

Interpretation Integrated in 'the Whole-ly Way'

The Integral Education and Learning
of Knowing and Understanding God

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Chapter 1

The Realm of Connection

Why do you look for the living among the dead? ...Remember how he told you.

Luke 24:5-6¹

Have you checked your emails for messages from God?

Oh! That's right, God doesn't need technology to connect with us. Well, really and not virtually, nor does our God use technology to communicate with us, though other gods have emerged to assume this function. Yet, this modern realm of connection reflects what has prevailed in the human context to define the scope of our human condition and to determine the parameters for our everyday practice. Past as well as present, Christians have made assumptions about God analogous to the modern phenomenon of how to connect with others and what constitutes communication. In overt terms, you likely don't wait and look for emails from God. In principle, however, the phenomenon of this ubiquitous realm of connection actually biases our brains² and shapes how we perceive God.³

So, here we are in 2019 after over two thousand years when the Word came to us. Do you think we have progressed with the Word since, or have we regressed?

Current practices on the internet serve to alert us to our surrounding contexts, and how they shape and thus bias our thinking, perceptions and interpretations about relational connections and communication in relationships. This realm of connection needs to be understood in our daily function and ongoingly taken into account in relation to God and the words from God that we learn and assume to understand. In the above biblical account, those pursuing the Word were asked the not-so-obvious question: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" (Lk 24:5) They were directed to remember not as much *what* the Word told them but much more *how*.

There is a vital difference between the what and the how that often escapes our learning, as those in this narrative needed to realize. The what is not unimportant but the how is critical to interpret and understand the what. We easily look for the what in the wrong way (implied in "among the dead") without knowing the how—no matter the amount of the what we access, accumulate and supposedly learn (educators take note).

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

² Sherry Turkle provides a helpful understanding of the influence of our involvement in the digital world, see *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). See also David Brooks' commentary in *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* (New York: Random House, 2011).

³ Quentin J. Schultze extends this discussion for Christians in *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

The realm of connection was defined in the beginning by the Creator. Contrary to common perception, the what that was stipulated for creation did not define the Creator's realm as much as the how. In the beginning, the how of creation determined the realm of connection unmistakably in God's image and likeness; and the incomparable significance of this uncommon realm constituted human life in the primacy of relationship together (as emerged in Gen 2:18)—with all the whats emerging as secondary to this primacy of the how, and being understood fully only in this irreducible and nonnegotiable realm constituted by the *whole* of God. It is the whole of God integrated with the Word (Jn 1:1-3) who enacts and then embodies **the defining how** of the Trinity to determine the realm of connection to understand the what of all the words from God.

Therefore, from the beginning the LORD clarified that the how of the words from God is communicated “face to face—clearly, not in riddles” (Num 11:8). Accordingly to the present, in order for this how of God's words to unfold, we must define our **locatedness** (or horizon⁴) in the realm of connection; that is, we need to account for where each of us is specifically located in our surrounding context that defines the everyday terms of our identity and function. The horizon of our location must be compatible with the how (including the horizon) enacted by God for us to share in the same realm of connection with God, so that the full significance of the what from God is understood.

At this stage, this raises basic issues for us in our relationship with God about the how and not the what:

1. How, in actual reality and not virtual, does God connect with us?
2. How in fact (neither alternative nor fake news) does God communicate with us?

The how may seem apparent to you but we should not be quick to make this assumption.

Wi-Fi (wireless fidelity) is the prevailing and pervasive medium that we use to gain knowledge, increasingly even in rural countries. Not surprisingly, this increasingly is becoming the primary medium for knowledge of God in theological education, perhaps even supplanting weekly Bible studies in Christian education and reflective study in spiritual formation. Yet, the reality is that this medium also predisposes our mindset (e.g. *syniēmi* in Mk 8:17, and *synesis* in Col 2:2-3) in reduced parameters (such as binary) of the fidelity of that knowledge, with the consequence that what we think we know may not represent the facts and truth (as in Jn 5:37-39). In such reductions our mindset becomes rendered to variations of “the medium is the message.” Also not surprising, this method of interpretation for reality in the Bible goes unchecked—though not without the tension from interpretive diversity—in which the fidelity of God's words is muted, distorted or lost. Thus, as in most wireless connections, there is in reality no relational connection in this realm (cf. Ps 145:18). Therefore, Scripture, the words *from* God, not simply the words *of* God, is not compatible with Wi-fying and related methods; and it's time for us to “Wake up! ...for I have not found your *practice* complete [whole] in the *perception* of my God”—in spite of even our success and “reputation of being alive” (Rev 3:1-2, NIV).

⁴ For a perspective on horizons crucial for biblical interpretation, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

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

In general, Nico Mele, the director of Harvard's Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, expounds on the damaging effects of the use of this technology not only on compromising the integrity of information but its power to shape our thinking. For Nico, however, the problem is not technology but "there's something in our culture that has become less substantive"; this is the problem of the human condition that he admits to not fully understanding.⁵ The lack of understanding the human condition with its underlying sin of reductionism is also indicative of many, if not most, Christians. This has certainly impacted the integrity of both churches and the academy, raising legitimate concern about the significance of the education and learning in those contexts.

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

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

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

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

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

⁵ Nico Mele expressed his views in an interview in the *Los Angeles Times Business Beat* (March 6, 2018) and in his book *The End of Big: How the Internet Makes David the New Goliath* (New York: Macmillan, 2013).

uncommon outcome that integrates our boasting only in the primary (distinguished in Jer 9:23-24). This study addresses these issues in whole context, with the prayerful hope and expectation that the irreducible and nonnegotiable relational outcome (thus uncommon) will take us (individually and together) further and deeper than we've experienced of and with God, and therefore be unmistakably distinguished in the whole image and holy likeness of the Trinity.

To experience the relational reality of this whole and holy (whole-ly) relational outcome, we have to engage ongoingly in a process (as in journey) that distinguishes our person as a *subject* in contrast to an *object*: *the hermeneutic (interpretation) challenge*.

The Realm of the Hermeneutic Challenge

Integrated with the epistemic realm revealed by God (above and beyond common epistemic realms), the hermeneutic challenge is an indispensable realm for all those engaged with the Bible.⁶ If we don't want to be found also "looking for the Word (the Way, Truth or Life) among the reduced and fragmented," thus in the wrong place or way, then it is crucial that we embrace the depth of "how the Word told us." That depth emerges with the compatible hermeneutic that unfolds interpretation integrated in God's whole-ly realm of connection.

The basic requisite to embrace how the Word speaks to us is to **listen to the Word**, as clearly made definitive for us by the Word (Lk 8:18; Mk 4:24). This initiates the how by the Word that both antecedes the what of the Word and then integrates the what into the how in order to embrace the depth of meaning and understanding communicated by the words from God. As the requisite for Scripture, listening is neither about merely hearing nor about conforming to what is heard (read) in the text and obeying its terms (as obedience is commonly perceived). Rather in contrast to obligation, listening involves our relational response—perhaps even reaction at times to what is difficult to listen to—distinguished by the nature of the how's relational process initiated by God, ongoingly enacted through Scripture, and embodied in God's whole relational response of grace. Therefore, the hermeneutic challenge encompasses the following for our engagement with the Word:

The how and thus Way of the Word amplifies God's relational context (or horizon) and intensifies God's relational process, in order for our relational involvement to be constituted in God's realm of connection, whereby we can learn, know and understand the whole-ly God, and thereby enable our relational response to unfold in likeness of the Trinity.

Anything less and any substitutes in our engagement with the Word render us "looking for *more* among the *less*."

⁶ Because of its importance, I reemphasize this discussion previously made in my study *The Disciples of Whole Theology and Practice: Following the Diversity of Reformation or the Wholeness of Transformation* (Discipleship Study, 2017). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

It is axiomatic for all Christians engaged with the Bible to submit to the hermeneutic challenge, in which the hermeneutic challenge makes imperative, the relational imperative: Listen before we interpret what God is saying, and do not make your assumptions the basis for any subsequent interpretations or you will end up speaking for God; this is the hermeneutic clarification and correction that Job experienced in his theological task (Job 38:1-3; 42:3-4). That is to say, “Be still” (*raphah*, to desist, quit, relax, Ps 46:10) by ceasing our initial human efforts to interpret and understand and thereby give God the opportunity to speak, so that we can “know that I am God”—the identity of whom only God can disclose. And the relational outcome will be not what we have “discovered” by our efforts and thus boast about, but rather boasting (*hālāl*, praising and celebrating) in what we have received from God’s communication and therefore gained in knowing and understanding God (Jer 9:23-24).⁷ Of encouraging significance for us today, this was the relational outcome that convicted Job of God’s whole identity in his theological task, when he responded to the hermeneutic challenge (Job 42:4-5).

Underlying this theological hermeneutic and its theological interpretation are three more basic questions, which have provided the basis for how Christians have defined themselves and determined their practice down through history:

1. How do we know God, or even if God exists?
2. How do we respond to this God to define our faith?
3. How does this faith grow and develop?

The issues central to these basic questions existed before the Reformation and go back to the early church and the time of Christ. They all converge in the pivotal history of Jesus (including the Word “In the beginning”), who embodied the Word communicated from God in order to disclose the identity of not just God but the whole and holy/uncommon God distinguished beyond the common of the human context. The identity of God disclosed by the Word cannot be diversified by common human terms (even by Christians) without fragmenting the identity of God and rendering God no longer whole and uncommon. The resulting diversity involves a reductionist process of **commonizing** God on the basis of our human contexts (personal and/or collective); commonization and contextualization are intertwined, and they remain entangled in human terms and practice—in spite of even good intentions by Christians. This underlying cultural practice is a critical influence still determining much of the practice of contextualization (e.g. of the gospel) engaged by Christians today to bias their

⁷ Hebrew and Greek word studies used in this study are taken from the following sources: Horst Balz, Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce Waitke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980); Ernst Jenni, Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997); Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Harold K. Moulton, ed., *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978); W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1981); Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible* (Chattanooga: AMG Publ., 1996).

interpretations (discussed further in chap. 4). The obvious consequence for Christians is claiming the identity of and practicing a faith in a different God than the whole and uncommon God vulnerably disclosed by the Word.

Any identity of God that does not unfold from the hermeneutic challenge of Scripture should be suspect—and rightfully encountered with a hermeneutic of suspicion—and challenged for clarification, if not confronted for correction. While the text of Scripture requires interpretation, the authority of Scripture is not subject to interpretation—particularly under the cloak of the priesthood of all believers. Authority is God’s domain and Christian faith only affirms the truth of this reality, so our faith does not compose this authority. This subtle distinction is critical to maintain in our faith. Moreover, while the practice of this faith may be variable among Christians, the affirmation of this truth is not dependent on faith alone and thus not subject to the diversity of Christian beliefs. Even though the relational response of the priesthood of all believers may reciprocally represent God, those who so respond do not speak *for* God.

The simple truth is: God communicates, and only God speaks for himself, using human contexts, authors and language to express in relational terms the whole of who, what and how God is. All Christians are subject to the authority of God’s communication, which is not about conforming literally to the text of Scripture. The hermeneutic challenge is the relational process of involvement that responds directly—neither indirectly nor with the latitude of personal interests and biases—to God and submits to the authority of God’s communication. This directs us in our involvement to the following:

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

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

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

embrace, and relationally respond to the whole Word face to face, person to person, whereby our whole person is able to “Follow my whole person” in reciprocal relationship together.

The relational imperative for our faith must be integrated ongoingly with the paradigm for our hermeneutic process in order for our practice of faith to have relational significance to God, as well as to be distinguished as true followers of the Word. The above subset of three basic questions are essential for the theology and practice of discipleship, which all disciples must answer with relational significance to truly be distinguished as followers of Jesus—that is, distinguished beyond what commonly exists among Christians. Most Christians presume in their practice to have the answers to basic questions 1 and 2, and on the basis of those assumptions (or presuppositions) they answer question 3. But the answer to question 3 can only be fully defined and determined by the depth of significance that question 2 is answered with. Further and integrally, question 2 unfolds (not evolves) defined and determined only by the depth of significance that fulfills question 1. Therefore, as we proceed in this study these three questions are basic to who and what are essential to our faith and vital for how we practice.

Getting to the depth of significance of God’s communication in Scripture has been problematic for Christians down through history, to say the least, notably because only relational significance constitutes the depth of God’s communication. Relational significance is the difference that distinguishes God’s relational language from the general use of referential language (discussed further in Chap 2), which is commonly used even by Christians—especially in the academy to compose biblical and theological studies. That makes listening to God not only a priority but primary in the process of interpretation, making all other hermeneutic activity secondary (not unimportant)—perhaps at times even unnecessary, certainly if it distracts us from the primary or disconnects us from the primacy of relationship that the grace of God’s communication constitutes only in this realm of connection. Yet, that still leaves us with the text of Scripture, which is contained within human contexts and historical settings that render God’s communication more complex than literal expressions of simple truths.

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

⁸ See my study on the hermeneutic challenge from the beginning and its ongoing implications for our theological task. “*Did God Really Say That?*” *Theology in the Age of Reductionism* (Theology Study, 2013). Online at <http://4X12.org>.

the primacy of relationship together but not according to human terms (including our terms as Christians).

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

Jesus made a distinct hermeneutic process the relational imperative for all his followers, or there would be consequences in their theology and practice (Lk 8:18; Mk 4:23-25). Based on his imperative, the unmistakable reason for the existing diversity in Christian theology and practice is failing to meet Jesus’ hermeneutic challenge, leaving the interpretation of the Other (the Word and his gospel) to others in all their diversity—even those with good intentions. These others would include the magisterial Reformers and all others (notably evangelicals) who subscribe to *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*.⁹ As a consequence predicted by **Jesus’ paradigm**—“the measure you give [or use] will be the measure you get” (Mk 4:24)—the common composition of orthodoxy has become a theological construction without the relational significance of God’s Word, therefore lacking the orthopraxy of the whole-ly Way, Truth and Life.

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

Certainly interpretation is always occurring about what the Word communicates. The hermeneutic challenge doesn’t preclude our interpretation but always puts it in its primary context, whereby the Word speaks first and thus for himself—always Jesus’ relational imperative for the hermeneutic process. However—and this must be recognized and acknowledged—as long as the hermeneutic door remains wide open to “Did God say

⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer examines Christian diversity in both-and terms that affirms a hermeneutic based on the *solas*, and thereby highlights the underlying unity existing in plurality of interpretation. See *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

that?” others will increasingly speak for God, speaking contrary not to orthodoxy and orthopraxy but to whole theology and practice.¹⁰ This then further raises the question: If Christians meet Jesus’ hermeneutic challenge, will there no longer be all this diversity in theology and practice? As just footnoted, opinions differ about the nature of existing Christian diversity and what is needed today. Just taking up Jesus’ hermeneutic challenge would likely not eliminate existing diversity, but it would greatly reduce it to the extent of our relational response of ongoing relational involvement in the hermeneutic process—the significant involvement of which is neither defined nor determined by the mere adjective ‘relational’. Only the depth of our relational involvement will meet the hermeneutic challenge that counteracts our divisive condition and the biases inherent in it (as Nathanael witnessed).

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

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

¹⁰ Christian Smith describes this existing condition in Christianity with stronger either-or terms in *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011). Peter J. Leithart calls for the death of Protestantism in order for the unity in the church to be restored, in *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

A reductionist mindset has prevailed in human history, shaping human perceptual-interpretive frameworks and lenses in underlying ways with a fragmentary focus. As we witness and are seduced today, the digital age of modern technological convenience has imposed its parameters on our thinking and shaped our practice with a dominating binary perceptual framework and interpretive lens. Subtly, our knowledge has been reduced mainly to either-or quantitative terms, which lack qualitative depth and relational significance—the consequences of convenience gained from the internet and experienced on social media. In no other context is this more true, though not prevailing overtly, than in the history of God’s people, with the modern Christian context the most evident. A cartoon demonstrates this condition. Moses is seen returning from Mt Sinai with the stone tablets of God’s commandments raised above his head, with this new declaration for God’s people: “**Behold! Now both thinner and lighter.**”¹¹ Ironically, and sadly, the historical reality for ancient Israel was their reduction of God’s relational terms for covenant relationship together down to “thinner and lighter” conforming to a code of behavior for religious-national identity, thereby losing the qualitative depth and relational significance of the covenant relationship of God’s love (as in Dt 7:7-9).

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

Whose Epistemic, Hermeneutic and Relational Realm of Connection?

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

Jesus told Nathanael in their initial realm of connection that “you will see greater things than these” (Jn 1:50). The Word’s prophetic voice, however, would only be an experiential reality for Nathanael if he went deeper into this realm of connection. Just as

¹¹ From *Parade Magazine*, “Cartoon Parade,” 12/8/2015.

for Nathanael, this requires from all of us the depth of relational involvement based only on the Word's relational terms, which are integrally designed for experiencing the relational reality in God's realm of connection. The early disciples (unfortunately, including Nathanael) struggled in their epistemic, hermeneutic and relational realm of connection with the Word; and it is arguable if this condition prevails among Christians today or has even become more relationally distant from the Word's clarification and correction. How do you see our condition today, and more importantly, how do you experience the Word?

In my perception and experience, our epistemic source has increasingly narrowed down to the quantitative and rationalistic (think rationalism), with our hermeneutic routine shaped by self-interest or merely an end in itself, and our relational terms having regressed to little if any significance. This condition, past and present, has generated epistemological illusions and ontological simulations, rendering our knowing and understanding the whole-ly God to a theological fog, thus "looking for the living Word among the reduced and fragmented."

Whether in the theology and practice of churches or the academy today, there is a pervasive reality existing overtly or covertly that is both in contrast to the traditional ideals assumed from the Bible and in conflict with the enacted and embodied Word. This underlying reality of what is commonly presented in Christian theology and practice exposes an inescapable condition needing the Word's clarification and correction: Christian identity today is thinner and lighter than it ever has been, and current Christian function witnesses to this fact. Whether new followers in the global South will change the course of this condition or merely add to the diversity of theology and practice, remains an open question. Renewal today simply could be another version of reformation—including current movements among Pentecostals and charismatics¹²—which Protestant tradition simply reduced from transformation by the Word. However, if the hermeneutic door remains open, we can only expect an increasing diversity of discipleship, resulting in the truth of the whole gospel eluding those who presume to claim its good news. And this Christian condition will continue because it evidences the presence of the human condition that has yet to be redeemed as an experiential reality—even though the relational reality of redemption has been completed according to the gospel.

The **narrative of this human condition** (our human condition) can be summarized with the following understanding, for which all Christians are accountable and need to be responsible:

From its beginning the human condition **consists** of reductionism; and this human condition **persists** with reductionism's counter-relational workings against God's wholeness; and these subtle practices **resist** (even unintentionally) the gospel of God's relational response to make us whole; the relational consequence is for our human condition to **subsist** in diverse theology and practice (contrary to whole theology and practice), persisting in ever new thinner-and-lighter alternatives that consistently counter, fragment and reduce God's whole theology and practice.

¹² Anthony C. Thiselton provides an overview of these developments in *The Holy Spirit—in Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries and Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

Absent from this narrative is significant coherence in the interpretation of God's Word, the coherence which distinguishes and thus understands the whole composing the Bible over merely parts (including their sum) of it. Christians need to be ongoingly aware that this whole of the Bible cannot be understood from just its parts; nor can it be distinguished by the quantity of parts, or the sum of those parts. God's whole is disclosed in a process of *synergism*, in which God's whole is always greater than the sum of multiple parts (including the diversity of interpretations). The primacy given to parts always emerges from reductionism and evolves with a fragmenting hermeneutic that is unable to integrate those parts into the whole—an inability evident of the human condition.

In their manifesto for coherence in Christian interpretation, Craig Bartholomew and Heath Thomas identify the cause and results of interpreting only parts of the Bible: “a plurality in theological thought and work is a direct result of the human condition.” For them, it is critical to interpret the whole that is outlined in the Bible in order to understand how the voice of God expressed in Scripture is heard in relation to all of human life, starting with Christians.¹³ For this outcome to unfold, our interpretation cannot be based on partial or selective words from God—not to mention be predisposed by familiar words—but only by allowing the whole of God and the whole gospel to communicate to us without reducing or fragmenting their words. Yet, what must also be understood in this hermeneutic challenge—particularly by those engaged in theological interpretation for biblical theology—is this:

The interconnections made from the Bible in only referential language do not result in the whole of God's communication expressed only in relational language; it merely maintains a language barrier that prevents entering God's realm of connection.

Biblical theology in referential language is still fragmentary and thus is always insufficient for whole theology and practice, at best only simulating the experiential truth and relational reality of God's disclosures that compose the full relational significance of the Word.

Whose epistemic source, hermeneutic routine and relational terms are nonnegotiable for God's realm of connection. Jesus made imperative for his followers the hermeneutic challenge because he expects all of us (not just a resourceful few) to have integral understanding of God's disclosures. This integral understanding (*syniemi* in NT) integrates the parts of God's disclosures (not just adding them up) to distinguish the whole—similar to putting together the pieces of a puzzle to get the complete picture, which doesn't result from merely studying the Scriptures (e.g. Jn 5:36-40, cf. Lk 10:21). Nor does this whole-ly understanding result from committed serving; the early disciples failed to engage the hermeneutic process of *syniemi* with Jesus' disclosures (notably in Mk 8:14-21), and this thus clouded their hermeneutic lens to minimize their relational

¹³ Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas, eds., *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 20.

connection with Jesus (as in Lk 9:44-45). Although Christians today may not respond to the relational imperative of Jesus' hermeneutic challenge, it is inescapable for the function of those who remain identified as his followers. Therefore, even the very gospel that followers claim today in the global church does not escape scrutiny for this pivotal reason crucial to our theology and practice.

The unavoidable reality paradigmatic in the Word's hermeneutic challenge (Mk 4:24) is indisputable:

- 'the measure of the epistemic, hermeneutic and relational engagement we use is the measure of the realm of connection we get'
- 'the measure of the realm of connection we use will be the measure of the Word we get'

Nothing more emerges and unfolds from this paradigm; it is axiomatic. On this unequivocal basis constituted by the Word, his paradigm is our relational imperative that is ongoingly clarified and corrected in, by and with the whole-ly Word.

"Therefore, consider carefully how you listen," as the Word speaks (Lk 8:18, NIV). Then, "Pay attention to what you hear [and read] *communicated in the words from God...For to those who have received from the Word's realm of connection, more will be given to them in this realm of connection; and for those who have not received from the Word's realm of connection, what they think they have will be rendered insignificant and lost in a virtual realm of connection,*" as clarified and corrected by the Word (Mk 4:25).

Chapter 2 Language: to Inform or to Communicate, to Discourse or to Connect

Why is my language not clear to you?

John 8:43, NIV

As you stand ‘in front of’ the Bible seeking to know and understand God, you likely have been susceptible to want to get ‘behind this text’ in order to gain this level in your learning and education.¹ You are not alone. Many have pursued this path, guided by historical criticism and linguistics. Theological as well as political studies have been influenced by a linguistic focus; and such a linguistic turn also has become central in the writing of social history.² What emerges in this process is the centrality of language and how it is used to construct information, discourse and even thought. Those engaged with the Bible also have to enter into a central focus on language, yet by taking only a qualified (if not chastened) turn to linguistics.

Obviously, in order for individuals or groups to have any mutual exchange and further interaction, they must share the same language. This shared language can be verbal and/or nonverbal (as in body language), yet with expressions and signs common to each other in order to have that exchange and interaction. On the other hand, even persons or groups who share the same language can have difficulty exchanging, interacting and being on the same level of understanding.

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

¹ Discussions of these interpretive positions in hermeneutics are found in Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene and Karl Moller, eds., *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), and in Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephen Evans, Mary Healy and Murray Rae, eds., *“Behind” the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

² A discussion of the relative composition of social history is found in Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990).

In the Bible we can observe similar difficulty and challenges with language, as well as give testimony of our similar personal experiences with the Word. Perhaps, not surprisingly, you may feel that you and the Word don't share the same language, and there may be more truth to that than is apparent. To highlight this reality, consider that the Jewish Jesus said directly to Jewish believers in the words cited above, "Why is my language not clear to you?" Certainly his words were not foreign to them, but the meaning of his language was uncommon to them. In other words, though they shared the same language expressions, they didn't share the same language signs. And what is underlying this difficulty is the factual reality that essentially they didn't have the same language as the Word to "know the Truth" (Jn 8:32). This paradoxical linguistic contrast led to their interpretation conflict in misunderstanding the Word (8:33-41). Critical to this process, what underlies interpretation conflicts with the Word are language barriers generated, erected and sustained by reductionism (8:42-47).

How reductionism is at the heart of interpretation conflicts emerged from the beginning; and it is indispensable to understand the language barriers reductionism creates, if we are to get past our current level of biblical interpretation and deeper into the Word's realm of connection.

Understanding the Nature and Purpose of Scripture's Language

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

The biblical text is expressed in various genres, which is helpful to know for discerning what is being expressed. This knowledge, however, neither accesses the original-*original* composition of the Word nor insures an understanding of the composition in its *original* language—that is, beyond and deeper than its Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek wording. The specific composition of the Word doesn't clearly emerge and fully unfold from its general expression unless that composition is perceived (read and listened to) in what is truly its original language. Stated briefly: The original language antecedes the biblical languages and gets us to the nature of the Word's language, which is essential for understanding the Word.

The Underlying Nature of Language

Jesus used parables to express various ideas, yet his thoughts behind them unfolded only in the nature of his language. This was problematic for those who heard him, even for his disciples. When the disciples asked him what a particular parable meant, he told them to their surprise: “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that *in spite of* ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand’” (Lk 8:9-10). Jesus’ words didn’t guarantee that the disciples understood him; on the contrary, they frequently didn’t understand the words from Jesus. For example, after his imperative to “Let these words sink into your ears,” he revealed vulnerably what was to happen to him. “But they did not understand *his words*; its meaning was concealed from them, so they could not perceived it” (Lk 9:44-45). Given how Jesus distinguished the perception of his disciples moments earlier, in contrast to others’ lack, how do we explain the disciples lack and thus loss?

The Word’s language is not readily apparent from these interactions. The clarity of the Word is illuminated when the Word’s original language is distinguished “In the beginning” (Jn 1:1; Gen 1:1), which isn’t the context paid attention to commonly in biblical interpretations. John’s Gospel is crucial for defining the Word’s horizon (main context) in complete context, so that the gospel is whole and neither reduced nor fragmented by a Word out of context.

In the beginning the Creator constituted the persons (no matter the gender) in the primordial garden with an irreducible ontology, an irreplaceable epistemology and a nonnegotiable relationship, the function of which distinguished the image and likeness of the whole of God (integrally incorporating the Word and the Spirit). Those defining words from the Creator (Gen 1:28-30; 2:16-17), expressed in an historical or allegorical context, were either given to human persons to inform them of the parameters of their human function; or they were shared with those persons to communicate distinctly the terms for the relationship between them and the Creator. If the words communicated the terms for relationship together, then these relational terms could only be distinguished when composed in relational language. Anything less than relational language would be ambiguous, elusive, and simply open to variable interpretation of those relational terms; the consequence would be to substitute the Word’s relational terms with other (notably human) terms to define the relationship. The terms for most relationships are open for negotiation, at least in theory. The Word’s relational terms, however, are nonnegotiable, and this truth has been ignored, denied or simply not understood by God’s people since this beginning—with Christians having assumed the most negotiating posture in their practice of faith, though not overtly as a Rule of Faith.

This consequence evolved in the primordial garden from the beginning when the question was raised “Did God really say *that?*” (Gen 3:1) What needs to be understood in this encounter is the linguistic dynamic that on the surface innocently challenged God’s relational language. But then, what evolved is the substitution of an apparently reasonable alternate language to be definitive instead of relational language. How so?

First of all, the nature of the language expressing God's words was changed from the relational language originally used *to communicate* to an alternate language used merely *to inform* (Gen 3:4-5). The shift to the primary focus on transmitting information over communicating relationship then opened the door to two major linguistic shifts of the words from God:

1. A selective process of omitting, neglecting, disregarding, or denying God's words, albeit in a manner that seems reasonable and not irrational, or even merely benign.
2. The deconstruction of the words from God and their reinterpretation in an alternate language speaking "like God," which both informs (read misinforms) and serves the self-interests/concerns of the interpreter (as in 3:6).

These major shifts transposed 'the words *from* God in relational language' to 'the words *of* God in referential language', and thereby altered the nature of the Word's original language. The consequence for this beginning that still prevails today is:

The use of referential language that is unable to compose relational terms in order to communicate but is limited only to inform—the narrow transmission of information—therefore a language that cannot understand the composition of the words *from* Word no matter the wealth of information (even about "good and evil") processing the words *of* God it can transmit to speak for God (as if "like God").

Indeed, "Why is my language not clear to you?"

The genius of reductionism is its reasonable appearance in questioning the words from God. After all, don't we read the Bible because we want to know if God said 'that'? In reductionism's subtle challenge, however, its linguistic shift moves from what God said to what God really meant by 'that'. And it would be a serious mistake for our engagement with the Bible to defer (perhaps bow) to the seeming innocence of this shift. By focusing solely on *God's intention*, the actual words from God were only used for reference, whereby the real meaning of God's words was opened to conjecture, the bias of assumptions, even to scholarly speculation—as pervades the academy and preoccupies its education. The hermeneutic door was opened to diversity of interpretation, a Biblepedia of information, based on an epistemic realm reduced from the original language of the words *from* God to a fragmentary language only referring to the words *of* God.

Substituting referential language for relational language has changed the nature of language, which then also alters the purpose of language. This is the linguistic condition from the beginning that composes the narrative of the human condition. Sadly, yet not surprising, we seem to be unaware of or appear to not understand the nature of the language that God uses and that we use instead—the purpose and goal of reductionism since the beginning. That's why Jesus clarified his question opening this chapter with the definitive response: "Because you are unable to hear *the language* I speak *and the relational words* I say. You *identify with the father of reductionism* and you *defer to its desires*" (Jn 8:44, NIV).

The Competing Purposes of Language

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

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

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

From the beginning, the dynamic workings of reductionism have put into living motion (not virtual) the human (including our) condition. In the dynamic of the human condition, there has evolved a reconstituted anthropology (including our theological anthropology) of distinctly reduced human ontology and function, which is fragmented from the whole ontology and function in the image and likeness of God. This reduction is evident whenever persons' identity and function are defined from outer in rather than from inner out—as evolved in Genesis 3:7 in contrast and conflict with Genesis 2:25. At this stage of this evolving condition, Christians above all need to embrace the Truth (as composed by the Word, Jn 8:31-32) to live as *subject* persons from inner out, who no longer have to exist as mere outer-in *objects* of reductionism. The relational language of these words from Jesus clarify that persons as subjects exercise free will and hold themselves accountable for their choices; persons as objects, on the other hand, abdicate their will and then by default defer to reductionism, conforming to its defining terms. Therefore, we need to recognize unmistakably and to understand entirely:

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

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

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

Referentialization of the Word is the most significant, and least understood, consequence emerging from the dynamic of reductionism. Moreover, this dynamic has evolved, has been long established and continues to extend itself in human contexts, even as the norm for the common notion of ‘the common good’. This addresses us urgently to the globalization of reductionism occurring today, and its defining influence that is forming the global church and its diversity of persons and relationships into a reduced ontology and function.³ This is the common theological anthropology that is assumed with referential language.

As Jesus would further clarify and deeply correct:

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

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

Given the definitive nature of the words from God’s language and the determinative purpose of the Word’s clarification and correction, it is crucial for our theological anthropology in particular and theology in general to understand a distinction that is not interchangeable.⁴ Despite the indispensable place of the creation context to complete the context composing the narrative for human beings, it is insufficient, inadequate and incorrect for theological anthropology simply to reference the context of the Creator. As Subject, the Creator’s context is not a referential context; and Creator-Subject’s creative and communicative actions (as well as salvific) are enacted only in relational terms, never referential terms that diminish, minimalize or make secondary the primacy of God’s relational design, purpose and function. In other words, God by nature acts simply in relational terms, which we quite simply often overlook or ignore. There is a basis for this.

The relational terms composing these relational actions can only be distinguished in Creator-Subject’s relational context, and not a referential context in which this relational significance becomes elusive, gets obscured, or is lost. This points to the underlying use of language. The use of relational terms and its composing relational language function for the primary purpose of communication in relationship. In contrast, and often in conflict, the use of referential terms and its composing referential language

³ I discuss this pervading reality in *The Global Church Engaging the Nature of Sin and the Human Condition: Reflecting, Reinforcing, Sustaining, or Transforming* (Global Church Study: 2016). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

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

function for the purpose of transmitting information, which is only secondary at best to the primary function and purpose of relationship. Essentially, on the one hand, it can be said that referential language was not “designed” for the further development of qualitative communication in relationship but, on the other hand, in reality it purposely went in the opposite direction that takes us away from qualitative relational connection. Historically, the referential language of prose evolved after poetry, and early poetry was sung, the qualitative significance of which was basic to communication in relationship and not the mere transmission of information.⁵ For further consideration, Iain McGilchrist locates this qualitative process in the function of the right brain hemisphere. This qualitative function of the right hemisphere, and its related view of the world, is in contrast to the quantitative reduction of words to the referential language of prose by the left brain hemisphere for its function not of communication in relationship but to merely make discourse about something.⁶

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

Moreover, language matters because language both forms thought and makes functional any thought (notably human consciousness) antecedent to language. It has become increasingly apparent to modern scientific research that the language we speak shapes the way we see the world and even the way we think (not necessarily producing thought).⁷ This points to the function of language not merely as a means of expression but also as a template imposing a constraint limiting what we see and the way we think. In his study of neuroscience, McGilchrist states about language:

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

In the process, language helps some things stand forward but by the same token makes others recede.... What language contributes is to firm up certain particular ways of seeing the world and give fixity to them. This has its good side, and its bad. It aids consistency of reference over time and space. But it can also exert a restrictive force on what and how we think. It represents a more *fixed version* of the world: it shapes, rather than grounds, our thinking.⁸

⁵ See Oliver Sacks for a discussion on perfect pitch, tonal communication and protolanguage, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008); see also Edward Foley, *From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991), 9.

⁶ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 105.

⁷ Reported by Sharon Begley in “What’s in a Word?” *Newsweek*, July 20, 2009, 31.

⁸ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 110.

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

The origination of referential language evolved as God's relational language was narrowed down and God's command (*sawah*, Gen 2:16) was redefined from communication in God's relational terms to the transmission of information in referential terms. Detaching the command from Subject God (or *de*-relationalizing it) removed God's words from their primary purpose only for relationship together. The command was clearly God's communication for the wholeness of their relationship together, not the mere transmission of information (the purpose of referential language) for humans to know merely what to do (the focus of referential terms). This inaugural referentialization of God's words (command) was extended later by the people of Israel whenever they transposed the commandments from God's relational language to referential language, and consequently shaped the covenant relationship to merely conforming in narrow referential terms—essentially *de*-relationalizing the covenant from ongoing relationship with Subject God, thus rendering both God and themselves to mere objects.

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

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

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

from this vital concern is the extent of knowing and understanding God, or at least what we think we know and understand about God.

So, how would you describe your experience with this study thus far?

Language Barriers by Nature and on Purpose

Like the language difficulty I experienced with my southern friend about our English, having the same linguistic expressions doesn't guarantee that understanding will take place. What Jesus illuminated in the above interaction is that there are unavoidable language barriers preventing understanding; and that until these language barriers are removed there will be interpretive conflicts and impasses in understanding. This problem is analogous to marriage conflicts, which may require the spouses to have marriage counseling to get past the language barriers that they either don't understand or are reluctant to face. In such situations counseling is not merely a suggestion but a need.

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

Language barriers are a "natural" occurrence in human relations, yet their existence is evidence of the nature of the human condition. The current political divisiveness dominating the U.S. is simply a demonstration of this human condition, and the language barriers of identity politics can be summed in a single word: toxic. Toxic is the single "word of the year" chosen for 2018 by the editors at the Oxford English Dictionary; Dictionary.com chose "misinformation," which is certainly a primary medium of toxic language. This word describes the language dominating this past year and the obvious purpose it has fulfilled in its use. The barriers created, however, go beyond the use of such language. As science has discovered, the language we speak also shapes both the way we see the world and even the way we think. This reality of our minds helps illuminate the nature of our human condition and the language barriers evolving from it to determine human relations, even in relation to God.

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

Jesus had been communicating intensively the words from God, which was at the heart of his actions and underlying his “miraculous signs” (*semion*, 3:2). Yet, the theological trajectory and relational path composed by his language expressions were not understood by this biblical scholar (a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin), because Jesus’ language signs could not be processed by Nicodemus’ perceptual-interpretive mindset (3:4,9-10). What Jesus clarified was Nicodemus’ prevailing referential language, which created this language barrier preventing Nicodemus from understanding. Moreover, Jesus had to correct Nicodemus’ narrow thinking formed by his referential language in order to overcome the language barrier between them. Fortunately, it was apparent as his life unfolded (Jn 7:50-51; 19:39) that Nicodemus was neither reluctant to be corrected nor unwilling to make his person vulnerable to Jesus’ whole person. Therefore, Nicodemus entered the Word’s realm of connection to be changed from inner out—the transformation in relational language that is not distinguished in the common words of “born again” in referential language.

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

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

With the nature of God’s relational language, the book of Deuteronomy is composed definitively to fulfill the language purpose essential for the words from God. Deuteronomy is not a book transmitting important information about the Law, despite the fact that it details what obedience to God looks like. On the contrary, the relational language of Deuteronomy in primary function communicates the words from God, specifically in order to share the relational terms (not mere law) necessary to have depth (as in whole) of relationship together integrally with God and with each other. Without God’s relational terms, relationship together will not emerge and unfold as the relational reality, though referential language certainly has informed us of its evolution as a virtual

reality. For God's language purpose, therefore, the book of Deuteronomy is uncommonly composed as the ultimate love story (highlighted in Dt 4:37; 7:8; 10:15; 23:5; 33:3,12), that is, the Book of Love (not Law) to fulfill God's only language purpose:

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

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

The Language of Love

Love is a universal theme in most languages of the world. The nature and purpose of love language, however, are not universal. What the word means and how it is used varies between languages, including among those with the same language. These differences also exist among Christians. While such differences would be compatible with a postmodern perceptual-interpretive framework, they are incompatible with God's language of love.

The pivotal words found in John 3:16 were not part of Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus but added to it later. The evangelist John wanted it to be included in Jesus' realm of connection with Nicodemus, in order that these pivotal words would not be taken out of Jesus' relational language and context and merely referenced as important. Yet, this reduction is what has happened to the language of John 3:16. How much information have you seen about the words of God's love, and how much discourse have you heard about God's love? Perhaps, also, Christians using a Bible Dictionary would choose 'love' as "the word of the year" for eternity, by referencing John 3:16.

In referential language, love is a word, concept, ideal and thought, the expressions of which do not distinguish the nature and purpose of love in God's relational language. And the thinking formed by referential language about love subconsciously erects a language barrier with the love words *from* God, even while the thoughts could be focused on the love words *of* God. This language disparity is the result of a perceptual-interpretive mindset formed by the workings of reductionism in their counter-relational nature and purpose. The basic issue in the language of love and the critical workings in its disparity are illuminated in a defining interaction that Jesus had with Peter, which not surprisingly is found only in the Gospel of John (Jn 21:15-22).

Since language both expresses thought and forms thinking, the thoughts on love either expressed or not expressed in this interaction are crucial to understand for the composition of love language. It will be also important to realize the following: discerning whether the thinking about love anteceded its expression, and thus made assumptions about love biased by a particular perceptual-interpretive mindset.

Peter didn't represent the model disciple but a disciple-in-making, who ongoingly required the Word's clarification and correction. In this post-resurrection encounter with Jesus, Peter is surprised and taken aback by the words from the Word—namely by the word love (both *agapē* and *phileo* in their common language). “Do you love me?” This question is highly visible for Christians, yet what is distinguished in it and addressed by it have had little if any perception by Christians. What is distinguished is the Word's language of love and what is addressed is the alternate language used by Peter.

Peter's first and second response to the Word's penetrating question was simply “Yes...I love you.” Peter's love language is not apparent in his answer, as with most expressions of “I love you” by Christians. There was no ambiguity in his words—a personal and direct I-statement—which he qualified each time with “Lord, you know that.” Indeed, the Word knew well the language Peter used and was fully aware of Peter's thinking composing his words. On this basis, the Word asked a third time using a synonym of love (*phileo*) to connect with the same love word Peter used in his responses. The Word, however, wasn't changing his love language in order to be compatible with Peter's love language. What the Word desired in his question is to circumvent the language barrier between them, so that Peter would question his thinking in his responses and reconsider the significance of his language of love. In other words, the language of love we use is the extent of relationship together we get.

This interaction points to three basic messages that underlie the language used in any exchange between persons. These three messages are not usually explicitly stated by the speaker but are definitely implied expressions in the exchange (discussed further in chap. 3). They are specifically expressed to indicate the following:

1. Expressing something about the speaker's person.
2. Expressing something about the person spoken to.
3. Expressing something about the relationship between them.⁹

These messages qualify what is stated in the language used in an exchange, thus they are important to interpret for more complete understanding of the speaker's statements. Based on these basic messages, what are Jesus and Peter expressing in each message that qualifies what they are saying?

To each of Peter's three responses the Word communicated what, not surprisingly, has been commonly misinterpreted and thus misapplied. The Word didn't transmit information to Peter to establish the purpose of love as serving him. Serving has become the benchmark for what Christians should do to demonstrate their love for God as well as others, which does not account for what Jesus expressed about his person, Peter's person and their relationship. Yet, this ideal is what the Word's love language is

⁹ These basic messages were identified and discussed for counseling by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Helmick Beavin, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967).

clarifying and correcting, so that the nature and purpose of love will be understood and enacted only according to the Word's relational language. For the Word, the function of serving is less about what to do and mostly involves *how* to live—namely, as persons in the primacy of relationship together. In this interaction, the response of serving is first and foremost integrated in the Word's relational imperative “Follow me” (Jn 21:19,22). Earlier, the Word made definitive the paradigm for all who serve: “follow me, *my whole person*, and where *my person* is, there will my servant also be *relationally involved in person-to-person relationship*” (Jn 12:26). In this relational imperative, the Word communicated the language of love that he embodied and enacted vulnerably with his whole person, with nothing less and no substitutes.

The Word's relational language of love is never about giving primary function to ‘what to do’, but always foremost distinguishing the vulnerable relational involvement of the person in the primacy of relationship first with God and then with others. This distinguished relational involvement of love is integral for the person (both the Word's and ours) to be whole in ontology and function. A reduced ontology and function makes primary what to do, and it is on this reductionist basis that Christian identity and function have been commonly defined and determined—just as Peter demonstrated by his discipleship.

Therefore, the love language of the Word is essential irreducibly and is integral nonnegotiablely for composing the language of discipleship. Without this language of love, language barriers with the Word remain—which Peter also demonstrated in this defining interaction (Jn 21:19-22) that expressed something different (focused subtly on the secondary) about his person and Jesus' person (both not at the level of the whole person), and their relationship (less depth of involvement), that is, his basic messages to qualify his words. The consequence of language barriers is inevitable and thus unavoidable:

The nature of the Word's relational language will not be embraced and the purpose of the Word's relational language will not be experienced for the relational reality of knowing and understanding the whole-ly God in vulnerable relationship together.

And the differences in their basic messages help us distinguish the language barrier preventing relational connection, involvement and thus this relational outcome.

This consequence points us directly to the matter of sin.

The Language of Sin

The language of love interacts with sin in a reflexive dynamic to compose and/or be composed by the language of sin. This interaction can be either integrating or fragmenting, depending on the language used. In the beginning the language of love was communicated, and from the beginning the alternate language of sin was transmitted. Ever since, the two languages have collided, competed and controlled the significance of the other, seeking to be either the dominant language or the definitive language for each other in order to compose the Word and its theology and practice for everyday life.

The dynamic of this language interaction is summarized as follows:

- When reductionism prevails, the language of sin is composed in referential language, in which persons are reduced in their ontology and function, forming their perceptual-interpretive mindset only focused outer in (even with a subtle appearance of being deeper), by which the language of love is composed merely in referential terms without relational significance, thereby rendering the Word and its theology and practice to mere information subject to diverse interpretation and human shaping.
- When God's relational language is definitive, the words from God communicate vulnerably the language of love to make primary whole persons from inner out who are thereby involved in the primacy of relationship together, by which the language of sin is composed with anything less and any substitutes for the primary, whereby reductionism is clarified and corrected by the Word for whole theology and practice.

This language interaction is a simple dynamic, but its reflexive workings in everyday life make it complex. Moreover, it is compounded when Christians don't listen carefully to the language used; and listening to the language of sin is difficult for hard-of-hearing Christians.

The most common understanding of sin is disobeying God and the commandments, breaking God's law, and related moral failure. This language of sin is insufficient understanding to be integral with what is primary in God's language of love. As just discussed, what is primary for God's love language is not 'what to do' but 'how to be involved in relationship'. Certainly, disobedience is not how to be involved in relationship with God but it is insufficient to account for and to be accountable to the primary of how involvement with God is defined (as Jesus clarified and corrected with Peter). If sin is limited to disobedience, this narrowed-down language reduces what sin is and thus what is primary to God.

From the beginning in the primordial garden, the primary issue was not disobeying God's specific command about the tree (as commonly perceived) but the following:

1. Reducing God's relational language communicating (not merely commanding) vital relational terms with those persons down to referential language transmitting mere information to them (albeit relevant information)—as they embraced in Genesis 3:2-5.
2. Using referential language to fragment the words from God selectively to serve their self-concern/interest—as they enacted in 3:6.
3. Reducing their ontology and function from the inner-out wholeness in the image and likeness of God to an ontology and function composed from outer in—as they embodied in 3:7.
4. Reducing relationship together from what is primary in God's love language (as initiated in 2:18) to a fragmentary relational condition lacking relational connection—as they practiced in 3:8-12.

What evolved from this beginning is reductionism and its counter-relational workings. When this is understood, the language of sin is composed as nothing less than *sin as reductionism*. The sin of reductionism always counters and is in conflict with the whole of God and the wholeness created in God's image and likeness. As evidenced in the primordial garden, the trajectory of reductionism tries to intercept the trajectory of the Word in the human context, so that its whole is fragmented and no longer whole. In this often subtle process, however, recognizing the sin of reductionism in its everyday workings is a continuous challenge, because it is not commonly apparent even to Christians. Reductionism alters the face of sin with the appearance of "good and evil" as if to be known "like God" (Gen 3:5); and this critical shift in the language of sin generates illusions of this knowledge and simulations in its practice—encompassing the theology and practice of many Christians (cf. 2 Cor 11:13-15).

This alternate language of sin seeks to dominate the language of love in order to compose the words of God and its theology and practice in the reduced meaning and significance of referential language, whereby the relational language communicating the words from God is rendered silent. More subtly, to maintain this language barrier the alternate language of sin submerging reductionism forms the perceptual-interpretive mindset that makes assumptions and imposes biases of epistemological illusions and ontological simulations, thereby appearing reasonable for everyday life. This reality challenges, if not confronts, us to listen carefully and examine our language of sin.

From the beginning the scope of referential language has been ubiquitous. As the primary medium for the transmission of reductionism, it has permeated every context and level of human life. Since the emergence of referential language, the dynamic of its influence and workings has permeated even human development (including the brain) along with its primary purpose to construct substitute developments in theology. As discussed, referential language is fragmentary and disembodies the Word into parts (e.g. teachings, doctrine), which it attempts to aggregate into some unity or whole (e.g. in a systematic or biblical theology). This fragmentation and disembodiment are further evident in textual criticism (historical, form, literary), which embeds us in the secondary without understanding the primary (as defined by God and not human reason). For George Steiner, this secondary critical reflection is the interpretive crisis that results in the loss of God's presence—a condition he identifies as 'a Secondary City'.¹⁰ More critically, the use of referential language in the quest for certainty (e.g. in foundationalism and philosophical theology), which presumably would more accurately describe and represent the Word (e.g. in propositionalism and criticism), cannot be more than self-referencing, inconsistent and incomplete. That is, this is the consequence once it disembodies the Word and de-relationalizes Subject God, and hence disengages from the Word's relational context and process vulnerably disclosing the whole of God, the whole-Trinity. This is the counter-relational workings of reductionism that subtly detaches God's theological trajectory from its integral relational path, which invariably results in disconnecting from the realm of connection distinguishing God's vulnerable presence and intimate involvement. This reality has not gone away or been diminished, notably in our theology and practice.

¹⁰ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

This disconnection has been amplified in the modern world.¹¹ With the wave of technology sweeping over the globe, the internet and social media have amplified communication to increasing quantitative levels that is shrinking the world and reshaping its cultures in how persons behave. The heightened intensity in this new(er) process of human engagement creates “noise” (too much activity, overstimulation, information overload, overly distracted brains), which significantly has reduced both the quality of our listening and the depth of our relational connections. This impact occurs not only in individualistic cultures but also in collectivist cultures (such as in East Asia) as the digital age takes hold—causing, for example, China to anxiously enforce strong constraints on internet usage to control access that could result in political consequences. Whatever the exposure and response to cyberspace, whether in the global North or South, there is and has been a growing disconnect in relationships as persons become further fragmented.¹²

Yet, there is more than technology that is causing changes in human behavior. There are deeper areas of human life that we need to listen to, which engage us beyond technology. Underlying the shape and reshaping of culture are deeper influences and causes for either individualistic cultures or collectivist cultures, some of which they have in common. For example, neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky reports on studies showing that what region persons live in a particular country can alter how a person thinks contrary to their culture. This is demonstrated in a specific context by how rice farmers in China epitomize their collectivist culture, whereas wheat farmers in China live as in an individualistic culture characteristic of the West—not due to technology or Western influence but from the structure of each farming system. The main point Sapolsky highlights in this “is simply to make us marvel at the subtlety of the factors that shape us.”¹³ These subtle factors keep pointing to reductionism.

Beyond technology, and apart from its noise in our lives, we need to listen carefully and pay attention to the subtle factors that shape us. The most consequential factors are those that reduce the quality of human life, most notably by fragmenting persons and relationships, both of which have resulted from technological engagement yet have more subtle causal factors than that. The most subtle factor converging with the global church to shape its theology and practice, and thereby to reduce the quality of its life and fragment persons and relationships embodying the church, is reductionism and its counter-relational workings; and this applies to the academy as well. Perhaps the internet and social media engagement are only its most apparent symptom. What distinguishes the global church, however, is not currently apparent, because only the church’s persons and relationships together in whole ontology and function composing whole theology and practice can distinguish the global church from the subtlety of reduced ontology and function and fragmentary theology and practice shaped by reductionism. The subtlety of

¹¹ I reemphasize this discussion previously made in *The Global Church Engaging the Nature of Sin & the Human Condition: Reflecting, Reinforcing, Sustaining, or Transforming* (Global Church Study: 2016). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

¹² This is also further discussed by Jarron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

¹³ Robert M. Sapolsky, “How humans are formed,” OP-ED, *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 2014.

reduced and/or fragmentary factors shaping us—notably defining persons and determining relationships with a reduced theological anthropology and an incomplete gospel—is never apparent unless we listen carefully and pay attention to the subtle presence of reductionism and understand its subtle influence. This requires knowing the language of sin in use and understanding its significance.

Listening carefully could be more problematic for global North Christians, whose individualistic cultures and Western functional dominance and theological prominence imply ‘speaking over listening’. At the same time, paying attention could be problematic for global South Christians, whose cultural lens may make too many assumptions that readily accept and thus easily ignore subtleties. Evil, for example, would likely draw the attention of global South Christians more than their counterparts in the North, yet the subtlety of reductionism could readily be accepted or ignored (e.g. as attributing it to the spirit world, even variations of magic). Contextual differences and variations must be accounted for in theology and practice. Simon Chan points in this direction to make a reasonable case for grassroots theology in Asian Christianity.¹⁴ Yet, unless it is understood what persons (at whatever level) in a particular culture listen to, and what is paid attention to or ignored and why, it is problematic knowing ‘what shapes who’ and ‘who shapes what’. Without making clear the subtlety of these distinctions in the language of sin used, any theology and practice is unable to be distinguished beyond the common shaped by the surrounding context—in spite of good grass-roots intentions (discussed further in chap. 4).

This human condition in general and our human condition as Christians in particular exist until clarified and corrected by the words from God’s language of love—as the Word embodied, enacted and continues to palpably communicate whole-ly in relational language. As we listen to the Word unfolding in his theological trajectory and relational path, we cannot ignore but must also listen to reductionism. That is, because of the nature of reductionism we cannot overlook paying acute attention to its easily overlooked trajectory and path subtly evolving in our midst. Reductionism’s trajectory and path are functioning parallel to the Word’s, seeking opportunities to intercept the Word’s trajectory and path in order to counter the Word. Therefore, reductionism is always present along with the presence of the Word and is unavoidable as a recurring issue in theology and practice (cf. Lk 4:13). Conversely, as we listen intently to sin as reductionism, we cannot ignore but must also deeply listen to the Word in relational language and pay close attention to the relational Word’s uncommon theological trajectory and whole relational path, which are integral for our interpretations of the Word from God. The whole-ly Word in relational terms unfolds in our midst in the language of God’s family love to clarify and correct our reductionism; therefore, the Word’s presence and involvement are always interacting with reductionism’s presence and integrally focused on confronting its influence and counter-relational work—that is, always interacting and integral in relational terms to counter the language of sin in referential terms. Simply put, we cannot listen carefully to one without listening to the other.

¹⁴ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2014).

The alternate language of sin without reductionism is incompatible with the Word, and its counterpart of good (as in “good and evil,” Gen 3:5) without wholeness is incongruent, as the Word clarifies and corrects. Yet, we could pay partial attention to the Word in our theology and practice and still ignore reductionism. This was the practice of Jesus’ disciples that subtly put them on a different relational path in their discipleship, with the relational consequence of not knowing and understanding Jesus in relational terms, though they obviously had much information about Jesus. Such a divergent path and relational consequence—which are often not paid attention to or simply ignored, as the disciples demonstrated—unequivocally reflect the ongoing presence and recurring issue of reductionism that are inseparable and unavoidable when engaging the whole-ly Word. The interaction unfolding in this converging process is vital for us to understand and is critical for what unfolds in the global church and all its churches, persons and relationships. Listening to sin without reductionism is a long-recurring issue increasing in our midst that more and more conveniently ignores the whole Word and, subsequently, the composition of the whole gospel. This unfolds in a subtle process that clogs the ears to listen to his whole relational terms communicated in relational language and fogs the eyes to pay attention to his whole relational path distinguished by his language of love—all while engaged in subtle illusion and simulation with reduced and fragmentary substitutes about the Word in our theology and practice, whether in the church or the academy.

If the global church and all its persons and relationships want to unfold in wholeness, we cannot continue to be fooled by the reductionist challenge offering (even from a referentialized Word) that “you will know good and evil.” The inconvenient truth of being subject to reductionism exposes this convenient reality: Good without wholeness is what God has been saying is “not good to be apart” for persons and thus what’s not good for the church; and sin without reductionism renders the church to what’s common, thereby subtly reflecting, reinforcing and sustaining the human condition—even as the church may serve the common good. If the church doesn’t want to be shaped by the fragmentary human context, it must by its constituted nature be restored to wholeness by redemptive change from the *old* and transformation to the *new* (discussed further in chap. 5). Sin by its nature operates on a trajectory and path of anything less and any substitutes—even with re-forms for the church.

Given our roots from the beginning and the evolution of our history, can the global church still assume or claim that in this globalizing world and digital age, we will not be reduced or fragmented? The contemporary global church is not exempt from the sin of reductionism that prevails in the human context and pervades all those defined by their globalized context. This complex fragmentary human context persists with encompassing influence to shape persons, relationships, as well as churches until, and not until, our theology and practice are constituted whole and distinguished accordingly from fragmentation, and thus the uncommon from the common. With the recurring issue of reductionism and its counter-relational workings converging with the global church as well as its academy, it is not only paradigmatic but indeed axiomatic for the reality of life in both the global North and South: “the measure we use will be the measure we get.”

The whole and uncommon (holy) nature and purpose of the Word's relational language must by necessity be the basis for our interpretations of the words from God. When our interpretations are whole-ly integrated, then and only then will we know and understand the whole-ly Trinity, and thereby have our learning process and education system constituted in likeness. It is critical, crucial, vital, essential, therefore, that we understand what *whole-ly* means and how to be whole-ly in likeness of the Trinity. This study progresses with this relational purpose to fulfill this relational outcome.

Chapter 3 Challenging Our Interpretations

**You do not have the *words from God* abiding in you, in your learning and education.
You search the Scriptures because you think that in *the words of God* you have
*the way, the truth and eternal life.***

John 5:38-39

**When many of his disciples heard *the Word's relational language*, they said,
“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”**

John 6:60

**I thank you, Father, Lord of *all life*, because you have hidden ‘*the words from God*’
from *the mindset of the wise and the intelligent*
and have revealed them to *the mindset of the vulnerable.***

Luke 10:21

After I became a Christian around twenty years old while in the U.S. Air Force, I didn't have any Christian fellowship in that initial period. Perhaps this was a benefit, since I read the Bible intensely for exciting interaction with the Word. In my naiveté I interpreted the Bible literally and counted on the Word accordingly (notably Phil 4:13). After my time in the Air Force, I became active in a church and later went to seminary. During this period, my literal interpretations were challenged and my naiveté was lost, both for the benefit and to the disadvantage of my interaction with the Word. On the one hand, my interpretations advanced (arguably progressed) in quantitative knowledge, while, on the other hand, without my naiveté something was missing if not lost—later discovered in the significance of qualitative relational understanding. Thankfully, my so-called advancing interpretations in my formative Christian theology and practice were challenged by the Word's ongoing clarification and correction to restore me to exciting involvement with the whole-ly Word. This relational process continues to unfold, which shouldn't be confused with gaining more quantitative knowledge of the Bible and being more informed about the words of God.

When Jesus literally leaped for joy and danced (*agalliao*) in his above praise of his Father, his excitement revolved around the integral fight against reductionism and its defeat by the words from God revealed in wholeness. What Jesus distinguished in this key moment must not be overlooked or dismissed: The revelation of God's words emerges only with a distinct perceptual-interpretive mindset, and only these interpretations unfold with whole understanding (*synesis*) of the words from God.

Anything less and any substitutes for this mindset (*phroneo*) illuminated by the Word forms an alternate perceptual-interpretive mindset, which is challenged in all its interpretations—just as Peter experienced with the interpretation from his mindset (Mk 8:31-33). These are the contrasting and competing perceptual-interpretive mindsets that I needed to turn from and then be restored to, in order for my interpretations to have clarity and thus have the significance of the words from God—and not have to be challenged for clarification and correction.

The Need for Challenging Interpretations

Persons, groups, peoples and nations turn to the Bible for various reasons and purposes. What results from their engagement are interpretations even more diverse than the diversity of those engaged. Diversity in itself creates challenges to different interpretations, with an implied competition to have the right or best interpretation. More and more persons in the global church (perhaps some groups and fewer peoples) are seeing diversity as vital and thus as necessary for theology and practice to progress—notably to advance beyond Western Christian dominance. Most important, however, whether in the global South or North, biblical interpretations need to be challenged, but not in order to see who has the right or best interpretations of the words of God in referential language. Rather, challenges are necessary to determine if interpretations have both the integrity and the significance of the words from God in relational language, thereby supporting the nature of God's language and fulfilling its purpose.

John's Gospel includes two narratives that (1) illuminate the need for challenging interpretations and (2) highlight the interpretive issues with the nature and purpose of the Word's relational language—with both narratives exposing the interpretive engagement of an alternate perceptual-interpretive mindset.

In the first narrative, Jesus challenged the interpretations of those intensely searching the Scriptures, who thought their interpretations resulted in knowing God and having eternal life (Jn 5:39-40). What had evolved from their interpretations was indeed a large quantity of information about God, yet information composed only by the words of God in referential language. What did not result from their perceptual-interpretive mindset was an unbiased interpretation of the words from God embodied before them face to face. *Who* they saw before them was determined by *how* they saw him with their mindset. So, that unbiased result wasn't possible with the language barrier they had with the Word's relational language. By challenging their interpretations, Jesus exposed (1) the nature of their referential language, (2) the bias imposed on their interpretations by their alternate mindset formed by referential language, and (3) the barrier erected to prevent entering the Word's realm of connection. The consequence was not having the experiential truth and relational reality of eternal life but merely the epistemological illusion and ontological simulation of it. Therefore, extending our previous discussion on John 3:16, does this first narrative intensify the need to challenge the interpretations of many Christians today throughout the global church and academy?

The second narrative amplifies the need to challenge, including apparent favorable interpretations. This narrative began with the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000 (Jn 6:14), which extended from his other previous miracles. Many interpreted his miracle

as the true fulfillment of the prophet promised to them in the OT (Dt 18:15,18). Yet, this favorable interpretation didn't emerge from the Book of Love composed by God's relational love language, so Jesus challenged their interpretation to expose their bias: "I tell you the truth, you are *following* me, not because you saw miraculous signs" (6:26, NIV). The language sign for miracle (*semeion*) goes beyond just the act itself (unique as it is) to distinguish who and what it indicates. Thus, they were not following the person Jesus revealed by *semeion*. Consequently, their interpretation had to be challenged, which included exposing their bias centered on self-interest/concern: "but because you ate the loaves and had your *desires* filled." Yet, the challenge process didn't stop here since the need was urgent. The Word continued to clarify his relational language and correct their referential language, seeking to change their perceptual-interpretive mindset (6:27-34). As they indicated an initial openness to change, the Word then disclosed his whole person in the nature and purpose of relational language; and he also defined the relational terms for the involvement necessary for relationship together (6:35-58). Sadly, "when many of his disciples heard *the Word's relational language and terms*, they said, 'This teaching is difficult, who can accept it?'" (6:60). So, their initial openness to change was closed by their rigid mindset formed by the reductionist workings of referential language, which selectively interpreted parts of the Word it could accept in referential terms. This is the nature and purpose of referential language with the primary focus on the quantitative from outer in; and the Word goes on to distinguish the whole-ly God's relational language composing the qualitative from inner out that contrasts and conflicts with its reduction (6:61-64).

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

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

When Jesus vulnerably shared the reality of what his person would soon experience—not a mere event and historical fact—this was incompatible with Peter’s messianic expectations (Mt 16:21). Accordingly from this mindset (*phroneo*), he confronted Jesus on what essentially echoed the earlier disciples’ interpretation: “This is a hard *disclosure*. Who can accept it?” Peter didn’t accept it and rebuked Jesus to his face: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” (Mt 16:22). This encounter certainly precipitated the urgent need for immediate attention to challenge Peter’s biased interpretation and existing perceptual-interpretive mindset. Jesus’ person then flared open to counter Peter’s reductionism, mindset and referential interpretation: “Get behind me, *Peter—acting as a surrogate of Satan!* You are a *conflicting barrier to my person*; for you are setting your *phroneo* not on *God’s realm* but on *the limits and constraints of the human realm*” (16:23). Hence, Peter’s biased interpretation and reduced mindset were corrected, yet still in need of transformation—the need Peter further demonstrated through much of his discipleship.

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

This points us back to the second relational message that Jesus communicated in his questions above: our person, how he sees us and how we see ourselves. The need for challenging our interpretations is heightened when we don’t make a crucial distinction in “how you listen” (the Word’s distinction, Lk 8:18). This distinction defines the ontology (or identity) of our person and determines our function in the following manner:

- If we listen *for* the words of God with the human brain, which includes using the human mind, we quantify our identity and function as a person merely from the outer in, and nothing more of significance is considered primary and accounted for, though not necessarily at the exclusion of anything secondary.
- If we listen *to* the words from God with the human heart, which includes using the brain and mind to integrate the whole person, we define our ontology and function in the primary significance of qualitative-relational terms from the inner out, though not at the exclusion of the quantitative secondary but always in this order of priority.

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

The Basis for Challenging Interpretations

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

The words from God converge in the Bible, and its text unfolds in a historical narrative that frames the real story (neither fictional nor virtual) of God's actions in the universe and involvement with created life. Thus, interpreting the Bible must take into account this history. As Murray Rae states: "The Bible does not present us with a set of timeless or universal truths that can be abstracted from history but directs our attention to the God who makes himself known precisely through the particularities of history."¹ At the same time, this historical account must be interpreted theologically—contrary to historical criticism—in order to fully account for God's action and involvement in the human context, not to overlook accounting for the whole of God's ontology. The lack or absence of such accounting has allowed the reductionism of God, of the trajectory of God's presence, and of the path of God's involvement, all to human terms, shaping or construction—that is, reduced to the *common* of life prevailing in the human context, including its history. Thus, while historical input refines interpretation, along with form and literary input, it is neither the main nor the most significant basis for challenging interpretations.

Moreover, interpreting the Bible isn't just about exegesis of texts, no matter how accurate that information may be. Exegesis alone does not give us whole understanding (synesis) of God's presence and involvement, even though it may yield greater quantity of knowledge detailing that. Without minimizing its value, exegetical interpretations must be qualified by hermeneutics and integrated together. Hermeneutics is needed for that understanding to emerge; yet, as discussed earlier, the hermeneutic process also needs to be qualified in order to understand God as revealed in Scripture.²

¹ Murray Rae, "Theological Interpretation and Historical Criticism," in Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas, eds., *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 96.

² For a discussion integrating hermeneutics and exegesis, see Matthew R. Malcolm, *From Hermeneutics to Exegesis: The Trajectory of Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2018).

Whole understanding emerges based on how God is revealed in Scripture—that is, based on God’s communication of self-disclosure distinctly by the words from God, rather than based on surrogates just transmitting information about God using the words of God. This distinction of how God is revealed in and by the Word is essential for defining the primary basis to challenge interpretations, so that understanding can truly be determined. Making this distinction, however, has been ambiguous, ignored or simply not understood by most who engage the Bible, thereby rendering interpretations diverse, and understanding elusive.

It is unequivocal that the Bible as the text of God’s words is polyphonic. That is to say, various different voices (human as well as heavenly) have been instrumental in echoing the voice of God. While these voices lend their particular nuance (e.g. contextual setting or horizon) to the text, each voice is only secondary to the primary of God’s voice for composing the textual messages (i.e. the revelations of God’s presence and involvement). Therefore, while it is important to recognize and account for these different voices, they (individually or collectively) neither define nor determine the relational communication of the words from God. When this essential distinction is understood without partiality, the Word is emphatically distinguished:

God speaks for himself; and whenever primacy is given to other voices in the text—including voices of methods of interpretation either ‘behind the text’ or ‘in front of the text’—they subtly end up speaking for God instead of only echoing God’s voice; thus, they speak for God merely with reference to the words of God rather than echoing the relational messages communicated by the words from God.

However, when the polyphonic sources are given their proper place in the Bible, the Word is echoed and highlighted such that the whole-ly God’s presence and involvement are fully interpreted in their relational significance—for example, as the evangelist John did in his Gospel. On this basis, these secondary biblical voices then also serve to help us interpret the primacy of the words from God communicated directly to us in relationship for the sole relational purpose to experience in relationship together in our current context.³ Assuming Moses’ voice in the Pentateuch, he teaches us not to focus on the information in the words of God but concentrate on the words from God communicated in relationship, that is, the primacy of face-to-face relationship (Ex 33:11-20, NIV). For Moses, the information of referential language wasn’t sufficient for his faith, nor to base his theology and practice on such interpretations. The relational significance of God’s voice could only be distinguished in relational language, so Moses held God accountable for God’s presence and involvement in only relational terms: “If your presence *is not relationally involved* with us.... Now show me your glory *face to face*”; therefore later God would illuminate his relational involvement with Moses, which God then clearly distinguished in correcting others questioning Moses’ interpretations

³ David I. Starling discusses how the biblical authors themselves help us learn how best to interpret the Bible, in *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship: How the Bible Shapes Our Interpretative Habits and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

(Num 12:6-8). This clarifies the primary basis by which interpretations need to be challenged for correction, just as Aaron and Miriam's were. Likewise for our clarification and correction, when Moses asked above "Teach me" the primary of God's relational language, he clearly demonstrates for us the primary basis for interpreting the words from God—a teaching moment that should not be overlooked or ignored.

Without the primary basis for interpreting the Bible, our interpretations evolve with adaptations to our surrounding contexts somewhat analogous to "the survival of the fittest." This self-centering evolution is not surprising since it has been the normative dynamic from the beginning. In this adaptive evolution, the interpretations of God's words have been influenced by the surrounding context and shaped by human thinking, self-interest and concern ever since the primordial garden. Not understanding and accounting for this human bias in our hermeneutics has resulted in the existing diversity and multiplicity of interpretations—a consequential process distinguished even in ancient times (Eccl 1:18; 5:1-3,7; 12:9-12) and witnessed by the Word on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:17,25-27).

Further Critical Distinctions to Make

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

The transcendent God cannot be humbly discovered in a limited epistemic realm or by a narrowed-down epistemic process—which apophatic (negative) theology rightly claims about what we can say about God, yet wrongly limits it to what cannot be said. However, as Moses taught us, the transcendent God can be known and experienced through the face-to-face presence and involvement of God—taking us beyond merely an encounter based solely on faith—whose depth emerged in the beginning with the Word and converged in the embodied Word. This is the relational outcome when our discovery is antecedent by and thus based on God's revelation—which the two disciples on the road to Emmaus learned the hard way (Lk 24:31-32).

This points to a second critical distinction, which the two disciples made evident in their previous interpretations of the Word, the kind of interpretation that has evolved exponentially. In the diverse interpretations of the Word and what so-called knowledge and understanding of God have amassed, the sum of what is concluded is best described as merely a **parenthesis**: an additional comment or explanation about the words of God, signifying interpretations that substitute for the expression of the words from God communicated in relational language. Accordingly, parentheses prevail in biblical

interpretation and studies but only with the following limits: As the diverse comments and explanations from our ideas and concepts of God in referential language, and in spite of how widely transmitted, they don't get to the heart of the Word from God; thus they neither know nor understand God in the primary context of relationship and its essential relational process—the relational context and process necessary to be involved in order to know any person, human or divine. Therefore, whatever their source or level of expertise, parentheses are human theological shaping of God that must be exposed, clarified and corrected as a basis for interpretation, so that our interpretations can get to the heart of God's presence and involvement to truly know and understand God in our theology and practice (as illuminated in Ps 25:4-5, 9-10,14).

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

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

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

The practice today of biblical literacy centers on gaining and possessing knowledge of the words of God referenced throughout the Bible. What characterizes this knowledge is the information composed in referential language, which may accurately inform the reader about the words of God but by the nature of its language also render that knowledge ambiguous and understanding misleading. The understanding evolving from biblical literacy is misleading, because based on its referential language its understanding centers on only what appears (and is assumed) to be the words from God—when in fact it is simply composed by the referential information about the words of God. Proper biblical (not extra-biblical) fact-checking (not proof-texting) make

evident that only simulations of the words from God are utilized, subtly or unknowingly, which then not only misinform and mislead but also promote, reinforce and sustain illusions about what is known. Simply stated about biblical literacy:

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

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

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

Therefore, the reductionist basis of biblical literacy requires us to go beyond questioning only the legitimacy of many challenges in interpretation and leads us also to questioning the education and what is learned in our churches and academy, and to challenge their legitimacy.

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

His whole person, the whole of God and God’s wholeness, and the whole picture of the design and purpose of God’s presence and involvement, and the whole relational outcome fulfilled by the whole-ly Trinity—all embodied, enacted and fulfilled irreducibly, as well as integrally distinguished nonnegotiablely, by whole ontology and function, therefore on the basis of nothing less and no substitutes.

The Whole Basis in Wholeness

The Word provides the *whole* basis in *wholeness* necessary for challenging our interpretations, along with challenging our education and learning. The Word's whole basis even challenges how we see wholeness (as in *shalôm*) and practice it (as in *tamiym*, from Gen 17:1). But, wherever the Word's clarification and correction have undergone a subtle reduction to referential language, this whole basis has been fragmented by a perceptual-interpretive mindset using a lens lacking wholeness (as evident in Lk 19:41-42). *What* we see depends on *how* we see it—demonstrated by those on the road to Emmaus. So, we cannot rely on the validity of our vision without understanding the lens used. For example, if we only see fragments or certain parts of something, that's how our lens sees them; even corrective lenses may help us see them better but don't guarantee seeing the whole picture. This applies to the Word and brings out the essential difference between God's lens and human lenses. Samuel demonstrated this difference when God told him to select a new king (1 Sam 16:6-7).

What we access from the Word depends on how we see it. In relational language, the words from God are written in cursive (all connected), which seems basic enough but is complicated by our lens. This is illustrated by the following comic of "Dennis the Menace." In this scene, Dennis returns home from elementary school and tells his mom: "They're gonna teach us *Cursive* in school, but I told 'em I'm not allowed to talk that way."⁴ Since Dennis perceives cursive as about cursing, he's right to think that he's not allowed to use that language. Yet, his assumed language conflict is really a language barrier that prevents him from understanding cursive. A similar assumption commonly exists in biblical interpretation that subtly obscures the language barrier preventing an understanding of how the words from God are connected together.

The Bible is composed by texts written in cursive, and it also includes what appears to be random discourse (discursive) that have little or no connection. However, we often miss the Bible's whole basis in wholeness, or at least don't understand its significance, because we see it differently and thus don't recognize the language barrier in our interpretations. Again, what we see depends on how we see it.

This takes us back to *how* the Word communicated the words from God, which is integral to *what* the Word communicated and must be seen together to understand the Word's whole basis in wholeness. The *how* and the *what* of the Word converge in this integral basis:

The Word (1) embodied the whole of God (nothing less) and (2) enacted God's wholeness (with nothing less and no substitutes); and the Word's basis of God's whole in wholeness (a) is specially revealed and thereby distinguished only in relational language, which (b) composes distinctly cursive relational terms that (c) emerge and unfold in God's integral relational context and process for (d) the irreducible relational purpose and nonnegotiable relational outcome of whole reciprocal relationship together in wholeness, thereby fulfilling God's definitive blessing (the integral connection between Num 6:25-26 and 2 Cor 4:6).

⁴ By Hank Ketcham, *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 2018.

When the what is separated from the how, the cursive words from God communicated in relational language are misperceived—perhaps as inappropriate language not to be used—because the receiving mindset has transposed (often inadvertently like Dennis) the Word’s original language to referential language. As discussed, referential language fragments the Word’s relational terms and messages from cursive to discursive bits of information, which reduces the relational purpose for communicating the words from God down to the discursive transmission of the fragmentary words of God. The perceptual-interpretive mindset formed by referential language is unable to perceive and understand cursive—also thinking as Dennis did that common discourse is not that way. Yet, this assumption of being unable to use such language only clouds the reality of a disabled mindset (as made evident in Jn 6:41-60).

The effects of referential language on our mindset is like what’s happening in the modern digital world: Digital language digitizes the human brain by flooding its cells and synapses with digital information, which the human mind only processes in bits without any cursive significance—misguided by the epistemological illusions of having the so-called *more* from the Information (misinformed) Age. This digitized mindset evolves on the internet and gets embedded in social media to simulate human interaction and communication with merely the transmission of discursive bits of information (personal or not). The consequence is to disable the human mindset to perceive cursive, to understand the difference between merely the fragmentary and the whole, and even to know what’s real and not real. The latter is currently amplified by artificial intelligence and related perceptions generated by computers. Hao Li, a leading researcher on computer-generated (CG) video at USC, is founder of Pinscreen, which produces videos (e.g. from a simple selfie) using an algorithm that will become so accurate they will defy reality—thus creating ambiguity and confounding the mind about what’s real and not real. This technology of computer science evolved from gains researchers have made in deeper neural networks, and the complex algorithms that loosely mimic the thinking of the human brain. Li said the key to preventing a distrust in video is to build awareness by educating people of the capabilities of the CG world.⁵

In a similar way, the information about the words of God generated by referential language blurs the reality of the words from God in relational language, which then can captivate human thinking with the realistic terms it projects. If the Word is not to devolve into fake news or bad news, then we also must build awareness by educating Christians of the capabilities of referential language and the world of reductionism. Yet, curiously, having said this about the digital world, it is being discovered existentially that podcasts are helping persons listen more carefully, and thus being affected more deeply than what their brains normally hear. Perhaps this suggests that the words from God should be podcast in order to rewire our brains and educate our persons more deeply than our minds.

Of course, the perceptual-interpretive mindset formed by referential language is neither limited to a modern phenomenon nor confined to the workings of the modern world. But we certainly observe today how this perceptual-interpretive mindset is amplified and its lens (not perception) magnified. The Word was always clarifying and correcting how he was perceived and his words were interpreted. Sadly, the Word also

⁵ Hao Li was interviewed by David Pierson for “When the realistic blurs reality,” *Los Angeles Times*, February, 19, 2018.

grieved over his people because they didn't recognize with their mindset what constitutes wholeness (Lk 19:41-42). To educate his disciples in his whole basis in wholeness, he challenged their existing mindset (*phroneo*, Mk 8:33, cf. Phil 2:2,5) to make them aware of the cursive lacking in their interpretation of his words (Mk 8:14-21). There was both patience and frustration in the Word's education because their learning was a struggle, given the extent of their mindset (as Peter demonstrated in the interaction soon after):

“Do you still not perceive (*noeo*, a basic act of the mind) or understand (*syniēmi*, the essential understanding of the whole) by putting together my words? Are your hearts *desensitized to the qualitative, putting a veil on your whole person?* Do you have eyes and fail to see *what's real?* Do you have ears and fail to *listen carefully* and hear the communication of my words in relational language?”

The Word wants all his followers to *syniēmi* by putting together the words from God in cursive, in order that God's relational language will reveal and distinguish the Word's whole basis in wholeness, distinguished from the fragmentary information of referential language. Moreover, for further education, the Word distinguishes his whole basis in wholeness with “my *uncommon* peace (as in *shalôm*) I give you,” contrary to the common peace of the world (Jn 14:27). In relational words (not referential), the Word's wholeness (the *shalôm* fulfilling God's definitive blessing, Num 6:26) is always *uncommon* and must be distinguished by the uncommon's nature from the common that referential language transmits. When the Word's clarification and correction of his whole basis in wholeness is embraced, the integral relational outcome will unfold so that we will indeed experience the relational reality of knowing and understanding the whole-ly God as well as having God's uncommon wholeness constituted in our theology and practice.

No other basis can distinguish the whole reality of God, and challenge what's not really whole.

The Pivotal Challenge of Incarnated Interpretation

By the counter-relational workings of reductionism, referential language has evolved today to adapt much engagement of the Bible in what essentially amounts to **digitized interpretations**: interpretation that is quantified without the significance of qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness. What is seen in the Bible emerges from how it is seen by a digitally influenced and shaped perceptual-interpretive mindset lacking a real sense of qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness, even though it may reference the qualitative and relational in its thinking and information about the words of God. The resulting digital information has amassed in existing theology and practice to compose them effectively as “Now both thinner and lighter” (as the Moses cartoon illustrated earlier). This condition, and its antecedent outworkings, will continue and further evolve unless it is challenged by what I call **incarnated interpretation**. This challenge is pivotal for theology and practice today, pivotal both in its basis and for the need it addresses.

As the definitive text written in cursive, the Bible goes further and deeper than composing simply one story or single drama unified throughout. From its beginning the Word communicated the words from God on the whole basis in wholeness, which takes biblical theology further in understanding and deeper in biblical practice. And central to the Word is the incarnation that constitutes the pivot for the integral basis of the words from God, including communicated in the OT. Yet, for this relational process to unfold, the incarnation has to go beyond merely an historical event that gets formalized in doctrine for our theology and practice.

Throughout the incarnation the embodied Word challenged the theology and practice of Judaism that were based on the Hebrew text rather than the *original* language. Without the original language of the Word, the OT is fragmented from its whole basis in wholeness, and thus reduced to referential information about the words of God that are no longer written in cursive. This critical difference is observed in interpreting Deuteronomy as either the Book of Law or the Book of Love (noted previously). The Word embodied the latter in the qualitative relational significance pivotal for (1) God's presence and involvement "In the beginning" and since, for (2) the whole basis in wholeness distinguishing the words from God through the OT and NT, and for (3) challenging interpretations of anything less and any substitutes, which currently compose much theology and practice. Therefore, both the validity and reliability of the Bible, biblical interpretations, and the theology and practice formed thereby, all pivot on the incarnation as well as rise in likeness on the basis of the incarnated dynamic of nothing less and no substitutes. If they are not incarnated accordingly, then they are not based on the Word's whole basis in wholeness, and consequently are always subject to the incarnation's pivotal challenge.

So, what does it mean to be incarnated? First of all, let's be clear that this does not mean mere embodiment, which historically has undergone environmental changes—perhaps analogous to the environmental changes incurred by planet Earth.

The interpretation of the incarnation was the central issue challenged first by different persons in the NT, next in the early church, and then throughout church history. Basic to this issue is *who* and *what* distinguish the incarnation, which leads to the *how* of the incarnation's significance. We need to examine our own interpretations of the incarnation in light of this critical challenge—a challenge frequently rehearsed in referential language that doesn't get to the full meaning of incarnated.

The incarnation was not merely a body that came to us—though Christmas tradition has centered on that—the embodiment of which was the topic of major theological debate in the early church. Yet, embodiment focused on the object embodied in contrast to the incarnated subject-person who was embodied. The *who* Jesus embodied was the whole of God, neither just the title or name of God nor merely attributes of God. The fact of the *who* was challenged in the NT and denied, distorted or simply rendered the *who* to a fact; and even as fact, the nature of the *who* continued to be debated in early church history, with nuances about the *who* as object that diminished or obscured the *who* as subject embodied only as the whole person. This overlaps into the next dimensions of the incarnation, which are integral to be incarnated.

Less central to this challenge and basic in this debate has been the *what* that Jesus embodied and enacted, along with the *how*. As the incarnation established the who of Jesus, he made imperative for those believing the who to “Follow me,” that is, follow the what of his whole person as subject constituted by whole ontology and function, not merely the who rendered to an object of belief. For the incarnated Jesus, the who is inseparable from the what, and to separate them would fragment his whole person and thereby reduce the whole of God constituted by the whole ontology and function of the Trinity. Yet, this separation is the most common interpretation of the incarnation by Christians, whereby the significance of being incarnated has been obscured or lost in their theology and practice. Furthermore, in this integral process to be incarnated, the what of the who is constituted solely by the how: Enacting whole ontology and function by the nonnegotiable relational terms of the whole of God’s vulnerable presence and relational involvement that distinguish the Trinity’s irreducible relational purpose and process of reciprocal relationship together in wholeness.

The incarnated Jesus, therefore, didn’t come to us merely with the embodiment of a physical body, but most basically and essentially he came as the subject-person who incarnated the who, the what and the how of his whole person, his Trinitarian person; accordingly, the Word incarnated also the image and likeness of the Trinity for us to be incarnated in the image and likeness of God’s whole ontology and function.⁶ Neither one dimensional nor two dimensional, the incarnated Jesus integrates these three dimensions of Jesus’ whole person (in 3-D) on the Word’s whole basis in wholeness. Therefore, the incarnation is incarnated only when this whole person is the who, what and how Jesus embodied and enacted; and the who cannot be distinguished without the what, and only the how distinguishes the what of the who. The incarnated Jesus fully embodied nothing less than the who and what, and vulnerably enacted no substitutes for the how. Accordingly and unmistakably, this incarnated dynamic constitutes integrally the who, what and how of the gospel on the Word’s whole basis in wholeness, whereby the good news offers the who, what and how for us to follow irreducibly and nonnegotiablely on the Word’s basis. Not only, then, does this incarnated understanding challenge our interpretations of the incarnation, but it also challenges our interpretations of both the gospel and discipleship.

Obviously we don’t have the gospel without the incarnation. The question is whether the gospel we claim and proclaim is the gospel of the incarnated Word. The incarnated Word signifies the pivotal challenge facing us here. Most Christians think that the gospel emerged from the incarnation, likely using John 3:16 as its central theme. The gospel of the incarnated Word, however, emerged in the human context “In the beginning” (Jn 1:1-3), whereby it unfolded in the incarnation on the whole basis in wholeness of the incarnated Word—the who, what and how of the whole of God enacted in the beginning. In the words of John’s Gospel, we cannot see the incarnation of the embodied Word without seeing the incarnated Word enacted in the beginning. In order to

⁶ I have expanded discussion of the Trinity in relational language in *The Face of the Trinity: The Trinitarian Essential for the Whole of God and Life* (Trinity Study, 2016). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

help us see the whole basis in wholeness of the Word, John provided the lens for how to see the Word's whole theological trajectory and relational path in wholeness. The whole gospel, therefore, composes only the good news of the incarnated Word, who together with the Father and the Spirit constitutes the covenant of love for incarnated relationship together face to face, person to person.

Moreover, the pivotal challenge of this incarnated interpretation extends also to our interpretations of discipleship. The incarnated Word in post-resurrection and ascension continued to clarify and correct those who followed him. One critical encounter was recorded by John when the palpable Word (together with the Spirit) gave this incisive feedback: "I know your works *of discipleship*—committed, dedicated and persevering servants for his sake, all based on correct doctrine, which was used to expose false teaching—But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the *relational involvement of love* you had at first *in our relationship together*" (Rev 2:2-4). How could the intensity of their discipleship be considered anything less than praiseworthy? Because they got preoccupied with the secondary and thus got diverted from the primary: following first and foremost the whole subject-person of the incarnated Word in the primacy of reciprocal relationship together in wholeness constituting the covenant of love. Consequently, they did not incarnate the persons necessary according to the Word's whole basis in wholeness. Rather they based their identity and function on the so-called right Christian things to do and were diligent in fulfilling them. Despite their good intentions, they merely reflected the perceptual-interpretive mindset formed by referential language and thus the reduction of the words from God to just possessing the words of God in their theology and practice—the subtle relational distance in discipleship that reduces or fragments primary relational involvement with the incarnated Word.

The church in Ephesus along with the church in Sardis—whose esteemed reputation for being alive was abruptly corrected by the Word not finding their works incarnated on God's whole basis in wholeness (Rev 3:1-2)—demonstrated the condition of churches widely existing today. In this pervasive condition, churches mislead, distort and sustain discipleship away from the incarnated Word in direct contrast and conflict with the Word's relational imperative to incarnate "Follow me" with nothing less than and no substitutes for the irreducible and nonnegotiable whole basis in wholeness. The same can be said for the education and learning primarily taking place in the academy.

So, where does this pivotal challenge by incarnated interpretation of the Word find the gospel and the discipleship that you presume in your theology and practice?

The Word ongoingly clarifies and corrects any reductionism of the words from God in relational language, which then by necessity includes clarifying and correcting anything less and any substitutes of the whole of God and God's uncommon wholeness. When the LORD corrected faithful Samuel's lens defining how he saw to determine what he saw, God's lens was revealed to illuminate for all of us *how* God sees differently: "God does not see as humans see; they see from the outer in, thus partially and fragmented, but God sees from the inner out, thus integrally and whole" (1 Sam 16:7).

The words from God always illuminate God's whole basis in wholeness. And what is magnified in the communication of God's whole and wholeness is the experiential truth and relational reality that this is not only incarnated whole but also distinguished *uncommon*—thus distinguished from the *common* defining the human context and determining human life. The truth and reality are: The uncommon nature of the words from God unequivocally conflicts with the common, such that “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it *in its original relational language?*” (Jn 6:60) Indeed, it is much more palatable in referential language, even at the communion table as commonly practiced. That is also the existential truth of the presence and influence of reductionism in our theology, as well as the pervading reality of reductionism's counter-relational workings in our practice.

In Paul Ricoeur's (known for his hermeneutic philosophy) critique of historical-critical interpretation focused 'behind' the biblical text, he aptly assessed the current hermeneutic condition—which also would include biblical interpretation by a mindset formed 'in front of' the biblical text that determines how one sees what is in the Bible; yet his apt assessment of the hermeneutic condition only includes a nebulous hope for the way out of it: “Beyond the desert of criticism [and existing biblical interpretations], we wish to be called again.”⁷

Clearly distinguished, however, the pivotal challenge of incarnated interpretation calls us to incarnate our theology and practice on the whole basis in wholeness of the words from God, and grieves for us until we do. As uncommon as this is to what we commonly hear, who will listen carefully and respond to the Word in the relational terms of our incarnated likeness? Until we do, no matter what our boast, “You do not have the *words from whole-ly God* abiding in you, *in your learning and education.*”

Incarnated interpretation, therefore, is not only a discomfiting challenge for our theology and practice, but also a threatening confrontation of our identity and function that are contextualized by the common's culture.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 349.

Chapter 4

Our Perceptual-Interpretive Culture

For in the *beginning*, I did not *communicate* to them or command them concerning *secondary things to do*. But this *relational imperative* I gave them, “*Relationally respond to my voice and I will be your God and you shall be my people and be relationally involved only in the way of my relational terms.*”

Jeremiah 7:22-23

Thus says the LORD: Amend your ways and your doings *from inner out* and let me *be involved* with you in this *context*. Do not trust in *misleading words*. ...For if you truly amend your ways and your doings *from inner out*... then I will *be relationally involved* with you in this *context together*.

Jeremiah 7:3-7

But I have this against you: you tolerate *the surrounding context and form a hybrid in your theology and practice*. ...All the churches *need to know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will respond to each of you accordingly*.

Revelations 2:20,23

On New Year’s Eve, 2018, NASA’s spacecraft New Horizons reached a mysterious body (known as Ultima Thule) in the universe, existing 4 billion miles from the earth. In the opening days of 2019, New Horizons started sending back close-up images to expand the known horizons of solar system; back in 2015, it sent back the first close-up images of dwarf planet Pluto seen by humanity. With these discoveries, the horizon of the human context has expanded, perhaps raising human speculation about reaching the horizon of God—a seemingly reasonable thought that is actually misinformed and thus misleading. Even noted physicist Stephen Hawking came to understand this when he realized the limits of human contextualization—and its self-referencing theories that can only be inconsistent or incomplete—in his attempts to develop a “grand unified theory” (GUT) that supposedly would, in his words, “know the mind of God” and essentially make a creator God superfluous.¹

¹ Quoted and discussed in Hans Kung, *The Beginning of All Things: Science and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 15-24.

The horizons of the human context and God's context are mutually exclusive, with one exception: if One penetrates into the horizon of the other unilaterally, thereby entering into the other context on the basis of One's own terms. This reality illuminates both God's context and the human context, both of which need to be further known and better understood, and which will require going beyond and deeper than New Horizons. The human context needs to know its limits and constraints. In the scientific approach of its context, there is apparent basis to acknowledge its limits and constraints. Scientists, however, shaped by their human context don't often function either by the limits and constraints intrinsic to science, or with awareness of their human context biasing their overall human function, general thinking, and specific interpretations as scientists.² In other words, while scientists probe the universe for new horizons, they also need to probe more deeply into the personal horizon of their surrounding context in order to know what underlies their function not merely as scientists but as humans.

Likewise, even more urgently, Christians need to examine their own horizon to know and understand their surrounding context's shaping influence on their function, general thinking, and specific interpretations as Christians—and not assume that the horizon of God's context has converged with theirs.

Contextualized Humans

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

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

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

Contextualization has been a pivotal issue facing God's people ever since this human evolution. In Scripture, notably from the beginning of the OT, the people of God were exposed to a different context, which was distinctly contrasting and in conflict with God's context, God's whole and uncommon (whole-ly) context. This narrative, from the primordial garden through Israel's history to the emergence of the church, describes the issues and consequences that evolved from this contextual encounter in everyday life with the surrounding contexts of the common's world. Understanding these issues and consequences of contextualization, including their significance for the identity and function of God's people, is basic for interpreting the Bible and a hermeneutic key for knowing and understanding God. Moreover, all of this that underlies contextualized humans both challenges as well as confronts Christian education in general and theological education in particular, calling into question what we are really learning about God. And the existing contextualization of Christians raises urgent concern for what is central to our education and the basis of our learning, whereby their causal source is determined.

Jeremiah was told to echo God's words communicated to his people, which illuminated their contextual shift evolving from the primordial garden: "For in the *beginning from my context*, I did not *communicate* to them or command them concerning sacrifices and other such secondary things to do" (Jer 7:22). Yet, throughout its ancient history, "sacrifices" was one of the main identity markers for the nation of Israel, which is even highlighted in the NT. So, how does this reflect the contextualized humans that evolved in and ever since the primordial garden? Two further ways.

First, being the holy nation of God's people was not enough to constitute Israel's identity. When Samuel grew old and needed to be replaced, the elders of Israel implored Samuel to appoint a king over them instead, much to Samuel's alarm. He tried to change their minds, but they refused to listen because they were embedded in defining their identity as a nation-state just "like all the other nations" in Israel's surrounding context (1 Sam 8:4-10,19-20, NIV). Their desire to be like those in the surrounding context made evident their evolution as contextualized humans.

Secondly, Jeremiah was told to repeat to them the relational words from God: "But this *relational imperative* I gave them, '*Relationally respond to my voice and I will be your God and you shall be my people; and be relationally involved in the primacy of relationship together only in the way of my relational terms*'" (Jer 7:23). They assumed that God's context had converged with their religious context and thereby were identified as God's people. But, they had shifted from the primary constituting God's context and became preoccupied with the secondary composing the surrounding human context; consequently, they had their identity shaped and their function reduced to the outer in—and how they transposed the Book of Love to the Book of Law. In this subtle shift, what was not apparent to them was obvious to God: They were contextualized humans "to be apart" from God's whole-ly context.

What is primary in human life has undergone fundamental changes; and the primacy now determining what's primary often differs from one surrounding context to another. What is primary for defining our identity and determining our daily function is the primacy given to the main surrounding context prevailing in our person and life

together. The subtly or implicit primary used for this outcome is often not understood unless the determining primacy shaping this process is known. Contextualized humans don't evolve from a mere concept or from merely a theory abstracted from concepts. The determining primacy we give our context shapes the primary used by all contextualized humans for their identity and function, evolving from the ways that particular context works out the life and practice within it and the significance given to those ways. This goes beyond merely a system of beliefs and values; even though such a system may have influence, that influence tends to be virtual by promoting ideals, which alone would be insufficient to contextualize humans. What does contextualize humans, and often irresistibly in key ways, is a specific culture of that surrounding context. Therefore, this culture composes the determining primacy we need to know, and signifies the primary determinant we need to understand, in order to assess the extent of influence our surrounding contexts could be having on our identity and function, and thereby on how we see what we see in the Word for our theology and practice.

Contextualized by and in Culture

In everyday life, culture is not something we think about; we just assume it or take it for granted, if we even know it's there. Culture is present in every human context, however culture is defined and whatever shape a human context takes. Culture also has a particular identity, and, depending on your definition of culture, culture promotes an identity for the participants (active or passive) in that context, either by belonging to it or by association. When culture generates the identity of its participants, this becomes an ongoing issue of identity formation and maintenance—particularly as contexts intersect, which is the norm in human life and practice as well as the reality for Christians.

I define culture as inseparable from identity and function, and use the following working definition in our discussion:

Culture is the life and practice (in its various expressions) of a collective group (formal or informal, large or small) of persons, the distinction of which relatively both defines who and what they are and determines how they function, thereby being a primary source of their identity and determinant of their function—all of which can operate explicitly or implicitly in a subtle process. Culture is not about an individual person but a social dynamic of persons who belong and/or identify in a context together.

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

Moreover, since we all participate in some type of collective group, we are all part of a particular culture that defines our person and determines how we function—relatively speaking, of course. To this extent we are never free of culture and always apply our culture to our activities, even in biblical interpretation. Therefore, as the main determinant in our everyday lives, culture works overtly or covertly to encompass how we see what we see, how we do what we do, thus basically has primary say over how we live what we live. The consequence of all this is: Culture is the contextualizing agent in that context, and intentionally or unintentionally we are contextualized by and in that culture, knowingly or not.

Examine this existing reality evolving exponentially in today's context, and tune-in more carefully to what you see. In this high-tech world, "who" is the most common companion you see persons interacting with, wherever they are, whether in a crowd or alone, whether dining in public or at the family dinner table, or even while driving? That's right, the companion is a smartphone or similar digital device that preoccupies the primary interaction of many persons today. This is not just a modern phenomenon but the existential reality of contextualized persons living in and by the culture of their surrounding context—a culture that ongoingly shapes, constructs and reconstructs their identity while dominating their daily function, even when going to the bathroom. The culture of the high-tech world has only recently been recognized for its impact on persons, including rewiring their brains from as early as the formative years of childhood. Yet, it is not technology to blame here but its culture contextualizing persons accordingly.

From this micro level let's zoom out to the macro level to observe the growing systemic context of globalization. The rising tide of globalization is transforming modern societies, which has raised speculation about the sovereignty and autonomy of modern states.³ Globalization is having a pivotal impact both economically (positive and negative) and politically (responsive or reactionary); and its expanding efforts in general⁴ and for U.S. politico-economic policy more specifically⁵ need to be recognized and understood. Whether we are aware of it or not, and no matter what we think about it, we all are being contextualized into globalization—contextualized by and in this fragmentary global culture. Despite any good intentions of human achievement for the purpose of so-called human progress, the engulfing reality of global culture is that it is not *whole* and thus will not contextualize humans in wholeness—just as observed in the efforts to build the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9). Having said that, globalization itself (like technology) is not the culprit here but its culture formed by those propagating it.

³ This analysis of the process of globalization is undertaken by David Helm, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transitions: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). See also Peter Heslam, ed., *Globalization and the Good* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

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

⁵ A discussion of U.S. empire building and the role of evangelicalism is undertaken in Bruce Ellis and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, eds., *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008).

Whether at the macro level or the micro level, and the spectrum in-between, the culture contextualizing humans in those contexts is neither neutral nor inconsequential. Therefore, as the definitive determinant for human identity and function, culture needs to be understood, addressed, and changed accordingly in order for contextualized humans not to live in reduced human identity and by reduced human function—so that whole ontology and function can emerge.

Christians need to take to heart the definitive paradigm made axiomatic by Jesus (Mk 4:24), and tune in carefully to the culture in their surrounding context: The measure of culture you use will be the perceptual-interpretive mindset you get for the identity and function for both your person and others. Whether we zoom out or zoom in, the common measure of culture has contextualized humans in a reduced measure of anthropology in general, and in the specific reduced measures first and foremost of gender (as witness in the primordial garden),⁶ then of race, ethnicity, class, age, and other human characteristics and distinctions. Consequently, this is not only a contextual issue but a systemic problem, both of which Christians need to address.

The Culture of Contextualized Christians

Since the human context evolved from the primordial garden, the cultures formed in the surrounding contexts of humanity have never been neutral or inconsequential. Intrinsic to the composition of all cultures is the language of sin as reductionism, which underlies composing how culture functions in what it practices. Cultures interpret the language of sin in diverse ways, yet mostly in language without reductionism, even with revisions of sin as reductionism that appear to be favorable or at least neutral and inconsequential. Nevertheless, the language of sin as reductionism still underlies the composition of any and all cultures. This is the intractable condition of the human context that has evolved from the primordial garden, and that has been diversely adapted by and in the cultures of all surrounding human context ever since.

Certainly, Christians have not been immune from being contextualized, and thus immune from having their perceptual-interpretive mindset shaped by the contextualizing culture. The explicit and subtle influence of a culture contextualizing Christians then shapes how we see what we see, how we do what we do, how we live therefore what we live—which certainly has permeated how we learn what we learn and how we teach what we teach, thus how our education is what Christian education is. Indeed, culture is neither neutral nor inconsequential; and as Christians participate in their surrounding contexts, we must never assume that we have not been or are not being reduced in our ontology and function by our contexts' cultures.

Likewise, therefore, the cultures of human contextualization cannot and should not be considered as vital parts of the diversity composing the common good integral to humanity. Yet, this misinformed and misguided perceptual-interpretive mindset of contextualization increasingly prevails in Christian thinking, theology and practice, and further pervades higher theological education and learning. For example,

⁶ This discussion of gender is made integrally by Kary A. Kambara, *The Gender Equation in Human Identity and Function: Examining Our Theology and Practice, and Their Essential Equation* (Gender Study: 2018). Online at <https://www.4X12.org>.

contextualization has become the present-day paradigm for missions and proclaiming the gospel, as if to say “the end justifies the use of any means”; while in theological studies, there is a growing movement to incorporate diverse contextualized views of theology, as if to assume that all these parts will contribute and add up to the whole understanding (as in *synesis*) necessary to know and understand God—not to mention as an antidote to Western theological hegemony. The results, however, have been composing merely hybrid theology and practice on a fragmentary basis, contrary to God’s whole basis in wholeness—results emerging from naïve acceptance or unexamined tolerance of the surrounding cultural context (as the church in Thyatira, (Rev 2:18-20).

In most Christian thinking (whatever the level), assimilation into the surrounding context is simply a given, since the common alternative of separation and/or isolation from the human context is considered either unrealistic or unreasonable for their theology and practice. Yet, assimilation into the surrounding cultural context comes at a price, which can only be paid by taking on that context’s culture for one’s identity and function (at least in its main aspects). Thus Christians seem to routinely embrace a prevailing culture, or at least readily take on elements of it, to define their identity and determine their function in key ways. But even paying that price comes with a further cost that includes the underpinning for cultures in the surrounding contexts of human life.

From the beginning, the condition prevailing in the human context is reduced ontology and function. This is the common’s inescapable human condition that underpins the diverse cultures of our surrounding contexts, without exception in everyday life even though cultural theories may appear to be exceptions. Accordingly, this common condition is what human contextualization shapes, constructs and sustains unavoidably for those not clearly distinguished from the contextualized persons contextualized by and in that culture. In other words, the further cost for taking on that culture in our surrounding context is also to be reduced in ontology and function—perhaps with variations that simulate appearing unreduced. This subtle process evolves even inadvertently, even with good intentions for assimilating; nevertheless, the consequence is unmistakable:

Reduced ontology and function from God’s whole basis in wholeness, which for all Christians then becomes our default mode whenever we don’t consciously exercise our free will as subject-persons to choose to be different in identity and function from the contextualizing culture—that is, distinguished differently only in the image and likeness of whole-ly God.

So, the pivotal reality facing Christians in all contexts is the choice between these:

Either fall into the default mode of reduced ontology and function formed by the contextualizing culture of our surrounding context, or choose to be counter-cultural (not ideologically or merely pragmatically) in order to be distinguished both from that reducing culture and in whole ontology and function—because, unequivocally, the measure of culture we use will be the measure we get for our ontology and function, nothing more in our everyday life and practice.

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

The Critical Cultural Shift

Allowing culture to be the main determinant for Christians at whatever level contradicts what Paul made imperative for Christians to be the only determinant in our life, both individually and collectively: “Let the *uncommon* peace of Christ rule in your persons from inner out, since as *whole persons* of one *church* body you were called to *wholeness*” (Col 3:15). This was nonnegotiable for Paul: “Rule” (*brabeuo* in the imperative) means to judge and arbitrate, thus rule as the only determinant for our persons and life together—that is, the Word’s whole basis in wholeness (the Word’s uncommon peace of Jn 14:27) as the sole (“the One and Only,” Jn 1:18) determinant for the new creation persons of God’s whole-ly church family.

Furthermore, Christians allowing culture to assume primacy for operating as their main determinant in any way also conflicts with following Jesus not merely in our theology but notably in our practice—following where he is in the surrounding context. The relational path of Jesus is intrusive, intruding deeper into the surrounding human contexts, the contexts of the common, while integrally neither being contextualized by it nor tolerating it. By following Jesus, the first aspect of the prevailing (common’s) function that all his followers encounter while following him into these surrounding contexts is culture. Jesus’ intrusive relational path intersects with the pervasive workings of culture, and its influence emerges as the pivotal issues of Jesus’ engagement with culture.

What Jesus ongoingly exposed by his intrusive engagement and consistently made imperative for all his followers is this: The critical need for **the cultural shift** that he embodied and enacted in order to incarnate being distinguished from that culture while in its context. He summarized this critical cultural shift in his intersection with the surrounding context of Judaism and its prevailing culture contextualizing the identity of God’s people in reduced ontology and function:

“Unless your righteousness—that is, the relational term for distinguishing the whole-integrity of who, what and how you are in your person and relationships—*goes deeper than the prevailing righteousness of the leaders of that context, and thus is not distinguished from those practitioners of reductionism commonly associated with God, then you are not relationally involved in my realm of connection to enter the relational context of the kingdom of heaven*” (Mt 5:20).

The perceptual-interpretive mindset for this critical cultural shift does not emerge as long as its primary determinant subtly remains the culture of a surrounding context. So, how did Jesus embody and enact the cultural shift critical for us to incarnate being distinguished as his followers?

Jesus Engaging Culture⁷

How Jesus engaged a culture in a particular context was always first with his own culture. Put in relational terms, Jesus always looked at culture theologically because that was his identity: the whole of who, what and how he was in the relational context and process of the whole-ly God. On the one hand, this was not unusual since engaging another culture from one's own culture is an assumption by which all persons engage a different culture. Yet, on the other hand, Jesus only engaged a culture on his whole basis in wholeness; and we should never assume that his ongoing engagement was not so and thus with anything less at times. More specifically, the Jewish Jesus engaged the Jewish culture but he was not assimilated in that culture. His whole identity was uncommon even to Jewish culture. Therefore, these are assumptions of our own that we have to understand and account for, even as we seek to further understand and more deeply follow Jesus, along with his culture.

To say that Jesus looked at culture theologically must not be separated from the function of his identity. His whole identity always functioned whole in the primacy of God's culture as the only determinant. Accordingly, his function was also uncommon in the surrounding contexts, which signified the critical cultural shift from those cultures. Foremost, then, his theological lens extended from his whole and uncommon perceptual-interpretive mindset formed by God's relational language and terms. Thus, theology for Jesus was not about doctrine, propositions of static truth, or systems of beliefs and values—just as the Word exposed in the church in Ephesus (Rev 2:2-4). Though his lens was certainly theologically orthodox (not in a gospel-speak, salvation-speak sense), it was always in conjoint function with orthopraxy (i.e. whole-ly life and practice) in the whole-ly God's relational context and process for relationship together. Jesus functionally engaged culture not only in orthodoxy but with orthopraxy, with the latter at times appearing to contradict the former, which was an ongoing source of controversy in many of his interactions—notably in a so-called orthodox religious context since his practice was often perceived as counter-cultural. Yet, Jesus' theological engagement of culture was not for the end result of orthodoxy, or even orthopraxy, but only for the outcome of relationship together and being whole; thus, his engagement was always the relational language expression of communicative action enacting God's thematic relational response to make whole the human condition (cf. Jn 12:46-47). In other words, he saw culture through the lens of God's perception and desires, and this primacy defined and determined his response. For Jesus, any other engagement with culture was secondary, which should neither define nor determine what is primary or its shaping primacy—as Jesus demonstrated at the wedding in Cana (Jn 2:1-11).

The significance of all this for both our theology and practice is that Jesus integrally (1) embodied the whole-ly theological trajectory of God vulnerably into the human context, and (2) enacted his uncommon relational path in surrounding contexts only on his whole basis in wholeness. What he embodied cannot be separated from what he enacted; and *what* he embodied and enacted are distinguished only by *how* he embodied and enacted his identity and function in surrounding contexts in order to be whole-ly incarnated.

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

As Jesus embodied God's communicative action in the contexts of the world, he always enacted God's relational language with the language of love. Therefore, Jesus did not engage culture "to condemn" (*krino*, to discriminate between good and evil) the identity it generates, "but *to make whole*" (*sozo*, Jn 3:17) its life and practice influenced by reductionism. By the nature of its source, reductionism has always functioned against the whole since creation in the primordial garden. The reductionism intrinsic in culture specifically involved the ontology of the whole person created in the image of the whole-ly God for the relationships together created in likeness of the relational ontology of the Trinity, thus which are necessary in conjoint function to be whole.

Along with his identity as the light, Jesus' full humanity as the Son of man also fully affirms this creation. By the earthly human life made evident in Jesus' whole person, human life is sanctified (made whole-ly) in a qualitatively distinct relational practice that is imperative for all his followers to live and experience to be whole as God's family (as he prayed, Jn 17:19). Here again we see the importance of the cultural shift to the uncommon. Furthermore, their whole-ly life and practice is necessary to be able to live whole in the surrounding cultural context for the world to "believe" (trust) and "know" (experience) that the whole-ly God is extended to them in the relational language of love in order to be part of, and thus no longer "to be apart" from (as he further prayed, Jn 17:21-23). Only the uncommon intrusion of this ontology and function distinguishes God's whole family in the world, and it would only be uncommon on the basis of whole ontology and function.

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

The whole of Jesus, therefore, functioned to engage culture intrusively in the surrounding context for the following purpose: (1) redefine its influence from reductionism, (2) transform its counter-relational work of reductionism, and (3) make whole the human relational condition "to be apart" from God's whole. His purpose, however, could not be fulfilled if he assimilated into the surrounding culture, but only if he **accommodated** (not adapted or isolated) his identity and function in that cultural context without letting it have determining primacy. Being accommodated and not assimilated in our identity and function as his followers is a critical distinction for the cultural shift to be a relational reality in any surrounding context.

Jesus' Integral Approach

Jesus' engagement of culture for his purpose to be, live and make whole involved an irreducible relational process; integrally, this whole relational process was specific to the uncommon relational context of his identity and ontology in the whole-ly God. The dynamic involvement of this integral relational process cannot be categorized by typologies of the relation of Jesus and culture. The classic typology of Richard Niebuhr, for example, is of initial interest, yet this is a static framework insufficient to account for Jesus' intrusion on culture.⁸ This includes variations or refinements of his typology.⁹ The dynamic relational involvement of Jesus in the surrounding contexts of the world was an ongoing process of engaging culture both to be whole and to make whole, which also required being vulnerable with his person and intrusive in his relationships in order to make qualitative relational connection with those contextualized by culture.

A different framework is needed to account for the multifaceted nature of this process and to understand the whole of Jesus' various actions engaging culture, which then also points to the need for a new perceptual-interpretive mindset. This involves three issues that Jesus ongoingly addressed to help us define why and how he engaged culture and aspects of it. Basic to his approach, Jesus vulnerably involved his whole person in the life and practice of a culture to function for the invariable and thus nonnegotiable purpose to be whole and to make whole. Therefore, the integrating theme "to be whole" defined his actions engaging culture, which were contingent on one or more of **three qualifying issues** involving a culture's life and practice:

1. *Compatibility, or congruence*, "to be whole"—thus, there is no tension or conflict with the life and practice of a culture, and further relational involvement is for deeper development of the whole.
2. *Partial overlapping areas* "to be whole"—some areas and/or practices in a culture are affirmed as part of God's general revelation and common grace, and what is basic to humanity as God's creation; thus this acceptance allows room for flexibility in some secondary differences to cultivate and nurture the whole, but other areas and practices are in tension or conflict "to be whole" and, nonnegotiable, still need to be redefined, transformed and made whole.
3. *Incompatibility* "to be whole"—thus, there is conflict, not merely tension, with no room for flexibility in differences; the situation/condition is nonnegotiable and needs to be redeemed to be made whole.

All cultures involve more than one of these qualifying issues, and engaging various aspects of a culture's life and practice usually involves an interaction of these qualifying issues. Culture then cannot be responded to in its surrounding context with a predetermined set of behavioral responses—which tends to seek merely the conformity of others—but rather only by being predisposed with the relational involvement to be whole and to make whole. This is how Jesus engaged culture and why.

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

⁹ See, for example, Glen H. Stassen, D.M. Yeager, John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), and also Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, (Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 93-110.

In the process of cultural engagement, Jesus in full identity appears to transcend culture (cf. Niebuhr’s categories, “Christ against culture”), yet while always relationally involved in the surrounding cultural context (cf. “Christ in paradox” or “Christ of culture”) with what amounts to his minority identity (cf. “Christ above culture”) to make it whole (cf. “Christ the transformer of culture”). The relational interaction of his full identity with his minority identity (signifying his whole-ly identity) integrally constitutes the qualitative distinction necessary to be distinguished whole in the surrounding cultural context, which is indistinguishable without also being uncommon (cf. Lev 10:10). Without Jesus’ uncommon whole basis in uncommon wholeness, there is neither basis to make whole culture’s life and practice, nor the significance to be compelling for the human condition.

The ongoing process of engaging culture both to be whole and to make whole involves this integral process of vulnerable and intrusive relational involvement unique to Jesus’ relational path into the surrounding contexts. Yet, even the term ‘relational’ is insufficient for *what* Jesus embodied and *how* he enacted his identity and function. Relational has become a more visible adjective (perhaps buzzword) used today for theology and practice, but the word has not appeared because of the critical cultural shift essential to be relational in *how* Jesus was and continues to be with his whole-ly person.

We cannot be followers of Jesus without following his whole-ly person on the intrusive relational path into our contexts and engaging those cultures as he embodied and enacted—nothing less and no substitutes for his uncommon whole basis in wholeness. Therefore, the critical cultural shift is not optional for us but, simply, essential to “Follow me” because to follow him is always on his relational terms and never revised by our terms, even with good intentions.

Jesus never assimilated into a surrounding context by and in its culture. He always accommodated his identity and function in that cultural context without compromise. Thereby, Jesus’ engagement of culture in the surrounding context was always in congruence with, and thus the definitive extension of, the whole-ly God’s thematic relational response to the human condition to make whole his creation. This is the irreducible and nonnegotiable function of the whole-ly God’s relational work of grace only for new covenant relationship together in love, which extends *into* his church family on his intrusive relational path. That is, this relational outcome will extend into a church that makes no assumptions about the culture of its surrounding context, and thus functions in relation to that culture by the three qualifying issues. When the conscious resolve of this ongoing relational process does not clearly distinguish the minority (uncommon) identity of church ontology and function, churches by default become co-opted by prevailing cultures and thereby seduced in their theology and practice to follow an incomplete (fragmentary, not whole) Jesus on a different path—the pivotal issue facing Peter at his footwashing and his post-resurrection interaction with Jesus about the language of love.

Critically then, “Amend your ways and your doings *from inner out* and let me *be involved* with you in this *surrounding context*.... For if you truly *undergo the critical cultural shift*, then I will *be relationally involved* with you in this *context together*” (Jer 7:3-7).

The Culture of Our Theology and Practice

It is imperative that Christians discover their perceptual-interpretive culture, so they can understand the mindset used to identify who they are and also whose they are. The same perceptual-interpretive culture is the main determinant for their theology and practice.

Christian theology and practice have long been dominated by Western culture. The main determinant for this still-existing condition is culture, not merely Western interpretations of theology. This prevailing culture certainly has not been neutral and has been obviously consequential for global Christianity—just as all cultures are neither neutral nor inconsequential. Whether in the global North or global South, regional and local contexts' cultures have the same effect on theology and practice, even though a southern context may compete with the West to be the main determinant. Regardless of where, the pivotal issue is: Whose culture determines our theology and practice, and thereby does our theology and practice call for the critical cultural shift embodied and enacted by Jesus?

Christians outside the global North would rightfully say “Yes, indeed!” Yet, those Christians cannot substitute their own culture as recourse for their theology and practice, that is, without also hearing Jesus rightfully and emphatically say “Yes, indeed!” in calling for the correct cultural shift.

Let's limit our focus to the U.S. and consider the existing condition here of evangelicals. Evangelicalism is not a monolith around the world and certainly not in the U.S.¹⁰ In the U.S., however, evangelicals form a curious, unique, unpredictable (take your pick) diversity, which not surprisingly maintains incompatible divisions between them. Much to the chagrin of many evangelicals, the public perception of evangelicals lumps them together as one entity, if not always in theology certainly in practice. Yet, the incompatible divisions among evangelicals have less to do with their theology and more to do with their practice, both of which are influenced and shaped by culture in the surrounding contexts. Whether it is social, political, economic, or a combination of factors underpinning a surrounding culture, that culture has become a main determinant forming the perceptual-interpretive mindset of evangelicals. For example, identity politics has been a key determinant for many evangelicals' identity and function, notably among high-visibility leaders. Moreover, culture has been the key for the increased intensity among various evangelical groups to promote nationalism, no matter the repercussions for other persons, peoples and nations.¹¹ I don't think the current “Make America Great Again” movement would have impetus, perhaps even survive, if evangelicals didn't support its nationalism at the forefront.¹² In the midst of this divisive condition, there are certainly evangelical counter-activists, whose source of identity and function is more ambiguous—though they may have the appearance of counter-cultural—

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

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

¹² In an OP-ED, Randall Balmer recently pointed to an underlying bias of racism in white evangelicals' political agenda, “Evangelical show their true colors,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 2017.

and thus is not clearly distinguished as emerging from the critical cultural shift embodied and enacted by Jesus. Then there are the many evangelicals who are simply silent, who may identify their theology and practice as evangelical but whose identity and function just mirror the silent majority composing the U.S.

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

For our further clarification and correction, consider the following narrative of “The Relative”:

This is the story of a relative of mine, whom I had never met before yet who specifically came to see me. Since I didn’t know him, we didn’t seem to have much in common. As he told me a lot about himself, his history and personal background were interesting but not enough to really captivate my attention. We interestingly came from the same extended family but that seemed so long ago; though I was informed, it was just information for my family background file—and I wasn’t interested in a DNA profile to confirm what he was telling me.

Then he seemed to share himself quite vulnerably and expressed some intimate moments that I thought were reasons to celebrate and commemorate. So, I had special dinners for him during such visits, even held a party for him and gave special recognition to the honored place of this relative in our family. According to our tradition, the entire family and friends gathered together to have a festive time, everyone enjoying the designated occasion to celebrate. Everyone, that is, except our relative of honor. I noticed him in the corner quietly observing our family tradition.

I went over to ask him why he wasn’t participating as the honored member tonight. He looked at me with eyes I’ll never forget. He shared further with me why he came to visit me. As tears filled his eyes, I became tense by the intimate expression from his face. It was as if I could see right into the interior of his heart—completely open for me to experience face to face.

Disarmed at first, I didn’t know what to do. I nervously looked around for others to join us, but they were all occupied. He kept looking at me with those eyes, as if to say “It’s not about what you do.” Then something shifted inside of me—my brain, my mind, my heart, perhaps all—and it started to dawn on me. In contrast to my family, for my relative it wasn’t about having dinners, party, celebration, and recognition. That was all secondary to what was primary for him. He came to be directly involved with me face to face, not merely to do things together or even to occupy a space as a relative in my family. He was sharing his whole person vulnerably with me for relationship together, and I was missing his person being occupied (OK, maybe preoccupied) with the secondary.

Up until that moment, I really didn't get it. I thought I was doing what I should by focusing on the history, important information and related things about my relative. While they were interesting and even cause to celebrate, to be honest with you those things really didn't grab my heart—not as his eyes did. Now that I began to really see my relative with different eyes, I can also start to see my need to change how I engage in relationships, that is, if I want to truly know him and the significance of his eyes.

In that conscious shift, I got up and politely excused everyone from the party, with the assurance we would gather together at a new time as well as in a new way. Then, still a little nervous, I turned to my relative to make connection—the kind of connection I now better understand that he came to have with me. Indeed, this was the good news I had always assumed informed me.

As you pay close attention to this incarnation narrative, what do you see, what do you hear, and what do you learn? As you make yourself vulnerable, can you further discover the perceptual-interpretive culture that's used in your theology and practice—maybe by also looking into “those eyes.”

The subtle consequence of any and all perceptual-interpretive cultures in the surrounding context is to displace followers of Jesus to a different path than Jesus' relational path—just like those on the road to Emmaus (cf. Mt 7:13). To be on a different path than Jesus has major consequences. In contrast to what Jesus embodied in his whole person and enacted in how he functioned whole-ly, persons are reshaped from inner out to outer in, and relationships are reconstructed accordingly with secondary matter to substitute for what is primary; and on this reduced basis, church practice also is established and extended in the academy. We cannot ignore the role culture plays in these consequences because its seductive influence is far-reaching on shaping our person, our relationships, and our churches and academy. Consider further, it is vital for us to examine church practice of worship and what determines its shape, including contemporary worship and music—as the popular church in Sardis had to be awakened to (Rev 3:1-2). How congruent is this worship with who and what the Father seeks in those worshipping him (Jn 4:23-24)? And how much does our worship correlate to what Jesus critiqued of worship on his whole basis in wholeness (Mt 15:8-9)? We cannot assume that the seductive influence of culture is not present, has not diminished our worship,¹³ and has not co-opted us from the primary, the primacy of reciprocal relationship together without the veil, and indeed has not removed us from the intrusive relational path of Jesus. Such an assumption mirrors the assumption from the primordial garden that “you will not surely *be reduced*.”

Besides the global church, this also raises a serious challenge to the multicultural church today—wherever it might exist or be considered as *the* church model—and whether the basis for its composition needs the critical cultural shift. More urgently, what prevails in your theology and practice, the secondary or the primary?

¹³ To better understand the shaping influence of culture on worship, see Kary A. Kambara, *A Theology of Worship: 'Singing' a New Song to the Lord* (2011). Online at <http://4X12.org>. See also *Hermeneutic of Worship Language: Understanding Communion with the Whole of God* (Worship Language Study, 2013). Online at <http://4X12.org>.

To counter the reductionism composing culture in the human context from the beginning, and to neutralize and transform culture's determinant influence, the incarnated Word ongoingly communicates to us clarification and correction in his relational language of love in order to be together intimately in his realm of connection. Yet, whenever his relational love language is transposed to referential language, it loses the relational significance of "those eyes." Furthermore, be alerted: When he speaks for himself rather than others speaking for him, he speaks in tough-love relational language, thus neither idealized nor romanticized. Therefore, it is imperative for all of us to "consider carefully how you listen" (Lk 8:18), and "pay attention closely to what you hear" (Mk 4:24).

The palpable Word with the Spirit corrected the church in Thyatira to expose the reality that "you tolerate *at best and assimilate at worst the surrounding cultural context and form a subtle hybrid in your theology and practice, notably with epistemological illusions of the Word and ontological simulations of his identity and function*" (Rev 2:20). Then "the significance of his eyes" was clarified: "All the churches (*including the academy*) need to know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will respond to each of you *accordingly*" (Rev 2:23).

Chapter 5 The Trajectory of Our Interpretations and Path of Our Understanding

**A pathway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way.
The common shall not journey on it; it shall be for God's people
who sojourn in that Way.**

Isaiah 35:8

**Do not conform to the reductionism you have when you lived without knowing God.
But just as he who connected with you is holy, so be holy in your whole
ontology and function; for it is written in relational language:
“Be holy, because I am holy.”**

1 Peter 1:14-15, NIV

**You have been anointed by the Holy One in relational terms...the anointing
that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need
anyone to teach you in referential language. But as his anointing
teaches you in relational language about all things, and is real and is not virtual,
and just as it has taught you his relational terms, abide in him
in the primacy of relationship together.**

1 John 2:20,27

In a recent reprint of a “Peanuts” comic, Linus raises a theological question to Charlie Brown: “When you die and go to heaven, are you graded on a percentage or a curve?” Assuming the posture of a scholar, Charlie asserts “on a curve, naturally.” “How can you be so sure?” replies Linus. Charlie pointedly answered, “I’m always sure about things that are a matter of opinion.”¹ This illustrates the diverse interpretations of the Bible shaped by a biased perceptual-interpretive mindset in need of clarification and correction; Charlie’s would have been clarified and corrected if he listened carefully to the words from God (as in Eze 7:3; Heb 10:30; Rev 20:12). As it was, his interpretation didn’t align with the theological trajectory of the Word—a common condition among Christians, even about the most basic issue of the gospel’s composition.

Just like Jesus, the transformed Jewish Paul (his identity and function, Phil 3:4-11) incarnated the pivotal fight against reductionism and for the wholeness of the gospel. He confronted interpretations of the gospel that essentially were “no gospel at all” (Gal 1:6-7). With the assumptions most Christians make today about the gospel, we don’t hear a theological question raised about its composition. Yet, I would be interested to see how many current interpretations of the gospel that Paul would also confront in the same way, including how fragmented the incarnated Word has become (similar to 1 Cor 1:12-13). Are our theology and practice in effect composed by recycled interpretations of the gospel of the Word that are on a different theological trajectory and relational path than the incarnated (not simply embodied) Word?

¹ By Charles M. Schulz, *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 2018.

In the realm of biblical interpretations, past and present, most interpretations don't distinguish in fullness their theological trajectory. Thus, most Christians are unaware that their identity and function are also on a different relational path than the Word, the way necessary to enter the incarnated realm of connection wherein they are able to distinguish the integral relational context and process essential to know and understand God. Only the incarnated Word along with the Spirit provide the clarification and correction, so that "his anointing teaches you *in relational language* about all things, and is *real* and not *virtual*" (1 Jn 2:27). Along the trajectory and path of the Word and Spirit, Paul and his cohorts John and Peter confronted the diverse forms of reductionism that evolved in the early church (as above Scripture illuminate), the diversity of which continues to evolve today. The underlying reductionism rendering Christians on a different theological trajectory and relational path than the incarnated Word emerges and evolves in three crucial measures ('**three dynamic dimensions**') for our identity and function, and thus for our theology and practice:

1. **The underpinning shift of human interpretation** from 'God speaking for God' in communication with the words *from* God, to 'others speaking for God' by transmitting information about the words *of* God—which evolves with the subtle challenging shift of language that transposes the words from God in relational language to the words of God in referential language, and then pervades our thinking to form our perceptual-interpretive mindset in those fragmentary referential terms.
2. **The essential shift of anthropology**—which should not be confused with a shift from creation to evolution—that converts the created theological anthropology defining human ontology and function on the basis of the inner-out whole, to an ontology and function reduced on an outer-in fragmentary basis, the adaptations of which have certainly evolved into a diversity of persons and peoples.
3. **The primary shift of the human context** from the primacy of God's uncommon (holy) relational context and process to giving primacy to the common's determinant context and process, which prevail over our surrounding contexts with subtle and seductive processes that influence, shape and dominate our identity and function, and thus our theology and education as well as our practice and learning.

These three crucial measures emerged from the primordial garden, and their dynamic dimensions have evolved from that beginning. Until we recognize these dynamic dimensions of reductionism and thereby understand its underlying workings—which are both necessary to compose our language of sin and to confront reductionism's presence and influence in our theology and practice—we will not be on the same theological trajectory and relational path as the incarnated Word. The consequential reality is that we will not be transformed in our ontology and function on his whole basis in wholeness, which is consequential both for individuals to be subject-persons and persons together to be relationally involved as his new creation church family in the very likeness of the whole-ly Trinity. For the reality of this incarnated relational outcome to be real and not virtual, we have to counter resolutely these three shifts of reductionism by shifting from the status quo (in all its variations) in our theology and practice to the new

dimensions enacted by the incarnated Word for our incarnated ontology and function—with and for nothing less and no substitutes.

Countering the Underpinning Shift of Human Interpretation

Maybe you don't always feel sure about your interpretations as Charlie Brown does, and perhaps you don't even think you're speaking for God. Yet, the fact is: If you are not listening to the words from God in relational language, you are only focused on fragmentary words of God in referential language; and if you are narrowly focused on the information about those words of God, then you are (1) by implication sure about your interpretations to even make any interpretations on such a narrowed-down basis, and also (2) by default actually speaking for God on your reduced basis, or else you would simply be silent by having no significant basis for making interpretations of the Word.

This is an uncomfortable, unnerving, or even unacceptable account of theology and practice today. But the reality exists that our current status quo remains status quo without significant qualitative relational changes because we haven't shifted the underpinning of our interpretations from its prevailing referential language back to the primary relational language of God (the original language of the Bible). This reality is evident in this fact: Whenever we are not consciously listening to the words *from* God communicated only in relational language, we are by default reading (perhaps hearing) the words *of* God transmitted in the alternate referential language. Thus, in our explicit or implicit thinking, we continue to ask "Did God say *that*?" with the perceptual-interpretive mindset that answers in effect "Yes, this is what God said and meant by that." This is the presumptuous mindset, notably of "the wise and learned" (Lk 10:21), that thinks it knows sufficiently to interpret and speak (e.g. Mt 21:15-16). God's response is, just as Job was clarified and corrected: "Who is this that *obscures my words with interpretations* without knowing?" (Job 38:2) As Job further experienced humbly, the only alternative that would shift from his reductionism is to make one's person vulnerable directly to the words from God speaking: "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things *beyond my narrow thinking* for me to know. You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak'" (Job 42:3-4, NIV). So, Job's whole persons shifted from the reduced underpinning of his interpretation and learned to listen with new ears and eyes in God's realm of connection (42:5).

Before that shift, what Job and his friends engaged in was theological discourse, which commonly exists among God's people and has evolved in the church and has been adapted in the academy at all levels of theological education. This is not surprising when the underpinning shift of biblical and theological interpretation has not been understood or even recognized; and this always prompts Jesus' disarming question for even mature and learned interpreters: "Why is my language not clear to you?"

When the theology composed in the words from God is transposed to referential language about the words of God, there is disconnection from the trajectory and path of God's qualitative realm of relational connection—leaving God's presence and involvement elusive, vague, forgotten or lost. Such theology thereby enters the trajectory and path of the quantitative realm of information and gets connected to the informed discourse commonly prevailing in the surrounding contexts of human life—with boasts

about discovery, biblical literacy and scholarly parentheses. Nothing changes in this status quo until this underpinning shift is countered.

When the trajectory of our interpretations gets disconnected from God's qualitative realm of relational connection, the path of our understanding is incomplete, fragmentary, misleading, and/or misguided. Variations of this status quo in theology and practice were clarified and corrected by the Word and Spirit, in order to reconnect the trajectory of churches and change their path of understanding:

The path of understanding for the church at Sardis was incomplete, despite their success and esteemed reputation (Rev 3:1-2); for the church at Ephesus, their correct theology and dedicated practice were fragmentary, giving priority to the secondary over the primary (Rev 2:1-4); for the church at Laodicea, their perceptual-interpretive mindset was misinformed and thus misleading, defining their identity by the vast amount of their resources (Rev 3:17-19); for the church at Thyatira, their tolerance of the surrounding context was misguided, creating a hybrid theology and practice (Rev 2:19-20,23).

All these variations of the path of understanding exist and continue to evolve in churches today. Nothing changes this status quo until the trajectory of their interpretations is transformed for the path of understanding in wholeness. Urgent update: "Listen! I am standing at church doors, knocking; if any of you listen to my voice *communicating in relational language*, I will come in to you and *your trajectory and path will be reconnected with me face to face*" (Rev 3:20). Who has shifted from hearing these 'good news' words in referential language in order to listen to *how* the Word communicated them?

This unavoidably faces us again with the pivotal issue of *how* we see the Bible, which determines both *what* we see in the Bible and learn from the Word. If the Bible is explicitly or implicitly our primary reference book, then we will use it to discover discursive information to build our biblical literacy, from which we may develop informed parentheses for theology and practice (as fill the shelves of Christian bookstores/distributors, cf. Ecc 12:12). The issue that keeps emerging because we haven't shifted from this status quo is simply: What we learn evolves from how we see the Bible. For example, the Word (*Logos*) can be conceptualized (as in early variations of Gnosticism), or could even be formalized (as in the Reformation) and idealized (as in evangelicalism), such that the Word (as written in cursive relational terms) is in effect no longer incarnate (not merely the embodiment of God). That is to say, there is a subtle disconnect from the realm of connection for God's presence and involvement, which are incarnated only by the Word's relational context and process. This disconnection may not be apparent in our theology when the doctrine of the incarnation is formalized; it is, however, evident in our practice when the Word's relational context and process are not incarnated.

The reality of God's presence and involvement is only virtual in doctrine and doesn't become real until experienced directly in the incarnated Word's relational context and process. Moreover, the inescapable relational consequence of this virtual reality is to reduce the face-to-face, person-to-person communication from God merely to discursive bits of information about God (as in digitized interpretations). Whatever level of learning

all this information may possess, their integrity no longer has the relational significance and purpose of God's revelation composing the Bible (as Paul illuminated, 1 Cor 2:9-12, cf. Ps 67:1-2; 119:130,135). All this parallels how modern technology has rendered communication in the digital age.

The reduced perceptual-interpretive mindset formed by referential language has evolved into the perceptual-interpretive culture pervading the church and prevailing in the academy. To counter the underpinning shift of Christian interpretation, therefore, also requires the critical cultural shift unmistakably distinguished from this perceptual-interpretive culture, so that its determinant effects are negated and transformed. Certainly, such a cultural shift raises tension in the status quo and also concerns for those who engage this shift; this is understandable because in any perceptual-interpretive mindset the shift would be considered distinctly counter-cultural, and thus threaten existing theology and practice. That's why it is indispensable. This critical cultural shift interacts reflexively with the new dimension incarnated by the Word, the dimension which incarnates "new eyes" (as Job experienced) for *how* to see the incarnated Word to determine *what* to see in the whole-ly Word. The shift to this new dimension together with the critical cultural shift are integral to counter the underpinning shift of Christian interpretation.

Yet, as Job would testify, "new eyes" does not emerge from our discovery or efforts at biblical literacy. This further faces us with the fact that how we learn determines what we learn, and the reality that *whom* we learn from determines the nature and significance of what we learn. The urgent question then is: In real life, not ideally, do we learn the Bible from human effort and interpretations as the primary determinant for how we learn? Or do we learn God's Word by being taught by the whole-ly Word (the Holy One in 1 Jn 2:20,27) as the primary determinant rather than by the scope of human effort? Certainly, the line between these two determinants is not always distinct, but what is primary and what is only secondary is always evident in how we learn what we learn. Consider what is primary in the learning progression of Psalm 119:13, 18, 72, 130—and experience what Job learned. "New eyes" only emerges from the primacy of the incarnated Word enacted to incarnate this new dimension necessary to counter the underpinning shift of human interpretations and the reductionism underlying human efforts.

In support and further illumination of the experiential reality of Job's "new eyes," John makes this definitive declaration that distinguishes God's theological trajectory and relational path for all of us the share in together: "You have been anointed by the Holy One *in relational terms*...the anointing that you received from him abides in you *from inner out*, and so you do not need anyone to teach you *in referential language*. But as his anointing teaches you *in relational language* about all things, and is *real* and is not *virtual*, and just as it has taught you *his relational terms*, abide *intimately with your whole person from inner out* with him *in the primacy of relationship together*" (1 Jn 2:20,27). When we are ongoingly involved with him in the primacy of reciprocal relationship together, we can count on the Holy One also for any necessary clarification and correction for our interpretations and understanding.

We either embrace the theological trajectory and relational path of the Holy One's vulnerable presence and relational involvement, and thereby counter reductionism in our theology and practice. Or we disconnect to engage a different trajectory and path, and thereby reinforce the status quo and sustain reductionism in our theology and practice.

Countering the Essential Shift of Anthropology

When the persons in the primordial garden were told “you will not die”—contrary to what God had told them—they certainly must have believed in this alternative fact or fake news. This demonstrated the power of language not only to subtly express contrary thought but also to form alternate thinking in diverse forms—thinking that is subtly misled and then misguided, as evident in theological learning and education. At that turning point, the fact is that they didn't literally die. Most Christians believe that if you disobey the Word, your life will experience death literally. If, however, the word ‘die’ were replaced by the word ‘reduced’, then Christians likely would believe that you will not literally be reduced in your life, present and future. What do we need to understand about these persons, whether in the primordial garden or in everyday life today? The dynamic dimension that evolved from the beginning was the language conflict and barrier that emerged from the first crucial measure signifying the underpinning shift of our interpretations. The issue from the beginning and today does not revolve around what is literal but centers on what is essential and thus primary. The first measure's language barrier prevents making this clear distinction and thereby clouds distinguishing what's essential and primary.

Therefore, the first dynamic dimension measuring our identity and function interacts with the second crucial measure signifying the essential shift of our theological anthropology. This essential shift reduces our ontology and function literally (intrinsically, if not also extrinsically); this is the human reality made ambiguous by alternative facts, revised by a reduced perceptual-interpretive mindset, or simply not understood in the language barrier of referential terms. Most importantly, the essential shift of the human person is the epicenter for the three crucial measures of reductionism's dynamic dimensions prevailing in the human context for human life.

In order to counter the essential shift of the human person, we need to understand the critical reference point when persons shifted in their ontology and function. This reference point pivots between (1) human ontology and function constituted in the image and likeness of whole-ly God, or (2) human ontology and function composed by human terms in the form of comparative human likeness. This critical reference point pivoted in the primordial garden, when those persons shifted from their image and likeness of God (persons “both naked and were not ashamed,” Gen 2:25) to their comparative human likeness (“they knew that they were naked and *covered up*,” 3:7). At that critical juncture, their persons were deconstructed from the whole ontology and function from inner out and reconstructed in the reduced ontology and function from outer in. The dynamic dimension of this essential shift is inseparable from the subtle transaction involving the underpinning shift of their interpretations. This makes evident the power of referential language both to form alternate thinking and to change reality from real to virtual. Essentially, reality changed from the real of whole ontology and function in God's

likeness to the virtual of reduced ontology and function in human likeness—and distinguishing the real from the virtual has been an ongoing problem for human persons in general and Christian persons in particular ever since.

From this beginning, the pivoting of this critical reference point also vacillates between (1) **person-consciousness** of one's identity and function in the wholeness of God's likeness, or (2) **self-consciousness** of one's identity and function in the comparative process of human likeness. These are not psychological concepts of the human person but dynamic dimensions that measure our identity and function in everyday life. As witnessed in the primordial garden, person-consciousness is the distinct consciousness of persons defined and their relationships determined in invariable wholeness from their inner depth to their outer composition. Unlike chameleons changing according to their surrounding context, whole persons and relationships are integrated from inner out according to the qualitative image of the uncommon God and the relational likeness of the whole of God—the whole-ly God, the Trinity. Therefore, the created wholeness of persons and relationships is irreversible—that is, unless they shift to human terms and thereby reconfigure their person and relationships from the outer in (demonstrated in Gen 3:6-7). The shift included going from person-consciousness from inner out to an outer-in focus on their self, thus establishing the self-consciousness prevailing in the human context (including churches) that so preoccupies persons and relationships. This shift shapes persons and relationships to the subtle influences of the surrounding human context and thus to the captivating influence of reductionism and its counter-relational workings. Can you see how this critical reference point pivots in your own life and in Christian contexts?

To continue to be whole is a qualitative function of person-consciousness that focuses on the person from inner out, that is, on the whole person. Yet, the whole person is not a *simple object* operating within the parameters of a predetermined condition or behavioral pattern. Rather, contrary to some theories of the person, the whole person is a *complex subject* whose function includes human agency composed by the will that further distinguishes the person's uniqueness created by God.²

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

² This vital discussion on theological anthropology is expanded in *The Person in Complete Context: The Whole of Theological Anthropology Distinguished* (TA Study, 2014).

body and without being apart from the body in a separate function of the soul. How do we account for these persons then?

The complex human subject is manifested in different outward forms, all of which cannot be explained. For example, any lack of physical capacity does not relegate a person to reduced ontology and function, though variable ontology and function is still possible for such a person. Each of these different forms, however, should not be perceived in the comparative process of prevailing human distinctions that compose a deficit model identifying those differences as less. This has obvious relational implications for those cultures and traditions that favor certain persons (e.g. by race) and have discriminated against others (e.g. by gender, class, age). Such practice is not only ethically and morally unacceptable for the global church but most important it exposes the sin as reductionism of persons embodying the church in reduced ontology and function.

What is definitive of the complex human subject in any form is this reality: “It is not good to be apart” from the whole that God created for all human ontology and function in the qualitative image and relational likeness of God, and therefore any human subject can be affirmed and needs to live in whole ontology and function—even if conditions, situations and circumstances appear to the contrary, as is the case for the persons discussed above. This challenges both our assumptions about persons who are different and how we define them and engage them in relationship. Any distinction differences from our perceptual-interpretive mindset that we impose on them reflect our reduced ontology and function, not theirs.

As a complex subject in the human context, the human will is responsible for the perceptual-interpretive mindset used to focus either inner out or outer in on the person, albeit with the influence of the surrounding context. Person-consciousness is intrinsic to being created whole but ongoing person-consciousness involves the person’s will. The person’s choice also can include using a lens focused on the person from outer in, which then shifts from person-consciousness to self-consciousness (as witnessed in the primordial garden). The vacillation between person-consciousness and self-consciousness is a reality of human agency that all persons in general assume by the function of their will, and that all Christians in particular are responsible for in living with whole ontology and function or reduced ontology and function—necessitating the careful and vulnerable examination of God’s penetrating questions, “Where are you?” and “what are you doing here?” (1 Kgs 19:9,13) And the further reality from the beginning needing to be understood is that self-consciousness and its mindset of outer in have become the default choice. Unless this reality is addressed with the reality of human agency, the default mode will prevail in human consciousness and the perceptual-interpretive mindset used. Moreover, this process of reality is nonnegotiable and thus is not amendable by a hybrid consciousness.

Along with the mindset used for the person and the human consciousness engaged, the human will is also responsible for the type of work engaged in. Given the reciprocal nature of whole relationships together, relational work is primary. How this work is perceived and the extent to which it is engaged—if it is perceived or engaged at all—unfold from the person’s will. For example, if the deliberate choice is not made to engage the primacy of relational work, secondary work becomes the primary focus either by intention or by default; the latter is always easier to engage, and social media today

has made that the convenient choice. In other words, the will is central to what ontology and function emerges from the person. Therefore, our theological anthropology must be able to account for variable ontology and function, and then counter any essential shift of basic anthropology. The soul of dualism and supervenience of nonreductive physicalism are insufficient to explain human agency and to define whole ontology and function. For example, the qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness of person-consciousness are not defined merely by a soul, nor is their lack explained by supervenience.

Person-consciousness and the primacy of relational work are integral and thus inseparable for the whole ontology and function created by God. We cannot integrate person-consciousness with mere simple association with others, nor can we engage the primacy of relational work with self-consciousness and expect the relationship to have significant involvement. Person-consciousness is relational work, the primacy of which distinguishes the relational involvement of the whole person defined from inner out. The integral interaction between person-consciousness and relational work is both irreducible and nonnegotiable, which is essential to be in the image and likeness of whole-ly God. Yet—and this is crucial to understand and recognize—the pervasive (and default) mode of self-consciousness uses illusions and simulations to counter the real with the virtual.

This points us directly back to the human (our) condition resulting from the essential shift of our anthropology. It is evident today that there is a critical gap in our understanding of the human condition, and perhaps a failure to take the human condition seriously. Directly interrelated, and most likely its determinant, a reduced theological anthropology not only fails to address the depth of the human condition but in reality obscures its depth, reinforces its breadth, or even conforms to this inescapable and unavoidable condition. The repercussions for us, of course, are that we do not account for our own practice of reductionism, and, interrelated, that we do not address our own function in the human condition; and this could subtly exist even if we are involved in changing the status quo.

Our function in the human condition manifests in three notable areas, which are the three interrelated issues of ongoing major importance for ontology and function:

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

These ongoing issues are **the three inescapable issues** for our ontology and function needing accountability. The pivotal shift from “embodied whole from inner out and not confused, disappointed (“ashamed”) in relationship together” to “embodied parts from outer in (self-conscious nakedness) and reduced to relational distance” has ongoing consequences; and their implications directly challenge our theological anthropology and hold us accountable for its assumptions of ontology and function.

This shift to reductionism expressed in these inescapable issues for our ontology and function further expresses itself in interaction with the following **three unavoidable issues** for all practice that are necessary to account for in all moments:

1. **The presentation of the person:** the outer-in parts of our person presented to others that define and determine our primary identity (e.g. using identity markers), thereby conveying to others who and what we are based on these fragmentary facts, not whole reality—that is, an ongoing presentation of the self in self-consciousness (e.g. “naked from outer in”) that is limited and/or constrained by covering up and masks.
2. **The integrity and quality of our communication:** our communication becomes more shallow, ambiguous or misleading in the presentation process with others, and how this communication compromises the integrity of relationship together (e.g. in self-conscious self-justification, “the woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate,” Gen 3:12).
3. **The depth level of involvement in relationship:** the involvement level engaged in this relationship is shaped by our identity presented and its related communication, and thus determined by levels of relational distance, not depth (e.g. “...they covered up,” “I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself,” Gen 3:10).

Regardless of who we are and what our place is in the human context, we all must account ongoingly for the type of person presented, the nature of our communication and the level of involvement engaged in our relationships. These are unavoidable issues that interact with the three inescapable issues, which together influence and shape our lives and need accountability even in the most typical and common expressions along the full width of the spectrum locating anything less and any substitutes of the whole.

The qualitative and relational aspects in human life necessary for whole ontology and function are neither sufficiently addressed nor deeply accounted for in theological anthropology discourse—including with the prominence of dualism, the emergence of supervenience, and the focus on relationality. In spite of recent focus on the latter, there appears to be a status quo in theology and function above which we rarely rise—perhaps evident of a lack of qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness—and which indicates our need for a critical and pivotal shift from reductionism back to the whole. This prompts a related question for theological anthropology: On what basis is the human condition defined and its resolution determined? The answer is either good news in relational terms or so-so news in referential terms, or perhaps disappointing news because it lacks qualitative and relational significance.

The ‘three dynamic dimensions’ composed by reductionism converge at the epicenter of our anthropology to measure the existing condition of our persons and relationships in daily life. Therefore, to counter reductionism in our ontology and function, we need to broaden and deepen our understanding of sin to fully account for the human condition in our midst, notably efforts of self-determination and the human shaping of relationships. If we think that the human condition is about sin but understand sin only in terms of conventional moral-ethical failure (e.g. disobedience in the garden), then we do not account for the loss of the qualitative and the relational in everyday

human life (even in the church and academy) that God clearly distinguished in created ontology and function of human persons—that qualitative image and relational likeness distinguishing not just God but the whole-ly God. The relational consequence “to be apart” (not merely “to be alone,” Gen 2:18) unfolding from the primordial garden is the human condition of the loss of the primacy of whole relationship together and its prevailing relational distance, separation, brokenness, and thus loneliness. Moreover, the human (our) condition even threatens the integrity of the human brain³ as further evidence that this condition “is not good, pleasant, beautiful, delightful, precious, correct, righteous for persons to be apart from whole relationship together.”

How we tend to do relationship and what prevails in our relationships today are reductions of the primacy of whole relationships that God created in the Trinity’s likeness; and the human shaping of relationships composes the human relational condition, which then is reflected, reinforced or sustained by any and all human shaping in a reflexive loop.

Furthermore, the whole person from inner out signified by the qualitative function of the heart needs renewed focus for understanding the human condition and needs to be restored in our theology and function—yet, merely discussing spirituality is inadequate. We cannot avoid addressing the human heart (our own to start) and the feelings associated with it because the whole of human identity is rooted in it—along with their consciousness in the self wired in the brain, noted by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio⁴—and the depths of the human condition is tied to it. If neuroscience can talk about feelings as integral to the human function, why doesn’t the theological academy discuss feelings as at the core of the human person?

A major part of the answer relates to our theological anthropology having redefined the person without the primacy of the qualitative and relational; but interrelated, the main reason involves the human condition, that is, our intentional, unintentional or inadvertent engagement in the reductionism composing the human condition—notably in the self-determination preoccupied in the secondary (“good for...a delight to...desired to”) and in the shaping of relationships (“unexposed and distant,” cf. Gen 2:25). Consciousness as a person necessarily involves feelings—even for the whole-ly God (e.g. Gen 6:6; Jn 11:33,35; Eph 4:30)—which Damasio defines as essential for the self but locates feelings only in brain function to integrate mind and body. Theological anthropology, however, can and needs to go deeper to inner out to get to the qualitative function of the heart (not separated from the brain) to distinguish the whole person. Yet, this is not about dualism, which goes ‘inner’ for an elusive soul but doesn’t integrate with the ‘out’ adequately to embody the whole person without fragmenting into parts (soul and body). And nonreductive physicality has ‘outer’ but not sufficiently ‘in’ to constitute the depth of the whole person in ontology and function; the whole person is pointed to but is either fragmentary or not distinguished.

The qualitative inner out signified by heart function is more definitive to distinguish the whole person, with its integral function irreplaceable for both the body to be whole and relationships together to be whole. Therefore, a turn away from the heart in

³ In their study of the brain John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick discuss this in *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

⁴ Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010).

any context or function has an unavoidable consequence of the human condition. The qualitative loss signified in the human condition emerges when we become distant from our heart, constrained or detached from feelings, thereby insensitive or hardened—just as Jesus exposed (Mk 7:6; Jn 5:42, cf. Mk 8:17) and Paul critiqued (Eph 4:17-19). This increasingly embeds human function in the outer in and reduces human ontology to ontological simulation.

This is evidenced in the function of “hypocrites” (*hypokrites*, Mk 7:6). In referential terms, *hypokrites* and *hypokrisis* (hypocrisy, cf. Lk 12:1) are limited to pretension or falsehood, in acts to dissemble or deceive. In relational terms, the dynamic involves the person presented to others (1st unavoidable issue) that is only from outer in and thus different from the whole person distinguished from inner out (2nd inescapable issue). Just as ancient Greek actors put on masks in a play, *hypokrites* engages in ontological simulation not necessarily with the intent to deceive but from what emerges by the nature of function from outer in. This dynamic evolved when the roles, titles and related markers we have are the basis for how we engage in relationships (3rd unavoidable issue). In other words, whatever the person presents to others, it is not whole and consequently cannot be counted on to be who and what the person is, which is less about the outer-in issue of deception but most importantly the inner-out issue of righteousness (who, what and how the person truly is). This dynamic engages the pivotal issue involving the ontology of the person and its effect on relationships. The consequence of such function in relational terms is always a qualitative relational consequence that may not be apparent at the quantitative level from outer in. The outer-in simulation masking its qualitative relational consequence is exposed by Jesus notably in the relational act of worship: “This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me” (Mk 7:6, as in the 2nd unavoidable issue). Paul also later confronted Peter and exposed his outer-in simulation (*hypokrisis*) by the role-playing he engaged in focused on secondary matters, which even influenced Barnabas and others to function outer in (Gal 2:11-14). All this magnifies the three unavoidable issues for all practice that must be accounted for ongoingly.

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

The breadth and depth of reductionism by its nature is anything less and any substitutes of the whole. This irrefutably composes a wide spectrum of shapes and expressions, even among Jesus' disciples and within gatherings of the church. All of these shapes and expressions of human ontology and function constitute the human condition—notably among Christians even by default—which prevail in the human context with the following consequence:

To define human being and determine being human, to construct human identity and shape human relationships, under the limits and constraints of the quantitative over the qualitative, the referential over the relational—all preoccupied with the secondary over the primary, even embedded in secondary information/details about the primary, under the long-standing assumption: “You will not surely be reduced.”

In reality, from the beginning to the present, discourse on theological anthropology is insufficient to be lived, and lived whole-ly; essentially, in interaction with the underpinning shift, it has shifted to be subject to the limits and constraints of the human context. Anything less and any substitutes in both our theological anthropology and its human ontology and function either ignore or reinforce the human condition in its depth, and therefore either sustain or even conform to its breadth. This state of our theological anthropology and its ontology and function of the person in the human context counters the whole person and relationships together in wholeness constituted in God's context. Until this counter-relational work of reductionism is countered with nothing less and no substitutes, and thereby on God's whole basis in wholeness, we and our theology and practice remain in the status quo embedded in the human context.

This brings us to the primary contextual shift facing us.

Countering the Primary Shift of the Human Context

In order for our theology and practice to be on the Word's whole basis in wholeness, we must “Follow me” integrally on the theological trajectory compatible with and on the relational path congruent with the incarnated Word's. To be compatible with the Word's trajectory is to be compatible with the Word's relational context constituting his trajectory. To be congruent with the Word's path is to be congruent with the Word's relational process that is essential to enact the trajectory of his relational context. Like his trajectory and path, his relational context and process are inseparable and always integrated. Furthermore, the significance of his relational process is determined (or measured) by the integrity of the whole-ly Word's relational context. Accordingly, for us to be congruent with the incarnated Word's relational process, we also must (*dei*, by its nature and not *opheilo*, out of obligation) be compatible with the whole-ly Word's relational context. This compatibility is unattainable wherever there is the primary shift of the human context. The critical issue directly involves the primary context subtly shaping the trajectory of our interpretations and the path of our understanding.

When Jesus wept over God's people in Jerusalem, it was because their interpretation of peace didn't understand what would "make for peace" (Lk 19:42). How did a people oppressed under Roman rule not understand what would bring them peace? Because their perceptual-interpretive mindset was focused on the common peace of the human context, at the loss of not understanding the uncommon peace Jesus gives (Jn 14:27). In other words, they had become contextualized by the common, which evidenced the subtle shift of their primary context determining their identity and function. In contrast, the book of Hebrews highlights the formative faith of God's people, their trajectory and path that defined their identity and function as "strangers and foreigners, *aliens, exiles* on the earth" (Heb 11:13-16)—or those whose "citizenship is in *God's context*" (as the Jewish Paul made definitive, Phil 3:20). Essentially, then, all of God's people should be immigrants in their surrounding context, because they have disconnected (perhaps escaped as refugees) from their past and now belong to God's kingdom family.

This illuminates the primary contextual issue that Christians neither discuss often enough nor address very deeply when they do. The epistemic and hermeneutic keys to interpreting God's revelation in the Bible is understanding the source of God's trajectory and path into the human context: That source is the whole-ly God's context, which determines the integral relational context and process that distinguish the whole-ly Trinity's presence and involvement in the common's context of human life. God's context is whole and uncommon (holy) and the Trinity's presence and involvement incarnate the experiential truth and relational reality of the whole and uncommon. Understanding our whole-ly God's whole-ly context is essential and thus fundamental for constituting our identity and function, and is the indispensable key for integrating our theology and practice.

The most likely definition Christians have of holy is typically moral purity and ethical perfection. This definition is necessary for the whole-ly God but not sufficient. Nor is it adequate to distinguish God's whole-ly context, presence and involvement. Perhaps this is why the primary contextual issue for Christians is not discussed often or addressed deeply. Along with being necessary, what is sufficient and adequate understanding for whole-ly?

Since God as Creator is simply beyond the universe and above all life—the horizon beyond human discovery—God cannot be limited, constrained or contained to the perceptions, interpretations and thinking of humans. The holy God (*qadosh, qadash*) is set apart from all that is common, and thus as the Uncommon both beyond and incompatible with the common. Yet, God always *is* and functions within the context and process of God's sanctuary, "your holy *living context*... heaven" (Dt 26:15); apart from this integral context God does not exist (except perhaps in deism) and cannot be experienced, known, understood, and is not available for relational connection (as in Lev 26:11). God's whole (contrary to reduced or fragmentary) and uncommon (in contrast to the common) context is God's realm of connection, and God's trajectory and path from this whole-ly context extended this realm to the human context for persons to connect with nothing less and no substitutes but the whole-ly Trinity. This relational outcome,

however, is only possible as a real reality (in conflict with virtual) when the relational context and process of God's presence and involvement are constituted ongoingly as whole-ly (as in Isa 5:16; 29:23; Eze 36:23). Anything less and any substitutes of this Whole-ly Way are merely epistemological illusions and ontological simulations of whole-ly God, of God's realm of connection, and of the relational outcome of God's presence and involvement. This is the epistemic clarification and hermeneutic correction that much Christian theology and practice require today.

Therefore, given God's horizon, the Bible cannot be interpreted and understood whole-ly while disconnected from the Trinity's whole-ly relational context and process. Whatever is assumed to be gained from the Bible apart from the whole-ly relational context and process does not have the whole basis of God's relational terms; nor does it have the uncommon relational outcome of the words from God's relational purpose for communicating with us (illuminated in Isa 55:11; Jn 14:16-18; 16:13-15; 17:25-26; 1 Cor 2:9-12; 2 Cor 3:15-18; Eph 2:19-22). How has this prevailing assumption composed our theology and practice, and what has it done to our identity and function as persons and as the church? Along with hermeneutical and epistemological issues, there are ontological and relational issues deeply involved ongoingly in the composition of our theology and practice and the formation of Christian identity in a changing world.

Ancient Israel gives us a preview of what has evolved. When Israel was chosen on the whole basis of God's relational terms to be God's uncommon family in the covenant relationship of love (Dt 7:7-9), they had difficulty being distinguished beyond the common and maintaining their whole identity in the limits of the world. The fragmentary human context would shape who they were at the expense of *whose* they were. They increasingly wanted to be a nation-state "such as all the other nations" rather than be uncommon—which is perceived as 'different thus less' in a comparative process—"so that we also may be like other nations" (1 Sam 8:5,20, NIV). Except for white U.S. evangelicals, we may not be interested in becoming God's nation-state, but this has not prevented our surrounding context from shaping the identity of who we are at the loss of *whose* we are.

Like identity politics in the U.S., Christian identity in the global church has had difficulty finding common ground—notably when Western Christians define it. Christian diversity prevails and rules in the global church, because what will unite us is not common ground but only *uncommon ground*—the whole-ly ground of the whole-ly way of the whole-ly God. Until Christian identity and function are whole-ly, the change of their transformation from the common will not unfold but just keep evolving in their variations of reductionism.

For Israel, God's sanctuary was more localized than today (Ps 63:2; 68:24-25,35; 78:60,69). So, God's people had more quantified details of what God's dwelling should look like. Rather than understanding God's instructions about his dwelling as the whole basis of relational terms for covenant relationship together in wholeness, these quantitative details often became the primary focus of their identity and function, which relegated God to a secondary place in the sanctuary. That is, God's presence and involvement were quantified to a localized place that constricted God's ontology and constrained God's function to the limits of human terms. And while we may not restrict

God's presence and involvement with such quantifiers, this has not kept us from relegating God's presence and involvement to a secondary place subordinate to other assumed primary details preoccupying us, whereby God's whole-ly terms for relationship together are subtly replaced by our common terms. This is most evident in Christians ignoring the experiential truth of the curtain having been torn down in God's whole-ly dwelling in order for the relational reality of intimately vulnerable face-to-face relational involvement together (as illuminated in Heb 10:19-22, cf. Eph 2:18; 3:12). The primacy of this experiential truth and relational reality has been elusive, buried or lost in our theology and practice, which then exposes how they are composed as if still in front of the curtain and thus relationally disconnected with the veil still covering our person (as Paul illuminated in 2 Cor 3:14-18).

The current condition in theology and practice evolved from early Judaism's theology and practice, and thus their condition cannot be dismissed as the past (old) irrelevant for the present (new). Without listening to God's relational terms to be whole (*tamiym*, not about being blameless, Gen 17:1) for the covenant in the primacy of relationship together and without paying attention to reductionism influencing their theology and practice, they composed traditions that reduced their theology and practice to the ontology of persons and the function of relationships defined and determined from outer in, based on fragmentary parts unconnected in relational distance (as in Isa 29:13). This history of their theology and practice unfolded further in Second Temple Judaism (after the exile) distinctly into Jesus' time—history we need to listen to carefully because it has significance for examining our own theology and practice, notably our worship (Mk 7:1-9, NIV). Pay close attention to the unconnected parts composed by tradition:

“lips” moving apart from “hearts”; “hearts” in relational distance “far from me”; the “worship me” relationship reduced to referential “teachings...rules taught by humans”; thereby substituting “the whole relational terms of God” with “the traditions composed by humans.”

And, therefore, “You have a *subtle way of reducing* the primacy of God's relational terms for relationship together in order to keep your traditions primary.”

What Jesus confronted in religious traditions was reductionism, exposing its subtle shaping of theology and practice that reduced God's whole relational terms to the fragmentary parts of their terms having renegotiated covenant relationship together (cf. *aphiemi* in v.8 with Rev 2:4). Moreover, their traditions evolved into their culture.

What evolved in the past and evolves in the present is this:

The primacy of relationship together and relational connection on the whole basis in wholeness were subtly subordinated or simply overlooked, replacing common human terms for the relational purpose and outcome of God's whole-ly terms; God's whole and uncommon Way (“the Holy Way” in Isa 35:8-9) was conflated with their common priorities, concerns, and practices, therefore, rendering God's whole-ly dwelling and way **common-ized**.

This common-ization is even more distinct today. Few Christians understand or think about God's whole-ly dwelling as such, even though it is distinguished as the church (Eph 2:21-22), because it has lost its primary significance as whole and uncommon to the quantified fragmentary details of everyday modern life. Lost, however, not simply in the localized context of the past but in the reductionism of God's whole-ly relational context and process by our contextual substitutes. Contextualized Christians thus are urgently faced with the critical cultural shift to counter this pervading primary shift of the context underlying the trajectory of their interpretations and the path of their understanding. Craig Bartholomew and Heath Thomas point to a cultural hermeneutic as an indispensable part of theological interpretation: "Rigorous cultural analysis is vital so that, like the Old Testament prophets, we work to relate God's Word to *this* time and *this* place."⁵ The time for this is now and the place is in our own context.

Both religious and cultural traditions have shaped the global church, and we cannot continue to assume that they are simply 'what's *good* for the church'. Listening to the Word is how we need to pay attention to the traditions in our theology and practice for any influence from reductionism, notably working subtly in our surrounding contexts that we must not ignore—or be subject to the above relational consequences. We should not, must not, cannot just assume that in the traditions explicitly or implicitly composing our theology and practice "you are not being reduced or fragmented"—the subtle assumption we are ongoingly subjected to.

Because of the pervasive influence of reductionism in our theology and practice, the line between the uncommon and the common has not been clearly delineated in order to unmistakably distinguish our identity and function from the common. More often than not, we easily live daily by **contextual default**, that is, by the context of the common. What ongoingly counters contextual default is for Christians to take up the primary citizenship of their identity and function (made definitive by Paul, Eph 2:19-22). Peter, who was transformed in the trajectory of his interpretations and the path of his understanding, unequivocally also made definitive that "you are a chosen race... a holy nation, God's own people," and thereby appealed to them "as aliens and exiles *in the human context*" (1 Pet 2:9,11). *Paroikos* and *parepidemos* are sojourners who live in a surrounding context without settling down in that context and thus without being defined or determined by what's common for that context (as noted in Heb 11:13). Accordingly, sojourners live by their faith, that is, by their relational involvement in reciprocal relationship together with the whole-ly Word—the *tamiym* of Abraham's faith (Gen 17:1) and the discipleship of "Follow me." Since Peter was transformed from his past and changed to the *new* distinguished by God's whole-ly Way, he made it essential: "Do not be conformed to the *common*.... Instead, as he who called you is *whole-ly*, be *whole-ly* yourselves in all your *ontology and function*" (1 Pet 1:14-15, cf. Rom 12:1-2).

The uncommon is incompatible with the common, thus those uncommon are not assimilated in it yet also not isolated from it (cf. Jn 17:15-16). Sojourning in reciprocal relationship together with the whole-ly Word is not optional for Christians—and sojourning certainly is not an end in itself of what Christians are obligated to do—but

⁵ Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas, eds., *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 25. See also the challenge of cultural interpretation in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman, eds., *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

essential for distinguishing their whole-ly identity and function from the common. Whenever, we stop sojourning in the primacy of relationship, we relinquish our citizenship, disconnect from God's realm of connection, and settle down in the common's context, whereby we are no longer distinguished in our whole-ly identity and function. That is the unavoidable reality evolving in the primary shift to the common's context for our identity and function, and thus for our theology and practice, and our education and learning.

The Trinity is whole-ly, whose presence and involvement only dwell (even within us, Eph 2:21-22) in the whole-ly relational context and process. The only way we can know and understand the Trinity is by the trajectory of our interpretations and the path of our understanding integrally being vulnerably (from inner out) involved in the Trinity's whole-ly realm of connection—integrated with nothing less and no substitutes. Reductionism and its counter-relational workings seek by subtle and seductive ways to common-ize the Whole-ly Way, in order that we will be on a different trajectory and path than the Trinity, so that any theological knowledge and understanding we think we have will only be virtual—"your eyes will be opened...like God, knowing...."

Footwashing Education and Learning

Timothy George makes this observation about seminaries: "Genuine theological education should aim for transformation, not the mere transfer of cognitive data from one mind to another. We can be satisfied with neither rigid intellectualism on the one hand nor unreflective sentimentalism on the other. Our aim ought to be rather head and heart together, puritanism and pietism, both together at their best. As Thomas Aquinas, echoing Augustine, put it, 'Theology is taught by God, teaches God, and takes us to God.'" With this goal at the core for the academy, George forecasts its future: "Theological education over the next decades of the twenty-first century will need to be increasingly personal, incarnational, global, and gospel centered."⁶

Yet, this goal will not bring significant difference from the past unless (1) it counters the underpinning shift of human interpretation and its challenging shift to referential language, and (2) returns to the relational language taught by God (not others speaking for God), teaching the words *from* God (not about the words *of* God), and takes us to God for the relational connection to know and understand the whole-ly God. Furthermore, the academy's future will not experience the redemptive change of the old dying so the new can rise until (1) it confronts sin as reductionism in its midst and thus in its theology and practice, and (2) transforms its theological anthropology from reduced ontology and function to whole ontology and function. Without addressing these critical underlying issues in all theology and practice, both past and present, the status quo keeps evolving. When theological education and learning have their determinant distinctly shifted from the common to the uncommon, then they will no longer simply keep recycling changes from the old but will indeed experience the new.

⁶ Quoted from the Forward in David S. Dockery, ed., *Theology, Church and Ministry: A Handbook for Theological Education* ((Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2017), xii-xiii.

What else is primary for Christian education in general and theological education in particular than knowing and understanding God? Yet, this needs to be qualified, because our theological learning and education are only significant when they are distinguished by the experiential truth (not merely propositional) and relational reality (not referential and virtual) of integrally knowing and understanding the whole-ly Trinity face to face (Jer 9:23-24; 2 Cor 4:6). Therefore, this is only a relational outcome that can unfold only from the whole-ly relational context and process of the Trinity's realm of connection—which is the outcome unmatched by human efforts parallel to virtual reality or artificial intelligence. Moreover, this whole-ly relational outcome is distinguished only in the uncommon and thus is incompatible with anything less and any substitutes—which then confronts (if not threatens) the composition of much theology and practice and their learning and education.

The Word incarnated all this for us to be incarnated. Besides the Sermon on the Mount, the Word's manifesto for all his disciples and their discipleship, the incarnated Word enacted his most significant education and learning for his disciples when he vulnerably washed their feet (Jn 13:1-17). By subordinating his identity as "Teacher and Lord," not letting that role and title determine his function and thus how he would be involved with them, and thereby making his whole person vulnerable to them face to face as never before—thus incarnating for them the three unavoidable issues and the three inescapable issues—whole-ly Jesus' footwashing gave them the experiential truth and relational reality of knowing and understanding the whole-ly Trinity. This incarnates the knowing and understanding without any veil (or mask) that creates a relational barrier or relational distance. The presence of any veil (e.g. role and title) prevents this relational connection and thus precludes this relational outcome.

Peter noticeably experienced Jesus' whole-ly person the most vulnerably presented at his footwashing; and Peter also learned that his own person had to be vulnerable from inner out—for example, without the veil of the Teacher's student and the Lord's servant, an uncommon shift—in order to make person-to-person relational connection with the incarnated Word. It was only in this whole-ly realm of connection that Peter (and any and all of Jesus' followers) could know and understand the whole-ly Word as the experiential truth and relational reality—that is, beyond the propositional, doctrinal, and virtual basis for the theological education and learning they had up to that pivotal change, conversion, transformation. This is not anecdotal for our theology and practice but essential, and therefore irreplaceable with anything less and any substitutes. As discussed through the course of this study, the various shifts Peter had to undergo to make this connection for his theology and practice, and thus to experience the transformation in his ontology and function, are the very integral trajectory and path we too have to be integrated in for the same whole and uncommon relational outcome.

This integral trajectory and path are the irreducible truth and nonnegotiable reality facing us Person to person today: "Unless I wash you, you have no *connection* with me *for your ontology and function to be whole-ly also, which then encompasses your theology and practice, your education and learning*" (Jn 13:8). Yet, in his comments for a hopeful future in theological education, David Dockery seems to opt for a previous phase of the status quo: "We need institutions of theological education to recommit themselves to academic excellence in teaching and scholarship, in research and service,

as well as in personal discipleship and churchmanship. At the same time, we must lay hold of the best of the Christian theological tradition and carry it forward to engage the culture and the academy.”⁷ Nothing really changes from the past to the future when we are on a different trajectory and path than what are incarnated by the Word—the whole-ly Word incarnated further, deeper and more significantly than the prominent evangelical Word of today.

Knowing and understanding the whole-ly Trinity are primary to God’s presence and involvement, and this primacy is the heart of theological education and learning. Therefore, what is essential for and thus in our education and learning is *footwashing*. Most important, footwashing education and learning incarnate the three ‘AREs’ of Jesus’ pedagogy.

Incarnating the Three ‘AREs’ of the Word’s Pedagogy

Another major assumption made in theological education is an implied approach that learning takes place however the pedagogical process is engaged. There is a benign neglect of how teachers teach and students learn, operating on the assumption that teachers teach and students learn. The apparent thinking is that teaching and learning are achieved by the transmission of and exposure to a high level of content—and the higher the level the better the achievement.⁸ This is a pedagogical model composed in referential terms by the wise and learned that Jesus exposed as incompatible to know and understand God (Lk 10:21-22), and that Paul identified as being embedded in an endless process of learning without knowing the truth (2 Tim 3:7), that is, the incarnated Truth as Subject-person who frees us from such referential constraints (Jn 8:31-32).

If the truth of theological education is the incarnated Truth (beyond a proposition) and the primary purpose of theological education is to know and understand God according to the Truth in relational language, then theological education can no longer adhere to the referentialization of the Word and depend on (even by default) a referential pedagogical model for its teaching and learning. The *how* of theological education is not optional on the agenda of the academy or church but integral for the irreducible and nonnegotiable relational outcome of knowing and understanding the whole-ly Trinity in compatible theology and congruent practice. This outcome may seem relatively routine in referential terms, but its reality as the relational outcome involves a vulnerable resolve in relational terms—which can be discomfiting and threatening.

It was no mere event of transcendence when the Father communicated directly to Jesus’ followers: “Listen to my Son” (Mt 17:5). The Father’s relational imperative clearly illuminated the nature and identity of the Word entirely in relational language, and the whole-ly God’s relational terms set in motion the final phase of the relational epistemic process that distinguishes theological education in the Trinity’s whole-ly ontology and function. To be so distinguished, theological education must compatibly engage this relational epistemic process and be congruent with the Word’s improbable-uncommon (not probable-common) theological trajectory and vulnerable relational path for its pedagogical model of teaching and learning. For this reason, Jesus extends the Father’s

⁷ David S. Dockery, ed., *Theology, Church, and Ministry: A Handbook for Theological Education*, 20.

⁸ Michael S. Lawson challenges this mindset in *The Professor’s Puzzle: Teaching in Christian Academics* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015).

relational imperative with two interrelated relational imperatives: “pay attention to *how* you listen” (Lk 8:18), and “pay attention to *what* you hear” (Mk 4:24) because “the pedagogical model you use will determine the teaching and learning you get.” Of course, our interpretive framework (*phronema*) and lens (*phroneo*)—which compose our perceptual-interpretive mindset—determine what we pay attention to and ignore, what we make primary and only secondary, thereby both determining our pedagogical approach and composing our teaching and learning. Certainly then our *phronema* and *phroneo* are critical to the pedagogical process, which, as Paul distinguished conclusively, makes the Spirit the key for theological education to be distinguished with the necessary *phronema* and *phroneo* in order to engage the pedagogical process in the primacy of wholeness and the qualitative (signified in *zoe*, not merely *bios*, Rom 8:5-6).

Jesus incarnated what to pay attention to for the how of theological education to be integrally (1) determined by the primary over the secondary, and thus (2) distinguished by the qualitative in whole relational terms and not the quantitative in fragmentary referential terms. When the core of theological education returns to the incarnated Word unfolded whole and uncommon (cf. Rev 2:4-5), it is face to Face with the whole-ly Word who, by the nature of the Word, must be taught in his relational language with curvilinear relational words by his relational process. Teaching in only his relational terms and not referential terms challenges the prevailing pedagogy in higher education and, more specifically, confronts how theological education is normally engaged (even with innovations under the assumption as the new normal). Therefore, theological education also needs to turn to Jesus for how to teach its innermost core—but turning to the uncommon Jesus who is not commonly perceived, listened to and connected with.

The most consequential non-issue issue in theological education involves its Christology, which routinely separates Jesus’ teachings from his whole person, leaving only de-personed and de-relationalized teachings. Contrary to prevailing views of discipleship, both in the ancient Mediterranean world and the modern world, Jesus did not merely embody teachings to follow, examples to emulate, even principles to embody, and subsequently for followers to teach. Accordingly, current theological students must be in contrast to rabbinic students in the past who followed their teachers in these ways, which also necessitates a qualitative relational difference in theological teachers.

The whole and uncommon incarnated by Jesus were clearly distinguished first in *how* he taught and then in *what* he taught. Jesus’ approach to teaching *the whole-ly* was not about revealing (*apokalypto*) key knowledge and critical information in referential terms, because the relational content (qualifying word-content) distinguishing God’s whole basis in wholeness involved only the whole person in relationship. What this involved for Jesus is vital for us to understand both to more deeply experience his incarnated whole and to further extend God’s whole basis to others within the church and in the world, the antecedent of which emerges from the quality of theological education and not its quantity. Jesus’ pedagogical approach to teaching and learning, which was integrated into the relational progression of discipleship in his theological trajectory and relational path, not only needs to inform and reform theological education in the academy and all levels of Christian education in the church, but also to transform them. This is essential for the status quo not to be recycled or to evolve with further adaptations.

When Jesus told the Father that he disclosed him to the disciples (Jn 17:6), he used *phaneroo*, which refers to those to whom the revelation is made, and not *apokalypto*, which refers only to the object revealed. This is not an artificial distinction to make but a critical one to distinguish God's revelation as Subject engaged in relationship in contrast to only the Object to be observed. *Phaneroo* signifies the necessary context and process of his disclosure of the whole-ly God and God's whole basis in wholeness, whose relational content would not be sufficient to understand merely as *apokalypto* of the Object observed in referential terms. How did Jesus constitute this key context and process to fully disclose this uncommon wholeness?

John's Gospel provides the initial overview of Jesus' pedagogy, which is the functionally integral framework for the qualitative significance of his disclosures. In the narrative of a wedding at Cana attended by Jesus and his disciples, Jesus used this situation to teach his disciples about himself (Jn 2:1-11). This initially evidenced the three dynamic dimensions basic to his approach to pedagogy.

As a guest, Jesus participated in the sociocultural context of the wedding (an event lasting days). In response to his mother's request, Jesus appeared reluctant yet involved himself even further than as guest. In what seems like an uneventful account of Jesus' first miracle unrelated to his function and purpose, John's Gospel also provides us with the bigger picture illuminated in his introduction (Jn 1:14). John's is the only Gospel to record this interaction, and the evangelist uses it to establish a pattern incarnated for Jesus' ministry. The miracle was ostensibly about the wine but its significance was to teach his disciples. Both how and what he taught are vital for the wholeness of theological education.

When Jesus responded to his mother and got further involved, he made the whole of his person **accessible** to his disciples. Jesus was not just approachable but vulnerably accessible. This involved more than the quantitative notions of accessible language or words in teaching, or of making accessible one's resources. This deeply involved making directly accessible the whole of his person from inner out and thus the qualitative significance of who, what and how he was. What unfolded from his person was his vulnerable resolve in relational terms. In this social context Jesus did not merely reveal (*apokalypto*) his resources, but most important, he vulnerably disclosed (*phaneroo*) his functional glory to his disciples, not a mere theological glory lacking functional significance (Jn 2:11, cf. 2 Cor 4:6). The first aspect of his glory that Jesus made accessible to them was God's being, the innermost of God signified by the primacy of the heart. It was Jesus' heart, composing his whole person, whom he made accessible to them. The whole person, composed by the function of the heart, distinguishes clearly the depth level of significance necessary to be *accessible* in Jesus' pedagogy. Anything less and any substitutes are inadequate for this accessible-level to teach the whole further and deeper than referential terms that distinctly common-izes what is uncommon. A turn from the heart is consequential for the qualitative engagement needed to be accessible. It is incongruent to be helping others understand wholeness while one is not functioning to be whole in the process. Therefore, **Accessible (A)** is the first dynamic dimension in Jesus' pedagogy necessary by its nature to be whole-ly in order to teach the whole-ly.

Phaneroo illuminates the irreplaceable context and process for making his whole person accessible. The miracle, self-disclosure, and being accessible, all are not ends in themselves but in Jesus' purpose and function (even in this apparent secondary situation) are always and only for relationship. More specifically then, *phaneroo* distinguishes the integral *relational* context and process involved in his teaching. When Jesus disclosed his glory, he did not end with making accessible God's being, the heart of God. The second aspect of his glory involved God's nature, God's intimate relational nature, witnessed initially between the Trinitarian persons during his baptism and later at the transfiguration. In this teaching moment, Jesus disclosed his whole person to his disciples for relationship together, thereby disclosing the intimate relational nature of God—that is, his functional glory, in his heart and relational nature, communicating in the innermost to make relational connection with their human ontology as whole persons created in the image of the heart of God for relationships together in likeness of the relational nature of the Trinity (as in Jn 1:14). This also provides further understanding of the relational context and process of God's thematic relational response to the human condition and what is involved in that connection, which integrally composes the innermost core of theological education.

In this seemingly insignificant social context, Jesus qualitatively engaged and relationally involved his whole person with his disciples in the most significant human function: the primacy of reciprocal relationship together in wholeness. As he made his whole person accessible in this relational context and process, his disciples responded back to his glory by relationally “putting their trust in him” (2:11). Their response was not merely to a miracle, or placing their belief in his teaching, example or resources—in other words, a mere response to the Object observed. The context of his teaching was *relational* in the process of making accessible his person to their person, thus deeply connecting with the heart of their person and evoking a compatible relational response to be whole in reciprocal relationship together Subject to subject, Face to face, heart to heart. This relational process also illuminates the intrusive relational path of Jesus' ‘relationship together involving the whole person’, which anticipates his improbable theological trajectory to remove the veil for intimate relationship with the whole-ly God. If his teaching content were only cognitive, this qualitative relational connection would not have been made. Anything less and any substitute from Jesus would not have composed the relational context and process necessary to qualitatively engage and relationally involve his whole person for relationship together to be whole, consequently not fulfilling God's thematic action in relational response to the human relational condition—nor fulfilling God's definitive blessing of bringing new relationship (*siym*) together in wholeness (*shalom*, Num 6:24-26). Therefore, **Relational (R)** is the second dynamic dimension in Jesus' pedagogy necessary by its uncommon nature to live whole in relationships in order to teach the whole, only God's relational whole.

When Jesus turned water into wine in this secondary social situation, he did not diminish the significance of his miracle or his glory. His disclosure was made not merely to impart knowledge and information about him for the disciples to assimilate. *Who* he presented and *what* he communicated are major issues. His disclosure was made in this

experiential situation (albeit secondary) for his disciples to experience him living wholly in this and any life context, not in social isolation or a conceptual vacuum that a theology divorced from function signifies. For Jesus, for example, merely giving a lecture/sermon would not constitute teaching—nor would listening to such constitute learning. That is to say, his teaching was *experiential* for their whole person (signified by heart function) to experience in relationship. For this experience to be a reality in relationship, the whole person must be vulnerably involved. This involved the third unavoidable issue of the depth level he engaged in relationships. When Jesus made his heart accessible to be relational with his disciples, he also disclosed the third aspect of his glory involving God’s presence, God’s vulnerable presence. In the strategic shift of God’s thematic relational action, the whole-ly Jesus incarnated God’s vulnerable presence for intimate involvement in relationship together, therefore disclosing God’s glory for his followers to experience and relationally respond back to “put their trust in him”—not merely a belief for the Rule of Faith but the relational involvement of the whole person. The incarnated Truth is experiential truth vulnerably present and involved for the experiential reality of this relationship together. If this is not the qualitative relational significance of the gospel at the heart of theological education, its core is not in the innermost.

Human experience is variable and relative. For experience to be whole, however, it needs to involve whole persons accessible to each other in relationship by vulnerable involvement together, which in the human context is uncommon (as social media today demonstrates). For this relational dynamic to be a functional reality, it must be the relational outcome of Jesus’ theological trajectory that removed the veil in relationship together (as in Eph 2:14-18), and of the relational path of his footwashing. This was Jesus’ purpose in his teaching and his pedagogical approach, which also was intrusive with ‘relationship together involving the whole person’. This was who, what, and how Jesus was ongoingly in his glory: *who*, as his whole person signified by the qualitative function of his heart; *what*, only by his intimate relational nature; and thus *how*, with vulnerable involvement only for relationship together to be God’s uncommon whole. The reality of relationally knowing (not referential knowledge about) the whole-ly God and relationally participating in God’s uncommon whole only emerges as experiential truth. Jesus’ teaching remains incomplete, and our learning is also not complete, unless it is *experiential* beyond the virtual. Therefore, to complete the three-dimensional approach, **Experiential (E)** is the third dynamic dimension in Jesus’ pedagogy necessary by its nature to integrate the other two dimensions of *Accessible* and *Relational* for the qualitative depth of the uncommon whole in order to teach the experiential truth of the whole for its experiential reality in new relationship together in wholeness.

The three *AREs* of Jesus’ pedagogy incarnate the definitive three-dimensional paradigm to be whole and to live whole in order to teach the experiential truth (not merely a propositional truth) of the uncommon whole. That is, incarnating this three-dimensional paradigm involves vulnerably teaching the whole as God’s relational whole on God’s qualitative relational terms, just as Jesus vulnerably incarnated, relationally disclosed and intimately involved his whole person with other persons. From this overview and with his vulnerable resolve, Jesus ongoingly demonstrated his three-dimensional pedagogical approach. His most notable teaching involvement unfolded in the last table fellowship he had with his disciples (Jn 13:1-17).

As the Master Teacher (13:13-14), Jesus took his pedagogical approach to a whole new level. His footwashing (as noted above) is commonly narrowed down to serving, thus fragmenting Jesus' whole person to a part (in this case a secondary act) that is perceived with the mindset of a theological anthropology in reduced ontology and function. This is the *phronema* and *phroneo* Peter had in this key interaction, which contrasted and conflicted with the pedagogical approach Jesus relationally incarnated—that is, who vulnerably intruded on traditional and conventional pedagogy. Beyond the norm and what would be considered reasonable, Jesus made his whole person vulnerably accessible to them without the veil of his title and role in order to reach the depths of *agape* involvement (“the full extent of his love”) for the relational connection necessary for them to experience the intimate reality of relationship together in wholeness. Since Peter defined his person from outer in focused on secondary matter, he defined Jesus' person by imposing the veil of the title and function of Master Teacher. Consequently, reduced ontology and function prevented Peter from learning experientially the primacy of whole relationship together incarnated by his Master Teacher's vulnerable relational path in whole ontology and function. And Peter's fragmentation should not be ignored in theological education since the limits in his theology and practice were consequential for the fragmentary formation of the early church (Acts 10:14-15,34; Gal 2:11-14). Nor should it be ignored by the educators and students occupying theological education if they want to progress in what's primary.

Jesus' pedagogy conflicted with the prevailing teaching practices in the ancient Mediterranean world; it was by its nature counter-cultural. Accordingly, his pedagogy conflicts with any reductionist teaching approaches, notably in the modern Western world with its primary focus on referential knowledge and rationalized understanding through the narrowed-down quantitative lens from reductionism (predating the Enlightenment)—further exposing a theological anthropology of reduced ontology and function. The learning process of Jesus' pedagogy necessarily involves whole knowledge and understanding (*synesis*), which engages the primacy of the qualitative and the relational for the outcome of whole ontology and function, and thereby requires the critical cultural shift. Therefore, Jesus' teaching of whole-ly God's uncommon whole involves redemptive change and transformation to the *new*—not only for the whole person to experience as an individual but most importantly to experience in relationship together to be the whole-ly Trinity's family. God's relational whole on only God's qualitative relational terms is this new creation family 'already'—the new wine communion with no veil, without relational distance or barriers—relationally progressing to its ultimate relational communion together 'not yet', which Jesus made imperative to be taught after he discussed a series of parables about the kingdom of God and the last things (Mt 13:52). Anything less and any substitutes of this new as whole-ly constrain the flow of the new wine and reduce the planting, cultivating, growth and taste of the new wine in its full qualitative relational significance, whereby the status quo is maintained (Lk 5:36-39).

John's Gospel gives us this whole picture from the beginning, in which the incarnated Word ongoingly functioned in his theological trajectory yet remaining vulnerably involved in his relational path for intimate relationship together. The whole-ly Word's teaching only had significance in this definitive relational progression for this relational outcome 'already' and relational conclusion 'not yet'. And this is how any

teaching of the whole-ly Trinity's family needs to be theologically and functionally contextualized (counter to common-ized)—and all the “trees” of life put into the “forest” of God's thematic relational action for the eschatological big picture and the ultimate relational communion together, just as Paul composed in his theological forest and systemic framework. For Jesus, and Jesus *into* Paul, the only incarnating of theology that has qualitative relational significance is nothing less and no substitutes for the uncommon whole. To incarnate God's whole basis in wholeness, therefore, any theological enterprise by necessity functions in the complete fullness (*pleroma*) of God's improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path (Col 1:19-20; Eph 1:22-23); and this trajectory and path involve irreplaceably the primacy of the qualitative and relational needed to be the Trinity's new family together in wholeness with no veil—the fulfillment of God's definitive blessing that incarnates *siym* for *shalom* (Num 6:26).

Both Jesus and Paul intrude on theological education today to challenge integrally *what* composes its core and *how* it teaches this core.⁹ To teach God's relational whole integrally constituted by uncommon wholeness and composed in the relational language, this engagement must involve the vulnerable resolve of the three *AREs* of Jesus' pedagogy to be compatible with the Trinitarian relational context of family and to be congruent with the Trinitarian relational process of family love that incarnate the new creation family. At the heart of this whole-ly relational context and process is ‘reciprocal relationship together involving the whole of persons’, and this clearly involves both teachers and students being accountable for our whole ontology and function with the veil removed. The new wine is composed by and is contained in only this whole ontology and function, whereby to counter the reduced ontology and function in our theology and practice as well as the status quo in our education and learning.

Yes indeed, what is essential for and thus in our education and learning is *footwashing*. Footwashing education and learning unmistakably distinguish for us and in us the uncommon from the common, the whole from the reduced or fragmentary, the primary from the secondary. Moreover, footwashing holds both those who educate and those who learn accountable for each of the former, even if any of the latter needs to be confronted—as Peter would testify. In the distinctly whole-ly relational context and process of footwashing, those involved integrally incarnate the whole of who, what and how they are—with nothing less and no substitutes, just as the whole-ly Word incarnated.

Integrated Integrally in the Whole-ly Way

So, here we are with the Bible 2000 years after the Word incarnated the trajectory and path of God's presence and involvement with us. How do you assess the trajectory of your interpretations and the path of your understanding? What connections are made in your theology and practice? Just as Linus asked Charlie Brown in their theological conversation, “How can you be so sure about your interpretations and understanding?”

⁹ For an in-depth study of the integration of Jesus and Paul, see *Jesus into Paul: Embodying the Theology and Hermeneutic of the Whole Gospel* (Integration Study, 2012). Online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

While the human context is at the juncture of entering a 5G revolution—the fifth generation of fiber optics in wireless telecommunication technology that is 100 times faster than existing 4G and allows for billions of simultaneous connections—we have not advanced very far (if at all) in connecting with the Word on his trajectory and path. This leaves unanswered and unresolved the following, among critical issues:

- Our primary boast of knowing and understanding God over other boasts (Jer 9:23-24).
- A definitive response to “Why is my language not clear to you?” (Jn 8:43), and as a teacher of the Word “yet you do not understand” (Jn 3:10).
- The distinguished involvement that unambiguously answers “Do you love me?” and how we “Follow me” (Jn 21:15-22)
- Why in all your Christian achievements and success “I have not found your *practice* complete (as in *pleroma*) in the *perceptual-interpretive framework, lens, mindset* of my God’s *whole basis in uncommon wholeness*” (Rev 3:2)?

This makes evident that even after 2000 years, the trajectory of our interpretations and the path of our understanding is at a crossroads—that is, not a juncture of a revolution in secondary connections, but the crossroads between conforming to the secondary and transforming in the primary connection. Our trajectory and path will either be common-ized by the secondary in our theology and practice, or will be integrated integrally in the Whole-ly Way for the primary. Which direction our trajectory and path takes is solely our decision; yet it should be clearly understood that not making a conscious choice then by default directs us in the former—conforming, even with a hybrid variation, at the expense of transforming to incarnated whole and uncommon interpretations and understanding for our theology and practice to be whole-ly.

To be incarnated in the Whole-ly Way, our interpretations must be by the nature of the Way incorporate integrally each and all the pairs of the following:

The communication of God’s revelation and the Bible; epistemology and hermeneutics; God’s epistemic realm and the human epistemic realm; God’s context (horizon) and the human context (horizon); God’s language and human language; God’s perceptual-interpretive mindset and human perceptual-interpretive mindset—all from which the following unfold: God’s ontology and function and human ontology and function; God’s whole and reductionism; the uncommon and the common; the language of love and the language of sin; the primary and the secondary; God’s culture and human culture; the new and the old—all incorporated integrally for the relational outcome to be constituted and thus distinguished whole-ly in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Whole-ly Trinity.

When the trajectory of Christians’, churches’ and the academy’s interpretations and the path of their understanding are integrated integrally in the Whole-ly Way, we can claim our transformation in primary relational connection with the whole-ly Word. Since the relational connection incarnated by “the whole-ly Way, Truth and Life” (Jn 14:6) is incompatible with the common, it only unfolds as we ongoingly are ‘set apart from the common’ (sanctified) to be incarnated in likeness. Then, therefore, after all these years,

we will finally embark on our sojourn together as nothing less and no substitutes but the Whole-ly Trinity's new creation family, whereby we can proclaim with qualitative relational significance the gospel on the whole basis in uncommon wholeness—just as the Word incarnated and prayed for us (Jn 17:20-26), and anointed us with the Holy One to abide intimately in us so that we will abide in the Whole-ly Trinity in the primacy of reciprocal relationship together (1 Jn 2:20,27).

The crossroads facing us today has never been more critical, and urgently calls for us to shift our direction. Incarnated by, in and with the Word, Paul and Peter illuminate our choice: “Do not conform to your surrounding context and its reductionism, rather be transformed to ‘Be whole-ly, because and just as I am whole-ly’” (Rom 12:2; 1 Pet 1:14-15).

When your resolve is to transform, our worship will also be integrated in the trajectory and path of this song:

The Holy God & the Holy Way¹⁰

Taken from 1 Pet 1:15; 2:9; Isa 35:8-9; Lev 10:10

Note: holy means to be uncommon, distinguished from all common; whole-ly is the integration of whole and uncommon, thus whole-ly.

1. O holy God, the One who is uncommon,
You are the One and Only
Beyond and different from all
that is common!
2. O holy God, the One who is uncommon,
You are the Whole and Complete
Beyond and different from all
that is incomplete!
3. O whole-ly God, the One ‘whole and Uncommon’,
You are the Distinguished
Beyond and different from all
common, incomplete!

Chorus 1:

Holy, holy, whole-ly
You God are whole-ly
And whole-ly is the only
way you *are*!

¹⁰ By T. Dave Matsuo and Kary A. Kambara. Sheet music available online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

4. O whole-ly God, the One who lives uncommon
You save us whole and complete
Beyond and different from all
that is common!
Beyond and different from all
that is incomplete!
Beyond and different from all
common, incomplete!

Chorus 2:

Holy, holy, whole-ly
Our God is whole-ly
And whole-ly is the only
way we *are*!

5. O whole-ly God, your whole-ly way before us
To live our life day to day
Beyond and different *with* God,
whole-ly together!
Beyond and different *like* God
—You *are*, so we *are*—
whole-ly together!
Yes, beyond and different...
whole-ly together!

Chorus 3:

Whole-ly God, whole-ly way
God saves us whole-ly
And whole-ly is the only
way together!
O people of God!
Yes, whole-ly is the only
way together!-----
O whole-ly way!
Whole-ly together!

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