounts for the different functions and roles in the Trinity, the relational significance of all those involves how each of the trinitarian persons fulfilled a part of the total vertical relational process to love us downward as the whole of God. In this qualitative approach, the primacy shifts from authority (or leadership) and roles to love and relationships.

As we consider differing viewpoints on trinitarian uniqueness and the aspects which are emphasized in those views, we can assess what the whole is that those parts form, and what kind of understanding of God and how God does relationship each view gives us. Central to this assessment is the awareness of the influence of reductionism.

## Development of Trinitarian Views

The doctrine of the Trinity emerged in the fourth century as a response to theological conflict and reductionism. Arius specifically taught that Jesus was subordinate to God in substance (*ousia*) and was created (begotten) by the Father. The Council of Nicea (the Nicene Creed in 325) countered that Jesus was begotten (that is, generated, not created) from the substance of the Father, of the same substance (*homoousios*) with God. In further response to another form of Arianism (from Eunomius: divine substance is unbegotten and only belongs to the Father), the Cappadocian fathers (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianus, between 358-380) formulated the distinction between the same substance of God and the different persons (*hypostasis*) of God, thus establishing the doctrine of the Trinity: one God existing in three persons.<sup>2</sup>

Essentially, from the fourth century into the twenty-first, we observe one aspect of God emphasized over another (for example, the oneness of God or the divine threeness), and some aspect of God reduced (for example, God's substance [*ousia*] or the persons/personhood [*hypostasis*] of God), as well as redefined or ignored (for example, "begotten" or the relationality of the Trinity). If not in theology most certainly in function, these perceptions/interpretations profoundly affect how we define God, define ourselves and thus how we do relationships together as the church.

The Nicene creedal concept of "begotten" (giving priority or primacy to the Father) is problematic today not so much in terms of crossing the line into Arianism but more in terms of understating its significance (as egalitarians tend to do) or overstating it (as complementarians do). That the Son was begotten of (not created nor derived his being from) the Father indicates

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<sup>2</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2004), 252-269. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed. *Freeing Theology: the Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993) 85-87. Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 7-8.

some specific difference in their relationship. What is the significance of this difference?

Wayne Grudem argues that this indicates a functional difference of roles (not substance) that subordinated the Son to the Father eternally. Even though the Son was begotten of the Father, Grudem emphasized that this difference in their relationship *never began* (“begotten of the Father before all worlds”), which includes the authority of the Father over the Son and the Spirit as always part (also “never began”) of their eternal roles (on the basis of Rom 8:29; Eph 1:4).<sup>3</sup> Grudem affirms the equal substance (*homoousios*), value and personhood of the trinitarian persons while maintaining their differences in authority and roles. This certainly mitigated an Arian controversy. Yet it is problematic to say that the trinitarian differences indicated by begetting and authority “never began.”

The term “begotten” is associated with two terms used in the Bible. The most common Greek term is *monogenes*, traditionally rendered “only begotten” with reference to Jesus (Jn 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 Jn 4:9). *Monogenes* means unique, one of a kind, one and only, and is more accurately rendered “only one,” “one and only”—defining the unique relationship of the Son with the Father without implying any element of procreation. We will discuss the significance of this designation for Jesus shortly.

The other term for begotten occurred initially in a messianic psalm about the Christ: “You are my Son; today I have become your Father” (Ps 2:7, *yabad*, meaning become the father of). This verse is quoted in the NT (Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5) with the Greek term *gennaō* meaning to beget, become the father of, generate, originate. This term more directly involves the function of begetting and distinctly defines the relationship between the Father and his Son. Yet when the Father said “today I have become your Father,” the term for “today” (*yom*) denotes both a point in time and a period in time. This certainly indicates that the Lord became the Father of the Son from some point by a purposeful action—action, however, not to be reduced to the procreation in Arianism, nor to overlook and fail to understand its purpose.

If the Trinity functions in subordinate relationships, either this structure always existed eternally (without beginning as Grudem argues) or it was generated/originated (at some point, however a mystery). I do not think these two can validly be combined. If the structure always existed, the Father did not initiate it by his action or authority; like God, it just is and always was. If generated of the Father at some point, the question “why so?” remains unaddressed—which unanswered leaves open the door to some form of Arianism or even modalism.

The NT quotes of Psalm 2:7 help us understand the Father’s purpose to beget (*gennaō*) the Son. In Acts, when asked to speak words of encouragement Paul summarized God’s ongoing faithful response to their condition “to be apart” and the good news that God fulfilled the promise to be the family of God now in Jesus by repeating the reality of Psalm 2:7 (Acts 13:15ff). The truth of this gospel is established further in the Hebrew epistle by clearly defining the equality of the Son in the being of God (Heb 1:2, 3) and his superiority even to the angels (1:4ff). In this comparison with the angels, what is the significance of quoting Psalm 2:7 and also quoting “I will be his Father and he will be my Son”? I suggest, because this is about being God’s family the Father never said this to the angels. They did not inherit the Father’s family name and its rights (1:4), suggesting that even though they were God’s personal messengers and servants they were not full family members. But, as Paul declared in Acts, this is the good news

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<sup>3</sup> Grudem, 405-418.

for the rest of us. And this full membership in God's family is secured by the Son as the great high priest (Heb 4:14ff). Yet this is not about role identity because Psalm 2:7 is quoted (5:5) to focus on the purposeful action of the Father to extend the Son to us in the function of relationships in family love (not priestly duties) in order to reconcile us to God so that we can be in God's family.

Role identity and function are not fixed ends in themselves but always serve the whole of God's design and purpose, particularly as God's thematic response to the human condition "to be apart." We also need to understand this more deeply about authority and the function it serves. In addition, the fact that the Father's authority existed even before the foundation of the world does not automatically mean that it never began. While eternity exists beyond our time and space, whatever exists or took place before this created context are not necessarily "eternal without beginning" (for example, angels). "Never began" has to be assumed by Grudem without biblical support.

Besides assuming "never began," Grudem also gives a static and quantitative descriptive account of these functions and thus ascribes fixed roles to the trinitarian persons in their eternal relationship. In this framework the eternal nature of these different roles constitutes the basis for eternal subordination in the Trinity and establishes the primacy of trinitarian relations in its authority structure. It is a major assumption, however, to define the immanent Trinity by the economic Trinity (which includes before creation). Since this authority structure and these fixed role differences are also used as the basis for constituting gender relations in marriage and the church, this implies the same authority and role differences to continue eternally for men and women—even though marriage does not exist in heaven. Furthermore, we need to see if authority and subordination adequately define the primary function of the relationship of God within the Trinity and if they signify the primacy given to the relationship of God as revealed by the Trinity in relationship with us.

Based on these fixed role differences, what becomes primary in how God does relationship? For Grudem, it is the following: "The doctrine of the Trinity thus indicates that equality of being together with authority and submission to authority are perhaps the most fundamental aspects of interpersonal relationships in the entire universe."<sup>4</sup> I can understand his bias for order and for the need for constraint on free will. Most certainly, there is need for this. Yet Jesus vulnerably revealed more than this about relationship both within the Trinity and for us. These are parts of God's revelation which need to be put together to understand the whole of God and God's desires in the eschatological big picture.

## **A Different Approach**

I can affirm the functions of begetting and authority of the Father but from a different approach. The other approach to understanding the significance of trinitarian differences is more dynamic and qualitative than the descriptive accounts of authority and roles. This involves examining the relational process. Doing this still accounts for the different functions and roles but shifts the focus to the qualitative aspects of persons and relationships and the dynamic

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<sup>4</sup> Grudem, 429.



process in which they are involved. This requires redefining the person not based on what they do (for example, roles) or have (for example, authority) but on what they are in qualitative significance, thus understanding relationships as a functional process of the relational involvement between such whole persons (unreduced) and not as relationships based merely on authority and roles. These relationships help us understand what is necessary to be whole as constituted by the Trinity.

When relationships are defined and examined merely on the basis of roles, this becomes a focus on the quantitative definition of the person (at the very least by what one does in a role) and a quantitative description of relationships (for example, a set of roles in a family) according to the performance of those roles—usually in a set order for different roles or even mutually coexisting for undifferentiated roles. Yet this does not account for the variations which naturally occur in how a person sees a role, performs that role and engages in it differently from one situation to another. Nor does it account for the dynamic relational process in which all of this is taking place—a process necessary for roles to have relational significance.

For example, when the primacy of the Father’s authority and role is emphasized as defining of his person and as constituting the relationships within the Trinity, this tends to imply two conclusions about the Trinity—if not theologically, certainly in how we functionally perceive God. The first implication for the Trinity is that everything is about and for only the Father; the Son and the Spirit are necessary but secondary in function to serve only the Father’s desires. While there is some truth to this in role description, the perceived imbalance reduces the oneness of the triune God with the inadvertent perception of their roles being “different and less” thus operating in stratified relationships. Secondly, such primacy of the Father also tends to imply a person self-sufficient from the other trinitarian persons. This unintentionally counters the relatedness or relationality of God as constituted in the Trinity.

These two conclusions (or variations of them) are problematic for trinitarian theology. But they have deeper implications for our practice of how we define the person, how we engage in relationships and how these become primary in the practice of church.

While the primacy of the Father’s authority and role must be accounted for in the revelation available to us, our understanding of trinitarian differences deepens when examined in the relational context and process of the whole of God and God’s design and purpose for us. God’s self-revelation is about how the whole of God does relationship as the persons of the Trinity in relation to us. In what God disclosed, do role differences fully account for how God does relationship and do they help us understand the significance of what is primary and matters most to God?

## **The Relational Significance of Jesus’ Revelation**

What Jesus revealed consistently throughout the Gospel narratives is that he was indeed all about the Father. He came to reveal the Father (Jn 17:6, 26), everything he did was from the Father (Jn 5:19, 20) and all he said was for the Father (Jn 12:49, 50). Even the cross served the Father—not us, though we benefit from it—as the redemptive means for adoption as the Father’s very own daughters and sons in his family together (Eph 1:5; Col 1:20). This relational conclusion is what is primary to God in response to the human condition “to be apart,” what God

started with creation (and planned even before, Rom 8:29) and Adam and Eve were supposed to complete (“fill the earth” Gen 1:28), and what matters most to God in the big picture (Col 1:19, 20). And the Spirit serves to bring this relational process to its eschatological conclusion (2 Cor 5:5; Eph 1:14); this specific function of the Spirit will be discussed in Chapter 5.

There is a definite subordination indicated in these functional differences. The question we need to answer, however, is what this subordination signifies. Related to this is why the Son originated from the Father and is designated as “the One and Only” (*monogenes*) of God. Does it define fixed roles in a hierarchy or does it signify the relational process of God loving downward necessitating subordination among the trinitarian persons in order to make a compatible relational connection with us, and thus us with God with the result of becoming God’s family?

A hierarchy is about structure and is static. But authority (*arche*) is not merely what someone possesses, rather it is always exercised over another in relationship—thus it involves a dynamic process. Hierarchy and authority together need to be understood as the dynamics of stratified relationships which involve more than order and includes how relationships are done. Stratified relationships can range from the oppression of power relations at one extreme to degrees of separation or, intentionally or unintentionally, to merely distance in relationships. At whatever point in this range, the relationships would be less intimate than what is accessible in horizontal relationships. Does this represent the sum of Jesus’ relationship with his Father or are there more pieces to put together for a fuller understanding of the Trinity?

Besides the functional differences in authority and roles within the Trinity, what other aspects of their relationships are revealed to us? There are two clear overlapping statements Jesus made to define his relationship with the Father: (1) “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30; 17:11, 22), and (2) “the Father is in me and I in the Father” (Jn 10:38; 14:10, 11, 20; 17:21). We need to understand these both ontologically and relationally, thus expanding on the Greek concept of *perichoresis* in trinitarian theology.

The first declaration revealed the ontological oneness of the trinitarian persons in qualitative substance (*homoousios*) which cannot be differentiated in any of their persons from the whole of the triune God, as well as undifferentiated in this sense from each other. Each person is wholly God and a part of the whole of God, suggesting that each is incomplete without the others. Yet what is disclosed to us is not the totality of God but the whole of God in who and what God is and how God does relationship. Paul affirms the whole of God (“fullness,” *pleroma*, complete, Col 1:19) residing in the incarnate Son. Each person is that who, what and how of God without distinctions that would reduce their persons from that whole. Thus they are inseparable, possibly suggesting in a limited sense interchangeable in function. So, on the one hand, if you see one trinitarian person you have seen them all; while on the other, to see the whole of the triune God is to see the trinitarian persons because each person is distinct in the whole but not distinguished from the whole. This constitutes the main basis for Jesus’ bold claim that “anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9; cf. 12:45). He did not merely resemble (*homoioima*, cf. Rom 8:3) the Father but is the exact copy (*charakter*, cf. Heb 1:3) of the Father.

Jesus prayed to the Father that his followers may “be one as we are one” (Jn 17:11, 21, 22). Yet, we cannot have ontological oneness with the triune God such that either we would be deified or God’s being would become all of us (pantheism). What Jesus prayed for that is possible, however, involves his second declaration overlapping with their ontological oneness. “The Father in me and I in the Father” further reveals their oneness not only in ontic qualitative

substance but also in the qualitative significance of relational oneness constituted by their intimate involvement with each other in communion. This deep intimacy together uniquely made Jesus the only one (*monogenes*) to fully exegete (*exegeomai*) the Father (Jn 1:18)—not to merely inform us of the transcendent God but to vulnerably make known the Father for intimate relationship as his family. These relational terms provide the remaining basis for Jesus' claim that if we truly see him we see the Father.

It is important to understand that when Jesus said seeing him was seeing the Father, he revealed in this twofold ontological and relational reality the importance of both what constitutes God's triune being as well as what matters most to God. Though unique in function by their differences in roles, what primarily defines their trinitarian persons are not these role distinctions. To define them by their roles is to define the trinitarian persons by what they do, which would be a reduction of God. This reduction makes role distinctions primary over the purpose for their functional differences to love us downward, thereby reducing not only the qualitative substance of the Trinity but also the qualitative significance of what matters most to God.

God's self-disclosure is about how God does relationship. As disclosed in the persons of the Trinity: the Father is how God does relationship—not about authority and influence; the Son is how God does relationship vulnerably—not about being the obedient subordinate; the Spirit is how God does relationship in the *whole*—not about the helper or mediator. In their functional differences, God is always loving us downward. Yet we cannot utilize how each trinitarian person discloses an aspect of how God does relationship in loving downward in order to make reductionist distinctions between them by which to define their persons. Just as we reduce defining human persons (for example, to what we do) and relationships (for example, to role behavior), this becomes a reductionism of God. Likewise, reducing the whole of each trinitarian person to the particular function each one enacts in loving downward becomes a reduction of how God does relationship, thus reducing the primacy of God's desires, purpose and actions to reconcile us from our condition as well as ongoing tendency “to be apart.” The emphasis on authority and roles does not give us this primacy for relationships nor is it sufficient to reconcile us from being apart—even if our condition “to be apart” only involves relational distance minimizing intimacy in our relationships.

Furthermore, this reduction removes trinitarian uniqueness from the relational context of the eschatological big picture and from its relational process constituted by the primacy of how God does relationship both within the Trinity and in relation to us. What constitutes this primacy in the Trinity's relationships is how they function in their relationships together *in* the whole of God *as* the whole of God and *for* the whole of God. This functional-relational togetherness of the whole of God is not signified by their authority and roles. Authority and roles would not be sufficient to enable Jesus to say seeing him was seeing the Father.

Jesus' declaration to be in the Father and the Father in him was not simply to inform us of God but to provide the primary means to truly know and experience God and be his family. As we grasp this, we more fully understand the significance of his designation as “the One and Only” (*monogenes*). This primacy of relationship within the Trinity is signified only by their intimate communion and love (Jn 3:35; Mk 1:11; Jn 5:20; Mt 17:5; Jn 14:31). Relationships of intimate communion and love are both sufficient and necessary to constitute the whole of the triune God (*homoousios*) as well as to identify the significance of the trinitarian persons

(*hypostasis*) and their relationships. This intimate communion of love is what matters most *to* God because it reflects what's most important *in* God and represents what's most important *of* God—not authority, different roles, unique functions. And this is what Jesus foremost wants us to experience relationally together, and, therefore, is the primary purpose of his formative prayer summarizing his incarnation (Jn 17).

This intimate relational involvement of love signifies both the relational oneness which we can have with the triune God in likeness to the Trinity's oneness and which we need to have also with each other in the intimate relational process vulnerably revealed by Jesus as the One and Only (Jn 14:20; 17:23, 26). Yet, this relational oneness is not about the structure of authority and roles but the function of relationships in the intimate relational process of love. These ongoing dynamic relationships of love, however, require the qualitative substance of God (Eph 1:4; Mt 5:8) and thus relationships only on God's terms (Jn 14:21; 15:9, 10; 17:17-19). Intimate communion with the whole of the triune God cannot be based merely on love because God is holy. This relationship requires compatibility of qualitative substance, therefore the need for our transformation in order to have intimate relationship with the holy God. God's love downward does not supersede this necessity, only provides for it.

From creation, God constituted the human person in the image of the qualitative substance of God (signified by the heart). The trinitarian persons and human persons cannot be separated from this qualitative substance and still be defined as whole persons. This substance is necessary for the primary definition of the person, not the secondary definitions of what they do (roles) or what they have (authority). The Cappadocians formulated the initial doctrine of the Trinity by distinguishing the persons (*hypostasis*) from substance (*ousia*) but advanced the person as ontologically more important than substance in order to give priority to the relationality of the triune God—establishing a social trinitarianism—though their persons were based on begotten and spiration. While this significantly countered the prevailing idea of God's essence as unrelated (or nonrelational), we should not reduce the importance of the qualitative substance of God because both interacting together are necessary to define the whole (oneness) of God and the relationships (threeness) necessary to be whole.

Moreover, to better grasp the qualitative significance of God helps us to more deeply understand the relationality of the Trinity. In trinitarian theology, the predominant explanatory basis for relationality is the Greek idea of *perichoresis*: the interpenetration of the trinitarian persons in dynamic interrelations with each other. The importance of *perichoresis* is certainly critical for our perceptual-interpretive framework and it may be a conceptually more complete term to define the ontology of the Trinity. But we need to expand this idea of relationality because it lacks the functional clarity to be of relational significance to more deeply grasp the whole of God and to intimately experience the who, what and how of God in relationship. The Eastern church, rooted in trinitarian theology from the Cappadocians, appears to lack this functional clarity in their ecclesial practice based on the Trinity. I suggest this is primarily due to the functional absence of the whole person in their relationships together as church—given the reduction of *ousia* inadvertently diminishing the function of the heart. Jesus provides this clarity in how he functioned during the incarnation.

Without this clarity of relational significance, we function less relationally specific—though the intention may be there—to the whole of God, and thus we practice church apart from the relationships necessary to be whole as God's family constituted in the Trinity—even though

the idea may be understood. The lack of functional clarity has further ramifications for how the human person is perceived in the image of God and how our persons function in the relationships necessary to reflect the whole of God's likeness signified in the Trinity as well as to represent and build God's family. This lack results in ontological simulations and epistemological illusions of the whole with reductionist substitutes.

The need for our understanding of the Trinity is not to be informed of God—which *perichoresis* merely tends to do—but to experience the whole of God for relationship: specifically to be involved with God as whole persons in the whole of God's family constituted in and by the Trinity. In the incarnation, the whole of God ultimately coheres for this relationship. The experience of this relational reality of the whole has been the integrating theme of the Trinity's response to our condition "to be apart" from the whole ever since the creation of the first person. God's desires indeed were formulated even before creation to restore us to the whole in the new creation to be completed at the eschatological conclusion.

Reductionism counters all this relational work, as we will see demonstrated by the churches in Ephesus, Sardis and Laodicea (in Rev 2, 3).

### **Reductionist Intrusion in the Process to Family**

Reductionism of the person (trinitarian and human) affects how relationships are done—affecting what we give priority to or minimize, even ignore. The basic issue involves defining the person in quantitative terms from the outside in (which does not include "in" very far) based, for example, on what one does or has, versus in qualitative terms from the inside out based on the primary substance of the inner person (signified by the heart), yet including the whole person, physical as well. The qualitative approach makes secondary any outer distinctions used in a quantitative approach to establish primacy for those differences. This is not to say, for example, that role differences are unimportant—only that they become secondary in priority to what is primary.

While there are functional differences in the Trinity and in the church, to focus on authority and roles to define persons in order to differentiate them from one another as well as to determine the primary way in which they will do relationships together becomes quantitative reductionism of the whole person and of the primary relations necessary to be whole—as revealed by Jesus in how the Trinity does relationship.

Grudem identifies the differences in authority among Father, Son, and Spirit as the only interpersonal differences existing eternally in the Trinity. In his approach, he needs this difference not only to define the trinitarian persons but also to determine how they will do relationship. Moreover, he boldly declares that functioning without this quantitative distinction "would destroy the Trinity."<sup>5</sup> Since Grudem defines the person by one's role in order to differentiate the trinitarian persons and to delineate the way they relate to one another, he argues that without this they would be identical not only in being but also in role and how they relate together. This stands in contrast to Jesus' declarations noted earlier.

Grudem's confusion of what is primary about God and thus matters most to God is a

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<sup>5</sup> Grudem, 433.

result of reductionism—which is not unique to complementarians but includes egalitarians also. To define the person and to maintain this identity in relationships as the primary way to do relationships (and church) based on quantitative terms are contrary to the God in self-revelation. It is one matter to affirm functional differences (with or without subordinationism) but a contrary matter to use those quantitative distinctions as the primary way to define the person and to engage in relationships—which is a practice of both complementarians and egalitarians.

Further, Grudem uses the name “Father” and “Son” to support these distinctions. Though he suggests a biblical basis that only indirectly may define the immanent Trinity (in eternity), he makes assumptions for a syllogistic-like conclusion: since “those names have belonged to the Father and the Son forever”<sup>6</sup> then their roles are also eternally theirs “*because* by nature they have always existed as Father and Son,”<sup>7</sup> therefore the Son is eternally submissive to the Father “simply because He eternally existed as Son, and submission to the Father was inherent in that relationship.”<sup>8</sup> Yet he does not account for the Son as messiah also named “Everlasting Father” (Is 9:6), not to mention Psalm 2:7 noted earlier. Besides making assumptions for the immanent Trinity based on the economic Trinity (as revealed even before creation), Grudem does not adequately put the pieces of revelation together to understand (*syniemi*) the triune God because he focuses on the quantitative distinctions of reductionism. Such an epistemic process is always inadequate to grasp the qualitative whole of God.

In addition, along with his position that this authority and submission “never began,” Grudem supports his conclusion that it will “never end” with 1 Corinthians 15:28: “the Son himself will be made subject to him.” This text refers to after the Son hands over the Kingdom to the Father signifying the beginning of the eternal state, which suggests to Grudem that it will continue for eternity.<sup>9</sup>

Two things strike me about this verse. The Son was already subject to the Father even in the plans made before creation. So why does the Son need to be subject to the Father again at this future point if this was the eternal nature of their relationship? The term for “subject to” (*hypotasso*) is in the Greek future tense passive voice which could be either the regular passive (the Son receives the action by the Father) or the reflexive passive (the Son is acting upon himself). If the regular passive is used here, it also begs the question why future action by the Father is indicated to subject the Son. If it is the reflexive passive in use, then we have to ask what the Son’s purpose would be in this action upon himself. I have no answer to the former other than to try to understand this from a qualitative approach examining the variability of a dynamic relational process as opposed to a static quantitative approach of fixed roles and relationship structure. Regarding the Son’s action upon himself, I will suggest a purpose in the discussion ahead.

God’s self-revelation is how the Trinity does relationship in loving us downward in

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 413.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 438.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 435.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 414.

response to our condition “to be apart.” We need to extend our understanding of the names of the trinitarian persons, their roles in the Trinity and their relationships together by seeing them more deeply in the relational context and process of God’s response to us—the response God planned even before creation. Yet this response exceeded not only what is commonly perceived at creation (as discussed previously) but also goes beyond the limited perceptions of sacrificial love (*agape*) defined only by “doing something” on the cross.

When the cross serves the human individual instead of the Father, it becomes only about atonement for our sins. While atonement is certainly a necessary outcome of Christ’s sacrifice, the cross serves only the Father as the redemptive means to make us compatible relationally in qualitative substance to be adopted as the Father’s very own daughters and sons in his family together. As Psalm 2:7 is used in the NT, this is about being the family of God, not merely about being saved from our sins.

God’s love is always relational—about how to be involved with others in relationship, not about doing something especially on the basis of a role (for example, the Son as the obedient subordinate). To love us God had to extend love downward to be involved with us, as discussed earlier. By further examining this love in the relational context and process of God’s response, a deeper understanding emerges. This is how God’s response functions in relational terms: God as Father extended God down to us in the trinitarian persons (the Son and the Spirit) to pursue us in our condition “to be apart” in order to take us back to their family and attend to our needs—not for a visit or to be their guest (or to become an employee in the household)—so that the Father did not merely receive us into his house but more importantly formally adopted us to be his very own as a full member of his family permanently in intimate interdependent relationship together with all the rights and responsibilities just as the Son, which the Spirit makes an experiential reality and brings to completion at the eschaton. This is the process of *God’s family love*. This trinitarian relational process of family love gives coherence to all the doctrines and aspects of Christian faith but most of all to the primacy of God’s desires.

Since God’s self-revelation is about how God does relationship in loving us downward, this purpose is the significance of functional subordination in the Trinity—necessary for the relational significance of God connecting with us in the context of relationship. Further revealed is how the whole of God does relationship by vulnerably extending family love to us, thus the significance of the functional difference in familial names—particularly the Father and the Son, though including the Spirit as their relational extension (Jn 14:18; 16:13-15; Rom 8:15, 16), to be relationally specific and significant as the family of God. Other names could have served to define functional differences for the Father (for example, King or CEO) or the Son (for example, Prince or chief operations officer). But it is neither an empire (kingdom notwithstanding) nor a corporate organization which can be relationally specific and significant to God’s design and purpose, God’s response of love and God’s desires for us. Only family, the family of the Father, the Son and the Spirit intimately in relationship together as the whole of God fulfill God’s purpose and desires. While “kingdom” certainly describes God’s covenant people, family is what deeply defines in ongoing function the redeemed children of God in the likeness of the Trinity.

This is who, what and how the whole of God was fully extended, directly revealed and vulnerably responding to us. The dynamic of family between the Father and Son does not describe the primacy of fixed roles in a permanent structure of authority and submission but rather reveals the process for the primacy of their intimate oneness together and their deep

relational involvement of love—for which *perichoresis* lacks functional clarity. This relational process can only be experienced in the function of relationships as family—the family of God. The Son was uniquely the only one (*monogenes*, Jn 1:18) to extend the Father (as “nothing less and no substitutes”) to us in family; and the Son in function and relationship defined for us how to be the Father’s very own as his family together. In “the One and Only” there is clarity, which is why the Father told us to listen to his Son (Mt 17:5) and planned for us to be exactly like his “firstborn” (*prototokos*, pre-eminent) in his family together (Rom 8:29). No one else could fulfill this except “the One and Only” (as Son, not another name)—not at the exclusion nor subordination of the Spirit—because this was totally about the relational context of God’s family and the relational process of God’s family love, which the Spirit brings to completion.

### **The Relational Outcome of the Whole**

Going back to 1 Cor 15:28, the relational context and process of the whole of God’s response to us to build the family of God suggest a purpose to the Son’s action upon himself (reflexive passive of “subject to”). When God’s family is complete in heaven, we will be ontologically whole with each other in the likeness of the whole of God as in the Trinity, as well as relationally whole with the Trinity in the whole of God—the complete fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer in John 17. God’s family will not need intercession by the Son and transformation by the Spirit. These functions cease to be needed because God’s family will be whole (complete); and the trinitarian persons can continue on to be the whole of God without the distinctions in vertical function necessary to do relationship in loving us downward in response to our condition “to be apart.”

It is the whole of God that I suggest is the Son’s purpose to subject himself. That is, as the Son’s purpose originated from the Father at some point in eternity—not created in essence but originating in function—to extend family love to us is completed, this allows the Son and the Spirit to “return” to the Father in function fully in the horizontal relational process as the whole (oneness) of the triune God without the functional differences previously necessary in the vertical relational context. This is not about only the Father but only about the whole of God together as one. When this is all enacted, the relational outcome will be the result that “God may be all in all” (*pas*, the whole, cf. Eph 1:23; 4:10). Though God will certainly be over all things at this future point, this result is not about the primacy of authority structure and role subordination. As Paul emphasized in 1 Corinthians 15, this is about the resurrection of the new creation—what Jesus saved us *to*. This is the relational outcome of *the whole* of God’s family as constituted and signified in *the whole* of the Trinity. This is the relational progression of God’s self-revelation in Christ which together with the relational work of the Spirit is brought to eschatological completion.

To be in intimate communion together in the primacy of the relational involvement of family love (not role behavior) has always been God’s design and purpose (which are functionally whole and wholistically relational) and what matters most to God because this is who, what and how the whole of God is. Trinitarian differences in name and function cohere in how God does relationship with us in order to be family together, and any reduction of these differences (for example, to quantitative matters) affects the integrity of the whole of God and



the primacy of the relationships necessary to be whole. Such reductionism, in turn, affects what we will pay attention to or ignore in defining our persons and where our focus will be in how we do relationships and thus practice church. And while reductionism may be convenient and simplify our perceptions and interpretations, it always comes with great cost to us at God's expense.

We must understand further how the influences of reductionism in our modern context affect this whole of God and the relationships indwelling the whole.



Perhaps you have already struggled with the influence of modernity as a worldview and its dependence on reason in search of knowledge and truth. While you may not have directly engaged this epistemological process, we are all ongoingly influenced by the outcomes of the modern enterprise of progress—whether from the physical and natural sciences or from related applied technologies, and from even theology. Certainly one of the most far-reaching outcomes of this human project impacting humanity is the globalization of the economy. Positive or negative, further development of globalization can be expected since, as sociologist Anthony Giddens states, “modernity is inherently globalizing.”<sup>1</sup>

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.

Yet this glimpse of the whole should not be lost to us, particularly as we give meaning to the universal (global) church. Dis-embedding the local church from its surrounding sociocultural context is necessary to re-embed it to the whole of God’s eschatological plan. In this sense, we can say with Giddens that “ecclesiology is inherently globalizing”—breaking down the provincialism and extending the boundaries of the local church.

### **Searching for the Whole**

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, 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 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

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequence of Modernity*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 63.

modernity and perhaps points to a holistic direction, postmodernity is neither instrumental in fully understanding reductionism nor significant in grasping the whole. Since the main voices of postmodernity do not speak of a definitive whole—only the need for it—a part (for example, 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.

Reductionism has been around since initial creation. And the current conversation about modernism vs. postmodernity needs to be placed within this ongoing historic context in order to fully understand the process of reductionism, which can be expected to continue until the eschaton. Where would this lead the modernity-postmodernity debate?

### **The Shift to Substitutes**

As a simplification of the issues,<sup>2</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 reductionist substitutes was inaugurated by the first human persons in the primordial garden but reductionism itself did not originate from them.

In the narrative of Eve’s encounter with Satan in the garden (Gen 3:1-7), we can observe the first historic account involving the process of reductionism. To understand the full significance of this interaction we have to examine what they are both doing. After the creation of the second human person, Adam and Eve enjoyed being whole parts of the whole of God (cf. Gen 2:25). It was within the context of this whole (discussed earlier as the trinitarian relational context of family) that reductionism emerged to challenge the integrity of the whole.

The encounter began by Satan challenging (testing, tempting) Eve to shift her focus from the whole to the parts (“eat from any tree” 3:1)—which in itself is only significant if it becomes a

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the 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).

substitute for the whole. Eve engages the conversation about the parts while still maintaining the relational significance of the whole as God's very own ("God did say" 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. In this process of reductionism, Satan likewise redefined Eve's whole person by appealing to her mind (a part) with knowledge ("knowing good and evil").

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 (for example, 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>3</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.

The relational implications of reductionism involve human persons determining relationship with God on their terms in contradiction to only God determining 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 than God's terms. This becomes clearly distinguished in Christ's temptations to be discussed shortly.

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 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 thus necessarily also involved attempts to have relationship with God on their terms (for example without the function of grace).

Along with the obvious sin of disobedience engaged here, we need to grasp what else was involved in this encounter and what Satan did in order to fully understand reductionism.

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<sup>3</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).

## Counter-Relational Work

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 Trinity’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 (for example, a scientific paradigm and foundationalism), or it may not be a shift in basic types of Christian practice but how they function (for example, without the significance of heart), not a change in outward behavior but without the relational significance of intimacy.

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. Without the qualitative significance of the heart and the intimacy of relationships together, there is no 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.

The lies underlying the reductionist process are even more apparent in the biblical narratives of Satan’s tests of Jesus. Briefly, the temptations of Jesus at the beginning of his formal ministry (see Lk 4:1-13) represent summary tests for all Christians and how Satan will try to interfere in relationship with God. The importance of heart for the whole person and its significance in our relationship with the whole of God are strongly brought out here in what are basic relational tests.

In the first test (Lk 4:3), Satan’s reductionist approach is apparent in what he tried to get Jesus to focus on. Ostensibly, it may seem merely to be food and the circumstances of Jesus’ hunger (cf. Mt 4:2, 3). This may also seem like a test of his deity (“if you are the Son of God . . .”) to prove what Satan certainly already knew. Yet, Satan was trying to get Jesus to see his own person in a certain way, which Jesus exposed by his response: “a person [*anthropos*, man or woman] does not live on bread alone” (Lk 4:4).

Since the tendency is to look at this statement apart from its context, the usual interpretation of Jesus' words is merely to prioritize the spiritual aspect of life over the physical, thus inadvertently substituting dualism for the whole person. That would be too simplistic and inadequate to meet the challenge of Satan's test. In his response Jesus was not reducing the whole of life or the person into different parts with the spiritual at the top of the priority list. Yet, in his use of reductionism that is exactly how Satan was trying to get Jesus to see his person and thus function (despite the implications of turning the stone into bread). 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—keep in mind Satan's objective.

Satan cultivates this reductionism with the influential lie: 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 by situations and circumstances—the priority of the parts which make up ontological simulation and epistemological illusion. This process becomes an approach to life with reductionist substitutes focused on secondary matter, not the primacy of the whole of the person and the relationships necessary to be whole.

Jesus connects us to the whole—for which there is no substitute—by the latter half of his first response: “but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (recorded only in Mt 4:4). Rather than focus on situations and circumstances to define our life and limit our person, Jesus tells us to *focus relationally* by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. The original OT words were given to understand (*yada*, to know personally) that reductionist life focuses on situations and circumstances (parts like food) whereas wholeness in life involves the relational meaning of “on every word. . . .” These words cannot be reduced to mere truths, beliefs or propositions, nor limited to the “spiritual” realm. They are words “that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3). “Mouth” (*peh*) signifies direct communication from God, communication which is a relational process involving intimate connection that the incarnate Word vulnerably revealed for us to experience as a relational reality. As Jesus 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.

The reductionist occupation and its relational consequence emerge in the second relational test (Lk 4:5-7). Satan further dangled status, privilege, power, and possessions before Jesus by which to better define his person based on the quantitative criteria of reductionism. Modern scenarios of this test would involve areas of education, vocation, economic security or having certain relationships. Yet the pursuit of these reductionist substitutes comes with a cost that intentionally or unintentionally compromises our integrity, beliefs and practice and has the relational consequence of less intimacy with God. This compromise and relational consequence were overtly presented to Jesus by Satan in order for us to fully understand the reductionism of “if you worship me” (4:7).

What is overtly presented to Jesus is rarely as obvious to us. If the compromise and relational consequence of 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 enable me to do more (for example, even to better serve God and others), or give me the most satisfaction and fulfillment. In this process of reductionism we see the genius of Satan to blur the distinction between truth and lie; and his influence is not

accounted for when we give priority to the parts over the whole and consequently do not distinguish between the importance of the qualitative and the secondary significance of the quantitative.

Jesus countered the second relational test with words (4:8) which we either perceive with only quantitative significance (for example, in the activity of what we do) or often take for granted with their familiarity (for example, 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 were always straightforward in our situations and circumstances, as it was for Jesus in this second test. We need to grasp the significance of Jesus' second response when he declared "worship" and "serve" in his 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 relationship together. Jesus is defining and exercising the relational work necessary to be whole in order to negate Satan's counter-relational work that reduces the whole person from the heart and the intimate relationship necessary to be with the whole of God.

Satan does not necessarily destroy the forms of worshiping and serving God, only substitutes their practice with ontological simulation and epistemological illusion. He does not contend with these practices if they have no qualitative and relational significance. When the qualitative whole of God (in 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 relationship with God—could even increase the activity—reductionist practices invariably create a shift in relationship to an increasing (usually unintentional) self-focus, self-interest, self-serving involvement—the priority of the parts over the whole. This becomes increasingly an inadvertent process of doing relationship with God on our terms, which by implication is bottom-up causation. This is the issue which emerges in Jesus' third relational test (4:9-12).

The order of these three tests in Luke (different order in Matthew's account) takes on added significance because it reveals a progression in Satan's counter-relational work and the comprehensive impact of reductionism. Since, at this stage, Satan has been unable to distance Jesus from his heart or to distract 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.

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 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 so? 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 ourself) to keep in focus that God fulfills his promises only *on his terms* for his 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. 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.

### **The Relational Implications**

If we take this reductionist process from how we subtly do relationships on our terms and apply it to how we do church, what is the consequence? I suggest that the prominent practice of church as a voluntary association is a shift to a reductionist substitute for the whole of God’s family constituted in and by the Trinity; and this practice has become merely an ontological simulation of the body of Christ laboring under an epistemological illusion of the Truth, who vulnerably revealed the whole of God for intimate relationship together. This is a relational consequence in contradiction to the relational outcome of Jesus’ family prayer for all his followers (Jn 17).

Reductionism has separated the whole individual person and has distanced the collective whole of God’s people from the whole of the trinitarian relational context of family and relational process of family love. This has embedded the local Western church in reductionist substitutes of individualism and voluntary association characterized by privatism. While these are certainly relational consequences from contextual influences (such as modernity), the full understanding of reductionism can only be gained from adequately perceiving Satan’s counter-relational work.

This is further understood when the interpretation of the task to “fill the earth” (discussed earlier, Gen 1:28) becomes the activity of populating the earth—that is, population growth in quantitative terms (bottom-up causation) rather than in qualitative terms of completing the whole of God’s family (a reciprocal relational process primarily of top-down causation). As a simulation of the ontology of the church, the task of “fill the church” (church growth) has often been undertaken by populating it in quantitative terms, not the quality of God’s family as constituted in and by the Trinity. These approaches to “fill the earth” and “fill the church” are the simulations and illusions of reductionism which distance persons from the whole and the relationships necessary to be whole, even while appearing to successfully accomplish God’s design and purpose (cf. the reductionist substitutes for the whole used in the churches at Ephesus and Sardis which Christ exposed in Rev 2:2-4; 3:1, 2).

Reductionism is not merely a philosophical framework but more importantly an underlying counter-relational process struggling against the whole of God. In this relational process Satan's counter-relational work is always seeking to reduce the whole of God's relational work by substituting ontological simulations and epistemological illusions for the whole of God and his creation (original and new in Christ)—a process persisting until the eschatological conclusion. Until we can fully account in our practice for Satan's counter-relational work—as Jesus demonstrated in his tests—reductionism and some form of its substitutes for the whole will remain influential in our midst.

These relational tests of reductionism continue to engage us in postmodernity, yet now with even greater challenge for the church to be the definitive whole of God. This is what faces church practice today.

For trinitarian theology to be consistent with the whole of God it must involve *the trinitarian relational context of family*. Such theology does not merely inform us about God but provides the framework to truly know God, be ongoingly involved with the trinitarian persons as family and to build God's family together. This is the function of Jesus' familial prayer for all his followers (Jn 17).

For us to be consistent with this trinitarian theology is to engage the trinitarian relational context of the whole of God, which is the family of God. Such engagement is necessarily both as an individual and as the collective of Christ's followers called the church. The individual alone is never sufficient to define the trinitarian relational context nor to represent the whole of God (just as each trinitarian person alone cannot)—a human condition at creation directly involving our tendency today "to be apart" (Gen 2:18).

Likewise, for us to be compatible in practice with this trinitarian theology and thus in function with the trinitarian relational context of family also necessitates direct involvement in *the trinitarian relational process of family love*. The intimate relational involvement of family love is how the Trinity functions with each other (roles notwithstanding) and how the trinitarian persons do relationship with us in vulnerably extending themselves to us. The whole of God is the family of trinitarian persons in triunity. The Trinity qua family only functions in the intimate interdependent relationships of family love just as the Son incarnated and the Spirit continues.

To be compatible with this deep relational process requires by its nature reciprocal relational involvement from us in order to be in likeness to the whole of God constituted in the Trinity. Without this compatible response there is no functional relationship with the whole of God as signified together with the trinitarian persons; without this compatible involvement in the relational process of family love, there is no corporate function of our relationships as God's family in the likeness of the Trinity. This family and the relationships necessary to be family are constituted in the Trinity and by the Trinity in relationship together with us.

Since such theology is not merely to inform us but to relationally engage our practice, we cannot talk about the Trinity without addressing ecclesiology—that is, our doctrine and practice of church. Thus, our discussion specifically extends to how the church functions as the Trinity in being the family of God.

### **Incompatibility of Church Practice**

The relational condition "to be apart" among God's people (even unintentionally or inadvertently with relational distance) is contrary to God's design and purpose for creation—which are both functionally whole and wholistically relational—as well as a contradiction to the

likeness of the Trinity. Historically, how work and even service or ministries have been engaged, for example, are practices which effectively often maintain relational distance and inadvertently even promote it—even in the practice of church. God is neither pleased nor passive with this relational condition. The Trinity’s ongoing relational response to God’s people being apart from the whole has been outlined historically in the narrative of God’s self-revelation, of which the incarnation of the Son is the ultimate relational outworking of God’s family love.

The NT counterpart to God’s declaration “not good to be apart” is Jesus’ declaration that “I will not leave you as orphans” (Jn 14:18). We need to understand these declarations together as the whole of God in response to our relational condition. Jesus’ declaration represents God’s ultimate response to fulfill his purpose and promise to be his family, which the Spirit relationally continues to bring to functional completion (cf. Rom 8). Being relational and emotional “orphans” among God’s people (even as unintentional or inadvertent relational distance) is contrary to the life of God’s family and in conflict with the life of the Trinity.

What truly represents God and being in his image is to function as the Trinity does, and what genuinely reflects the life of the Trinity is the practice of their intimate interdependent relationships as family. In contrast to the church operating as an organization or as a voluntary association, the function of the Trinity is the primary issue facing the church for how it will function both within itself and in the world.

The church in Sardis (Rev 3:1, 2) had “a reputation of being alive” in the prevailing perception, and that church lived behind their “reputation” (*onoma*, used as the substitute of what a person actually is). But Jesus said, in actuality “you are dead” (*nekros*, the condition of being separated from the source of life, thus being unaccompanied by something) because “I have not found your deeds complete.” Their “deeds” (*ergon*, works denoting what defined them) were not “complete” (*pleroo*, to fill up, make full or complete). What was missing in their practice?

It started back at creation and the purpose to “fill the earth” (Gen 1:28). As noted earlier, the Hebrew term for “fill” (*male*) generally denotes completion of something that was unfinished. What God started with Adam and Eve was the relational context and process of the function to be God’s family, which is now fulfilled in Christ and brought to completion by the Spirit—“I will not leave you as orphans.” This relational context and process were not the primacy of the Sardis church’s involvement and ministry.

In spite of how well the Sardis church presented itself (its appearance) and how well it was perceived (its image), substance was lacking. This lack of deeper qualitative substance exposed the credibility of their reputation as essentially worthless, while the validity of their work (service and ministry) was insignificant because they were separated (“to be apart”) from the substance primary to life. These are severe judgments Jesus made on a church which at least was doing something to earn that reputation of being alive. Yet, the credibility gap between what appears so 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.

When Jesus confronted them to “wake up,” the sense of this two-word combination (*gregoreuo* and *ginomai*) is to emerge as a new, whole person. They needed to be transformed as persons because they defined themselves from the outside in and thus did not give full importance to the qualitative significance of the whole person (especially signified by the heart). Their quantitative-over-qualitative way of defining themselves determined how they did

relationships and influenced how they practiced church—which were not complete. This certainly affected their relationships with God and with each other, though not obvious to them because of the influence of reductionism.

Jesus called them back to what they “received” (*lambano*, 3:3) as defined in John 1:12, which means to embrace and follow as a teacher (that is, be a disciple) not as students in the rabbinic tradition but as adherents in the relational reality of God’s family as his very own daughters and sons. This is the qualitative significance of the incarnation and the relational significance of the gospel, nothing less and no substitutes. In other words, Jesus called them back to the basic necessity of relational work inherent in who, what and how the Trinity is, and thus who his people are and what his church is: the family of God. For this they needed to become transformed persons who directly engaged in relational work in order to build transformed relationships together so as to be a transformed church.

The lack of primacy for this fundamental relational work is demonstrated even more definitively by the church in Ephesus (Rev 2:1-4). Jesus acknowledged their “deeds” (*ergon*, what defined them), their “hard work” (*kopos*, denotes not so much the actual effort but the weariness experienced from that effort) and their “perseverance” (*hypomone*, endurance as to things and circumstances, in contrast to patience toward persons; character that does not allow losing to circumstances). Along with maintaining the doctrinal purity of the church in trying circumstances and even suffering repercussions for Christ’s name, they held up and remained constant in their faith. This composite picture describes how they were, what they did and were involved in—very, very active in church work, which can certainly describe a number of successful churches today.

Jesus was not impressed but even felt to the contrary about what they were doing: “you have forsaken your first love” (2:4). If it was not Jesus making this critique, we would probably dismiss such a charge. This is serious church business and important to account for in how we practice church ourselves.

The term “forsaken” (*aphiemi*) means to forsake, abandon persons, to leave, let go from oneself or let alone. This is the same word Jesus used in his promise to “not leave [us] as orphans” (Jn 14:18). In the context at Ephesus this strongly describes not paying attention to the whole person and giving primacy to relationships. They worked hard doing things *for* God but the relational process was deemphasized or misplaced in the effort. As the word for “perseverance” denotes, they were so focused on circumstances and situations such that persons (especially God) were relationally ignored, left at a distance or emotionally forgotten. Despite what would usually be defined as positive church work, there was distance in their relationships leaving them in the condition “to be apart.” They did not have the relational involvement of *agape* love (as family love), which is the only involvement having relational significance to God. Since they focused on what they did—suggesting how they defined themselves—their interests were on less important areas (secondary in God’s priorities) than relationship. This determined how they did relationships, which resulted in the relational consequence of forsaking their first love reflecting the lack of relational involvement in their practice of church.

The basic complaint God had against them that we need to examine in our practice of church was: in all they were doing (which was a lot) as a church and as Christians, they were not directly involved in the relational context and process of the whole of God constituted in the Trinity. This church lacked the relational work of family love because the relationships signified

by the Trinity were not their primary priority. There is demonstrated here 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). Whether Jesus' complaint against the church in Ephesus includes both their relationship with God and with others is not clearly indicated in the text. Yet we can strongly infer that it includes all their relationships because what they emphasized in their work reflected how they defined themselves, which further determined how they did relationships and thus practiced church.

The practices of the churches in Sardis and Ephesus were contradictions which reflect the 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 fall into ontological simulation and epistemological illusion. Whenever such "church" work is given priority over relational work, we have to examine what we are "filling up" our churches with and how this fulfills what God started in the relational work of the Trinity.

### **Engaging the Trinity**

The church functioning as the Trinity is not merely a paradigm (though the trinitarian example does serve as that) but more significantly it is the relational outcome of directly experiencing the Trinity in relationship. This ongoing process is fundamental to the practice of church, particularly as revealed vulnerably by Jesus in the relational progression of following him to the Father.

We cannot adequately "observe" the Trinity without being relationally addressed by the Trinity at the same time. Keep in focus that God's self-revelation is how God does relationship. How the Trinity is revealed, therefore, is how the Trinity relates to us, which is how the trinitarian persons do relationship with each other (though in horizontal relational process discussed earlier).

We cannot ontologically understand and epistemologically know the Trinity without engaging the Trinity in how the trinitarian persons do relationship in general and are doing relationship with us specifically at the time. It is within this relational context and process that God's self-disclosure vulnerably is given and needs to be received, thus directly experienced as an outcome of this relational connection. This consistency with the trinitarian relational context and compatibility with the trinitarian relational process cannot be engaged from the detached observation of a scientific paradigm or with the relational distance of a quantitative-analytic framework but can only be engaged from the qualitative function of relationship. Similarly, J. I. Packer defined the process of knowing God as a relationship with emotional involvement, and he challenged as invalid the assumption that the theological task can be engaged meaningfully with relational detachment.<sup>1</sup>

This is the relational significance of the deeper epistemology that Jesus made a necessity for Philip and Thomas in order to truly know him and thus also know the Father (Jn 14:1-9, as

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<sup>1</sup> As noted by Alister E. McGrath, "Evangelical Theological Method" in *Evangelical Futures*, ed. John G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 23.

discussed earlier). This is the relationally-specific process that does not merely see (or observe) but rather deeply contemplates (as in *theaomai*, Jn 1:14), that does not reduce the person merely to attributes and categories but rather puts the parts of revelation together to comprehend the whole of God (as in *syniemi*, Mk 8:17, and *synesis*, Col 2:2).

This relational epistemic process is the outworking of the Trinity's relational involvement with us. Therefore, to come to know the triune God is not possible by individual effort nor is the individual's relationship with God alone sufficient. This process involves the practice of relationship as signified by the Trinity which, when experienced, results in the corporate life of relationship constituted in the Trinity as the family of God. Thus this process involves the integration of both spirituality (engaging intimate relationship with the Trinity) and community (practicing the family relationships of the Trinity). Understanding the Trinity as revealed—present and involved with us—is never merely for us to be informed about God but always directly impacts our person and relationships, thus consequential for how we define our person, how we do relationships and practice church.

Consequently the function of the Trinity cannot be grasped in propositions of trinitarian theology nor experienced in church doctrine. Along with reducing the whole of God to attributes and the trinitarian persons to categories (or roles), these reflect how our understanding (“a reputation of being alive,” Rev 3:1) and our practice (“have forsaken your first love,” Rev 2:4) become *decontextualized*. That is, they are removed (or deemphasized) from the relational context and process of the Trinity and need to be recontextualized in the relational nature of the Trinity.

The church is the ultimate practice that must (*dei* by its nature, not from obligation or compulsion) be contextualized in the Trinity's relational presence and involvement. Even overemphasis of the metaphor “the body of Christ” for the church (for example, focused on organizational structure, not relational function) can decontextualize the church as the family of God constituted in and by the Trinity. Moreover, in another sense, with an incomplete Christology and truncated soteriology a church can inadvertently become too Christocentric, and subsequently not practice the relational progression to the Father vulnerably enacted by the Son and continued by the Spirit in the function of the Trinity constituting the whole of God as family.

The life of the Trinity becomes the church's life and function. It is this life as the family of God which defines the church's purpose and constitutes its practice.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Relational Paradigm**

As previously discussed, the different roles and functions expressed in the Trinity do not define their persons, though these reflect the unique (but secondary) distinctions each person exercises to extend family love to us. Each of the trinitarian persons is defined by the same

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<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf also contends that “the church must speak of the Trinity as its determining reality,” and recognizes the limits of this analogy in “Community Formation as an Image of the Triune God: A Congregational Model of Church Order and Life,” in Richard N. Longenecker, ed. *Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 223-225.

qualitative substance (*homoousiou*) which not only defines the equality of their persons (*hypostases*) but is also fundamental to their relationships (*perichoresis*). Thus these unique distinctions also do not determine the primacy of their relationships and how they are involved with each other. They are not involved with each other primarily on the basis of role differences but rather with the essential qualitative significance of their persons expressed in love (both *agape*, Jn 14:31, and *phileo*, Jn 5:20).

This qualitative substance and these intimate relationships of love are what the churches in Sardis and Ephesus got away from. This issue is not merely a matter of priorities but about the primacy of relationship without which all other effort (even with good intentions) is insignificant to God and qualitatively meaningless. Given the high activity level of these churches, they likely had well-organized roles to operate so efficiently. This suggests how they substituted for what is primary and matters most to God.

The corporate life of a church can be undertaken in either of two contrasting approaches. One approach is from an institutional framework or organizational paradigm. Institutions and most organizations are a function of structure and systemic processes. While the church has organizational properties of structure (namely interdependence) and systems (specifically covariation), the authentic church cannot be a function of organizational aspects. Such a framework and mindset tend to predispose or bias us to see and practice church in a limited way—with the substitutes of reductionism. This is particularly critical in the information age and the broad influences of information technology, which Quentin Schultze contends shift our perceptions of the world increasingly through the lenses of measurable norms, means, causes, and effects—that is, a systemic concept (closed systems) of human culture, our image of ourselves and society that persons can objectively observe, measure, manipulate, and eventually control.<sup>3</sup> This leaves us susceptible to practice what Schultze calls “*informational promiscuity*: impersonal relationships based on feigned intimacies and lacking moral integrity.”<sup>4</sup>

The apostolic church was not based on an organizational paradigm even though it reflected organization. At the core of the church is *relationship*: a covenant relationship (from the OT) and a transformed relationship (in the NT) constituted in and by the Trinity as the family of God. The church is a function only of these relationships, and any structure, system or roles serve only as support functions of the primacy of these relationships. This contrasting approach to the corporate life of the church is from *the relational paradigm* emerging from the relational outcome of direct experience with the Trinity.

This relational paradigm is inherent in the relational progression to the Father incarnated by Jesus and continued by the Spirit. The deep understanding of the relational process involved in the relationship of God is gained from Jesus’ vulnerable self-disclosure of his interactions with the Father, which serves as the *functional key* for church practice. Two particular interactions in different but related situations regarding the same purpose provide this understanding.

The Father had already revealed his “delight” with his Son (Mt 3:17; 17:5; cf. Is 42:1; Mt 12:18). The term “delight” (*eudokeo*) is also rendered “to be well-pleased.” The latter

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<sup>3</sup> Quentin J. Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 37-42.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.



suggests to be pleased with what a person has done whereas the former seems to focus on the person. I suggest “delight” better expresses the qualitative substance of the Father in relationship with the Son about his qualitative substance, not the expression of a parent about a child’s performance. Yet, whatever emphasis is given to the Father’s feeling for his Son, consider what the Father felt when the Son told him that he no longer wanted to die on the cross (Mt 26:39).

This interaction in the garden of Gethsemane demonstrated the relational process involved in the Trinity’s relationship with each other. What had been planned together even before creation and was now being fulfilled by the incarnation, the Son astonishingly did not want to continue. We can speculate that in that moment the Father was displeased with the Son or dismayed, not delighted. Yet, what we need to understand about the Trinity and grasp for our relationships is why this interaction even happened at all.

Jesus did not want to die, but human weakness is not the significance of the interaction. Why this interaction even happened at all is because such an interaction could happen, was “designed” to happen and thus was expected to happen. That is, what this interaction signifies is the complete openness (honesty as it were) and vulnerableness of their whole person (not reduced to roles ) with each other in the intimate relational involvement of love as family together. And since this was not a monologue by the Son, for the implied response from the Father I would suggest deep sadness by the Father in having to say “no” to the Son’s request. Whatever is implied in this interaction, Jesus demonstrated how they do relationship together. In other words the trinitarian persons can be their “genuine” person before each other and intimately share with each other anything, so to speak—without the caution, restrictions or limits practiced in human relationships since the primordial garden (cf. they “were both naked and they felt no shame,” Gen 2:25). Anything less than their whole person and these relationships necessary to be the whole of God no longer would constitute the Trinity of revelation and therefore becomes a reduction of God.

Such reductionism even occurs with good intentions, as witnessed by the churches in Ephesus and Sardis. This is further illustrated in Mel Gibson’s historic film “The Passion of the Christ” during the reenactment of the Gethsemane scene. Whether by creative license or revisionist history, Gibson had Jesus returning to Peter, James and John after his intense ordeal with the Father only to remark: “I don’t want the others [disciples] to see me this way.” Gibson suggests by adding this statement to the historic narrative that Jesus wanted to appear to the other disciples as if everything was fine. Jesus, however, never reduced his person and presented himself wearing a mask—that is, reinforcing relational barriers “to be apart.”

More significantly, the Son did not reduce his person with the Father. Not only did he express his desire to avoid the cross but he expressed his deeper desire “yet not as I will but as you will” (Mt 26:39). The Son’s prayer was not about himself, though he openly expressed his person. This was not a matter of the priority of the individual, thus also not merely including the individual desires of only the Father. This was about the whole of God. There is no aspect or function of individualism in the nature of the Trinity, though each is distinct in their person and unique in their function. As a trinitarian person, the Son demonstrated the interdependent (in contrast to independent) relational nature of the Trinity as the whole of God’s family. Furthermore, the Son also defined how the Spirit does not function independently but interdependently in the whole of God in another interaction (Jn 16:13-15).

The intimate interdependent relationships of the Trinity are constitutive both of the whole

of God and the whole of each trinitarian person. Therefore, not only can the trinitarian persons not be reduced but neither can they be separated from each other nor considered independently. The identity of each as a whole person is reduced and thus incomplete if not also constituted in relation to each other in the whole of God as family. This is how our practice can become too Christocentric, consequently individualized.

The significance of the Son's intimate interaction with the Father distinctly defines for us what is a whole person and how relationships need to be practiced in order to be whole. This is directly connected to our previous discussion of Adam and Eve "both naked and they felt no shame" (Gen 2:25) in God's original design and purpose, which is restored and expanded in the new creation by Christ to be completed by the Spirit as God's ongoing faithfulness in response to our reductionist substitutes "to be apart."

God's ongoing response to our relational condition and our activity to maintain this condition "to be apart" point us to a second related interaction helping us further to understand the relational process involved in the relationship of God.

## **The Whole of the Relationship of God**

From the direct honesty at Gethsemane we are led to the pain on the cross. Beyond the physical pain, however, we are exposed to the relational pain, which was initially experienced in the garden (Mt 26:37) in anticipation of this: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46). The Son's painful cry not only further expressed his honesty and openness 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 most fundamental to the life 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 life of God does not function.

As a result of taking our sin, in that moment of mystery the Son was no longer in the Father nor the Father in him. We can have only some sense of understanding this by focusing on the relational reality in distress, not the ontological. With this qualitative relational focus we become vulnerable participants both in the painful relational consequence involving any degree of the condition "to be apart" from the whole and in the fullness of God's ultimate response to redeem us from this condition as well as to reconcile us to the whole of God in the relationship of God. Together with the relational work of the Spirit we not only can understand but also directly experience the relational process essential to the life of the Trinity as family constituting the whole of God (2 Cor 3:16-18; Eph 2:22).

For this wholeness to be experienced, however, the relational barriers "to be apart" have to be removed (cf. Eph 2:14-16). When the Son cried out in relational pain, all those barriers converged on him to evoke the Father's rejection. For me, it was also the moment the Father cried. In a figurative sense, the whole of God was broken; yet the relational significance of this paradoxical moment was specific to wholeness in order that we (both individually and corporately) would be made whole in our person and would live relationally specific to God and others in the relationships necessary to be whole (cf. Eph 2:17-22).

We cannot talk about the Trinity without the whole of God. We cannot discuss the ontology of the triune God without the function of their relational oneness. Wholeness is a function of relational oneness, which is a function of the relational process of intimate involvement in the interdependent relationships as family with family love. To be whole is not merely an individual quality but must include the qualitative state of one's corporate relationships. Wholeness is not constituted in the individual alone but only in persons together functioning in these requisite relationships.

If we grasp the relational significance of the Son's 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 fundamental 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 in this both signifies the fundamental whole of the Trinity as well as establishes the means for relationship necessary to be whole in the 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 truly have it, and further provided his Spirit to help us authentically experience it and ongoingly function in it together.

The church functioning as Trinity is the outworking of the family relationships demonstrated between the Son and the Father and mediated by the Spirit. The function of these relationships only becomes relationally significant to God and to each other when it involves the qualitative substance of the whole person (signified by the heart) opened to one another and coming together in the primacy of relationships (constituted by intimacy). The relational significance to the Trinity happens when our whole persons function together in the intimate interdependent relationships as God's family in the process of God's family love. In practice this is the integration of spirituality and community (communion), both of which are defined by God on the terms self-disclosed in the Trinity.

This is the whole of the relationship of God in which all of God's actions since creation can be understood as the response of God's desires for us to experience instead of any function "to be apart." Anything less than the relationship of God breaks the whole and becomes a substitute of reductionism, which then creates barriers (unintentionally or inadvertent) to reconcile the relational distance "to be apart." Just as the Son's painful relational experience accomplished on the cross, these barriers need to be redeemed ongoingly in the process of redemptive change (the old dying and the new rising) for the church to be reconciled to its function in likeness of the Trinity in the whole of the relationship of God.

Redemption and reconciliation involve the relational process of restoring God's creation to this wholeness. Thus redemptive change is a necessary function of the church in the relational process involved in the relationship of God, without which the church and each of its members could not be whole. This function of the church involves the relational work directly with the trinitarian persons (and their relational work) as vulnerably revealed by Jesus during the incarnation, particularly as noted in Gethsemane and on the cross. As the church functions in this

reciprocal relational work necessary for redemptive change, it can expect to be made whole in its practice and in its relationships as the whole of God's family constituted in and by the Trinity.

The primacy of this requisite relational work must be engaged within the trinitarian relational context of family and must be ongoingly compatible with the trinitarian relational process of family love. This is the relational paradigm subsequent to the relational outcome of directly experiencing the Trinity in relationship and thus the relational imperative for ongoing involvement with the Trinity. Anything less or other than this relational context and process becomes a reductionism of the whole of the Trinity, the trinitarian persons, our person and the whole of the church as family. And the main functional indicators of the presence of reductionism involve how we define the person and do relationships, even in the inadvertent practice of relational distance.

### **How the Church Is to Come Together**

Reductionism has been the critical issue for the relational condition "to be apart" ever since Adam and Eve in the primordial garden. Reductionism of and in the church is not a phenomenon unique to modernity, as demonstrated by the early churches in Ephesus and Sardis. Moreover, reductionism in the epistemic process of understanding and truly knowing God has been most problematic—even a crisis today—that Thomas and Philip experienced (Jn 14:1-10), as discussed earlier. Yet directly in contention with the ongoing issue of reductionism, Jesus committed himself not to leave his followers as relational or emotional orphans, ontological or epistemological orphans apart experientially from the whole of the Trinity as complete-intimate members of God's family. We need to hold him accountable for this today in the life of the church, and we need to account for this ongoingly in our practice of church.

As Christ's followers gather (*ekklesia*), it is the gathering of those who have been called out and together (*ekkletoi*). How the church is to *come together* cannot be in the likeness of individualism, inequality, nor even in the likeness of a voluntary association. It must (by its nature, not obligation or compulsion) be in the relational context and process with and in likeness of the Trinity. This relational dynamic is the critical basis by which we need to construct a functional ecclesiology—which is contrary to the substitutes of reductionism and thus in conflict with their practice, as Christ declared in Revelations 2 and 3.

The trinitarian relational context and process never allow the relationships in the church to remain distant, shallow, independent, or selectively involved. The Trinity never does relationships on these terms, nor does God accept such relationships from us. Indeed, the whole of the relationship of God is both relationship specific and relationally significant to the Trinity's interdependent relationships intimately involved in family love, of which the gathering of Christ's followers is the likeness. The church's practice must have this relational clarity.

Paul's emphasis for the church expands on this relational paradigm, the focus of which should not be confused with his responses to various reductionist contexts throughout his epistles. In the Pauline corpus, he brings together various metaphors for the church (God's people, God's household or family, a building) which serve toward the metaphor of the temple (Eph 2:19-22; cf. 1 Pet 2:5). The temple in the OT was God's dwelling place but in the NT God's presence has more direct and intimate relational significance—vulnerably in the

incarnation and then in the person of his Spirit. This church is thus to *come together* (not just gather) in order to be transformed “to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph 2:22). Yet this is not merely God’s place of residence from which he observes his people doing ministry, nor a structure over which God presides monitoring their beliefs and traditions. God intimately lives by his Spirit *within his people*, as Paul further defined about the nature of the temple (1 Cor 3:16), not in a place, structure or system. And how God lives within the church is solely on the basis of the trinitarian relational process, not on organizational terms.

The temple metaphor does not define this relational process for us. For this purpose Paul uses other metaphors to complete our understanding of what indeed constitutes coming together as the church. The metaphor of household or family provides us with this relational significance (Eph 2:19; Gal 6:10; 1 Tim 3:15; cf. 1 Pet 2:5); the Greek terms (*oikeios* and its root *oikos*) used here, along with their significant cognates (*oikodomeo*, Mt 16:18; *oikodome*, Eph 2:21; *oikonomos*, 1 Cor 4:1), all point to the new kinship family of God and building the whole of God’s family together. This provides us with the vital relational context and process signified by the Trinity for how to function as the church. Yet we cannot adequately perceive this new kinship family with a reductionist framework which would substitute, for example, the household from the Industrial Revolution or the nuclear family of today. Contrary to those reductionist substitutes, God does not preside over this new family in the role of figurehead nor does he merely dwell in the household. Unlike the norm of how we tend to do family with relational distance, God’s household and family involve the intimate relational process between the Son and the Father discussed earlier.

The church functions as God’s family because of the relational outcome of directly experiencing the Trinity in relationship. The relational work of the whole of the Trinity in each trinitarian person’s function to extend family love to us brings us together in the church as the family of God. The Father is able to build transformed relationships with his adopted children as family together because of the Son’s vulnerable relational work of redemptive reconciliation. While his Spirit lives within each individual daughter or son, the Spirit does not work for the individual’s self-autonomy or self-determination but for the whole of God functioning as family in the likeness of the Trinity (cf. 1 Cor 12:7). This is the relational outcome covenanted by the Father and incarnated by the Son in the relational progression of God’s family love, which the Spirit brings to complete wholeness in God’s eschatological plan for all creation (Rev 21:1-5).

The sum of the Trinity’s relational work in family love constitutes the church and its function as God’s family. Christ’s church comes together with him only for these relationships—to be the whole of God’s family. The authentic church cannot be a function of anything less than relationships, family relationships, living by his family love in likeness of the Trinity. Though the Son and Father define and demonstrate what it means to be God’s family, the Spirit’s relational work is the critical relational means to experiencing this relational reality. Often overlooked in the Trinity, it is necessary briefly to highlight the Spirit’s relational work.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Spirit’s relational work is outlined further in my related study, *The Relational Progression: A Relational Theology of Discipleship*, (Discipleship Study, 2004); online at <http://www.4X12.org.chap.7>.

## The Spirit: Overlooked and Misused

Directly from the Son's commitment not to leave us as relational and emotional orphans, the intimate relational presence of the Spirit is given to his followers (Jn 14:16, 17). "The Spirit of truth" in function needs to be understood as the Son's relational replacement whom the Father gave as "another" in lieu of the Son. The term "another" (*allos*) means another of equal quality, not another of different quality (*heteros*). The Spirit then is defined by the Son as equal to himself; in a relational sense they are interchangeable (cf. 2 Cor 3:17, 18; Gal 4:6).

The Spirit functions in the trinitarian relational context and process as the Son's relational replacement (Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-16) and as the relational extension of the Father (Eph 2:18, 22; Rom 8:15, 16). The perception of the Spirit as helper, counselor ("Paraclete") merely to do something and help the individual is inadequate and tends to become a reductionist function. The Spirit's presence, however, is only relational and relational work is the fundamental function of the Spirit's purpose.

Without defining all this relational work, the Spirit functions in the primacy of the relational context of family (Rom 8:16; 2 Cor 5:5) and the relational process of family love (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6,7). And the person of the Spirit is deeply affected by any practice "to be apart" in God's family relationships (Eph 4:30), which we will discuss shortly. "The Spirit of adoption" serves only the relational purpose of bringing to completion the relational progression to God's family which the Son incarnated and the Father ordained (Rom 8:29; Eph 1:5). It is this whole of the relationship of God from which the Spirit works as the third person ontologically and relationally constituted in the Trinity. We cannot reduce, distort or obscure the complete relational function involved between the Son's promise not to leave his followers as orphans, the Father's fulfillment and the Spirit's purpose—which clearly involves our relationship to the whole of God and being God's family as his very own daughters and sons, and the experiential reality and responsibility which the Spirit serves to help us complete.

The Spirit is the only one who can and will bring these relationships of God's family to completion, transforming us to be in qualitative conformity to the relational likeness of the Son, just as the Father desires (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18). As suggested in these verses, "the Spirit of transformation" does the relational work necessary to transform us (*metamorphoo*, to change from inside out) to the *new* of what the Son *saved us to*, thus the redemptive change to genuinely live in relational significance to the Father and relationship-specific to the Father's desires. The presence and function of the Spirit's person guarantees this relational outcome when not constrained nor grieved.

Without the Spirit's active presence and function, church practice becomes in effect the unilateral effort of relational orphans. Besides being the overlooked or forgotten person, however, the Spirit is often *the misused person*. Even when not overlooked, the Spirit still can be misused—in two major ways in particular.

The *first misuse* of the Spirit involves what is represented in spiritual gifts and what we do. A reductionist view of these spiritual gifts perceives them with a mindset which defines our person by what we have and thus can do. In some Christian subcultures, having a spiritual gift has become the main ingredient to Christian identity. Invariably in church practice, when this gift essentially defines what a person can do, thus what role they should have, this engages a comparative process of what we have and do which leads to subtle stratification in the church

(based on the gift you have) and to implicit differentiation of status (based on what you do)—relational consequences even unintentional or inadvertent. Such a process reduces the significance of what a person is while confusing the identity of who a person is, not to mention the distance in church relationships.

Contrary to such a view is the mindset of the Spirit who gives out all the spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:11). Every spiritual gift (*charisma*) by definition means a gift of God's grace (1 Cor 1:4-7). Everyone in Christ has that grace and is not without *charisma*, therefore is never lacking of a spiritual gift. There are specific spiritual gifts further distributed by the Spirit (Heb 2:4). The term for "distribute" (*merimos*) comes from the word *merizo* which means to divide into parts. This implies a *whole* from which the parts come and which they make up together. From this whole, only the Spirit determines who gets what part and "gives them to each one" (1 Cor 12:11). "Gives" (*diaireo*) means to take one part from another (that is, a whole), again defining the mindset of how the Spirit works contrary to a reductionist mindset. Whether we focus on the whole or the parts is consequential for church practice.

The distribution of the parts is certainly not uniform (1 Cor 12:8-10; Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:11). Different gifts are given to different persons (1 Cor 12:4), yet every person is given a spiritual gift the unique function of which is manifested by the Spirit (*phonerosis*, make visible or observable, 12:7). The pivotal emphasis essential for us to grasp, however, is not on differences but on their commonality to the *whole*: different gifts but the same Spirit (12:4), different ministries, service (*diakonia*) but the same Lord (12:5), different effects of exercising these ("working," *energema*) but the same result because of the same God's underlying work (*energo*) in all the different gifts in all the different persons (12:6). And the Spirit's relational work unifies all these differences to the whole of God because the Spirit functions only from this whole (12:11). Therefore, the Spirit is the necessary person in the Trinity functionally constituting us as the family of God. It is problematic to perceive the Spirit apart from this whole, as we will see further shortly.

Reductionism defines our person by what we have and do, thus focusing us on the *doing* (accomplishing, achieving, performing) aspect of spiritual gifts and other related church work. This pivotal shift of emphasis takes us away in function from the primary relational involvement of *being* God's family, as the church in Ephesus experienced. This shift inevitably focuses on differences and secondary matters, which become manifested in our relationships (often unknowingly), as the church in Sardis experienced. Moreover, this pivotal shift in emphasis involves the issue of whether the Spirit (and spiritual gifts) is given to us to *do something* (individually or corporately for God) or to relationally *be family* in the whole of God. These should not be mutually exclusive in function, but in practice reductionism makes the former primary over the latter (for example, parts over the whole), inverting the order of God's design and purpose (cf. Sardis) or neglecting the primacy of God's desires (cf. Ephesus), which means relational distance.

As the Spirit of truth, the Spirit always functions in conformity to the Trinity's purpose, which is completely relational and all about the whole of God as family—the whole from which the Spirit of adoption works and distributes gifts. In other words, spiritual gifts are designed and given only to serve toward fulfilling our reciprocal relational responsibility as the Father's adopted daughters and sons in order to function together as God's family and build this whole in likeness to the Trinity (1 Cor 12:7; Eph 4:11-13). When these gifts of God's grace become

reduced in function (if not also in perception) to merely *do* something, however sincere in practice or with good intentions for God, then we effectively misuse the Spirit. Additionally, such reductionism distorts the body metaphor of the church by viewing the whole as merely the sum of its parts. This view is consequential to the synergism of the church body in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Church synergy is not only the organic function of its relationships (as Paul described, 1 Cor 12:12-26) but also the outcome in cooperation with the Spirit's relational work.

This overlaps into the second misuse of the Spirit. When the relational purpose of the Spirit is misperceived, the Spirit's function is not only reduced but individualized. With the need, responsibility or pressure to measure up, to produce, to perform, even to justify (for example, God's love, grace, promises), reductionism and individualism resist the relational purpose of the Spirit and try to change the Spirit's function. In this mindset and process, the Spirit is reduced to serve the individual and to work, for example, to secure the individual's self-autonomy, to assist in self-determination or to fulfill the individual's agenda even "for the sake of Christ."

This creates an ongoing tension and conflict with the Spirit—creating a contradiction of purpose and function. Since the Spirit is here for the whole of God and the relationships necessary to be whole as God's family, contrary to many perceptions the Spirit is not here for the individual. The Spirit works the relational progression to God's family to complete wholeness in God's eschatological plan, so that we will not stop short in the big picture or get stuck in a reductionist framework.

As in all valid relational work by its nature—contrary to power relations—the Spirit's relational work is not unilateral. The Spirit does not impose his work on us as a general rule but works in cooperation with our relational work such that the Spirit does not do all the work, nor do we. This signifies the cooperative and reflexive nature of this relational process that goes back and forth between us. And since the Spirit is not a force or an essence but a person, the person of the Spirit is grieved when the whole of God's family is reduced and the relationships necessary to be whole are deemphasized, distorted or ignored (Eph 4:30; cf. Is 63:10), which then reduces the Spirit's presence and function relationally.

The term for "grieve" (*lypeo*) involves a relational context in which emotional pain is experienced. We need to connect the Spirit's pain Paul describes with the emotional pain Jesus experienced in the garden of Gethsemane (*lypeo, perilypos*, Mt 26:37, 38). The Son's pain went well beyond the situational (pending death) to the relational (anticipating being apart from the whole of God), as discussed earlier. The Spirit's emotional pain is about the same relational issue. These emotional pains are not metaphors but the actual relational experiences of the trinitarian persons, which further interacts with our involvement (cf. "cry out," *krazo*, with the Spirit and with Jesus on the cross, Mt 27:50). And this disclosure provides us with the clearest distinction of the Spirit's full personhood, whose presence and function we must (by its nature, not from obligation or compulsion) embrace relationally.

Together with the relational context and process of the church, Paul directly interrelates the function of the Spirit throughout this epistle (Eph 1:13, 14, 17; 2:18, 22; 3:4, 5, 16, 17; 4:3,30; 5:18; 6:17, 18). While addressing the relational process of deeper relational involvement within the church and the relational issues "to be apart," Paul warns them not to inflict emotional pain on the Spirit "with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (4:30). The term "sealed" (*sphragize*) signified a mark of ownership (cf. 2 Cor 1:22). As those redeemed



(ransomed by the Son) from enslavement and adopted by the Father as his very own (Eph 1:5, 7, 14), the Spirit of adoption relationally works together with us to make the relational context of family and the relational process of family love an experiential reality in likeness of the Trinity. Anything less in function—even with orthodox theology and doctrinal purity—is relationally apart from the whole of the triune God and causes emotional pain for the Spirit, as it did earlier for the Son, and also for the Father (Gen 6:6).

As the Son promised his followers and the Father fulfilled to his very own, the Spirit is present and functions so that the church would not be filled with relational and emotional orphans. Now that the whole of God’s response to our relational condition “to be apart” is complete, we need to address the relational responsibility of our response to the Trinity.

### **The Compatibility of Our Response**

God’s self-disclosure and response to us have engaged ongoingly the trinitarian relational context of family and relational process of family love. If our response (necessarily both as individuals and corporately as church) is to be compatible to the whole of the triune God disclosed and to the vulnerable response of the trinitarian persons, then this compatibility necessitates the disclosure of our whole person (signified by the qualitative substance of our heart) vulnerably open and involved with the Trinity and thus together with each other in the relationships necessary for the whole of God’s family. In other words, how we respond back to God must be compatible with how the whole of God is extended to us in the trinitarian persons; and the church must engage the trinitarian relational context of family and process of family love in its practice in order to function compatibly with the Trinity and be in the Trinity’s likeness as God’s family. We need to grasp this more deeply.

The compatibility of these vulnerable responses—from the whole of God and the trinitarian persons to the whole of our persons and the church—come together (not just gather) in the loving involvement of intimate relationships as family. These intimate relationships together in family love distinguish the fundamental qualitative difference of how the Trinity functions from the reductionist substitutes of how we often do relationships and practice church. This is what God started at creation and wanted Adam and Eve to complete, that is, to “fill the earth” (Gen 1:28). This is what the Son restores with the new creation and the Spirit cooperatively completes. This is the eschatological plan of the Trinity vulnerably revealed in the incarnation as the relational progression to God’s family—the family constituted in the Trinity and constituted for us by the Trinity.

It is these family relationships and family process in which our response both as individuals and together as church needs to be rooted and functionally involved. Yet, any association of the church to the function of the Trinity likely will challenge most ecclesiologies formulated today.

Moreover, this perception of the church raises various related issues involving theological anthropology and eschatology, in addition to the pneumatology discussed above, while addressing an incomplete Christology (without the complete self-disclosure of God in the face of Christ) and truncated soteriology (without the full gospel of what Christ also saved us *to*). For these to cohere in the church as Trinity, we must consider that this conversation is engaged

further within a context in which the influences of modernity are challenged and the challenges of postmodernity provide opportunity for Christ's followers, as Jesus prayed, to live together just as the Trinity does "so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21) and "to let the world know" (Jn 17:23). Specifically then for our immediate concern, the compatibility of our response involves two issues of church practice (among others) needing resolve: the place of the individual and the voluntary association of church membership.

Is the individual a secondary part of the church and does the church function in priority over its individuals? Or is the church a voluntary association of individuals and is the collective of individuals the church? Generally, an Eastern interpretive framework would answer the first set of questions affirmatively while a Western interpretive framework would be in the affirmative to the second set. The Western framework assumes that what underlies the individual are the common notions of freedom and independence. Assuming self-autonomy and self-determination is not an option in an Eastern framework, but is the only viable one in most Western perceptions. These positions coincide with the differences in human thought between the ancient Chinese philosophers and ancient Greek philosophers.<sup>6</sup>

Yet when either perceptual framework of the individual is applied to the biological family (extended or nuclear), there are consequences for the individual and the family whole in both Eastern and Western families. Since the individual is commonly sacrificed in the East, the person tends to be lost in the family without a sense of the deeper identity of *who* one is as a person within the whole. With the aggrandized individual in the West, the person also tends to become lost, that is, lost in oneself without a sense of the deeper identity of *what* one is as a person in the primacy of the whole. As a result of the ambiguity or shallowness of who and what the person is, both families experience a less significant family and less complete persons.

### **In Function with the Divine Image of God**

Returning to the church as family, we can expect the same results from church practice unless the whole person becomes defined and engages the relationships to be whole, both of which are signified in the Trinity. This requires a new person who is not sacrificed for the economy of the whole (as in Eastern families) nor who is aggrandized at the expense of the whole (seen in Western families). The whole person is distinguished in a theological anthropology which includes a deeper understanding of the image and likeness of God (*imago dei*) that coheres with Christ as the image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15).

This is directly consequential for determining the compatibility of our response to God and thus the nature of our involvement as we practice church.

How the human person is perceived and how that person functions, particularly in relationships, are directly associated with the *imago dei*. There have been three basic theological formulations or approaches to what constitutes the image of God for all humans. One, it is substantial or structural, that is, consisting of certain attributes or capabilities (like reason) built

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<sup>6</sup> For an expanded discussion on the origins of cultural differences in human thought see Richard E. Nisbet, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

into the person. Two, it is relational indicating a fundamental relationship between human creature and Creator. Three, it is a goal or destiny for humanity which lies in the eschatological conclusion toward which humans are directed. Each approach by itself lacks the significance of the whole of God. I suggest the *imago dei* necessarily involves all three aspects within the function of what it means to be whole, which is only constituted by whole persons intimately involved together in the interdependent relationships of the whole of God as family signified in the Trinity and is to be completed at the eschaton.

The whole person is signified by the functional importance of the heart, which is the dynamic qualitative significance God planted into the human person in likeness to the qualitative significance of the whole of God (cf. Eccl 3:11). It is this qualitative significance of heart which God consistently makes most important for the person and pursues in the person throughout the Scriptures. God does not pursue a rationality, intelligence or some attribute or capability ascribed to the *imago dei*. While this substance certainly correlates to part of the character of God, it is insufficient to be compatible with God for relationship. God wants heart—the qualitative significance of God’s own likeness which is necessary in order to have intimate relationship with God and involvement together in love. Yet this is not merely an individual relationship God desires but also a corporate relationship in the likeness of the Trinity.

In the creation narrative, the *imago dei* is not just ascribed to an individual but to both human persons, that is, to them together (Gen 1:26, 27). This is an important functional distinction because what God said is “not good” is “to be apart” from the whole of God and the likeness of God’s whole created in human persons as their design and purpose together. This defines the *imago dei* as directly involving the whole person in the relationships necessary to be whole, which is life together as God’s new kinship family. This is the whole in which God created human persons in the Trinity’s image, and which God has ultimately responded to in Christ for a new creation so we can be whole—God’s desires even before creation that the Spirit is bringing to completion. Therefore, the whole of the *imago dei* is God’s family as the new creation (humanity) which will be completed in the eschatological conclusion of God’s desires. Yet God’s desires are not goal oriented but ultimately seek only intimate life together as the whole of family constituted in the Trinity, both now and in eternity.

These three aspects of the *imago dei* converge to formulate this image for the human person in coherence with the whole of God understood in the Trinity. This understanding is gained from God’s self-disclosure in Christ as the image of God, who constitutes the *imago dei* and the person in the whole.

As we consider “Christ as the image of God” to help us functionally distinguish the whole person, two issues about his person (both human and divine) are important to keep in perspective to ensure a complete Christology. The first issue involves the predominant perception of Jesus as one who only died on the cross as the sacrifice for sin. We cannot reduce his person to what he did merely as a sacrifice for the economy of God’s plan of salvation. This would make the same mistake about the person which individuals experience in families from an Eastern framework.

Similarly, the second issue exalts the image of Christ to a Christocentric position that the Son never claimed (Jn 14:13, 31; 17:4). The issue here is an incomplete Christology, which does not center on the Father, and a truncated soteriology, which does not continue in the relational progression to the Father as his very own family. To stop short in this relational process

(however unintentional or inadvertent) is to focus on one trinitarian person at the expense of the whole of the Trinity as well as to focus on one relationship at the expense of the whole of the relationship of God as family. This reduction of the Trinity is also then a reduction of the Son which focuses in effect on a substitute Christ—who may be doctrinally correct but without relational significance to the whole of God, and which may exalt Christ the individual but in actuality reduces the whole of his divine person. This substitute creates a false center revolved around the individual and makes the same mistake about the person which individuals and families experience in a Western framework (or an ancient Greek worldview reflected historically throughout church tradition). To be truly Christocentric, therefore, is to perceive Christ as the image of God, the whole of God constituted in the Trinity—not merely in likeness as the human *imago dei* signifies but nothing less and no substitutes than the very whole of God. This is the only *hermeneutical key* Jesus provides.

These two issues about Christ's person both reduce God's self-disclosure. As the image of the immanent and invisible God, Paul definitively declares Christ as the only valid source of knowledge of God within contexts of competing claims of knowledge (see context of 2 Cor 4:4 and Col 1:15). He can be definitive because "Christ as the image of God" is about the revelation of God—the full revelation of the fullness of God since Christ *is* God (Col 1:19; 2:9). Yet, Jesus is not only our hermeneutical key but also our *functional key* to what is primary in his revelation. What we need to grasp about the person is not primarily the doctrine of Christ as the image of God but more importantly the function of his person as the disclosure of God.

God's self-disclosure in the incarnation of the Son involved a principle of function by which his person acted and our persons need to act in response. This is the only action which validates the person of Jesus as God's full self-disclosure. Simply stated the incarnation is a function of the principle: *no substitutes and nothing less*. The person Jesus presented to us is no substitute of God and nothing less than God. As the Word made flesh this person vulnerably disclosed the whole of God (Jn 1:14, 18).

The principle of "no substitutes and nothing less" also defines *by what* God does relationship and *how* God does relationships. Since the incarnation is the fulfillment of God's response to our condition "to be apart," the "no substitutes and nothing less" relational response of the life of Jesus communicates two vital relational messages directly to us. First, the whole of God vulnerably extends himself to us and is wholly involved with us relationally (the meaning of *agape* love) because of the importance to him of our whole person created in the image of the whole of God. Secondly, the whole of God responds to us intimately with family love not only so we would no longer function relationally "to be apart" and remain as relational orphans, but so that we can understand and experience the relationships necessary to be whole together in the family of God as signified by the whole of the Trinity (not solely Christ). For these family relationships and family process of family love, we were created and are re-created in the image and likeness of the Trinity.

Some theologians are now formulating theological anthropology by narrowly focusing on the image of God for humans only as the fulfillment of the new humanity/creation at the eschaton.<sup>7</sup> While this may extend the practice of the church, it lacks functional clarity to be of

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of this project see Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001),

relational significance to the whole of God, thus is susceptible to reductionism. From the textual convergence of God's self-disclosure, I suggest that "Christ as the image of God" is what we need to wholly conform to (cf. Rom 8:29) to be the image of God. And Christ clearly defined and vulnerably demonstrated to us: (1) how to define the person, and on this basis (2) how to be involved in relationships, and thus (3) how to function in relationships together as the church, the new creation, the family of God. The image of God involves all three to be whole with the whole of God—whole persons in the relationships necessary to be whole as constituted in the Trinity. The function of the revelation of the image of God in the face of Christ is only for relationship, the reality of which we are accountable now to practice and experience.

In God's "no substitutes and nothing less" relational response, God demonstrates directly with us both by what God does relationships and how God does relationships. Furthermore, as Jesus consistently demonstrated in his interactions with others, this is the only way God does relationships, which cannot be negotiated. Our response, therefore, needs to be compatible with God's way of doing relationships. This necessitates also functioning in the principle of "no substitutes and nothing less." Anything other or anything less would not engage the image and likeness of God, the whole of whom Christ reveals fully to us when his image is not reduced by a substitute.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Relational Imperative of the Whole**

We need to examine more deeply by what and how God does relationships. Essentially, God does relationship only by the whole, whether it is the whole of God or the whole of a trinitarian person, which cannot be separated from the whole of the Trinity. The whole is by what God does relationship—nothing less and no substitutes. This whole is what the Son presented of his person and what he communicated in his words (actions, interactions and teachings) which authenticated being the image of the triune God. What the Son presents of his person God seeks from our person. The whole of our person is what we need to present in response back to God—no substitutes and nothing less in order to be compatible with the way God does relationship. Moreover, the whole person is what God created, and what is necessary for relationships to be whole in the Creator's design and purpose.

The whole of the human person is inseparable from the *imago dei* but not necessarily synonymous with it—depending on the definition of this image, as discussed earlier as a structural nature possessing certain characteristics and capabilities, as something more relational, or as an eschatological outcome. Even with the composite definition I suggest, what is important is its function as it involves the whole person. In likeness to God in the incarnation, God demands our complete relational involvement (defining *agape* love, Mt 22:37). This involvement—by the relational nature of the way God does relationship—makes imperative

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<sup>8</sup> Consider Peter's image of Christ when he in effect would not let Jesus go to the cross (Mt 16:21, 22) and when he refused to let Jesus wash his feet (Jn 13:6-8). His reductionist images of Christ both prevented him from embracing the whole of God's response and also allowed his whole person to remain in a comfort zone of relational distance.

presenting the vulnerable integrity (open honesty) of our whole person (from inner out which the Father seeks, Jn 4:23, 24) that is signified by the authentic involvement of our heart (which the Son pursues, Mt 15:8). This is not a metaphor merely to reflect on nor a virtual reality of relationship exercised by outward appearances and well-intentioned simulations. This is a relational reality the authentic experience of which is the outcome only of our person functioning with no substitutes and nothing less than the person God created in the divine image.

In order to be compatible with the relationship of God and thus practice relationships in God's design and purpose, our response must (again by its nature) be the presentation of our whole person and the communication from our whole person—no substitutes and nothing less. This whole is what Christ as the image of God presented and communicated, thus defining for us by *what* relationships are done in his likeness.

Jesus Christ constitutes the new creation of the image of God. Christ functioned in the flesh as the image of God to fulfill what Adam and Eve as the image of God did not complete in the first creation. God initially responded to the relational condition “to be apart” in the first creation (Gen 2:18) in order for them to experience relationally together the reality of the image of God functionally signified and constituted in the whole of the Trinity. God initiated further in Christ as the image of God to fulfill his response to our relational condition for a new creation. Therefore, the first creation and the new creation are inextricably linked by Christ in God's desires for creation and what matters most to God: the whole of the relationship of God as family.

God wants *what* he created. If the *what* that God said “is not good” is rendered “to be alone,” (Gen 2:18), then this suggests what matters most to God is the “work” (service for God) and thus defines the person by what one does and the outward aspects of a person. This is not the *what* God defines as “not good” nor the *by what* God functions and created in his image. When rendered “to be apart” instead of “to be alone,” we can better grasp the whole of the person God created and the relationships necessary to be whole which God desires for both the first and new creation in the eschatological big picture.

God desires, wants, demands the whole of what he created—the whole of my person, our whole persons in relationship and the whole of those relationships together. In other words, God wants the whole in us which is the image of the whole of God constituted and experienced in the Trinity. This is *by what* God functions and does all relationships as vulnerably disclosed by Christ and the *what* he created us for.

If human destiny is defined and constituted by the whole of God—not the substitutes of reductionism—then human conduct and church practice needs to be whole in the required relationships of the whole—nothing less and no substitutes. Reductionism today competes with the whole of God by using a perceptual-interpretive framework which reprioritizes practice away from the primacy of the whole: the whole person signified by the importance of the heart and the intimate relationships necessary to be whole. Yet the functional truth of the incarnate Word as the no-substitutes-and-nothing-less self-disclosure of the whole of God defines and constitutes the gospel, which Paul said must not be “distorted” (reduced, 2 Cor 4:2) or “peddled” (for popular consumption, 2 Cor 2:17).

As followers of Christ, we (individually and corporately) need to desire, want, require, even demand the whole for ourselves and our relationships as the church. Yet our conventional notions of the individual tend to predispose our perceptions of the person in reduced terms and

thus our relationships with reductionist substitutes. The place of the individual in church practice cannot be defined or determined by philosophical and sociocultural frameworks without the person getting reduced or lost. When we fail to grasp this whole, a person (of whatever distinction) cannot truly know the importance of *who* one is and is a part of nor understand the primacy of *what* one is apart from, thus not realizing the significance of *how* the relational condition “to be apart” reduces that person(s) to something qualitatively less (not whole) than by what and for what God created us.

Furthermore, Jesus vulnerably disclosed both *by what* God does all relationships and *how* God does all relationships. In his “no substitutes and nothing less” response of the incarnation, God extends himself beyond making himself accessible to us such as a king gives audience to his subjects. Much more significantly, Jesus demonstrated how God pursues us for deeper relationship, but not any kind of so-called deeper relationship. “No substitutes and nothing less” implies that God put his whole being on the line in the incarnation opening himself to us only for intimate relationship. Combined with *by what* God only does all relationships (the whole of God presented and communicated), this is the only level of relational involvement in *how* God does relationships. Intimacy is the relational outcome of whole persons (signified by the heart) opening to each other and coming together. In our relationship with God this intimacy is also associated with spirituality and spiritual formation, which further defines for spiritual disciplines what is necessary for their practice to have relational significance to God.

Intimate relationships are what functionally constitute the Trinity. This only is *how* God does relationship. In his interactions (particularly with women), Jesus demonstrated the heart of God vulnerably open and lovingly involved with persons for intimate relationships.<sup>9</sup> Just as experienced in the Trinity, this is the experience of our relationships for which Jesus prayed to the Father (Jn 17:20-26); and we need to submit our whole person in response to the level of relational involvement necessary for these relationships. Moreover, these intimate relationships of love are not merely individual relationships but relationship-specific to the context of the whole of the Trinity as family and thereby constituted in relational significance by family love. When this level of relational involvement is properly engaged, these intimate family relationships are both for our benefit as God’s family and for the world to witness as the alternative to reductionism of persons and relationships—just as Jesus revealed, demonstrated and prayed.

When our Christology is complete, the whole of Christ as the image of the whole of God emerges. When our soteriology is not truncated, Christ as the image of God functions to create the new persons for intimate relationship together as God’s family in the likeness of the Trinity—as God planned even before creation (Rom 8:29) and brings to completion at the eschatological conclusion (1 Cor 15:49) through the process of transformation by the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18). This new person is made whole by being transformed (*metamorphoo*) qualitatively from the inside out which is a substantive change ontologically distinct from mere outer changes (*metaschematizo*) having perceptually similar form (for example, “apostles of Christ,” “angel of light” and “servants of righteousness” in 2 Cor 11:13-15). And the place of the individual in the

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<sup>9</sup> These interactions are discussed in depth in my study, *Following Jesus, Knowing Christ: Engaging the Intimate Relational Process* (Spirituality Study, 2003); online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

process of completing this new creation is a person neither sacrificed nor aggrandized, neither reduced nor lost.

Given then *by what* and *how* God does all relationships, the compatible response of our whole person functions for the primacy of the intimate relationships of the whole of God as family—for the purpose not “to be alone,” not “to be apart,” not to be relational orphans, and even more significantly to function in the new creation image and likeness of God. Furthermore, the response of these whole persons as the image of God in the new creation determines the relational involvement of authentic church practice beyond the limits of church as a voluntary association. We need to understand this more deeply.

### **The Purpose of the Church as Family**

Since God’s plan and purpose for us as the new creation involves being “conformed (*symmorphos*, together with in substance) to the likeness (*eikon*, image) of his Son” (Rom 8:29), is there any difference in Christ as the image of God and the church’s practice as the image of God? I suggest that there is no relational difference except for one important distinction of function. Consequent to our ontological limits to conform to the image of Christ, we cannot function just as the Son does to be the revelation of God. Obviously, only God can disclose the ontology of God (cf. Jn 1:18).

Yet, as God’s response to our condition “to be apart,” the Son intimately involved his whole person with us and, along with his Spirit, constitutes us in the whole of God (cf. Eph 1:23; 3:19). While as the image of God we cannot be a revelation of God in the way only Christ was, we can nevertheless distinctly *reflect* the whole of God. Reflecting the whole of God is a function only of our relationships as the whole of God’s family signified in the Trinity. This function exercised in family love emerges only from the ontology of the church as family constituted by the Trinity (Eph 2:19-22). So constituted and expressed the church reflects the whole of God just as Christ revealed the Trinity, thus Christ and his church intimately *come together* to have a common share (communion) in the image of God.

Moreover, the church’s function to reflect the whole of God is also conjoined with the function to *represent* God. The function to reflect God and to represent God integrate together inseparably to define the purpose of the church as family (to be discussed also in chapters 8 and 10). Whereas reflecting God necessitates the ontic development of the whole persons together in the church as family engaged in the relational process of family love, representing God involves the relational context and process directly created by the Trinity’s relational work of adoption (Jn 14:18; Gal 4:4-7; Eph 1:5).

In response to our condition “to be apart” and to restore us to the wholeness of creation (first and second), God in his family love adopted us. Adoption has vital relational significance which includes both heir rights and privileges as well as responsibilities. We need to understand this for the practice of the church as family.

In the Roman sociocultural context of NT times, adoption was an important means by which to maintain a family and continue the family name and property. A father in those days had authority (*potestas*) over sons, and through adoption that *potestas* changed from a natural father to the adopting father. By Roman law, all debts of a new son—or daughter, though female



adoption was rare—were cancelled and all ties to the old life were broken. It was now a new life for the adoptee to whom the new father laid claim. All privileges and heir rights which came with this new family included responsibilities. The adopted son had responsibility to bear the new father's name (as his very own signifying ownership, possession) as well as to represent the father, neither of which was optional. This responsibility to represent the father and to extend his family was effective also from the time of adoption according to Roman law.<sup>10</sup>

It is with this sense of adoption (and the process in 2 Sam 7:14) that Paul proclaimed the truth of the gospel in the incarnation and Christ's redeeming work to take us to the Father as his very own and the transforming work of his Spirit to constitute us in his family with relational intimacy (Gal 4:4-7). The adoptees are the new persons of the new creation and together in the relationships necessary to be whole become the new kinship family of God. The church as this family has the purpose and responsibility to represent the Father and extend his family, which is intentional but not voluntary.

While each adoptee has the relational responsibility to represent the Father, the individual alone cannot reflect the whole of God as family. Likewise, the church as family functions to reflect and to represent the whole of the relationship of God but a church cannot fulfill its function while operating as a voluntary association of individuals. A voluntary character essentially allows individuals to determine the church; such a determination becomes a substitute of reductionism in which the parts (and their sum) define the whole—bottom-up causation. Yet the nature of the whole (God or the church) goes beyond its parts (persons or individuals) because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. A voluntary association is compatible with reductionism but contrary to the whole of God and the church as the whole of God's family.

In terms of the voluntary aspect of church membership and participation today, too many Western assumptions are made for the meaning of voluntary, for example, such as optional, selective, relative and conditional involvement essentially determined by the individual. While the early church emerged in the social context of the Mediterranean world as another voluntary association, we would be in error to base our perception of the apostolic church on the sociology of a voluntary association. Nothing that Jesus did and said, or that his disciples went on to enact, suggests the connotation of voluntary we give the church today. Even though the voluntary associations of their day did not have the loose associations most voluntary organizations have today, Jesus and the early disciples transformed this association to be different from any other in its time. As so constituted, many could no longer continue their association with Jesus (Jn 6:66), while others gained a deeper respect of what it meant to be so aligned (Acts 5:11).

When Paul used the term *ekklesia* for the local church (for example, Gal 1:13), he may have at times focused on a voluntary association. When he used the body metaphor to describe the church, he is no longer focused on a voluntary association because everyone in Christ belongs to it, whether we volunteer or not. As a result of Christ's redemptive work, God's people were not redeemed to be merely free; that would in effect only involve what Christ saved us *from* in a truncated soteriology. The whole purpose of redemption is to be adopted as the Father's very own in his family together (Gal 4:7; cf. 1 Cor 6:19, 20).

Though the Western family norm today revolves around the individual—the consequence

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<sup>10</sup> For a more complete background on adoption, see David J. Williams, *Paul's Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 64-66.

of which is fragmenting the family—few would subscribe to the notion of voluntary family membership. A meaningful family does not and cannot function together on this basis. Yet, this is how we tend to do church because we approach it more with an organizational framework than a family relational process. How well a church functions in qualitative significance to the image of Christ as the whole of God is not a by-product of organization but the relational outcome of intimate interdependent family relationships involving family love.

The ongoing reality of the Trinity's relational work of adoption both precludes the voluntary association of the church as well as holds the church accountable for its relational responsibility to represent the Father and extend his family. The church fulfills this relational responsibility as it reflects the whole of the relationship of God constituted in and by the Trinity. Yet the church cannot reflect in its life what it does not first relationally experience with the Trinity and then directly experience with each other together. A church only reflects, and thus represents, what it experiences in its relationships—no matter how many individuals there are and how much those individuals are doing.

Jesus prayed for these intimate interdependent relationships necessary to be whole as family both for his followers together to experience in family love and, then, for the world to be the objects of this family love in order to believe and know what it means to *belong* to the whole of God's family (Jn 17:20-26). By his familial prayer for his followers, Jesus constitutes the essential experiential reality of the trinitarian relational context of family and its relational process of family love.

### **The Church *Belonging* to the Trinity**

The church, of course, cannot reflect to the world what it does not first relationally experience in its own life. In other words, the church can only function to reflect the whole of God—just as Jesus revealed the whole of the Trinity—when the church's life together is the relational outcome of intimately engaging the Trinity in the relational context of family and the relational process of family love. The church constituted by the Trinity *belongs* to the whole of God's family and thus can authentically extend God's family to the world. It is this relational experience of belonging to God's family in family love that is primary in Jesus' prayer for the world to believe and know, not the mere information of God in doctrinal truth nor knowledge about God merely in what God does.

Yet what does it mean to *belong*? We need to be able to distinguish it from belonging to a voluntary association, which in NT times was a more significant attachment than can be said for conventional church membership today. The issue of belonging takes us beyond membership or even mere ownership and possession, though it involves them.

The sense of belonging for us to grasp here is critical to understand both as God's design and purpose in the first creation and in the relational importance of the new creation. Belonging needs a whole entity to belong to and implies a whole of which one is a part. God first created this whole for humankind in the image and likeness of the whole of the Trinity. It was this relational whole that God declared in the beginning was not good to be apart from, not a matter of being alone nor needing a helper for the work (Gen 2:18). And God's response ever since is essentially summarized as fulfilling, restoring and completing this whole—ultimately in the

incarnation of the Son for a new creation culminated by the Spirit.

In the NT there are two terms usually rendered “belong” which combined provide us with the full significance of what it means to belong. The first Greek term is *ginomai* (see Rom 7:4) which means to begin to be, to become, implying a change of state or condition. This involves the redemptive change necessary for adoption in order to belong to God (cf. Lev 25:55). What *ginomai* also suggests is the ontology of the new creation: *to belong is to become and thus to be whole, which is necessarily both as a person and together in the church as the whole of God’s family*. The person cannot *become* and *be* and the church cannot *become* and *be* apart from the whole of God, not merely in a belief system but also in ongoing function. This is the significance of being “in Christ” and belonging to God. This ontological aspect of belonging is *being* what God created us (originally and new in Christ), which therefore can authentically reflect the image of God constituted in the Trinity.

The second term rendered “belong” is *meno* (see Jn 8:35). This sense of belonging overlaps with the ontological aspect as well as also includes the dynamic relational aspect. The term *meno* means to remain, abide, dwell (cf. Jn 15:4-10), which in John 8 involves the relational process of functioning as full family member (son or daughter). Unlike a slave who is not freed (redeemed) to be adopted to function as a full family member, those who belong to God function in the reciprocal relational involvement of family love as his very own—both intimately with God and with each other.

Yet the relational aspect of belonging is dynamic and thus variable. While the ontological aspect of belonging to God and being a part of the whole of God’s family remains permanent, how we function relationally can vary even to the extent of acting like a slave, as Peter learned (cf. 2 Pet 2:19b). We cannot have a controlling influence in our life (a form of enslavement) and still function as full children in God’s family. They cannot function together nor both determine relationship with God at the same time, as Jesus clearly defined in the interaction above (Jn 8:31-36). If our understanding of belonging is to go beyond mere church membership, then we must get past individualism and voluntary associations. This brings us back to how we define the person, how we engage in relationships and thus practice church.

In this process, we will need to counter the influence of reductionism which has plagued the whole person and the relationships necessary to be whole since that faithless encounter in the primordial garden. Along with redefining the importance of the whole person, reductionism takes away the relational primacy and significance of belonging to the whole (even while advocating membership) by focusing on parts (individuals) the sum of which cannot establish—the sum of which reductionism falsely assumes can determine—the whole necessary for persons to be part of. Reductionism may indeed establish a group of individuals in which to claim membership. But the whole of God and of creation constitutes a process of interdependent relationships the dynamics of which intimately involve the whole parts in covariation wherein the whole is greater than the sum of its parts—the process of synergism created in the likeness of the Trinity.

Nothing less than the whole parts and the whole together and no substitutes for their wholeness can reflect and represent the whole of God as family constituted in the Trinity—just as the “nothing less and no substitutes” divine person vulnerably revealed the whole of God to us. When not reduced in function, whole persons together in the church as family (intimately involved in the interdependent relationships of family love) ongoingly conform in qualitative significance to the image of Christ in relational communion together with the Trinity as God’s

family according to God's desires, design and purpose (Rom 8:29; Gal 4:4-7). This is what it means to belong to the Trinity as the whole of God.

### **The Alternative of Reductionism**

Some may perceive “the church as Trinity” as a metaphor by which to envision the church. For others, “the church as Trinity” may serve as an organizational paradigm to structure the church and its operation. Either would be an error of reductionism which would result in a reductionist substitute of twofold consequence. The first part of the consequence diminishes the reality of relational involvement by the Trinity who experientially constitutes the church in the trinitarian persons' ongoing relational work. The second part of the relational consequence from a reductionist substitute also separates (or distances) the church from functioning in its reciprocal relational work cooperatively with the Trinity to fulfill its purpose as the relational extension of the whole of God's family.

Just as the whole of God vulnerably responded to our relational condition “to be apart” from the whole and the relationships necessary to be whole, our compatible response back to God can only be the whole of our persons in relationship together in the church as family both signified and ongoingly constituted by the Trinity. In the trinitarian relational context of family and the trinitarian relational process of family love, the persons together as the church become whole in the image and likeness of the whole of God. Without this relational context and process, there are only individuals in voluntary association—individually and collectively incomplete. Theological anthropology and ecclesiology without the Trinity are incomplete; both apart from the eschatological whole of the new creation lack coherence with God's desires, design and purpose. All these theological aspects converge in the whole of God's response to our condition in order for us to be whole.

Wholeness (for human persons and the church) has qualitative meaning and substance only in relational significance to the whole of God, and thus to be whole is an experiential reality only in relationship-specific involvement with the Trinity. The substitutes of reductionism are the only alternative for both the person and the church—the alternative from which the “successful” churches at Ephesus and Sardis still needed to be redeemed. We need to address the substitutes for wholeness to which we have turned and from which we likewise need to be redeemed in order to have significance “outside the box” of modernity and beyond postmodernity so as to reflect and represent the definitive whole of God as Trinity.

“It is not good for [the church] to be apart” from the whole. Yet this has been a tension and struggle for the church since its beginning. And the issue then—as it remains for the church today—was reductionism as churches shifted to reductionist substitutes and focused on secondary matter to define itself and determine its practice: namely, circumcision or uncircumcision instead of the new creation (Gal 6:15) and other outer distinctions to stratify and fragment the whole of God’s family (Gal 3:26-29).

As we continue to be subjected to the relational tests of reductionism, the church must—by its nature, not from obligation or compulsion—claim the whole of its life together as family both with the Trinity and with each other. This claim of the whole is not an option for the church but the ontological condition and relational reality of the new creation in Christ, apart from which the church is functionally rendered in practice to mere ontological simulation and epistemological illusion.

In addition, as Paul said to the church in the above context, this claim is what counts and matters most to God (cf. Gal 5:6); and Paul’s life and teachings reflecting the whole are critical for our further understanding and practice of the whole of God. Along with Jesus and the Spirit, Paul is central to the church’s claim and transition to the whole, and is thus integral to its discussion in these next two chapters.

### The Need for Redemptive Change

In its claim of the whole, church practice needs to address how the person is defined and perceived in actual function—not merely in theology and doctrinal beliefs about the human person and the *imago dei*—as well as to confront the basis by which relationships are ongoingly engaged. These two issues remain inseparable from what is involved in church practice and usually are antecedent in influencing how we do church. These will not be easy to address and confront because invariably they will involve making changes—that is, *redemptive change*: the process of being freed from the old and being raised up in the new of the whole (cf. 2 Cor 3:16-18; 5:16-17).

Change always generated controversy when it involved altering the word of God or the consensus of church creedal tradition. Yet, often such controversy resulted in deepening our understanding of God’s Word and reforming practice from church tradition, both of which further brought forth the whole of God. For example, at the Jerusalem council the controversy stratifying the Jewish believers from the Gentile converts resulted in their equalization in the church as the emerging whole of God’s family (Acts 15); instrumental in bringing this redemptive change to the church was the convincing testimony of Peter, whose reductionist theology about the Gentiles had changed earlier (see Acts 10:9-11:17).

Another example of positive change resulting from controversy involved forms of the

Arian controversy in the fourth century in which the whole of God was reduced, notably denying the deity of Christ. The Cappadocian fathers responded by formulating the initial doctrine of the Trinity and thus provided a deeper understanding of the relational nature of the whole of God as the social Trinity. Despite this crucial change in theology, the church—particularly in the West though not exempting the Eastern church—has yet to grasp the relational significance of the Trinity for its practice—which Jesus’ high priestly formative prayer defines and constitutes as the whole of God’s family.

Positive changes in theology do not guarantee corresponding changes in church practice—as further demonstrated in the Reformation, though the magisterial Reformers focused on soteriology over ecclesiology. Nor do deepening theological developments (and correct doctrine) automatically bring redemptive change, particularly in how we define the person and function in our relationships. While Peter changed his theology and how he did his ministry, how he actually functioned in his relationships was exposed by Paul to still be the old way, thus lacking deeper redemptive change and heart-level reconciliation (Gal 2:11-14). This suggests that vestiges of reductionism remaining most resistant to change involve the substitutes for the whole in how we define the person by what we do and have and how we function in relationship without the primacy of intimate involvement. This appears to be true even where there is a shift to postmodernity, which, while rejecting modernist assumptions, remains under the influence of reductionism.

Substitutes for the whole person and for the relationships necessary to be whole tend to be the last areas to change not only because they are the most threatening but also because it is easy to confuse their forms of simulation and illusion for “the real thing.” This becomes especially problematic when our perceptual-interpretive framework tends to equate quantitative forms for qualitative substance (as in “masquerade,” cf. 2 Cor 11:13-15) and fails to distinguish whether there is any quality in the quantity (for example, statistics of church growth). When we use such a framework to prescribe and assess change, we are predisposed to reduce the whole of God.

Interestingly, at the Jerusalem council, Peter defined God as the one “who knows the heart” (*kardiognostes*, searcher of hearts, Acts 15:8) yet did not account for this truth in his own relationships. Furthermore, while the forms of behavior may be impeccable, God assesses the involvement of our heart in that behavior (Mt 15:8). As discussed in Chapter 1, the function of the heart constitutes the whole person, so the whole is not engaged without heart involvement. Measuring the distance we keep from our heart and the extent of heart involvement in our relationships are inherent to the qualitative framework of the whole of God because this is what matters most to God, signifying who, what and how the triune God is.

Consequently, in its claim of the whole the church needs to shift to the qualitative perceptual-interpretive framework of the whole of God in order to fully prescribe and assess the changes necessary to be whole, for example, in spiritual formation and community formation and their underlying identity formation. This necessitates the church distinguishing clearly between the change of transformation (*metamorphoo*, the fundamental inner-out change of the whole person, 2 Cor 3:18) from the merely outward changes of form (*metaschematizo*, denotes only outward change, which as a reductionist substitute can be mistaken for the redemptive change of transformation, 2 Cor 11:13-15). The simulation or illusion of so-called transformative—a current buzzword tending to involve *metaschematizo* more than *metamorphoo*—change

functions in what we do by taking on a role (*hypokrisis*, acting out a different identity, which Paul exposed Peter doing, Gal 2:13) without the qualitative significance of heart, thus in effect functioning (even unintentionally) just as a “masquerade” (*metaschematizo*).

Without enforcing this vital distinction of change, church practice is unable to account for redemptive change in its midst. The Spirit engages only in the relational work (top-down causation) of *metamorphoo* (2 Cor 3:18) and constitutes the church only as God’s family (Eph 2:21, 22; Rom 8:15, 16). If church practice is to be compatible in working cooperatively with the Spirit in this relational process, it needs to address and confront reductionist substitutes (and bottom-up causation) and must undergo the redemptive changes necessary to be the whole of God’s family.

### **Three Vital Aspects of Practice**

The two issues of how we define the person and how we do relationships, and thus church, further involve three vital aspects for all practice: (1) the presentation of our self to others (the veracity of *who* is presented), (2) the content of our communication (the qualitative substance of *what* is communicated), and (3) the level of relationship we engage (the qualitative extent of *how* we’re involved). As we examine these three aspects of practice along with the two issues involved in church practice, we can better understand if how we do church is the relational function of the whole of God or has shifted to a reductionist substitute. This process includes examining the compatibility of church practice with the relationship of God in *by what* and *how* God does all relationships, discussed in the last chapter.

The relational significance of the incarnation of the Word revealed the qualitative substance necessary to express these vital aspects of practice in the likeness of the whole of God. Jesus disclosed the nothing-less-and-no-substitutes whole of God. By directly and openly sharing his whole person (the presentation of his self), he communicated the very heart of God (the content of his communication) and made himself vulnerable for intimate relationships (the level of relationship engaged). In other words, Jesus engaged the whole of other persons in the only way God does relationships: nothing less than heart-to-heart involvement for intimate relationships—which contradicts any aspect of practice “to be apart” and for which there is no substitute.

If Jesus had not vulnerably disclosed his person and intimately engaged his followers for relationship together, we would not have the deeper ontological reality and qualitative epistemological basis for truly knowing and experiencing the whole of God constituted in the Trinity. We have to grasp this as a function of relationship, not a function of doctrine or theology though they are important as a basis for the relationship. This is not the informed result of quantifying God’s self-revelation but the relational outcome of God’s loving response to our condition “to be apart” from the whole.

When the incarnation is perceived as only a miraculous event or act, there is reductionism of God’s loving response. The act may still be described as loving but God’s response is perceived with less relational significance. When the incarnation is perceived merely as the revelation of God to quantify in propositions for theological foundationalism, there is reductionism of the whole of the person Jesus presented and reductionism of the content of the

whole of God disclosed in the communication shared during his engagement of his followers in intimate relationship. This challenges how we see God's revelation and thus what we do with God's self-disclosure in the presentation of Jesus' person and in the content of his communication, the qualitative substance of which is relationally significant and specific only for intimate relationship together. God's revelation and truth are only for this relationship.

When Jesus told the Father in his formative prayer "I have revealed you to those" (Jn 17:6)—signifying the completion of the relational work the Father gave him to do (17:4)—he defined for his followers the full meaning and purpose of the incarnation and God's revelation. He used the term for "reveal" (*phaneroo*, to make known, show openly) which is synonymous with another Greek term *apokalypto* (to reveal, remove a lid), yet with an important difference we need to embrace. While *apokalypto* points only to the object revealed, *phaneroo* engages the relational process to address those to whom the revelation is made. Certainly Jesus *apokalypto* the whole of God and fully exegeted the Father (*exegeomai*, Jn 1:18). Yet *phaneroo* completes the purpose for God's self-disclosure in the incarnation of the Son as the relational process only for the life eternal of intimately knowing the whole of God as family constituted in the Trinity (Jn 17:2, 26). Simply stated, God's revelation communicates relational messages from him to us for the purpose of relationship together. As the hermeneutical and functional keys, Jesus opens the door to the whole of God for relationship.

Moreover, Jesus challenged the reductionism of his disciples just prior to his prayer in order for them to grasp, that in being "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6) his life is about relationship together, his truth is only for this relationship, his way is just to this relationship—nothing less and no substitutes. We need to embrace and take to heart for our practice that God only vulnerably presents the whole of his Self and communicates the quality of his heart to be lovingly involved with us for the sole purpose to engage our hearts in intimate relationship together as his family, the whole of God. All church practice converges in these three aspects of practice and becomes compatible in response to God's *phaneroo* when not substituted for by reductionism.

### **The Practice of Disciples: To Follow or to Serve**

The church is ongoingly challenged not to reduce the who, what, and how of God's revelation. As followers of Jesus, the church tends to practice the same reductionism as his first disciples by reducing Jesus' self-disclosure to his teachings and ministry examples (namely as a servant), thus diminishing the whole of his person. This reduces discipleship to following his teachings, not his person, following his examples of servanthood, not personhood. This defines Jesus as a teacher and not a whole person to be involved with, defines him as a servant and not the Son to be involved with together as family. This reduces discipleship merely to what we do for Christ rather than being who and what we are in relationship with Christ, focusing on how to serve rather than how to be involved in relationship.<sup>1</sup> This minimalist approach, even with the best of intentions, has relational consequences for church practice.

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<sup>1</sup> A full theology of discipleship is discussed in my study *The Relational Progression: A Relational Theology of Discipleship* (Discipleship Study, 2004); online at <http://www.4X12.org>.



When we reduce following the whole of Jesus to only parts of him, no matter how sincere and rigorous we engage in his service and mission we can expect the same relational consequence as his first disciples: “Don’t you know me” (Jn 14:9). The disciples had yet to grasp that earlier Jesus clearly defined *the paradigm for serving* that counters reductionist substitutes: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, my servant will also be” (Jn 12:26). Just as “follow me” were the fundamental first (Mk 1:17) and last words (Jn 21:22) which Jesus told Peter, this imperative defines the process of discipleship as totally a relational imperative. This paradigm defines further the necessary condition to serve him. As previously discussed, Jesus used the term for “serve” (*diakoneo*) that comes from the word for minister, deacon, servant (*diakonos*). What is vital for his followers to grasp is that *diakoneo* emphasizes the work to be done, not the relationship between them. Note this important distinction between the work and the relationship—a basic issue faced by Adam and Eve in the primordial garden, discussed previously—that deals with reductionism.

In the relational imperative and this paradigm for serving, Jesus communicated directly to his followers that in order to serve him it is not sufficient for us to focus “on the work to be done,” or on related situations and circumstances—that is, reductionist parts—no matter how dedicated we are or how good our intentions. Contrary to many notions of serving, even aspects of a servant model, service is not what being a disciple is all about. While service results from it, being a disciple does not mean service first nor involve serving as the primary priority.

The first priority in this paradigm is the relational priority of intimate involvement with Christ (“where I am my servant also will be”) because Jesus does not define his followers by what they do (service or mission) but by their whole person in intimate relationship together. The necessary condition to serve Christ, and the most important priority regardless of urgent circumstances, is to be fully involved with him in the ongoing deep relational process of discipleship—that is, the intimate relationship of *being with him*. Reductionism redefines a disciple merely by the behavior of service or ministry without the deep significance of this relationship, thus creating an epistemological illusion: outer behavior is a sufficient condition for *who* is presented, *what* is communicated and *how* one is involved. To be his disciples, however, is only a function of this relationship and thus by its nature necessitates being intimately involved not for service first but for the relational involvement of love (cf. Jn 13:35). This relational experience is the outcome of the ontological reality of this relationship, which cannot be simulated nor experienced apart from anything less than intimate relationship with the whole of God. This relationship is the true vocation of his disciples which church practice must be challenged to be involved in as his followers.

The primacy of intimate relationship together is signified in the whole of God and constituted by the Trinity as family. This is who, what and how Jesus, as the image of God, vulnerably disclosed the whole of God to his followers and what he asked the Father for his followers to experience together in the whole of God’s family, which the Spirit is making a relational reality. Anything less than the whole person (divine and human) and any substitutes for the relationships necessary to be whole (in the Trinity and the church) are reductionism—a condition and practice in which “it is not good for the church to be apart” because anything else we present, communicate and are involved in do not have relational significance to the whole of God, as well as are incompatible with the relationship of God.

## The Practice of Church: Family or Orphanage

While a disciple is all about the relational process of discipleship, discipleship is not all about a disciple, nor even a gathering of individual disciples. The relational process of following Jesus involves the relational progression which leads to the redemptive act of adoption as the Father's very own daughters and sons in his family together. The whole of this family is the fulfillment of God's covenant promise which constitutes the gospel and what Christ saved us *to* in the new creation—contradicting the reductionist emphasis of good news for the individual merely in what Christ saved us *from*.

Throughout this study God's response to the human condition "to be apart" from the whole of God has been the integrating thesis for God's involvement with humankind, thus the theme for salvation history and the ultimate expectation for its eschatological conclusion. In the process of this relational progression as discussed earlier, after Jesus promised that his followers would not be left as orphans (Jn 14:18) he prayed for his followers to experience the relational reality of the whole of God's family as constituted in the Trinity (Jn 17:6-26).

Given God's ongoing response, Jesus' redemptive relational work and prayer and the relational purpose for the Spirit's continual presence, each church is confronted with the decision that functionally defines its existence. By its practice, each church decides either to take up its relational responsibility as the whole of God's family or to assume the function of a gathering of orphans in effect as an orphanage. This either-or decision is directly correlated to a church's perspective on and extent of practice in the condition "to be apart." Whether a church gives functional priority to this relational responsibility of family or subordinates it with other church functions, there is no intermediate position for church practice that functionally defines its existence. We either are engaging the relational process of the whole of God or are apart from its relational function—no neutral practice, though certainly the relational process is not always consistent in practice.

The metaphor of "church as an orphanage" is descriptive of any gathering of Christ's followers who remain in some condition "to be apart" as relational or emotional orphans—gathering even with good intentions or for a missional purpose. An orphanage can provide organizational membership, group identity in joint activities, and it may even simulate belonging in a limited sense of community. Yet biological orphans would have no illusions that this would substitute for belonging to an authentic family. The same awareness cannot be said for most relational and emotional orphans in the church.

Jesus defined the reciprocal relational responsibility involved in relationship together without being apart as orphans (Jn 15:3-11). As discussed in "The Church in the Likeness of the Trinity," the key term used for this process is "remain" (*meno*, abide, dwell) which is not a static descriptive term but a dynamic relational term involving ongoing engagement in a relational process. It is the same term Jesus used to define his disciples (Jn 8:31). Furthermore, *meno* is used by Jesus to distinguish the function of those in enslavement (or reductionism) from those who authentically live as God's very own daughters and sons in his family as the relational outcome of redemptive change, therefore defining the qualitative significance of *belonging* (Jn 8:34, 35).

Belonging is a relational function of the whole of God—not as an organization nor even in a limited sense of community—as family constituted in and by the Trinity. While *meno* has a

quantitative dimension of duration (permanence), Jesus emphasizes the qualitative aspect of the depth of relationship and involvement. Therefore, belonging is the relational outcome of intimately experiencing the relational reality of being God's very own together as family (Jn 14:23 "home," *mone* from *meno*). This experience may be simulated with good intentions or may be perceived with illusions but authentic belonging cannot be substituted for. Nor should church practice be accountable for anything less—just as Jesus held accountable the churches of Ephesus (Rev 2:2-4), Sardis (Rev 3:2), and Laodicea (Rev 3:15, 16).

What renders a church effectively an orphanage are its reductionist practices of relationships without the primacy of intimacy and its reductionist definition (perception) of the person functioning apart (or distant) from the whole person signified by the importance of the heart. Even though church as orphanage can be a refuge for those who are apart—as orphanages historically have served for those without family—this practice is still a reductionist substitute for the relational responsibility as the whole of God's family. God holds his people accountable for his created design and purpose for relationships, to be his covenant people, to live in the new creation of his family—that is, accountable to relationally respond back to the whole of God as the Trinity, whose trinitarian persons are intimately involved with us. Settling for anything less puts us in tension or conflict with God's desires and with what matters most to God.

Jesus was in ongoing conflict with the main reductionists of his time—notably the scribes and Pharisees who reduced religious practice to following a code and focused on fulfilling the outer behavior (instead of relationships) deemed necessary for the covenant, while acting out a role (note Jesus' polemic in the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5-7). The disciples in general and Peter in particular, as discussed earlier, were in ongoing tension with Jesus because of their tendency to have distance from their heart and to maintain relational distance from the vulnerable heart of Jesus. Consequently, they did not intimately know Jesus (and thus the Father) despite their membership as his first disciples, and all their shared activities and time together. When Jesus had warned them of "the yeast of the Pharisees" (Mt 16:5; Lk 12:1), he addressed their reductionism in some degree of practice "to be apart." Later, of course, he directly confronted their reductionism (Jn 14:1-9). As a group, the early disciples essentially functioned as relational orphans serving in an orphanage during Jesus' earthly life. It was not until after Christ's ascension that they decisively took up their relational responsibility as the whole of God's family.

Certainly the arrival of the Spirit's presence and work can explain the redemptive changes undergone by the early disciples. Yet this does not eliminate the necessary reciprocal relational work of Christ's followers in cooperative engagement with the Spirit, for which the church is accountable in the trinitarian relational context of family to practice, to nurture and to extend by the trinitarian relational process of family love.

For authentic followers of Jesus, to function as orphans together is a contradiction of being in relationship with Christ and is not an option for practice in our relationships. Nor is following Jesus in the relational progression as his new kinship family optional. In his study of the NT house church Roger Gehring observes that the image Jesus preferred for the new people of God was the eschatological family of God. He concludes that this was most likely because

family of God best communicated the theological essence of what Jesus was trying to impart.<sup>2</sup> With further use of social history, Joseph Hellerman examines the social organization of the pre-Constantinian house churches to find that from first-century Palestine to third-century Carthage the church was a surrogate kinship family whose members understood themselves to be the sons and daughters of God.<sup>3</sup>

We can add that the function of this new kinship family (not necessarily in the form of a house church) is the necessary practice of God's people everywhere and how to do church anywhere regardless of its tradition, even in the twenty-first century Western world. Christian community formation (past, present or future) is more significant than a house, a household or even a conventional family, as our study will discuss shortly. The church as family in likeness of the Trinity is a new creation unlike any gathering experienced before, even as covenant people of God. And as transformed persons involved in transformed relationships with family love, the practice of this new relational process raises issues for us which need to be resolved both as individuals and as a church family.

When church practice accounts for this reciprocal relational responsibility, as seen with the early disciples, it becomes the apostolic church as the whole of God's family, not an orphanage of those still functioning apart. No human person was more instrumental in establishing the church as the whole of God's family than the apostle Paul. We need to examine briefly Paul's account of the church, yet more so in his practice as a disciple than in doctrine as a theologian.

## **Paul and the Whole**

The practice of God's Word was always subject to reductionism in the early church, even its ministry. In counteracting reductionism in the church at Corinth, Paul declared that his ministry team did not "distort the word of God" (2 Cor 4:2); the Greek term *doloo* means to adulterate, dilute, water down, cheapen (e.g., as merchants used to do with wine). Contrary to what apparently was a norm in that period, they also did not "peddle the word of God for profit" (2 Cor 2:17). The term for "peddle" (*kapeleuo*) means to merchandise it, treat it like a commodity and utilize it for one's own ends. These reductions basically serve to popularize the Word and make it more palatable for a prevailing perceptual framework—similar to what we see in Western Christian culture and church practice today, particularly in the U.S.

Yet Paul could ensure the integrity of his interpretative framework and practice of the Word from reductionism because of redemptive change in his life. Previously in his life, the Word of God was merely a code-book to follow rigorously (cf. Phil 3:4-6). Then he encountered the Word revealed to him directly in a relational experience (Acts 9:1-19; 22:3-16; 26:9-18).

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<sup>2</sup>Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structure in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 47.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

Jesus took Saul's persecution personally, not situationally. That is, he made it relationally between Paul and him ("Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me"); in doing so, he established with Paul the relational context and process of the whole of God.

It was this experience that changed Paul's understanding of the Word from a code-book to God's self-disclosure "in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6) to follow wholly for relationship. This was more than a paradigm shift in perspective but more significantly a transformation of Paul's person which defined his theology. The revelation of God is for relationship, which is further understood because Paul's life and theology increasingly demonstrated the full functional resolve and relational outcome of God's response to our condition "to be apart" by defining the whole of who was included in God's family, what his family was all about and how this family functioned. Jesus disclosed himself to Paul for this purpose, both for him individually and for the corporate community of God's people (Acts 26:16-18).

It was from this direct relational experience with the Word that Paul became a disciple, the terms of which were still determined by the discipleship Jesus established during his earthly life. Paul's following of Jesus may be disputed because of his lack of quoting Christ in his epistles. This raises various questions: was Paul only interested in the Christ event (his death and resurrection plus his return) and not in his teachings, or did Paul lack knowledge of his teachings; did his lack indicate he only saw Jesus as savior and not as teacher in the rabbinic tradition, or indicate that he didn't really follow Jesus as a disciple? I suggest Paul was a follower of Jesus in the discipleship Jesus redefined for his disciples and the terms for adherence to him as teacher, which contrasted with other disciples in the rabbinic tradition as students.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to a reductionist substitute of merely following teachings, Paul followed the person Jesus. Moreover, the God this person disclosed—"the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6) who is the very image of God (4:4)—is the whole of God as the Trinity. Paul followed Jesus in this relational progression to the whole of God, so it is the Trinity, not Christ alone, who claims the center of God's glory, the purpose for the church and their eschatological work.

From the lens of this discipleship framework, we need to understand Paul's conversion and calling. To serve Jesus is to follow him and following him is a function only of relationship with him, not of service for him (Jn 12:26). Nor can the whole of Jesus' person be reduced merely to his teachings, which may suggest in part why Paul rarely quoted Jesus nor referred directly to his teachings very much. The priority of relationship is understood in Paul's major focus to be "in Christ" (e.g., Rom 8:1; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 1:22;5:6; Eph 1:13) which is central to his theology not as a code to follow as in his former life but as the whole person ("the image of the invisible God," Col 1:15) to be involved with for relationship together in a new life. The qualitative difference between his former and new life is definitive in the relational significance of Paul's desire "to know Christ" (Phil 3:4-10), coinciding with what Jesus defined as eternal life (Jn 17:3). And as reflected in Paul's prayers, knowing Christ is not about information but the relational outcome of intimate relationship (Eph 1:17; 3:16-19). The priority and primacy of intimate relationship was basic to Paul's life as a disciple and defines his theology of the whole of God as family to which Jesus called him (cf. Eph 4:12, 13). While his

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<sup>4</sup>For a deeper discussion on how Jesus defined discipleship see *The Relational Progression*.

epistles lack quantitative reference to Christ's teaching, Paul demonstrated the qualitative significance of Christ and following him in the whole of God.

Paul's initial relational experience with Jesus on the Damascus road was the defining moment both for his life and theology, the thrust of which became conclusive for fully determining how God responded to the human condition "to be apart" and what Christ saved us to. To understand the connections involved here we have to grasp the relational process of the whole of God.

While Paul's Damascus road encounter with Jesus traditionally has been understood as a conversion experience, a recent shift in interpretation would describe the same experience as Paul's unique call to be apostle to the Gentiles.<sup>5</sup> A call seems to fit the narrative situation rather than a conversion. Yet more than a traditional conversion but a transformation was necessary to fulfill the call, which Jesus obviously understood and certainly was not overlooking in that encounter. If he did, this would imply that serving was a priority over the relationship, in which the relationship could be on Paul's terms. Ananias set the record straight by essentially defining for Paul what was necessary to follow Jesus (Acts 22:16). This included transformation ("wash your sins away," *apolouo*, which Paul clearly connects later to "sanctified" and "justified" in 1 Cor 6:11) and relational involvement ("calling on his name," *epikaleio*), plus taking on the new identity reflecting these redemptive changes ("be baptized"). The latter was not merely a new ritual to replace old practices but the substantive expression of qualitative change (cf. Rom 10:10).

In other words, Paul was both transformed and called. To focus on one at the expense of the other is a reductionist attempt to categorize Paul's experience into a part separated from the whole. Yet they are inseparable in the relational process involving the whole of God's response not only for Paul's life but for all of God's people. Furthermore, the call to discipleship is not optional to transformation "in Christ" nor is functional participation in Christ's body voluntary. Relationship with Christ determines both identity and function. It was this relationship and the intimate experience of God in it which transformed Paul and saved him *to* the whole of God's covenant family. Paul's theology unfolds in the relational context and process of the whole of the Trinity.

To understand Paul the theologian we need to grasp the relational significance of Paul as a disciple. As commonly experienced in transformations, the practice (religious and cultural) of Paul's former life represented not only a point of tension but direct conflict with his new life in Christ. All that was associated with his former life (namely Judaism, Gal 1:14; Phil 3:4-6) factors into the central theology Paul presents. Yet Paul was not merely substituting a different belief system for Judaism. I suggest that what his former life and Judaism represent is a variation of reductionism. In counteracting the reductionism underlying the contextual issue of Judaism—as well as other variations, for example, in early forms of Gnosticism—Paul formulated theology which is relationship-specific to the whole of God and God's response to those who are apart from the whole. Certainly Paul can speak on this matter from direct personal experience. Even

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<sup>5</sup> For a summary of this discussion see Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid, eds. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 156-163.

more important than his former life, therefore, is to understand that what factors more deeply into his theology is the relational significance of God's response and the whole of the new life which Paul claims for his whole person and experiences in the relationships necessary to be whole. We need to account for this in the corpus of Pauline theology and thus in church practice as followers of Christ.

The death and resurrection of Christ were not about mere event for Paul but the absolute *means* relationally necessary for the relational *end* to be "in Christ," thus Paul's dominant focus on what can be confused as event apart from the whole of Christ. Likewise, Paul's view of the Law and justification by grace are certainly in conflict with Judaism but even more so counteract reductionism. Yet his theology was not designed to be divisive—though certainly formulated in a context of tension and conflict—but reconciling, restoring to the whole of God. His teachings focused on the tension and conflict with reductionism—just as Jesus did throughout his earthly life—and the reductionist substitute of "parts" determining the whole (bottom-up causation) in a process of justification by works. Paul understood how this reductionist system was based in prevailing incorrect or incomplete perceptions of the Law which in reality prevented wholeness, because he was previously enslaved in the system.

Analyzing the different aspects of Paul's theology separately fails to help us understand his theological resolve to operationalize the qualitative-interpretive framework which embraces the whole person signified by the importance of the heart (Col 2:2, 3) and the necessary relationships of the whole of God as his new covenant family (Eph 2:11-22). This was his calling (along with his transformation) which was always in the context of his relational experience with God (see also Acts 22:17-21; 23:11; cf. 2 Cor 12:1-4). His theological resolve—and his passion seen, for example, in 2 Corinthians—emerged from his relational involvement as a disciple. His theology then was not about rational proclamation (denoted by the Gk. term *lego*) of propositional truths but about simply sharing (in contrast to *lego*, denoted by the term *laleo* in Col 4:3) the qualitative and relational significance of the whole of God found in the mystery of Christ by making known relationally to others (denoted by *phaneroo*, not *apokalypto* as discussed earlier, in Col 4:4, rendered "proclaim clearly" in NIV) God's self-disclosure—just as God revealed relationally to Paul.

Paul formulated his theology and understood the whole of the gospel by piecing together the various relational experiences of God's self-disclosure to him. God's revelation is always for relationship in the integrating thesis of his response to the human condition "to be apart," which Paul grasped as God's thematic action since Abraham (Rom 4) yet was determined by God's desires even before creation (Eph 1:4, 5; Rom 8:29). Unlike Jesus' early disciples who did not piece together his self-disclosures (as discussed previously about *syniemi* in Mk 8:17) and thus really did not know him (cf. Jn 14:9), Paul claims full comprehension (using the related term *synesis* in Col 2:2) of the mystery of God (Eph 3:3). Despite what may appear to be self study (Gal 1:16, 17), this was not the rational conclusion of a process of reason but the relational outcome from the cooperative involvement of Paul's whole person signified by his heart (Rom 10:10) with the relational work of the Spirit (whose purpose is described by Paul in 1 Cor 2:10-13; Eph 1:17-19; 3:16-19). Connecting these texts yields the relational process of the heart-to-heart involvement of intimacy constituted in the Trinity and the basic nature of the whole of God's response to us.

From this experiential base of direct revelation Paul proceeded to fulfill the purpose of

the whole of God and to provide theological coherence for church practice as the whole of God's family. This purpose was outlined in Colossians 1:25-2:4 and was always in conflict with reductionism of the word of God (*doloo* in 2 Cor 4:2). Whether it was Judaism or early forms of gnostic philosophy on the reductionist side, Paul was entrusted with the responsibility ("commission" in Col 1:25 and "administration" in Eph 3:2 rendering the same term, *oikonomia*, which involves managing the affairs of a household—the whole of God's family) for the whole of God's word: "to present . . . in its fullness" (one term, *pleroo*, meaning fully or complete, i.e., without reduction, Col 1:25) the mystery of God revealed to Paul (Col 1:26; Eph 3:3), which is all about God's response to our condition "to be apart" from the whole and now "in Christ" can be part of the whole of God's family (Col 1:27; Eph 3:6) and thus be whole, complete (*teleios* rendered "perfect" in Col 1:29).

This is the gospel Paul struggled for in conflict with reductionism (Col 1:29-2:1; Eph 3:7; Gal 2:5, 14; cf. Rom 16:25, 26). This gospel is the gospel of the whole of God which Paul boldly confronted Peter with as the only truth of the gospel. The practice of anything less Paul identified as simply role-playing (*hypokrisis*, Gal 2:11-14)—that is, essentially a reductionist substitute without both the qualitative significance of heart and the relational significance of the whole of God's family. Paul was entrusted with the responsibility (*oikonomia*) for God's family and the integrity of its whole. This was not a theological responsibility but a relational responsibility. While Paul formulated critical theology about salvation, justification, sanctification, pneumatology, eschatology, he was not focused on the theological task but rather intensely engaged in the family "business" of building God's family. With the various aspects of his theology, Paul provided the theological coherence for church practice as the whole of God's family to be operationalized in family process, in what can be called "ecclesiology of the whole."

As a disciple, Paul's purpose then for the followers of Christ was further summarized (in Col 2:2, 3): "that they may be encouraged in heart [signifying the whole person] and united in love [intimately involved together in the relationships of family love necessary to be whole as constituted in the Trinity] so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding [the qualitative perceptual-interpretive framework of the whole for *synesis*, making the connections to comprehend] in order that they may know [*epignosis*, perceive and know specifically] the mystery of God, namely Christ [the qualitative depth of God in the face of Christ] in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge [the qualitative whole of who, what and how God is]."

## **Transitioning to the Whole**

Moreover Paul defined how this relational responsibility needs to be fulfilled (in Col 4:3, 4): "that we may proclaim [*laleo*, simply speaking, sharing and not about theological discourse and reason, *lego*] the mystery of Christ [Christ's self-revelation is not about information to inform us of God but for us to have intimate relationship with him to know God, which cannot be sufficiently proclaimed merely by intellectual expression of content from the mind but necessitates the qualitative significance of the heart] . . . that I may proclaim it clearly [*phaneroo*, discussed earlier, focuses on those to whom the revelation is made, thus engaging a relational process] as I should [communicating, *laleo*, by its nature, *dei*, as opposed to obligation or



compulsion].” That is, communicating (*laleo*) the whole of God is a relational function (*phaneroo* and not merely *apokalypto*), therefore must by its nature (*dei*) be compatible with how Jesus shared relationally with us—vulnerably with his heart for intimate connection (cf. Jn 17:26). Anything less or any substitutes are reductionism.

This indicates how Paul defined the whole person with the qualitative significance of the heart and how he practiced relationships in the primacy of intimacy. Both are necessary in order to be compatible with how Jesus functioned and thus continue the relational progression Jesus established for the church to function “with Christ” as his followers and “in Christ” as the whole of his family (cf. Eph 4:12, 13). What Paul presented of his self, shared in his communication and engaged in relationally define further that by its nature what Paul operationalized for church practice must involve the relational context of family and the relational process of family love as constituted in the Trinity. All of this involves the whole of God and how God’s response to our condition “to be apart” from his whole coheres in the ecclesiology of the whole. This ecclesiology is the focus of the next chapter.



Central in Christ's teachings is the kingdom of God (cf. Mt 4:23; 9:35). Reductionist substitutes in Paul's time, however, turned the kingdom of God into secondary practices focused on less significant aspects of the persons and relationships in a gathering (see Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 4:20; 15:50). In the limited times Paul referred to the kingdom of God, he focused not merely on the concept of the kingdom but on the functional aspects of it—that is, its relational context and process which are about family. For Paul, the gospel was not about the idea of the kingdom nor merely the eschatological hope for it. As established in the relational progression by the Son's incarnation, the kingdom (or family) of God was at hand. Thus Paul operationalized the kingdom in the church as the family of God constituted in and by the Trinity.

Jesus alluded to the necessity for the *whole* of the kingdom (united and complete) without being divided (Mk 3:23-25). Paul affirmed the necessity of the whole also by asking if Christ himself has been divided into parts (1 Cor 1:13). The term for “divide” (*merizo*) is used in a negative sense to imply the reduction of unity and completeness. This involved not only the reduction of the whole of Christ's person (for example, down merely to his teachings) but reducing the whole of the Trinity, as if the parts had more significance than the whole and could determine the whole (bottom-up causation). The church in Corinth was practicing such reductionism (1 Cor 1:10-17).

The whole of the church depends on the unity and completeness of the Trinity to constitute it as the whole of God's family. Any reduction of or disregard for the Trinity makes any church practice insufficient to be whole—for example as the church in Sardis was confronted by Christ and needed to emerge (Rev. 3:2). Likewise, to have a trinitarian view of God and to affirm the relationality of the Trinity without engaging the church in the intimate relationships of family reduces the whole of church practice to a correct doctrine without the relational significance and involvement of family love signifying the Trinity—for example as the church in Ephesus insufficiently practiced (Rev 2:2-4). How is this whole operationalized for church practice? This chapter attempts to answer this question in the historical development and the functional process of this new ecclesiology.

### Its Emergence

Ecclesiology of the whole begins to emerge from two metaphors. The first, as discussed earlier, is “the church as an orphanage” (a gathering of Christ's followers who remain in some relational condition “to be apart”), from which church practice needs to be transformed (*metamorphoo*, not *metaschematizo*), just as the church in Sardis needed. This imperative change relates to the second metaphor lovingly extended by Christ to the reductionist church in Laodicea which used its own resources to define itself under an illusion effectively promoting the status

quo (Rev 3:15-20). The classic visual of Jesus knocking at the door represents the desires of the whole of God to have intimate relationship with his family. This change therefore must (by its nature as signified in the Trinity) be a relational change from a gathering of relationships having distance (orphanage) to the intimate involvement of relationships together as family (“open door”)—the whole of God as family constituted in the Trinity.

These linked metaphors reflect God’s response to our condition “to be apart” in order to fulfill both his promise not to leave us as orphans (Jn 14:18) and his prayer to experience family together with the Trinity (Jn 17:20-26). Paul summarizes the redemptive process necessary to be God’s very own family and the function of the trinitarian persons to make this a relational reality (Eph 1:3-14). And Paul defines the Spirit’s relational work (as previously discussed) for the relational change of our whole persons knowing and experiencing the whole of God in intimate relationship (Eph 1:17; 3:16-19). When relationships are redeemed, they are changed from relationships characterized by any degree of distance to intimate relationships involving hearts open to each other and coming together, thus belonging as family. Anything less than intimate relationships redefines the function of the Trinity and replaces the relationships inherent to the Trinity with substitutes of reductionism.

Simply changing the form of relationships (*metaschematizo*)—for example in activity or quantity—does not result in this relational reality because intimacy cannot be simulated—no matter how sincere our intentions. In other words, the redeemed relationships of the whole of God’s family are not the function of mere human effort. The relational change indicative of transformation (*metamorphoo*) engages the relational process necessary for this relational outcome. In the ecclesiology of the whole, the church relationally reflects the whole of God constituted intimately in the Trinity and experiences the ontological reality of God’s family signified by the Trinity because the church ongoingly and cooperatively works together relationally with the Spirit (cf. 2 Cor 3:17, 18). That is, this is the relational outcome when the Spirit is not misused as discussed earlier. Without this joint relational work church practice becomes the ontological simulations and epistemological illusions of reductionism.

There are other aspects of relationships involving the family process of the whole of God’s family but it is crucial to understand that their practice needs to be predicated on the primacy of intimate relationships of love. Without the primary function of these intimate relationships, all other church practice functions in some relational condition “to be apart”—resulting, for example, in relational distance from “your first love” (Rev 2:4), in church practice “not . . . complete in the sight of God” (Rev 3:2), or in maintaining the status quo of “you are lukewarm” (Rev 3:16). The intimate involvement of love in relationships as family is what gives coherence to church practices for relational significance to the whole of God (see Col 3:14 and context). Moreover, without the primacy of intimate relationships the practice of love becomes focused on “what to do” (for example, service or sacrifice) rather than on “how to be involved” with other persons in relationship, not merely the situation or need. When such reductionism determines church practice, Christ’s followers have yet to learn what he desires and what matters most to God (Mt 9:13; Jn 13:34, 35).

### **The Apostolic Church and the *Definitive Key*:**

In the initial development of the apostolic church we see only the inaugural formulation of the ecclesiology of the whole, albeit significant beginnings. Yet Christ would be “knocking on

the door” of the church for imperative relational changes. Apparently, the relational involvement of love was not well established, at least it was not consistently practiced. Indications of this relational problem first surfaced because the widows of Grecian Jews were being neglected in their food needs (Acts 6:1). The action which followed can be perceived in two ways.

The first perception is the church’s response to the persons in need. While the apostles made the word of God their priority, they set in motion the family process for family members to care for each other (Acts 6:2-4). This appeared to be a relational process suggesting some relational involvement since everyone was “pleased” (*aresko*, to please, make one inclined to, to soften one’s heart toward another, 6:5). From this ministry emerged the significance of Stephen (Acts 6:8-7:60) and Philip (Acts 8:4-40) in the church’s transition to ecclesiology of the whole.

Another perception of what took place describes church action in response to a need or situation, not relationally to the persons. Perhaps this is observing church organization operating at optimum: establish ministries based on need, designating qualified persons to serve in them within a division of labor based on doctrine or tradition. While the apostles correctly gave themselves over to the priority of the word of God, we need to ask if at this stage they understood that the revelations and truth of God are for relationships. As discussed earlier, the word of God was subjected to reductionism and the first disciples certainly engaged in reductionist practices with Jesus. And remnants of reductionist substitutes apparently remained in this situation and at this stage of the church’s development, suggesting that the second perception may be more accurate.

At the heart of God’s word is God’s intimate involvement of love with his people, particularly in response to our condition “to be apart” from the whole. The widows represented not mere needs but persons who were experiencing being apart and not belonging to the whole. The apostles’ decision to concentrate on “prayer and the ministry of the word” and to delegate “this responsibility” to others (Acts 6:3, 4) suggests a focus on the work to be done over the primacy of relationship (cf. Jesus’ paradigm for service, Jn 12:26). The term for “responsibility” (*chreia*) signifies a person’s employment or job—ministry and service in this situation. What this focus suggests for the apostles and the other disciples is the enactment of roles. While the church is an interrelation of various functions—as Paul defined later—their practice needs to be predicated on the primacy of intimate relationships of love. Whatever the ministry or service for God, Jesus cautions his followers about engaging in role-playing (Lk 12:1) which invariably reduces the primacy of relationship.

Though the church grew at this stage (Acts 6:7), Jesus was still knocking on its door. Something was missing despite the presence of the Spirit and their ministry of the word because the church was relationally constrained by their perceptual-interpretive framework. That is, the relational involvement of their hearts appeared to be more measured than vulnerably open both within the church (as the second perception of Acts 6 suggests and the Jerusalem council clearly addressed in Acts 15) as well as to those outside the church (as their provincialism indicated). Yet dramatic events were about to happen to change the church in its transition to the ecclesiology of the whole.

After Stephen’s martyrdom in Acts 7, the church was persecuted and scattered, from Acts 8. Up to Acts 8 the church was essentially provincial in function and thus constrained in its operation. As the church was persecuted and dispersed, God used this to force the church out of the reductionist box of provincialism. This would lead to church practice of an ecclesiology that

is globalizing—the inherent nature of the ecclesiology of the whole. Yet, we need to see this change as more than geographical and to understand this beyond a traditional missiology of the church (spreading the gospel to all nations), which tends to reduce evangelism to work apart from the relationship of discipleship. We need to understand this critical change of church practice in its relational significance because it concerns the whole of God as family and sharing his family love—the extension of the trinitarian relational context and process of the triune God’s response to the human condition “to be apart” from the whole of God. And Paul was at the center of this relational change and development of the church—emerging as the *definitive key* for church practice and growth—which appeared at times to put him in tension with the other apostles (e.g., with Peter in Gal 2:11-14; cf. Acts 9:26, 27).

In his narrative Luke places Paul’s conversion-call experience in Acts 9. The placement of this account after Acts 8 (the book of Acts may not necessarily always be in historical sequence) is significant for the historical perspective of the church in its development as the whole of God’s family. Luke was presenting God’s strategic activity which constituted his whole family (kingdom) in the church. Thus we need to understand that Jesus’ revelation to Paul was not merely about Paul’s conversion and the special treatment he received as an individual. This was about God’s continued response to our condition “to be apart” from the whole and to reconcile his creation into his family together.

As Jesus “knocked on the door” of Paul’s heart in Acts 9, he “knocked on the door” of Peter’s in Acts 10 for the relational changes imperative for the ecclesiology of the whole. While Peter struggled in this relational process to be whole, Paul led the process to operationalize church practice in the ecclesiology necessary to be whole. With Paul’s emergence the church would find its direction on the eschatological journey in the new creation as God’s very own family constituted in and by the Trinity.

### **Its Formulation**

God claimed possession of his people as his very own through redemption (as Paul summarized in Eph 1:5, 7, 14). As the church claims the whole of its intimate life together both with the Trinity and with each other, the process of redemptive change and transformation also underlies a church’s authentic experience of this relational reality. This transformation involves both qualitative change of the whole person (signified by the heart, *metamorphoo*) and conversion to heart involvement in the intimate relationships of God’s family love. For transformed persons to function in these transformed relationships, however, what this must include by its nature is a change in basic perception of persons and relationships in order for the whole of God’s family to be realized. This shift or turnaround is fundamental to repentance.

This issue of perception was a critical factor which Jesus addressed as he knocked on Peter’s door in Acts 10. It is obvious in this vision that what Peter perceived (Acts 10:14) was in contradiction to what Jesus saw (10:15). As Peter learned, his perception was crucial because it created a relational barrier (or distance) in the relationships necessary to be whole as God’s family. Certainly this included not only how he saw others but how he saw himself and God as well. Peter needed transformation of his perceptual framework in order to function as a transformed person in transformed relationships. Thus this redemptive change involved both his

theology and more importantly his relational practice—the latter change still being a struggle for Peter in spite of having his theology reworked.

The issue of basic perceptions held by a church has broad implications for church practice within its life together as well as its relations in the world. The perceptions influencing what a church pays attention to or ignores certainly are instrumental in determining church practice. Understanding and addressing the source of these perceptions is critical in the process of church development. As Paul operationalizes the ecclesiology of the whole, the coherence of church practice reflecting the whole encounters various points of tension and conflict with reductionism of the whole.

After summarizing the redemptive act of adoption into God's family (Eph 1:4-14), Paul goes on to describe the process of building the church involving the full members of God's household as his new kinship family, in which God intimately lives by his Spirit with all his adopted children (Eph 2:19-22). Paul began this passage by identifying those who constitute the church as full members of God's household, in direct contrast to outsiders, visitors, peripheral and measured participants who essentially remain relationally apart and do not have a sense of belonging—rendered “aliens” in NIV (2:19, *paroikos*, a temporary dweller not having a settled home in the place where one currently participates, though not to be confused with the same word Peter used to define God's people as sojourners, 1 Pet 2:11).

The difference between full members (as sojourners) of God's household and all others present in a church involves the relational function of belonging to the whole—the whole of God's family. Anything less than the trinitarian relational context and process in effect functions only as an orphanage for God's children who are gathered yet remain relationally (not in doctrine) apart from the whole of God's family. This urgently raises two questions for church to address. One, how does a church become transformed? The second is related, what does it mean for a church to practice transformed relationships? While we have partially addressed the second question with the primacy of intimate relationship, the response to both starts with transformed persons. This is the necessary beginning where Paul opened the second chapter of Ephesians leading to the above text and subsequent texts involving the church and its relationships.

What Paul implied about Christ in the adoption summary in the first chapter of Ephesians—which involves what he experienced directly with Christ—serves to define the transformed person. The relational work clearly demonstrated that the Son traversed the natural inequality between the holy, eternal God and all humans (cf. Phil 2:6-8). The importance of this inequality is necessary to grasp for both our theology and our practice. As discussed previously, despite God's obvious position of superiority and power, Jesus did not come down to our level to condemn us—though we are indeed *less* (quantitatively and qualitatively)—nor did he reveal God to expand the ontic differences between us and God (cf. Jn 3:17). As God's ultimate response to the human condition “to be apart,” Jesus came to redeem us from the barriers and differences separating us from the whole and to reconcile us with the whole of God—in coming “to save” (*sozo*), the Greek term also means to make whole—in a new relationship no longer constrained by the reductionist character of a system of inequality. That is to say, although God always loves us downward (to our stratum), the inequality between God and us does not determine the character of our relationship with him.

While the distinction between Creator and creation will never be dissolved and even though the basic and inherent inequality between God and us can never be equalized, as Jesus

vulnerably demonstrated in the incarnation and relationally ensured in his prayer (previously discussed from Jn 17), the fundamental function and experiential reality of our relationship together is: intimately involved heart to heart, relationally united as the Father is with the Son, experientially loved by the Father just as he loves the Son.

What this defines is the initiative of God's response to vulnerably extend nothing less and no substitutes of the whole of God to us, and then it defines the relational outcome of his response to our condition "to be apart" from the whole. "Full members" function as part of and belonging to the whole because they have become the Father's very own children through redemption by the Son and transformation by the Spirit. Thus what invariably is the relational consequence in any system of inequality—that is, relational separation or distance—now becomes transformed to the relational outcome of the new creation signified by relational belonging in the intimate involvement of love. God does not define us by the reductionist criteria of inequality, nor does God do relationship with us by the process of inequality. Given the absolute inequality involved between us, this starts to inform us about what it means to practice transformed relationships in a context of diversity and differences.

### **Grace as the Functional Basis:**

Yet there is more to understand about this process of transformation. As Paul clearly established God's relational initiative in the redemptive process of adoption, he compellingly defined the significance of God's grace as the functional basis for the transformed persons and the transformed relationships necessary for the church to be transformed (Eph 2:1-10). The initial experience of God's grace intimately changing us is best summarized by Paul in this text. Here we find God's people going from death to life, from the old order to the new creation, from being apart to being part of the whole of God in what can be described as "the equalization process." Whether our life is characterized by independence, self-indulgence or conventional arrogance, or in the implied converse, whether we are living in the hurtful effects of sin, we all need to be equalized. That is, we either need to be brought down to the level of our true humanity or we need to be raised up in order to be made whole (cf. Ps 75:7). Whatever our condition or circumstances, we experience consequences from which we need redemption. We need to be freed from our enslavements in order to be adopted into God's family.

This further defines the process of transformation for the church to be whole. These matters needing redemption always involve our relationships, so the redemptive process must address relational consequences, particularly from reductionism. The influence or control reductionism may have on our lives effectively enslaves us, thus preventing the free function of full family members. The connection between freedom and authentic family function in contrast to enslavement and not relationally belonging was clearly defined by Jesus (see Jn 8:31-36), and this functional issue became the necessary condition to authentically experience the relational outcome from God's redemptive process of adoption.

Moreover, it is inevitable in human relations that comparisons are made among persons. When comparisons are perceived from a reductionist mindset, quantitative distinctions are generated with some subjective culturally-conditioned value attached such as good or bad, better or less (cf. Peter's perceptions in Acts 10:14). Certainly, this distinction-making process is never well intentioned or neutral but is always used to gain an advantage in relationships. This comparative judgment underlies defining ourselves by what we do or have (cf. Jn 7:24). When



the process is formalized (be it with a family, community, a society or nations), a system of inequality develops by vertically stratifying persons. In such a system a person or group is unnaturally subordinated by others, as Peter practiced. This subordination is unnatural because it is an inequality between persons who are basically and inherently equal—as all members of humanity are. This stratification is what Paul addressed convincingly in the early church because grace compelled no other relational outcome in the truth of the gospel.

As God's relational initiative, grace fundamentally alters our perceptual framework in how we see ourselves, how we see others and thus function in relationships together. When persons joined in Christ by grace for the process of redemption becomes a relational reality (not merely a doctrinal truth of our belief system), two vital changes in relationships are established and set into motion. First, having been equalized and justified before God as a relational outcome of Christ's relational work, we have reconciliation (restored communion) with the Father as his very own in the whole of God's family. Secondly, on the basis of this grace equalizing persons before God, there is an equalization of all other relationships, without the false distinctions of reductionism such that "there is neither Jew nor Greek [race, ethnicity], slave nor free [class], male nor female [gender]" (Gal 3:28). These distinctions, plus many others including clergy-laity, cause relational separation or distance (even inadvertently with good intentions) which functionally fragment the whole of "you are all one in Christ." The grace of Christ's redemptive work of adoption conclusively established the relational imperative for perception and practice that no person is comparatively less in the whole of God but only full members of his family without distinctions.

Paul was certainly prophetic in his emphatic declaration that the relational transformation of this equalization became a fully operational reality when Christ destroyed the barriers to the intimate relationships of his new family—barriers which include both the prevailing vertical barriers of distinctions separating relationships and the conventional horizontal barriers of keeping relational distance (Eph 2:11-18). Yet, without engaging the relational imperative, the fact of this new condition along with the presence of grace can remain static in church doctrine, the mere possession of which is insufficient to function as a transformed church to fulfill God's desires for his family—as the church in Ephesus obviously learned later the hard way (Rev 2:4). What a church must also engage ongoingly is the dynamic process of relationships; as Christ set into motion, this process necessitates operationalizing the ongoing relational work of eliminating separation and distance in our relationships along with building greater trust, intimacy, wholeness and well-being (the relational significance of peace) in belonging to God and each other as his family—the lack or substitute of which maintains the church as an orphanage. As Paul operationalized for church practice in contrast to reductionist substitutes, the combination of equalization and intimacy in our relationships becomes: first, the clear *qualitative functional indicator* that we are redeemed from the *old*, and secondly, the *qualitative relational indicator* that our practices are transformed to the *new* (cf. Paul's concern in 1 Cor 1:12, 13; Gal 4:9; Col 2:20).

Transformed persons thus practice transformed relationships, which by the nature of grace are not only reconciled intimate relationships but also redeemed equalized relationships. Yet a reductionist framework of inequality and reductionist substitutes of distinction-making separate us, distance our relationships, fragment the whole of God's family. In Paul's theology there is no basis of hope for transformed persons, transformed relationships and the transformed

church apart from redemptive change from reductionism. The effect of reductionism renders church practice to ontological simulation and epistemological illusion. And the only alternative Paul posits to negate the influence or control of reductionism is grace. Grace is the functional basis for the transformed, the new, for becoming the whole of God. The urgent issue for church practice, however, is understanding the significant difference between grace as the functional basis from grace merely as the theological basis. The latter is necessary but it is not sufficient to distinguish church practice from reductionism.

This suggests that a church is challenged necessarily to determine its basis for existence beyond formulating a statement of faith. Each church needs to consciously and ongoingly decide whether it is made operational by God's activity or by human activity. This choice, of course, involves the issue central to Paul's theology: justification. Yet, we have to deepen our understanding of the relational significance of justification by embedding Paul's discourse on it into the context of the ecclesiology of the whole, which was Paul's apostolic and prophetic purpose (cf. Gal 2:7-21).

This ongoing choice between God's effort (grace) and human effort (works) translates into the decision (conscious or not, intentional or inadvertent) between "the narrow path" of relational involvement with the whole of God or "the conventional (broad) path" of reductionism and its substitutes for the whole. While theological discussion of justification focuses on salvation—with the tendency to limit it to what we are "saved from"—justification by grace involves the Trinity's redemptive action in the relational process of adoption which makes God's family operational in intimate and equalized relationships. In reductionism, justification by "what we do" reduces the function (or even the need) of grace: first, by focusing on human function apart (or distant) from the importance of the heart, thus reducing the whole person; next, by substitutions, simulations and illusions with which the relational context is redefined and the relational process is minimized, thus reducing the relational involvement of the whole of God; then by diminishing the ongoing function of intimate and equalized relationships necessary to be the whole of God's family. The consequence of a church's decision is why this issue is so critical to the ecclesiology of the whole and helps us understand the significance of why Paul dealt with justification by grace so definitively for ecclesial contexts and not as a separate theological topic of concern.

There can be a fine line distinguishing grace as the functional basis for a church or grace as only its theological basis. The ecclesiology of the whole operationalizes church practice such that it can be assessed by the qualitative functional indicator of being redeemed from the old and the qualitative relational indicator of being transformed to the new, as noted above. These indicators of equalized, intimate relationships are useful for church determination because they directly involve the function of grace.

The perceptual framework of grace is contrary to the perception of defining ourselves by what we do. The perception of works sees self, others and God in a comparative process of distinctions and differences which vertically structure relationships in levels of inequality. Since God's redemptive action of grace equalizes all of us before God and thus with each other in the whole of God's family, the redemptive outcome for all ongoing church practice is clearly then: grace does not allow us our distinctions and takes away the comparative use of differences (cf. Gal 6:15; 5:6).

Our perception of differences is an important process for the church to address: how we

perceive our own personal differences and self-evaluate, how we “see” others in comparison and make judgment, even how we look at God and thus treat him. Our perception of these differences exerts controlling influence on our relationships, determining what we pay attention to and what we may overlook or ignore. Stereotypes, for example, either dominate, control or strongly influence how we relate to a particular human difference. Paul even defined the need to be redeemed from our stereotypes of Christ. As a preface to the ministry of reconciliation, Paul redefines the framework for this relational work by declaring “from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view,” not even Christ (2 Cor 5:16). “Regard” (*oida*, recognize) and “worldly point of view” (Gk. *sarx*, flesh) can be rendered respectively “perceive” and “reductionist perspective”—that is, perceptions from a reductionist framework, which includes various Christian perceptions of Christ. Therefore, changing to the new creation necessitates transformation in church practice that no longer perceives others with the quantitative distinctions of a prevailing reductionist framework. If Paul makes this redemptive change a necessity to engage the fundamental ministry of reconciliation, this begs the question for each church: what determines its perceptions—grace or reductionism?

For a church to have grace as the functional basis to be operational there are deep ramifications. Grace determines not only God’s ongoing relational involvement but also, and equally important, determines how God’s people function and are involved, notably in what we present of our person, in the content of our communication and in the level of relationship we engage. Grace fundamentally affects our relationships at their roots and basic functions. Based on the relational experience of God’s grace vulnerably extended to us by the incarnation of the Son, the functional outcome of grace demands: first, the presentation of the whole person at the very heart of what that person is—without any qualification or concealment because that is only what that person can be when grace prevails as the functional basis; next, as persons practice presenting their whole person, this opens the way (and closes any distance) in relationships to be involved with each other on the heart level, without constraint in vulnerable intimate relationships of love; then, since grace determines the person presented, the nature of the relationship and the process involved, there are no acceptable bases to God for making distinctions among us which would create distance in relationships—in other words, grace demands relationships which are equalized as well as intimate.

What grace demands of our person and in our relationships is exactly what grace demands of us before and with God—our whole person in the relationships necessary to be the whole of God’s family as constituted in and by the Trinity. The whole of our response by grace back to God must be compatible with the whole of God’s response of grace to us. Grace defines the terms for relationships with God and simply defines the functional basis for all practice of God’s people.

While the normative perceptions of church practice, even as family, have been seen through a lens of wide latitude, grace does not allow us this latitude (particularly of reductionism) as it deepens our perceptions to the very heart of the whole of God. God has disclosed himself only as an act of grace and has given us no other alternative to himself than by his grace. By the relational function of grace the church is constituted and by the function of grace in its relationships the church is made operational as transformed persons experience transformed relationships in its ongoing practice together as family. The church as the whole of God’s family has no other functional basis.

How does the church function as God’s family in those intimate and equalized relationships signifying relational transformation to the whole of God? If we have adequately addressed the previous questions for the church, our discussion of the ecclesiology of the whole is now ready to focus on the vital operation of the transformed church.

## Its Operation

As we address the operation of the whole of God’s family, we need to keep in mind the susceptible tendency to turn to or rely on reductionist substitutes to ontologically simulate God’s family and to settle for epistemological illusions of the relational truth of the gospel. This tendency toward reductionism is magnified especially when we are discomforted or feel the pressure to change—both of which are likely in the discussion ahead, if not experienced already.

Paul allowed no negotiating room for reductionism—as demonstrated by his confrontation of Peter—which was why he dealt firmly, if not always clearly, with various “secondary” reductionist issues and practices in his epistles. The latter makes it difficult for Christians to agree on Paul’s practical prescriptions (for example, on gender) when they are removed from the context of the ecclesiology of the whole. In spite of this issue, I suggest that Paul would have more tension and conflict with church practice today than we may have with parts of his teachings—whether due to our practice of reductionist substitutes or our use of a reductionist perceptual-interpretive framework.

The ongoing operational lens which a church must use to assess its practice is the trinitarian relational context of family and its relational process of family love. This suggests the working definition for church and its operation that needs to shape its growth and development is: the intimate interdependent relationships of whole persons equalizing each other together in family love as the whole family of God constituted in and by the Trinity.

When Jesus said he will build “his church,” he used the Greek term *ekklesia* (Mt 16:18). The term meant the assembly or gathering of those who were called out (*ekkletoi*). *Ekklesia* also has roots in the OT, which the Septuagint (Gk translation of the Hebrew OT) uses for Israel as the covenant community. This embeds the Christian church in the context of God’s dealings with his chosen people and their covenantal relationship (Ex 19:5; Deut 7:6; Heb 8:10; 1 Pet 2:9-10). The NT extends this salvation history as the Father pursues a people for himself in his eschatological plan (Lk 1:17; Acts 15:14; Tit 2:14; Heb 4:9). Yet there is much more involved to make the church functional. The incarnation of the Son—involving the complete Christology (including between the manger and the cross) and full soteriology (including what Christ saved us *to*)—converges with Paul in the truth of the gospel through the relational work of the Spirit to operationalize the church.

The word *ekklesia* itself appears to have only limited descriptive value for what the church is and does. Robert Banks suggests that Paul’s usage of the term has less theological significance than we should assume.<sup>1</sup> As far as function is concerned, *ekklesia* is a static term which is not useful to define the church (local especially). We need a more dynamic

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, rev. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publ., 1994), 46.

understanding for the church's function than merely a gathering. This dynamic process is gained from the narrative life of Jesus and Paul's use of other metaphors for the church, as discussed previously in the section "The Church in Likeness of the Trinity" (Chapter 5).

Based in the Trinity, Jesus' person and words provide us with the relationship-specific nature of involvement with the whole God and the basis for the identity of his people as family; these also give us the understanding of the relational significance our involvement must engage—individually and corporately with God and with each other. This forms the trinitarian relational context and process for Paul's metaphors of the church, which then combine for the necessary framework to the dynamic understanding of church in its full vital function. For church practice, this necessitates integrating what has been known as authentic spirituality, and its importance of the whole person, with the corporate process of family, and its intimate, equalized relationships necessary to be whole.

In its claim of the whole of God as family, the church is challenged to function unlike the historic covenant people of the OT, the voluntary associations of NT times and even the conventional institutional-organizational models of church seen throughout church history. That is, the church is the new creation which functions, even beyond any prevailing perceptions of family, in life together as God's new kinship family. This does not preclude various church forms, it only defines how they need to function.

A major part of church function is definitive in Paul's metaphor of the human body (1 Cor 12) as it pertains to the new creation family. If we think of this metaphor merely as form or organizational structure, we tend to use it in a perfunctory manner avoiding the main issues involved in it. In this metaphor, the church is a *whole*, a "system" similar to biological systems. Paul was not describing anatomy but an organic system of deeply interdependent parts in covariation ("if one part . . . every part . . . with it," 12:26) which function together as the whole having synergism, where the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts, just as in the Trinity (12:12). Yet, this outcome of the whole does not happen automatically for a church, regardless of what the individuals do or do not do (cf. the church in Sardis, Rev 3:1, 2). Nor is the synergism in a church attributed to the unilateral "signs and wonders" work of the Spirit (note the cooperative work of the Spirit in the distribution and purpose of spiritual gifts, 12:7). The church is not a mystical system but a relational system which together as family involves a cooperative relational process.

To engage with the Spirit in the cooperative relational process inherent in Paul's body metaphor, church practice has to resolve ongoingly the discomfort about and need to change involved with the issues implied in this metaphor—notably freedom, independence, inequality, voluntary association and the underlying reductionism, all of which have critical implications for the whole. The system and the process of relationships necessary to make it work coincide with the whole of God's family constituted in the Trinity. This combines the metaphors of body and family to operationalize the church.

As noted earlier about adoption, full membership in God's family constitutes significant relational involvement, the quality of which cannot be adequately fulfilled by voluntary, optional, selective practice, nor can it be substituted for with quantity. These latter practices signify the terms for relationship determined only by the individual, not the Father's terms for his family functioning together as Paul pointed to in his metaphor. Such practice is a misuse of redemptive freedom, which Paul dealt with also in his first epistle to the Corinthians. While

every member of Christ's body willfully decided to follow him, it is the Father who chose us and adopted us for himself to be a permanent (and full) member of his family (Eph 1:3-14). This favor extended to us by the Father, enacted for us by the Son and being completed in us by the Spirit is entirely a function of relationship the terms of which altogether preclude our individual and voluntary determination and allow for no negotiation. This is simply the nature of relationship with the holy, eternal God and the significance of responding to his grace. And Paul addressed the issue of accountability in this matter with the church discipline necessary to be whole.

This defines the relational imperative for church practice signified in the Trinity—the same relational imperative Christ conclusively established by his redemptive work of adoption making all of his followers full members of his family without distinctions. As noted about the Trinity, the trinitarian persons are not independent from each other nor can each person be defined and understood apart from the whole Trinity. The Trinity is ontologically and relationally inseparable as one and also relationally and ontologically irreducible as “three in one” in the interdependence of the whole. The Trinity constitutes the whole of God as family without independence from the whole and with interdependence in the whole as equal persons. Likewise, with the body metaphor Paul operationalizes the church without independence from the whole and with interdependence in the whole as equal persons. Church practice must account for this.

The relational imperative for church practice is twofold: first, dealing with each member and one's independence and, secondly, dealing with their relationships together and their interdependence. A church needs to address both the first aspect without sacrificing the whole church as family and the second aspect without sacrificing the whole person. Reductionism would simulate the second without addressing the first or create illusions about the first without practicing the second. Yet to account for the relational imperative is not about enforcing what church and its members are supposed to do but rather about living out what they are redeemed to be in love. That is, the relational imperative is about how to be involved with each other in the relationships of God's new family in the relational process of family love, not about what to do.

The whole person and the relationships necessary to be the whole of God's family cannot experience being whole without the relational involvement of family love. Paul alludes to this love as God's design for the church in the body metaphor: “God has combined the members of the body . . . so that there should be no division [relational separation or distance] in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Cor 12:24, 25; cf. Eph 4:16). The church cannot be operational as God's family apart from the relational involvement of family love—which is intimate and equalizing—constituted in the Trinity. God's family love is the basis for full membership and ongoing participation in the church and the inherent practice of the church as his family.

Just as God's family love vulnerably involved himself with us relationally in the incarnation and, with our willful response to him, redeemed us back to his house to be adopted as his very own daughters and sons (not servants or guests) in order to be intimately equalized together in the interdependent relationships of the whole of the Trinity as family, from this relational reality the transformed church functions in the same relational process of family love. The experience and practice of anything less is contrary to Jesus' prayer to the Father for his followers: “I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that

the love you have for me may be in them”—that is, to experience the same love as the Trinity (Jn 17:26). The revelation of God in the incarnation is God’s ultimate response for these intimate interdependent relationships equalized together by family love in order not “to be apart” from the whole of God. As Paul operationalized the church, he reinforced Jesus’ prayer with his own prayer (in Eph 3:14-19) for our whole persons to experience the love of the whole of God constituted in the Trinity.

Family love is the experience and practice of God’s family operating together in likeness of the Trinity. Moreover, as Jesus further prayed (Jn 17:13-23), these intimate interdependent relationships equalized by family love not only fully satisfy those within the church as whole but their overt demonstration of this whole in family love reflecting the Trinity also can deeply affect those outside the church. What attracts the world is not Christian ideology but relational experiences about the human condition “to be apart” and the need to be part of (belong through relationship) the whole. In other words, as the church practices God’s family love in the ecclesiology of the whole, it makes operational the fulfillment of Jesus’ and Paul’s prayers as an experiential reality. And the world will notice. (More on the church within the world will be discussed in the tenth chapter.)

### **Submission as the Functional Response:**

After Paul’s prayer in Ephesians, he defined specific relational actions in the process of family love to make operational the whole of God’s family—prescriptions to be whole always in conflict with and in contrast to reductionism. And the singular relational response (cf. “one and only” revealed by the Son) that most characterizes this relational process of God’s family love is *submission*—not to be confused with subjugation, compulsory subordination and self-denial, or any other conventional notions from reductionism such as mere self-sacrifice inadequately defining *agape* love.

Submission tends to be perceived as a passive act. In conflict with such reductionism, Paul makes necessary the assessment of how we live (the imperative form of *blepo*, “look at, examine,” Eph 5:15); additionally in contrast to reductionist substitutes, he outlines the relational imperative in cooperation with the Spirit to formulate our response as the whole of God’s family to the whole of God in worship together (5:17-20). And he culminates this outline of the relational imperative for church practice with the prescription: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21).

While Paul used the Greek passive voice for “submit,” he was not implying anything passive. The passive voice indicates that the subject is being acted upon by some other agent. There is a dynamic relational process involved in Paul’s prescription. As ongoing recipients of God’s family love demonstrated in the incarnation of Christ, our only response back that can be compatible to his relational act of grace is to submit our whole person (as is) to the whole of God—based on God’s principle of relational involvement with “nothing less and no substitutes.” *Submission then is the volitional action of the whole person in relational response to the whole of God;* and by the nature of this relational involvement submission is the full affirmation of the whole person.

Nothing less than the whole person in relational response to the whole of God’s family love engages our “reverence for Christ.” That is, without submitting to the grace of the holy God vulnerably presented in Christ, our person in function remains relationally distant (“to be apart”)

from the whole of God in Christ. We have to understand “reverence for Christ” as a function of relationship and as the practice of intimate relational involvement in response back to the whole of God. Without submission our whole person is not actually involved, and without such a response we are not relationally connected to the whole of God, who makes our person whole in the relationships necessary for the whole of God’s family.

Submission is not only the full affirmation of the whole person but is also the full understanding of the absolute necessity to be relationally involved with the whole of God’s family in order for the person to be whole. Ever since the first person was created, it was never good “to be apart” from the whole—that is, to be relationally separate or distant in the relationships necessary to be whole. The person was never created just to be an individual. God’s design and purpose for the whole person was always to be in relationship together with others in the whole of God as family.<sup>2</sup> The person cannot be whole apart from this corporate whole of God’s family, which is operationalized in the church with the Spirit in the cooperative relational process of family love. Submission practices this relational truth.

Submission has further relational implications in church practice—particularly for the issues implied in Paul’s body metaphor concerning freedom, independence, inequality. To make the church operational, Paul either highlighted the need for submission or implied the importance of it, the interpretation of which can be misperceived when taken out of the context of the ecclesiology of the whole.

Each of Paul’s prescriptions of submission was to counter reductionism and is totally about the whole, thus should not be taken out of this context. The act of submission is for the sake of the whole of God and is not an end in itself, which either promotes or sacrifices the doer. Therefore, whenever the matter or issue is about the whole, submission is warranted and necessary—the absence of which diminished the whole for all involved. Submission, however, is not warranted and is even contrary to the whole when it serves reductionism. This suggests that when Paul calls for submission in marriage, church polity, government and slavery he is not advocating submission in any context if it reinforces reductionism and thus fragments the whole. We have to understand his prescriptions of submission in this qualitative framework of the whole of God and for this relational purpose of the whole of God’s family. Otherwise, the practice of submission does not counter reductionism but instead becomes reductionist.

Submission is *the foremost relational response* of God’s covenant people, the followers of Christ, the full members of the church. As grace is the functional basis for the relationship, submission is the functional response in the relationship which involves two important relational issues: the first defines the priority of the relationship and thus on whose terms, and the second determines what the relationship is about in its ongoing actual practice—the whole of God, his desires and eschatological plan, not about us and our situations and circumstances.

Moreover, relational submission is both a necessary and sufficient condition for the process of family love, whereas reductionist submission is not even a sufficient condition for its

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<sup>2</sup> Following the lead of the Cappadocians on the social Trinity, Eastern theologian John Zizioulas conceptualizes personal being as a communal ontology of personhood in *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985).



authentic practice. The single-mindedness of submission is always the relational response necessary to take us beyond and deeper than the subtle focus on what we do, to the primary focus on God (and his desires) and the primacy of relational involvement with others (over doing something for them). This response reflects how God is with us, particularly in Christ during the incarnation and now through his Spirit. Without submission there is no sufficient relational basis to be involved with others beyond merely making it about ourselves in what we do. This is a crucial issue for church practice when love essentially is defined by what we do, not how to be involved relationally, thus making it difficult to distinguish it from reductionist substitutes.

In the relational process of family love, therefore, submission always antecedes love in relational expression as well as is motivated by love for further relational involvement. The Son submitted to the Father to share family love with us as well as was motivated by love to submit himself to be vulnerably involved with us, even in difficult times. We cannot love God, for example, without our submission to his grace first; submission is the functional response to God's initiative which unequivocally defines the relationship on God's terms. If love precedes submission in our practice, even with good intention, this becomes more about us and what we do in the relationship on our terms. Relational submission then, not love, is *the conclusive relational indicator* that our practice is about the whole of God and not about us; love further extends this relational response in progression to God's family.

### **Submission to Wholeness:**

When Paul outlined the relational imperative for church practice (Eph 5:17-21), his focus understandably was on the ultimate relational practice of worship. By the nature of worship, this outline culminates quite naturally with his prescription of submission because relational submission is an integral part of the meaning of worship. Specifically, submission is our (individual and corporate) relational message of worship directly to God expressing the significance of *who* we are in Christ and thus *whose* we are as the Father's—nothing less and no substitutes. The significance of this relational message expressed in submission is the relational response undergirding the practice of the whole of the church and the whole of each of its members.

When Paul addressed reductionist activity in the church, notably the misuse of Christian freedom and the incompatibility of independence, he negated this with the relational function of submission for the sake of the interdependence necessary for the church to be operational as the whole of God's family. He understood that reductionism is Satan's counter-relational work seeking to diminish the whole with simulated practices and illusions of *more* which effectively reinforce our condition "to be apart" from the whole (2 Cor 11:13-15; Eph 5:16; 6:11). As Satan influenced Eve with reductionism to exercise independence (Gen 3:16) and tempted Jesus with reductionist substitutes to act apart from the whole of God (Lk 4:1-13), his counter-relational work continues to challenge the church with substitutes and settling for less. Paul fought (*agonizomai*) for the whole person and the relationships in the church necessary to be the whole of God (Col 1:28-2:2). He knew the person cannot be whole while practicing independence because wholeness is constituted by a person's relational function in the whole of God's family. Additionally, as understood in Paul's Jewish heritage, wholeness is rooted in the Hebrew term for peace (*shalom*) which signifies the well-being of a community or corporate body (cf. Eph 4:3). The practice of freedom (or individualism) becomes reductionist when it is primarily about

oneself and one's so-called rights. To be free indeed is to be redeemed for the sake of relationships—family relationships sharing family love (cf. Jn 8:35, 36). Submission, therefore, in relational function actually optimizes redemptive freedom rather than constrains it.

In his personal life, Paul struggled with using the substitutes of reductionism for his own life—perhaps even indulged it (see 2 Cor 12:1-6); and he labored under the need to practice relational submission for the sake of the whole of God—even while he operationalized the church in the ecclesiology of the whole (see 2 Cor 12:7-9). The thorn in his flesh helped Paul get beyond making it about himself and what he could do. In addition, submission was necessary to free Paul from any reductionism in order to go deeper in the relationship of the whole of God. Yet it is important to grasp in Paul's struggle that submission should not be confused with resignation to one's circumstances—a critical distinction to help understand his submission prescription in other social circumstances (for example, about slavery). Resignation was not Paul's conclusion here; that would have only reinforced reductionism. As demonstrated here by his response to God's relational message—"my grace is sufficient for you . . .," which is not about Paul's circumstances—submission is only relational. While circumstances may be involved, submission is about relationship on God's terms and our relational response to the whole of who we are and whose we are.

In being the foremost relational response and the conclusive relational indicator, submission by the whole person for the sake of and in response to the whole of God constitutes the relational involvement necessary together to operationalize church practice in the relational process of family love. The importance of the whole person engaging the whole of God's family in relationship together is even more deeply grasped as we move from the issues of freedom and independence to address inequality. Paul's use of the body metaphor further involved this issue when he made church practice operational by interdependence.

Interdependence of the church body should not be confused with fostering dependence in its members nor with constraining the whole person by conformity, though it certainly limits the independence of the individual. Just as submission does, interdependence fully affirms the whole person as important—from the inside out in contrast to the outside in of reductionism—without grading, for example, the person's role performed in the body. Paul establishes each person as indispensable regardless of how others perceive (*dokeo*, "seem," a subjective estimate or opinion) the individual from an outside-in reductionist framework (*asthenes*, "weaker," less ability, 1 Cor 12:22; cf. 2 Cor 5:16), thus every person is important. Furthermore, interdependence establishes all persons (regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, age) within the body in a common significant value without stratifying their place based on these distinctions or any other characteristics (12:24b-25a). Yet, this is not about homogeneity.

Paul was not simply suggesting a way for the church to be operational. Nor does the body metaphor necessarily suggest a singular form the church must have; yet whatever form a church takes needs to follow the imperative relational functions defined by this metaphor combined with family. In the current challenge to formulate evangelical ecclesiology, Richard Beaton makes a similar observation that "if the church is to reimagine what an ecclesiology might look like in the twenty-first century, it seems that part of that exercise will require a return to the biblical metaphors that have contributed to the structuring of the identity of the church throughout its

history.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, it is important to grasp that Paul’s metaphors imply a functional ecclesiology which defines relational structure and process more than institutional-organizational structure. And one of the most vital functions he defined for the church is the interdependence of its members—not as a suggestion but as relational imperative.

The interdependence of the church family is the new creation which reflects the image of the whole of God as the Trinity in their relationships together as one (Col 3:10, 11). As discussed in “The Church in Likeness of the Trinity,” this is not optional or even voluntary church practice but the relational imperative. The function of interdependence relationally connects all the members of God’s family (local and universal) in two indispensable ways: (1) it provides the trinitarian relational context for all persons to be equalized with each other, and in doing so, (2) it opens access to the trinitarian relational process of intimate relationships with each other “so that there should be no division [Gk. *schisma*, relational separation or distance] in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Cor 12:25). Interdependence therefore engages the relationships in the church within the covariation of the whole (12:26), which constitutes all of a church’s practices to cohere in family love (cf. Col 3:14 in contrast to Rev 2:2-4).

### **Equalizing to Be Whole:**

This brings us to the intentional, unintentional and subtle vertical disconnectedness in relationships due to inequality—even from clergy-laity distinction—as well as the horizontal relational distance from unequalized relationships. Both of these relational conditions constrain the whole person (notably from the heart) because of defining the person by what one does or has and thereby engaging in relationships on this reductionist basis of outer-in perception of persons and involvement in relationships. In church practice these relationships not only lack intimacy to experience family but also preclude intimate connection to be family because the relational involvement is not equalized. The distinctions of reductionism applied in a comparative process always imply (directly or indirectly) inequalities which separate or disconnect persons, distance their relationships and fragment the whole of God’s family.

Equalized relationships and reductionist substitutes are incompatible; equalization and a reductionist framework are irreconcilable. Since Jesus equalized persons for relationship both during his earthly life and by his death and resurrection, what distinguished his followers, his church, his family is to equalize persons by extending family love for this relationship also. When soteriology is truncated, however, church practice becomes operationalized by a reductionist mindset of what Christ saved us *from*. To operate from the full soteriology includes embracing, practicing and experiencing what Christ saved us *to* (and *sozo*, to make whole) in the relational progression to the Father as his very own family. This progression necessitates the complete Christology of the whole of God vulnerably self-disclosed in the incarnation.

What this complete Christology reveals is that this equalizing process was initiated by Jesus before the cross. One interaction he had demonstrates various aspects of this process. This involved a Canaanite woman who boldly intruded on Jesus for help to free her daughter from a

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Beaton, “Reimagining the Church,” in *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 223.

demon (Mt 15:21-28). Canaanites were the most morally despised people by Israelites in the OT. As a pagan woman who was assimilated into Greek culture (cf. Mk 7:36), she would not be conventionally perceived a likely candidate to receive God's redemptive response—his disciples wanted to reject her. Jesus appeared to indicate as much by his response about the primacy of a family's children over dogs. How Jesus' statement was perceived is important in this equalizing process. Dogs were considered scavengers in the Jewish community, while in Greek custom at times dogs were pets. The woman was not a scavenger looking for some handout—not that Jesus was implying such—though she accepted the analogy of the children's priority to eat before pets, which would imply staying in her place of inequality as someone less. Nevertheless, she did not seem to define herself comparatively in those reductionist distinctions but she continued to impose herself on Jesus. This suggests that on the relational level she boldly approached him to receive in effect as an equal to others in his family (“the lost sheep of Israel,” 15:24).

This is not about social mobility and climbing the ladder of success. By vulnerably presenting her whole person—as she was, nothing less and no substitutes—she claimed God's favor without even knowing yet that she could be equalized by Christ. She certainly relationally impacted Jesus and demonstrated the quality (not necessarily quantity) of her faith (relational trust). Despite being different and culturally perceived as less, she never defined herself by how others did, nor did Jesus see and define her as less in her difference (cf. Samaritan woman in Jn 4:7ff). What Jesus demonstrated is the equalizing process and the need for his followers together as the church to practice in relationships to be *the equalizer*—a relational work both within the church as well as in the world.

As Paul operationalized this for the church, he said there are no “foreigners” and “aliens” in the church (Eph 2:19). Does this imply that all diversity and differences have been eliminated? Yes and no—yes in terms of the influence of reductionist distinctions and substitutes, no in terms of the transformed relationships of God's family love in which homogeneity is reductionism (cf. 1 Cor 12:19). No “foreigners” and “aliens” exist in God's family because persons formerly “to be apart” have been taken in (not the same as assimilated), accepted (not the same as pluralism) and equalized (not the same as reformed or conformed) as full members of his family, without reductionist distinctions. It was inconceivable to Paul that the church could function apart from equalization—though some of his contextual prescriptions of submission appear to confuse this. In “the mystery of Christ” (Eph 3:4-6) and “the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:14) equalized relationships are at the heart of the church, making it operational as God's family. To be authentically redeemed resulted in a process of reconciliation to be relationally one with the whole of God signified in the Trinity and thus whole together with his very own as family. Reductionist distinctions and their comparative inequality only cause division, separation, relational distance which fragment this unity or whole; equalizing is a necessary function from redemption for the church to be operational as the whole of God's family—Paul's thesis in Galatians, Ephesians, Corinthians.

In Banks' study about the early house churches and Paul's formulation of community, he concludes differently: “for Paul equality was subservient to the more fundamental idea of unity. For this reason the idea of equality itself could never become a leading motif in his thought.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 138.

Yet, despite his positive observations of the principle of equality in Paul's formulation of community, Banks does not adequately perceive that equalization is inherent to authentic unity, not the structural unity of the institutional-organizational church but the functional and relational unity of the transformed church as the whole of God's family signified in the Trinity. Moreover, he does not account for the equalization process necessary for full membership in the community of God's household without which, as Paul said, church practice does not function in the truth of the gospel.

Perhaps the confusion comes from a perception of equality as not only the basis for all church members to assume personal responsibility for the operation of the church but also using equality as a rationale for individualism. This tendency is certainly an issue impacting the whole of church practice. For example, while the priesthood of believers equalizes all of God's people, evangelicalism historically (with roots in the Reformation) has used this (intentionally or inadvertently) to foster individualism, particularly since Pietism. This consequence happens when intimate relationship with God (spirituality and piety) is not integrated into the relational progression to the Father as his very own, which necessitates taking one's personal place in the reciprocal relational responsibilities of the whole of God's family. Reductionism separates the whole of the person from the whole of the church by defining the whole of each according to the function of quantitative aspects such as what they do or have, thus not grasping how the person and the relationships necessary in the church must by their nature function together inseparably and irreducibly to be whole.

Paul never separates the person from the function of the church, nor both from the whole of God. In further consistency with his conflict with reductionism, his metaphors for the church and the processes he describes for church function do not suffer from such a reductionist perceptual framework. He does not talk about equality in quantitative terms of what the members do or what they have; and we should not confuse the different functions of the parts in the body metaphor with each person's self-definition precluding equalized relationships. Paul defines equality in qualitative relational terms of *what* the members (individually and corporately) *are* in relation to God (Eph 2) and *who* they *are* in relation to each other (Gal 3). Equalization then does not reduce church practice to the notions of the individual, rather it brings the church to the depths of each whole person (signifying the importance of the heart) and opens the way for hearts to come together in the primacy of the relationships necessary to be whole. Equalizing is the function of the qualitative significance of the triune God and the relationality of the Trinity.

Equality is the qualitative function of transformed relationships that is fundamental to how God is involved with us and how he wants his very own to be involved in their relationships. The unity or oneness of the church Paul describes is the relational outcome of this intimate reciprocal involvement of equalized relationships, which thus form the qualitative interdependent bonds of his family constituted in the Trinity. There was no tension for Paul between equality and unity because, when not reduced, the one is inextricably linked to the other to be whole. The process of equalization is the relational opposite of individualism; and equalizing always functions in direct conflict with any form of antinomianism (in effect doing whatever the individual chooses), or any other reductionist substitute. Even well-intentioned efforts for organizational church unity and efficiency cannot substitute for the intimate interdependent relationships equalized in the qualitative function of the church as family practicing family love.

## The Church Becomes Equalizer

For Paul, both for theological congruence and to reflect the relational reality involving even his own direct experience, to be redeemed is to be equalized (Eph 2:12-15a)—not merely as a person but together as the Father’s very own family in which he intimately lives by his Spirit (2:15b-22). As God responded to our condition “to be apart,” in this redemptive process Christ indeed vulnerably functioned as *the* equalizer. The church which follows him in the relational progression with the relational work of his Spirit also lives and functions with him as the equalizer. This is the functional operation of family love which the Father initiated and now extends in his very own.

As the equalizer both within itself and within the world, the church makes operational the trinitarian relational context of family and relational process of family love. In likeness to and cooperation with the Trinity’s response to our condition “to be apart” from the whole, the ecclesiology of the whole establishes church practice in the relational functions necessary to come together to be whole. The trinitarian persons’ ongoing relational involvement with us provides the experiential basis for the practice of the necessary relational involvement in our relationships so that we would no longer be apart (or distant) from the whole but intimately belong as full (equalized) functioning members of the whole of God’s family. Just as the incarnation demonstrated the Trinity’s ultimate relational response and involvement with nothing less and no substitutes, Paul confronted the response and involvement of anything less and any substitutes from church practice as reductionism.

Ecclesiology of the whole suggests the only church practice compatible with the truth of the gospel and the mystery of Christ and the only church function in coherence with God’s eschatological plan for all of creation. With the ongoing lure of reductionism and mounting pressure from postmodernity, churches today are critically challenged to relationally demonstrate the whole of *who they are* and *whose they are*. This is the call that Jesus makes the relational imperative to follow him in progression and which Paul made relationally imperative for the church to operationalize in transformed life together as the whole of God’s family.

The call Jesus made the relational imperative to “Follow me” is the ongoing function of discipleship in which Paul responded with his whole person to be intimately involved with the whole of God as family together. While doing so, Paul operationalized the church to be whole. Paul’s theology followed the vulnerable revelation of Jesus and thus he made the church operational in the dynamic progression of the relational context and process of the Trinity and the trinitarian persons’ involvement with us. Church practice needs to be the same relational response of discipleship to the whole of God’s self-disclosure in Christ, who was the ultimate response to the human condition “to be apart” from the whole.

Throughout this study the incarnation has been defined as the ultimate of God’s self-disclosure and loving response, thus the hermeneutical and functional keys for defining the human person and the church. The Son was *sent by the whole of God, as the whole of God, for the whole of God*. To summarize Jesus’ formative family prayer (Jn 17): “Righteous Father . . . you have sent me (*apostello*, send for the specific mission, vv. 8, 25), to reveal you to them (*phaneroo*, reveal to them for relationship, v. 6), make you known and continue to make you known to them (v. 26), in order for them to know you intimately (v. 3), so that the love you have for me may also be the experiential reality of their heart together and that I may be intimately involved together with them in the whole of our family” (v. 26).

The Son was sent for this purpose/mission which was totally relational. God’s revelation and truth are only for relationship—the relationship of the whole of God. This relationship is the function of discipleship which necessarily integrates spirituality (intimate relationship with God) and community (intimate interdependent relationships equalized together in God’s family) in God’s eschatological desires. This relationship is our call (both individual and corporate) to be whole—the whole of God constituted in and by the Trinity. For the church to be whole involves transformed relationships—engaged by transformed persons—which are both intimate and equalized. Yet, for the church to follow Jesus as the equalizer in God’s redemptive process for his people, for humanity, creation and all of salvation history requires a deeper and more rigorous functional understanding of redemption and reconciliation. This will be the focus of the next three chapters in the attempt to establish a working basis for the practice of the church as equalizer within itself (chap. 8, along with parenthetical chap. 9) and within the world (chap. 10), followed by the concluding chapter suggesting who will best meet this challenge for the whole of God.

### **The Work of Equalization**

In the process of discipleship, following Jesus in the relational progression encounters various matters which can be a blessing or a threat. Equalizing is one of those matters that is a blessing or a threat. It is a threat for those who depend on what they do, accomplish and have, in

order to establish themselves; this includes those who misuse Christian freedom and feed on individualism. It is a blessing, however, for those who need grace and who want more than reductionist substitutes. Since Jesus equalized persons by extending the relationship of his Father to us, what distinguishes his followers, his church, his family, is to likewise equalize by extending this relationship of family love. Yet, equalization and a reductionist framework are irreconcilable, thus incompatible as a working basis for church practice.

Reductionist influences diminish or minimalize the qualitative significance of God's people to an ambiguous function (diminished "light") and shallow practice (minimalized "salt"). Whether fragmenting into parts the whole of God, reducing the whole person, constraining God's design and purpose for relationships, minimalizing qualitative substance in life, or even diminishing the relational process of faith and the relational truth of the gospel, reductionist practices essentially take something away from what is authentic and replace it with a counterfeit substitute—though the substitute may appear in form to be the same, is presented as genuine and fulfills a prevailing function. By diminishing or minimalizing the whole, reductionism takes away the qualitative significance clearly distinguishing God's people and thus makes the church ordinary in usage, common in function and practice; that is, in effect the church becomes "of the world." If a church's identity and function as God's family of sojourners is not to be co-opted by a reductionist process—shaping it, for example, as another well-intentioned social institution among a plurality, or assimilating its members into a prevailing sociocultural context—then it is imperative for church practice to make more explicit and heighten its conflict with reductionism. By its nature as those equalized by and who now follow Jesus the equalizer, the church in its practice must be true to the redemptive process which reconciled all its members together to the whole of God.

In addition to the lure of reductionism, we should not have any romanticized illusions about equalizing. The process is rigorous. Whether within the church or in the world, the process of equalization is a rigorous work. The divine cost to equalize all of us before God was beyond our comprehension—involving, at the very least, the Son temporarily giving up equality in the Trinity and submitting his whole person for the relationships (through redemption and by adoption) necessary to be whole as God's family (cf. Phil 2:6-8; Col 1:19-20). When we contemplate intently on the holy, eternal God and truly grasp what the Father did in his Son and continues to do in his Spirit for its completion, we can understand that indeed this equalization process is rigorous relational work. All that the Trinity engages goes into destroying the barriers "to be apart" in order to reconcile us together as one in the whole of God. The work of equalization and the cost to implement it, therefore, should never become ends in themselves because in God's call the work and cost always serve toward the primacy of relationship in the whole of God.

The human cost for equalizing work—first to be equalized within one's own person and then to equalize all persons in relationships—is similar to the divine cost. It involves ongoingly giving up all elements of reductionist human distinctions which stratify persons, as well as submitting one's whole person (as is, without those distinctions) to be intimately involved with others in relationships of family love which equalize and reconcile to the whole of God. Yet this cost is always for these relationships necessary in order to be whole. A prime example of this is when Paul operationalized the ecclesiology of the whole for Philemon in relation to his runaway



slave, Onesimus. Philemon was called to be whole in the rigorous relational work of equalizing not only his slave but also himself for transformed relationship together (Phlm 9-12). On the basis of family love, this required Philemon to give up a slave to gain a brother, to make his household “business” secondary to gain family (Phlm 16)—the importance of the whole person in the primacy of the whole of God’s family.

The primacy of the trinitarian relational context and process cannot be diminished or minimalized in any way in order for the relational outcome to be authentic of the whole of God. When we are establishing our persons not “to be apart” from the whole of God, we are engaging the redemptive process of reconciliation God extends to us through redemption in Christ, which is imperative for relationship with God in particular. To participate in—that is, to be relationally involved in and have communion with—the whole of God’s life requires the redemptive change that transforms (*metamorphoo*, not *metaschematizo*) the person to be reconciled to God for intimate relationship as his very own, belonging permanently to God’s family. Additionally, when we are working on our relationships not “to be apart” from the whole of relationships in general, we need to engage the relational process of redemption and reconciliation (or redemptive reconciliation to be discussed in chap. 10) imperative for these relationships to be whole. To participate in and have an equal share in life together as family in likeness of the Trinity requires the equalization of redemption and intimate involvement of reconciliation in family love.

For human persons to be whole is a dynamic relational condition of *coming together*, which cannot be compatible with any presence of the more static relational condition “to be apart.” Therefore to be whole is an ongoing relational condition that involves reconciliation. Situations and circumstances may bring persons into common activity or shared space (including cyberspace connections) but they do not account for (unintentionally or by design) bringing those persons *together*—notably to be whole. This is the unique function of relationship, specifically reconciled relationships. Yet, reconciliation is not mere peaceful harmony or operational unity. We cannot fully come together as one in deep, meaningful relationships unless they are established with the whole person signified at the level of our hearts. Churches have to reexamine the significance of the ministry of reconciliation God committed to those of the new creation (2 Cor 5:17-19) and how we practice it foremost within the gathering of the church.

This becomes an issue in church practice that often tends to be a threat or burden more than a blessing and privilege. The Greek term for reconciliation (*katallege*) denotes: to change from one condition to another by taking away the root cause of a broken (or distant) relationship and, thus, leaving no barriers to restoring communion. This restoring to communion is the qualitative significance of persons coming together, that is, hearts coming together. In other words, as noted previously, this is intimacy. *Intimacy is the relational process which underlies all reconciliation*. Clearly then, the ministry of reconciliation involves specifically the building of intimacy. Building the intimate relationships necessary to be whole—foremost with God and within the church, then extending its purpose of reconciliation in the world—becomes the definitive work (cf. Gen 2:18; 1:28) for the new creation “in Christ.” This relational work is what substantively distinguishes the functional life and practice of the transformed church from the common usages and ordinary practices prevailing in the surrounding contexts, and often in churches today. That is, this is the outcome when this rigorous relational work is not diminished or minimalized by reductionism, nor avoided because of threat or burden.

Practicing transformed relationships (both intimate and equalized) is simplified when diversity is the exception rather than the rule. Human differences, however, prevail increasingly regardless of the context. How we address differences is the most crucial issue in this relational work which not only rigorously challenges church practice but also imperatively calls it forth in order to be whole.

### **Its Multicultural Nature**

All the global changes and instability experienced since the latter third of the twentieth century have created much more uncertainty in our lives, collectively and even individually. With the extent of the changes taking place around us, relational changes are the most critical. As noted earlier, globalization is forcing us to think more about the interrelationships beyond our provincial boundaries and comfort zones. Additionally, emigration (voluntary and involuntary) has affected all our lives in one way or another. At no other time in history has a group of persons “faced” so many other peoples different from themselves than exists today. This certainly has strained our comfort zones and either has threatened and burdened church practice or has challenged, privileged and blessed churches to expand its relationships, even to change how it does relationships.

Diversity and human differences have been addressed in various ways. In the U.S., assimilation into the dominant culture has been the prevailing approach to deal with differences, the effects of which may be functionally efficient but do not have the qualitative outcome sufficient for the persons involved to be whole as well as necessary for their relationships to be whole. During this recent period of change, we have been hearing the call from more progressive segments of our society for pluralism and multiculturalism. Pluralism is the acceptance of others’ differences and the mutual coexistence of those differences. Multiculturalism attempts to be more adaptive to differences by mutually establishing a solidarity of them together, though not to be confused with the myth of a melting pot identified with the U.S. Whether done with good intentions or mere political correctness, however, the solidarity of multiculturalism tends to be essentially a call for pluralism and the tolerance of others’ differences. Though this affirmation of diversity is certainly important and necessary for our times, *coming together and becoming one* is not on their agenda, reconciliation and restoring wholeness are not a part of their process.

The mere affirmation of human diversity is not sufficient to define the purpose nor to determine the practice of the church. Moreover, the presence of diversity in a church is not necessarily a sufficient basis to celebrate, though such celebration would be conventional of multiculturalism. This is not the multicultural perspective to be presented in this chapter.

What distinguishes the church as equalizer goes beyond these limited efforts in the surrounding context, and for the church to be whole it cannot mirror them. It would be naive to think that pluralism is or can be the dominant structure ordering human life. In contrast to the horizontal structure of pluralism—where differences are accepted or at least tolerated—the vertical structure imposed on human differences is what dominates. Divisions in human relations, for example, caused by human differences are not simply horizontal partitions. Implied in most divisions is vertical structuring which stratifies relationships in inequality—as seen between

Judaizers and Gentile Christians in the early church, observed in U.S. race-ethnic relations under the illusion of “separate but equal,” and witnessed in twentieth-century Balkanization. The human tendency to perceive human differences on a vertical scale of “better” or “less” is the dominant way of human life reflecting the relational condition “to be apart” from the whole.

Since God intervened in this relational condition, the action he initiated by his grace constitutes the church in the process of the rigorous relational work of equalizing. Furthermore, Jesus clearly led the way to equalize in order to change this old order of life. Indeed, along with the whole nature of the cross, the whole week of Jesus’ passion demonstrates this equalization: Sunday’s humble but triumphant entry set the tone for the week and for the equalizing nature of Christ’s relational work, purpose and his church to follow; Monday, Jesus cleansed the temple of its system of inequality (to be discussed further in Chapter 10) and opened God’s house for “all nations”; on Thursday—assuming a traditional view of what day this Passover meal took place—he washed his disciples’ feet, demonstrating the new relational order of relational involvement, which means to be willing to submit one’s life for others in order to be whole—ultimately demonstrating this love on Friday; Wednesday was absent of recorded activity strongly suggesting that Jesus separated himself in the solitude of prayer, which, for us, is a place of equalization where there is no one else to be compared to and no work or role to define self other than our whole person.

This is the week the world and all history became equalized, when the *old* died and the *new* was raised up, where God’s design for relationships was restored to their true purpose. As discussed in the ecclesiology of the whole, the redemptive outcome of all this is that the relational work of God’s grace does not allow us our distinctions and takes away differences which keep us apart from the whole.

Going back to the cleansing of the temple, Jesus restated unequivocally “my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Mk 11:17). He was not merely opening access to God’s house for “all nations” by his actions. This has to be connected to the window of the whole Jesus opened by defining who his family is (Mt 12:48-50). Whereas he clearly constituted the whole of his family as his authentic disciples, here he emphatically demonstrates that the whole of God’s house (*oikos*, household, family) is made up of “all nations” (*ethnos*, people as a unit and humankind together). In the Great Commission, the only imperative Jesus made is to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Without grasping the whole, our tendency in evangelism is to make converts over disciples, while our mission focus is geographical—going to “all nations.” This missional paradigm grasps neither Jesus’ call nor his commission. We need to revisit “all nations” and the imperative call of Jesus because *ethne* (pl. of *ethnos*) is not about places, situations and doing something but about persons, relationships and being the whole of God’s family.

In the whole of God’s family, all the human differences catalogued under humanity *come together*, not simply have access or a presence. This is the multicultural nature of the whole of God as family constituted in the Trinity—without the distinctions which stratify in a system of inequality, yet with all the unique functions necessary to be whole.

A church functioning without distinctions may sound good in theory but pragmatically it is not the kind of ideal many churches (mainline denominational or free) would actually practice. Even the magisterial Reformers did not subject their ecclesiology to the priesthood of all

believers. This issue, however, is not whether the practice of the church should be left to anybody—thus, for example, sacrificing orthodoxy or compromising mission—but whether church function can be the practice of *everybody*, that is, the whole. It appears to elude the grasp of conventional Christian wisdom how the church can operationally function in *unity* (whether according to a creed or pragmatic principles) with the participation of all its existing diversity, and how the church can operate with *efficiency* along with the range of differences among its members. Certainly a reductionist framework influences how unity is approached and what priority is given to efficiency, which must be reexamined for church practice to engage the redemptive-reconciling relational work of God’s family.

The relational tension created by others’ differences is directly proportional to the homogeneity of “our little world,” which we construct of ideas, beliefs and experiences. This world or “box” we live in, this reality essentially constructed from cultural stuff and relational experiences, tends to define things presumably as the sum total of the way life is and should be conformed to. We would all be consigned to “our little world” had God not intruded in this world by his vulnerable incarnation to relationally extend family love so we would not be apart from the reality of the whole. This initiative of God’s reconciling work redeems us from “our little world” and extends us beyond it in the equalizing process of the ministry of reconciliation.

The imperative call to extend family love beyond “our little world,” however, involves change—major redemptive changes both individually and corporately. These changes are nonnegotiable, thus imperative if, in actual practice, the purpose of the church engages the relational process of family love in which persons who are *different* will be embraced equally within the church family and into the whole of God’s family. The transformed relationships necessary in this process and the ongoing redemptive dynamics needed to enlarge “our little world,” to extend beyond our “box”—that is, effectively transforming our established ways of doing things in the church—all help us to understand the rigorous relational work imperative to constitute the multicultural nature (diversity) of Christ’s church and the church’s function to represent the whole of God as family constituted in the Trinity. This becomes the fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer in John 17.

### **Addressing Change from Without from Within**

The work of church growth and development must be examined more deeply. The focus on quantitative goals—defined primarily as production and the activity (labor) connected to it—reduces the priority needed for the primacy of building *the infrastructure of the church*: transformed persons practicing transformed relationships with family love (cf. Gal 5:6, 6:15; Rev 2:2-4).

Understanding the relational nature of Jesus’ purpose throughout the incarnation needs to be the basis for determining the working priorities for church practice. Based on his own behavior in many of what turned into intimate interactions—most of which were unplanned, untimely and even disruptive to his original plans—Jesus demonstrated how to function in the process of God’s desires and what is important to God in the new creation. This often caused consternation for the disciples due to their working priorities, particularly from their perceptions of people who were

different, like the Canaanite woman discussed earlier (Mt 15:21-28). Nothing was more important to Jesus than *persons* and *relationships*—and transforming them to be equalized in and reconciled to the whole of God.

Jesus' working priorities were not about goals to fulfill in a divine mission because his whole purpose was a function of relationship: its origin, its initiation, its enactment, its fulfillment, its outcome. While functioning in the primacy of relationship, Jesus was not an efficient missionary or church planter in terms of how efficiency controls function today and becomes an unwritten policy of church operation. Yet, the church as an organic body, as the family of God, is also a direct function of the relationships which are necessary to make it whole in likeness of the Trinity. As followers of Jesus, the nature of the purpose for the transformed church must find its sum and substance in relationships—the very nature of the whole of God as intimately relational, vulnerably responsive and lovingly involved in ongoing function. The structure and process of the new creation order are based on this priority of relationship. The church's life is an expression of this qualitative significance, and its mission is an extension of the qualitative difference of the whole of God. When authentically practiced, the transformed church's purpose deals with relationships: their alienation, their healing, their reconciliation, their restoration and transformation.

This calls for a fundamental paradigm shift in our approach to church body life and church growth. The trinitarian relational context of family and the relational process of family love establish the priorities necessary to build the infrastructure for the whole of God's people to be whole as family in likeness not of any type of family or any form of community—including those of the first-century Mediterranean world, though there is clear association to its patrilineal kinship group<sup>1</sup>—but in likeness of the Trinity. This likeness and purpose are fulfilled as the church ongoingly engages the relational involvement of family love and becomes equalized in the multicultural church.

If the church is to be a household of “all nations” (*ethne*) as Jesus defined, churches cannot be selective about the specific persons whom it involves or to whom it reaches out consistently. The church must not bypass some persons (or make it more difficult for them) in order to include specific other persons. In other words, the practical operation of a gathering of God's people must not discriminate between persons—even inadvertently, for example by charging for programs that make it difficult for the poor to participate freely—no matter how efficacious it may appear in the process of church growth, development and mission. The church character of *ethne* is an inclusive approach and suggests no discretionary models or expedient strategies to fulfill the whole of God's desires as revealed by Jesus in the incarnation and further revealed by him to Peter and Paul (cf. Acts 15:8, 9). More importantly, God's family is *the reconciliatory inclusion* of human differences and cannot be the transformed church without the explicit and ongoing effort to be inclusive for the whole (read all of Peter's argument before the Jerusalem council in Acts 15). In its practice of family love the church takes in and involves all persons, overlooking none, neglecting no one, and especially avoiding no persons. Church practice cannot legitimate any other approach to the whole of God's desires—with even language

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<sup>1</sup> See Joseph Hellerman's study for a discussion of this correlation, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

only a conditional exception for ethnic churches.

Yet the church cannot be relationally involved with the human diversity in the surrounding context of the world without the full involvement of human differences in transformed relationships (equalized and intimate) within its own life as family. In extending God's response to the relational condition "to be apart" from the whole, the church fails to fulfill its purpose as equalizer as long as its own members remain functionally apart in this condition—even if unintentional or inadvertent. The equalizing of redemption and the intimacy of reconciliation are intentional relational practices, in the total process of which the church naturally and by necessity becomes the multicultural whole of God's family.

This is "the truth of the gospel" enforced by Paul invalidating discriminatory distinctions in the church, and "the mystery of Christ" operationalized by Paul precluding stratification in God's covenant family. These are not codes to follow for church structure and polity but the framework of qualitative significance shaping not only our perceptions but requiring our obedience in the practice of the church. Functionally, this means, for example, that any homogeneous model of church growth—or any variation emphasizing "likeness" other than of the Trinity—is a critical error in building the body of Christ. The implicit quantitative nature of any homogeneous church growth approach not only reduces the quality of disciples making up the church, but it also reinforces (intentionally or unintentionally) the exclusionary practices characteristic of a system of inequality. As Paul clearly defined the truth for biblical culture in applying the new relational reality to exactly this issue (Eph 2:11-22), Christ wiped out the relational barriers separating and stratifying us and made us all one whole—that is, "one new *anthropos*" (signifying human being without respect to gender, and thus to any other distinction, v. 15) with all the human differences structurally and relationally reconciled into the whole of God's new kinship family. This makes it imperative for church practice: no more "homogeneous models," no more "separate but equal" models, and moreover, no more "deficit models" (the treatment, however subtle, of others who are different as being essentially *less*).

While being involved with diversity within the church or engaging diversity within the world, the church must be extremely careful, even scrupulous, not to use a "deficit model" for any human differences. Historically, in its extreme usage this treatment was perpetrated by colonialism and manifest destiny while its more common usage is subtly employed (even as a norm today) by paternalism. The stigma of being *less* is even attached to the needy and the disadvantaged. Whatever the difference, persons are perceived as less because ostensibly they do not measure up to the prevailing standards used in the reductionist process of defining the human person by what one does or has, as discussed initially in the first chapter. Besides the process of human definition, these prevailing standards themselves, not only their application, raise the question: are these standards based on what prevails in the sociocultural context or on biblical culture formulated from the whole of God's desires revealed particularly in the incarnation? I realize that church tradition at times has failed to illuminate the latter clearly, even at times has confused the distinction between the latter and the former, notably since Constantinianism in the fourth century.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Olson identifies Constantinianism, and its symptom in church history, as "the disease of allowing secular and pagan rulers to dominate church life and meddle in biblical and

Yet, the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ emerges unreduced when it creates a cultural context of its own in the formation of the church as the whole of God's family—just as Paul demonstrated. Unless this biblical cultural context is functionally developed in a church's practice as the trinitarian relational context of family and relational process of family love, the transformed church and the truth of the gospel have not been distinguished in the world of common usage and ordinary function, thus susceptible to the influence of prevailing cultures and reductionism.

The authentic biblical cultural context of the transformed church (and thus the truth of the gospel) is the outcome of the rigorous relational work of redemption and reconciliation established by Christ and being completed by his Spirit in cooperative function with his followers. "All nations" is not a goal for missions, nor is *ethne* a church policy of diversity-quotas. The *ethne* character of church is the relational reality from the equalizing of redemption and the intimacy of reconciliation functioning with family love. In its authentic practice this new creation context not only generates the ministry of reconciliation but it also creates a distinct *culture of reconciliation* clearly defined only by biblical culture. This culture—as distinguished from multiculturalism in common usage—is about restoring *wholeness* to the person and to all relationships according to the whole of God's design and purpose.

The transformed church creates this cultural context which functionally, on the one hand, equalizes the differences keeping persons apart from the whole while, on the other hand, affirms those differences which are both important and necessary for the organic function of the body of Christ, though perhaps of secondary import for the diverse whole of God's family. The function of biblical culture defines human significance from the qualitative framework of God: what differences mean, what differences are significant, which ones are not necessary, and which are unacceptable. Prevailing cultures should not define this for the church, nor should subtle aspects of reductionism determine church practice in common and ordinary terms. We need to understand specifically from what context, for example, our standards come and our perceptions of mission and church growth are determined. Change is imperative where indicated.

This also directly relates to the issues of unity and efficiency in the church raised in the previous section. Knowing the context which informs our approach to church unity and which determines the priority we give to efficiency in church operation—a priority that emerged in the industrial age which is compounded in the postindustrial information age—becomes vital for the practice of any church and for any critical changes necessary to be whole. In the truth of the gospel, the transformed church context is incompatible with homogeneous models, deficit models and any other success models which generate unity and growth primarily in quantitative terms. For transformed persons to live in transformed relationships (equalized and intimate) together in God's new kinship family, all the created differences, contextual differences and the gifted (from God) differences, as well as the consequential differences we have to live with until total wholeness and well-being are brought to eschatological completion, all need to be reconciled to God and to each other—however difficult and inefficient—in the whole of God's new creation with a new cultural context. It is within this new context where legitimate diversity is truly seen

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theological interpretation," and describes its influence in theological development in *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 158ff.

(through the perceptual framework of biblical culture), affirmed, experienced together, and given its full and rightful place in God's household as a relational function of family love. This is fundamental to the covenant promise of the mystery of Christ (Eph 3:6).

Yet, how does the unity of the whole of God's family preclude becoming an essentially homogeneous context which only addresses the changing diversity in its neighborhood by a dominant assimilation approach? The mere presence of diversity is not an adequate response to this question urgently framed in modern contextual changes of human migration. While having diversity is becoming an accepted indicator of church growth, this tends to indicate only a static quantitative condition rather than having functional qualitative significance in church relations. The answer we need to pursue further involves the primacy for biblical culture to inform church practice, which then will also include imperative redemptive changes.

The authentic church of Jesus Christ is both local and universal (catholic as defined in the Nicene Creed). The integrity of this twofold character of the church must be dynamic (not fluid) by nature and not static where local has no functional meaning. This necessitates a biblically orthodox (monocultural) ideological core for our belief system as "one new *anthropos*" which cannot be reduced, substituted for or redefined by a surrounding context. There is no dialectic at work here resulting in a multicultural church. The significance of this core also includes a functional framework to account for multicultural shaping of secondary areas (defined by biblical culture) for the operation (not the identity and purpose) of the church in its unique and increasingly diverse local settings. Any dialectical relationship reduces the church to common usage and ordinary function and practice of a surrounding context.

The church universal, however, transcends surrounding sociocultural contexts with its own monocultural base while the church local, by the relational process of family love, vulnerably accounts for the diversity of persons and peoples and aspects of their culture within the limits of this framework for secondary matter. Biblical culture maintains the unity (one) and universal (catholic) attributes of the Nicene Creed and the traditional characteristics of the church, yet it does so with a dynamic integrity, not a static integrity of institutionalism. In doing so, biblical culture necessarily integrates (not assimilates) the human diversity of the multicultural nature of the church vitally within the practice of the local apostolic church of the NT. This is the whole of God's family Paul made operational in the church. This precludes any homogeneous simulation of church ontology and exposes any epistemological illusion of the truth of the gospel. Thus, both the integrity of the universal and the local church must be maintained. Any other unity is not whole and becomes a reductionist substitute of the whole of God.

What shapes local church practice is certainly an issue which requires ongoing attention. The growing contexts of human migration (again voluntary and involuntary) and their intrusive realities have magnified the need in human relations, both local and global, for redemption and reconciliation. Compounded by the reductionist influences of globalization and the technology of the information age, this exponential need exists today at the church's doorsteps more than ever before. This makes the multicultural nature of the church that much more urgently necessary. Yet, it is important for local churches to be multicultural not just because of the surrounding situation but because of the truth of the gospel and biblical culture. When biblical culture does not provide the context for our faith and church practice, they become contextualized by a surrounding reductionist source.



In order for us to respond and be relationally involved with our whole persons to Christ's commission to be the multicultural church, there are various tensions and conflicts necessary to address both individually and corporately. We began to address some of these issues in the previous two chapters. As we deepen this process to the multicultural family of God, the need for change increases—individual changes involving one's personhood, corporate changes within the church, and changes in how both do relationships. In the call to be whole, before the church deals with changes in the world it needs to change within itself in vital areas. In other words, we cannot be "sent to all nations" before we embody the "call to be whole"—which is why this chapter precedes the tenth chapter on mission into the world.

### **Four Major Aspects to Multicultural Change**

This priority is apparent as we discuss more specifically what it means for the body of Christ's followers to be multicultural. There are four aspects involved in becoming the transformed multicultural church (MCC): two requiring structural and contextual dimensions, plus two more necessitating individual and relational processes. In each aspect redemptive changes are necessary—changes which overlap and interact with other aspects.

To stress a point made in part earlier, the MCC does not automatically mean the church has to be made up of different races, colors and ethnicities, like a quota system. The multicultural nature of the ecclesiology of the whole should not be confused with affirmative-action ecclesiology. The latter perspective tends to be limited in its focus (for example, more quantitative or outer in) and in its practice (for example, to merely celebrating diversity or promoting solidarity). In the deeper perspective of biblical culture, the first key characteristic of the MCC is the structural dimension of *access*. While access can be seen as a static condition in merely an "open-door policy," from a relational perspective access is dynamic and includes relational involvement.

In his description of the whole of God's family made operational in the MCC, Paul said: "for through him we both [human diversity] have access to the Father by one Spirit" (Eph 2:18). The term for "access" (*prosagoge*) was used for an audience granted to someone by high officials and monarchs; it comes from *prosago*, "to bring near." This is not merely an open door but the opportunity to interact with someone greater, however limited the interaction may be. Paul goes on to define the nature of this relational involvement with the Father: "we may approach [*prosago*] God with freedom and confidence" (Eph 3:12). "Freedom" (*parresia*) involves boldness, especially to speak all that one thinks, feels, that is, with "confidence" (*pepoithesis*, trust, from *peitho*, to persuade; cf. Heb 4:16). This trust to share one's person openly suggests a very intimate relationship, not merely having access—which Paul further defines for those who have been equalized to interact with Abba as his very own daughters and sons (Rom 8:15). Access to the Father involves this intimate relationship in which his very own are not "treated differently" (*diakrino*, Acts 15:9).

What Peter testified about at the Jerusalem council was the kind of access he firmly believed was traditionally impossible for Gentiles. Though Jesus changed Peter's theology, Peter struggled to change the practice of his tradition. Emotional investment made the issue of change

more than a matter of habit. Change is always difficult if it involves losing something, or at least the perception of losing something even when it involves redemptive change.

After the primordial garden, the relational condition “to be apart” became an intentional process by human design to secure advantage and maintain self-preservation. The specific resources for this relational struggle may vary from one historical context to another. Yet, power, privilege and prestige are the basic issues around which these relational struggles of inequality revolve—whether the context is family, social, economic, political or even among God’s people. We see these issues in Peter’s transition to the MCC of the ecclesiology of the whole (Acts 10): the privilege of having access to grace and life’s resources and opportunities (10:34ff); the power of the anointing of the Holy Spirit (10:44-46); the prestige (status) of being God’s children with all the rights and privileges (10:47, 48). Any aspects of power, privilege and prestige are advantages (and benefits) many persons are reluctant to even share if the perception (even if unreal) means less for them. The control of this distribution is threatened by equal access.

Access, however, is not a quantitative resource based on merit. Access is the qualitative relational process based on grace. The significance of this relational opportunity for all persons not to be treated differently is the availability of God to redeem them from the relational condition “to be apart” and to resolve their relational struggle by reconciliation to the whole of God. In other words, equal access does not threaten personhood and wholeness for the church but is instrumental in the qualitative development of them. Embracing the redemptive change which functionally engages equal access extends church practice intentionally in the relational involvement necessary to be whole and deepens this involvement with persons who are different to receive, experience and belong to the whole of God.

The dynamic structural change in the early church led quite naturally to a contextual change—a contextual dimension which is the second key characteristic of the MCC. Though the MCC is not always of multiracial-ethnic makeup, it is improbable without it since we live in multicultural contexts. This was true of the ancient Mediterranean world. Yet the early Jewish Christian community was a homogeneous group which denied or limited access to others who were different. Until Peter’s transformation and Paul’s pivotal arrival, “all nations” had not been perceived to include Gentiles, Samaritans, or whomever else, into their house churches, table fellowships and community identity. Despite a missional program to the surrounding diversity, church practice had yet to involve the reconciliatory inclusion of those persons for the whole. Such purposeful relational involvement necessitates a major contextual change, especially for a homogeneous group (even those based on language).

The mere inclusion of human diversity is not sufficient to ensure against ontological simulation of the whole and epistemological illusion of the truth of the gospel. The trinitarian relational context of the transformed church operates with a culture of reconciliation by which the vital relational process of its reconciliation ministry practice intentionally initiates active relational involvement with all persons in family love. As Peter learned and testified to before the Jerusalem council, God’s family love does not make distinctions of persons, nor does it give any comparative value to their differences and thus treat them differently—“He made no distinctions between us and them” (*diakrino*, treat different, Acts 15:9). Yet, in order to be whole, it is not adequate just to include those persons in the church.

The process of family love simply extends relational involvement to those who are

different, takes in and embraces as a full part of one's own family those who respond to God. This is what definitively operationalizes the relational involvement necessary for the multicultural nature of the transformed church. Yet, for authenticity of church practice in this relational process involving reconciliatory inclusion, there has to be significant contextual change within the church. This contextual change defines the second key characteristic of the MCC: the process of *absorbing differences* into the church and, therefore, the willingness to change and even adopt differences for the whole of God, all within the framework of biblical culture.

As Peter was chastened by Christ and humbled by Paul, embracing this contextual change requires us to humbly accept the limitations of our working perceptual-interpretive framework (determining what we pay attention to or ignore) to understand the significance of all differences in the whole of God, as well as requires us to honestly admit the practice of our bias in applying our framework. Without this we tend to be lured by reductionism. Thus, this humility and honesty are necessary to be whole, the whole of the holy and eternal triune God.

Moreover, this contextual principle suggests that the biological family among Christians also needs to be “multicultural” in the sense that it needs to absorb (i.e., increasingly accept) family differences (especially generational) and change and even adopt some of those differences within the wisdom of biblical culture—including redefining biological family with the significance of church as family. When Christians practice this contextual dimension, both the family of God and the biological family become more loving and whole.

The importance of these structural and contextual aspects to multicultural change signifying the body of Christ was first demonstrated by Jesus back at the temple cleansing discussed earlier in this chapter. The process of becoming multicultural began when Jesus confronted the system of inequality the Jewish leaders established to control the temple to their advantage. Of course, this effectively denied access and use of the temple to those with less power, privilege and prestige. By his nature and the nature of God's house, his cleaning out the temple not only gave access to the less resourceful but absorbed those who were different into one household without distinctions. Jesus' actions were always in the relational context and process of God's response to the relational condition “to be apart” for the purpose of reconciliation to the whole of God. This is the beginning of the multicultural nature of the transformed church.

The church today has its roots here—not just by tradition, not merely ecclesial roots but, more importantly, because of the trinitarian relational context of family and the trinitarian relational process of family love Christ engaged to establish his body. And this suggests the need for some structural and contextual cleansing to get back to these roots. What churches today pattern themselves after defines the context of influence that basically determines how they will function within themselves and in the world. When competing influences from contexts surrounding the church diminish or minimize the influence of biblical culture, churches increasingly promote illusions of what the gospel is completely about and thus practice simulations of church ontology as the whole of God's family constituted in and by the Trinity. There is only one true basis for the church (past, present and eschatologically directed) but many reductionist alternatives for why a church exists and how it functions today. The latter need fundamental, redemptive changes.

These structural and contextual aspects involved in becoming the MCC directly relate to the other two major aspects which are processes for the individual person and our relationships.

These four aspects strongly interact together in reflexive relationship which suggests no set order of their development and practice. Yet, there is an obvious flow to each pair of aspects—for example, there has to be access before differences can be absorbed—while in crucial and practical ways the latter pair will determine the extent and significance of the former’s practice.

*The individual process* (third key characteristic) involves our reaction and response to differences. When a person is faced with differences in others, there is invariably some degree of tension for that person, whether conscious or not. This has to do with “our little world” or the “box” we live in—constructed from the limitations of our perceptual-interpretive framework—which is why humbly accepting its limits and honestly admitting our bias are necessary to be whole, as noted in the contextual aspect. What do we do with that tension in those situations? More importantly, what do we do with those differences in that relational context? This is important to understand for the ongoing issues of what we depend on to define our person, how we do relationships in these conditions and what level of relationship we engage, especially within the church. These are issues which each person must address as an individual and be accountable for, on the one hand, while the church community must account for them in practice on the other.

Two contrasting individual responses to others’ differences can be observed in the Bible to help our understanding. One response is from Paul. While affirming the existence of Christian freedom, he constituted it in the relational context of the whole in order that the significance of Christian freedom would not be diminished, minimalized or abused. Paul highlighted his own liberty (see 1 Cor 9:19-23) by responding to others’ differences simply with the dynamic relational process of submission (discussed in the previous chapter) summarized in his declaration: “I have become all things to all. . . .” (9:22). This is not the variable personality of a person who has no clear sense of his real identity. Nor is this about assimilating or masquerading in the context of differences. Furthermore, Paul was not illustrating what to do with tension in those situations created by human diversity. Since Paul did not define his person in quantitative terms from the outer in, he was free to exercise relational involvement with others in the qualitative significance of inner out—regardless of outer-in differences to which he would relationally submit for the sake of the whole.

It is crucial for our understanding of personhood and human relations to grasp that deeply implied in Christian liberty is being redeemed from those matters causing barriers in relationships—specifically in the relational condition “to be apart” from the whole. Christology and soteriology cohered for Paul in this practice of freedom for the individual person in the relationships necessary for the ecclesiology signifying the whole of God.

In response to the sociocultural conflicts apparent in the diversity of the church community at Corinth,<sup>3</sup> Paul demonstrated the relational need to venture out of “our little world” and beyond the limitations that its perceptual framework imposes on personhood and relationships in order to realize and experience the whole of God. He demonstrated the relational need of the whole to have sociocultural sensitivity and responsiveness to others’ differences

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of its social organization, see Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family*, 95-99, and Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structure in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 167-171.

(without losing his true identity) in order to be involved with them in the relational context and process of the culture and ministry of reconciliation (as he described in 9:22-23). Moreover, this also critically informs us that as long as we maintain the basic integrity of *what we are* in Christ and *whose we are* as the Father's within the framework of biblical culture, then whatever multicultural mode we use in secondary areas to express our lives or ministry is not an issue. Mode is not that important to what we are and whose we are as long as it does not substitute, distort or diminish the qualitative significance of our identity as the whole of God's very own.

In contrast to Paul, the second response to examine involves more general differences in others seen at Jesus' dinner visit with Martha and Mary (see Lk 10:38-42). Martha had tension with others' differences in that situation. When Jesus responded to her being worried and upset by saying "only one thing is necessary," it was a vital statement about the meaning of differences and our reaction to them based on our perceptual framework (acting as a filter for relationships).

What was Martha worried or upset about? Essentially, it centered on the repercussion of others' differences—in this situation both Jesus' and Mary's. Martha had an established way of doing things based on the prevailing cultural norms: her role as a woman, the importance of dinner in hospitality, the expectation for conformity of others in this social pattern. In the established ways of "her little world," Martha felt comfortable; within this social matrix, she defined her person and determined how relations should be. Thus, in her tension about encountering differences outside of her framework, her response in contrast to Paul was to demand that Mary do the same things as she. Furthermore, she tried to make Jesus feel guilty for not enforcing the prevailing norms. Martha's response and solution to others' differences can be described as conventional: she tried to *control* the situation by changing Mary to her established ways of doing things, that is, to be like her.

Martha's response is understandable because her personhood and the human relations perceived as necessary were threatened by differences. In her conventional mindset, differences to "her little world" had to be controlled. We see this conventional practice in all contexts and levels of human life, even notably in the church. What is absent from this response overlaps with the contextual change discussed above: humbly accepting the limitations of our framework to understand the significance of differences in the whole of God, and honestly admitting our bias in imposing our framework on others' differences. The absence of this humility and honesty is crucial in the process to be whole because some of the differences of others can take us deeper and beyond in the whole of God, as Mary's did with Jesus (cf. also Jn 12:1-8).

Martha's response also helps us understand that the underlying issue all of us face about others' differences is the confronting reality: *such differences pressure us to change*. The qualitative differences of the whole of God apply more than pressure; they also make it imperative for us to change. This issue becomes another burden or blessing—to try to maintain the status quo or to change for growth. Others' differences either become a threat to our established ways of doing things (particularly regarding personhood and relationships) or are an opportunity for further reconciliation to be whole and growth in God's wholeness. Our responses converge with either the fear and control of Martha or the freedom and love of Paul.

Postmodern influences today pressure us to change, for better or for worse. The lure of reductionism always pressures us, however, both to change what is whole and settle for less as well as to maintain the substitutes for the whole. Just as Jesus told Martha what was important, we

need to rediscover those ways which are truly necessary and essential priorities to the whole of God based on biblical culture, not prevailing cultures. In his call to be whole, the structural and contextual integrity of the MCC make it imperative for individual persons belonging to God's family to humbly relinquish control of unnecessary ways and honestly stop expecting others to fit into "our little world." To follow the qualitative difference of Jesus means to step out of the comforts of our framework—in trust of him to be whole—by adjusting and changing in order to engage others in their differences with the relational involvement of family love. In the significance of the ministry of reconciliation this is the access of truly being multicultural, not about pluralism; in the qualitative culture of reconciliation this is absorbing differences, not about solidarity in blanket tolerance.

These changes within the individual certainly involve redemptive change (old dying and new rising) which not only clears the way for the new creation but brings it in. Redemptive change must antecede and prevail in the relational process leading to reconciliation to the whole of God.

Yet, for the individual to authentically engage others (different or not) in the relationships necessary for the MCC involves not only the significance of this new relational context beyond "our little world" but also by nature imperatively requires *its deeper relational process in our relationships* (fourth key characteristic). While this deeper relational process is seen above in Mary, this is the most clearly visible in Jesus' life.

Along with the various examples of Jesus' relational involvement previously noted, in the incarnation of God's glory—revealing the heart of God's being, God's intimate relational nature and ongoing open presence (cf. Jn 1:14)—Jesus made himself vulnerable to our rejection (cf. Jn 1:11; Is 53:3). Beyond the conflict of ideological differences, this is the relational conflict naturally consequential when the *what* that is separated from the ordinary and common (i.e., what is holy) engages those of ordinary and common usage. When the Son stepped out of "his eternal world" to encounter the differences in our temporal context, Jesus opened his whole person to be affected by all those relational consequences (cf. Lk 13:34; 19:41, 42). Nevertheless, the integrity of the Holy One was maintained even though not separate but relationally involved; and this mystery of the incarnation establishes its qualitative significance that revelation of the Truth was for relationship—intimate relationship together regardless of differences. This is the mystery of Christ and the whole of the gospel made vulnerable relationally beyond theological convention and church pronouncement (Eph 3:4, 6).

Despite all the inherent differences the Holy One of God encountered, Jesus did not insulate himself from them but openly engaged them with his whole person out of the "box" to reconcile relationships. In doing so, Jesus demonstrated the basis for the deeper relational process in all our relationships. The opposite of *control* in the relational context of others' differences is *vulnerability* in the relational process of love. Based on the new nature of those who have received the vulnerable family love of God, Christ calls those to be whole by extending vulnerability to others (different or not) for the purpose of reconciliation. This call to wholeness prevails in all of Jesus' nonnegotiable desires for us to love; to love is how to be relationally involved by opening our whole persons to others (God included) and being vulnerable—not on our terms or for ourselves. To love others, especially those who are different—which also includes God in qualitative difference—is not to expect them to be like me or to come into my

little world.

Just as the experience of the incarnation was unavoidable to the holy God, this deeper relational process in our relationships is irreducible for those made whole. The relational process of love always involves being vulnerable to rejection, challenges to our person or criticism by others, especially who are different. Jesus extended family love in this way in his relationships and suffered consequences from it. Does the incarnation experience suggest that God could have responded to the human condition “to be apart” in only this way? I have no conclusive answer, yet in God’s self-disclosure there is no other way God does relationship. This certainly indicates to us that any other way would not have the relational significance nor have the qualitative substance as the incarnation. God’s vulnerability is “nothing less and no substitutes” than the whole of God. On this basis, Jesus not only created “access” to the Father but vulnerably “absorbed” into the whole of God’s family those who received him regardless of their differences. There can be no authentic practice of these structural and contextual aspects to becoming the MCC without vulnerability in the relational process of God’s family love—which, of course, depends on stepping out of “our little world” into the relational context of God’s family.

Being vulnerable to others obviously involves redemptive change from our prevailing way of doing relationships, including our conventional perceptions. The vulnerability of love cannot be focused on an issue of *losing something*, which can be constraining, if not controlling. Yet, as urgent as this perception may appear, the significant reality beyond this involves the greater issue of *gaining someone* and the greater wholeness which comes from relational involvement in the relationships necessary to be whole as God’s family.

Moreover, the whole of God does not sacrifice the individual person for the family, as discussed previously about Eastern families; it nurtures and grows the whole person in the whole, for the whole, as the whole of God in likeness of the Trinity. In the narrative accounts of Jesus’ vulnerability, the active trust and intimacy he experienced with his Father attended to the needs of his whole person constituted by his heart. His ongoing relational involvement with his Father is definitive for our practice, making evident that the vulnerability of love also necessitates the ongoing involvement of trust and intimacy in our relationship with God. Relational faith engages God for this ongoing relational experience which attends to our needs, just as it did for Jesus.

This relational process has a further relational outcome involving the discovery of faith by freeing us to determine what is necessary in life and what we need to relinquish control over. This is certainly of significance because it would affect our involvement with others, particularly who are different, making us more vulnerable to equalized involvement for reconciled relationships of the whole. God’s family love functions in this way. Thus, to be compatible with God’s most fundamental response to our relational condition “to be apart” from the whole, the authentic practice of this love by its nature requires change in us: individual, relational, structural and contextual changes.

These necessary changes certainly do not always occur smoothly nor in linear order. The interaction among the four key characteristics of being multicultural suggests reflexive influence each aspect may have on the total process of change. More importantly, the total process involves cooperative relational work with God, and God often uses or allows negative situations to bring the change in our lives necessary to be vulnerable, and then whole. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the development of the apostolic church God used persecution to force the church out

of its provincial context and made it vulnerable. For the ecclesial transition to be whole, Christ chose Paul, a Hebrew of Hebrews, dogmatically monocultural, to operationalize the church in the new creation as the MCC. This remarkable development happened because Paul's whole person was changed from inner out. Indeed, redemptive change is necessary and often unpredictable in the process to be whole.

Yet change is not the mere product of unilateral divine action but the mutuality of the Trinity in cooperative relationship with the intentional efforts of the church accounting for these changes and the necessary involvement from the individual persons accountable for change. Moreover, change in itself is not a sufficient indicator of a redemptive process, nor that that change is significant beyond mere human effort. Schultze's comment on the technology of the information age chastens our modern perceptions of change: "cyberculture is so dynamic that it . . . makes change itself into a symbol for progress."<sup>4</sup> In God's qualitative framework, redemptive change is for wholeness, not progress, and for the deeper involvement in the relationships necessary to be whole both with God and with each other, not the quantity of connections.

The call to be whole is the call to go beyond the common and ordinary—to be transformed *from* common usage and ordinary function and practice *to* the new creation in likeness of the whole of God made operational in the multicultural nature of the church as equalizer.

### **Called Beyond the Common and Ordinary**

In the function of the incarnation, it was critical for Jesus' identity and practice not to be "of the world" while vulnerably involved "in the world." John the Baptist testified about this difference which distinguished Jesus from John's own ministry (Jn 3:31-35). Jesus, himself, testified about his qualitative difference from the Pharisees (reductionists) with the conclusion "you are of this world, I am not of this world" (Jn 8:13-23). In his pivotal prayer for his followers, Jesus also embeds our identity in this qualitative difference from the world while being vulnerably involved in it (Jn 17:13-16).

Jesus' pivotal prayer invokes the transfer of both his identity and function directly to his followers (Jn 17:18). In this transfer, the transmission of the Father's desires for his family and God's response to the human condition "to be apart" is passed from his one and only Son to the whole of God's family as the Father's new daughters and sons, as the Son's new sisters and brothers (cf. Rom 8:19, 29). We need to grasp the full significance of this transfer because it qualifies Christ's commission to become the multicultural family of God.

The foremost imperative Jesus made in his prayer to operationalize the qualitative difference of this identity and function is clearly "sanctify" (Jn 17:17-19). The word for "sanctify" (*hagiazō*) means to cause to be holy, make holy; the fundamental idea of this word is separation from common or ordinary usage. We tend not to address this aspect of holy, so what is the

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<sup>4</sup> Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 76.



functional significance needed to be holy?

In God's disclosure through Isaiah that "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," that "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is 55:8, 9), we tend to think of God's *quantity* more than his *quality*. While this quantitative distinction is true, it is an inadequate distinction about God to understand his ways; this quantitative lens also conveniently does not pay attention to the deeper issue involved in the above aspect of holy.

God's thoughts and ways are not only greater from a quantitative yardstick but they are *different* using a qualitative measure. Accepting the quantitative gap between God and us should not diminish or minimize the more important issue of God's qualitative difference. It is this primary difference of God which is in conflict with all the common and ordinary of our surrounding contexts. By its nature, to be holy functionally signifies this ongoing tension, the absence of which indicates the influence of the common and ordinary.

This qualitative difference is what is revealed fundamentally in the incarnation, not the quantitative aspects of God. As much of an enigma as it is to understand how the quantity of God can be contained in a human package, more so the paradox of God's quality able to be vulnerably present in the human context. Christology is more significant and compelling for Christ's followers when it involves the deeper implications of his qualitative difference.

The implication most compelling about Christ which confronts all who would follow him involves the provoking reality: the incarnation of God is not only a paradox, it is a necessary contradiction, the qualitative nature of which cannot be redefined, diminished or minimized by his followers if the integrity of their identity and function is to be relationally significant to God (cf. again the issue for would-be disciples [Jn 6:51-60, 66] and the resolve of authentic disciples [Jn 6:67-69]). The vulnerable presence of the holy triune God is a contradiction with whom Christ's followers have the opportunity to be intimately involved and in whose life they can participate. In the transfer to his followers, Jesus asks his Father for this experiential reality in likeness of the Trinity (Jn 17:11, 20-21, 26). Yet, for this experience to be whole "in the world" it compels a change for his followers resulting from the imperative "sanctify." His followers cannot be whole without sanctified life and practice.

To be holy is the functional change from the common and ordinary to the whole of the Uncommon, which necessitates this contradiction in order to be involved "in the world." In the context of the Uncommon *out of* the world, to be holy is natural and totally compatible. *In* the world, however, to be holy, and thus whole, is a contradiction—life and practice contrary to common usage and ordinary function and practice. This is pivotal in Jesus' prayer for the transfer and transmission of God's desires, purpose and response.

This constitutes following Jesus and the practice of his church—by its nature in whatever context except the Uncommon—as essentially a contradiction of whatever else competes with it in the surrounding contexts "of the world." The functional significance of living a contradiction in the world before others is the deeper issue about being holy needing resolve from his followers because this matter has relational consequences, as it did for Jesus (Jn 15:18, 19; 17:14).

Every aspect of Jesus' prayer for his followers hinges on the imperative to be holy—to be beyond common usage and deeper than ordinary function and practice. There is no other basis to be the whole of God and no other process to experience the whole of God. The call to be whole is

the call to be holy—the *contradiction of qualitative difference*. To follow Jesus in the world requires his qualitatively different identity and function from the world. To be with him in this difference is the outcome of the redemptive change of transformation (sanctification), which includes the rigorous process of establishing contradiction with aspects of the world while reconciling differences in the world to the whole of God. Paradoxically, only the difference reflected in this contradiction can reconcile the differences of the world to God’s whole beyond the world. This was what distinguished Jesus in the incarnation and what distinguishes his followers in the world as the whole of God. This may explain the motivation for Jesus also revealing in his prayer: “For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified” (Jn 17:19).

His statement is somewhat puzzling. Does this suggest that Jesus lacked deity and thus a holy nature (as Arianism does), or that Jesus was merely a man elevated to divine status (as in adoptionism or dynamic monarchianism), or that in emphasizing the distinction of Jesus’ divine and human nature (as the Antiochenes did) Jesus worked on sanctifying his human nature? None of these Christologies sufficiently explain the whole of Jesus, the whole of the Trinity and the whole of God’s self-disclosure in the incarnation for relationship in the trinitarian relational context of family and relational process of family love. Why, then, did Jesus sanctify himself or even need to?

Since the whole of Jesus is one with and in God the Father, we can confess with Peter “that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:69). “Sanctify” was not imperative for Jesus’ person because this “nothing less and no substitutes” God person was *hagios* (holy). In saying this about himself right after the transfer of the Father’s purpose (Jn 17:18), Jesus was not focused so much on the condition of holy but more so on the function of being holy. The issue here was not about himself but about his followers (“for them . . . that they too”). Along with being the basis for their transformation, Jesus wanted to demonstrate his difference to his followers, not his quantitative difference (which certainly emerged) but his qualitative difference. That is, he also wanted his followers to have the experiential understanding of what it means to rise above the common and ordinary which prevailed in their surrounding contexts and even in their lives. Throughout the incarnation Jesus defined his person and presented himself, communicated with others and engaged in the level of relationship which went both deeper and beyond common usage and ordinary function and practice. “Sanctify” exceeded the conventional issues of truth, doctrinal and moral purity and contradicted the prevailing notions of personhood and how relationships functioned— notions and practice which reflect having been redefined, diminished or minimized by reductionism.

The whole person signified by the importance of the heart and the primacy of intimate relationships necessary to be whole are inherent to the whole of God constituted in the Trinity. This is the whole Jesus functionally outlined in the Sermon on the Mount which contradicted the reductionism of the Pharisees by making imperative the function and practice of the whole of God to surpass the reductionist substitutes in the common and ordinary (Mt 5:20).

In the nature of sanctified life and practice, Jesus was always confronting reductionism, not only in the surrounding contexts but even in his disciples (notably Peter) and the early church (namely in Ephesus, Sardis, Thyatira and Laodicea). Reductionism creates the tension and conflict with the Uncommon by shifting the person and relationships to common usage and

ordinary function and practice, by redefining the whole by its parts, and by refocusing perceptual-interpretive frameworks from the inner out to the outer in. Yet, the parameters of “our little world” shaped by reductionism become established ways in which we maintain control and resist change. To rise above this limit can be discomfoting, to go deeper than this constraint can be threatening. This is the deeper issue of sanctification which is unavoidable and nonnegotiable, needing our resolve in our identity and function. To be restored to the whole of God requires redemptive change in the basic paradigm: the old dying and the new rising—relinquishing control of certain established ways and establishing the practice of necessary new ones.

## **Sanctified Whole**

From the demonstration of sanctified practices throughout Jesus’ life (“sanctify myself”), his followers can grasp the functional significance to be holy, to be whole and not “of the world” (preposition *ek* signifying emergence from within and thus separation from the world), yet be relationally involved “in the world” (*en* means remaining in place). The call of discipleship to “Follow me” is the call to be whole and to be holy, which means to be involved with him in sanctified life and practice “that they too may be truly sanctified” (Jn 17:19b) to receive the transfer of identity and function from the Son. That is, the call to be whole is the call to be holy involving life together “in the world” in the experiential reality of the whole of God as family (signified in “name,” Jn 17:11) beyond the ontological simulations and epistemological illusions of the common and ordinary. Therefore, Jesus’ prayer converges with his practice to provide the understanding that to be holy involves two functional aspects: a negative aspect addressing “not being reduced” from the whole and a positive aspect engaging the relational work necessary “to be whole.”

When church identity and practice become sanctified from “of the world,” the transfer of the purpose and function of the whole of God constituted in and by the Trinity emerges in Christ’s followers “in the world,” just as it did in Jesus. Thus we cannot separate becoming whole from being holy without being reduced to common and ordinary usage with no relational significance to God, however well intentioned. In sanctified life and practice, “the contradiction of the qualitative difference” expressed in the whole of Christ’s followers also functions by its nature—paradoxically in likeness to the incarnation of the Son—as the authentic equalizer within itself and the world to reconcile differences in the relationships necessary to be whole.

We need to humbly address the most significant of those differences if the church is indeed to be “truly sanctified”—that is, in reality transformed to the whole of God’s family constituted in the Trinity. The next chapter serves as a parenthetical chapter for this purpose.



## Chapter 9

# Gender in the Big Picture or a Reduced Context

(An Unavoidable Blessing for the Church as Equalizer)

In the narrative of the first creation, God created a difference that was fundamental to the whole yet critical not to be distinguished beyond God's purpose to be whole. Since then, the most dominant human difference which all humanity has faced without exception is gender. Gender is the most dominant human difference because it pervades in all other distinctions of race, ethnicity, class or age. To the extent that gender has gone beyond God's purpose, there has been struggle with this distinction both within the human person and in human relations. As discussed in the first chapter, God created this difference for more than procreation; and God created the relationship having this difference for more than marriage and biological family. God created this difference in order to be whole in the whole of God as the whole of God's family constituted in the Trinity.

How the church has addressed, dealt with and struggled over gender suggest the absence of the whole of God or a lack of understanding of the significance to be whole. This would apply to both biblical egalitarians and complementarians. While gender in the church goes beyond the scope of this study, it is vital that this issue be addressed within the context of discourse on the whole of God. The process necessary to be whole for personhood and relationships cannot circumvent the issue since it directly involves God's resolution to our condition "to be apart" from the whole. Within the limits of this study, I will address this unavoidable blessing briefly in this parenthetical chapter and suggest an alternative in the last chapter.

In *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, Craig Keener concludes his egalitarian discussion by emphasizing Jesus' demand "that we keep first things first, not missing the forest for the trees."<sup>1</sup> "What matters most to God," as Keener discusses, should indeed be our primary focus and priority. Yet, Keener suggests only broader principles such as justice, mercy and faith to define God's desires. We need to go further and deeper than mere principles to understand the whole of God's desires in the big picture. In doing so, much of the current exegetical discussion on gender can be extended in a deeper perceptual-interpretive framework—challenging our lens which filters what we see and how we see it (our biases) and examining the basis for determining what we pay attention to and what we ignore.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Keener, "Women in Ministry," in James R. Beck and Craig L. Blomberg, eds., *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 68.

## Distinguishing the Context

Throughout this study, the thesis for the fundamental condition of human relations which God defined as “not good” has been “to be apart” (a more relationally significant rendering of the traditional but limited “to be alone,” Heb. *bad*, Gen 2:18) from the whole. And God’s thematic actions throughout Scripture have been distinguished as a response to this human condition, whereas human activity has been summarized as maintaining this relational condition “to be apart” in various ways (even unintentionally in Christian practice) in multiple forms (even inadvertently in church practice).

Since God has acted consistently in the big picture toward an eschatological conclusion—most clearly and vulnerably in the incarnation of Jesus—we need to address more deeply in function how we may have unintentionally reduced God’s design and inadvertently redefined God’s purpose for human relations. Such reductionism is critical to address specifically in three basic interrelated issues, as discussed previously, which directly involve what matters most to God: (1) how we define ourselves, (2) how we do relationships and thus (3) how we do church.

How we see gender relations is always formulated by our perceptual framework, which for Christians is a combination of the social, cultural and religious aspects of our lives, influencing what we pay attention to and what we ignore. This means that gender relations for Christians should not be seen in isolation from human relations in the larger sociocultural context. We do not live in a vacuum, as if “to be alone.” And sociology helps us functionally understand that each of us is a part of something bigger than *self*.

Whether that self is about gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, or any other distinction, it is only a part of a larger context of human relations. Sociology helps us understand the relationships involved in a larger context. Yet, useful as that is, sociology is limited in giving us understanding of the relations which constitute life—particularly its qualitative aspects. This understanding needs to be expanded and deepened in order to specifically address the human condition “to be apart.” A person cannot know *what* one is a part of without understanding *who* one is apart from, and *how* being apart reduces that person to something less.

This more expanded and even deeper context into which all persons and human relations are placed is: *the created context of interpersonal relationships in God’s design and purpose*, constituted by and with God to address the condition of human relations “to be apart” from the whole. From first creation to the eschatological completion of the new creation, God’s actions consistently responding to this human condition formulate the big picture.

What matters most to God in the big picture is *the relational context*. This relational context is the very extension of the qualitative significance of God’s being as the heart of God as well as of the qualitative relational nature of the Trinity. In God’s likeness and into this relational context we all were created and for this purpose our lives are designed. From this expanded and deeper context our primary perceptual framework must be constituted in order to formulate perceptions of the importance of the whole person (defining the true status of personhood from the inside out, without distinctions) and the primacy of interpersonal relationships (defining intimate relationships as resolution for “to be apart” and thus its primacy over any other level of involvement).

Such perceptions of the importance of the person and the primacy of relationships are

inadequately defined from sociocultural perceptual frameworks, even with Christian influence, because of the lens of reductionism. Reductionism redefines personhood and diminishes or minimalizes relationships to common usage and ordinary function and practice—the outer in over the inner out, quantitative over qualitative, parts over the whole. The importance of the person and the primacy of relationships can only be sufficiently and necessarily based on God's self-disclosure of what matters most to the Creator.

God's desires are defined and most vulnerably revealed in the relationship-specific incarnation of Jesus, which is ongoingly mediated by the relational work of the Spirit. The relational response and involvement of the persons of the Trinity should not be minimized because they constitute the relational context and process of God's big picture. Therefore, despite the various sociocultural contexts in which human persons live, we all are parts of this whole and share in common this overall relational context constituted in the very trinitarian being of God (not tritheism) and signified by the relational process of the Trinity.

God's creation of persons is both an extension of God and how God does relationships. God's self-disclosure is the vulnerable presentation of God and this vulnerable relational involvement defines how God does relationships. Both creation and revelation represent who, what and how God is—with nothing less than God and no substitutes for God. Thus any reduction of God's design and purpose or of the relational context (especially as Jesus engaged) become a reductionism of God, however unintentional and inadvertent. This is how God gets put in a "box." Likewise, anything less than God's design and purpose or any substitute for the relational context consign gender and human relations to a reduced context, a reductionist alternative. And we cannot adequately address nor resolve any relations from a reductionist framework, nor can we experience wholeness in personhood without the relationships necessary to be whole.

Similar to a call we hear from postmodernism, this suggests a need for a paradigm shift from quantitative to qualitative. Unlike postmodernism, however, this change requires going deeper than the relativity associated with persons and beyond the variability of human experiences in communities. All persons and human relations are rooted in the shared relational context of God, which is distinctly qualitative.

Whenever we define gender and its relations according to a context influenced by reductionism, we are susceptible to drawing a scenario that is incompatible with God's big picture, and thus can inadvertently be modifying the big picture or formulating in function a different picture. Such a picture may not appear to be theologically contrary, yet may be incompatible functionally with the whole of God in the eschatological picture—specifically with how the persons of the Trinity do relationships.

Since this can be true for both evangelical complementarians and egalitarians, we need to honestly address the three basic issues noted earlier (how we define ourselves, how we do relationships, how we do church). These vital issues are not only interrelated and overlapping but both linear and reflexive in their influence on each other. How we define ourselves is a prime determinant for how we do relationships, with both determining how we actually practice church—and mutually reinforcing thus, for example, entrenching us further into reductionist practices.

## What Matters Most to God

“To be apart” was God’s concern for us from the beginning, and Jesus deeply struggled over the effects of this condition within his own person (both in relation to his Father, Mt 27:46, and his followers Jn 14:9) as he responded on behalf of all our persons. What matters most to God is what we do with our whole person and how we function as that person in the created design and purpose for relationships, which are both extensions of who, what and how God is. The *whole* of the person and the relationships necessary to be *whole* are God’s deepest desires because this *whole* directly corresponds in likeness to the *whole* of God. When we don’t grasp this *whole*, a person (of whatever distinction) cannot truly know the importance of *who* one is and is a part of nor understand the primacy of *what* one is apart from, thus not realizing the significance of *how* being apart reduces that person(s) to something qualitatively less, or less than whole.

To reduce the person to less than how God defines and sees the person, to reduce the qualitative significance (the image of God signified by the heart) of the person from the inside out by subordinating this to quantitative matter redefining the person from the outside in, notably by what they do or have, has serious relational consequences not only with what matters most to God but also with what we would ideally, if not pragmatically, desire for ourselves. This involves having relationships in which we can be our true substantive person and can experience genuine intimate involvement and belonging in the relationships necessary to be whole. To reduce any part of this is to reduce the whole of God’s desires for life, not merely for the condition “to be apart” but for the wholeness of life together with God and with each other as constituted and experienced in the communion of the Trinity.

Our lack of awareness or our insensitivity to any of the various ways or multiple forms of the condition “to be apart” in human relations reflect the operation of reductionism. This may further reflect being controlled by the lens of a reductionist framework, signifying our lack of freedom to adequately perceive the whole person and the primary function of relationships to be whole. This constrains us in “our little world” and confines God’s function to a quantitative “box.” The change from the quantitative to the qualitative therefore is an issue of redemptive change, the process of which involves being freed from reductionist substitutes in order to function in the new creation.

Redemptive change is a basic need which the church must seriously address in an expanded and deeper context than it often has. God’s response to “to be apart” enacted by Christ in the redemptive relational process (summarized by Paul in Eph 2) redeems all persons from the reductionist practices and effects of distinctions based on the outside in (Eph 2:9, 11-12) to the qualitative significance of their whole person from the inside out (2:4, 5, 10). In this process persons are equalized because they are no longer defined by reductionist distinctions (2:13). This frees persons and removes the relational barriers for relationships to be restored to the design and purpose of how the whole of God does relationships (2:14-22).

As previously discussed, in the redemptive process engaged relationally to be with and thus in Christ, two irreducible changes are established and irreversibly set into motion: (1) all persons are equalized in their whole person before God, and (2) all persons are equalized as these persons with each other in relationships together as the whole of God.

God’s response to “to be apart” fulfilled by the “nothing less and no substitutes” person of



God in this redemptive relational process must not be spiritualized nor doctrinized in an inadvertent reductionist attempt to remove it from the relational context in which all human relations are rooted. God's response signifies *the process of equalization* for human persons and human relations. Furthermore, the integrity of church identity (Eph 2:19, 20) and the validity of its practice (2:21, 22) are constituted by this process of equalization inherent in God's vulnerable response, which constitutes the truth of the gospel operationalized by Paul in the ecclesiology of the whole.

God's response in Christ defines what matters most to God. Any reduction of the equalization process is a reduction of God's response to the condition "to be apart" in human relations, which then becomes a reduction of God—who and what God is and how God does relationships, thus reconstituting the gospel. This then is about not only what matters most to God but also about what particular God matters most to us, that is, on whose terms and in whose image.

### **How We Define Gender and How We Do Gender Relations**

The norm to define ourselves and to do relationships in reductionist terms is endemic to Western contexts—but is not unique to modernity, only compounded by it. Variations of this human practice are pandemic to all sociocultural contexts. Historically, reductionism has been consistently present in particular to how gender is defined and how gender relations are done. And this is true today even for biblical egalitarians as well as complementarians. Yet egalitarians have not grasped their reductionism, for example, indicated by qualifying female persons for leadership based on giftedness (that is, on what a woman has or can do) and with this focus thereby continuing to do relationships and practicing church in effect not much differently than male leaders do, modifications notwithstanding. We cannot dismiss the similar reductionist influence on these perceptual-interpretive frameworks for how we define ourselves. Egalitarians (especially women) need to examine if this is all they want, because this is not what matters most to God.

For human relations, the matter of authority is essential and necessary in any structure relating persons to each other, be it a society, community, the church or a family. In the New Testament, authority (*exousia*) means rightful, actual and unimpeded power to act, or to possess, control, use or dispose of, something or someone. Yet, we should not look at authority as some static means in the possession of some individual/group or designated to some individual/group. Essentially, authority is a relational matter exercised in a relational context. That is, authority or power is always exercised over some other person/group. Consequently, there is an ongoing dynamic relationship involved in this process of authority, which needs to be examined in the extended and deeper context of the relational context, not merely sociologically.

Ultimately, the only rightful power in life is God's. As the Lord and Creator, God exercises that authority over all life whether we like it or not. Furthermore, since all human authority is established by God, the issue of authority becomes an ongoing relational issue between God and us (Rom 13:1, 2). Having said this, aside from our relationship with God, where in human relationships does the rightful exercise of power fulfill the desires of God as part of the

whole, for the whole and in the whole of God? Moreover, how can we exercise or be subject to human authority within and consistent with God’s redemptive plan for all creation and not find ourselves inadvertently in conflict with what matters most to God?

Consider what characterizes the existing condition of human relationships in modernity more than anything. I suggest it is distant, depersonalized or broken relationships—variations of “to be apart.” Our established ways of doing things further reduce or constrain the whole person while cultivating distance in our relationships, intentionally or unintentionally, with bad intentions or with good intentions. These ways have become further embedded with the use of technology in the information age.<sup>2</sup>

In the broad context of human interaction the greatest indicator of distant, depersonalized, broken relationships is the operation of power relations. Whatever its form, the unrighteous use of power (legitimate or otherwise) is responsible for determining the nature or extent of relationships more than any other single factor. The greatest consequence of power relations is systems of inequality. Unlike our relationship with God which, on the one hand, requires inequality while, on the other, functions with intimate connections upon reconciliation, human systems of inequality create only barriers in human relationships. Whether the criteria used to determine inequality are based on race, class, culture, religion or gender, the results are to eliminate certain people from equitable participation in a system. Yet this relational consequence can be accomplished even without prejudices or biases—even unintentionally. Also, the subtlety of this relational issue may not involve overt power or discrimination but may only be indicated by distance in relationships reflected in a lack of intimacy. For example, how many persons feel less important merely by not being listened to or simply being ignored? “To be apart” always involves horizontal distance but usually also includes the vertical distance of stratified relationships in which disparity (sometimes read diversity) means to be less.

The relational context is necessary to take us deeper than the sociocultural context of these relationships to help us understand underlying issues needing redemptive change. This requires that human relations, power relations and systems of inequality must be addressed both from the aspects of discrimination/oppression (stratified relationships) and the reductionism from which such relationships evolve.

To deal with stratified relationships, for example, merely by redistributing power is to address the human condition “to be apart” with only the economic and political substitutes of reductionism. While these resources are necessary and may be urgent for a situation, there are deeper issues beyond situations to address in order to be whole. Likewise, to share power to level the playing field in power relations is to provide a social substitute of reductionism (such as inadequate prevailing notions of pluralism and multiculturalism), which may level the playing field but does not redeem and transform the “game” itself because the issue is not dealt with in the expanded and deeper aspects of the relational context. Thus underlying issues are not changed—namely reductionism.

Justice and equality (even as principles that matter most to God) do not have the extended

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<sup>2</sup> Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

and deeper significance of God's qualitative basis for the person and for relationships, if that justice and equality only perceive all persons as equal in reductionist terms and pursues equality in their relationships merely with the substitutes of reductionism. Reductionist substitutes by definition cannot resolve the human condition "to be apart" for the whole person and the relationships necessary to be whole.

As Jesus revealed, fulfilled and made imperative by the relational context and process of his life, however, the process of equalization redeems and restores the person from reductionism to the whole of God, which involves restoring the primacy of intimate relationships from reductionist substitutes. We need to look more closely at how Jesus revealed this.

### **Jesus' Response to "to be apart"**

Any response to the issues of church order and the relationships among its members requires compatibility with God's big picture and God's ultimate response in Christ to the human condition "to be apart" from the whole. We need to keep in focus that God's self-disclosure is always about how God does relationships, and that revelation and truth are for this relationship, not for mere church doctrine and propositional truth. As we look more closely at Jesus, we are confronted to examine what aspects of how we do relationships and thus practice church are determined by a perceptual-interpretive framework from reductionism. Failure to do so makes it difficult for us to distinguish the old about us (which we will see Jesus redeeming) and the new for us (which we will see Jesus restoring). Furthermore, failing to assess honestly our established ways of doing things makes us susceptible to being in conflict with or even in opposition to, however unintentional, the desires of God in the big picture.

Peter learned this the hard way when he was confronted with his failures to deal with how he did relationships by distinction-making based on ethnicity (Gal 2:11ff). As God revealed (Eph 3:4-6; Acts 10:9-16, 34, 35), the practice of false distinctions was in opposition to God's desires in the big picture because distinction-making creates, cultivates, reinforces or perpetuates the very barriers in relationships destroyed by Christ in response to the relational condition "to be apart" to reconcile us to the whole of God's family (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:24).

We know that it required the death and resurrection of Jesus to destroy these barriers in relationships and to establish the new creation of transformed relationships (equalized and intimate) for his followers. Yet this relational work started prior to his death. In the narratives between the manger and the cross, Jesus was destroying barriers in relationship and eliminating distance for intimate connections. These interactions defined God's direct response to the various ways and forms "to be apart," and they were consequential both for their opposition to the old as well as for their establishing the new. Our Christology must include this to be sufficient of God's self-disclosure in the life of Jesus.

Throughout his incarnation, Jesus demonstrated how God does relationships by engaging in the relational work necessary to restore the person to wholeness and to reconcile human relationships from relational distance to the whole. Notably, in all his human interactions, the most significant and intimate relational connections were made with women. This was not coincidence. Given Jesus' position of authority and the sociocultural and religious position of

women, his intimate connections with women were remarkable in themselves. More significant, however, is the wholistic issue of equalizing relationships in the prevailing context of systems of inequality. The significance of this goes beyond responding to the sociocultural-religious context to involve the deeper issue of establishing the relationship of the whole of God. This is the relationship in the first creation that God said is “not good to be apart” from and thus provided the female person to complete the relational whole. Of course Adam and Eve did not fully consummate it other than quantitatively in marriage and biological family.

Jesus’ intimate connections with women, in contrast to the relational constraints for men, possibly suggests a symbolic consummation of the first creation relationship between the genders to be whole in the whole for the whole of God. Whether it does or not, Jesus’ intimate relationships with women do suggest the significance of gender in the new creation. This significance of gender seen in his relationships, however, is not as a distinction for personhood to define qualitative differences between female and male persons. Rather, Jesus’ relationships demonstrate the reductionist influence on gender and help us to understand the redemptive changes necessary to be whole as persons in the relationships together as the whole of God’s family. In no other human distinction or difference is the influence of reductionism more pervasive, and thus necessary for change, than in gender. Gender, then, not only informs us of the extent of the human condition “to be apart” but it also reveals the depth of the resolution needed to be whole.

When Jesus vulnerably engaged a Samaritan woman at a well, he broke down “double jeopardy” (double discrimination based here on ethnicity and gender) for her and gave her direct access for intimate relationship with God by equalizing her person without distinctions (Jn 4:4-26). The ethnic issue was certainly important here but gender was even more significant because it applied whether she was a Jew or a Samaritan. In his relational connections (see also Lk 7:36-50; Mt 15:21-28), Jesus defines the relational process needed for qualitative relationships in general, and for significant church relationships in particular to be whole and not “to be apart.” And gender relations provide the functional understanding of this relational process.

No relationship brings these issues to the forefront of Christian practice more than Jesus’ interactions with Mary, sister of Martha (whom we contrasted in the previous chapter). As we review the highlights of this relationship, note its development: (1) Luke 10:38-42; at this first dinner there is a conflict of cultural perceptual framework; Jesus doesn’t deny Martha her framework but prioritizes it in the deeper qualitative framework of the relational context; Mary goes against the religious culture by sitting at Jesus’ feet in order to be taught by the Rabbi—a place forbidden for women and reserved only for men, particularly disciples (note also, that serious disciples usually were training for leadership); Jesus not only warmly receives her in front of all the other men but affirms her place and gently explains to Martha what’s more important than the prevailing reductionist substitutes—namely, relationships and discipleship; (2) John 11:17-44; here again we contrast the two sisters; Martha shared her concern for Lazarus but within the limits (maybe barriers) of relationships between men/rabbi and women; consequently, she sincerely expresses her belief but does not fully open her heart; in contrast, Mary, though she repeated the exact opening words (see Greek text) to Jesus as Martha, expressed herself completely from her heart, thus deeply moving Jesus to engage in that intimate connection; (3) John 12:1-11; Mary again breaks various established customs in order to respond even more

intimately to Jesus (cf. Luke 7:36-50); Jesus, once again, not only receives her intimate connection in their relationship but makes this relational process more important than even ministry to the poor.

The priority of relationship over ministry, service and work is difficult to reconcile in practice. Yet, what we see Jesus practicing and, therefore, clearly defining is what is necessary to be whole: (1) the primacy of relationships; (2) the intimate character of those relationships; (3) the equalizing of persons in the process of the relationship. As surprising (shocking to some) as his interactions with women were, this is not really exceptional, though beyond ordinary function and practice (the significance of “holy”). That is, it was not exceptional to the Holy One because the human condition “to be apart” is what Jesus came to restore by vulnerably establishing the relational context and process to his Father (or Mother, if you need) and for his family in the whole of God’s big eschatological picture. And in order to restore these relationships, he had to redeem relationships—notably from how we make distinctions and relate to others based on those distinctions with reductionist substitutes. Thus, what Jesus discloses in these relationships for our depth of understanding is the ongoing tension and conflict between his call to be whole and the lure of reductionism. Reductionism shifts us to common usage and ordinary function and practice. By his nature, Jesus takes us vulnerably beyond that in sanctified life and practice to the whole of God as family in likeness of the Trinity.

All Jesus’ authority expressed while on this earth served to complete this eschatological end. Every exercise of his power (even for healing) worked for this purpose in the big picture. Jesus’ authority and power cohere in the eschatological plan for the whole of God’s family. It is to this end and for this purpose that all human authority must be examined and critiqued.

Church order and relations can neither function in this eschatological end on our terms nor serve a purpose apart from the relational context of God’s family in his eschatological plan. To be compatible with the whole of God’s desires and how God does relationships necessitates countering stratified relationships (in all ways and forms) with the process of equalization, as well as displacing any reductionist relational substitutes which reinforce distance or impede intimacy. This is the redemptive relational process of transformed persons engaged in transformed relationships of the new creation as the new kinship family of God. Regardless of what side of the gender issue you support, we need to address how we define our person and do relationships and thus practice church, because what concerns God most is what we do with the whole person and the relationships of the whole of God. We need to affirm together the divine priority that it is indeed “not good to be apart” from the whole, then respond as the Trinity ongoingly has since the first creation.

## **The Need for Deeper Change**

Reconciliation denotes the change from the old to the new by taking away the root cause of the human condition “to be apart,” of relational distance or brokenness, leaving no barriers to restoring communion as signified by God’s communion in the Trinity. The process of reconciliation involves restoring relationships to wholeness and well-being; that is, by its nature reconciliation must return persons to God’s original design and purpose, specifically for intimate

and equalized relationships (now also new in Christ)—the whole person and relationships to be whole in likeness of the whole of God.

Yet, this is no simple process because to restore to wholeness involves redemptive change from what exists. Reconciliation requires redemption, and the two should not be separated or undertaken independent of the other. In Christian practice, however, many redemptive efforts have not included reconciliation, while reconciling efforts have not involved redemption. It is always easier to make reductionist substitutes for wholeness and settle for less. Changing from the prevailing condition of human relationships (invested also with culture and tradition) to how God does relationships tends to create tension, conflict or even opposition. Why?

When Jesus countered both how the human person was perceived and how relationships were done with his teachings on the new life order (outlined in the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5-7), we can understand why. As he clearly brought out the qualitative significance and meaning of the law and the prophets (the primary purpose behind all of God's directives and the heart of God's desires for his people), Jesus helps us understand two of the overriding and far-reaching effects of our established ways of defining our person and doing relationships. They are: (1) it gives more emphasis to secondary aspects of life than to primary aspects, of the quantitative over the qualitative, defining the person from the outside in rather than from inside out, that is, based on what we do or have rather than on who and what we are in the significance of the heart; and (2) as a result, it reduces our function in relationships away from the qualitative, thus does not give top priority to intimate involvement in relationships. This is about reductionism, and Jesus expects (indeed demands) who, what and how we are as his followers to surpass the reductionists (Mt 5:20).

God's presence and involvement with us has always been directed toward wholeness. If we are to get beyond the prevailing norms for human relations and surpass the reductionists, we will need redemptive change from any reductionist influence on how we define ourselves, do relationships and practice church. While certain reductionist distinctions such as race, class and gender have consistently remained resistant to change through history, as we undergo redemptive change and experience reconciliation the church can function with Christ as equalizer, both within itself and then in the world.

Yet, of course, there are costs to change and reconciliation which need to be deeply addressed also.

### **Costs to Change and Reconciliation**

Jesus experienced the kind of intimacy (defined as hearts opening to each other and coming together) with women that would make many men (and even some women) very uncomfortable. The primary discomfort with intimacy in gender relations, however, is not for sexual reasons—with the prevailing reductionist substitute of sex confused as intimacy—but for the primary threat genuine intimacy creates. This emerges more clearly when you include equalization with intimacy in gender relations. Adding equalization would make women more confident in gender relations but not necessarily less uncomfortable with intimacy. It depends on how we define our person.

Whether back in Jesus' time or in ours today, men have always had more to lose than to gain from intimate relationships, at least in their perceptions. Aspects of prestige, privilege or power are diminished when intimacy defines the relationship. This can explain why males have tended to divert intimate connections in general to contexts with more competitive, adversarial or even conflict relations (such as sports)—which may in fact provide the connections not “to be alone” but still maintain enough relational distance to prevent the resolution of “to be apart.” This is compounded because it also becomes confused with intimacy in particular.

Insecurities and self-worth are exposed when the heart is opened, leaving only the authentic person unembellished by what one does or has and without distinction to enter into relationships. This is the significance of genuine prayer and the discomfort we have with silence in prayer (cf. Mt 6:6-8). Even though this is how we intimately need to come equalized before God, we tend to resist this in relation to others. Who would be more vulnerable in such relationships and why?

We have also settled into certain assumptions about the genders, for example, that women are more relationship-oriented and that men are not really “wired” well for intimate relationships. Even though these assumptions have no biblical basis and cannot be used to explain Jesus' relationships, churches have bought into these reductionist perceptions (as if God created us with a different heart or designed us for a different purpose) to establish a mindset, even a bias, that deeply affects what the church does with the whole person and the relationships necessary to be whole in likeness with the whole of God. This certainly compromises the integrity of church identity as constituted by the truth of the gospel and by the persons of the Trinity.

All the above reflect matters which we humbly need to let go of, to be freed from, to die to. We need to understand them as substitutes which have kept us “to be apart” from the *more* and whole of God beyond the common and ordinary. Essential for our response to the basic issue of how we define ourselves is to be redeemed from the reductionist alternatives to self-definition. Further, we need to let go of, to be freed from, to die to the reductionist substitutes for how we do relationships and thus get into for how we practice church.

Ironically, what these costs also make us accountable for in gender relations is *submission*—submission by men and women, by complementarians and egalitarians. Foremost, our submission to God is the submission to how God does relationships in creation and revelation. In this relational context and process, this submission is submission to God's response of redemption and reconciliation. To submit then to redemptive change and reconciliation is to submit to redeemed and transformed relationships. Redeemed and transformed relationships are both intimate and equalized relationships. Thus, submission is the foremost relational response in the process to be whole in the relationships necessary for the whole of God.

This is the submission God demands from both sides of the gender issue. It is the cost all persons must bear if gender relations are to get beyond a reduced context to the big picture. We cannot avoid the issue (even by ignoring it) yet we can be blessed by its significance, as Adam was in the primordial garden.

## **Where Our Expectations Are Rooted**

Our perceptual-interpretive framework will effectively determine further how we will move on to define ourselves, do relationships and practice church. Hopefully, this discussion will challenge us at the very least to think beyond the terms of egalitarians or complementarians. These positions are not what is important to God. I suggest that is probably why Jesus never spoke directly about the issue. He only affirmed the whole person without distinctions and vulnerably involved his person with their persons in intimate relationship together in relational progression to the whole of God's family constituted in the Trinity. Now this is what matters most to God.

As discussed previously, in Paul's conversion he followed Jesus in this relational context and process; and in his call from Jesus he operationalized the trinitarian relational context of family and relational process of family love in the ecclesiology of the whole. Even in the textual areas of dispute with Paul's teachings on gender, he completely reinforced Jesus' qualitative emphasis on the whole person and intimate relationships together. If we distinguish, on the one hand, what Paul said about human relations (particularly in church) in the big picture, while on the other, with what he said about gender relations in reduced contexts involving essentially important reductionist issues, we can better understand that in dealing with the latter Paul was always working for the relational context and process of God's desires for the big picture. When we take Paul's gender teachings out of the extended and deeper relational context, we are susceptible to overlooking the reductionist issues affecting the whole persons they were in Christ and the relationships necessary for the new creation as the whole of God's family in the eschatological big picture. I suggest to this end and for this purpose Paul addressed these gender issues. He did not shift from this qualitative focus on the inner out of personhood and relationships to fragment the whole by giving priority to a reductionist focus on outer-in issues. Paul did, however, address the latter as it affected the former—the ongoing tension between the lure of reductionism and the whole of God.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, I further suggest that we even need to revisit some of Paul's teachings on issues about a reductionist focus on secondary matter by examining them more deeply in three vital areas of practice: (1) the presentation of our self to others, (2) the content of our communication, and (3) the level of relationship we engage. Certain secondary matters (for example, dress and appearance) are issues even complementarians conveniently ignore in Paul's teachings. Yet, in part or all, Paul was not establishing church structure or order in all these unavoidable reductionist issues, but he was concerned about what they did with the whole person and with the relationships necessary to be whole in likeness of the whole of God as vulnerably revealed in the face of Christ (cf. Col 2:2, 3; 2 Cor 4:5, 6). For Paul, what matters most to God was also what mattered most to him, and this was where his expectations for the church were rooted. We have yet to adequately address similar reductionist emphases practiced today in churches. Until we do, our expectations of church practice and for change or resolution of the gender issue cannot be promising.

In the unreduced context of the big picture, God's desire is not for a specific church structure or order but for the distinct qualitative function of relationship which reflects the likeness of the whole of God and experiences being God's very own family. This is not about the



church doing something a certain way but about God's people being the new creation family as the extension of the communion of the Trinity. This becomes a functional reality only as it is operationalized by God's family love (intimately involved to equalize), not by doctrine or church polity.

As we see Jesus intimately interacting with women and understand the purpose his Father gave him to respond to the human condition "to be apart" from the whole and all that was necessary to fulfill the Father's desires, it becomes evident also that his commands to love in this relational context and process can be operational only in relationships which would not create, cultivate, nurture or reinforce, however unintentional, any forms of stratified relationships, power relations and systems of inequality whatsoever, as well as any other reductionist practices impeding intimacy. When the full Christology of the incarnation coheres with a complete soteriology (saved from and to), the truth of the gospel compels our persons to the redemptive change of transformation (from inner out, as Peter was compelled, Gal 2:11-14), thus constituting our practice together in the church by the ecclesiology of the whole.

Intimacy and equalization are the qualitative functions of transformed relationships engaged by those persons truly being redeemed and transformed in Christ. These functions are fundamental to who, what, how God is and continues to be vulnerably involved with us in the persons of the Trinity. And this is who, what and how God expects (demands) his very own to be and to be involved in their relationships together in the multicultural church as equalizer.

From the beginning with the person Adam, the condition "to be apart" has always been what concerns God the most—to whom God responded with the gift of the person (not gender) Eve, responding ultimately with the gift of the incarnate person God and continuing with the gift of the person Spirit. This is only how God does relationship. As the righteous and faithful God, we need to expect (demand if you will) how God does relationship to continue in the big picture to the eschatological conclusion. At the same time, this is a reciprocal relational responsibility since God also expects this relational work from us—even demands it, if we fully grasp this—both among ourselves as the whole of God's family and within the world as equalizer.

Our call to be whole includes being sent to be whole, which is discussed in the next chapter.



In Jesus' paradigm for serving (Jn 12:26), the priority of intimate relationship with him in communion together is necessary over the work of serving, ministry and mission. In conventional paradigms for mission, sending workers out to the harvest fields becomes the urgent priority dominating our focus, with contextualization to those "fields" a growing part of this priority. Yet, the call to discipleship is the call to be whole which, in order not to be reduced, involves the call to be holy required to distinguish it from the common and ordinary of the world, including those "fields." This qualifies Christ's commission for mission and challenges prevailing perceptions of it by defining the following: *what* to send out, *whom* to send out, *why* and thus *how* to send out. Grasping this more deeply is the focus of this chapter.

### The Context to Send Out

In his formative prayer, Jesus commissions (*apostello*, send for the specific mission) his followers just as (*kathos*, to show agreement between) his Father commissioned him: "As you sent me into the world, I send them into the world" (Jn 17:18; cf. 20:21). The context for this commission, however, should not be confused with "into the world," which the current missional emphasis on contextualization tends to do. The world is certainly where the work is to be done but such situations and circumstances do not determine the context for the significance of this commission.

In this prayer, Jesus summarizes his purpose to reveal the Father to us for intimate relationship together in the very likeness of the Trinity. This relationship of eternal life cannot function in the context "of the world" (*ek*, signifying out of which one is derived), that is, determined by our terms (however well intentioned) or reductionist substitutes from the surrounding context. Thus Jesus' prayer conjoins the call to be whole and the commission—as God's name and glory are revealed here conjointly (17:4-5, 10-11)—in the trinitarian relational context of family and relational process of family love (17:21-23). This clearly establishes the relational context of Christ's commission in sanctified life and practice of the whole of God (discussed earlier in Chapter 8). To be distinguished "in the world" (*en*, while remaining in it) is the call to be whole which necessitates the call to be holy in order not to be reduced to "of the world"—that is, common usage and ordinary function and practice, or essentially that which prevails in the surrounding context.

For the Son's purpose and function from the Father to be transferred to his followers, the enactment of the commission has to be both sanctified and whole to be compatible ("just as," *kathos*) with the Father-Son relationship and then the Father-Son-disciples relationship. When this

compatibility exists in the trinitarian relational context of family and relational process of family love, the church as the whole of God's new kinship family is not statically "still in the world" but now dynamically sent "into the world" (*eis*, motion into) to reflect the likeness of the Father and the Son with the Spirit in response to the human condition "to be apart" from the whole of God. *The church's call to be whole is conjointly the church sent to be whole.* This constitutes the significance of *what* to send out and signifies the importance of *whom* to send out and defines more deeply *why* to send out while providing the basis for *how* to function in this commission.

As followers intimately involved with Jesus the equalizer, they together are with him in his paradigm ("where I am," Jn 12:26) to become his church as equalizer both within itself and in the world. The remaining discussion of this chapter focuses primarily on why and how the church (whole and sanctified) functions in the world as the equalizer.

### Clarifying Some Terms

The church is established as equalizer within itself by becoming whole in the multicultural nature of transformed relationships together through rigorous relational work. While this relational context and process are uniquely intimate and sanctified, church practice cannot remain private nor individual. The transformed life of the whole of God's new kinship family is also lived in public. For the early church in the Greco-Roman world this was known as their practice in *politeia* ("public life"). The Greek term has a much broader focus than our limited notions of politics have. As Bruce Winter informs us, the term *politeia* involved different spheres of activity and should not be equated to "politics."<sup>1</sup>

Historically, the church has strained to define exactly what its involvement in public life should be. Depending on which tradition was used, church mission in the world has been conducted narrowly, ambiguously, or engaged without spiritual substance and eschatological significance. Perhaps much of the difficulty centers ultimately on the key prepositions Jesus used in his prayer.

Directly relating the world (and public life) to himself and his followers, Jesus prayed using the prepositions "in" (*en*, 17:11,13), "of" (*ek*, vv. 14,16), "out of" (*ek*, v. 15) and "into" (*eis*, v. 18). Each preposition has its own significance which should be distinguished in discourse about mission for the church's public life.

For Jesus to be "in the world" only described a general surrounding context in which he remained (*en*) temporarily. While *en* means remaining in the world for his followers also, this position is governed by the preposition *ek*. That is, how Jesus functioned while remaining in the surrounding context was determined by the nature of his context of origin, not by what prevailed in the surrounding context. Likewise, for those "not of the world," *ek* involves being embedded and signifies motion out from within the surrounding context, yet only in terms of its common usage and ordinary function and practice (cf. Jn 15:19); the phrase also implies movement to the

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

holy and Uncommon (signifying both *what* his followers are and *whose* they are), just as Jesus was “not of the world” and sanctified himself for his followers to practice “in the world.” The latter was necessary because in this phrase *ek* is limited to a shift only in purpose and function. In the same breath Jesus also prayed for his followers not to be removed “out of the world.” “Out of” is the same preposition *ek* which is used in this phrase not for being embedded but for spatial location; and eliminating this sense of separation also should apply to not being removed from relational involvement with the world by relational distance. Jesus gave his followers no option to remain (*en*) and to be involved (not the separation of *ek*) in public life; and he clearly qualified what was to determine how they functioned in the surrounding context.

Grasping *en* and *ek* is a crucial distinction, the subtle difference of which is blurred by reductionism. Being “not of the world” goes beyond a static identity or status from self-determination and involves a functional framework imperative for determining the practice for those who remain (*en*) in the surrounding context but emerge beyond (*ek*) the common and ordinary. This interrelated dynamic is the reason in his prayer Jesus made imperative his call and commission in conjoint function. The call to be whole (thus holy) emerges in public life as “sent to be whole.” For this emergence to be distinguished and thus distinct from the common and ordinary of the surrounding context, it is necessary in function for the call to precede the commission because the latter alone is not sufficient to fulfill the transfer of Christ’s purpose and function without being established in the call to be whole.

The sanctified life and practice of the whole of God’s family constitutes the commission and signifies the basis for the authentic undertaking of church mission in public life. To be whole is the basis for his followers to be sent “into the world” (*eis*). As *ek* is the “motion out of” the world necessary to establish the functional significance of the whole, *eis* governs “motion (back) into” public life necessary to fulfill the transfer of the Son’s purpose and function from the Father to his family. *Ek* and *eis* are not in dialectical tension but operate ongoingly together in a reflexive interrelated process (with triangulation and reciprocating contextualization) for church practice to grow and develop in its conjoint call and commission.

Yet, there is ongoing tension and conflict with reductionism which shifts church practice to and embeds it in common usage and ordinary function and practice. This reductionist influence is most prominent in diminishing personhood and minimalizing relationships, thus affecting how we practice church and engage in mission. As Jesus prayed, it is imperative for church public life that *eis* should not be confused with *en*, that is, merely to be in the same context, remain in the same space, occupy ministries in surrounding situations and circumstances. *En* only statically describes where we remain, not what, who, why and how we are in that context. *Eis*, however, is not simply dynamic “movement into” a surrounding context but also engagement of persons in deep relational involvement the depths of which is “just as” (*kathos*, indicating conformity) the Father sent the Son in the incarnation (Jn 17:18). This process invokes the principle of God’s self-disclosure as “nothing less and no substitutes.” Anything less and any substitutes of this depth of involvement are reductions of the church’s conjoint call and commission. While the commission takes place “in the world,” it can only be enacted and fulfilled “into the world.” Anything other than the *ek-eis* process is reductionism.

This process further explains why Paul’s apostolic commission was predicated on his conversion (transformation). Paul’s person, not only his perceptual-interpretive framework, was

changed to be whole. From the basis of his following Jesus, he formulated the ecclesiology of the whole which operationalized the church beyond the reductionist substitutes of his time. The call and the commission signify to be whole and thus necessitate to be whole in function.

The Father only sent the whole of God and the Son only sends the whole of his family to be whole, along with the Spirit to complete the whole. Therefore, the church cannot be sent on any mission in its public life without functioning in its call to be whole; nor can the church be whole within itself and thus *into* (not merely *in*) the world without being holy. Separating the commission from this call fails to understand God's thematic response to the human condition "to be apart" from the whole of God, and it only fragments (notably with a truncated soteriology) the church's purpose and function as the whole of God's family in likeness of the Trinity. In conjoint function: the church's presence (*en*) with humanity and all of creation must by its nature be presented functionally from beyond (*ek*) the prevailing ways of the surrounding context to distinguish itself as the whole of God in order to both engage (*eis*) its conflict with reductionism and engage in the relationships necessary for the intimate involvement of family love as the whole of God's family constituted by the Trinity.

How this conjoint function is fulfilled and why it involves certain responses need further discussion.

## God's Paradigm

God's thematic response to the human relational condition from the first creation through the new creation to the eschatological completion pivots on God's ultimate response in the incarnation. This axis through which Christ takes his followers is the relational progression consummating God's response to restore the whole of God: Jesus came to vulnerably reveal his Father only for relationship together, which required both redemption for his followers in order to be adopted as the Father's very own, and thus reconciliation so that they can intimately know the whole of God and experience relationships together as the whole of God's new kinship family in likeness of the Trinity. The whole of God's ultimate response in this relational progression is the trinitarian relational work of family love which the Father initiated, the Son fulfilled and his Spirit brings to completion. This is the triune God's desire for the whole creation, God's direction for salvation history and eschatological plan for God's family.

The relational progression Jesus incarnated is *God's paradigm* for the church in the whole of God's eschatological desires. In his formative family prayer Jesus defines why and how this conjoint function is the outworking of the relational progression and God's paradigm for church practice. The engagement "into the world" in contrast to the relational distance "out of the world" is significant in its purpose and function only as Jesus prayed: "so that the world may believe" (*pistis*, trust, Jn 17:21) and "to let the world know" (*ginosko*, to come to know, experience, 17:23). Trust *what*, experience *what*? How this has been answered in church practice must be reexamined. This is the current issue about *politeia* and the tendency to define Christian mission in reductionist terms. Jesus qualifies his commission with this petition and makes imperative the call to be whole.

"Trust that you have sent me" and "experience that you sent me and have loved them even

as you have loved me.” What the world can trust and experience is the relational progression of the whole of God’s response of family love vulnerably expressed by the Son and now extended through his family. Yet, the *what* for the world to trust and experience—and quite likely even for some within the church—is not predicated on the propositional truth of this relational progression but rather on the witness directly from the experiential reality of these intimate relationships between the Father, the Son and the whole of God’s family: “that all of them may be one, Father, just as [*kathos*] you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us” (17:21); “that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me . . . and have loved them even as [*kathos*] you have loved me” (17:22, 23). This is not about organizational unity and group identity. This is a function only of relationship—the quality of intimate relationship. As noted earlier, *kathos* indicates compatibility, agreement, that is, with the intimate relationships in the very likeness of the Trinity.

Vulnerably following Jesus in the relational progression is imperative to be compatible with the whole of God. This call to be whole must by its nature be conjoined with the commission in order for the commission to be the compatible transfer of the purpose and function from the Father to the Son and to his family. When the world can observe this compatibility in God’s people, it is exposed to more than a belief system that it can believe or know. This is the wholeness various movements in the world pursue, this is the wholeness of God the world can trust and experience. And only God’s paradigm constitutes church practice to be whole in its purpose and function.

Further, as Jesus relationally involved himself with others in public as the equalizer, with the practice of the same family love the church engages others directly to equalize in the world. When the world not only observes God’s wholeness but becomes the object of this family love, it has the true basis to trust the reality of God’s covenant promise and to experience the qualitative significance of love and hope unique to the whole of God’s response to the human relational condition “to be apart.” When so engaged by the public life of the church, the world has the opportunity to trust in the truth of the gospel incarnated by the church (in practice more so than in proclamation, cf. Peter in Gal 2), and thus be able to experience the reality of the whole of God’s family love by also becoming God’s very own in family together.

Since God’s paradigm is a function of relationships and the corporate relational involvement of family, this purpose in the world operationalized by family love cannot be fulfilled by the individual(s). Though the individual can point to it, the individual alone cannot witness to—much less incarnate—the relational progression of God’s desires and purpose. This can only be fulfilled by the church functioning as family. The Father did not send only the Son; Jesus incarnated the whole of the triune God in the relational progression. Thus, God’s paradigm for the church is also the incarnation of this whole—that is, to incarnate nothing less and no substitutes than the relationships necessary to be the whole of God in likeness of the Trinity.

This process signifies the compatible transfer of the Father’s purpose and function from the Son to his family, which makes imperative the commission for the church as nothing less than: (1) God’s further relational response to the human relational condition “to be apart” from the whole, thus (2), must by its nature be the vulnerable incarnation of God’s family love in the three critical areas of practice—(a) the presentation of our whole person, (b) the qualitative content of our communication, and (c) the intimate depth of relationships we engage which are

necessary to be whole.

We need to further understand the nature and scope of this conjoint function of the church.

## The Mindset of Repentance

The current conditions of human ecology—and the influence human migration, globalization and the Internet have had—challenge us to change, force us to do so, or cause us to resist change. Resistance reflects how these conditions have increasingly altered the modern human posture and psyche from passive indifference to active intolerance of human differences. Whatever the level of differences—racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, economic, political, social, interpersonal, personal—the inability or the unwillingness to deal with and live with others who are different (look, act, think, feel) has always had a damaging impact on human relations (cf. Cain and Abel). In the past we could minimize these consequences as long as we could avoid encountering others' differences. In today's global community that is highly unlikely, and the results are an alarming increase in conflicts and violence (physical or emotional).

This is just part of the world today into which Jesus sends his followers to fulfill the transfer of the Father's function and purpose. How well the church fulfills his commission depends significantly on how well it responds to the challenge to change, acts (not reacts) on the force (or imperative) to change, as well as knows what change to resist. Distinguishing the latter from the other two and being able to practice all three require repentance—that is, *the mindset of repentance*.

Certainly, repentance is a precondition for conversion to become an authentic follower of Jesus; and the commission to “make disciples of all nations” involves “proclaiming repentance to all nations” (Lk 24:47). Other than this, how does the mindset of repentance involve church practice? This requires understanding what underlies the commission. Because of the tendency to utilize reductionist alternatives for these two aspects of Christ's commission, we need to reexamine these critical aspects within the relational progression, that is, according to God's paradigm.

Repentance in Greek (*metanoia*, verb form of *metanoeo*) has the distinguishing characteristic of change (of mind), both good or bad. In the OT, the Hebrew term *naham* describes the process of changing one's mind and is translated for “repent” in the Septuagint by *metanoeo*. Yet, more decisive for NT understanding of this change is the Hebrew term *sub*: “to turn around” in the sense of turning away from present things and returning to the point of departure (1 Kings 8:47, 48; Ezek 3:19, 20). *Sub* in the prophets directs the return to the original relationship with God and implies a new beginning in the relationship (cf. Jer 34:15; Ezek 18:30, 31).

The process of “turning away from and returning to” is one process which should not be separated nor left incomplete. This separation happens when the emphasis on turning away from sins or returning to the so-called behavioral fruits of repentance (cf. Lk 3:7-14) are not understood as interconnected; for the former to be valid necessitates the latter, whereas for the latter to be authentic implies the former. Along with recording Jesus' commission declaration (Lk 24:47), Luke appears to present a wholistic view of repentance that connects it with forgiveness of sins,



that is, a change that leads to conversion followed by deeds (Acts 26:20; cf. Lk 3:8). He alone records Jesus' use of *metanoeo* and *epistrepho* (to return) to human relationships (Lk 17:3, 4) which reflects the mindset of repentance as more than ethics. Jesus embeds this mindset in the relationships of the whole of God as family—the new creation hope of repentance for forgiveness of sins signified in his commission declaration above.

This deepens our understanding to grasp that the singular process of repentance is further left incomplete when it is not understood entirely as a relational process. The only significance of this relational process is: on the one hand, the primacy of relationship to turn away from the relational condition “to be apart” from the whole of God and, on the other hand, to return to be restored to intimate relationship with the whole of God, thus as the new creation family in likeness of the Trinity.

Contrary to this relational process for the primacy of relationship, reductionism shifts the focus of repentance from the qualitative whole person (inner out) and relationship to the quantitative aspect of persons (outer in) with the priority on the behavior of sins and fruits, not the relationship. John the Baptist, whose use of *metanoia* was more characteristic to him than to Jesus, appears to have a limited focus with his emphasis on behavior (Lk 3:1-18). While Jesus demanded repentance of all without exception (Lk 13:3, 5), he focused on the relationship of repentance (Lk 11:29-32).

The relationship Jesus emphasized was to follow him in the relational progression, that is, discipleship which integrated intimate relationship with the whole of God as family together. “To be apart” from the whole constitutes the need for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. When Jesus celebrated this relational process with Levi, he disputed the reductionists by clarifying his vulnerable presence, purpose and function (Lk 5:27-31). As God's ultimate response to the human relational condition “to be apart” from the whole, he came to call sinners to repentance—not “the healthy” (*hygiaino*, to be whole) nor “the righteous” (*dikaios*, congruence in actions to one's constitutionally just, right character, which implies wholeness instead of disparity). Those who are not whole and who remain apart from the whole are the ones Jesus came to be vulnerably involved with in his relational mission to restore them back to the whole of God. This was his mindset of repentance.

This deepens and broadens our understanding of sinners and the function of sin. In the relational context and process established by Jesus, sin is the functional opposite of being whole and sinners are in the ontological-relational condition “to be apart” from the whole. When sin is understood beyond just moral and ethical failure displeasing to God, *sin becomes the functional reduction of the whole of God*, thus in conflict with God and that which is and those who are whole. Counter-relational work functions in this way.

It can be suggested—maybe with some valid basis—that it is more difficult to deal with sin and evil today than in the age of the early church. Whether this has any validity or not, two factors heavily contribute to what has become a weakened view of sin and evil. One is a contextual factor: the increasing normative character of sin. We need to realize that the growing frequency and extent of any negative behavior or practice create conditions for redefining those to be more favorable, or at least tolerable. The second factor is structural: the collective nature of sin and evil found in the operation of institutions, systems and structures of a society or the global community, which can in effect force the individual to participate in collective sin. This certainly

raises accountability for Christians not to directly or indirectly propagate sin and evil by being in complicity with the operation of such an institution, system or structure.

Yet, what weakens our understanding of sin the most is reductionism, which is the underlying framework for even the above contextual and structural factors. The influence of reductionism prevails at all levels of human life, emerging most significantly in diminishing the ontological importance of the whole person and minimalizing the Divine-created primacy of the relationships necessary to be whole. All aspects of “*sin as reductionism of the whole of God*” of all aspects of life at all levels must be addressed and called to repentance, thus restored to wholeness—even within the church, which may include how we call persons to repent, do evangelism, missions and also church. This involves the mindset of repentance in ongoing function focused on the whole of God. Perceiving sin and sinners through this lens empowers the church to respond to the challenge to change, to act on the imperative to change, and to resist any change reducing the whole, in order to fulfill the conjoint function of the church transferred from the Father to the Son to his family—the whole of God.

In this process, the church is not only sensitive to reductions of any whole but also exposes such reductionism—even in its own practice—and always responds to it with the whole as the whole for the whole of God, just as Jesus did. When a church does not function with the mindset of repentance, its own practice is likely to involve reductionist substitutes. This was the problem Jesus exposed in the churches in Ephesus, Sardis and Laodicea, as previously discussed. In his call to them to repent, *metanoeo* did not refer to their need to repent for conversion but for them to return to the whole originally constituting their condition and practice (Rev 2:5; 3:3; 3:19). These churches demonstrate how sin as reductionism of the whole of God can pervade even the most successful of churches.

The process, therefore, for the church to develop its purpose and function is directly related and subject to the strength of its ongoing relations against sin and evil, notably as reductionism. And countering sin as reductionism of the whole of God necessitates going beyond the limited notions of evangelism, ethics and discipleship we tend to prescribe for church practice in *politeia*.

## **Incarnating the Incarnation**

Since the incarnation is God’s ultimate response to the human relational condition “to be apart” from the whole, it is imperative for the church by its nature to address these human relations as its thematic action. From the beginning of creation and human history, God’s thematic response to this relational condition has been countered by human effort to maintain and reinforce this condition. When Adam blamed Eve, the implication of using her as a scapegoat was to reduce her person and stratify their relationship. Sin reduces others in various ways and works “to be apart” in relationships, even inadvertently.

The ongoing repercussion of Adam’s action set in motion a process in relationships causing distance, depersonalization and brokenness, the conditions of which are the most prevailing in the operation of some form of power relations. This basic dynamic process results in conflicts and inequality—having the broadest consequence in systems of inequality. Whether the

criteria are based on race, class, culture, gender, age, ability, or religion, any system of inequality creates barriers in human relationships which keep persons in some aspect of the condition “to be apart” from the whole.

As discussed previously, the issue of such a system of inequality operating within the early church was pivotal in the mission of the early disciples. While the *parousia* (Christ’s coming) was an eschatological hope encouraging the church’s practice in *politeia*, particularly in difficult times and circumstances, this more immediate critical relational issue transformed church purpose and function to align with the truth of the gospel’s new creation in Jesus Christ. It can be said that from this point, in cooperation with the Spirit, the apostolic church began incarnating the incarnation of God’s ultimate response in the Son to the human relational condition.

Their direct involvement with this relational condition was imperative because of God’s paradigm for the church. Since the basic issues behind systems of inequality deal with power, privilege and prestige in human relations, any involvement *into* the human context made addressing this condition unavoidable in the making of authentic disciples. Furthermore, any call to repentance of the human condition made it imperative for the church to contend with this sinful process—both within the church and the world.

The incarnation is characterized by Jesus using his power and resources to heal and to restore (*apokathistemi*, restore to soundness, cf. Mt 12:9-14)—that is, to be well (*hygies*, sound, whole, see Jn 5:6-16). These narrative accounts clearly illustrate Jesus’ mindset of repentance for those who are not whole (Lk 5:27-31) and define one aspect of his ongoing relational work to restore persons back to wholeness. The process of restoring meant much more than to mend, to fix or to reform, that is, essentially returning something to its commonly existing condition—see Jesus’ comment in the second healing (Jn 5:14). To restore to wholeness involves a change from the existing condition. Therefore, with the mindset of repentance, to heal means to change from old to new (which will be discussed further as we get into other aspects of Jesus’ work of wholeness). Of course, the healing aspect of his restoring work caused much debate and conflict because Jesus was countering reductionism (cf. Mt 12:11, 12). Thus, even his healing was a threat to those who depended on reductionist substitutes as the basis for their purpose and function (Jn 5:16; cf. Mt 12:14). This work was the nature of the incarnation as God’s ultimate relational response which fulfilled God’s thematic work until then (see Jesus’ response to their threats, Jn 5:17), and which is extended by his family for eschatological completion by the Spirit.

Yet, the church cannot incarnate the incarnation without extending Jesus’ relational restoring work which counters reductionism. Because the fundamental issue today and from the beginning remains the attempts to reduce the whole of personhood and relationships, for the church not to address any reductions of the whole leaves it susceptible in its practice merely to mirror how the surrounding context defines the person and does relationships. The consequence would directly affect the practice of Christ’s commission in the kind of disciples and the call to repentance the church makes. This then involves the more far-reaching effects of reductionism in shaping church identity, purpose and function.

Incarnating the incarnation is intimate involvement in the relational process signified by “nothing less and no substitutes.” Foremost, this process is constituted by following Jesus, which needs to be reexamined in church practice today. Jesus revolutionized what it meant to be a

disciple in the Mediterranean world and the rabbinic tradition.<sup>2</sup> His process of discipleship involved a deep relational involvement with the Teacher and becoming progressively more intimate with his Father, not about learning as in rabbinic schools. When Jesus commissioned us to “make disciples” (*matheteuo*), this relational process must be distinguished from the Greek verb *matheo* which simply means to learn without any attachment to the teacher (*didaskolos*). The aspect of “teaching” (*didasko*) in his commission was focused on transforming a disciple for this relationship, not for the purpose of learning something to later teach others about as conventional rabbinic disciples did. Furthermore, these reductions of discipleship tend to make it merely individualistic because it does not integrate this relationship into the interdependent corporate relationships as family. This is what happens when we stop short in the relational progression.

In a reductionist framework, his commission to “make disciples” is not only misinterpreted but oversimplified. Besides being subordinated in emphasis by giving primary attention to “go ye” (often incorrectly expressed as the imperative command in his commission, when “make disciples” is the only imperative here), the matter of making disciples tends to get reduced to solely conversion, primarily on simplistic spiritual and moral grounds. This is a truncated focus only on what Christ saved us from, which is often perceived with a reductionist view of sin. It is a serious error to limit the application of this commission merely to the operation of traditional evangelism.

A truncated soteriology addressing only what Jesus saves us from does not fully engage the mindset of repentance, thus cannot fulfill his commission as the transfer of his purpose and function in the incarnation. God did not send the Son “to condemn” (*krino*, to discriminate between good and evil and choose out the good)—as Jesus previously clarified for the reductionists (Lk 5:27-31)—“but to save” (*sozo*, also meaning to make whole, Jn 3:17). Salvation is the process to make whole by restoring to the whole of God’s family constituted in the Trinity. The incarnation without a complete soteriology has no relational significance and does not signify the truth of the gospel. The Son’s commission from his Father is the same commission he transfers to his followers to incarnate. Compatibility of practice is a relational function of “nothing less and no substitutes.”

Jesus calls us both to be disciples as well as to make disciples. They go together and should not be separated. Yet, the disciples we are and the disciples we make must be in the discipleship process of the relational progression Jesus made functional with his family love. This ongoing process in family love is the basis for our experience with him and his purpose for us; thus, this must constitute our practice of evangelism. This deepens what evangelism involves. It also radicalizes the process of evangelism from quantitative measures like technique to the qualitative process of relationships made operational by family love—nothing less and no substitutes, just as Jesus extended family love from his Father.

In our quantitative emphasis we reduce evangelism more to a method of sharing propositional truths. But the function of his disciples in the Mediterranean world was not to spread “teachings”; it was to *witness* to the person of Jesus, and thus their relationship with him in

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion about some of these differences, see Michael J. Wilkins, *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995).

the whole of their life together. This is not a methodology for dispensing truth but a life of sharing this relationship and demonstrating “the truth of the gospel” and “the mystery of Christ” with family love. Jesus said we are witnesses (*martyreo*, Lk 24:48; Jn 15:27) of *him*, that is, participants with him in relationship, not observers processing information to dispense later. This is what evangelism involves.

The tendency in such a limited approach to evangelism also involves having a weak or inadequate view of sin and dealing with individuals apart from the contexts of human life in which they live. The latter is not about the absence of contextualization as a method but about failing to address the broader relationship issues present. Sin is not merely an individual matter within a spiritual context. Sin has to do with our relationship to God and the whole order of life he established for all of creation. Sin is a violation of that relationship with God but it also has consequences in his design and purpose for creation. Christian ethics is not a private practice nor can it be limited to issues involving only the individual. Thus, we need also to address the collective nature of sin and evil and deal with all sin in this broader relational context. For example, more and more Christians have realized these consequences in relation to the abuses of physical creation and the environment. As a result more effort has rightfully been undertaken to counteract these abuses with the rationale of the divine order of creation. Still more effort is needed but with a deeper understanding of the relational context.

Sin has social consequences also, as well as social influences. Our perspective of sin must include these macro-level human factors and human contexts. Evil does not restrict itself to the individual nor does it stay within the limited context of the individual(s).

Historically, churches in the past have recognized this fact. Great revivals have occurred as Christians addressed social problems. Significant social changes resulted from such movements. Urged by such tradition, the church today must review its position on sin, yet on the basis of biblical culture. Where it has undergone reduction, it must be restored or made complete.

The development of the new creation life in Christ is always preceded in the process by a clear understanding of and, thus, response to the conditions of the old order and its impact on personhood and relationships. This signifies both the trinitarian context of the relational progression and the redemptive relational process necessary to experience together relationally the whole of what Christ saved us to. By the nature of this new relational condition, this also involves responding to the social consequences of sin and its social influences in our surrounding context. The OT prophets exemplified this in their response to confront their society by countering its evil and calling it to repentance over all its sin—all as a precedence to be restored to the whole of God.

This process to be whole involves the prophetic aspect of the church’s function in God’s paradigm, which is always combined with its apostolic aspect. As the church incarnates this function and becomes this relationally involved, *the transformed church becomes transforming*, that is, redeeming and restoring to the whole of God, just as Jesus did.

## Understanding Our Working Assumptions

Sometimes this transforming work to be whole is a major struggle which can be perplexing. As Jesus' behavior throughout the incarnation demonstrated the depth of his teachings and fulfilled the scope of his mission, his behavior also reveals paradoxes to understand in order for the church to further incarnate his relational restoring work. For example, his cleansing of the temple by forcefully throwing out the people and overturning their tables (Mk 11:15-17; cf. Jn 2:15) in order to restore the whole of God's house for communion for all peoples (especially the disadvantaged) stood in contrast to the incident in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was taken to be crucified. The disciple who cut off the slave's ear was rebuked, as Jesus healed the slave (Mt 26:50-52).

When is such action justified and when is it unnecessary? We are informed that Jesus preached the gospel of peace (Eph 2:17; Acts 10:36); we also know that Jesus said: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Mt 10:34). How do we understand such apparent paradoxes in the life and teachings of Jesus, especially regarding peace and reconciliation?

Church practices in the twentieth century can be characterized as tending to place more emphasis on either the work of redemption (e.g., liberation from social conditions) or the work of reconciliation (e.g., traditional evangelism)—usually to the exclusion of the other. Theologically, however, we know that redemption and reconciliation are not mutually exclusive. A full Christology of the narrative life of Jesus' vulnerable presence, purpose and function counters any such reduction. Thus, a singular emphasis not only is insufficient to understand the apparent paradoxes of Jesus it also conflicts with what underlies the paradoxes, as we will understand in the discussion ahead.

Yet, depending on our functional worldview and particular approach to prevailing orders of life, churches as well as individual Christians often find themselves identified with either redemptive work or reconciling work, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally. These approaches lend themselves to simplified classification on a continuum which will be helpful for us to review.

As descriptive examples, at one end of the spectrum there are left-wing, radical revolutionaries and at the other end there are hard-core, right-wing nationalists (or fundamentalists). Essentially, one tries to completely change the prevailing order while the other tries to maintain it at all costs. In between these extremes there is a host of variations. Yet each approach bases its action or perspective on certain assumptions. These assumptions have to do with views on humanity and on society—with more specific underlying views about sin and about God.

Whether we articulate it or not, we all hold to some kind of belief or model of the nature of humanity. This is also true of our conceptions of society—assumptions usually even more implicit. We can locate ourselves on this continuum by the very practical ways we make assumptions about both areas. Both our model of humanity and our model of society predispose each of us to certain choices and how we will approach, for example, improving the quality of life. Understanding this influence is important to our immediate discussion about Jesus' paradoxes and the church extending his purpose and function *into* the world.

Basically, we hold to either the inherent sinfulness or the inherent goodness of humankind. Without getting into all of the ramifications of these views, we can just call the former a “pessimistic model” and the latter an “optimistic model.”

We can also place most perspectives of contemporary society into either one of two general models. The first model does not assume the basic goodness of the existing social order. Nor does it automatically accept the standards of the society but invariably questions the legitimacy of existing practices and values. Thus, this model does not oppose basic changes in the existing institutions, systems or structures—especially if it is in the best interest of the people as a whole. In fact, it often finds itself in conflict with some aspect of society because it does not seek to maintain the status quo. We can call this the “conflict model.”

The second model of society stands in contrast to the first. It is somewhat optimistic in that it basically affirms (explicitly or implicitly) the existing institutions, systems and structures of the society in effect as good. The prevailing social order is assumed to be *good* and, thus, to be maintained or upheld—though some reforms may be sought. The core practices and values of the society are accepted as the prevailing standards by which all else is measured. We can call this the “consensus model” because it represents a dominant (if not majority) perspective.

These models do not delineate all the variations which exist but merely provide us with very general categories. Most persons subscribe to one of them for humanity and one for society in their practice, if not also by ideology.

The two sets of models for humanity and society also closely align to one another. The optimistic model (goodness) of humanity aligns with the consensus model of society. They do not see significant reasons for humanity or society to undergo basic changes—a very optimistic or romanticized outlook. The pessimistic model (sinfulness) of humanity matches up with the conflict model of society in their more realistic assessment of the conditions of humanity and society respectively. These two both understand that basic changes are necessary if the quality of life is to be improved.

With respect to sin and evil, we would expect Christians to hold a pessimistic-conflict model combination. This is a reasonable assumption to make; ironically, that is often not the case. Other factors intervene which influence Christians to assume other models. For example, more conservative Christians would generally believe in the inherent sinfulness of humanity (a pessimistic model) while tending also to affirm (if only by silence) the basic goodness of society, especially in the U.S. (a consensus model). On the other hand, more liberal Christians may not believe in humanity’s inherent sinfulness (optimistic model) but do not necessarily assume that basic goodness for society (conflict model).

Since holding to one model of humanity or society does not mean that one automatically embraces the other model aligning to it, four different combinations of models are possible here. Each combination of models of humanity and society exert a particular influence on choices we make and the approach to mission we take. For example, we may seek basic change in only the individual but not society due to a pessimistic-consensus combination of models; or an optimistic-conflict combination seeks change only in society. This influence—conditioned by prevailing cultures but most significantly by reductionism—can determine not only whether church practice has a singular emphasis on redemption or reconciliation but also the extent of redemption and the level of reconciliation engaged for mission.

Understanding these working assumptions we make about humanity and society as well as the influence they exert on us helps us to reexamine the life of Jesus to understand his working assumptions.

### **Jesus' Working Assumptions**

The day prior to his cleansing of the temple during the week of passion, Jesus entered Jerusalem. In spite of his popular reception, Jesus willfully entered a hostile context, knowing fully the consequences he would bear. It is defined as “the triumphal entry” because of his ultimate triumph over sin. Yet, that is insufficient to understand the relational significance of his triumph to the whole of God taking place this entire week. We need to reexamine this narrative from the relational context and process of Jesus’ incarnation, focusing specifically on his mindset and working assumptions as he entered Jerusalem.

Jesus entered Jerusalem with the humility of a commoner, not a king. Yet, as a commoner’s king of those apart from the whole, he did not seize upon their messianic hope and aspirations in an exercise of power relations. In actuality, the equalizing relational nature of his life and teachings created conflict with their messianic presumptions. He had a different mindset which did not misuse his authority or power in relationships. Counter to what prevailed, his approach to relationships humbly assumed responsibility for broken relations and pursued those apart from the whole. Jesus took the initiative to enter this hostile context in order to open the way to reconciliation. This is the essence of God’s grace and the triumph of Jesus as God’s ultimate response to the human condition “to be apart” from the whole.

Jesus’ triumphant entry engaged this crowd of followers who praised God “for all the miracles they had seen” (Lk 19:37). This miraculous power was not political power per se, though it certainly had political implications. This power, however, was healing power; they rallied around Jesus for this healing work of power to be made whole. This further illustrates that in Jesus’ approach to humanity and social life power relations is clearly replaced by both the mindset of repentance and the ministry of reconciliation. As God’s response to the human condition “to be apart,” the first of his working assumptions is the need for repentance.

Yet, how do we understand this approach of reconciliation in light of his physically forceful cleansing of the temple on the next day, as well as his earlier declaration about not coming to bring peace but a sword? How do we look at human relations, healing and peace given these other aspects in the life and teachings of Jesus?

As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept openly over it (Lk 19:41; cf. Is 22:4). His deep feelings could not be contained and compassion for the whole of God’s creation overflowed. Throughout this week Jesus demonstrated the full glory of God in his heart, his intimate relational nature and his vulnerable presence as the passibility of God emerged. And in this initial poignant expression he said “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace” (19:42). Both the vulnerable expression of his heart and his statement combine to help us understand his actions and working assumptions.

It would serve you to consider at this point with what models of humanity and society do you think Jesus approached Jerusalem? What would he have done if he had different models?



“What would bring you peace” is a critical issue focused on *what belongs to peace*. This crucial area—which Jesus goes on to say “but now it is hidden from your eyes”—is often overlooked even by Christians who work for peace. There is much discussion on how to bring about peace, yet little said about the specifics of what peace truly is, that is, what belongs to peace. We tend to make assumptions about the definition of peace as well as assumptions that those who use the term all have the same understanding of peace. Jesus did not have these working assumptions. The mindset of repentance would not allow for such assumptions and reductionist alternatives. In his farewell address to his disciples later in the week, Jesus clearly distinguished the peace he brought and gave from what the world gives (Jn 14:27). Understanding what belongs to peace helps us to discern further Jesus’ working assumptions.

In the classical Greek sense peace is looked upon as the opposite of war. The NT, however, does not take its meaning of peace from this source; its concept of peace is an extension from the OT and of the Hebrew *shalom*. The opposite of *shalom* is any disturbance to the well-being of the community. In other words, biblical peace is not so much the *absence* of something (like conflict) but more importantly the *presence* of something. Throughout the Bible the primary concept of peace is wholeness and well-being.

Peace is a general well-being which has both an individual dimension and a corporate/collective dimension. This wholeness extends to all aspects of human life and by necessity includes salvation and the end times but certainly is not limited to the latter. Beyond the mere absence of negative activity, all of this involves what must be present for peace. This is what belongs to peace. Such peace, distinguished from what the world gives, can only belong to the new creation for which Jesus entered Jerusalem. Yet, in order to be part of this new creation and order of life, we must go through a process of redemption. God’s plan of redemption for his creation emerges in the progression of God’s ultimate response when at the end of this week Jesus paid the price for this redemption to take away the barrier of hostility between us for reconciliation to the whole of God.

This redemptive relational process functions with specific assumptions. Jesus’ initial working assumption as God’s ultimate response to the human condition “to be apart” assumes the need for repentance. For the authentic whole of peace, God is not concerned about the mere absence of conflict. That alone does not bring people together, nor is it sufficient to bring about a new order, a new creation; that is, the absence of conflict will not result in wholeness and well-being. The mindset of repentance assumes the need for redemption and calls for it. The new does not emerge without liberation from the old. Thus, basically and soteriologically, *peace is grounded in God’s work of redemption*. There is no whole of peace without it, only reductionist substitutes.

Furthermore, the redemptive relational process does not end with redemption. Passion week does not illustrate simply being freed and saved from the old. Redemption assumes the need for reconciliation, as Jesus’ actions this week in the temple and with his disciples demonstrated. For the authentic whole of reconciliation, God is not concerned about mere harmony in relationships. Just as in the whole of peace, significant relations in God’s desires for creation are not signified in the absence of negative activity. They directly involve the relationships necessary to be whole. This relational context and process are what Jesus revealed and constituted in the incarnation as God’s complete response to the relational condition “to be apart.” Therefore, the

whole of reconciliation assumes the need for the initiative, vulnerable presence and intimate relational function of the whole of God fulfilled by the Son and to be completed by the Spirit in order to be constituted in the relationships of the whole of God's family in likeness of the Trinity. The incarnation, as this week demonstrates, is this relational engagement by the Son *into (eis)* the world.

The whole of reconciliation signifies the redemptive change of relationships that involves a vulnerable heart and the intimate relational involvement of family love in the process of equalization, just as Jesus engaged. If relationships are changed from the inner out (*metamorphoo*) and not the outer in (*metaschematizo*) of reductionism, then these transformed relationships are always intimate and equalized relationships. Authentic reconciliation cannot allow barriers to remain which keep persons apart from the whole, thus calling for repentance and the work of redemption—which is why Paul confronted Peter for his *metaschematizo* reflecting his *hypokrisis*, or role-playing (Gal 2:11-14). Thus, as peace is grounded in God's work of redemption, *reconciliation is predicated on redemption*.

In coming to restore communion to the whole of God, Jesus functioned in the natural relational flow from repentance to redemption to reconciliation—nothing less and no substitutes. He simply worked on the basis of what is necessary to be whole. While peace describes interpersonal relationships only in a corollary sense, the condition of wholeness and well-being is the new relational order of the new creation as the whole of God's family. This is the only relational outcome of reconciliation and the only purpose for the ministry of reconciliation. Each act of reconciliation (and peacemaking, cf. Mt 5:9, *eirenopoios*, a reconciler) must function in the same natural relational flow toward this end, if, with compatibility with Jesus, it is indeed to be reconciling to the whole. In understanding Jesus' working assumptions, not only our theology but our practice as well must reflect him if the transfer of purpose and function from the Father to the Son to his family is to be fulfilled and not fragmented. This is only the function of following him in the relational progression and incarnating the incarnation.

## **The Change of Redemptive Reconciliation**

From the natural relational flow of this functional perspective, we can approach human relations, peace and healing more deeply and also better understand Jesus' action in the temple cleansing.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Jesus contained and directed his power for the purpose to heal. Healing involved restoring to some aspect of wholeness, which meant to change from old to new. This is not any type of change, particularly outer-in *metaschematizo*, but only the redemptive change of *metamorphoo*. The determining factor for redemptive change is the wholeness to which something is being restored. While our understanding of wholeness (and what belongs to peace) is far from complete, its primary aspects involve the ontology of personhood with the importance of the whole person signified by the heart combined with the highest priority given to the transformed relationships necessary to be whole. This is how Jesus vulnerably opened his person and the level of relationship he engaged throughout the incarnation, thus

intimately revealing the whole of God for relationship. On this basis, the redemptive relational process of restoring to wholeness needs to be both engaged as well as experienced.

Yet, Jesus never presumed this vulnerability of heart and intimacy of relationship could be an experiential reality without the change basic and necessary to be *new*, and thus qualitatively different from prevailing practices of personhood and relationships. His experiences with his disciples (notably Peter) clearly demonstrated this need for redemptive change, even in ongoing ministry, service and mission for God (cf. Lk 22:31-34; Jn 16:31-34). Inherent to repentance, redemption and reconciliation is change. Each of them implies undergoing a process of change which cannot be diminished or minimalized for them to be complete. Therefore, the mindset of repentance, the work of redemption and the ministry of reconciliation together necessitate dealing with our attitude and approach to change—not only in the world but also within the church.

Since Jesus always functioned for the change necessary to be whole, this can be examined in the temple situation. Conventional reconciliation brings conflicting parties together based on the prevailing values, mindset or worldview of its context or time. In so doing, conventional reconciliation seeks in effect to maintain, uphold or restore the status quo. Basic change is not seen as necessary or pragmatic; an optimistic model of humanity and a consensus model of the social order have this working perception of change. And, like the classic medical model, this perceptual framework sees variation from the status quo as deviations which need to be fixed. With these assumptions, any effort for unity tends to be about conformity or tolerance, not wholeness. If these were Jesus' assumptions, what would he have done in the temple?

The authentic whole of reconciliation, on the other hand, by necessity must involve fundamental change. Since change itself is often a pre-existing issue and source of tension, the process of redemptive change may require first being freed from old or existing conditions, states or order which then would allow for the relational changes necessary for reconciliation to the whole. This is the ongoing work of redemption, which assumes the need for reconciliation and must always function jointly with it. Redemptive change involves restoring God's creation to wholeness. If we focused only on reconciliation in this process, we would approach situations differently and overlook the redemptive changes necessary for that reconciliation, thus not know what belongs to peace. Given Jesus' working assumptions, he entered Jerusalem and the temple for the change of redemptive reconciliation.

In the initial observations of the temple incident, his actions certainly do not seem like an act of reconciliation. If anything, it was divisive to the religious community—behavior more congruent with his statement about bringing a sword, not peace. Yet, Jesus was not contentious in terms of reinforcing the human relational condition “to be apart” but rather directly addressed the condition to redeem it. This is a crucial distinction to understand. To approach this situation only from a reductionist framework of reconciliation without the need for redemption would not make this distinction and invariably lead to a substitute for Jesus' action.

As this week keeps revealing, to redeem is a rigorous process since it ultimately required the death of Jesus. Redemptive work is firm and uncompromising when the purpose and function of God's creation are violated; and at times this work can appear contentious. With the mindset of repentance, what did Jesus see at the temple? Though their activity was the prevailing norm of religious practice, he did not make any assumptions for its legitimacy. He clearly saw the temple prostituted for reductionist substitutes that violated God's purpose and function. The temple was

not an institution created by God; it was the functional dwelling of God for the purpose of all peoples to have communion with the whole of God. The prevailing temple system of inequality denied access for the disadvantaged to be involved with God, thus reinforcing the human condition “to be apart.” These relations had to be equalized by eliminating the barriers created by such distinctions.

What would be the alternatives in this situation? We could pray, or negotiate with the leaders, or have a protest demonstration, or be silent; except for the last one, all of these are definite possibilities. Yet, prayer, negotiation and demonstration must be about redemptive change. By functioning in the natural relational flow from repentance to redemption to reconciliation, Jesus acted in the temple on the basis of what was necessary to be whole. In this apparent paradox, Jesus did not substitute a reconciliation of harmonious relations with the abusers of the temple for needed redemptive change, though he never forsook the whole of their reconciliation. To restore the whole of God’s house, it had to be freed from its existing relational condition or order; thus Jesus functioned as the equalizer. His actions only reflect the redemptive change necessary for this wholeness—the change of redemptive reconciliation.

I cannot completely understand the violent mode of his actions or explain when its use is warranted. Yet, I do understand the necessity of his action to fully engage his purpose in the redemptive relational process resulting in reconciliation. Redemptive work has to be firm and uncompromising—nothing less and no substitutes—when the purpose and function of God’s creation are violated.

It should be apparent how Jesus’ approach to the existing order would differ from those who maintain a consensus model of society or the social order. While a consensus model approach does not seek basic change because of its assumption of basic goodness, for Jesus redemptive change was basic to all he did, as highlighted in this week. On the other hand, his goal was not to tear down an existing sinful order. How then does Jesus’ approach differ from those who hold only a conflict model of society as do so-called liberationists or revolutionaries?

For Jesus, peace is the order of wholeness established by the whole of God. This wholeness is what Jesus gave to those who followed him in the relational progression (Jn 14:27) and thus established in the embryonic church, despite contextually in the world not experiencing conventional notions of peace or even prevailing forms of reconciliation (Jn 16:33). The disparity is by design and needs to be intentional for God’s purpose and function. While God’s peace is opposed to disorder, it is opposed even more importantly to existing sinful orders which need to be redeemed. Yet, Jesus never forsook reconciliation as he worked for redemption because he always acted in the redemptive relational process for the whole of God. In this week of equalization, the temple incident needs to be integrated with his pacification at his arrest and his intercession at his crucifixion (“Father, forgive them”) which were directed on behalf of his enemies.

Redemption of the temple by Jesus, then, was only part of the process engaged by Jesus. To separate this part only truncates the process to be whole, leaving it incomplete and fragmented. By entering a context that was hostile toward him, Jesus opened the way for reconciliation through redemption. He intentionally initiated actions solely for the change of redemptive reconciliation. As God’s ultimate response to the human condition “to be apart” from the whole, his purpose and function could be nothing less and no substitutes.

These are important distinctions from a historic conflict model approach. While redemptive action can appear contentious and even cause conflict, reconciliation does not promote adversary relations. The change of redemptive reconciliation always makes enemies—notably with reductionists—but seeks the whole of their reconciliation. Redemptive reconciliation speaks the truth with the mindset of repentance that undoubtedly offends but relationally seeks to heal and restore. Power relations are replaced by the healing process to wholeness while the barriers of hostility between parties are being removed to become part of the whole. The natural relational flow of these actions change the character of a conflict model approach and even an approach which limits its work to redemption. Moreover, redemptive reconciliation reflects the nature of God’s love in response to our condition: initiating family love by vulnerable relational involvement with us in order to restore us to the whole as God’s very own in family together constituted by the Trinity.

There are no shortcuts to the whole of God, no alternatives and nothing optional. In the mindset of repentance redemptive change is always a given in order to be whole. With this functional mindset, the work of redemption and the ministry of reconciliation will interact inseparably in the singular process of God’s eschatological plan for his creation, and thus his purpose and function *into* (*eis*, not only *en*) the world. This relational process of redemptive reconciliation helps us to grasp what belongs to peace and how Jesus fulfilled the relational progression to the whole of God.

Contrary to conventional notions of peace, authentic peace is an issue of reconciliation, which is predicated on the redemption seen through the lens of repentance—all of which operate within the relational context and process of following Jesus in the relational progression to wholeness. Therefore, to be compatible with what belongs to the peace of Jesus’ entrance *into* Jerusalem requires the function of mission *into* (*eis*, movement into signifying engagement) the world that is not: influenced by discrimination (e.g., power relations, systems of inequality), shaped by distinctions (e.g., gender, other differences), limited by provincialism (e.g., ethnocentrism, nationalism, other comfort zones), or most importantly diminished by reductionism (e.g., defining the person from the outer in without the significance of the heart and relationships without the priority of intimacy), therefore free to counter any of the above which are barriers to be whole. Peace sustains the sanctity of all life which is constituted by what God defines as wholeness and thus is no longer in the relational condition “to be apart” from the whole of God.

When church practice in mission is itself redeemed and then reconciled to be whole, the church wholly appropriates the transfer of the Son’s commission to itself as his family. With this change within itself, the church is sent to be whole *into* the world to extend redemptive reconciliation with family love.

### **The Church in Conjoint Function**

The process to be whole helps us understand that the church has no commission of significance to God within the world apart from discipleship in the relational progression. Whatever work a church practices in *politeia* has no relational significance to God unless it is the

relational work of extending God's response to the human condition "to be apart" as the compatible transfer of Jesus' purpose and function to the whole of his family.

The incarnation as "nothing less and no substitutes" than the whole of God and God's response for creation to be whole was Christ's commission (cf. Col 1:19, 20). For the church to incarnate what Jesus fulfilled in the incarnation necessitates responding first to the imperative call of discipleship to follow him in the relational progression to be whole as God's family. This nonnegotiable call to be whole in sanctified life and practice (call to be holy) is irreducible yet defines only half of the *ek-eis* dynamic in the relational process of the whole of God. For those "not of the world" in identity, purpose and function, *ek* involves the movement (redemptive change) beyond the common and ordinary, out of one's little world and box, to be whole. The call to be whole necessitating the movement out, however, cannot be separated from the movement back (*eis*) "into the world" to further incarnate the incarnation.

This commission to extend Christ's purpose and function as God's response to be whole requires compatibility with the Son's incarnation for the transfer to be fulfilled. This involves church purpose and function to be whole as God's family such that it is conjoined with the commission; this conjoint process results in the movement back "into the world" which clearly denotes the commission as "sent to be whole" to engage those in the human relational condition "to be apart" from the whole of God. *Eis* is this relational engagement which can only emerge from *ek* as the whole of God's family functioning in family love. Thus, the *ek-eis* dynamic also requires an ongoing engagement with reductionism so that the call to be whole and the commission "sent to be whole" are not separated nor reduced in identity, purpose and function.

While missional approaches and paradigms consistently separate Christ's commission from his call to be whole, the commission by itself fails to understand God's thematic response to the human condition ultimately fulfilled in the incarnation. This only fragments the church's purpose and function as the whole of God's family extended to others to be part of the whole—truncating soteriology, for example, to only what Christ saved us from. Moreover, such an incomplete commission does not emerge from *ek*, thus does not engage the relational process of *eis* with vulnerability to others' differences in family love—the fourth key characteristic of the multicultural church discussed in Chapter 8. Without the conjoint function of the church's call and commission, the church does not join the Spirit (as Jesus' relational replacement, Jn 15:26) to "testify" (*martyreo*, as relational participant, Jn 15:27) about the whole person of Jesus in the incarnation, and therefore leaves the commission without a "witness" (*martyreo*, Lk 24:48) of the nothing less and no substitutes whole of God and God's response to be whole.

Only the church in conjoint function can be an equalizer with Jesus and the basis for the world to trust and to experience the whole of God's family constituted by the Trinity—the fulfillment of Jesus' formative family prayer. This dynamic function predicated on the natural relational flow of repentance, redemption and reconciliation clearly takes the church and its missional enterprise well beyond traditional evangelism in calling to repentance and making disciples. Yet, the church's posture and function into the world involve the redemptive relational process which engages the church more deeply in the lives of persons than may be desired—by both persons in the world as well as even in the church. Deeper involvement always guarantees tension (perceived as positive or negative) since this relational practice breaches "comfort zones" both in the world and in the church. That is, such practice penetrates these barriers when defined

by biblical culture (notably of redemptive reconciliation) and not made ambiguous or shallow by reductionist influences from surrounding contexts—for example, diminished personhood and minimalized relationships.

Though the strength of a church's view of sin and evil determines the extent of its practice in *politeia*, the primary discomfort about the church's movement into the world is actually not about *what it does* but about *how it is involved*. This is the shift from beyond the common and ordinary of quantitative behavior to the qualitative relationships necessary to be whole. By the relational progression, for example, Jesus' involvement redefines evangelism within the relational context of the whole of family and the relational process of family love. Despite how rigorous this process can be at times—as Jesus demonstrated throughout the incarnation—*agape* love is not focused on what to do, only on how to be relationally involved with others. Such involvement affirms both the integrity and dignity of the whole of every person and the primacy of interpersonal relationships necessary to be whole within the relational context of God's design and purpose at creation, which Christ restored in the new creation.

The nature of this relational involvement is God's thematic response for those “to be apart” to be restored to the whole of God. God's desires, ultimately fulfilled by Jesus, transferred to his family to extend this relational involvement make family love the single most important quality expressed in the church's purpose and function as equalizer—within itself and into the world. No other actions, no activity, proclamation, propositional truth or provision can substitute for the direct relational involvement of love.

Yet, in actual practice this intimate involvement makes many persons uncomfortable, too vulnerable. Consequently, in function the *deeds* of love (quantitative behavior) get separated from the *involvement* of love—similar to the commission without conjoint function with the call to be whole—leaving the relational involvement often avoided, redefined, distorted, compromised or even denied by reductionist alternatives and substitutes. By not attending to this tension, church practice, even with good deeds, is rendered less than whole and thus of no relational significance to extend God's response of “nothing less and no substitutes.” The church in conjoint function is the only qualitative significance compatible with the incarnation of God's response.

The tension the church faces ongoingly is compounded when the world reacts to the church's direct involvement—reactions ranging from rejection to persecution. Under such conditions it is always easier in church purpose and function to let the *light* become ambiguous and the *salt* become shallow. Yet, this is not about what to do regardless of the consequences. Church practice is always about how to be relationally involved with family love in the relational progression.

Faced with hardships and suffering, the early church was challenged to develop in the redemptive relational process. Since their involvement was based in the relational progression, contrary to a reductionist framework, situations and circumstances did not signify the status of this progression. Its relational significance was constituted by the covenant response of the whole of God and God's ongoing involvement to eschatological completion. Eschatology (for relationship, not doctrine) provided the framework for a functional, secure hope necessary to encourage early church practice in difficult conditions (cf. Peter's line of thought in 1 Pet 1:3-4, 13; 4:12-13; 5:10). In the *parousia*, the relational progression is brought to ultimate conclusion, the relational outcome of family love is complete, and this secures God's family that they are the

whole of God's very own and permanently belong to the Trinity's family.

The conjoint relational function of this new kinship family is vital for us to grasp in the total relational process of mission in the new creation order. The early church eventually changed the nature of mission to a *redeemed system of equality* functional in its own midst whereby every person was vitally interrelated to each other as full family, without distinctions in the relationships necessary to be whole. This testified to the whole of God and witnessed to the world of both the authentic living alternative to systems of inequality as well as the qualitative significance of wholeness. It is a functional model, however imperfect, of the kingdom of God and how the new creation in Christ lives. In its very life operationalized by family love, the church in conjoint function is both confronting to the *old* and the hope for the *new*.

Yet, the church cannot confront the old without the redemptive change from "of the world" signified in the call to be whole (thus holy), nor can the church bring hope for the new without the redemptive reconciliation constituting its being sent to be whole "into the world." Only the church in conjoint function reflects the whole of God and extends the whole of God's response—nothing less and no substitutes.



From the beginning, the human person has been accountable for God's revelation (cf. Rom 1:20). With God's self-disclosure in the incarnation, this accountability has been clarified with the imperative need for compatibility of our relational response to Jesus' vulnerable revelation (cf. Mt 7:24-27; Jas 1:22).

As the hermeneutical key opening the ontological door to the whole of God and the functional key opening the relational door to the ontology of the whole of God's family constituted in the Trinity, Jesus vulnerably revealed nothing less and no substitutes than the whole of God and God's ultimate response to our relational condition "to be apart" from this whole. God's revelation and truth are shared with us only for the purpose of this relationship (cf. Jn 14:6, 7), for which we are accountable to respond compatibly to the qualitative significance of the incarnation—as were the first disciples (Jn 14:9). The relationship-specific nature of God's vulnerable self-disclosure and ultimate response is demonstrated further by Jesus in the above narrative account with his disciples (see Jn 14:21-24).

Judas' (not Iscariot) question, "why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?" (v. 22), is important to understand in the relational context and process of Jesus' words. On the one hand, Jesus did reveal the "object" (*apokalypto*, cf. Mt 16:17; Lk 2:32) of God to all the world; yet, his revelation was not an end in itself merely to inform or to be observed. On the other hand, he distinctly limited to whom he would "show myself" (v. 21, *emphanes*, to be rendered here not merely as *apokalypto* but similar to *phaneroo* focusing on the persons receiving the revelation, as in Jn 17:6). Those whom Jesus clearly defined are basically persons who intimately have received him (*lambano*, cf. Jn 1:12) and are relationally responding to him (*akoloutheo*, cf. Jn 8:12; 12:26) compatibly with only his terms for relationship (outlined in vv. 21, 23, 24).

While Jesus' response to Judas appears not to answer his question, it actually does when we understand revelation and truth are only for relationship—relationship with the whole of God as family together, nothing less and no substitutes. If our Christology is incomplete and soteriology is truncated, then we tend to become overly Christocentric. A position excessively Christocentric is reductionism that does not understand or embrace the incarnation as nothing less and no substitutes than the whole of God. Christ gives us no other hermeneutical key than to the whole of God and serves as no other functional key than in the relational progression to the Trinity as the family of God.

We are accountable to respond to and practice this relationship in our lives both within the church and into the world. Moreover, this distinctively defines for the whole of church practice that all actions extending Christ's commission (cf. Jn 15:27) are only for relationship, not to inform, not to promote a belief system, nor to disseminate propositional truths.

## Accountable for Wholeness

The trinitarian relational context of family and the trinitarian relational process of family love established by Jesus are not simply theological formulations of the Trinity but the experiential reality of relationship with the whole of God. On the basis of this relational outcome from God's revelation and truth in Christ, our accountability is unequivocally nonnegotiable and irreducible, not to mention unavoidable. By fulfilling his relational purpose and function, Jesus not only revealed the ontology of God but in correlative importance also restores the ontology of the human person to nothing less and no substitutes in the relational context and process of the relationships necessary to be whole as God's family in likeness of the Trinity.

The whole of God established at creation for the human relational condition in the image and likeness of God and restored in the new creation require "nothing less and no substitutes" both from God's response and our response back in order to be whole. The principle of nothing less and no substitutes enacted in our practice signifies wholeness from redemption and constitutes the function to be whole in reconciliation. Anything less and any substitutes then always indicate a reduction of the whole. Christ came in the only way God presents his being, communicates and engages in relationship; and as nothing less and no substitutes, the Trinity cannot be reduced, for example, to distinctions of authority and roles. Like God's response, our response and practice must be compatible by nature to be *whole*. Thus, in these three major aspects of all practice, the presentation of our person, the content of our communication and the level of relationship engaged necessitate nothing less and no substitutes than the whole of our persons in the relationships necessary to be whole. This also requires, by the nature of this function, countering sin as reductionism of the whole of God.

Based on God's vulnerable self-disclosure and relational response in the incarnation to restore us to the whole of God, we are accountable to be whole and church practice must account for this wholeness to fulfill our purpose and function. We have to grasp functionally, however, that the practice to be whole ongoingly is critically challenged by reductionism, testing our authenticity and depth of relational involvement. Reductionism is always positioned against the whole; it has no significance without the presence of the whole. Given its source, reductionism thus is essentially about counter-relational work to reduce the whole and to lure us "to be apart" from it.

The demands of "nothing less and no substitutes" are necessary to engage the function to be whole. This rigorous process is contingent on God's grace to be equalized in how we define our person. With the relational outcome of grace based on this ontology of personhood, we then can function in relationships "naked and felt no shame" (as Adam and Eve did before sin as reductionism, Gen 2:25). A reductionist ontology of personhood based on what we do and have shifts the function of relationships to presenting our persons in these quantitative substitutes and thus engaging in relationships with less than intimate involvement. Grace is the only basis to negate reductionism and to be "naked without shame"—thus to be able to function in the equalized and intimate relationships necessary to be whole.

Yet, grace itself must not be reduced to merely an element of belief or propositional truth, even a provision from God. Grace is an unwarranted relational action initiated by God that is a function of relationship defining the terms for that relationship. Part of those terms demand

nothing less and no substitutes than our whole person involved in equalized and intimate relationships of the whole of God. But underlying these terms is the *ek-eis* (out of-into) dynamic as the process of ongoing relational involvement with God in his terms to constitute the whole of who we are and whose we are. This relational call to be whole and thus holy (*ek* relational movement) can only be a function of God's grace and antecedes its conjoint purpose and function with "sent to be whole" (*eis* relational movement). Without the *ek-eis* relational movement of involvement with God for the whole, our practice is functionally based just *en* (in) the surrounding context. This is problematic for the relational function of grace in its demand for nothing less and no substitutes because our practice is susceptible to the influence of what prevails in that surrounding context. And what prevails *en* any context of the world is reductionism.

Without the ongoing function of grace in *ek-eis* relational involvement, there is no consistent functional basis to negate the influence of reductionism. This leaves church practice susceptible to subtle embedding in the surrounding context, even despite apparent indicators of important church practices distinguishing its identity. This is clearly illustrated by the church in Thyatira (see 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, thus 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>1</sup>

In this surrounding context Jesus acknowledges the church's "deeds" (*ergon*, work that defined them, Rev 2:19): "love" (*agape*), "faith" (*pistis*), "service" (*diakonia*, service, ministry that benefits others, especially compassion to the needy), "perseverance" (*hypomone*, enduring and not giving in to bad circumstances [cf. Rev 2:3] in contrast to *makrothymia* which is patience with respect to persons), and that they were "now doing more than . . . at first," suggesting not a status quo situation (cf. Laodicea, Rev 3:15) but actually doing more *ergon* than before. Yet, their practice also "tolerated" (v. 20, *aphiemi*, same word as "forsake" in Rev 2:4 and Jn 14:18 but used here as to let pass, permit, allow) 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 the 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). What is significant to grasp 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 the

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<sup>1</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).

church along with all its other goods deeds acknowledged above. This is not simply an issue about syncretism, synthesizing competing ideologies, or even pluralism, but goes beyond merely maintaining doctrinal purity (like the church in Ephesus, 2:2) to the deeper issue about participation *en* a surrounding context having the prevailing presence of reductionism and its subsequent influence on their perceptual-interpretive framework. When reductionism is not negated, its influence then affects how those other deeds would be engaged with something less and some substitute for the whole of persons and relationships.

This reduction is usually more subtle than observed in the Thyatira church, as witnessed in the churches in Ephesus and Sardis discussed earlier. Yet, whatever the surrounding context may be, we can expect the prevailing influence of reductionism to affect the whole of church practice unless there is the ongoing function of grace in *ek-eis* relational involvement to distinctively distinguish church purpose and function from beyond merely its position *en* the world. Without the relational function of grace, reductionism is able to shift grace's demand for nothing less and no substitutes than the whole to anything less and any substitutes. This shift is qualitative, the significance of which cannot be grasped in quantitative terms, as the Thyatira church's increased amount of "good deeds" demonstrate.

As long as we depend on a quantitative perceptual-interpretative framework, the extent of surrounding influences reducing the whole of church practice will not be apparent. The relational function of grace, however, clarifies that nothing less and no substitutes than the whole is the only practice which has significance to God. And Jesus wants "all the churches" to clearly understand "that I am he who searches hearts and minds" (Rev 2:23)—that is, examines the qualitative significance of the inner person, whom he holds accountable to be whole in relationships together as the whole of God (2:25; 3:11).

It is not sufficient for God's people merely to be present or merely to function *en* the world; their only significance is to function *eis* (relational movement into) the world both to engage others as the whole of God and, by the nature of such function, also to confront all sin as reductionism of the whole. The lesson we need to learn from Thyatira is: to let pass, indifferently permit or inadvertently allow 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. And the *eis* relational engagement—conjoined with the *ek* relational involvement as its antecedent in the *ek-eis* dynamic—negates the continuous counter-relational work of Satan and its reductionist influence (Rev 2:24) by ongoingly engaging, embracing and practicing the whole of God in the qualitative significance of the ontology both of personhood and the church constituted in and by the Trinity.

This lesson delineates a simple reality of life about the human person and the social order which we either pay attention to or ignore depending on our working models and assumptions. Since we do not live in a vacuum, our practice is either shaped by the context we are *en* (thus embedded) or constituted by what we enter *eis* that context with. For the latter to function necessitates the *ek* relational movement to disembed us from a surrounding context in order to re-embed us to the whole of God, thus constituting the whole for the *eis* relational movement back. This signifies the relational process of grace compatible with the working assumptions Jesus came *eis* the world and the models of humanity and the social order with which he engaged the world

(as discussed in the previous chapter).

Disembedding from the influence of reductionism to re-embed to the whole of God is the issue we need to grasp. Regardless of past or present situations and circumstances, we are accountable to be whole. Without the function of nothing less and no substitutes wholeness is diminished and the whole is minimalized. For church practice to fulfill its purpose and function, it must account for being embedded in the whole of God and God's eschatological plan for its globalizing commission in conjoint relational function with its call to be whole (cf. Rev 2:26-29). Just as Jesus was accountable in the incarnation for the whole of God and the whole of God's response, the church is accountable for this whole in compatible purpose and function—"just as," *kathos*, nothing less and no substitutes (Jn 17:18).

## Churches Today

Church practice in the trinitarian relational context of family and with the trinitarian relational process of family love appears foreign to most Western churches today. If this is true, then Western churches function in the relational condition "to be apart." Of course, to this condition God said "it is not good" and has responded since. This suggests that we have not understood God's thematic response ultimately fulfilled in the incarnation, nor do we really grasp the truth of the gospel.

Without the fulfillment of Jesus' formative family prayer, church practice labors in ontological simulations and epistemological illusions, just as the churches in Ephesus, Sardis and Thyatira did. The church functioning as the new kinship family of God was problematic from the church's inception, yet modernity has compounded the issues for qualitatively significant family formation and process. Moreover, Gehring concludes that ever since Constantine and the introduction of large church structures "the church has had difficulty adequately integrating the biblically based family elements of the *ecclesia* into the overall understanding and life of the church."<sup>2</sup>

Does this mean a return to the house church model characterizing the early church in the first three centuries, as Gehring suggests?<sup>3</sup> If the house church movement in mainland China today is a qualitative indicator, this is a significant model which Western churches cannot dismiss for their own practice. Yet, we also cannot overlook the ontological simulations and epistemological illusions seen in early house churches. Past or present, the underlying issue is still about reductionism. The house church and group issue is beyond the immediate scope of this study and warrants extensive response. More importantly, however, than what form a church has is how a group functions as family of the whole of God constituted in the Trinity, as Jesus prayed. The transformed multicultural church may not have to be a house church but it does need to be

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<sup>2</sup> Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structure in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 304 n. 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 300-311.

the new creation family of transformed persons in equalized and intimate (transformed) relationships required to be whole signified by the Trinity.

The most significant issue urgently facing any church (Western or not) is: whether the *context* a church creates either restores its members to be part of the whole of God's family together, or that context reinforces their relational condition "to be apart," however unintentional or inadvertent; and whether the *process* by which a church functions either restores its members to heart-to-heart relationships transformed to be whole, or that process reinforces its members to substitute something less, however well meaning, in relationships which effectively continue "to be apart" from the whole. This is the basic conflict between the whole of God and reductionism, the ongoing tension and choice between wholeness and reductionist alternatives.

The development of this trinitarian relational context of family and relational process of family love is imperative in order for the church to fulfill its purpose and function. This relational imperative of the church's conjoint function in call and commission is nonnegotiable and irreducible, thus accountable only in whole, not in part. How does a church respond to get beyond the reductionist alternatives to nothing less and no substitutes? Who can best make this response and lead this development? The whole of those persons and the relationships necessary to be the whole of God in the Western church suggest more probable candidates to best fulfill this purpose and function. This current study provisionally concludes with this discussion.

### **A Suggested Relational Conclusion**

While God does not work on the basis of probability and the Spirit's function must not be put into the box of likelihood, there are indicators today pointing in a qualitative direction which should not be ignored. When the call to be whole (thus holy) is neither diminished nor minimalized by the lure of reductionism, this call in our contemporary context suggests a unique response to develop the trinitarian relational context of family and relational process of family love for the whole of God.

The significance we cannot dismiss about the house church/group model is the context it provides for greater opportunity for persons to have deeper relational connections.<sup>4</sup> The expectation, and then accountability, in such a context is critical in the development of the ontology of personhood and church as family. Yet, this context alone is not sufficient for the relational outcome of the ecclesiology of the whole. This ecclesiology necessitates transformed relationships in which persons are equalized and intimately involved in the interdependent relationships of the whole of God as family in likeness of the Trinity. Conjoined with this relational context is the imperative relational process based on grace which demands nothing less and no substitutes than the whole of our persons and our relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> Gehring quotes a Chinese bishop's experience in the house church movement in which everyone served everyone else: "As bishop I felt somewhat uncomfortable in such groups, but I learned to allow others to serve me . . . The educated and the farmer sat side by side and learned from one another" (307).

The church (whatever its form) needs to provide this relational context—necessary yet insufficient to fulfill its purpose. More importantly, the church needs to function in this relational process—both necessary and sufficient to fulfill its purpose and function. While the church is accountable for both this context and process, churches can more readily (not without difficulty) account for such a relational context than its relational process. Given the demands of this relational process necessary for the whole of God, churches must acknowledge and be open to affirm those who more readily engage this process to lead the church further and deeper in its conjoint function of call and commission.

In the first creation God created the second human person (Eve) to complete the relational context for his family. Though the person was embodied in gender, the primary significance of this relationship was not to highlight female-male relationships (in marriage and family) as the highest form of relationship. Most significantly, God's created design and purpose for this relational context focused on the intimate nature of all relationships as signified by the nature of the whole of God constituted in the Trinity. As the ultimate extension of God's response in the first creation, Jesus vulnerably revealed and definitively demonstrated how the whole of God does relationships, thereby constituting the new creation. And Jesus' relationships during the incarnation specifically were the initiation of the new creation relational process.

What emerges clearly in his various interactions is the reality that he had the most intimate connections with female persons. The significance of this indicates sociocultural issues which suggest a consistent pattern: males are more reductionist than females both in personhood and relationships. Historically, this pattern has endured and continues to be entrenched in lifestyle today, compounded by modernity in the West.

Even the first male disciples functioned in contrast to the intimate connections Jesus had with females. While these early disciples were directly affected (usually with conflicting thoughts and feelings) by his interactions with women, they did not appear to grasp their significance and learn from them. The Samaritan woman showed them the necessity to be honest and open to *new* change despite the dominance of the *old* (Jn 4:4-42). The Canaanite woman taught the disciples what it means to have faith and not to be controlled by sociocultural limitations (Mt 15:21-28). The prostitute who anointed Jesus taught how to be loved in one's whole person, and thus how to love as a whole person without constraint—clearly demonstrating the relational involvement of grace in its demands of nothing less and no substitutes (Lk 7:36-50). Martha's sister Mary taught the disciples what matters most to God, even over ministry, and how to make intimate connection with God (Jn 12:1-8) in ongoing relationship (Lk 10:38-42). These women teach us about following Jesus and being intimately involved with him more than the first male disciples did during Jesus' earthly life. They do as persons because despite all their diversity they held in common the fundamental necessity to engage the relational process as persons from the inside out with the significance of the heart rather than as persons from the outside in based on the distinctions of gender, culture, race, class or any other reductionist distinctions, notably what we do.

The significance of this for the relational process cannot be dismissed and its meaning for church development of this relational process has to be considered. The significance of the whole person embodied in gender for the new creation is suggested as having a similar purpose with the first creation but for a different reason. Whereas at the first creation the female person completed

the human relational context, for the new creation female persons appear to emerge again as the key person to help us together engage the relational process of family love necessary to build the relational context of God's family.

Whether acknowledged in church practice or not, males have become socioculturally conditioned to reinforce "to be apart"<sup>5</sup> rather than cultivate the intimate relationships constitutional to God's design and purpose for the first creation to be whole. When the first persons "were both naked and they felt no shame" (Gen 2:25), God gave us the operational definition of how our persons need to function and how our relationships need to be involved in order to be whole. That definition for wholeness has not changed; our function and involvement obviously have. Since then the only basis to be wholly "naked without shame" is by God's grace which equalizes all persons in nothing less and no substitutes.

If the person is defined by what one does and has, notably authority and roles, then living by grace "naked" in relationships is more difficult for males than females because males have more at stake to lose. Additionally, being "naked *without* shame" in relationships becomes even more problematic and an urgent reason to maintain relational distance. Such vulnerability does not develop through human ability but only through God's grace. This further illustrates that those most open to God's wholeness of persons and relationships would be those females functioning more qualitatively than those males quantitatively constrained.

Yet, this is not to imply that women are free from reductionism; many have functioned in reductionist alternatives just as much, or even more so, as men have. More importantly, this is certainly not to suggest to any degree that males have less qualitative significance of the relational nature of God's image and likeness, nor to imply that females are intrinsically more heart and relationship oriented than males. Contrary to modern quantitative research positing such gender differences in human make-up, such distinctions and differences cannot be supported in God's self-revelation of the persons of the Trinity, nor by God's design and purpose (which are functionally whole and wholistically relational) for the ontology of personhood and the relationships that ontology inherently involves.

Given the demands of living by grace with nothing less and no substitutes necessary to fulfill church purpose and function, how does the church indeed become a function of grace and not merely in possession of a doctrine of grace? We have to turn to those who more consistently demonstrate this grace to lead the way. This suggests that women not only need to be leaders in the church but to take the lead for the church to be the whole of God as family. That is, this is turning only to those persons who are not influenced by reductionist substitutes as Eve was, which then distinguishes this from an egalitarian agenda. This is not about leading *church as organization*—in which case men arguably could continue in the lead—but about *church as family* which is a function only of relationship. This is about the necessary purpose of the

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<sup>5</sup> Fareed Zakaria reports on a significant trend emerging on the world stage of women leaders in public life that could reshape politics, give greater priority to poverty needs and education, and less for the military; moreover, women are considered to make better diplomats suggesting that countries with women leaders should become less aggressive, violent and competitive. "First Ladies, in the Truest Sense," *Newsweek*, 28 November 2005, 39.



trinitarian relational context of family and the imperative function of the trinitarian relational process of family love.

In response to the current challenge of the church's purpose and function, female persons appear more qualitatively ready, and thus are essential, to take the lead for further and deeper church practice in its conjoint call and commission. While some may argue that this recommendation is based on gender stereotypes, the truth of the issue is based on the reality of reductionism versus those who function in wholeness instead of ontological simulations and epistemological illusions. Until we address the presence of reductionism in church practice with functional wholeness, churches will continue to labor in the simulations and illusions of the whole of God, just as those in Thyatira, Ephesus and Sardis did. This makes "sin as reductionism" more of an issue for the church than secularism—even an ontological and epistemological crisis.

Wayne Grudem begins his complementarian analysis of gender with the following reference (repeated at the end of the preface<sup>6</sup>): "Male and female he created them . . . and behold, it was good" (Gen 1:27, 31). I presume he uses this reference to support the differences between genders defined in his analysis of what God says is good. Yet, whatever Grudem thinks is good to God needs to be understood in contrast to what God said "is not good" (Gen 2:18). "It was good" is directly related to and in conflict with "it is not good"; they should not be seen separately because the latter helps explain the function of the former. If what is not good is merely about the conventional notions of "to be alone," then reductionism defines not only what "is not good" but also the ontology of what "is good." If what is not good is about the relational condition "to be apart" from the whole, then the qualitative significance of the whole is the only determinant of what "is good" for the genders and their relationships—nothing less and no substitutes. Any alternatives to this is from reductionism, alternatives which are found equally among both egalitarians as well as complementarians.

The gender difference God defined as good is less about their quantitative differences and more about the common wholeness of their persons for relationship together. Yet, this relationship is less about marriage, procreation and biological family and more about wholeness in the relationships together as the whole of God's family signified by the Trinity. Neither the whole of personhood nor the relationships necessary to be whole can be reduced without functioning in the relational distance God can only define as "not good." Any definition of persons and practice in relationships which create, reinforce or promote relational distance—even inadvertently with good intentions—cannot be truthfully associated with what is good to God.

Since gender is the most dominant human difference and creates the most pervasive relational distance which all humanity faces without exception, restoring wholeness to persons and relationships constitute the new creation church family, only as Jesus established. This priority for church function makes imperative the transformation of gender relationships (thus all relationships) to equalized and intimate qualitative involvement. Only the conjoint function of equalized and intimate relationships are the transformed relationships which inform church practice as both: (1) the functional indicator for being redeemed from the *old*, and (2) the

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<sup>6</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sister, OR: Multnomah Publishers: 2004), 21.

relational indicator for being transformed to the *new*. Yet, this function cannot be fulfilled as the new creation church family whenever persons are distinguished and relationships are determined primarily on the basis of authority and roles. This has to be on the basis of the intimate involvement of love exercised by persons who are equalized by grace, thus involved “naked without shame.” Otherwise, the distinctions and differences of authority and roles create horizontal or vertical barriers to such relational involvement, thus maintaining some relational distance “to be apart.”

Even Grudem vulnerably admits to the hurtfulness of his relational distance with his own wife. Early in their marriage he didn’t value or listen to her input based on his perception of gender differences, which left his wife feeling “as though her voice was taken away and as though my ears were closed.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, while he indicates progress made in their relationship, Grudem does not appear to grasp the underlying reason for this relational consequence. What this relational consequence illustrates is directly associated with the subtle (or blatant) relational distance resulting from reductionist distinctions, which put limits on the intimate involvement of love in relationships “naked without shame.” Reductionist distinctions resulting in relational distance thus effectively renegotiate the terms of “nothing less and no substitutes than the whole” for both personhood and relational involvement. This also redefines and/or maintains the practice of love as only about what to do rather than how to be involved with others in relationship.

As the hermeneutical and functional keys, however, Jesus vulnerably revealed to us a difference in the Trinity of primary function beyond authority and role distinctions to the depth of the trinitarian persons’ primacy of qualitative function in family love: “God so loved the world” (Jn 3:16; cf. 1 Jn 4:9, 10); “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (Jn 15:9), you “have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn 17:23); “who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love” those persons (Jn 14:21). Based on the significance of the whole of God’s qualitative involvement with us directly in intimate relationship with nothing less and no substitutes, Jesus holds his disciples accountable for compatible involvement with each other as the whole of God’s family (Jn 13:34, 35; 15:12).

In his conjoint call and commission, Jesus defines these persons based on *what they are* and *whose they are* as the relational outcome of this qualitative involvement by God. The significance therefore of their persons and their relationships is the function of love and the intimate relational involvement which constitutes them, not authority, roles, spiritual gifts or giftedness. Just as Jesus vulnerably shared with us, this is the only significance to how God does relationship that reconciles our condition “to be apart”—both in the first creation and the new creation. What I suggest the gift of gender symbolizes today appears significant for us as the new creation just as it was in the first.

Whether or not you can agree with my suggested relational conclusion of women taking the lead, we are accountable in church practice to unambiguously establish the trinitarian relational context of family and to deeply function in the trinitarian relational process of family love. This relational context and process are the experiential reality of relationship with the whole of God; anything less or any substitutes leave us relationally apart from the whole of God, thus

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 27.

reducing the whole person in the image of God (signified in the trinitarian persons as revealed in Christ) and the relationships necessary to be whole in likeness of the Trinity (as constituted in the relationships between the trinitarian persons). Until we account for this with compatible response to Jesus' vulnerable revelation, his formative family prayer (in Jn 17) still remains for us relationally to embrace and experience, and then to be further fulfilled by extending the whole of God's response of redemptive reconciliation for the human relational condition "to be apart."

The new creation church purpose and function are contingent upon nothing less and no substitutes. As Jesus said: "*Wholeness* I leave with you; my *wholeness* I give you" (Jn 14:27), thus "*Wholeness* to you! Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you" (Jn 20:21). And for those who may lead the church in his call and commission, the only alternative to wholeness is reductionism.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A relational challenge to my sisters:

God has created and embodied your person in gender by design and purpose. Don't let this distinction, however, reduce you from the primary significance of God's purpose. This has less to do with your uniqueness as a female individual and more to do with the whole of God's desires in the big picture for redemptive reconciliation of our relational condition "to be apart." God has gifted your person in gender for this qualitative purpose, which has everything to do with the church as his family. If you only function apart from the church or give up on the church, you will fail to use your whole person to fulfill our primary purpose to build God's family, thus leaving my gender in particular with only its simulations and illusions of church family.

Certainly for you to function wholly within the church is a struggle and may seemingly be without opportunity. Yet we need you to demonstrate the grace imperative for the qualitative purpose and function of church practice. With the Spirit you can go beyond your situations and circumstances to help us distinguish between the prevailing church as an organization or institution from the reality of the new creation church as family—into which I suggest God is asking you to lead us all further and deeper. My gender needs your help to get out of our enslavement to reductionism, both in personhood as well as relationships, in order to experience the whole of God together in intimate interdependent relationships equalized in family love. Your willingness to make your person vulnerable in these relationships will demonstrate the grace and redemptive changes necessary to be whole as this new creation church family. God calls us both to build this family, yet current conditions suggest for you (yes, embodied in your gender) to take the lead. Please don't wait for my gender to give your gender "permission" to act. Just as the Canaanite woman, the prostitute and Mary did, let the heart of your whole person be expressed to and involved for the whole of God.



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