

The Relational Progression

A Relational Theology of Discipleship

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Preface

Paul describes how God touches our hearts with the light of his intimate presence “*in the face of Christ*” (2 Cor.4:6). The purpose of this study is to clearly perceive the face of Jesus to be able to be relationally involved with him as his followers for the experiential reality Paul describes. This necessitates more deeply understanding God’s revelation of himself in Christ, specifically in the relational significance of its context and process. I pray our discussion will serve this purpose, and that your own efforts beyond just reading will further develop this relational outcome.

If we adequately perceive the face of Jesus, discipleship should create as much unrest and conflict in Christians today as it undoubtedly did during Jesus’ earthly life. Yet, we seem to be quite comfortable about discipleship – either by how we define it or by tending to ignore it. Apparently, our perceptions of Jesus are increasingly more palatable and less threatening.

For this reason, as well as a number of important other ones, I realize that many aspects of the discussion in this study on discipleship may be difficult to accept in general or to embrace personally. I am also aware that there is a tendency for the broad Christian community to promote too much milk in our spiritual diet and seldom move on to, chew on and digest the meatier substance of the Christian life and practice. Hopefully, this study will serve toward more than formulating a theology of discipleship but also to enrich our diet and help to develop the infrastructure to make *whole* followers of Christ, both individually and corporately.

For this purpose, I will not apologize for the difficulty you may experience in any of this discussion – and I warn you now that it may be progressively so. I apologize only for my errors and any failure to adequately fulfill his purpose.

I encourage you to engage this study in sequence because the chapters are progressive and thus the discussion is cumulative. This effort may be time-consuming and may not immediately address your specialized interest. Yet, I hope and pray that what may seem secondary to you in that moment will be of general benefit to better inform you of the larger context into which your specific concern will undoubtedly need to be put. Engaging this relational process will more than inform you but provide opportunity to *know* God more deeply.

Too much Christian practice has been reduced to substitutes for the face of Christ, or to settling for less than God’s intimate presence. Authentic Christian spirituality, however, functions in a process of discipleship. As we will discuss in this study, the discipleship process cannot be defined with a truncated soteriology focused only on what Christ saved us **from** without addressing what he saved us **to**. Discipleship involves a total Christology integrated with a distinct ecclesiology in God’s eschatological plan. All these various aspects will converge in **the relational progression** and become functional for our practice in the relational process – without reduction or substitution. Such coherence is necessary for any theology of discipleship, as well as to formulate the gospel with the full meaning and substance revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

I pray he will reveal his face to us.

1

"Follow Me"

"You don't call yourself one of his disciples, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"Don't you hang out with him a lot?"

"I don't really know him."

"Hey, don't you identify yourself as one of his radicals?"

"Damn, no way! Where did ya get that idea?"

These scenarios sadly depict what being a disciple has come to mean today for many Christians. They reflect how we often approach following Jesus. As reproductions of Peter's experience, this was the result of Peter "following Jesus" (Jn. 18:15)¹ on that night of passion. Is this how we are seen "following Jesus" today and also, in effect, how we relate to him at a distance as we put our own twist or spin on our relationship with Christ?

"Follow me!" are the most prominent words consistently shared by Jesus. Whether directly spoken or implied in what he said, these words are conspicuous throughout his earthly life. Any examination of the person and words of Jesus will always be faced with his words "Follow me." Their dominance in Christ's teachings is understandable, when we realize how fundamental they are in formulating the identity of any and all who are involved with him.

We can't see and hear Jesus and get away from these words. Yet, is it possible that among Christians "Follow me" has become the most avoided words of Christ, intentionally or inadvertently? If this is the situation today, how ironic that what is really the most basic concept determining relationship with Christ is what is ignored (or redefined) the most. Peter learned this through painful experience.

Certainly, there can be a lot of ambivalence about these two words—perhaps more than any two. On the one hand, there is the privilege to follow God and the opportunities it opens up, plus the prestige to be called one of his disciples. On the other, we have the uncertainty, anxiety, the responsibility of having him as Lord and having to fulfill our part. No two words create more confusion, illusion and submission than Jesus' call to "Follow me."

Restoring the Call

Let's turn the focus on the person of Jesus and the context of those words. In the process, we will have to address *two critical interrelated issues*: one, how we define ourselves and, as a result, two, how we do relationships.

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Scripture are taken from the NIV.

The word "to follow" (Gk. *akoloutheo*) means to accompany, go with,² and occurs almost exclusively in the Gospels. Like today, following Jesus back then didn't always involve being a disciple (Mt. 4:25; 8:1; Mk. 10:32); it was merely an association for those people. Many persons also followed him for the wrong reasons, pursuing their self-interests (Jn. 6:14-27). The Greek word involves relational significance when it refers to individuals. To follow Christ involves ongoing fellowship (intimate relational connection) with him, not occasional and temporary following. It is more than selective involvement and beyond sharing situations and activities together but engages an intimate relationship. As Jesus demonstrated, he didn't wait for persons to volunteer to follow him. He initiated this call – a call always to uncompromising and intimate discipleship, though not just for the sake of learning as students from their teacher.

Being "with Christ" is a closer connection than following with relational distance; it involves a deeper relational connection than we're used to. Jesus defined a new relationship from what was also the norm of his time. As we will discuss in the next chapter: *the relational process of this fellowship with Jesus is characterized by intimate trust, not by deeds (his or ours), and by sharing together in intimate relationship, not in activities (however frequent, sincere or with good intentions)*. This is the fundamental way Jesus calls us to relate to him and the working paradigm by which to be involved with him.

I think all of us have some type of predisposition, or even bias, of some type about discipleship and being a disciple. For the most part these would fall into one of three categories, or a variation or combination of them:

1. Being a disciple is all about service.
2. Being a disciple is all about sacrifice.
3. Being a disciple is only for a select group.

While each of these may partially describe an aspect of following Jesus, they are not valid to define the identity of his disciples nor to identify the character of discipleship. Each of these positions corresponds respectively to the opening scenarios in our discussion. They tell us nothing about true discipleship but offer some reasons why persons (especially Christians today) keep a relational distance from Jesus, ignore or even deny being his disciple.

Service is a defining term for many Christians. But its importance to them only secondarily involves their active relationship with Christ, if at all; service takes on prime importance when we define ourselves by what we *do*, by the roles we fulfill, by the spiritual gifts we exercise. If being a disciple is all about service, then there is a lot a disciple has to measure up to.

But Jesus says "whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be" (Jn. 12:26). In these words he said a necessary condition to serve him is to

2. Greek and Hebrew word studies used in this study are taken from the following sources: Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce Waitke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980); Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1981); Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible* (Chattanooga: AMG Publ., 1996).

follow him and be where he is. The word "to serve" (Gk. *diakoneo*) comes from the word for minister, deacon, servant (*diakonos*) and has the emphasis on the work to be done, not on the relationship between a master and servant. Note this distinction. Jesus is telling us, in other words, that in order to serve him it's not sufficient for Christians to focus "on the work to be done," or on situations, circumstances, no matter how dedicated we are or how good our intentions. Service is not what being a disciple is all about. While service results from it, being a disciple does not mean service first.

It is necessary, and more important, to be involved in the ongoing deep relational process of discipleship, that is, the intimate relationship of *being with him*. Being a disciple *is* this relationship first and foremost, and that means to be intimately involved not for service but for love first (Jn. 13:35). **This relationship is the true vocation of his disciple.** (We will discuss this more later.)

Sacrifice is also a defining term for some Christians. After all, isn't that what Jesus modeled for us? And didn't he say we have to give up everything in order to be his disciple and follow him (Lk. 14:33; Mk. 10:21)? The words seem to indicate sacrifice but the context tells us much more, as we will discuss later. When Jesus instructed about the Sabbath, he restated from the OT "I desire mercy [compassion], not sacrifice" (Mt. 12:7). When he was challenged for associating with sinners, he repeated the same words and instructed us to learn what they mean (Mt. 9:13). The context here emphasized relational involvement (*agape* love) which the full quote from Hosea expands on: "I desire mercy... and knowledge of God rather than..." (Hosea 6:6). That is, God wants love (Heb. *hesed*) and knowledge of him gained from intimate involvement over anything else done *for* him. Sacrifice and service never supersede relationships.

In the situations in Matthew, as well as the OT situations, Jesus sharply brings our focus back to the importance of the *total person* and the primacy of relationships – foremost the person of God and our relationship with him – not about *doing* the "right thing." If we think sacrifice is what a disciple is all about, we still have to go back and learn what those words in Hosea mean. This underlies God's law, his commands, his design and purpose for our life and how Jesus lived.

Exclusive is another perception some Christians have of disciples, whether it's about being qualified to have that status to begin with or related to being able to fulfill a disciple's function. It's an "exclusive club." The fact is, as our discussion ahead on the biblical narratives will show, Jesus called all kinds of persons along the social spectrum to follow him; and he allowed and affirmed anyone to be his disciple, no matter their position on the socio-cultural ladder. As far as performance and being able to measure up are concerned, certainly his first disciples didn't demonstrate a high standard of success while he was physically with them. To the contrary, there was nothing exclusive about this group based on their ability, resourcefulness or performance; they were a *select* group only because Jesus called them – a call not based on what they had or could do but on the initiative of God's grace.

Essentially, Jesus can be described as an "equal opportunity employer" who doesn't discriminate against race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, disability. While he doesn't discriminate against who could be his disciple, he is certainly uncompromising about who actually becomes one. And though his disciples have different functions (e.g., some also served as apostles), they are all equal in relationship to him. Furthermore, the early church described all new converts as being disciples (Acts 14:21). That was the identity of the early church.

Any response to his call is voluntary but it is critical for us to understand that his call is not optional. It's not something as Christians we can contemplate among various alternatives; his call to "Follow me" is basic to become a Christian to begin with. There is no distinction biblically between a disciple and a Christian, though we have made this false distinction in much of our Christian practice. Therefore, it's imperative for Christians and churches to restore this call as fundamental to our faith and having a relationship with Christ.

As we let go of our misconceptions and become freed from such predispositions and transformed from any biases, we can better hear Christ's call to all Christians to "Follow me" and embrace being his disciple. Then we can get down to the practice of discipleship in our true vocation (calling), no matter what the context of our occupation (what we do) is. It's our only vocation – the relationship of following Jesus intimately.

This is true for our theology and the theological task. If our theological reflections don't serve this purpose and advance this end by helping to develop this practice, then our theological endeavors become ends in themselves and serve only to occupy library shelves. In his reassessment of evangelical theology, Stan Grenz argues not only for a theology oriented for discipleship but also that theology must flow from discipleship.³ I hope this study serves toward formulating theology for his disciples and the fundamental practice of discipleship for his church. It's our only vocation, the identity of which is also lacking today.

Restoring the Identity

During Christ's earthly life the identity of his disciples was distinct (cf. Lk. 5:33) and discomfiting (both for his disciples as well as for others), if not disturbing (certainly for others but sometimes even for his disciples). Today that distinct identity is elusive, if not lost. Being a disciple of Christ has come to mean different things to different persons. It has taken on a garden variety identity whenever discipleship is mentioned at all. This is characteristic of individualism which dominates Western cultures today; it also reflects the so-called freedom Christians exercise in determining their faith. Jesus didn't give us this latitude.

In many respects the concept of disciple has become an anachronism for many Christians. It's one of those ideas relegated to the history of Jesus Christ with no imperative application beyond that period. There is some truth to this view with respect to the Greek word for disciple (*mathetes*) itself, since it occurs exclusively in the Gospels and Acts. Yet, it would be a critical error to conclude on this basis that the remaining epistles didn't build on and extend the discipleship Jesus established.

Before Christians were ever called Christians, they were disciples. Not until the disciples gathered at Antioch during the time of Barnabas and Saul were they called Christians. That was a label probably used more by outsiders as an identifying marker to disrespect the followers of Christ. It doesn't appear that the early church and disciples used that term to refer to themselves; it is only referred to twice more in the NT (Acts 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16). Their primary identity remained as followers, disciples of Jesus.

3. Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

The term disciple (Gk. *mathetes*) is a follower who studies under the instruction of a teacher, master (Gk. *didaskolos*). It is used in the NT, however, to mean much more than a mere student or learner; its usage indicates total attachment to someone in discipleship. A disciple denotes an adherent who embraces the instruction given to him/her and makes it his/her way to live.⁴ The specific terms for adherence are determined solely by the teacher. And while the Jewish rabbi-pupil relationship model may seem to be related here, Jesus instituted a completely new character for the relationship of his disciples. These terms for adherence are vital for us to understand because they define the extent and nature of the relationship underlying all involvement with Christ. Despite the fact the word *mathetes* is only used in the Gospels and Acts, we can't ignore it nor define discipleship apart from the more rigorous words of Jesus and the intensity of his person. Indeed, the person and words of Jesus defined those terms for us and we have to get back to his terms for our relationship. Our true identity depends on it.

This study is about our identity and identity formation as much as it is about anything else. It's about what it means to be a Christian, to have faith, to have a relationship with Christ, to be involved with Christ, to be a *new* person (transformed) in Christ, to be his church. All of this goes into the formation of our identity as Christians, as the people of God.

A personal identity (based on what I do or achieve, have or accumulate) and a group identity (fashioned from joint activities, participation in common mission, occupying solemn space together or any other association) both conceive the Christian identity from an outer-to-inner approach, from the outer parts of us to the inner by focusing on secondary areas. The identity of Jesus' followers, in strong contrast, is always relationship-specific – specific only to the relationship he defines on his terms. This makes the relationship primary and distinguishes the importance of the total person (particularly the heart), thus forming identity from the inside first. Our true identity, then, is rooted in our relationship with him, in our connection to him relationally (not organizationally, nor doctrinally), in our involvement with him (directly and intimately, not indirectly through activities, deeds or beliefs). As such, the validity of our identity is directly dependent on being his disciples and the process of discipleship Jesus established in the incarnation of his person and words.

Understanding the *Word*

This gets us back to God's revelation of himself. The focus of discipleship in this study is biblical discipleship. That is, the authority of Scripture as God's revelation of himself particularly in Jesus Christ remains the primary source of identity for disciples of Jesus. Therefore the biblical narratives of Jesus' person and words (especially between the manger and the cross) and the early church will be the main focus of our study on discipleship in order to understand what it means to be his disciple, and how that identity remains significant and imperative for Christian practice today.

Having said this about Scripture, it's important to understand briefly two things about it: one, how we look at Scripture and, two, how we use it. We must be aware that

4. See Michael J. Wilkins, *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995) for a more in-depth study of *mathetes*.

the objective words recorded in Scripture are not the total sum and substance of God's communication to us, so merely examining those specific words is not sufficient to know his *Word*. Inspired by the Holy Spirit as the biblical writers were, human words and language still have limits; and we have to be aware of the human contexts within which they recorded those words. Our God is certainly beyond those limits and freely shares his heart relationally with us – as he extended himself relationally to us in the incarnation. Yet, Jesus' words must also be put into their relational context in order to fully understand what God is saying to us. The Spirit helps us make this relational connection so we can properly understand the Word. To look at Scripture apart from the relational context keeps us in the box of rationalism and dependent on the limits of the human mind. This is not to open the door to subjectivism, nor to suggest that God's special revelation of himself extends apart from Scripture. What I am suggesting is that to merely examine the objective words of Scripture without the relational context will result in overlooking Jesus' person and not understanding the deeper meaning of his words for our relationship. Likewise, J. I. Packer defined the process of knowing God as a relationship with emotional involvement, and he challenged the invalid assumption of engaging in the theological task with relational detachment.⁵

Even with his physical presence, the first disciples (especially Peter) struggled with discipleship. Their struggle was not because of its demands, nor because of its expectations. They struggled because the process of discipleship was relational. Given how they defined themselves, they struggled with relationship. The relational connection with Jesus was often lacking, so they missed his person and didn't understand his words. As much as he vulnerably and intimately shared himself (his person and heart) with them, even after three years, for example, Thomas and Philip didn't really know him (read Jn. 14:4-9). How could they not know him? Because they looked merely at the objective details about Jesus (see Jn. 14:5,8) from a conventional epistemology dependent on the mind. The incarnation of God was beyond their grasp even after all they did together because they didn't *know* Jesus based on the experience of intimate relationship with him – the deeper epistemology Jesus pointed to in this interaction (Jn. 14:6,9) which involves the heart and the mind. They certainly were *informed* about Jesus but they didn't truly *know* him.

How we look at Scripture and the person and words of Jesus is significant for our understanding of God's revelations of himself and his communication with us. Perhaps our limited understanding and/or application of discipleship rests in our dependence on conventional epistemology (with the primacy of the mind and the inadvertent dominance of reason) and a cognitive search of Scripture for propositional truths, principles or standards, rather than exercise the deeper epistemology Jesus brought which engages the intimate relational process and also involves primarily the heart.

If Thomas and Philip had engaged the incarnation of the Word in the relational context, they wouldn't have focused merely on information and objective data – the facts of God. Likewise, whenever we engage the Word in the relational context, we are in face-to-face interaction, thus we must also take into account the *relational messages* included in his words which God also communicates to us. These relational messages are relational in character and by nature involve the heart and the mind, that is, our total

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

person. In the relational process the **relational messages** in any interaction basically are about one or all of the following (made verbally or nonverbally, directly or indirectly, usually implied in the message):

1. What the other person is communicating about you, how they see you or feel about you.
2. What the other person is saying about their relationship with you, how they see it or feel about it.
3. What that person is saying about their own self.

These relational messages become vitally important for our deeper understanding of Jesus' person and words and for our experience in our relationship with God. To help you become familiar with them, go back to our scenarios reproducing Peter's experience. What were the relational messages he was indirectly communicating to Jesus? When we identify these messages, we can understand why this was a painful experience for Jesus also. Then, go back to John 12:26 and our earlier discussion. In Jesus' words, what are the relational messages he is specifically communicating to you?

How we use Scripture is also important for us to understand. We have a tendency, maybe even an affection, for using the Bible as an encyclopedia or a dictionary. When we want an answer to some part of life, we go to our "spiritual encyclopedia." When we need to define some aspect for ourselves, we use our "spiritual dictionary." Rather than approaching his Word as an integrated *whole* and as narrative truth for all life in general and specifically for our identity (individual and corporate), we use it only topically as needed or selectively as desired. Even systematic theology can be topical, without coherence.

God didn't really speak to us about topics. The relevance of God's revelation of himself and his words is that he shares his *self*, his true *being*, not things about him nor parts of him – not the facts of God but the face of God. He vulnerably shares his full self; this is the importance of the incarnation, especially between the manger and the cross. These revelations weren't announcements. The significance of his words is that he relationally shares his words with us, his *self* with our *self*, that is, not with a part of my *self* but with all of *me*. His revelations are direct relational communications of his *whole* self with our *whole* self, all within the relational context and containing important relational messages.

This is how we need to see Scripture and use (hear) it. We can't dissect it intellectually into mere elements, nor reduce his being and person while inadvertently minimizing the relational nature and character of life the Father shares with us in his Son. We can't reduce his Word to topics. We cannot compartmentalize it to various subjects of faith. And we have to stop restricting his words to propositional truths, principles of ethics, standards for conduct and systems of theology, regardless of their biblical reliability. Such reliability does not ensure relational validity. A valid grasp of God's revelation of his Self always has relational significance because the word of God is seen and heard within the relational context and received into one's relationship with Christ (Lk. 10:21-24).

Authentic discipleship rises or falls with our understanding of the person and words of Jesus. The identity of his disciples depends on it. Rediscovering the roots of this

identity is essential for every Christian because it is fundamental to all Christian practice. Additionally, and of strategic importance, restoring the identity of Jesus' disciples is vital not only for our Christian life and practice today. It is also urgent in our drastically changing times for us to demonstrate to the world the relationally significant substance of our faith as well as to provide for others the relational experience (individual and corporate) so basic (yet often lacking) to relationship with Christ.

This substance and experience would be distinctly captivating to a postmodern world (especially those seeking intimacy); these would also be discomforting to our established ways influenced by modernism (particularly how we define ourselves and do relationships); they would be disturbing to all *the old* in our world needing redemption and requiring transformation. This is what the God person Jesus stirred up and generated with his earthly presence, the impact he made by his vulnerable person and words. Those who believe in Christ – which means those who follow Jesus – need to embrace this Truth in his relational substance and to experience the relational reality of being *with Christ*, not just the belief of being *in Christ*.

I don't think I overstate the critical juncture biblical Christians face either to restore the relational substance of being Jesus' disciples (individually and corporately), or to continue in our current mind-set (heavily influenced by a modernist worldview) and mode of Christian practice which is often ambiguous, if not contradictory, in relational significance and usually strains for genuine relational experience.

Restoring the Relationship

This identity makes it inadequate to define or to limit discipleship to following the model set forth by Jesus and imitating (conforming to) his character in our lives. Being Christ's disciple is about relationship, the extent and nature of which is what our study essentially involves. This study of discipleship is not for informational purposes but for our practice (both individual and corporate) in this relationship. In fact, our reading of the biblical text with only information in mind predisposes us to limit, or even prevent, our understanding of Jesus' person and words.

If the incarnation is merely an objective, historical fact (which it easily tends to remain in our minds), then this piece of information (important as it is) has little relational significance for us. It may function in our belief systems but it really has no functional impact on our daily living. Jesus didn't bring us a set of divine data which could be catalogued for truths. When we get into such reductionism, Christ is *depersoned* and the relational quality of God no longer has any significance. What we are left with are propositions, principles, standards and systems.

When Jesus came to openly show God's glory to the original witnesses (Jn. 1), they could not just passively "see" and "receive" him. That is, they were not able to actually see God's glory and connect with him if they were passive observers of Jesus and distant relationally. When John said "we have seen his glory" (v.14), he wasn't referring to just anyone or everyone who laid eyes on Jesus. The word he used for "seen" (Gk. *theaomai*) means to behold, view attentively, to contemplate something which has a sense of wonderment (which is different from the word "seen" in v.18 that could be passive). This word involves a contemplative focus which carefully and deliberately observes an object in order to perceive it correctly and in detail. *Theaomai* would involve more than

merely seeing something; it also includes noticing, recognizing and taking note of something with deeper reflection and acute interest.

Likewise, those who "received" the Word weren't those who merely believed the fact of the incarnation or received its information. The word John uses in this popular verse (v.12) for "receive" (Gk. *lambano*) means to take in hand, embrace, listen to, trust, and follow as a teacher. To *receive* is a relational act which can't be accomplished at a relational distance. So, John was referring only to those persons actually exercising *theomai* and *lambano*. Now, when we put these acts into the relational context of Jesus' person and words, we're not merely talking about a mental process here – a process for more information. More importantly we are describing a relational process involving: **the relational connection of the heart of the person seeing with the heart of the person seen which engages intimate relationship for deeper spirituality and spiritual formation in the practice of God's people.**⁶ Discipleship is rooted in this intimate relational process and we have to get back to this relationship.

The arrival of Jesus on the human scene didn't just objectively quantify God in the incarnation. Jesus didn't just show up in the flesh and bring us some nebulous idea of the glory of God. He came to reveal the Father to us (Jn. 17:6). Yet, he revealed more than information about the Father but also the Father's experiential presence because they were intimately united as one (Jn. 10:38; 14:20; 17:21-22). Bonded together (relationally as well as ontologically) such that: if we *see* Jesus, we see the Father (Jn. 14:9), if you *know* one you know the other (Lk. 10:22). This is what Thomas and Philip didn't *see* and *know* yet in John 14.

Because Jesus openly revealed to us his relational bond with his Father, we can know what that relationship is and how it functions. Yet, he didn't come only to reveal the Father and their relationship. He also connected us relationally to the Father so we can truly know him; this is what eternal life is all about (Jn. 17:3). But Jesus goes on to define *knowing* the Father and him as the ongoing deep intimate relationship of love (Jn. 17:26), not as a matter of information and intellectual beliefs. Furthermore, that same relational bond experienced on the heart level between the Father and Jesus is also ours to have and experience: relationally bonded to each other (Jn. 14:20; 17:21); their intimate love relationship extended to those who obediently involve themselves with Jesus (Jn. 14:21); loved by the Father just as he loves (*agape*) Jesus (Jn. 17:23,26), which also includes being loved affectionately (*phileo*, Jn. 16:27), the same as the Son (Jn. 5:20). This is the relational significance and the qualitative substance of the relational progression.

So, in the incarnation Jesus didn't come to give us a model to follow, principles to live by, ethics to practice, character to emulate or a mission to fulfill. He came to bring a relationship to embrace, to give us a relationship to experience, to share relationship together in God's family – intimate relationship to have so that our joy may be full, to experience deeply together as he does, to share with each other as well as with others.

The genius of the incarnation is that Jesus is all about *relationship*. The mystery of the incarnation is about God's love, so *Jesus revealed God's heart in a totally relational way, in a distinct relational context, for the ultimate relational purpose*. The brilliance of the incarnation is not just the light shining in the darkness for us to see but

6. I expand the discussion on the intimate relationship of spirituality in an overlapping study entitled *Following Jesus, Knowing Christ: Engaging the Intimate Relational Process* available online at www.4X12.org.

the Light is for relationship. The incarnation is not truth objectively available to us to constrain in propositions but the Truth is for relationship. This relationship is what Thomas and Philip didn't experience yet, despite all that time with Jesus.

This also means for us today that if we aren't experiencing the Father then we are not relationally connecting with Christ – maybe circumstantially or situationally, but not relationally. This is an important distinction to make because as Jesus said: if you've really seen him, you've seen the Father (Jn. 14:9), if you truly know him, you know the Father (Lk. 10:22). Jesus is all about the Father and all about relationship. This relationship is the purpose of following him, being involved with him and obeying him. All else is predicated on this relationship, contingent on the relationship (cf. Jn. 12:26). Any practice apart from this relationship is secondary or a substitute for it. Discipleship is following Jesus in the relational progression to the Father.

Discipleship today is often described as Christian living in general, following the specific example or model of Christ, and reflecting his character. But all of these are inadequate or incomplete to describe what Jesus himself practiced. He didn't tell persons: "Come along with me so you'll learn something." Jesus always called persons to himself ("Follow *me*"), always focused them on his person, not what he did. Throughout Jesus' earthly function to reveal the Father, he focused on establishing followers of his person – not mere pupils who learned from him. These disciples were adherents of Jesus the person, not just to his divine teachings. Discipleship during Jesus' earthly presence meant being directly involved with and committed to him, even if not always physically present with him.

In contrast to today, the term for disciple (*mathetes*) was common in Greek at the time of Jesus. This difference in contexts can either strain our perceptions of the meaning of disciple or disconnect us from Jesus' original intent for all those who follow him. The term *mathetes* itself does not determine the type of discipleship; that was determined by the teacher or leader. But the common understanding of a disciple was an "adherent" to that teacher; the emphasis was not on learning or being a pupil but on adherence, the terms of which were determined by the teacher. While Jesus' gathering of disciples around him paralleled the rabbis of Judaism, he went well beyond the recognized boundaries of a rabbi, redefining the common practices and creating a distinctly new teacher-disciple relationship. The terms for adherence Jesus practiced are fundamental for us to understand in our relationship with him.

In his study of the term disciple (*mathetes*), Wilkins makes a case for calling Matthew's Gospel a manual on discipleship.⁷ Yet the same can be said for all the narratives of Jesus. Throughout his earthly life Jesus taught, demonstrated but most of all intimately interacted with his disciples to help them to see, to understand and to experience how he wanted their adherence to him to be. And contrary to the relationship we commonly perceive with Christ, he did not establish a learning relationship. The concept of disciple that Jesus practiced was about relationship. It wasn't an instructional model, an institutional model, nor even a servant model. His model disciple is one who experiences intimate relationship with him. The adherence was not to teachings, principles, beliefs or his character but first and foremost to his person, to relationship with him and its relational process. Discipleship and being a disciple are a function of this relationship and not about anything else.

7. Wilkins, 126-172.

Discipleship is this intimate relational process which Jesus defined by his person and words, and which his Spirit helps us live and experience to its fullness. When we *see* the incarnation (especially between the manger and the cross, as John helps us do in his first chapter), we can never get away from Jesus' words to "Follow me." Likewise, along with his person we can never get away from *relationship*. Relationship is intrinsic to Jesus Christ, it is God's nature.

Since the goal of discipleship is not attaining information, nor simply learning, this can open our perceptions to the real purpose of experiencing this relationship and enjoying intimate fellowship together (as revealed between the persons of the Godhead). In the incarnation, Jesus' person vulnerably emerges to pursue us in order to intimately connect with him, so that we can be taken to his Father and be intimately involved with him in their family together. Jesus' focus and effort during the incarnation coincide with the Father's plan and desires (as defined in Rom. 8:29) for us to be relationally like his Son in function as his daughters and sons, and he as our Father, and all of us as his family. This focus by the Son and the Father, and now extended by the Spirit, is on the *person* and the *relationship* between persons. This is God's desire, this is his design and purpose, this is what he wants us to have and to experience.

The relational significance of this process of intimate relationship is not readily apparent in the pursuit of discipleship if we are predisposed to define ourselves by what we do and to do our relationship based on this "outside-in" approach. As Jesus vulnerably opened his heart and made himself relationally accessible, he called persons to be intimately involved with him and their lives will be changed. But such transformation doesn't take place apart from the relationship. Peter struggled with transformation as a disciple because he did relationship with Jesus primarily from an "outside-in" approach. In his last recorded words to Peter prior to his ascension, Jesus had a crucial interaction with him. Without completely reviewing that well-known "Do you love me?" interaction (Jn. 21:15-22), Jesus closes by emphatically stating to Peter (and to reemphasize his first imperative in v.19): "You must follow me" (v.22). Why was it necessary to tell Peter this – as if he weren't a disciple?

Essentially, the first (Mt. 4:19) and last earthly words Peter heard Jesus say to him were "Follow me." Was Peter not grasping something? Indeed he wasn't. In the last exchange Peter wasn't making relational connection with Jesus such that he really heard and saw Jesus' person in the three "Do you love me?" questions and answers. In all three responses, Peter focused on Jesus "knowing" (Gk. *oida*) and his ability to know intimately, not by learning (vv.15,16,17). While Jesus certainly has this ability and knowledge, he was not seeking information here from Peter. If not information, what was Jesus seeking?

In spite of the painful relational consequences of his recent denials (which were past and forgiven), Peter still didn't seem to focus on Jesus' person and their relationship. Yes, Jesus knew (*oida*) that Peter loved him at least with *phileo* love. But this wasn't about information; it never is about information as far as God is concerned. It's only and always about the relationship and our intimate relational involvement. This relational response is what Jesus was seeking from Peter because Peter's love didn't translate into the relational process and transmit in their relationship. So, Jesus once again had to refocus Peter on what's important: "Follow me" (v.19), that is, concentrate on *being with me* and devote your person to our relationship.

Did this put Peter in the right perspective and in the proper relational context? It

should have if Peter hadn't been so predisposed by his "outside-in" approach. Right after Jesus said "Follow me," Peter noticed John behind them (v.20) and inquired "Lord, what about him" (v.21). Where do you think Peter was focused in this moment? His seemingly innocent question demonstrates that Peter was still not focused on Jesus' person but on secondary, situational things. This problem is common in how we do relationships when the total person (significantly the heart) is given a lower priority than what we *do*. The relational consequence is that we easily overlook each other, functioning in the relationship with substitutes, as Peter continues to experience here.

Jesus was not only dissatisfied with their connection here, he was displeased. Peter tried his loving patience. His response to Peter's question, "what is that to you?" (v.22), expressed rebuke from Jesus which Peter needed; in our vernacular the words might be "That is none of your business." This is why Jesus, then, emphatically made it imperative to Peter: "You must follow me" – the only imperative that Peter needed to hear and focus on. This relationship was the primary issue throughout the struggles in Peter's life; their relationship was the primary focus for Jesus here and throughout their time together, in which he was always pursuing Peter. This is expanded in the last chapter.

Nothing was more important to God than this intimate relationship. Peter was into *doing something* more than the relationship. But his last exchange with Jesus was not about serving – only about their relationship. That's what being a disciple is all about, which the early disciples struggled to grasp. Discipleship is a function only of this relationship.

What does this tell us about what's important to God? What does this tell us about his priorities? It's vital for us to grasp his relational messages here (just as we need to grasp in Jn. 12:26). In God's design and purpose, it's the person (from the "inner-out") who is always more important than the work/service (from the "outside-in"). Our primary work is always *relational work*. That is, the relationship always takes primacy over anything else; all else is secondary (not necessarily unimportant) to our relationship with him. There is no substitute for it. Therefore, **this relationship needs to be restored for discipleship to be of significance because the imperative from Christ to "Follow me" is the relational imperative.**

Thankfully, the intimate relational process of discipleship continued to develop for Peter and the others after Jesus' ascension and the Spirit's arrival. This was not lost on even the opposing leaders of Judaism in their day. During their conflicts with the ministry of the early church, they confronted Peter and John (Acts 4:1ff). After interrogating them before the Sanhedrin, those leaders were astonished with Peter and John (v.13). They understood that Peter and John didn't attend any rabbinic schools nor had any religious credentials; yet, these disciples confidently and boldly articulated their beliefs and expressed their convictions. The leaders fully comprehended that the only thing which distinguished Peter and John was "they had been *with Jesus*." "With (Gk. *syn*) Jesus" – that is, those who had a close connection and involvement with Jesus, not that they were merely in his company, nor only occupied the same space. The religious establishment realized that a whole new disciple and discipleship were on the scene which threatened their system of how they defined themselves, how they did relationships and how they did religion.

Following Jesus indeed threatens how we define ourselves from the outside in, how we then do relationships based on this, and how all this influences (even controls)

how we do church today. These three critical issues and their interrelations will be a constant tension throughout our study which have to be addressed.

The relational imperative of being a disciple is extended when Jesus gave all his disciples the further imperative in the Great Commission to “make disciples” (Mt. 28:19). With these words Jesus brings closure to his earthly ministry and physical presence. There has been a progression to his incarnation – **the relational progression**. It is a notable progression for us to grasp with our heart and embrace relationally. It begins, as John said, when Jesus objectified the glory of God – presenting God’s heart, his intimate relational nature and his vulnerable presence – not merely as truthful information but openly functioning in his person and words. This God person relationally extended himself to us, pursued us and made his *self* accessible for us: to receive him, to follow and be involved with him, to be intimate friends, to take us to his Father as his very own children and to become family together. Then, he asks us to share his love, this family love, with others and help build his family. The *whole* story of Jesus reads as love story – the story of family love – the relational progression of which continues through his Spirit.

This relational progression cannot take place without relational connection; and it cannot continue without ongoing intimate relational involvement. Being a disciple is only a function of this relationship. Discipleship is the process of this relational progression.

Nothing else distinguishes a disciple but this specific relationship. When Jesus told us, his disciples, to “make disciples,” he used the Greek verb *matheteuo*. This verb is significantly distinguished from another similar verb *matheo*, which simply means to learn without any attachment to the teacher. *A learner* is not what Jesus means by *disciple*. Yet, is *matheo* the dominant practice in our churches, is such learning the primary emphasis in our seminaries?

Matheteuo signifies the kind of disciple Jesus wants. When the early church preached the good news and “won a large number of disciples” (Acts 14:21), the NIV rendering here can be confusing. The verb used for “won” is *matheteuo*. This was not the practice of “winning” souls and gaining decisions for Christ, which have become our common indicators of evangelism. We should not assume that being a disciple and discipleship underlie or are implied in our Christian practice, what we do in church, nor in our theology. Discipleship may not be involved in or related to any of these unless it is specifically defined as such according to the person and words of Jesus.

A disciple is an adherent and, therefore, has attachment to his/her teacher. For Jesus, this can only take place within the relational context, as he demonstrated, practiced and defined during his incarnation. The extent of this relationship involves deeper and deeper connection, which obviously then goes beyond the mind and necessitates the heart. This implies the intimate relationship between the vulnerable heart of Jesus (teacher, *didaskolos*) and the open heart of his disciple (*mathetes*). Note that the relational process of this outcome is two-way.

Adherence involves relational commitment while attachment entails relational involvement. In this sense Jesus also exercised adherence and attachment to his disciples. It wasn’t sufficient for God to merely come in the flesh in order for us to be able to be a disciple as described above. It was also necessary for Jesus to open his heart and make it vulnerable to us in order for us to be deeply touched, affected and therefore changed as his true disciples. Jesus is also vulnerably committed to and involved with his disciples, so they can intimately connect with his person, be involved with his heart and experientially *know* him. Relationship with Christ always involves the efforts of both of

us. And this relational work requires the person and heart of both to ongoingly engage the relational process in order to grow in intimate relationship. Jesus doesn't settle for anything less and we can't afford to settle for less either.

This raises a very important issue for us to examine honestly. It is quite possible that we don't take seriously Jesus' call to "Follow me" because we aren't looking for a deep relationship or don't want one. This even begs the question: could the reason we inadvertently stay away from Jesus' words be that we really don't want this kind of relationship?

When the rich young man pursued Jesus for eternal life, he called Jesus "Good teacher" (*didaskolos*, Mk. 10:17). But, this successful young guy wasn't looking for a relationship. He only wanted to know what he must *do* to qualify for more. He only wanted more (longevity) of what he had and did (which by most standards was a lot) because that's how he defined himself. That's also how he defined Jesus, as only a good teacher to give him information. He was only there as a student simply to learn (*matheo*); he didn't want the intimate relationship of a disciple (*mathetes*). Since this young guy defined himself from the "outside in," Jesus lovingly responded to redefine him from the inner first; he pointed him to the relational work ("follow me") which was more important, as he tried to free him from his enslavement to define himself by what he did and had (Mk. 10:21). But the young guy was unwilling to change.

Maybe this successful guy also had on his agenda benefitting from this good teacher, so that he could eventually go out to be a teacher himself – that is, in the rabbinic tradition of Judaism (disciples went on to become teachers), instead of the relationally unique discipleship Jesus offered. This raises a related issue of even greater importance to all Christians: *pursuing relationship with Jesus on our terms*.

It is very probable that we, in effect, only give lip service to "Follow me" – no matter what our track record in service or church participation may be – because we want, need or only will have the relationship on our terms.

Restoring the Terms

When we formulate discipleship, the Jesus whom we have in our perceptions to follow often tends to be contextualized by a prevailing culture (including Christian subculture). That is, we often perceive of a popular Jesus, not the Jesus of the incarnation. A popular Jesus effectively becomes a Jesus we want to follow on our terms – one who may be more palatable or less threatening. This is why in our practice we tend to perceive of Jesus going from the manger straight to the cross. The complete narratives of Jesus not only define who, what, how he is but also the terms of relationship with him.

If discipleship involves having "faith in Christ" (which will be discussed in the next chapter) or being "with Jesus," then what does being with him involve?

From the dynamics of relationships we understand that a relationship requires at least cooperation between persons for that relationship to work, for it to function. The first disciples followed Jesus around, shared the same space, spent a lot of time together and participated jointly in numerous activities. Does this constitute being "with Jesus"? How we answer this will be strongly influenced by how we practice being with anyone, which is determined by how we define ourselves more than anything else. The issue is basically whether we approach the *person* from the outer-to-inner order of importance or

from the inner-outward priority. The tension and conflict between these approaches directly relate to determining the terms of our relationship with Christ.

Let's look at this in the context of Jesus' person and words. Even though it was understood in those days that a disciple (*mathetes*) was an adherent, it was only the teacher (*didaskolos*) who determined the specific terms of adherence. A disciple was not in a position to negotiate the terms of their relationship; it was common even to pay rabbis to be their disciple. Jesus certainly revolutionized the nature of *mathetes* and transformed what it means to be a disciple of his. One incident in particular illustrates these changes.

On this occasion Jesus was questioned about the difference between his disciples and those of the Pharisees and John (Lk. 5:33ff). The latter groups of disciples frequently fasted while his disciples enjoyed freely eating. In this interaction Jesus makes *two vital distinctions for all his disciples which are fundamental to how God sees us, to our relationship with him and our identity*:

1. The religious leaders indicated what was important from an outer-to-inner self-definition based on what they do. Jesus focused on the reason for celebrating as more important than what we do (v.34). His response indicates, in effect, that the person from inner-out is what's necessary for his disciples because that's how God sees us and defines us.
2. Jesus also tells us that the relationship is always primary and more important than what we do. And what we do is never an end in itself (even if it serves our self-interest) but must have relational significance. What is the purpose of fasting? After Jesus was no longer physically present, then his disciples fasted (v.35) – because the purpose of fasting is always this relational connection. For Jesus and his disciples, nothing else subordinates this relationship nor substitutes for this relational involvement.

Despite the disciples' experience above, they struggled in their relationship with Jesus. It takes more than cooperation to be truly *with Christ*. A relationship also requires willfully open persons to advance from only *doing* something between them to actually making relational connection together, especially with their hearts. Our willful openness obviously involves cooperation but the nature and extent of this openness is determined only by Jesus.

While cooperation may be enough for a working relationship, a learning relationship and a casual relationship, it is not sufficient by itself to be with Jesus – no matter how diligent and sincere. There are two ways cooperation is exercised in a relationship. One is cooperation as submission, which will be discussed in the next chapter. The second is to use cooperation as negotiation – or process of exchange to get something you want – which essentially involves the terms of the relationship. This assumes that the terms are negotiable and mutual agreement with those terms is possible. Whether such negotiations are conducted directly in the open or indirectly by hidden agendas, intentionally or unintentionally, these assumptions are critical errors of understanding and judgment. God doesn't negotiate the terms of the relationship, and agreement with his terms is totally our decision.

Openness in our relationship with Christ implies the inner-outward approach of the person. If we use the outward-inner approach, then that implies our control of our

inner person (whether to hide or protect) and how far we will be vulnerable with our true person. God sees us from the inside first; our heart is always what he looks at. And that's how he defines us. Obviously, then, God sees our true inner person in all its humanity, so what good would trying to embellish it with secondary outer things accomplish? How else do we think we can present ourselves to him without being deceiving of the truth about us? The consequence of these attempts and the outward-in approach is always some measure of relational distance. That's why his is the only way he does relationships. These terms are nonnegotiable.

The terms of the relationship of a disciple are clearly illustrated in contrasting situations where persons are faced with the opportunity to follow Jesus. Let's examine three of these contrasts to better understand Jesus' terms for relationship.

The first contrast. When Matthew, a tax (toll) collector, was called by Jesus to "Follow me," he was at work (Mt. 9:9). Being employed by a chief tax collector (like Zacchaeus in Lk. 19:2) who was contracted by the Roman government involved a system of collecting fees on the goods and services passing through. The system commonly lent itself to abuse and often employed unethical workers without loyalties who engaged in a loose, ritually unclean lifestyle. Consequently, tax collectors were identified as the "enemy" by some segments of the Jewish community and were despised by practicing religious people. Despite this background, Matthew responded immediately (Luke says he left everything, Lk. 5:28) and followed Jesus. Obviously, Jesus crossed social, cultural and religious boundaries here; but it should be clear also that Matthew crossed these boundaries as well. Aside from the conviction of the Spirit, how could Matthew undertake such a drastic, 180° identity change? He certainly couldn't have responded to Jesus if he continued an outer-in approach to his person. Matthew had to change how he saw himself (given how most everyone else saw him by what he did) and how he defined himself in order to follow Christ and be involved with him. There was no other way he would even consider such a response.

This is the only way Jesus would even extend his call. That's why in contrast to Matthew we return to the successful young guy discussed earlier (Mk.10:17ff). When Jesus told him the primary matter of importance was to "Follow me: (v.21), he wouldn't let go of how he saw himself and how he defined himself by what he had and did. How could he undertake such significant relational involvement without changing how he defined himself and, thus, did relationships?

The second contrast. The fishermen (the brothers Simon and Andrew, James and John) were also at work when Jesus called them (Mk. 1:16-20). They immediately left job, family, everything to follow him (vv.18,20; Mk. 10:28). This wasn't merely a career change – although, in my bias, I think fishermen would welcome a career move – but a totally new life. What does this tell us about their response? They certainly didn't know the details of this new life. And as they struggled with specific aspects of this life, especially Peter, they might have considered turning back at times. Their ongoing response to follow Jesus tells us where and what their commitment was.

These disciples stand in contrast to some other would-be disciples. The latter exercised definite initiative and displayed strong interest in following Jesus but were only would-be disciples (Lk. 9:57-62). One of them replied to his call "first let me go and bury my father" (v.59). A legitimate request but Jesus responded essentially that there are two realities here (v.60): (1) the social reality of the world which includes the family of those who are spiritually dead; while a definite reality in which we all participate, he is telling

us not to be controlled by it nor let it define us; (2) in contrast, he brings forth the reality of the kingdom of God, that is, the family of those who are *alive*, new in Christ, free from the control and definition of lies which dominate the social reality of the world; this new reality needs to be “proclaimed” to others because people need this family of the living and God wants all to be in his family. Following him is about more than interest, however strong, but about *attachment* and *priority*.

A second guy declared his plans to follow Jesus but first wanted to “go back and say good-bye to my family” (v.61). Seems reasonable, but this was really an excuse because saying good-bye (Gk. *apotasso*) in their cultural context connotes a lengthy process (maybe many years) and a number of duties to perform before leaving. This guy may have had a stronger interest to follow Jesus than he had in his family. But he obviously had a stronger attachment to his family; attachments (which are of the heart) would always exert greater influence than interests (which work in the mind), no matter how strong. As a result of his attachment, his first priority was still with his family over Christ.

Christ demands that in terms of our interests, attachments and priorities, everything else must be subordinated to him. When Jesus talked about the need to “give up” (same Greek word as good-bye, *apotasso*) everything to be his disciple (Lk. 14:33), this is not about relinquishing all else and detaching ourselves from them, particularly the relationships he described earlier (Lk. 14:26). This is about relational priority and what/who will determine our lives. That’s why Jesus emphasized to the second guy above (Lk. 9:62) that anything less is a compromise, that it’s not “fit for service” (Gk. *euthetos*, usable, suitable), that is, it’s not relationally meaningful in God’s family.

The third contrast. The last contrast examines the issue of focusing on what we do or on how we make relational connection. It involves two definite disciples whom Jesus loved – the sisters Martha and Mary. Their involvement with Christ helps us to understand how relational consequences (distance) or outcomes (connection) happen.

One of their interactions with Jesus was the well-known scene which took place in their home (Lk. 10:38-42). Martha worked on all the preparations (Gk. *diakonia*, service, ministry involving compassionate labor benefitting others) necessary for hospitality – work (*diakoneo*) which, on the one hand, was culturally hers to do while, on the other, was an opportunity to serve Jesus (v.40). Mary seemed to ignore the work (*diakoneo*) which was also culturally hers to do and chose instead to engage with Jesus in a manner not customarily available to women (sit at the feet of a rabbi as a disciple). The key here is where their focus was. Martha was engaged in important service; though her good intentions were to fulfill this service, Martha “was distracted” (v.40) by the work. From our earlier discussion of Jesus’ words about serving (*diakoneo*) in John 12:26, *diakoneo* emphasizes the work to be done, not the relationship. Jesus gives priority to the relationship of being with him. Martha did something for Christ and occupied the same space with him but it was Mary who was truly with Jesus. Mary didn’t participate with Martha in serving because she chose the relationship first, focusing on how to make connection. Jesus fully affirmed Mary and told Martha “but only one thing is needed” (v.42). The word for “need” (Gk. *chreia*) means act of using, employment, that in which one is employed. Jesus seems to tell us that only one life activity or vocation is really important: *to focus on being with Christ and be ongoingly involved in the relationship.*

Such relational work takes serious full-time effort. Two other interactions the sisters had with Jesus demonstrate this effort. Immediately after their brother Lazarus

died, Jesus was on his way to visit them (Jn. 11:17ff). When Martha heard he was coming, she took the initiative to go meet him (v.20) – a good relational effort by Martha. But in their interaction she didn't seem to extend that effort to make deeper connection with Jesus. Whether due to culture, personality, or both, she seemed reserved or constrained, resulting in a pleasant but somewhat merely mind-level exchange. I don't think Martha expressed what was on her heart. Mary repeated the exact same initial words as Martha upon seeing Jesus (vv.21,32) but she let all her feelings out also. Because Mary opened her heart to him, Jesus was touched and moved in his heart (vv.33b,35,38). In those moments, Mary connected with her Teacher (*didaskolos*) and experienced him more deeply and, as a result, came to *know* him as never before. This is the kind of effort involved in relational work.

In their next interaction Mary went to the next level of their relationship. During a dinner at their house soon before Jesus' triumphal entry (Jn. 12:1-8), Martha served (*diakoneo*) again but didn't complain (v.2); hopefully, she learned more about discipleship from the earlier dinner. Mary let her heart be expressed to new heights. Whether she followed the lead of the prostitute (see Lk. 7:36ff) or acted spontaneously from her own creative heart, Mary made another costly choice (v.3). With the cost of the perfume (a year's wages, v.5) also added to this decision, she once again went against cultural norms and practice to literally let her hair down to intimately connect with Jesus and humbly in love attend to his needs. Mary was engaged in the deepest relational work of a disciple; in Jesus' own words he describes this as "a beautiful [Gk. *kalos*, in quality and character] thing [Gk. *ergon*, work of her vocation] to me" (Mt. 26:10).

This was an ultimate expression of *diakoneo* in which Mary both served Jesus while intimately enjoying his person more than ever before. She grew and experienced more of this relational outcome of discipleship because she seized with unrestrained heart the opportunity to be with Jesus' intimate presence (v.8). Love acts this way, it always makes the *person* and the relationship most important. That's how Jesus involves himself with us and how he wants us *to follow him*.

These relational outcomes don't happen unintentionally – that is, without serious relational effort. This great effort (Gk. *agonizomai*), which Jesus (Lk. 13:24) and Paul (1 Tim.6:12) both said is imperative, involves only the relational process of developing intimate relationship with God. **Discipleship is only about this relational imperative.** Anything other than this is a substitute or settling for less, and only pursuing relationship with Jesus on our terms.

Character of the Relationship

From our scriptural understanding of God in how he is with us along with how he is with himself (by the interaction between the persons of the Trinity), we can certainly conclude that God is a relational being of heart. Furthermore, as Jesus revealed of God's glory, God's nature is intimately relational. Jesus' person and words bring us the intimately relational God of heart, vulnerably present for us to have relationship with – relationship only on his terms, not ours. The holy and eternal God can't do relationships any other way.

Given *what* and *how* God is, there are *two characteristics for all Christian practices* which are unavoidably necessary:

1. First, Christian practice has to be **relationship-specific** (person to person), that is, from my person to God's person (and/or other persons).
2. Secondly, it has to have **relational significance** (heart to heart), that is, develop toward and grow in intimate relational connection; *intimacy* is hearts open to each other and coming together in the relationship.

If who, what and how we are in our Christian practice does not have this relational context, does not include relational substance and does not make relational connection, then our practice has no relational significance to God and, therefore, is useless to him (e.g., our worship, Mt. 15:8,9a). The Christian life and discipleship are only a function of relationship. This is how God is and does relationship, his created design and purpose for life, and the distinctive way we need to live.

It is of further importance for us to understand that *the relationship is always a reciprocal process*. Consequently, God doesn't do all the work in the relationship nor do we. Yet, this means we have to get actively involved in the relational process of discipleship and engage in serious relational work. The absence of our part has relational consequences but our relational effort will always have a relational outcome.

Jesus discussed this relational outcome in the metaphor of the vine and the branches. We tend to view this metaphor in a static way, like structural importance. Actually, Jesus is providing understanding of a very dynamic process – the dynamic reciprocal relational process. Each time he identifies our part in the relationship with the word “remain” (Gk. *meno*, abide, dwell) a relational outcome is also identified (Jn. 15:4-11). This relational outcome reflects the fact of being his disciples (v.8). But this fact is not a title or status, a role or identity, but a relational process.

Previously, Jesus discussed a more dramatic relational outcome in a familiar verse that Christians don't usually look at relationally: “you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:32). But this verse is contingent on the previous verse, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” (v.31). The word “hold” is the same as “remain” (*meno*), the relational act of abiding, dwelling. “Teaching” (Gk. *logos*) involves the essence of the person, not merely principles, ways or propositions. “If you abide, dwell in my person, you are my authentic disciples” describes an intimate relational process. The outcome is that you will *know* “the truth,” that is, you will intimately experience and come to know my person, the Truth (Jn. 14:6), whom Thomas didn't know yet. The result of this relational experience “will set you free” (redemption), so that you can be his Father's son/daughter and “belong” (*meno*) in his family permanently (8:35) – the ultimate relational outcome for his disciples ongoingly engaged in the reciprocal relational process of discipleship in the relational progression.

What our reciprocal responsibilities in the relationship are underlies all we will discuss in this study. What the quality of our response is to “Follow me” will be discussed in the next chapter.

Preliminary Working Definition

“Disciple” is not a label for those associated with Jesus, nor is it a role for those following him. A disciple responds to the call to follow the *person* of Jesus in the unique relationship defined by him. It is this relational context and process which determine who

a disciple is. The identity of Jesus' followers is always relationship-specific – specific only to the relationship he defines on his terms. Being his disciple is about relationship, the terms of which make involvement in the relationship primary and necessitate the importance of the total person (particularly the heart) to engage him in relationship. Identity formation is a function of this relationship only and not based on what his followers do. Our authentic identity is rooted in our relationship with Jesus, in our direct connection to him relationally, in our intimate involvement with him, not indirectly through activities, deeds or beliefs.

This identity makes it inadequate to define or limit discipleship to following the model demonstrated by Jesus and conforming to his character in our lives. Discipleship is only about his relational imperative to “Follow me” and is rooted in this intimate relational process. Its practice needs to be relationship-specific (person to person) and to have relational significance (heart to heart), that is, develop toward and grow in intimate relational involvement in the relational progression. Anything other than this is a substitute, and only pursuing relationship with Jesus on our terms.

Consider:

How does this definition of discipleship compare to or contrast with discipleship as you have known it?

What changes are necessary to formulate (or reformulate) discipleship in this relational framework?

2 The Quality of Our Response

*So, you see, it is impossible to please God without faith.
Hebrews 11:6 (NLT)*

What constitutes our response to Christ specifically? Having a personal relationship with Christ is usually perceived by most Christians as one who is saved as a result of confession of faith in Jesus Christ. What follows that decision is not usually seen as constituting that relationship, only what established the relationship. Faith, then, becomes basically a belief system, and maybe a way of life. We need to reject this view because what follows that decision does indeed ongoingly constitute the relationship with regard to its most fundamental element: faith. A misguided assumption in this view is defining faith as something one has or possesses; so, once the relationship with Christ is established by faith, one always *has* faith. Though one always has the relationship, it is erroneous to think one automatically also always has faith.

At the same time Christians understand for the most part that we need faith to live the Christian life – for example, when we’re in need, when the situation calls for it, and especially in times of crisis. But there is a tendency to take faith for granted during the times between those circumstances. Do we assume that our faith is “alive and working” ongoingly? That would be another ill-advised assumption.

Since discipleship is about following Christ and following him is being a disciple (not a learner, not a follower of principles, not an imitator of behaviors), it is the relational process of *an adherent deeply involved with the person of Jesus* that is the primary action to keep in focus. Faith is critical to this relational process. Yet, although the epistle of James makes it clear that our faith and our daily life actions must go together (see Jas.2:14-26), as followers of Jesus we need to further understand that *faith is not merely doing something* – no matter how much of a service it is. No matter how sincere we are or how good our intentions, faith which merely does deeds is dead also.

This discussion is an important foundation on which all of discipleship is engaged and built. Whatever our level of maturity, faith is not a matter we can bypass nor assume; faith is an ongoing issue for all Christians. It was for Jesus’ first disciples. We cannot understand the disciple (*mathetes*) in the Gospels without grasping *faith*. The disciples’ faith in their Lord was crucial and also problematic in how they practiced it. And maybe today in our zeal, guilt or anxiety to make our faith complete we don’t consider the converse of James’ well-known words (Jas.2:26b): *to perform daily deeds apart from an active faith is to render those deeds useless*. This is a susceptibility especially for active Christians who seek, for the most part with good intentions, to be a servant of God and of service to others. Yet, all who define themselves by what they do are easily misguided about their faith.

Authentic faith is more than doing good deeds. Scripture is even more distinct on

this issue and can be summarized in the opening verse of this chapter: “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb.11:6). What is this faith which must also be conjoined with our deeds so they would not be useless? What is the active nature of faith which is to be distinguished from our deeds of service? What is this faith basic to discipleship and why is it *the* fundamental condition necessary in order to please God?

The Nonnegotiable Starting Point

Even though faith obviously begins with God’s people in the OT – epitomized by Abraham and summarized in Habakkuk 2:4 – I begin our understanding with the incarnation. Focusing once again on Jesus’ incarnation clearly provides us with the *unique context* and the *specific process* which are inherent to all Christian faith.

When God revealed himself to us in the flesh of Jesus Christ, directly extending himself to us first and openly sharing his person and words (particularly as promises), he gave each of us the opportunity to respond. That response could be: flat out not interested, a disinterested “whatever” or an interested “OK,” a routine assent, a moment of “Wow!,” a humble obligation or appreciation, or a deep involvement. These are possible responses, however, not only to his incarnation; they are also a range of responses we each make to his person and words during the course our relationship with him.

The opportunity Jesus gives us to respond to God’s vulnerable presence is what faith is all about. Our response is what God holds us accountable for. But not only do we have to account for our initial response to Christ, we must also account for our ongoing response at any given point in our relationship with him. That’s what accountability involves in a relationship. **The issue of faith is the quality of our response to the person(s) of God in relationship – an ongoing issue about our ongoing response.**

When Hebrews 11:6 goes on to say “anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him,” faith emerges distinctly and solely as an interpersonal response taking place from me to God. In the incarnation Jesus presents us (in his person) with the objective existence and presence of God and demonstrates to us (in his words and actions) the moral integrity of God we can count on to keep his promises. But the incarnation (including the resurrection) is not mere objective fact on which to hang our cognitive hat, nor a divine revelation to evoke responses of an interested “OK,” a routine assent, a moment of “Wow” or appreciation. These responses are not what define the faith pleasing to God. As James tells us, these responses (except for appreciation) are the kind of faith, in effect, the demons have also (Jas.2:19).

If the incarnation of Jesus is what we base our faith on, then there are **two nonnegotiable aspects of faith** which are crucial to understand in our relationship with Christ. First, the opportunity Jesus gives us to respond is first and foremost a response to his *person*, not his teachings, his deeds, his examples, his life in general. That makes the necessary response totally a relational response. *Faith must take place within the unique relational context of the vulnerable presence of God presented to us by his incarnation, and faith must engage the specific relational process of involvement with God intimately opened to us by Jesus’ person and words.* This involves the quality of our response,

which we will discuss shortly.

Secondly, the incarnation reflects God's initiative to reveal himself to us, to extend himself to us by initiating in a way that we can intimately grasp and experience God. *Faith then becomes nothing more and nothing less than the reciprocal response we make relationally to God's initiative.*

His initiative, of course, is unjustified by us and totally represents his grace expressed intimately in love to us. This familiar truth often gets set aside or even lost in the exercise of faith but it is vital for us to understand in the relational process. Since God took the initiative in the incarnation, we cannot initiate faith in the sense of making the initial response in our relationship. Even the choice to be Christ's disciple is not made by the initiative of one's faith. In contrast to the norm of biblical times where the student made the initial decision to be a disciple, Jesus took the initiative and called persons to discipleship. The importance of this distinction will be apparent in our discussion to follow, especially for those who tend to express faith as what they do.

Because our response is simply a reciprocal relational response to God's relational action toward us, it is not enough to say that "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Heb.11:1). Maybe it was before the incarnation but not after. These views of faith or any faith-deeds perspectives (such as James') are not properly understood unless we grasp faith as a reciprocal relational response from us to God's grace. This is the starting point for our relationship with God, but it also involves the extent of our ongoing response that pleases God.

These two nonnegotiable aspects of faith are deeply interrelated and strongly interact in the relational process of any and all relationship with Christ. Let's examine them within this relational context and process.

Its Relational Process

If we were to examine Christian practice today and get a sense of the landscape of Christian culture, the dominant picture to emerge has faith defined as what we possess, have or do – individually and/or collectively. Some of this faith might be perceived within a context of a personal relationship with God but very little of that faith is actually practiced ongoingly in the relational process. That is, since faith is not seen relationally, such faith doesn't intentionally engage the relational process. But it certainly affects this process in problematic ways, as the early disciples demonstrated.

While the general concept of faith (religious or otherwise) may connote what one possesses, has or does, faith in Christ is only relational. If the practice of faith is not relationally specific to the person of Jesus, such faith has no significance to God because there is no relational connection with him. Faith is a function only of this relationship, nothing else.

If we read Paul's epistles apart from their total context, we can be misinformed about both faith and discipleship. Paul didn't specifically use terms like "following Christ" (*akoloutheo*) and being his "disciple" (*mathetes*) but rather focused on "faith in Christ." Does this mean discipleship was not important or a priority in Paul's teaching? Certainly not, yet he seems to be taken this way. When Paul talked about different

followers of different personalities (namely, Apollos, Cephas, Christ, Paul, 1 Cor. 1:12), he didn't use the term *akoloutheo*, yet their attachment is usually rendered "follow" in today's translations. The divisive situation in Corinth is informative for us. It is highly likely that Paul doesn't use the terms for "follow" and "disciple" because of this kind of situation where people had a tendency to follow "cult-like" personalities, as well as systems of false teachings. Paul wanted to counter these by focusing only on the *person* of Jesus Christ and exercising faith *in him*. He didn't want believers to reduce Christ to mere teachings; and he didn't want "following Christ" to become an activity or something they do. Faith was distinctly relational for Paul also.

Yet, Paul is not always clear (particularly apart from the total context) about what faith is and involves in the relational process. For example, he makes 138 references to "faith" (plus references to "believe," which is the verb form of faith) but only 14 of those include the object "in Christ" (one is "in God"). For Paul, faith is always clearly connected to the *message* of the gospel but connection to the *person* of the gospel is not explicitly stated in most of his uses of the term. Not putting the remaining 124 references to "faith" (plus those to "believe") into context can easily distort faith to imply something we possess, have or do. An accurate reading of Paul always puts faith into the relational context as well as includes the process of deep involvement with Christ, which is what discipleship is all about.

Matthew's Gospel has the most specific use of disciple (*mathetes*) and clearly establishes the relational context as that of following (*akoloutheo*) Jesus. John's Gospel seems to expand the relational context to the big picture and focuses on God's revelations in the person and words of Jesus. His emphasis on receiving Christ's revelations and following this God person as his disciples clearly mean having faith. While John's focus may be broader than Matthew's and can be seen as a transition to the rest of the NT (especially Paul's writings on faith), together these Scriptures provide us with the relational context and process of the faith of Christ's disciples.

When faith is put in its proper relational context, the relational process can be distinctly and intentionally engaged. God's initiative with his incarnation is the reason we have relationship with him; so his grace is always the starting point – the initial action and the sustaining action for the relationship, its basis and base. This is critical throughout the relational process because grace defines the nature of the relationship as one between superior and inferior (or subordinate), between benefactor and beneficiary. There is no other way we can legitimately define this relationship. Though this may not appear to conflict with our beliefs and perceptions, this may not be the way we actually function in our relationship with him.

For example, if we live a life faster than grace (e.g., when our faith-deeds move ahead of him or apart from him), then our faith precedes grace, or displaces it, in the relational process. This creates a shift in the relationship. When our faith becomes the starting point (the initial action and/or the sustaining action) in our relationship, grace subtly no longer is the reason we have the relationship nor what defines the nature of the relationship.

What are the implications of this in the relational process? Faith ahead of grace makes us susceptible to attempt to create, to establish or control our relationship in some way on our terms. But the functional and theological truth is that God took the initiative

and extended his unmerited favor. Grace, therefore, precludes any terms for the relationship other than his. The burden is on us to respond to him, not him to us. Contrary to many perceptions, faith cannot precede grace and be used as a “stimulus” to evoke God’s favorable response in the relationship. While grace precludes our terms, authentic faith is our acknowledgment and response to his terms for our relationship. This is why faith is necessary to please God, and without it we can’t please him.

Grace or faith as the starting point in the relational process (not necessarily in our beliefs or theology) is an absolutely vital distinction to ongoingly keep in focus because it tells us who controls the relationship and determines its terms.

Religions, in general, tend to determine who their god is and what god is like based on some expression of their faith. Christians have not been immune from this kind of faith activity in their actual practice, if not in their belief system. Biblical Christianity, however, reveals God acting to us first with his favor and, thus, revealing who, what and how God is. Biblical faith is our response to God and his initiative; faith is not an expression which determines our God. God won’t be controlled or manipulated in the relationship. He will not accept anything less than our faith in him for who he truly is, what and how he really is, not some projection or wishfulness on our part.

What exactly is the quality of our response which properly puts faith in this relational context and fully engages its relational process?

The Basic Quality of Our Response

With the incarnation Jesus revealed God’s glory (in terms of his being, nature and presence) as the God of heart (his being) who is intimately relational (his nature) and vulnerably present and accessible (his presence, Jn.1:14,18). This openly revealed not only who God is but what he is and how he is, all of which determines how to connect with God and defines how to do relationship with him.

Since Jesus came to “our house,” presented his heart, pursued us for intimate relationship and vulnerably involved himself with us, what constitutes an appropriate response to such initiative? “Anyone who comes to him must believe . . .” (Heb.11:6) sets not only the relational context and process of faith but also establishes the active nature of faith as that of *trust and intimacy*. Herein is the basic foundation of faith on which all relationship with Christ grows and from which all life actions as his disciples must flow. This kind of faith is the ongoing response by which discipleship is lived.

As made explicit in both parts of Hebrews 11:6, to please God is to *come* to him. To please God who came to us first is to respond to him on his terms. Yet, responding to him does not mean to come to him in the dominant way we do relationship or as we commonly do even in our close relationships. “To come” (Gk. *proserchomai*) means to draw near to him, to walk closely with him, that is, to have fellowship with him in intimate terms – not to only approach him. *Trust and intimacy* are the most fundamental characteristics to a deep relationship, be it with God or with others.

Faith and believing have always been synonymous in Scripture with trust. The heroes of faith outlined in Hebrews 11 lived by their trust in God, even without the incarnation. But we must understand trust in its relational context, not as something the

faithful generate by what they do. Faith cannot be rightly understood by functionally isolating the individual from this relationship. The trust of the faithful is enacted only in relation to God in the relational process. Consequently, biblical trust focuses more on the person(s) of God than it does on our person. That's because trust is not something we have or do by ourselves but what we exercise and experience only in our relationship with God. And the incarnation made this relational context an objective reality and established its relational process in distinct intimate experience.

The whole of Christ's work was to make us acceptable to God for intimate fellowship (Heb.10:1,22), to redeem us from the impenetrable barriers to such intimate relationship (Heb.7:19,25), to open the way for our relationship to *come together* intimately as friends (Jn.15:15), intimately as Parent-child (Gal.4:4-7). As discussed in Chapter 1, the incarnation revealed to us Jesus' intimate bond with his Father – to *see* Jesus we see the Father (Jn.14:9), to know one we know the other (Lk.10:22) – he describes it as “the Father living in me” (Jn.14:10). Their intimate bond is both ontological and relational. Their ontological bond is beyond us; but we can understand the relational bond of their hearts intimately connected only because Jesus openly revealed to us their relational bond. He also offered this same relational bond on the heart level for us: relationally bonded (Jn.14:20; 17:21); intimate relationship (Jn.14:21); loved by the Father (Jn.17:23,26; 16:27). This is the significance of the relational progression that we can experience.

To receive Jesus in the incarnation and to *come* to God on these intimate terms requires the ongoing exercise of an active faith as trust and intimacy. If authentic faith is the difference between someone who *believes* (Jn.6:29) in contrast to an outsider or an observer (see Jn.6:14-66 for those who functionally fell into the latter category), then the difference between any faith and trust is the ongoing *relational work of involvement*. Mere faith (e.g., mind-level assent) can often put us at a distance in the relationship as an observer but trust is the relational act which engages us intimately in the relationship. This is the quality of faith necessary to please God – ongoingly.

Trust is characterized by *honesty and openness of the heart*. Without these elements our faith is only exercised with our mind, not by our heart. Without these the process of faith does not become an experiential reality of growing intimate relationship with God. When we understand trust as a process of this relationship, we can also understand why intimacy must also characterize our relationship with God.

Trust is not something we can exercise in any relationship casually or at a distance. We cannot be relationally distant from another person – not necessarily distant mentally or even physically – and still think we are trusting that person. In this sense, trust is not being exercised merely through participation in Christian disciplines and church activities or, for that matter, in Christian mission. We may want to conclude that trust is implied indirectly through this involvement. Yet, despite what has become the norm in relationships, we must realize that in any good relationship nothing substitutes for direct relational involvement of our person. God wasn't indirect in his incarnation, nor did he send us a substitute. In these same terms, he expects nothing less in our response to him.

Likewise, trust cannot be truly exercised without the risks involved in disclosing myself, in making my person vulnerable, specifically for the purpose of getting closer to

another person – in relation to God, a superior being at that. In other words, the relational involvement of faith, which often tends to get obscured, is intimacy. *We cannot separate intimacy from trust.* Together they constitute the faith which has relational significance to God. To restate David’s basic expressions of faith pleasing to God in his experience, “The intimacy of the Lord is for those who reverently trust him” (Ps.25:14).

In the relational process there are two aspects of trust which we need to exercise ongoingly:

1. *The trusting of the other person:* that which I place in the other person, expecting them *to be* who they say they are and counting on them *to do* what they say, all of which is contingent on the other person sharing their true self directly with me.
2. *The entrusting of my person:* trust also involves presenting myself to the other person as I truly am; that means to disclose *me* in the relationship such that the other person has the access and opportunity to be involved directly with me.

Since relationship with God is a reciprocal process, God never does all the relational work nor can we. Our relationship always requires joint cooperation and participation. God has been exercising his part of the relationship – specifically as demonstrated throughout his incarnation. Our discussion on faith and discipleship primarily focuses on our part of the relational work and our response in this relational process.

The second aspect of trust (entrusting my person), then, becomes crucial for us to grasp because any limitations we put on this practice directly limits our relationship with God. We are obviously transparent to God since he sees everything within us; there is nothing to disclose of ourselves which he doesn’t already know. But relationship with God is not about information, it’s about heart involvement. Despite God’s knowledge, I think it is accurate to say: *as a rule he only interacts with that part of our person we are willing to disclose to him openly or are open to let him be involved with.*

With exception, of course, God doesn’t seem to engage us in the relational process beyond what we present of ourselves to him. This doesn’t mean that God doesn’t pursue us for more of our person, which he certainly does as the further initiative of his grace. But our response to his grace is what faith is. God doesn’t do all the relational work in the relationship, nor does he do relationship on our terms. Our response of ongoing trust is a necessary condition for relationship with him – nonnegotiable. This relational response to trust him (his person) to be and do what he is and says, by his design (for intimate relationship), must also include entrusting our person (to disclose ourselves) to him. This second aspect of trust is inseparable from the first and, thus, is just as important in the quality of our response.

The Relational Imperative

When we define ourselves by what we do or have, then that’s how we tend to see faith and invariably limit our relational involvement with God. This is illustrated by a number of persons pursuing Christ and following him (Jn.6:14ff). Pursuing and following

Jesus should have pleased him. But their response was not to his person (6:26,27), thus exposing their self-interest and their attempt to have relationship with Jesus on their terms. Since they apparently defined themselves by what they did and had, they inquired about the things to do that would measure up to God's requirements ("to do the works," v.28). Jesus said it's not about doing something but only one relational response is significant to God (v.29). As the interaction continued, Jesus elaborated on his terms for relationship and the changes necessary for them in order to experience relationship with the Father (vv.51,56,57). This confronted them with an overshadowing issue (obstacle), and it certainly wasn't about cannibalism (vv.52ff). It only involved who determined the terms of relationship and how to do relationship with God. They were unwilling to let go of their terms and trust Jesus to define the relationship (vv.60,66).

Authentic faith and discipleship are always relationally specific to Jesus' *person* (nothing less) and only have relational significance in direct intimate involvement with him (no substitutes). To be connected with Christ (and thus the Father), to be involved with Jesus (and thus the Father) is constituted on our part by the relational act of trust within the relational context and in the intimate relational process of following him in the relational progression. This ongoing *relationship of following* does indeed constitute functional "personal relationship with Christ" because this is the only relationship which defines *being with Christ*. All other identities of a personal relationship with him are not relationally significant to God. This is strongly demonstrated in Jesus' analogy of the narrow door (see Lk.13:24-27).

In his response to a question if only a few will be saved (made whole), Jesus replied with the analogy of "the narrow door" (v.24) by which many will try to enter the house but "will not be able to" (Gk. *ischyo*, to have ability). Why? Because the owner didn't *know* (think about this word in relational terms) them (v.25b). But they argued that they had fellowshiped with him – eating and drinking together were very significant in their culture – and he had even taught them (v.26). His insistence of not knowing them (v.27) instructs us that this difference in perception is not understood from their joint activity but in the relationship.

While the question was about being saved, the focus here is not only on the future. Jesus' response actually emphasizes a vital matter in the present to them and, thus, is of extreme importance even to all who have a personal relationship with him. The narrow door is not about how to earn salvation. In the statement "make every effort" (Gk. *agonizomai*, to fight, struggle, engage in strenuous endeavor, exert great effort) Jesus used Greek grammar (present tense, middle voice, imperative mood) communicating that he wasn't making a suggestion or a request to them. Indeed, Jesus was demanding (imperative mood) that they start taking direct responsibility now (present tense) and rigorously act. We can easily misinterpret this as further expectations he lays on us *to do* – how to qualify or better measure up.

By his use of Greek middle voice, Jesus demands the direct involvement of the person in the action, not merely *doing something*. The middle voice further indicates that the person is seen as acting upon oneself; that is, the person is taking responsibility for oneself and acting on what is necessary about oneself. Since Jesus is engaged in relational work, he is focusing us on our part of that work. In other words, he demands that we take responsibility for our *person* (particularly where our heart is) and rigorously address, for

example, how we make intimacy with God difficult. *All this effort* involves only the relational process of developing intimate relationship with God. **This is the relational imperative; and it's all about relational work.**

Paul reinforces this relational work in his charge to Timothy (1 Tim.6:12). “Fight [*agonizomai*] the good fight of faith” is first and foremost the rigorous relational work of his relational response of trust in Christ. “Take hold of eternal life” uses a word (Gk. *epilambanomai*) which involves laying hold of firmly, grasping securely a *person*. Indeed, because eternal life, in Jesus’ words, is experiencing *knowing* him and the Father as a relational outcome of intimate involvement with each other (Jn. 17:3). Paul’s charge is all about relational work: *the relational imperative*.

God didn’t relationally know “the many” trying to enter the narrow door because they were not intimately involved with him – despite the fact they were *doing* things with him. The effort necessary to the narrow door is relationship-specific, which makes relational work on our part ongoingly necessary and rigorous. It’s the only work which has significance to God. It’s not optional, nor negotiable.

The Ongoing Process

Let’s return to the question at the beginning of this chapter: Do we assume that our faith is “alive and working” ongoingly? If faith is something we have or possess, we can assume our faith is always present throughout our life – that is, unless we’ve “lost” it or given it up. If faith is something we only do, we may also be able to assume we’re *doing* faith, depending on what we do, of course. But if faith is a relational action, then faith is only distinguished by what we ongoingly exercise and directly experience in our relationship with God.

Since this active nature of faith is characterized by trust and intimacy, these fundamental functions must always be exercised jointly, for example, with our spiritual disciplines or our deeds of service if they will not be useless. For all levels of discipleship, these are the functions which determine the *quality* of our relationship with God, which determines what pleases him. In the relationship the determining factor with God is never the quantity of our deeds, though we certainly will be held accountable for our deeds.

David learned this distinction, as he shared from his heart (in Ps.40:4,6-7):

“Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust. . .”

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire . . .

burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.”

What then does God want from us?

“Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come.’”

“I come” – beyond anything God could receive from me or that I could do for him, God wants *me*. And God has me when he receives my faith ongoingly as trust and intimacy.

This seems clear throughout Scripture and attains unequivocal clarity in the incarnation. Yet, there is much in our everyday living which obscures or distorts the relational functions of trust and intimacy. These faith functions are not what we declare only at the beginning of our relationship with Christ and, then, can expect to be present thereafter. We should never assume the presence of trust and intimacy. This assumption is a tendency too many persons make about their relationships in general. That's why, for example, marriage relationships develop problems or are dissatisfying – often much to the dismay of the assuming person.

Making this assumption is especially critical in our relationship with God. As followers of Christ we can't account for our faith based on what we have or do, but we must always assess our ongoing interaction in the relationship to determine the extent of faith in operation and the quality of our relationship. Trust and intimacy are processes ongoing in this relationship. That means faith is not static – for example, something we possess or have that remains constant. Faith as trust and intimacy is dynamic. Since these functions are not static, for this reason they fluctuate: go up and down in amount, and extend in and out in terms of relational distance. More often than not, a good level of consistency may be the exception. It certainly was an exception for his first disciples.

These changes in our faith reflect, on the one hand, the unchangeable sinful condition basic in our humanity while, on the other, they reflect changing influences on our lives. These issues (both internal and external to us) often interfere and even work against these processes of trust and intimacy. We need to assess honestly, for example, how many of our relationships demonstrate this trust and intimacy – especially among Christians at church. As we reflect on this, we start to understand the difficulties involved and why, for example, it's easier to do things *for* God than to be *with* him on deeply relational terms.

Distance in relationships reflects problems needing redemption, healing or reconciliation. Until we address these issues directly we will continue to maintain such distance with God and with others. Relational distance unattended to increasingly reflects also distance from our heart, which, in turn, results in distance from our true humanity as well as from the image of God. Without heart our faith becomes merely an intellectual exercise; and what we end up presenting to God is someone less than our total person, our true self.

The long-term effects of Western cultures and a mind-set formulated from a modernist worldview have had profound influence on how we do relationships and the relational process today. Under political conditions of freedom, social conditions of individualism and conditions of a global economy, the pressure to get things done and succeed in today's task-oriented, result-oriented, high tech lifestyles have redefined the person without the substance of the inner person, replaced the primacy of relationship with relations without intimate significance and displaced faith from God to human endeavor and other things. In this climate self-determination, enhancing one's self-worth and emotional self-preservation are influences which divert our faith as trust and dilute our faith as intimacy. The fears of failure, exposure, being rejected, being disappointed, being out of control or feeling inadequate, as well as pains and angers from past relationships, are some of the reasons we wear masks, erect relational barriers and "protect" ourselves – making trust and intimacy more difficult. These conditions, including the continued loss of trust and intimacy as an expectation of our everyday

cultures, reflect the underlying need for redemption and healing of our *person* and our relationships.

Even when faith is talked about today in terms of relationship, the language of relationship may be there but not the function. The words or forms of relationship may be there but not its deeper meaning and substance. This reflects one problem about relationship critical for us to understand: that the perception of relationship is not consistent with the actual substance of relationship. Too often our perceptions are influenced and conditioned by sources contrary to God's design and purpose for relationships. These distortions or misperceptions are certainly not unique to modern life, as some of Jesus' interactions discussed earlier demonstrate. But this problem is more acute today because of the conditions stated above and the dominant influence of the media (particularly the entertainment media) upon our lives shaping how we define ourselves and do relationships.

Since trust and intimacy are fundamental to a deep relationship, anything which minimizes these processes has significant affect on God. Any distance, any avoidance or withdrawal on our part from God all have strong implications relationally. Avoiding, for example, deeper areas of our lives which need healing is critical to the whole issue of faith because these areas left unattended to effectively create barriers, impose restraints or otherwise disrupt the process of faith as trust and intimacy. What this translates to in our relationship is keeping distance, evading, withdrawing from him.

God makes clear his feelings about this kind of response when he shared: "my righteous one will live by faith; and if he [she] shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him [her]" (Heb.10:38). We may commonly think of "shrinking back" only in terms of our deeds. But the word (Gk. *hypostello*) also means to withdraw, even avoid and must be understood in the relational context of faith and its process as trust and intimacy. He is not pleased when we shrink back relationally from him. Understandably – who would be pleased with this kind of relational response and involvement when you care about someone and have vulnerably, intimately and ongoingly involved yourself with this person?

The Relational Posture

Besides the quality of our response being specifically relational and ongoing, there is also a necessary posture to our response. This relational posture tells us a lot about the nature and extent of our participation in the relationship.

When individualism is the norm in our culture or social context, when individualism is the operating standard in our Christian practice, then commitment becomes defined by what is relative to the individual. Since no functional authority (not for what we believe but for what we practice) supersedes the individual, it is each individual who effectively determines the nature and extent of one's commitment. In relationships this involves having the relationship on one's own terms, not a commitment of mutuality, of submission or of self-sacrifice.

Any relationship (good or bad) requires some degree of cooperation between the persons involved. With God, however, we can never assume that cooperation includes

negotiation. The fact that ongoing relationship with God is on his terms signifies a certain kind of involvement on our part: **submission**. When grace is the starting point in the relationship (its base and ongoing basis) and our faith never moves faster than grace to precede it, our relational involvement with God is with submission.

Cooperation with God equals submission, which cannot be reduced or compromised by negotiation. Submission in this relationship is submission of our total person: will, mind, body and especially the heart. First and foremost, *submission involves worship*. This is our primary posture in the relationship of following.

Worship is relationship-specific and its presence or absence tells us a lot about the relationship. **The functional everyday posture of worship serves as the primary determinant for what the relationship means to us.** It distinguishes what we have attachment to (in our heart) from that which only has our interest (primarily in our mind). Based on our attachment it determines our priorities; interest alone is not sufficient to establish priority. For following Jesus, worship is the benchmark for relationship with God because it expresses who is important to us and what the relationship means to us. Without worship our relational messages to him communicate a different priority.

To understand worship as a relational act helps us to see the presence of compromise and its consequences on the relationship. When Jesus rebuffed Satan in his third temptation, he exercised what is basic and vital to relationship with God: “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only” (Mt.4:10). As Jesus demonstrated (and the Hebrew words he quoted from Deut.6:13 denote), true worship functionally signifies *submission* which then would involve *service* to the superior. *To submit is to serve*; the two go together naturally and should not be separated. Together this is the relational posture of his disciple.

Whether in the above temptation or in his intense trial in the garden of Gethsemane (see Mt.26:37-39), Jesus wouldn’t entertain compromise of his relationship with the Father. The act of this relational posture, which includes service, clarifies for us when our relationship is rendered to compromise. For example, to only respect God as the expression of our worship doesn’t guarantee submission, and thus service to him. How we treat him ongoingly the rest of the week reveals the extent of our worship. Likewise, to only serve God doesn’t guarantee submission either if it doesn’t include worship. Such service could be on our terms or how we define ourselves and establish our worth.

To submit to God is to ongoingly extend our true person to the true person God is. That submission wouldn’t genuinely take place if we weren’t openly honest about our person and responding to the vulnerable presence of God, particularly as revealed by Christ. Such honesty was problematic for his early disciples. Also, after David’s adultery, he learned that God desires honesty of the heart (“truth in the inner parts,” Ps.51:6). Had he exercised this honesty with God on the night he couldn’t sleep and saw Bathsheba bathing, he might not have compromised their relationship (2 Sam.11:1-4).

Jesus’ person and words clearly involve this honesty and posture in his relationship with the Father. This is what God expects in all relationships with him because he wants the true me, all of *me*.

A Necessary Condition

When faith is taken out of the relational context and practiced apart from its relational process, we don't have to account for acts of trust, intimacy and submission. I don't include service as one of these acts because generally service is perceived to accompany faith, even without a relational perspective. Yet, how one actually serves (if at all) is problematic given the diversity of Christian perspectives and lifestyles existing today. This points to a deeper problem.

Under conditions of individualism so dominant in our context, freedom essentially legitimates (within reason) what choices we make, how we define things and basically live in relation to others. Christians use this freedom as a qualifier (intentionally or unintentionally) for how they choose to live their faith. When the style and shape of faith become so individualized, it is inevitable that compromise, contradiction and conflicts with biblical perspectives result. Postmodernism exacerbates this condition.

In this kind of context faith is not only individualized but privatized as well. Individualism among Christians is highly susceptible to prompting the privatizing of faith. Even accountability for trust, intimacy and submission can be seen as a private matter. This is a contradiction of what we profess in Christ and in conflict with what Christ professes about us (e.g., see Jn. 17:20-23; 13:34,35).

Faith expresses itself in a public way, not just private. This is not a public display of our good works but witnessing to the object of our faith and making others the object of our love. Biblical faith is not lived for oneself nor merely for God's pleasure. If our response of faith to the grace of God is complete, then it will find its expression publicly in the lives of others. Beyond the intimate relational process of faith, any expression of our faith is designed to be public: for others to see, to hear from, to be directly affected by, or generally to be the recipients of.

Furthermore, authentic faith is not adequately expressed by the individual alone, no matter how conspicuous. It is and must be also the individual's public expression through the corporate efforts of the church. Such active faith is the life of the family of God in public. This public aspect and corporate nature of faith will be discussed in later chapters.

The underlying assumptions that faith is individual and private are religious fictions, not biblical truths; and they have far-reaching repercussions in all our relationships, both with God and others. Even Peter – who was well into the ministry of the gospel and establishing the church – didn't realize the implications of his individual practices. Though he didn't live in a context of individualism, his decisions were still influenced by his socio-cultural surroundings. Thus, he took the liberty to be inconsistent in how he treated the Gentiles in contrast to the Judaizers (those who believed circumcision was necessary for salvation). Peter made his decision to practice religious fiction even after Jesus corrected him about his discrimination of the Gentiles and treating them as less (see Acts 10:9-11:18). So, Paul had to confront Peter about his hypocrisy in order to expose the clear fact that Peter was not “acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (see Gal.2:11-14).

The deeper we address the daily outworking of our faith, the more we will encounter personal decision-making conflicts – for example, between our so-called

“secular” life and our “religious” life, between our terms and God’s terms, between our *old* self and our *new* self. This can take place between, in our estimation, two positive choices – an approach-approach conflict. Or we can feel both positive and negative about the same alternative – an approach-avoidance conflict. If we are resistant to act in our faith while feeling guilty for doing something else, the result may be a retreat from both by taking a third alternative – avoidance-avoidance conflict.

All of us have experienced these conflicts in decision making. Discipleship includes the need to deal with them. How well these conflicts are resolved is greatly dependent on our honesty and seriousness. Yet, in general, these personal decision-making conflicts are made more difficult by a distorted sense of Christian freedom.

One of the most influential qualifiers for the outworking of faith is the liberty Christians exercise in making choices. (Obviously, this is not to imply that Christians don’t have liberty and shouldn’t make choices.) By implication, however, these qualifiers are choices which serve our personal interests more than God’s. Our response of faith remains basically determined by our self-interests and self-concerns unless our faith operates under a necessary condition. This condition necessary in order for any faith to act without self-imposed qualifiers or limits is **obedience**.

Obedience to God and his revelations (especially in Jesus’ person and words) compels his people to respond; we are accountable to him for all his revelations. Though we may not like a particular action, obedience directs our faith to respond regardless of circumstances, costs or consequences. Self-concerns and interests are not ignored but they are not the determiners of our response (cf. Jesus in Gethsemane). Discipleship requires obedience, or it gets reduced essentially to following *me*, not Jesus. Without obedience the expressions of our faith (if any) are on very precarious ground (see Lk.6:46-49).

The Hebrew word (*sama*) in the OT translated *obey* means “hearken to, hear.” In the NT the verb for obey (Gk. *hypakouo*) comes from the root word for “hear” and means literally “to hear under” (i.e., under the authority/influence of another). Obedience, then, in the Bible signifies the active response to words one hears, rather than passive listening.

In the teachings of Christ one who hears his words without acting on them is forecast for a downfall (Lk.6:49). One who hears and acts receives great honor and blessing (Lk.11:27-28), experiences God’s love (Jn.14:21) and intimate relationship together (Jn.14:23). Jesus also clearly described the various ways we “hear” God’s word and the results for each (Lk.8:11-18). James also took up this discussion: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (Jas.1:22).

Christian freedom may give us flexibility in the particular way we express our response of faith, but it does not allow us to negotiate *what* that response is. Obedience to his word qualifies Christian freedom; Christian freedom does not qualify the outworking of biblical faith. Paul extends our understanding of the use of Christian freedom (see 1 Cor.8-10) as being for the primary purpose of serving others in love such that the individual and her/his freedom is deferred in faith.

Faith, obedience and God’s word interact together in a distinct relational growth process (Rom.10:17). We cannot minimize obedience or compromise his word if faith is to function properly and grow. This necessary condition of obedience certainly

challenges the true make-up of our faith and how we constitute relationship with Christ. It also takes away some of our options which we usually assume to be legitimate – especially since they are often dominant practices in our social, cultural and/or religious contexts.

This brings out what I would call a “social nature of commitment,” which our discipleship needs to address also. This involves a commitment to Christ which has contingencies related to a particular social or cultural context. It may be tied to the way people live with each other in that context (e.g., how they define themselves and do relationships) or linked to how these people react to deviations from the norm (e.g., pressure to conform and not be different). However it’s connected, the contingency (explicit or implicit) must be met before the commitment is carried out. Jesus frequently contended with this social nature of commitment in those interested in following him, notably the man who first wanted to go bury his father and another who first needed to go back to say good-bye to his family (a cultural process, as noted earlier, which could take years, Lk.9:59-62). These were contingencies needing to be met to follow Jesus, which seemed to be reasonable but revealed only interest in Christ while having deeper attachment elsewhere. *The relationship of following in the relational progression* is not engaged with such a commitment.

In a reverse sense this social nature of commitment can be implied indirectly by placing contingencies also on God to be a certain way. This emerged in Peter when he strongly objected to two of Jesus’ loving acts for him – objections based on contingencies influenced by his socio-cultural context. Peter wouldn’t let Jesus go to the cross for him (see Mt.16:21-23) and he also wouldn’t let Jesus wash his feet (Jn.13:6-8). Peter’s God could not do this, would not do this because in his perceptions God had to be a certain way (in Peter’s box). If Jesus did these acts for him, then Peter would have to redefine himself and how he did relationship with God. That’s the redemption and transformation Peter ongoingly experienced in his person and his relationship with God.

This social nature of commitment is in contrast to the commitment of faith not significantly influenced or controlled by social conditions, cultural factors or any other attachments. The quality of this response is first and foremost a commitment to Jesus Christ in trust and intimacy to live life together with him in submission to his terms. Obedience to his word is the necessary condition which keeps this all in the proper perspective for us and maintains the relational context and its process, for which we are accountable and by which our relationship will grow.

A Sufficient Condition

The responsibilities of carrying out biblical faith, even its demands, are such that they can be discouraging, frustrating, even burdensome. In addition, the negative situations and conditions encountered along the way could easily take their toll on us – not only emotionally and spiritually but physically as well. Though obedience is a necessary condition for the faith that responds, at times like these it is not always a sufficient condition to yield that action. The willingness may be there but not the

resources to exercise faith. Even Jesus struggled with this as he approached the time of his death.

It is important for followers of Christ to take to heart the truth that biblical faith does not reduce us to mere servants. Likewise, obedience doesn't disregard nor immunize us from the effects of negative situations and conditions, especially in relationships. Consequently, the process of faith must include another condition sufficient for faith to act consistently. This sufficient condition is **resiliency**.

There is a definite resilience about faith that must exist in order to continue to act in spite of circumstances, repercussions or other consequences. But the strength of that resiliency is directly proportional to being attended to in our needs and feelings created by those negative conditions and experiences. This involves how we present ourselves, our person: making our person vulnerable, openly and honestly sharing our heart and giving God and his people the opportunity to be involved with our heart. Being attended to is part of an overall process directly engaging the exercise of faith as trust and intimacy as well as submission, not merely by an individual believer but by a body of believers also.

What Christians experience together as a body, as they respond relationally in trust, intimacy and submission, is absolutely essential in our support base. Along with his Spirit, the Father provides us the support base of his family in order to live out biblical faith in the world (which will be discussed in greater detail later). Without such an active support base the individual tends to gut it out basically alone – that is, essentially grit one's teeth to step out again. Gritting our teeth is not the kind of cross Jesus said we should bear.

The faith that acts consistently, in spite of negative situations and conditions, is a faith intimately nurtured, relationally supported and ongoingly trusting in God's sovereignty, as well as experiencing the intimacy of God's presence along with his people. When this is our experience, our faith develops resiliency creating a sufficient condition to continue to act.

This was Jesus' experience in his struggle in the garden at Gethsemane (Mt.26:36-46). Jesus always made himself vulnerable during his incarnation. So, in his obvious negative circumstances he was deeply affected. That's how he presented himself to his disciples and his Father; he poured out his feelings to his Father, he didn't want to continue this action to the cross. Unfortunately, the opportunity Jesus gave his disciples to support him was not responded to very much. They struggled to be involved with him. Nevertheless, Jesus intimately opened his heart to the Father and also declared his willingness to defer to his Father's will. There was clearly trust being exercised. Having made deep relational connection, Jesus was attended to in his needs and feelings.

The outcome was the resilience creating the sufficient condition for Jesus to continue his loving action to completion on our behalf. We further benefit from the relational model Jesus presents for us to follow him in practice and experience also with our Father. What a beautiful account of the necessary condition of *obedience* and the sufficient condition of *resiliency* working in "faith that responds" because of actively exercising relational trust, intimacy and submission.

This is how genuine faith is always relationship-specific and relationally significant. When this takes place ongoingly with obedience and consistently with resiliency, God is both pleased and served.

The Progressive Aspect of Faith

Faith is not static but it also cannot be passive – that is, relationally passive, which may exist even with high levels of personal activity or church participation. The reality of being a new person in Christ is not a condition that can be experienced here and now in a passive way. Such relational passivity is a contradiction to the redemptive results of the work of Christ and his Spirit. Life itself is not static, and relationships don't remain constant, even in an inactive period or because nothing ostensibly negative is taking place. Passivity actually involves a regression in faith because it's disengaging the relational process – effectively distancing oneself in the relationship.

By being redeemed in Christ, the *redemptive outcome* for us is liberation, even here and now though not completed until heaven. As we exercise this new condition we engage in the process of liberation and transformation that provides us opportunities to experience the *new creature* (Gk. *kaine ktisis*, qualitatively new species) Paul talked about in 2 Corinthians 5:17. This process of liberation yields creative expressions of our faith. Without such a transformation process, “old things” don't drop out of our life and “new things” don't replace them.

For faith to grow, to progress in the relational process, it needs a progressive aspect to it. That aspect is **creativity**. Basic to the practical everyday functioning of the redeemed in Christ is the ongoing outworking of faith involving the adventure of *the creative process*. In this sense, the exercising of faith becomes pleasing not only to God but to us also. Without it we cannot go forth to fulfill *who we are* in Christ. That means living experientially as *what we truly are* in Christ is not realized and, therefore, cannot be a source of satisfaction.

This suggests that creativity needs to be a distinct aspect of our daily faith, that creativity is necessary to further operationalize our faith, or else our faith will become passive. But that would depend on what is meant by creativity.

The common perception of creativity is the ability to create something new, something unique. This act of doing something new or unique is confirmed primarily by the product that results. If what is produced, for example, can be valued for its uniqueness, then creativity has been achieved. But it is the *form*, the product, the result which receives the attention here. Just the act of doing something new or unique is not considered sufficient in itself to be called creativity. Consequently, the predominant idea of creativity implies having a certain ability to do something new or unique. In the arts, for example, creativity would involve a greater ability (even mastery) to achieve a level of sophistication that could be labeled unique.

Well, how many people have this ability? Even if we did, how often could we produce a new or unique form? Certainly, with this predominant perception of creativity no one would expect creativity to be a natural aspect of our daily faith. Justifiably so, because in this sense creativity is a limited activity of only the more gifted; and most of us would dismiss our participation in creative efforts.

Disqualifying ourselves from such efforts, however, would also be nullifying a vital part of who and what we are in Christ. Creativity is not about producing something but about stepping out and taking risks – about *being someone*. This effort is not to be confused with the special uniqueness of the product or with a new form that results. That

expectation is a level of sophistication we adults impose on creativity. In doing so we effectively eliminate most creative efforts as beyond our abilities. This has a tremendous negative effect on discipleship – putting constraints on our person and rendering us increasingly passive in our relationship with God, even with very active church participation.

We don't usually do this with children. If a young child brought us a drawing he/she tried for the first time, how would we evaluate that likely crude and unartistic product? Even if it didn't resemble anything seen before, I'm sure we wouldn't dismiss the child's effort but applaud it. Why? Implicit in this affirmation is the recognition of the child's creativity to step out in this new or unique way. We don't usually impose the same expectations on children which we do for adults. We affirm in them the creative process – whatever the outcome – because for them what's unique is not the product but the effort, the attempt.

The effort or attempt is how creativity needs to be perceived as unique, not in the form, the results. The fact that someone is trying something new makes that effort unique for them. Whether it is elementary or commonplace for everyone else is irrelevant to creativity. Yet, because of our entrenched predisposition to form, products and results, adults have made it difficult to step out in new ways for ourselves. Unlike children who have yet to be conditioned with our constraints, adults live with constraints almost naturally. This can be called “*adult incapacity*” (similar to the “trained incapacities” of higher education). This approach to living is directly related to our product-oriented, result-oriented social contexts which manifests, for example, in sports with “winning is the only thing” and in business with the bottom line.

For the Christian, young or old, this creative process becomes crucial for what and who we are in Christ. Without this progressive aspect we tend to become passive in the relationship: either neglect to actively trust him or fall into routine practices (maybe legalism) which displace our trust from him to ourself. In the creative process there is inherent an aspect of childlike trust that needs to be developed in all adults in order to grow, to progress in quality relationship with God. Jesus told his disciples when they asked who is the greatest in his kingdom: the person whose *being* exercises trust as a child (Mt.18:3,4). They might have thought Jesus was using hyperbole again and oversimplified the issue. Yet, the simplicity of this trust involves the freedom to let go of oneself (e.g., in self-sufficiency or self-determination) and to relinquish control of a situation or an outcome into God's hands – an issue adults struggle with in contrast to children. Such involvement is part of the *new* person's relational work.

The disciples' question reflected their focus (from the outside in), so Jesus knew “unless you change . . .” (Gk. *strepho*, turn around, adopt another course) their faith would be limited and not grow. For adults to exercise their faith in the creative process requires liberation (redemption) and extending trust, intimacy and submission to God. As it undoubtedly meant for Christ's first disciples, this change probably means a paradigm shift in most Christians today. It certainly requires a change in how we define ourselves and what we look at in relationships and use relationships for.

It is in the creative process that the redeemed in Christ (the liberated new person) must engage in practical and ongoing relational expression of their faith for it to develop. It is in “making every effort” in this relational work that we incarnate our redemption and witness to the transforming work of Christ (and his Spirit). Consequently, creativity is not

the option or the privilege of the more spiritually gifted. This process of creativity becomes the progressive aspect for the ongoing faith of all who are recreated *new* in Christ, and basic to following him.

Reformation and Operationalizing Creative Faith

Besides thinking of the creative exercise of our faith as optional, another reason that faith is constrained and rendered passive is the mind-set of “professionalizing” its action or limiting its greater expression to the educated, trained and experienced. Who essentially lead our churches today? Jesus’ first group of disciples wouldn’t have qualified by today’s standards of faith. As noted earlier when the early church was being established, the rulers, leaders and teachers of the law were astonished with how confidently Peter and John expressed themselves. These educated and privileged leaders knew that Peter and John were uneducated and ostensibly unqualified persons presented before them; they simply knew what distinguished Peter and John was having been *with Jesus* (Acts 4:13).

This relational involvement of faith in being with Jesus has these kinds of outcomes which take us beyond our comfort zones and are able to witness to others our involvement with the person of Jesus. These relational outcomes are the result of the active discipleship to which we are all called – whether in church leadership or whatever function in the body of Christ.

In the 16th century, the Reformation movement relied on “the priesthood of all believers” as a rationale to liberate faith from a system of constraints. Yet, Protestants still utilize a hierarchy in practice (though not in theology) to operate the church – a hierarchy of ability (often called by the euphemism “spiritual gifts”). In this sense we need another reformation of ecclesiology today to get us back to the priesthood of all believers, not to further cultivate individualism but to step out further in the exercise of our faith and to participate in the church for development individually and corporately.

The faith of all believers needs to take up this responsibility and demonstrate openly in our lives what a relationship directly with God involves. This quality of our response to Christ is upon each of us to determine its extent ongoingly – a response for which each of us is accountable first to God, then to his people.

Obedience helps us to counteract the constraints on faith (as the early Reformers demonstrated) while *love* motivates us to engage the relational process of faith in creativity. Two biblical examples, in addition to Christ, demonstrate this love and obedience which are instructive in their relational process for us to examine.

The account of an immoral woman (probably a prostitute, Lk.7:36-50) anointing Jesus gives us a remarkable example of adult creativity. Though the form of her act is well known, it is this creative process of faith she exercised that needs our attention. Whether she gained access to this special gathering in order to respond to Jesus in a demonstrative way, or she decided to act in seeing that the host did not follow custom by providing for Jesus, we don’t know. Yet, in apparent spontaneity, in lieu of water and a towel she used her tears and her hair to refresh his feet. In place of cheap oil for his head

(used for dryness) she poured very expensive perfume on his feet. Instead of a customary kiss of greeting from the host, Jesus received from her repeatedly tender kisses on his feet. By all custom she was remarkably unique.

Even more important was her boldness to step out at all to do this. Certainly her reputation preceded her. It was unheard of for such an immoral person to enter the house of a Pharisee. It was also clearly shameful among Jews for a woman to let her hair down in public; that would identify her as promiscuous. These were strong reasons for her not to have acted at all, or at least to have chosen an easier, more comfortable alternative to respond to Jesus.

Yet, in her humble and devoted way she took the risk to be *with Jesus* and paid the cost to respond to him. Even the perfume would be perceived as offensive since it was a tool of her trade. Nevertheless, love motivated her because she was already forgiven by God before this situation. As a forgiven sinner she acted with the love she felt for Jesus without constraint. Because she let God love her first through forgiveness, she experienced love. Now with that love she risked further rejection (and failure) in order to be involved *with Jesus* in this difficult and beautiful expression of love. She was redeemed; and this was *what* and *who* she was now in Christ. Whatever anyone else thought, she wouldn't let her past and the *old* control her. In her own unique way she stepped out by exercising her faith as trust and intimacy, thus engaging in the creative process to express her heart in love for Jesus.

As extraordinary as this relational outcome was, the process itself is ordinary and simple enough for even the most timid to step out. But it requires relational work. Relationships don't grow without it. When we operationalize creativity in the specific terms of our relationship with God, we become much more aware of how any Christian can participate in this creative process. The relational truth, of course, is that participation is not optional, despite our circumstances or condition.

When acts of faith are made more sophisticated by the social values of education and training, when we have contingencies for the expression of faith tied to the social nature of commitment, tied more and more to economic and political conditions, then it is no longer a simple matter to step out in faith. Faith is becoming too calculated, measured more by modern contingencies than the long-standing promises of God. The priority of relationships is displaced by the assumptions and priorities of so-called progress. But faith as relational response is not progressive under these constraints.

While love motivates us to engage this relational process, obedience is necessary to counteract the constraints limiting our faith. Our devotion and love for Christ, for example, do not experience their potential apart from practical application of our liberation in relational work. If allowed to, internal and external constraints can control the process of faith by effectively eliminating the opportunities to step out in new or further ways.

The discipline of obedience relationally practiced helps us to counteract these constraints. With the help of the Holy Spirit obedience is a "resource" we all can exercise. Early in his "career" Moses provides us with a working example of how obedience operates in the creative process in the face of various constraints.

In Exodus 3, God called Moses to lead his people out of captivity. Moses' response was "Who am I?" with the strong sense of being unqualified (3:11). God said,

“I will be with you.” But Moses set up a number of “what ifs,” to which the Lord gave explicit answers. Then Moses brought up the obvious reality that he had never been good at speaking, in fact he was bad at it (4:11). God promised him a greater reality: “I will help you speak and will teach you what to say” (v.12). Finally, Moses pleaded honestly to the Lord to send anyone else but him. The Lord was honest also and confronted him with the truth that he would not be alone. Not only God but Aaron will be with him also.

In response to God’s words, not circumstances or conditions, Moses reluctantly obeyed. Things, however, didn’t work out with Pharaoh; the situation even seemed worse. So, Moses went back to the Lord and let his complaint honestly be known (5:22,23). God assured him that he was in control and would do what he promised. With that he asked Moses to step out further. Yet, once again, Moses raised the issue of his terrible speech (6:12,30). God was steadfast and his promises unaltered. Again, in response to God’s words Moses obeyed, and the rest is redemptive history.

We need to learn from Moses and embrace this process for ourselves. He would not have experienced this new, unique way for him if he had not stepped out. Yet, he wouldn’t have stepped out to take the opportunity to see what else could be done unless he had exercised the discipline of obedience. Since obedience is not about gritting one’s teeth but about the relationship, this creative process would not have moved along apart from the trust and intimacy of Moses’ faith.

Moses shared his feelings with the Lord, opening his heart to him. He talked honestly with his God and he listened to what God said also. This is a relational interaction which reflects the deep aspects of intimacy, not relational distance. The actions which followed reflect the relational trust Moses put in his God, not in his own abilities or resources. The development of his faith took place as Moses stepped out more and more. His confidence was not misplaced; it was relationally on the Lord. Thus, in the face of the crisis at the Red Sea Moses declared unequivocally: “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today” (Ex.14:13).

From this working example we can further define the *operational steps in the relational process of creativity*:

1. The first step, as Moses did, is to go directly to our relationship with God, talk things out, share all of our feelings honestly with him, as well as quietly listen to him – particularly his words, his promises.
2. Next, embrace whatever *resource* God has made available to us right *now*, even if it’s only a promise.
3. Taking that to heart, we then step out relationally *with him* (not on our own) on that basis in order to act in the given moment, situation or issue.
4. Lastly, as we move out we need to actively count on (trust) him to feed back to us, to show us and help us develop what else can be done – especially if things don’t seem to be working out as he promised.

As we engage our Lord in this relational process, our faith expresses itself in new and further ways. Since the creative process operates in this relational way, like Moses we may find these steps being repeated in the same situation. The order of them is not fixed either, so we may find ourselves, for example, continuously going back to pursue him on the last step involving feedback. The important matter in relational work is that

our faith is exercised in trust and intimacy with him, not passively, and that our will defers (submits) in the end to his will.

As the redeemed in Christ, as those who profess to be a new creation, each individual as well as the church are accountable to exercise daily the liberation resulting from redemption. In daily living, this liberation means exercising our faith with creativity. Yet, creativity can't be discussed apart from its relational context. Faith is not about oneself but is always a relational act focused primarily on the object of this relational process. When this is understood, then the most important dimension of creativity can be realized also in its basic substance as the *process of giving*. That is, creativity is the giving of one's *self*, the extending of one's true person, in new and deeper ways to God and to others.

This process of giving is the love (*agape*) Jesus commanded which identified his disciples (Jn.13:35). *Agape* is about extending our person in relational involvement with others. Love is not *what to do* but *how to be involved*. Peter focused on secondary things and what he did as Jesus emphasized how to be involved; so Peter didn't really give of his true self and missed crucial opportunities for *agape* involvement (13:37,38). Such giving and involvement are the real uniqueness of the prostitute who anointed Jesus. As this is done, it's not the *form* that matters but the opening of hearts to one another in love which signifies the new creation and identifies Christ's disciples.

All the above aspects of faith together determine the quality of our ongoing response to Christ. This response is both individual and corporate (which we will discuss increasingly). This constitutes the underlying process for the relationship of following Jesus in the relational progression. The process as well as his call are imperative. It's the relational imperative for all Christians. And God is not pleased with any response less nor with any substitutes. Thus we need to account for our faith.

Operational Discipleship

Just as discipleship is the relational response to Jesus' call to follow him, the quality of this response is the ongoing reciprocal response of our faith as trust and intimacy to God's initiative. His grace vulnerably revealed by Jesus in the relational progression is the basis and base for ongoingly trusting his person as well as vulnerably entrusting our person to him in intimate relationship. Authentic discipleship becomes operational by the reciprocal relational work of developing this intimate relationship with God (spirituality). The ongoing relational work of opening our heart honestly to God develops our involvement with him on his terms signified by submission. This submission involves the primary posture of worship and includes service. Together this is the relational posture of his disciple.

Furthermore, the quality of our response cannot remain individualized and privatized but with obedience in the relational progression becomes part of the life of the family of God in public. Obedience helps us to counteract the constraints on our faith, while love motivates us to engage the relational process of faith in creative steps for its development. This progressive process is basic to following Jesus, and it cannot be reduced to something we do or have but is constituted by the qualitative relational substance vulnerably initiated by God and reciprocally responded to vulnerably by us.

3

Following the Uncommon

*“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?
No, I tell you, but division.”*

Luke 12:51

There is so much of God to experience, and there is so much he wants us to experience of himself and *life together*, both with him and his people. Yet, what Jesus presented of himself for us to follow goes well beyond what we’re familiar with and deeper than our conventional ways. Discipleship of his person and the quality of our response to God are not completely natural to us. That is, even though God made us in his image as persons of heart and created us for intimate relationships, this relational context and its relational process are relatively foreign to us.

As we’ve discussed, we can’t engage relationship with God (specifically in his incarnation in Christ) on our terms. Nevertheless, in another sense we definitely can’t engage ongoingly the relationship on his terms either; we can’t, that is, without our redemption and transformation also ongoingly taking place.

This represents the tension, struggle, conflict between our person as the *old* apart from Christ and now as the *new* in Christ. It’s this distinction which needs to be defined comprehensively in order for us to address very basic issues in discipleship. These issues have to do with who and what God is and who and what we are.

Grasping the Common

When God revealed himself intimately in the incarnation, the effect Jesus had resulted in either a positive relational outcome or a negative relational consequence. The romanticized Jesus is comfortably perceived as about peace and unity; the biblical Jesus is a hard reality of conflict and division (Lk.12:51ff). In this more complete picture Jesus gives his disciples the opportunity to follow the uncomfortable, if you will. Yet, the discomfort is not about his disciples’ lifestyle. The conflict is about incompatibilities while the division is about truly irreconcilable differences (not the fiction in divorce courts).

As much as it may make us uncomfortable, this conflict should not be lost for us. When Jesus vulnerably presents himself to us to follow him, this immediately becomes a clash between choices (as discussed earlier), a clash of wills, including the collective will of culture, a clash essentially between the *old* and the *new*.

When Jesus presented God to us, he brought not only the loving God but also the holy and eternal God to us. This God person came vulnerably with that holiness which will forever remain a mystery of God’s love. Yet, we need to understand our God as more than pure and sinless. The word for “holy” (Gk. *hagios*) further means to be separated

from ordinary or common usage – that which is not common. It is crucial for us to embrace the fact and truth: *Jesus brought that which was uncommon and, therefore, was in constant tension and conflict with that which is common.*

Whether Christians are aware of it, the “uncommon” is an ongoing issue we have with Jesus’ life and words. It is an illusion to think that relational involvement with the holy God is only a spiritual and moral matter, leaving the other areas of our life partitioned from the relationship. Satan would encourage us to think this way because that would leave those other areas (e.g., our common, everyday social context which we tend to take for granted or readily accept) more vulnerable to his counter-relational work and influence. These distinctions of the uncommon have become blurred in many Christian perceptions.

Since none of our commitments and practices in the Christian life take place in a vacuum, we need to seriously grasp that the common in life – the dominant views, the majority ways, the popular, the conventional – influences how Christians think, feel, perceive things, develop mind-sets, even form worldviews. **That which is common in our daily life is the most problematic issue affecting intimate relationship with the holy God and growing as his disciples.** This is compounded for us by Satan who simply emphasizes, encourages and promotes *the common*, the temporal – that is, that which distances us from our heart and interferes in our ongoing relationship with God.

If we don’t deal with the common, we will not be following the Uncommon. It is vital for us to realize in particular – as our theology of the holy defines in general – that *the uncommon* and *common* are incompatible for relationship. Intimacy is not possible between these two conditions.

Certainly, ever since Adam and Eve fundamentally altered the original relational context and process, we have been predisposed to the common, even controlled by it. Relationship with God requires a change from this condition which means the need for redemption. Theologically, redemption is defined as being set free from enslavement by payment of a ransom (Christ’s death). The ultimate redemption necessary to be involved with God is spiritual. But there are other areas of life in which we need to experience being set free – common, everyday areas which make up the total person individually and take in human life collectively. These other areas all influence our involvement with God and, for example, can make intimate relationship difficult. So, we have to factor them into the relational equation underlying all spiritual growth. That means Christians need to realize that functionally not everything in spiritual growth and spiritual formation is spiritual. Redemptive changes are needed ongoingly in all areas of our life.

Common Relational Consequences

The prevalence of how we see things and how we do things (particularly relationships) makes them seem so innocuous that the common usually doesn’t raise any spiritual red flags nor ruffle any moral feathers. Its effects and consequences, however, are significant – especially because of their relational consequences.

It is valuable for us to see the effects of the common and ordinary in the dynamics of some interactions Jesus had. When Jesus returned to his hometown, Nazareth, we can

see the tension and conflict between the common and the uncommon (read Mk.6:1-6). At first many were amazed at his teaching (v.2). But they went from being amazed to being offended by him (considered a stumbling block, v.3). How did this happen so quickly?

Examine their line of thought as they wondered where Jesus got these amazing teachings and how he even did miracles. The questions which follow reveal the reason for their quick turnaround. “Isn’t this the carpenter?” defined Jesus as a common worker; and *seeing* Jesus by what he did made him no better than they. This biased their perception of him against being able to be wise and powerful. “Isn’t this Mary’s son?” defined Jesus by his social standing in the community; he was not anyone special, just ordinary. This further biased them to reconsider their opinion. There was no way for someone with his low social standing to be given esteemed status in their midst. Since Nazareth was looked down upon in general, it’s understandable to think this way. Even Nathaniel said when told about Jesus: “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (Jn.1:46).

Despite what they had heard with their ears and seen with their eyes, in their minds it was not possible for this to be valid. That’s how stereotypes and other biases predispose us from reality (seeing it as it really is) and the truth. Even Jesus “was amazed at their lack of faith” (Mk.6:6) because there was no reason to distrust him, except for their biases. How does this happen for us? Think about limits we place on seeing Jesus’ person and hearing his words, or barriers we have to more intimacy with God because of our perceptions.

What Jesus presented of himself in the incarnation certainly clashed with nearly all who were exposed to him, even his mother and his disciples. But the tension and conflict had less to do with theological differences over truth than the issue of how he was perceived – perceptions which reflect predispositions and biases. Jesus was rarely taken at face value because the facts of God are invariably observed with some kind of bias. Processing the incarnation then can’t be predominantly intellectual but must be primarily a relational process.

Jesus’ miraculous deeds and objective information about him are only secondarily related to the whole issue of *understanding* the person Jesus and the importance of *knowing* Christ; these were not the primary and direct areas which resulted in this understanding and intimate knowledge (not information). Raising secondary issues functions like red herrings and gets us away from the heart of the matter. That’s why Jesus was always engaged in relational work in order to establish the relational context necessary for us to make relational connection through trust and intimacy. Biases prevent that connection. These are the effects of the common and ordinary.

Before you dismiss such interactions as involving essentially the likes of, for example, closed-minded, hardened-hearted Jews, we need also to examine Jesus’ interactions with his disciples. Their biases also limited their connections, for example, to only a working relationship. Even an open mind, but without heart, will not yield the depth of relational connection necessary to understand and know Christ.

After feeding the 4000 and denying the Pharisees’ request for a follow-up miraculous sign, Jesus continued this particular discussion with his disciples (read Mk.8:14-21). Just earlier Jesus had fed the 5000 (Mk.6:30ff), walked on water (Mk.6:45ff) and healed numerous persons – all before the disciples’ eyes. As he

continued, Jesus warned them of a vital issue (Mk.8:15). Since the disciples had forgotten to bring enough food, they thought (notice, only to themselves) Jesus focused on the situation of not having bread to eat (8:14,16). Given all the miraculous events which the disciples had witnessed in recent days, what was the implication of their discussion about no bread? What do you think their perceptions of Jesus were at this point?

Not surprisingly, what Jesus warned them about (8:15) was the very thing they were doing here. In warning them (using Greek indicative mood), Jesus asserted the fact of an existing reality in life about which his disciples need to take ongoing action (Greek imperfect tense). “Be careful” (Gk. *horao*) means to perceive with the eyes, implying not the mere act of seeing but also the actual perception of some object. “Watch out” (Gk. *blepo*) involves the activity of the eyes and denotes fundamentally exercising our capacity of sight. *Horao* (“be careful”) is broader in scope than *blepo* (“watch out”); it involves locking in on something in our perception – not just look at it – and, consequently, to recognize the significance of something, to experience something and thus to encounter the true nature of a thing. The perception from *horao*, therefore, stands in contrast to misperception and misconception. To lock in and achieve this result may require contemplation, deep reflection or scrutiny.

As a related note, it is also helpful for us to understand the cultural world of biblical times. In that Mediterranean culture, the connection of the eyes to the heart is very significant because they were both considered to have similar function. So, they were used interchangeably. Malina describes the eye-heart as the zone for emotion-focused thought.¹

Jesus was not merely engaging his disciples in a mental exercise. His warning cuts to the depths of all his disciples’ hearts because it involves important aspects of relational work. What, then, is this existing reality in life about which Jesus said to *horao* (“be careful”) and *blepo* (“watch out”)? Ostensibly it’s the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod, whose behaviors and character few of us would intentionally practice. We’ve learned from Jesus that hypocrisy is the yeast of the Pharisees (Lk.12:1); that is, presenting a different or false identity of self than is true. The self-serving Herod was involved in political power and concerned about only his own gain and security. But, functionally this yeast focuses on appearances (e.g., how we present ourselves) and, therefore, emphasizes secondary matters (e.g., what we’re doing), which Jesus just earlier explained and exposed (see Mk.7:1-23).

Now how did this yeast relate to the disciples in this situation? Did this yeast permeate their perceptions? When Jesus earlier had explained the importance of the heart and our total person, he also exposed the relational consequences of the yeast (Mk.7:6-13). To answer these questions about the disciples we have to look to their heart and how their relationship with Jesus was.

Let’s look at how Jesus described them. In the previous discussion he said they were “dull” (Gk. *asynetos*, without insight, inability to “get it”) and didn’t “see” (Gk.

1. See John J. Pilch and Bruce Malina, *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publ., 1993), 63-67.

noeo, comprehend, grasp mentally; Mk.7:18). In this discussion they still didn't "see" (*noeo*) or "understand" (Gk. *syniemi*, to perceive; Mk.8:17). *Syniemi* denotes putting together various individual features of an object into a whole, like putting together pieces of a puzzle. Jesus also said their hearts were "hardened" (Gk. *poroo*, to make hard like stone, make callous, insensitive to the touch) making it difficult for them to see and hear correctly (Mk.8:17,18, also Mk.6:52).

Was he putting his disciples in the same category as the Pharisees and others who rejected him? No, but Jesus is showing all of his disciples how we may function in a similar way that will have relational consequences on what we will experience in relationship with him. They didn't see Jesus' person and weren't making intimate relational connection with him. So, despite direct, firsthand experience with Jesus' miracles, barriers prevented them from really *knowing* him at this stage in their relationship. This is vital for us to understand because we may still experience similar consequences as the early disciples – in spite of the benefit of hindsight we enjoy.

What prevented the disciples from the ability "to get it" and put the pieces together? What was a major barrier that prevented more intimate knowledge of Jesus? It would be too simplistic to explain the cause merely as sin; that would also be an insufficient explanation given our usually limited perspectives of sin. We cannot doubt the commitment these disciples had to follow Jesus. Yet, their lives (past and present) and commitment didn't take place in a vacuum; we need to account for the broader context of any individual in order to understand its influence on one's focus and perceptions. This is the context of the common and ordinary.

* * *

The influences of this broader context from culture, society, family or other experiences develop predispositions in us which form our biases. We all have biases – good and bad, valid or invalid. Even our Christian experiences, for example, in church, help form biases. Let's briefly expand on this process.

Whatever the source of our biases and however they developed, biases provide a highly selective screen (or shield) between us and the rest of the world outside of us. This screen acts like a filter to the real world, helping us to decide how to deal with it. Similar to the lens of the eye, such a filter either sharpens or distorts, clarifies or colors our perceptions and the extent to which we'll see something. In other words, **biases tell us what we should pay attention to and what we should ignore** (note this for the disciples and the Pharisees). Without this screening process to help us deal with our real world, we can easily be threatened or overwhelmed. Do you see this happening for either the Pharisees or the disciples?

As these biases become established in our thinking, they unify into our mind-sets in which we construct "our own little world" of reality, again whether valid or invalid. It is important for us to understand that this screening function also provides structure for our lives and strongly influences how we perceive things. This is how we put God "in a box." In further development, mind-sets formalize into worldviews which then dominate or control our perceptions and thinking. Thomas Kuhn showed how these form paradigms to shape our perceptions; and this influence is exerted upon everyone, even on

those who formulate scientific theories and models.² That's why thinking relationally may require a paradigm shift for many Christians.

The Pharisees certainly exercised a worldview in their interactions with Jesus. But they weren't honest about the predispositions underlying their biases, so Jesus refused to engage with them in futile discussion. I don't know if the disciples expressed a worldview but they definitely exercised a certain mind-set which filtered how they saw Jesus, what they paid attention to and ignored about him. But, since they were willing to be open to Jesus, even in their limited ways, he had the opportunity to work with them relationally for redemptive change.

The effect of these predispositions – which includes lies promoted by Satan – is to get us further and further from the substance (not necessarily the forms) of life and the truths (not necessarily the theology) of God revealed in the person and words of Jesus. This effect is most evident in the distance created from our heart – in its deemphasis or even denial. To put this screen on our heart (which is created in his image) and filter his eternity-substance implanted in it results in daily practice which actually hardens (makes callous, insensitive to the touch) our hearts, as Jesus discussed with his disciples (Mk.6: 52; 8:17).

* * *

After carefully walking them back through their experiences with the miraculous feeding of first the 5000, then the 4000, Jesus said “Do you still not understand?” (Mk.8:19-21). Jesus was engaging them in relational work, but the disciples' biases and callousness or insensitivity at this point had a twofold effect on their relationship. First, their biases prevented them from the simple function of seeing what exists (*blepo*). They didn't process the two miraculous feedings, not to mention walking on water, and other miracles of healing. They didn't see these events objectively for what they were and, therefore, couldn't connect it to their situation of not having any bread. They didn't see clearly to be able to add them up together (*syniemi*).

But, more importantly, they did not “be careful” (*horao*), that is, recognize the significance of those miracles and understand who it was doing them. This led to the second effect on their relationship: the callousness or insensitivity formed in their heart (or distance or detachment from heart) prevented them from locking in (making deeper relational connection) on Jesus and thus experiencing *what* was happening and *who* made it happen. The sad result for now was a relational consequence in which the opportunity to encounter the true nature of Jesus – that is, have an intimate connection with God – was lost or squandered. Therefore, they didn't understand what was happening and, most of all, they didn't truly know Jesus.

Obviously, the disciples were not free from the influences which affected their perceptions – the impact from that which is common. Like the disciples, we need to understand the influences on our own perceptions because similar influences exist for us today. Despite our benefit of hindsight to view the events in Jesus' life, our perceptions

2. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970).

of other areas of Jesus' person and words could just as easily screen out our ability "to get it" and put the pieces together, as well as filter away the experience of intimate connection with him. So, we need to learn for our life, as the disciples did for theirs, that these reflect and indicate the redemptive changes needed for relationship with God. For these Jesus came to save us *from* in order to save us *to*. In the tradition of the OT prophets, Jesus' person and words exposed the *old* in us to free us so that the *new* could be raised up.

A Critique of Hope

An urgent question for every Christian is "*what determines our perceptions and how we see things?*" The answer to this important question tells us how we will understand and assess events, experiences and other phenomena in our everyday life and most importantly in our Christian journey. Here we must expand our perspective beyond the individual to include the collective life of which each individual is a part. For all social beings, without exception, the most dominant influence on our perceptions is our *culture* (defined in the broadest sense as our established ways). If we take Jesus' warning (Mk.8:15) to heart to "be careful" (*horao*) and "watch out" (*blepo*), we need to critique our cultures and subcultures more comprehensively.

In any time period or context we can expect competing cultures to provide a highly selective screen between us and the rest of our world. As we discussed this filtering process earlier, culture tells us then what we should pay attention to and what we should ignore. On the individual level, our perceptions are further conditioned by our personal experiences. In particular, that means the experiences from our relationships – especially our family relationships and those with significant others, all of whom have been influenced by some culture also.

As social beings how do we deal with the influence of culture? The implication here, of course, is that this influence is often not good. Whether it is or not depends on its assessment by the common or the uncommon. The Bible is not a support system for every common culture, or for that matter arguably for any common culture, though historically it certainly has been used to justify, validate or anoint particular ones. Yet, culture is not a neutral institution or a system without sin; culture is also vested with a specific ideology which may not be compatible with biblical beliefs and values. In fact, Jesus guaranteed this tension and conflict when he brought the uncommon and established the *new*.

The common only becomes an issue in the presence of the uncommon. Likewise, something new is never anticipated nor embraced (despite our consumptive and indulgent lifestyles) without some awareness of the presence of something old. That is, we need some awareness of what exists now, an understanding of the *old* in order to anticipate or pursue the *new*. That usually involves some kind of dissatisfaction with the old. Without this feeling or perspective about the old (or common) we normally don't want or anticipate something new. This essentially is the purpose of the law (Gal.3:24) – a function in practice which Christians who define themselves by what they do have yet to truly experience.

This was also the vital task for the OT prophets. They were the human agents used by God to help generate the awareness and understanding of the *old* necessary in order to anticipate the *new*. The significance of their message was not just the fact of their predictions – God-given revelations about the future – but that they exposed the common present things for what they really were. They declared “*Thus says the Lord*” about the “here and now” as well as about the future. In fact, they disclosed the future in order to illuminate what was involved in the present.

Understandably, then, this makes the prophets *hard* reading. They do not speak pleasantries which catch the fancy of the people or make them comfortable. Rather they speak of harsh realities which disturb the people – disturb them because they speak of realities close to *home*, not abstract, distant matters. They speak to the heart of the issue – our hearts. In terms of everyday life, the prophets glossed over nothing; and the repercussions for speaking the truth about matters directly involving the people’s lives were accepted as part of the territory. But, they declared the word of the Lord not as prophets of doom or gloom. On the contrary, they shared confronting truths with compassion in order to open the way for the anticipation of something *new*. To speak merely of the *new* without giving perspective to the *old* would have yielded little impact and, thus, provoked no response. Their critique of common life indeed was always a critique of hope.

What has been said about the prophets can also be said about John the Baptist. As the forerunner of Jesus Christ, he set the tone for the entrance of the new order of life by exhorting repentance from the *old*. And like the prophets, he was not speaking of repentance in abstract terms but rather dealt with the common areas of life in its everyday forms. Here again, John, like the prophets, speaks to the heart of the issue – our hearts.

A People Without Critique

It is important for discipleship to embrace this function in the prophets and the Baptist in order to understand what we’re following. There was, in their time, a general acceptance of the social and religious orders of their period, though political tensions were ongoing. Whether it was given serious assessment or not, the people of their time embraced these old orders as basically good, or at least resigned themselves to assimilate into them. Without critique people participated in the lifestyles, institutions, processes, and structures of their day. This was an extremely serious matter for God’s people. Because of having become so embedded in the old order of religious and social life, there was no vital anticipation of the fulfillment of God’s promise of redemption and of his reconciling plan for history. Though there was some presence of a political messianic hope, their participation in the old order resulted, even worse, in resistance and even opposition to the will of the Lord God.

If there were to be any shift from the people’s position, if there were to be any anticipation of the new order of life, then it would have to be predicated on having a clear understanding and uncompromising response to the conditions of the old religious and social orders currently in effect – to that which was common. The prophets indeed exemplify this understanding. (See the Lord’s description in Jeremiah 6:27.) Their total

life response to their socio-cultural context was to counter it. They condemned its practices and assumptions while indicting its complacency and infidelity. They spoke so harshly, decisively and inflexibly because they were declaring God's perspective on the matter, not the normative, majority viewpoint. The normative perspective would like to think that all was not bad; with God there was no cause to feel good about the old order. For the culture the people embraced and practiced was not the culture of God's people, as he defines it. As another writer put it:

We and the prophet have no language in common. To us the moral state of society, for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim; to the prophet it is dreadful. So many deeds of charity are done, so much decency radiates day and night; yet to the prophet satiety of the conscience is prudery and flight from responsibility. Our standards are modest; our sense of injustice tolerable, timid; our moral indignation impermanent; yet human violence is interminable, unbearable, permanent. To us life is often serene, in the prophet's eye the world reels in confusion. The prophet makes no concession to man's capacity. Exhibiting little understanding for human weakness, he seems unable to extenuate the culpability of man.³

As the forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist carried on in similar fashion to the prophets before him. We, however, would tend to look at his call to repentance merely on individual and spiritual grounds, thinking that he did not address himself to the socio-cultural problems and unrighteous social structures and processes of his day. We would probably like to limit his perspective of repentance to the spiritual requisite involved in any conversion. In essence, we look upon the ministry of John the Baptist as being in a vacuum, devoid of any social context and unrelated to most of the dimensions of our everyday life. But, those who constrain the message of the Baptist forget his exhortation (Lk.3:8-14) about the correlating fruits of repentance:

- to the multitudes: “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same” (v.11); is this not an indictment on the system of inequality which existed in his day and the need to act with and for equity?
- to the tax-collectors: “Collect no more than what you have been ordered to” (v.13); does this not expose the structural inequities of his time and the systemic injustices which particularly impacted the poorer people the most?
- to the soldiers: “Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely and be content with your wages” (v.14); the abuse of power is a historical trademark, but does he not confront the main institution of power, implying that power has an institutional dimension as well as an individual accountability?

All of these show that John was not calling people to repentance from merely a spiritual perspective about the future. He indicted the social processes of his day, the old

3. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York; Harper, 1962), p.9.

order in which the people were deeply involved and, then, he demanded a new way. Repentance was not a limited response to some abstract spiritual system; it was the rigorous response to the God who was now among them (Emmanuel) inaugurating a new order of religious and social life. We cannot escape these implications of John's discourse on the fruits of repentance.

To realize the fullness of the prophets' and the Baptist's message is to see and to hear that they did not deal only with the spiritual aspect of the individual as if in a vacuum. They dealt with a people and their culture, with society and with the course of history for all of humanity. These were not only spiritual issues of the heart or those issues involving merely the individual. They included the everyday life issues of classes of people, the operations of a nation and even international relations. (Israel was not isolated from other nations.) By the fact that the Lord God dealt with the total life of his people, he had his prophets confront them also on moral issues involving sociology, economics and politics. Sin did not restrict itself from certain areas of life. Fallen humanity did not remain solely within the individual. There were institutional, systemic and structural factors to sin which went well beyond the influence and control of the individual. Along with the person and words of Jesus, a more complete view of God and a stronger view of sin form the biblical basis for this perspective.

The Illusions of Wisdom, Wealth, Power

This understanding of the old order was a necessary process if the people were to turn from their involvement in it and, then, to anticipate and receive the new order of life in Jesus Christ. Consequently, these servants of God and partners in his redemptive plan imposed, without apology, God's perspective on the here and now of life and indicted the people for the way they lived in all its aspects.

This is illustrated further by examining some of their encounters. In antiquity three major resources were treasured above all else by society: wisdom, wealth and power. The use and abuse of these had become normative in the society. Yet, to the prophets, this passion for wisdom, wealth and power was absurd – a false hope to establish oneself – as well as idolatrous.

The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what kind of wisdom do they have? (Jeremiah 8:9).

Ephraim boasts, 'I am very rich, I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin' (Hosea 12:8).

But you have planted wickedness, you have reaped evil, you have eaten the fruit of deception. Because you have depended on your own strength and on your many warriors, the roar of battle will arise against your people, so that all your fortresses will be devastated (Hosea 10:13,14).

The people experienced a sense of security, a transient period of satisfaction and success with these resources. And this process involving wisdom, wealth and power dictated their lifestyles, structured their society and generated their religious and social systems. The illusion of these conventional pursuits was complete when they used it to gain justification before God: “with all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin.”

What would it take to destroy this delusion? What was needed to put that which was common into the proper perspective? Certainly nothing less than “*the word of the Lord*” declared by the prophets bringing down rigorous indictment on the present order of life, while making clear what the new order involves, would be sufficient.

This is the word of the Lord, “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord almighty. Zechariah 4:6

This is what the Lord says: “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast of this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord. Jeremiah 9:23,24

Does It Still Apply Today?

With the incarnation does the message of the prophets and John the Baptist still have vital significance for today as it did then? Their response indeed was counter to the common context and setting in which they lived. Jesus didn’t change this with his life and words but built on their effort and brought it into fullness. The Uncommon had arrived, the *new* was at hand. Now the common, the old stood distinctly in contrast – in uncomfortable tension and inevitable conflict.

Yet, the contrast of the common with the Uncommon gets very ambiguous in Christian perspectives today. The tension and conflict with the old seem to be more the exception than the rule in current Christian practice.

If we are to genuinely receive (Jn.1:12, Gk. *lambano*, take in hand, embrace, listen to, trust and follow as a teacher) the Jesus of the incarnation and participate with him intimately in the new life, then we need the kind of complete critique of the prophets and the Baptist to help us make these distinctions. In a context like the United States where traditional American culture, a national spirit and civil religion are nearly inseparable from Christian values, from no other source can we obtain the penetrating critique necessary to expose any subtle roots of God’s people having become embedded in the common base. The working presence of their message represents the difference between the radical uncommon “*Thus says the Lord*” and the popular common voices of modern Christianity, individualized, privatized or homogenized in identity.

There is much in our current social and religious contexts which aligns to those contexts during the period of the prophets. Though the setup of our society is dissimilar to the ancient society, the processes serve a similar function and produce almost identical consequences, particularly for relationships, for example, inequitable relations. Consider

those treasured resources of wisdom, wealth and power. Don't these characterize the American way of life? Are these not the goals under which most of our activities would be classified? Implicit in this mind-set is the pursuit of the so-called American Dream which, while remains elusive to many, still captures the hearts of most Christians.

Of course, today we have more acceptable variations of these treasured resources. Wisdom translates into the pursuit of education, knowledge and information. Wealth is defined less narrowly and now also includes the ability to live a lifestyle of unmitigated consumption. And power is exercised less and less in terms of physical force and more in terms of economic, political and social controls, or influence to have one's way.

Don't we revere education and knowledge, and the accumulation of information, to the point of idolatry? Don't we defer to wealth and ascribe to it a quality of great significance? Doesn't the pursuit of these resources arouse survival and competitive reactions which eventually can develop into systems of inequality, a stratified context, the continued discrimination of the less fortunate? Aren't power relations (aside from physical force) at the heart of most human interaction today? Don't the institutions, structures, systems and processes of society often support these operations and, thus, have the effect of creating more inequity – intended or unintended – among its people? Internationally, isn't this the consequence which generates the hesitance, doubt and fear of globalization? Yet, don't we find legitimation, direct or indirect, for the pursuit of these resources (and thus whatever inequities result) within the so-called Christian perspectives normative to most Christians today?

I would think that the operation of these negative practices was much more obvious within the ancient society of the prophets. In the complex nature of a modern technological society merging with the global community, where knowledge and information are so significant and where consumption is a necessary by-product, the interrelated action of wisdom, wealth and power makes it much more difficult to identify their operation in our daily lives. Sadly, like many other major influences in our lives, their most insidious effect is upon our relationships.

This makes the message of God's prophets that much more important to us today. Though we may not be able to identify the full actions of these negative practices, or always understand their exact nature, we can certainly see the negative consequences produced by them – especially by examining our relationships. As disciples of Christ, of course, our most significant relationship is with him, thus needing to develop this relationship of following the Uncommon.

Grasping the Uncommon

When the Lord revealed of himself through Isaiah that “my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” that “as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is.55:8,9), we tend to think of God's *quantity* more than his *quality*. While this quantitative distinction is true, it is an inadequate distinction to focus on, which also conveniently allows us to stay away from the deeper issue.

God's thoughts and ways are not only greater (more) from a quantitative yardstick

but they are *different* using a qualitative standard. We not only have to learn to accept the quantitative gap of his thoughts and ways, more importantly we have to deal with his *qualitative difference*. This difference, his primary difference, is in conflict with the common.

It is this qualitative difference which is revealed fundamentally in the incarnation, not the quantitative aspects of God. As much of an enigma as it is to understand how the quantity of God can be contained in a human package, even more so is the paradox of his quality being vulnerably present in the human context. It is the deeper issue of Christ's *qualitative difference* which his followers can no longer circumvent.

When Jesus declared in the opening verse of this chapter (Lk.12:51), he didn't go around causing division as his goal; that wasn't his end purpose. But division is just as much an inevitable relational consequence as reconciliation is a relational outcome for those who *receive* him.

Jesus didn't present himself in a vacuum, as a display for any who wanted to come and view him. He didn't showcase his relationship with the Father nor exhibit the heart level and intimate ways of God for any and all to observe in a process of neutrality or value-free contact. To the contrary, the incarnation of God emerged conspicuously and perspicuously in the context and culture of the common in order to engage us in relationship. The incarnation is totally the relational act of the relational God engaged in relational work.

In vulnerably presenting God's qualitative difference, this relational act was a confrontation, an invasion, if you wish, but by no means was the incarnation merely a visit by God – absolutely not a peaceful visitation. The image of the babe in the manger doesn't capture the relational significance of the incarnation. In this sense, neither does some passive image or object on a cross.

In relational engagement, Jesus was initiating, ongoingly active and always extending the uncommon to the common. Nothing he did nor happened to him was by default. He never compromised the qualitative difference of the Uncommon to the common. His person and words were always an expression of God exercising his relational work. Yet, the division in Luke 12:51 (much less the sword in Mt.10:34) isn't compatible with Christians' conventional script about God's love. It doesn't have the fictional outcomes of many of our predispositions, nor the classical theme of "common love" reflected in our biases – not to mention talk of peace.

At the socio-cultural level, Christ's engagement didn't assimilate into a prevailing culture and become a part of it. He maintained his distinct qualitative difference (Jn.8:23). He also didn't merely coexist with competing cultures with a relative sense of *tolerance* nor with a shallow perception of *multiculturalism* – both of which are currently prescribed by the common (Jn.15:18,19; 17:14,16,19). By his active qualitatively different presence, Jesus caused confrontation of competing cultures and, therefore, conflict and division. That's the nature of *uncommon* in the context of *common* and contact with it.

The totality of the incarnation (which includes in particular the basic life and fundamental words of Jesus between the manger and the cross) is vital, as John said (Jn.1:14), for us to "see" (Gk. *theaomai*), meaning to behold, view attentively, to contemplate with acute interest in order to perceive it correctly and in detail. The

incarnation is not only a source of tension, conflict and division but it is a *critique of hope*. Without the function today of the complete incarnation, the common has no competition and those (which includes all Christians) within the common know of nothing more. Without it the *old* looks good enough.

Jesus Christ (his person, life and words) established the basis for *the culture of the uncommon* in our midst – a true counterculture, as it were. This was not a historical fiction shaped by tradition, nor the romanticized images of recent history. The 1960s - 70s were considered years of a countercultural revolution. But since its efforts were essentially lacking any basis for truth (not truth of existing situations but ideological truth), this movement had no infrastructure to guide it, develop it, contain it. Rather than a true counterculture, it was really more of a reactionary-culture because it depended on traditional culture to react to in order to formulate or emerge in ways different from the conventional.

This is not a problem for the uncommon. It neither depends on the common to define itself, nor does it have a need to react to the common to motivate its action. The fact bears repeating: by ontological definition and as a relational reality, the common is incompatible for relationship with the uncommon. Indeed, either is a contradiction to the other.

Living a Contradiction

The incarnation of God is not only a paradox, it is a necessary contradiction for us to embrace and live. The vulnerable presence of the holy God is a contradiction which we have the opportunity to be involved with and participate in. But, in a real sense, here is where the conceptual mystery ends and the hard reality begins.

Christ's life and words (including all his teachings) are not only a perspective and position in the minority but a worldview in conflict with all other worldviews. This makes following Jesus and the practice of the Christian life, by its nature in whatever context except the holy and eternal, essentially a *contradiction* of whatever else exists around it. Therefore, an authentic Christian lives a contradiction in the eyes of others – just as Christ did (cf. Jn.15:18; 7:7b).

The opportunity to be involved with and participate in God's life as presented intimately by Jesus instigates an involuntary clash between choices, wills, cultures, that is, categorical conflict between *old* and *new*. At the heart of every Christian's personal decision to be involved with and participate in God's life is the ongoing relational work of exercising *choice*. These choices, however, are not merely between Christ and Caesar (Mt.22:21), between God and money (Mt.6:24), nor even between freedom and some form of social bondage (though between slave and son/daughter is critical, as discussed earlier). The most significant juncture of our ongoing choices each of us faces is between the uncommon and the common, the holy and the secular.

Living this contradiction is relational work because it has more to do with living a relationship than a particular way of life. That is, it involves living in intimate relationship with the Uncommon, the person of the contradiction, not merely living an uncommon, contradictory life.

Jesus revealed the fundamental aspect of eternal life as relationship with God – intimately knowing him and the Father (Jn.17:3). Since Jesus shared himself vulnerably and intimately with us, the incarnation revealed the Father, who, what and how he is. Yet, this relational process is not just his relational work of sharing himself with us so we can know him and the Father. His relational work ongoingly provides the opportunity for us to be intimately involved with and personally participate in God’s life. In the reciprocal relational process we also have to actively share *in* his life in order to know him. This relationship, its process and this outcome, however, are only experienced on his terms, in his context. For us, that necessitates embracing the uncommon and entering the eternal now (i.e., focused beyond the temporal). This is the only relational context in which we can truly know him and the only process by which we can genuinely experience the holy and eternal God.

The necessity of this relational context is clearly established by Jesus in his farewell prayer for all his disciples. Within the context of the common and secular, he establishes the identity of his disciples as the same as his: “not of the world” (Jn.17:14,16). Yet, this was not mere doctrine, not merely propositional truth; this is relational fact (Jn.15:19). If this intimate relationship together is to be an experiential reality, his disciples will have to be undergoing change from the common and secular, specifically transformation, sanctification. When Jesus asks the Father to sanctify his disciples (17:17), the word for “sanctify” (Gk. *hagiazō*) means to cause to be holy, make holy; the fundamental idea of this word is separation from common or ordinary usage.

Following the Uncommon and living this contradiction today necessitates transformation beyond only the spiritual to include much more than spiritual things, encompassing all areas of life along with spiritual issues. The total person of God came in the incarnation and requires our total person for relationship. Christians need to apply the truth functionally that intimacy in our relationship with God is not possible between the uncommon and the common. There is no flexibility in this truth, no room for negotiation nor compromise. Furthermore, merely having truth in hand does not guarantee this transformation and relational outcome; and his word can’t be selectively utilized, nor inconsistently emphasized, applied and practiced. The truth is the Father’s word (Jn.17:17) – all his words in its entirety – relationally communicated directly with us (17:6,14a), intimately shared as his own person (the Truth, Jn.14:6) and vulnerably present without substitute (the Word, Jn.1:14). Transformation, sanctification, is the relational process of receiving (*lambano*, take hold of, embrace and follow) the Word and working with *him*, not his truths, and letting him free (redeem) us from the common and secular and change us to the uncommon and eternal. This is the relational process Jesus established as the only means to be authentically changed to the uncommon (Jn.17:19) and to live together as a contradiction in the world (17:21-23).

Living the Distinction

We need to recognize that changing to the uncommon is an ongoing tension and conflict we have with God. If we aren’t selective in applying his word nor putting God in a box, then this is the most problematic issue affecting intimacy with the holy God and

the growth and development of our relationship.

While change is not often welcomed into our life, change is exactly what the holy God person Jesus came for – to redeem us *from the old* and to transform us *to the new*. When we try to avoid these personal issues, then we essentially distance ourselves from his holy person and words and, in effect, don't welcome Jesus into our life. This can be done even while having activities with him and listening to his teachings (Lk.13:26), or while presenting a righteous or spiritual identity (Mk.8:15).

If we are going to “be careful” (*horao*, Mk.8:15), as opposed to living with our misperceptions and misconceptions, then we will need to honestly address with him the areas in our life to change in order to be freed from our current predispositions. That release may be experienced also by his comfort of a past relationship, his healing from a bad experience as well as his forgiveness and cleansing for sin. This is the relational work in which we need to be more rigorous.

But we also have to address more deeply and comprehensively the relational consequences of our perceptions in everyday life today, particularly in how we define ourselves and how we do relationships – issues which are basic to discipleship. Since none of us live in a vacuum – and Jesus doesn't want us to be separatists from the world (Jn.17:15,18) – we need to account for the broader contexts of our life in order to understand its influence, entanglement or control on our focus and perceptions, not only on life in general but in particular on our Christian life.

This influence develops our predispositions, which form our biases, mind-sets, worldviews. This affects our identity in how we define ourselves, how we see our place and function in the world and how we will do relationships with others, both in the world and in the church. For example, the filtering function this serves for us determines how we will see a person (like Jesus, or a race, ethnicity, class, gender, age or ability of a person), what we will hear from that person and how we will be involved with them.

If we assimilate into the common, what distinguishes us as Christ's followers? We should not be confused on this issue by Paul's example to “become all to all” (1 Cor.9:22). Paul seemed to have blended into cultures but he didn't become a part of those cultures – that didn't define him. His cultural involvement was a methodology in order to make connection with persons for the sake of mission (1 Cor.9:19,23; cf. Acts 17:16-34). While Paul didn't assimilate as his way of life, he was neither a separatist nor an exilist. His identity was distinctly rooted in Christ and thus intimately involved with others. This is the good news of the incarnation, yet its contradiction as well.

Assimilation into a common culture is an issue even with a democratic society like the United States. Despite general tendencies to assume the Christian character of American culture, even to anoint it with God's blessings, we should not have illusions about its membership in anything other than the common. Therefore, if we assimilate into anything other than the uncommon, what distinguishes us as anything other than *common* Christians, civil Christians, American Christians, Christian Americans? The hard reality is that if our identity can't significantly be distinguished from other identities in the common, then we are no longer functionally following the Uncommon.

Any common qualifiers to our Christian identity are lethal to the identity as his disciples. If at the heart level we aren't open to and involved with the Uncommon, we only want to follow a Christ of popular appearance, a Jesus shaped by the common.

Whatever “Jesus” we may be acknowledging and doing things for, even living in his name, it is not the Jesus of the incarnation. *Homogenized identities* do not distinguish his authentic followers. Just as a chemist would never mix a pure compound with an impure one and still expect to maintain its purity, it is absurd to assume we can combine elements of the uncommon and common, the holy and secular, the new and old, and still expect wholeness in our person and integrity in our practice.

Furthermore, coexistence is not the alternative. This requires the tolerance of relativity in the absence of truth or the detachment of a closed heart in the absence of love. Jesus had neither because he lacked neither. As he declared and demonstrated about the uncommon, there is no such thing as *benign coexistence*.

We need to understand what’s happening in all aspects of our life. Consequently, it is necessary for all discipleship as the new creation to grasp what living in the *old* means. Likewise, it is not sufficient for us to be practicing Christians without rigorously, comprehensively and deeply dealing with what’s involved in being and living *in* the world (common) while not becoming *of* the world, as Jesus urgently discussed with the Father (Jn.17).

Secularism, for example, has been increasingly a concern among Christians, and rightly so; but the concern should not be limited to secularism’s philosophical underpinnings nor should it be filtered by cultural biases, no matter how widespread within the Christian community. I think the urgent issue with secularism today is not so much keeping it out of the church and the Christian life. We can’t assume that our beliefs and practices have the integrity of holy, separated from the common and ordinary. We are accountable to urgently distinguish secularism already present in and influencing our Christian life and our churches.

The line of distinction between the sacred and secular is much more ambiguous today because Christian culture (our beliefs and practices) is less distinguishable from the competing cultures surrounding it. While our basic doctrinal beliefs may remain intact and distinct, what we actually value and practice are often indistinguishable from the surrounding context. Return again to the resources of wisdom (education), wealth (lifestyle) and power (ability and influence to have our terms). The pursuit of these resources has little distinction, if any, from those around us. How they influence our identity and determine how we define ourselves more from the outside-in by what we do and have are not distinctions of the uncommon, and how the Uncommon sees and defines us. How these processes subtly distance us from our heart and influence how we relate to others (thus redefining the primacy of relationships and restructuring our involvement in relationships to less than intimate) are not the distinctions of the Uncommon, both in the relations within the Godhead (the persons of the Trinity) and in God’s created design and purpose for life. Essentially, in all this it can be said that churches have been silent, supportive of or co-opted by the common cultural context in which it often functions as merely another social institution or voluntary association without much further distinction.

To authentically follow the Uncommon and live its contradiction with distinction amidst competing cultures, we need *the alternative culture* to provide us with the context and the process counter to the common. We need more than merely a system of beliefs to establish us, individually and corporately, as the disciples of Jesus Christ and the children of God. This alternative (counter) culture, I suggest, is what Jesus formulates and what

emerges from his narratives (including Acts 10 and Rev.2 and 3) and the rest of Scripture.

The Alternative Culture

In establishing *the culture of the uncommon*, Christ distinguished his followers from all others – not only as disciples but as *persons* and as a people. (Our study of discipleship is essentially defining this basic culture.)

I don't think the first disciples could have known what they were getting themselves into, could have realized exactly what they were following when Jesus called them. Yet, there was something about him, something convincing about him that evoked their response. Certainly, he was unique (e.g., teachers didn't usually initiate calling their disciples), but on the surface he didn't appear as radical as John the Baptist. So, what was that something about him?

This something seemed to have little to do with his quantitative difference. Though Jesus quantified the transcendent God, his miraculous deeds, for example, were not the greatest impact he had – impressive certainly but not often convincing. It wasn't the quantitative difference of God presented in the incarnation that makes Jesus the unique contradiction for us to embrace. That something about Jesus was his *qualitative difference*; this is what struck a chord in his first disciples and brought out their desire for *more* – a desire which, we will see, is a direct result of eternity implanted in our hearts.

When we accept Jesus as different yet still try to combine elements of our common with the Uncommon, we are only acknowledging his quantitative difference, not his qualitative difference. In addition, God is not only holy but transcendent. If we want the transcendent God, we have to go beyond the temporal. That is, not on some mystical journey of nebulous spirituality but to a level beyond what we can come up with in the common in order to be relationally involved with the Uncommon and transcendent, who has already presented himself to us objectively in the incarnation.

Eternal is also what transcendent is about. Eternal means lasting, never ending. We know God is eternal (Gen.21:33; Jer.10:10). The eternal God takes us beyond the temporal, gives us more than the common. He has a big picture plan which, the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us in those popular words, “God has made everything beautiful in its time” (Ecc.3:11). In the same breath he declares that “God has planted eternity in the human heart” (v.11, NLT). Eternity is the very substance of God which he transplanted in us.

In God's big picture plan, all the parts of it are wonderfully put together into this perfect *whole*. Though humans can't fully take in or imagine this *whole*, we can experience and enjoy the beauty of some of its parts because God has created us with the substance of this *whole* in us; he implanted his eternity-substance in our heart. Though our mind can't comprehend or imagine his big picture, our heart has definite understanding of it.

This understanding in our heart can be a burden or a blessing. It's a burden when it just brings out dissatisfaction and frustration with our life, as it did for the writer of Ecclesiastes. But such honest reflections on our life are also a blessing when it helps us

realize there is more in life to experience and enjoy. This is beyond merely an awareness; it is the deep desire of our heart for *more*. This *more* that our heart desires is the working of his eternity-substance in us. This is the *more* the first disciples desired. This “eternity stuff” is basic to our heart’s needs and desires. And we experience *wholeness* when we become involved in and a part of his perfect *whole*.

The common can only perceive the temporal – particularly in terms of time, space and quantity. The big picture of God, which includes the deeper dimensions of the incarnation, can’t be acknowledged in the temporal. Yet, we tend to want Christ and the Christian life in this mode. This puts God in a box and redefines faith to what we do as opposed to a relational response to the grace of the Uncommon.

Relationship with the uncommon and eternal God can only function in the context of the uncommon and the mode of the eternal. *Following the Uncommon involves living on this actual journey not only to eternity but also in eternity.* This is a journey with the eternal God in intimate relationship together in which he keeps expanding us *in* his life now as we journey *to* his life. The present part of our journey in which we are able to partake increasingly *in* God’s life now and to experience this intimate relationship with him is what the eternal God currently keeps expanding us in more and more until it “reaches eternity.” *Functionally, then, if we don’t live in this journey in eternity, our life doesn’t keep expanding in breadth and depth.*

Contrary to the subtle influences in our perceptions, the eternal God and his life vulnerably extended to us in the person Jesus is not about “time and quantity” but about “boundless depth and quality.” Anything that limits this depth and quality constrains who God is and essentially puts him in a box – which our assumptions, notions and lies accomplish. The depth and quality from eternity are what Jesus came to objectively present on our finite terms. But he also goes beyond our finite terms to take us to the next level of his eternal terms to connect us experientially with the intimate presence of the eternal God.

We may find ourselves in a similar position as the first disciples upon their engagement in discipleship. When we include the heart and add relational perspective, then we can start to better grasp “depth and quality” and act to embrace more and more of its relational significance. As we listen with our heart to Jesus tell us about eternal life (e.g., Mk.10:17-27), it increasingly comes into the *present*. As we embrace in our heart what he revealed about eternal life (Jn.17:3), we are brought “face-to-face” with God in the present as a lasting and satisfying experience of intimate relationship together. As Jesus goes on to define in his closing prayer for all his disciples, *knowing* the Father and him are not a matter of information and a system of beliefs but the ongoing deep intimate relationship of love, just as the Father and Jesus experience together (Jn.17:26).

The qualitative difference in the incarnation is totally relational. It was *from* the heart of the Father, *about* the intimately relational Father, revealed to us by his Son as an expression of their intimate and loving relationship, the substance of which is extended to us to have and experience together in his family – the relational progression. This qualitative difference is about the importance of heart and the primacy of intimate relationships. It is rooted in, objectively presented, vulnerably expressed and freely extended in the incarnation as *love* (*agape* primarily but also including *phileo*, affectionate love). That’s the difference unmatched by any other teacher, by any other

worldview. That's the fully satisfying, never-ending difference which is unequalled by any other alternative. Anything less co-opts the incarnation for the common.

Why is the qualitative difference of love the distinction of only Jesus' disciples, as he said (Jn.13:35)? Could love not distinguish other leaders or groups? Certainly, charity is an expression found throughout humanity; and love, in one form or another, is not limited to the Christian community. There is, however, a distinct quality of relationship that is unique to and characteristic of God – which is revealed and demonstrated in the relationships within the Godhead (between Father, Son and Spirit) – who created us with the design and purpose for intimate relationships, just as within the Godhead. The nature, depth and quality of these relationships identify none other than God and the God person Jesus openly revealed in objective flesh.

Since Christ not only taught but vulnerably lived this qualitative difference in functional terms (not only in his relationship with his Father but also with others), we can now operationalize this difference in our daily living. This necessitates formulating and making operational the culture of the uncommon (biblical culture) in our midst.

Culture of Distinction

Many would question or debate whether a biblical culture is indicated in Scripture. I can understand the concerns which may be related to such objection. The primary issue in this matter, however, is not a culture which separates us relationally from other people nor creates an elitist distinction with others. The issue of importance here is the culture which distinguishes us as God's people, as Christ's disciples, as his church. This is primarily about *what* we are in relation to God, and only secondarily in relation to others.

The Christian identity today is an odd mixture of practices and variations of belief. This lack of clarity is reflected by churches which are not distinguished in the church's unique identity but in their similarity to the surrounding context. This forms an ambiguous or shallow identity.

To be authentic followers of Christ and his authentic church is to be distinct and different – distinct in the truth and different in its culture. Historically, one has usually been emphasized over the other; among evangelicals today the former is emphasized more than the latter. But “distinct in the truth” and “different in its culture” are inseparable, not only in the incarnation but throughout the OT as witnessed in the prophets. Both define our identity by the holy God revealed in Jesus Christ.

We can't rely on propositional truth and doctrinal purity to distinguish us. This is not what Christ said distinguishes those who are his (Jn.13:35); to the contrary, he was unimpressed with the church in Ephesus – which was very active in church work, maintained the doctrinal purity of the church and suffered repercussions for Christ's name – because they failed to exercise (more so, had abandoned, “forsaken” Gk. *aphiemi*) the qualitative difference distinguishing his disciples (Rev.2:2-4).

Paul appears to focus primarily on truth and maintaining doctrinal purity in many of his letters. But we have to understand the situations he was addressing (competing belief systems) and not overlook his total context and the priority of relational work he

emphasized. He never separates truth from practice and what truth leads to (Titus 1:1). In his emphatic charge to Timothy, who was at the church in Ephesus helping to contend with false teachers in that situation, Paul gives balance to the task of doctrinal purity (see 1 Tim.6:11ff). “Take hold of eternal life” (v.12) uses the Greek word (*epilambanomai*) that slightly intensifies the word “to receive” (*lambano* Jesus in Jn.1:12). It means to take serious interest in, with concern and become involved in, that is, to experience it (intimate relationship with the Father and Christ) and not merely possess it (eternal life). When Paul included “Fight the good fight of faith” (v.12), he used the same word (*agonizomai*) Jesus used to “make every effort” (Lk.13:24). Paul wasn’t limiting his charge to Timothy to the situation at Ephesus and about spiritual warfare. As Jesus made imperative earlier, Paul primarily emphasized here the intense relational work necessary for the relationship of eternal life and the reciprocal relational response of faith. Paul charged Timothy not to compromise this relationship and its qualitative difference in his practice.

Given Christ’s indictment later of the church at Ephesus, we have to wonder if they didn’t learn completely from Timothy or if Timothy didn’t learn fully from Paul. Doctrinal purity and propositional truth are never sufficient to distinguish the qualitative difference of God in his people. It’s our relational practice, formulated and expressed as our culture, which distinguishes our identity. This culture must be rigorously addressed with the truth.

The identity revealed in the incarnation is often co-opted by the common culture prevailing around us that dilutes, distorts or effectively displaces the uncommon culture of God and his people. If we are to have a distinct and, therefore, significant presence in the world, then it has to be a holy presence. Without this holy, without the uncommon, we are functionally only common.

Scripture (especially the narratives of Jesus’ person and words) provides the alternative by defining its own culture; this is the core which provides the basis for the uncommon, the *new* in Christ – what he *saved us to*. Without this core of beliefs, values and practices, followers of Christ would have little understanding of what being a *new creation* functionally translates into for their daily lives and that also distinguishes them from their surrounding context. Without this culture we would not have an alternative to a prevailing culture, nor be able to deal with its influences on our lives.

Biblical culture, however, does not mean all Christians worship and pray in the same way, or practice the same things in all areas of life (particularly in secondary matters), nor that all Christians even agree on every minor issue. Biblical culture can be multicultural in form or expression; as we will discuss later, its make-up needs to be multicultural. At the same time, this biblical culture is monocultural in its basic core of beliefs, values and practices.

Identifying and exercising this cultural core is the task of discipleship. As I hope we will experience, this task involves theological work and even more relational work. As mentioned earlier, Scripture is not a support system for every culture. Culture is neither a neutral institution nor a system without sin; culture is also vested with a specific ideology which may not be compatible with biblical truths and practice. The integrity of our identity in “distinct truth” and “difference in practice” is fundamental to living out a biblical culture.

At the heart of biblical culture is the heart of God, who made us in his image as persons of heart; the importance of the total person from the inside first is no greater than in biblical culture. Revealed in the heart of God is his intimately relational nature. Whenever the presence of this God of heart is made vulnerable to us (as in the incarnation), the opportunity for intimate relational connection is available to us. When that unique connection is made – unique because of the contradiction of his initiative – we are touched by his qualitative difference and thus distinguished by having been *with him*.

When Moses expressed his complaint to God (Ex.33:12ff), he was feeling somewhat alone in the major task God called him to do. God responded to Moses' objection with the promise "My presence will go with you" (v.14). The relationship was the important matter for Moses and being together (vv.15,16). Amazingly, Moses also asked God the rhetorical question "What else will distinguish me if you aren't with me?" (v.16). Unlike common culture today, what defined Moses is not what he *did*, as great as it was. He was defined by who he was in his *being* with God, not his *doing*. Like Moses, what distinguishes all of us is God's presence – the intimate relationship between God and his people being together, openly sharing together. This is foundational for biblical culture, what it emphasizes and cultivates.

In the workings of the early church what distinguished Peter and John was not the prevailing characteristics of education and training. What distinguished them to the learned leaders of their day was that they "had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). It is this relationship which is at the heart of biblical culture and which is the most significant distinction reflecting the qualitative difference of God.

Christians need to understand, for example, whether it's our faith (focused on what we do or have) that distinguishes us, or the relational object of our faith, that is, God's intimate presence, being with Jesus. Making this relational distinction is the tension and issue involved in living *in* the world but not *of* the world. Our authentic identity as Christ's disciples and followers of the Uncommon is vitally dependent on biblical culture for both individual and corporate identity formation. Without this culture of distinction Christians and churches are highly susceptible to the subtle influences diminishing their qualitative difference and are severely hampered in their capacity to expose any masquerades (Gk. *metaschematizo*, changes in outward form or appearance but not in substance, cf. 2 Cor.11:13-15) substituting for this qualitative difference.

As Jesus told Peter, the gates of hell will not prevail against his church (Mt.16:18) in terms of its conflict with evil and with those against God. But Christians and churches are not immune from the prevailing influences of their surrounding context, as Peter demonstrated in the very next moment by his common bias in not permitting Jesus to die on the cross (Mt.16:21-23). As Peter learned (not without struggle) and grew (not without failure) relationally, the church today needs to grow relationally to be distinguished substantively and to be significant deeply. In terms of relationships, in a sense churches may not be in conflict with evil but in complicity with it. And here is where we need to get back to the heart of God, the intimate relational nature of life *with him* and together as his church – that is, to our first love – for us to be significant to him, and distinguished in the world.

Biblical culture comprehensively involves the function of relationships – the function of relationships uncommon to that which surrounds us. To practice this distinct

culture and to live in its difference *in* the world will cause conflict, or at least tension, with other prevailing cultures of our time and context. If this is genuinely undertaken, then the Christian church very likely will become a threat to that which prevails and to the status quo, not a function of them – no matter how morally correct they may appear. This is a constant tension observed during the earthly ministry of Jesus and the early church. And I think it would be accurate to say that when this tension is not present the distinctions of this biblical culture and its qualitative difference are not apparent either.

Uncommon Discipleship

Discipleship involves following the uncommon because the holy is what and who God is. Discipleship, by necessity then, has to be uncommon because the common is what we are; and discipleship is about God, not about us.

The contradiction of the Uncommon is its incompatibility with the common, and thus for any relationship with it, yet its vulnerable presence in the common context and our access for intimate relationship together. This relationship intimately together, however, is only on his terms; it's impossible to experience any other way. The ongoing experiential reality of this relationship develops only in following the Uncommon. In this relational process Christians constitute their identity in what and who they truly are as the new creation.

Following the Uncommon is distinctly *more* and qualitatively different from anything we are used to. Undertaking this life and engaging its process is a function only of relationship – the involvement of which ongoingly necessitates our redemption from the *old* and our transformation (sanctification) to the *new*. Consequently, any biblical theology of discipleship, along with redemption and sanctification, must include the complete critique of hope and the culture of distinction, both of which respectively are revealed in the incarnation in what Jesus saved us *from* and he saved us *to*.

From this foundation the following functional definition of discipleship can be operationalized.

Discipleship:

The **relational process** of following Jesus
in ongoing intimate relationship with him in **the relational progression**,
the involvement of which is only on **his terms**,
only within the **uncommon** context
and the **eternal** mode of God our Father,
as defined by **biblical culture**,
and the relationship of which, along with its intense **reciprocal relational work**,
and with the cooperative help of the Spirit,
is intimately experienced together corporately as **his family** –
family qualitatively distinguished from the world
while distinctly shared in love with others in the world.

Consider

The source of our perceptions of discipleship and its practice can be misleading if our beliefs and doctrine have biblical foundation. Yet, even foundationalism in evangelical theology has reduced the theological task and tended to separate it from a functional framework that formulates practice with relational significance to God and experiential significance for his people. Given the tension, conflicts and struggle in the pursuit of what is indeed authentic and truly significant, God simply presents his *self* (without substitute and nothing less) to us for relationship.

What is the difference between merely maintaining doctrinal purity and practicing biblical culture?

How does the incarnation get co-opted in the process of Christian practice, even with our best intentions?

Extremism today has negative connotations by which Christians would not want to be defined. To what extent do we need to take up the culture of the uncommon, and how rigorous do we need to be in its practice?

4 The Character of Discipleship

*People may think they are doing what is right,
but the Lord examines the heart.*

Prov.21:2, NLT

The heart reflects the person.

Prov. 27:19b, NLT

We have to consciously resist the tendency to practice discipleship as doing something – whether it is to serve, sacrifice or whatever *for* Christ but subtly not have relational involvement *with him*. The strength of this tendency is inversely proportional to the extent that we are being transformed from defining ourselves by what we do or have, as well as from how we do relationships based on that identity. This transformation involves not only the individual but involves the compounding influences surrounding that individual – which include the influences from church and Christian community.

If we have yet to grasp the significance of Jesus’ statement “I desire mercy [compassion], not sacrifice” (Mt.9:13, cf. Hos.6:6), our discipleship will lack relational significance to him. His desire (Gk. *thelo*) indicates not only actively willing something but also pressing on to action; it is the root for another term (*thelema*) which denotes God’s will, signifying his gracious disposition toward what pleases him and creates joy. The relational significance of responding to his desire or will is an issue we need to deal with ongoingly in order to help us distinguish what we are actually doing in our efforts to follow him.

Additionally, if we haven’t taken to heart Christ’s imperative that whoever serves him must “Follow me” (Jn.12:26), then our discipleship – no matter how much service rendered or sacrifice made – will not fulfill God’s will (*thelema*), please him and bring him joy. *Serving* placed before or without *following* fails to understand what is important to God and how he defines us.

In these two verses Jesus sharply brings our focus back to the importance of the *whole person* and the primacy of relationships. These underlie God’s word, his law, his commands, his created design and purpose for life and how the Word was with us. This new character of relationship is what Jesus instituted for his disciples in contradistinction to, for example, the prevailing norm of the Jewish model for rabbi-pupil relationship. Jesus did things differently because he is *different*. He didn’t wait for voluntary followers, he went out to recruit his own. He didn’t call them to acquire and master traditional modes of conduct, he established a deeper level of living in a new life. He wasn’t condescending to his disciples, he humbly served them. He didn’t remain above them in his superiority as divine Teacher, he vulnerably involved himself with them intimately in love as friends.

As mentioned earlier, in the incarnation (including between manger and cross) there is a distinct progression for his disciples – *the relational progression* from servant to friend to family member. This relational progression cannot be experienced without

relationship-specific connection and cannot develop without ongoing intimate relational involvement. Our discipleship has significance and distinction when it becomes the process of this relational progression.

The Importance of the Whole Person

Ironically, the Jesus that Christians often talk about is not the Jesus of the incarnation. In addition, the incarnation is discussed primarily as event more than as the *person* Jesus. We have to restore the authentic Jesus (free from our predispositions and biases) back into the incarnation. This may in fact necessitate putting his person functionally back in the incarnation – the person who has been often reduced (de-personed) and relegated to beliefs, values, ways, principles or propositions.

When we are predisposed to defining a *person* by what one does or has, then this routinely results in reducing Jesus down to his deeds and teachings. Since God is who he is, everything he does is done with heart, and everything he does toward us he does relationally. The incarnation reveals this about God beyond just objective information. This is the level of person that Jesus vulnerably presented in the incarnation – his *whole* person, no substitutes and nothing less.

Since we are created in God's image as persons of heart with his eternity-substance (Ecc.3:11), Jesus obviously knew it takes our total person to be involved in relationship with God: "in spirit and in truth," that is, the honesty of our heart (the inner being), as he told the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn.4:23,24). This is the level of person the Father sent, that Jesus presented, and that they expect in return for our relationship together. *To know him* only takes place at the heart level (not the information level of the mind) within the intimate relational context of God's design and purpose (not our ways of doing relationship). *To experience him* only happens when our heart receives the heart of God vulnerably extended to us in Jesus and is deeply touched by our hearts coming together intimately – not necessarily emotionally but relationally.

Just as demonstrated in his relationship with Peter, Jesus' person and words are always engaged in this relational work of pursuing his disciples' heart – a heart not often ready, often unwilling and never able by itself. As he said in Matthew 9:13, the importance of the person is not defined by what one does ("sacrifice") nor by what one has (or in this situation, by what one doesn't have, those considered less, like "the sick... sinners"). As he said in John 12:26, the work of service (*diakoneo*) done even for him is not as important as the person in intimate relationship with his person.

The importance of the total person functioning with heart is clearly distinguished by Jesus as he shared what is unacceptable to God for relationship, particularly in worship: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Mt.15:8). God examines the heart (Prov.21:2) because the heart reflects the person (Prov.27:19). We need to examine our *total person* also and, specifically in our discipleship, measure the distance our heart (our inner person) maintains in the relationship. **The distance our heart keeps in any relationship is the primary indicator of the quality of our involvement in that relationship.**

We have to realize, if we don't already, that relating to Christ merely in his

teachings and by what he did (especially on the cross), but not primarily to his person in a functioning relationship, is an easier way for us to relate to someone and to be involved in a relationship. Presenting essentially our outer person is clearly easier because our heart can keep distance (or be detached), and we thus won't be vulnerable – vulnerable not only to the other person (in this case God) but also to our own person.

Our heart is distracted, entangled or controlled in various ways, by various things from which we need to be freed, that is, redeemed. Redemptive change is an ongoing need basic to discipleship which none of us can circumvent nor take short cuts in.

The Priority of Redemption

In the relational progression of the incarnation, Paul underscores the priority of redemption: “when the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under [basically enslaved] law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights [adoption] of sons [and daughters]” (Gal.4:4,5).

The enslavement of the law is a familiar theme in Paul's theology of grace. Even more so, Jesus demonstrated the effective presence of enslavement (even in those who didn't realize their enslavement, e.g., see Jn.8:33; Lk.10:40-42) in his interactions and relationships; and he showed how this effectively distanced them from their heart and prevented intimate connection with God in his unwarranted initiative in the incarnation.

Used as a system of self-justification, the law failed to perform. It only frustrated and condemned its users; it was a false hope. Yet, God provided the law as a critique of hope to teach us the poverty of our condition in the *old* and to lead us to the *new* in Christ (Gal.3:19,24). God's mercy and grace in the progression of the incarnation leads to Christ's redemptive work which liberates us from the legal demands of the law and its oppressive effects of indicting us that “I don't measure up.”

Too often, however, we confine his redemptive work to spiritual dimensions and religious aspects of the law while not dealing also with the broader consequences of the *old* and the influences of the common. The sum of the old and common is only partly represented in this situation with the law. Since these areas essentially have a quantitative focus, they measure the person by what one has and does, that in effect cultivates legalistic practices; and they create a comparative measurement between persons and people which causes competition, secondary differentiation (in which *different means less*), stratification, exclusionary policies and systems of inequality. These influences and consequences are concretely observed, manifested and experienced in everyday life – both in the lives of individuals and in the collective lives of peoples (even within a church), cultures, nations, races or humanity in general.

The situation Paul addressed in Galatia involved the inequality that Jewish Christians (namely the Judaizers) imposed on Gentile Christians. Not merely a theological issue but primarily as a relational issue, Paul dealt with the need to be freed from the influences and consequences of such a system in order to be the new creation in Christ and the family of God (Gal.3:26-29). To limit this redemptive process to merely a spiritual interpretation and application is to deny the fullness of the redemptive life and what Christ *saves us to*.

Redemption (liberation) must not remain only a spiritual experience. That would leave the rest of our life enslaved in one way or another. What results may have the appearance or form of discipleship, spirituality and relationship with God but not the substance. Redemption can and also needs to be an emotional experience (e.g., in relation to our self-image), a mental experience (e.g., in relation to identity, ideology and our worldview), a physical experience (e.g., in terms of our personal lifestyles), an interpersonal experience (e.g., in our relationships with others, both past and present), an institutional, systemic and structural experience (e.g., in terms of our surrounding socio-cultural context). All of these go into forming our predispositions and biases, in addition to shaping our identity.

The influences, even control and domination, from these areas have profound consequences in our life – relational consequences with God and others. The poverty of the *old* ways and the bankruptcy of the *common* substitutes both need to be exposed and connected to Christ's relational work of redemption. Authentic discipleship properly practices this priority of redemption so that the *new life* indeed can emerge.

We cannot let naiveté or other persistent factors (like tolerance or lack of rigor, fear or even greed) keep us intentionally or inadvertently with attachment to values, practices, institutions, systems and structures of the old, the common. Contrary to frequent Christian practice, we should never assume the neutrality or the righteousness of any aspect of this order of life. As noted earlier, it is in conflict with the new order of life, the common and the uncommon are a contradiction to the other. Consequently, the need for redemption is a given; and its priority is revealed in the relational progression incarnated by Christ.

The strength of our interest in discipleship, however, is not sufficient to make redemption a priority; attachments, not our interests, determine our priorities – as Jesus exposed in those interested in following him (Lk.9:59-62).

The Primary Issue of Secondary Matter

The heart is vulnerable not only in relational interaction and to relational consequences – both of which Jesus experienced in the incarnation when he presented his heart to other persons. The heart is also susceptible to its surrounding context (as Jesus experienced in exposing his heart to the common, to sin), specifically in reducing the heart's importance in defining the basic person. The deemphasis of the heart – how we function as a person and what we present of our person to others in relationships – has been exceptionally widespread in modernity because of an underlying worldview (modernism) and its prevailing mind-set, which has also downgraded the primacy of relationships. Both reductions have had the relational consequence of diminished (or the absence of) intimacy, which will be discussed later.

For example, scientists today explain away the heart (the inner being) as an illusion. They try to quantify the experiences of the heart (like religious ecstasy) in order to explain these phenomena, for example, as nothing more than brain cell activity. Thus, their conclusion is that any inner phenomena, or spirituality, is an illusion.

As noted earlier, culture (functioning as cultural perceptual framework) acts like a

filter or lens of the eye which tells us what to pay attention to and what to ignore. Now Andrew Newburg, a neuroscientist, explains in his book *Why God Won't Go Away* that the brain actually perceives two realities.¹ In one, the self filters what we perceive as reality; and in the second, the self is set aside and the mind is broadened and more unified with a greater reality beyond self. Let's assume for the moment that the brain actually perceives these realities; this can be a burden or a blessing. It's a burden if we have the responsibility to produce this greater reality beyond self – which if produced would be problematic to distinguish from an illusion, the point of these so-called quantitative analyses. It also has the potential for blessing if it gets us beyond our predispositions and biases to truly open us to pursue the *more* of eternity-substance from the transcendent God who vulnerably revealed himself objectively in the incarnation. This blessing, however, would open us to qualitative reality, which is denied by quantitative suppositions. So, while god may not go away in our mind, there is really no place for the heart to receive the qualitative reality of the God person Jesus. Christians inadvertently can also labor in this dilemma.

This is a further dimension of materialism for which our discipleship must account. Such dependence on materialism (quantitative mode of reduction) in life does not account for qualitative phenomena. Yet, it seems apparent that these scientists and their suppositions are frustrated and dissatisfied by the presence of qualitative rumblings (such as longing and yearnings) of the heart and the deep desire for *more* than the material. Their tendency is to interpret these merely as a quantum jump (or leap), for which there is no explanation. This is the quandary when life becomes so quantitative: no room for mystery and quality of life.

Faith under the influence of reductionism is always problematic. Elements in life get detached, aspects of life become fragmented. The longings of the heart and the desire for more stemming from its eternity-substance, however, seek the quality of *wholeness* in life, the depths of which goes beneath the material person in its brain activity and the chemistry of such persons interacting. The breadth of this wholeness cannot be experienced in a quantitative box – no matter what neurophysiological associations are made with this experience – but is discovered by becoming part of the mystery of the Big Picture (not the Big Bang) and by intimate relationship with the One who designed and works it.

The writer of Ecclesiastes informs us that this One God “has made everything beautiful in its time” (Ecc.3:11). “In its time” (Heb. *et* comes from *ad* which means ever, forever, eternally) is better rendered “season” because of being part of a *whole* or larger context; compare “a season for everything” (3:1) in contrast to a moment of time detached or fragmented from the whole picture. God acts only by the eternal mode, so we can't think of “time” here in the temporal mode. He makes everything beautiful (not quantitatively) in his eternal mode, that is, he makes everything qualitatively *well* in his Big Picture.

God is always working (v.11, Heb. *asah*) the Big Picture. We can't understand this from merely a quantitative perspective. Even with his eternity-substance planted in

1. Andrew Newburg, *Why God Won't Go Away* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).

our heart, we cannot observe the depth and breadth of his qualitative work (as the rest of 3:11 informs us). Yet, the heart can have understanding of this qualitative difference and experience him in it – that is, our whole person not constrained in a quantitative box and engaging him with intimate relational work.

In the process of discipleship we can expect difficulty, for example, with our circumstances when we only think about them in the temporal mode and the small picture of time, space, situations and quantity. In our predispositions and biases compounded by modernism, we develop mind-sets (even form a worldview) influenced by quantitative suppositions which contract the universe, reduce life to physical matter (for scientists) and to secondary matters (for the rest of us), limit life to time, space, situations, circumstances and quantity.

The qualitative, however, is always beyond this, taking us to a deeper and broader level. God doesn't live in this quantitative box; he can't "survive" in it. God is beyond this; and the objective incarnation doesn't change nor reduce his qualitative difference but reveals it for us to grasp in our hearts, relationally embrace and intimately experience.

While the God many Christians experience inadvertently in a quantitative box may have an objective form of Christ, it doesn't have the qualitative substance of his incarnation. This is indeed problematic for discipleship, not only for *what* and *whom* we're following but also for *what* and *who* is following.

Quantitative emphases and priorities reduce the whole person away from the heart, redefining the total person without heart; they downgrade the primacy of relationships by reducing their original design and purpose to function now without intimacy. They essentially reduce time from the eternal to the temporal, effectively focus us on the situations and circumstances of the small picture without the Big Picture, while they prevail on us to live predominantly with quantity without quality. This all gets us directed (unintentionally and even intentionally) toward secondary matter.

The functional (not necessarily theological) reduction of the person without heart and of relationships without intimacy becomes **a quantitative preoccupation with secondary matter**. This is where the importance given to secondary matter is reflected in: (1) what we do and have (the predominant identity defining our self); (2) relationships that revolve around the quantity of activities, tasks or *doing* something together, length of time together or sharing space together but not much else – the dominant way we do relationships today; and, (3) where the main attention about churches is statistical – number of members, participants in activities, extent of church staff, amount of budget, number of decisions for Christ – reflecting the common way we conduct church today. All of these secondary areas can become functionally primary in our practice despite the presence of theology, beliefs, language and words espousing the heart and relationships. And the relational consequence is that these areas become substitutes for our whole person and what/who we present to others – substitutes for intimate connection and quality in our relationships and substitutes for the substantive truth and experiential reality of what we are in Christ together as his church.

Whenever this quantitative process of reduction (and its preoccupation with secondary matter) becomes primary in our practice, we become dominated, controlled, even enslaved by the quantitative. This is not how we would readily think of enslavement

and being a slave. That's because we tend to think of our condition or circumstances merely in a situational way, not relationally.

A person functioning in less than their whole person is not free to be their authentic *self*. That obviously affects how they live, particularly in relationships. This issue is forcefully addressed by Jesus as the difference experienced by a slave and by a son or daughter (Jn.8:31-35), and what Paul describes theologically (Rom.8:14-16). For the Christian to live by secondary matter is in effect to be a functional slave. This has relational consequences associated with a slave, not in terms of salvation but in the extent of relationship actually experienced with God as Father. A functioning son or daughter experiences intimacy with God, being a part of his family and belonging to him (Jn.8:35); a functioning slave (though son or daughter in name) cannot experience this relational reality as long as enslavement continues in practice.

When we examine this issue relationally, we have to look at the kind of connection made with God, which would increasingly point to the need to involve our heart and be accountable for it. *The distance we have from our heart directly determines in the same proportion the distance we have in our relationships.*

As noted earlier, this is Satan's goal for Christians: to distance us from our heart and to minimize (or eliminate) intimacy in our relationship with God.

The *qualitative* difference of God is beyond this quantitative box and secondary matter because it does the opposite of reductionism. It transforms (saves us to) us to *wholeness* of our person and the design and purpose of relationships as it redeems (saves us from) us from the reduction of our person and our relationships. Because it restores heart to our person and intimacy to our relationships, this wholeness satisfies the yearning need in our heart to be intimately connected with God, to be "a part of" others in the design and purpose of the Big Picture – his plan that takes us beyond self and establishes us as God our Father's, in his family.

When our discipleship gets focused on secondary matter like timing, situations and circumstances, our concerns become more about us than about God. Subtly, or inadvertently, we no longer distinguish between the quantitative and qualitative because we are unequivocally influenced by the former. The presence of this influence is exerted not only personally, relationally, culturally, systemically but most important endemically. This is the foremost characteristic of Satan's *counter-relational work* on Christians.

Knowing Our Roots

Reductionism is certainly not unique to modernity. Jesus dealt with the reductionist practices of Judaism. Paul continued the effort against Judaizers (Jewish Christians who required Gentile Christians to be circumcised), the dualism of early forms of Gnosticism (e.g., in the Colossian church), not to mention the dependence on reason of Stoicism in Athens (Acts 17:16ff). Yet, reductionism among Christians today seems to be more comprehensive in its influence and more vague in its effects because these reductions are not confronted.

These efforts of Jesus and Paul must not be omitted in discipleship. Whenever you have competing belief and value systems defining the importance of different parts of the person (mind vs. heart, outer-in vs. inner-out) and emphasizing different priorities

for relationships (secondary vs. primary) as well as how to do them (less vulnerable connection vs. intimacy), you have potentially a major problem.

This potential is already a reality in some aspects of the church, within parts of the Christian community and its various traditions and cultures. When these differences are not distinguished in our practice, we have compromise. This compromise is of no consequence to secondary matter, to the quantitative, the temporal, the common, the *old*. This compromise represents only loss for the most distinguished difference (the primary, the qualitative, the eternal, the uncommon, the *new*) which is no longer able to distinguish itself.

Maintaining ambiguity between the old order and the new, or failing to make this distinction, has serious consequences for our identity as followers of Christ, as noted earlier. Compromise is unavoidable and has insidious effects. What may appear minor has serious relational consequences.

When Christian faith and practice, for example, are based primarily on tradition and/or popular prevailing views, we will find inconsistencies and conflicts with biblical truth and teachings, particularly with Jesus' person and words. Under such conditions the *image* of discipleship is not usually consistent with the biblical reality; this includes many of our contemporary perceptions of discipleship lacking in qualitative substance. Understanding this disparity with biblical reality is helpful for establishing the character of our discipleship in the authentic qualitative difference of Christ

When conditions of ambiguity or the absence of sufficient distinction between old and new exist, any solutions or alternatives attempted to give form or semblance to the new is problematic. For example, the subtle preoccupation in our life with quantity affects us the most by emphasizing external form, appearance or image over the substance, quality or worth underlying these forms. Implicit in this is the hope that this will be enough to get by, even without its substance or quality. Then, it follows, that these forms of our practice often become *ends* in themselves, not *means* for following the actual person of Jesus and for authentic intimate relationship with him. Such practices basically only render to us substitutes for the real thing – no matter how real their appearance may be. Essentially, these are the quantitative efforts to simulate the qualitative difference of God. And they reveal a fundamental illusion in the Christian context, the workings of which need to be exposed, understood and dealt with accordingly.

This discrepancy between form and substance, appearance and reality, fact and fiction can certainly be attributed to a naive, uncritical or persistent involvement with values, beliefs, processes, institutions, systems and structures which have roots in the common, the old order of life. Discrepancy in our established ways of doing things in the Christian life, however, is most significantly influenced by the greatest advocate of the common, the temporal, the quantitative.

Satan's presence in the Christian context is engaged in counter-relational work simply by emphasizing the prevailing common and temporal aspects of our surrounding context, and by shifting our focus onto quantitative aspects which – often unknowingly but effectively – distance us from our heart and interfere (directly or indirectly) with our relational connections with God. He accomplishes his goal often with believable substitutes and unassuming lies which, on their appearance, seem right and righteous.

That seems to make his counter-relational work formidable to expose and deal with. There is truth to that which we should never underestimate.

While, on the one hand, that may be true of Satan's work, he cannot accomplish his goal among Christians if we understand *how* he works in the Christian context and if we practice the vital distinction between how he works with *how* we live.

Paul provides us with this understanding of *how* Satan works in the Christian context (see 2 Cor.11:13-15). Satan does his counter-relational work more covertly than the overt ways he is usually considered and depicted doing. It's covert not in the sense of being hidden from view but in terms of not being distinguished from the real thing – a consequence of non-distinction between the quantitative and the qualitative.

By masquerading in the Christian context as “an angel of light” along with his servants masquerading as “servants of righteousness” (11:14,15), we can understand *how* Satan works and its vital significance for *how* we engage in discipleship. The term for masquerade (Gk. *metaschematizo*) involves changes of outward form or appearance but not of substance. Satan and his servants can take on a spiritually correct, theologically orthodox or popularly-Christian outward appearance as light and righteousness but not change their substance. In other words, they can essentially *look good* but not *be good*.

Metaschematizo is the quantitative process of outward (outer-in) change which is in distinct contrast (but with likely outward semblance) to the qualitative process of transformation (inner-out) of one's inner or total person. The qualitative difference that results from transformation (Gk. *metamorphoo*, e.g., in Rom.12:2) involves a change of substance as well as form. Since *metamorphoo* and *metaschematizo* may have the same appearance, only the heart can make this fundamental distinction and reveal the presence or absence of the qualitative substance significant to God. That's why he examines our heart, not what we're doing (Prov.21:2). It is the heart, not what we do or have, that defines the person and determines *what* we are (Prov.27:19b).

When the Lord called his people to change (repent) and return to him, he wanted them only to come with their hearts (Joel 2:12). “Don't tear your clothing . . . instead tear your hearts” (v.13, NLT). This is the authentic character of repentance; it is also the only character of transformation (*metamorphoo*). Tearing one's clothes may look like repentance, as outward change may appear like transformation. But the Lord looks at the heart because that is the only place *metamorphoo* authentically occurs.

Metamorphoo (change of substance) obviously reflects the new creation in Christ and the transforming work (sanctification) of the Spirit. Its distinction with *metaschematizo* (only quantitative changes), therefore, is critical for authenticity of our person, our relationship with God, our discipleship of Jesus Christ, of being his family, the church. *Metaschematizo*, at best, can only be an inviting substitute for *metamorphoo*, yet it has become a prevailing Christian practice. This is a defining issue essential to our Christian roots and must be dealt with at every level of the Christian community.

Contrary to dominant perceptions among Christians, Satan doesn't have to get us doing something wrong – though always an issue – as long as he can get us to think we're doing something right. The insidious way he does that is merely to emphasize the quantitative changes of outer-in without the inner-out changes of substance. The ingenious way he accomplishes this is to emphasize, for example, merely *doing something*. He doesn't care how much we worship God, as long as it's only with our lips

(Mt.15:8). He doesn't care how much we serve Christ, as long as the focus is only on the work and not the relationship (Jn.12:26; Lk.10:41,42). He will reinforce all the right Christian forms, behaviors, vocabulary, beliefs as long as it's only *doing something* and not an inner-out expression of our heart in intimate relational connection with God.

In addition, Satan influences us with lies, being the father and author of lies (Jn.8:44). Lies are "his native language" (Gk. *ek idios*, out of one's own, denotes inner property). Lies, for example, to get us to try to be a "better Christian" by *doing something* more rather than giving priority to our relationships and our *persons*; lies with a quantitative twist (spin) that make us feel we don't measure up to God's expectations, despite the appearance of grace. Satan cultivates and promotes these lies as substitutes for our transformation (*metamorphoo*). As long as we concentrate on secondary matters, we will primarily be concerned with outward changes (*metaschematizo*). Satan encourages this type of "Christian" change because that would essentially in principle get us into masquerades also, unintentionally or not. Transformative redemptive change only takes place on the basis of truth in the heart. And the truth cannot emerge from a lie.

Operating as outwardly-correct forms of light and righteousness, Satan and his crew direct all quantitative changes (*metaschematizo*) in our midst as if they were one of us. We have no sense of what is only *masquerade* as long as we are distant or detached functionally from our heart in daily practice. We have nothing to distinguish this for us. Not even doctrinal purity functioning on the informational level informs us of the difference between *metaschematizo* and *metamorphoo* and the presence of masquerade. Even the Spirit's presence to help us is rendered inactive because he functions relationally on the heart level, not for information or for *doing something* but for relational work. That's why Jesus warned us in the metaphor of building a house (Lk.6:47-49). Two houses may be built exactly alike but their underpinning is what distinguishes them. Only the practices rooted in his person and words will have the qualitative substance to emerge as real, authentic.

Uncovering Our Roots

Determining these roots is certainly problematic when Satan's implicit influence occupies us, entangles or enslaves us in patterns of living which have only the appearance of being righteous (as opposed to overtly sinful). We are all susceptible to presenting ourselves in some amplified way. A quantitative focus encourages us to take on an identity which often doesn't have high fidelity to our inner person. We even essentially take on a role, probably unintentionally acting out an identity different (to whatever degree) than the honesty of our heart – at times maybe putting on a false identity. This process of acting out a different identity is the meaning of the term "hypocrisy" (Gk. *hypokrisis*) which Jesus disclosed to his disciples as "the yeast of the Pharisees" to avoid practicing in their lives (Lk.12:1).

Elsewhere in relation to hypocrisy, Jesus told his disciples to "watch out" (Gk. *blepo*), that is, essentially be aware of its presence, and to "be careful" (Gk. *horao*), that is, recognize its significance and understand its true nature (Mk.8:15), and to "be on guard" (Gk. *prosecho*), not passively, but pay attention, devote and apply yourself to this

issue (Mt.16:6). This yeast of the Pharisees should not be lost to us today. Functionally this yeast focuses on appearances (e.g., how we present ourselves) and, therefore, emphasizes secondary matters (e.g., what we're doing), which Jesus earlier explained and exposed (see Mk.7:1-23). Masquerade underlies the hypocrisy of the Pharisees; their hypocrisy was "the appearance of right," not the substance of it.

Masquerading and hypocrisy may seem like strong terms to describe a lot of Christian practices, especially if done sincerely or with good intentions. Yet, these biblical disclosures are not used to indict us but to help us understand (a critique of hope) when we are substituting for or settling for less than the qualitative difference Jesus makes available to us. The quantitative emphases of Satan's counter-relational work, especially his lies, directly impact the qualitative substance of the relational work Jesus defines for us. And the key indicator of Satan's influence or Jesus' qualitative difference – the defining issue for our roots – is the distance we have from our heart and the extent of intimate connection with God.

When Jesus exposed the church at Ephesus, he acknowledged all their quantitative success, even maintaining doctrinal purity (Rev.2:1-7). But when he told them they had forsaken their first love, the masquerade was over. "Forsaken" (Gk. *aphiemi*) means to forsake, abandon persons, to leave, let go from oneself or let alone. It's the same word Jesus used in his promise not to leave us as orphans (Jn.14:18). This strongly implies not paying attention to the *person* and relationships – relational actions. They worked hard *for* God but the relational process got lost in the effort. And even doctrinal purity in itself is not sufficient to prevent this. This relational consequence results from practices which lack heart and intimacy in relationships. That's what happens when a quantitative approach (with its focus on secondary matter) supersedes the qualitative difference of God.

This is the reductionism of Satan's counter-relational work to which we are ongoingly subjected. His efforts, and those related (directly or indirectly), redefine the person with increasing distance from the heart and re-prioritize relationships with decreasing intimacy, thus encourage relationships on one's own self-serving terms. This is illustrated more overtly in biblical narratives of Satan's temptations (relational tests).

Briefly, the temptations of Jesus (see Lk.4:1-13) represent summary tests for all persons with a relationship with Christ and how Satan will try to interfere in that relationship. The importance of the heart in the *whole* person and its significance in our relationship with God are strongly brought out here in what are basic relational tests.

In the first test (v.3), Satan's quantitative emphasis is apparent in what he tried to get Jesus to focus on. Ostensibly, it may seem merely like food and the situation of Jesus' hunger (cf. Mt.4:2,3). It may also seem like a test of his deity ("if you are the Son of God . . ."); certainly, Satan already knew that. Satan is trying to get Jesus to see his person in a certain way. That way is exposed by Jesus in his response: "a person [Gk. *anthropos*, man or woman] does not live on bread alone" (Lk.4:4).

Since we tend to look at this statement apart from its context, we usually interpret Jesus' words merely as the spiritual aspect of life being more important than the physical. That would be too simplistic and insufficient to meet the challenge of Satan's test. Jesus was not dividing life or the *person* into different aspects, with the spiritual at the top of the list. Yet, that in fact was exactly how Satan was trying to get Jesus to see his person

and function (the power of a miracle here, notwithstanding). Satan was trying to actually reduce Jesus' person to only one part of him because he knew the relational consequence this would have.

Satan cultivates this reductionism with the lie: *the need and importance to see ourselves and, therefore, to define our **person** by what we **do** and **have***. This process becomes a clear quantitative approach to life with a focus on secondary matter. This quantitative occupation and its relational consequence emerge in the second relational test (Lk.4:5-7).

Satan dangled more status, privilege, power, possessions, whatever, by which to better define the person based on quantitative criteria. Modern scenarios of this test would involve areas of education, vocation, security or having certain relationships. But his reduction and the pursuit of secondary matter comes with a cost that in some way compromises our integrity and beliefs and has a relational consequence of less intimacy with God. This compromise and relational consequence were overtly presented by Satan: "if you worship me" (4:7).

If the compromise and relational consequence of this reduction and pursuit of secondary matter are not as clear for us today, it's because Satan tweaks some truths with another major lie: *to have any of these things will make me a better person, or enable me to do more (e.g., even to better serve God or others), or give me the most satisfaction and fulfillment*. Here we see the genius of Satan to blur the distinction between truth and lie; and he can get away with this when we don't distinguish between the qualitative and quantitative.

Jesus countered the second relational test with words (4:8) which we either quantitatively perceive with less significance or often take for granted with their familiarity. Obviously, we would worship God over Satan, but this decision is not always that clear. Of course, we would serve God instead of Satan, that is, if this choice were always straightforward in our situations and circumstances. When Jesus declared "worship" and "serve" in his response, he wants us to focus relationally on the context and ongoing process these terms provide. "Worship" and "serve" are not about *doing something* before or for God. Jesus is exercising relational work here to negate Satan's counter-relational work.

Quantitative practices invariably create a shift in relationships to an increasing self-focus, self-interest, self-serving involvement. When the qualitative difference of God (in his heart and intimately relational nature) becomes secondary in our practice, we increasingly do relationships on our terms. This is the issue which emerges in Jesus' third relational test (4:9-12).

The order of these tests in Luke (different in Matthew's account) takes on added significance because it reveals a progression in Satan's counter-relational work and the impact of reductionism. Since, at this stage, Satan hasn't been able to distance or distract Jesus from relationship with the Father, he seeks to disrupt directly how that relationship functions. The dramatics of this scene should not detract from the important relational work going on here (vv.10,11). He begins by challenging Jesus to claim a promise from the Father. His challenge, however, is not about building trust and taking God at his word. We have to focus deeply on relationship with God and what Satan is trying to do to it.

Jesus counters Satan with the response: “don’t put God to the test” (v.12, Gk. *ekpeirazo*, test to the limits, see how far it can go). How so? Sometimes the dynamics in relationships get complicated or confusing. God certainly wants to fulfill his promises to us; yet, we must not think of this in a quantitative box because this reduction imposes a shift on the relationship. We always need to keep in focus that God fulfills his promises *on his terms*. If Jesus tried to evoke his Father’s promise in the manner Satan suggested, then he would be determining the relationship on his own terms. This is the real relational test Jesus refused to do and the ongoing appealing temptation Satan presents to all of us: *to test the limits of God and how much we can control the relationship on our terms, not his*. The false assumption here, of course, is that the relationship is negotiable and that God accepts terms for it other than his own.

The effectiveness of Satan’s appealing quantitative temptations is epitomized in his reductionism with Eve (and Adam). He redefined her person by appealing to her mind with knowledge (Gen.3:5), thus giving her a quantitative focus on secondary matter (3:6) that led to her pursuit to be a quantitatively better person and to her attempt to have relationship with God on her terms. His counter-relational work began with them, extended to Jesus and continues with us today.

When the primary and secondary matter are reversed, this shift is not readily apparent because the external presence of the primary is not lost. In many situations, its external presence is amplified in quantitative terms. But, essentially the primary is only given lip service. It becomes like window dressing for our main pursuits and what prevails in our lives. We need to uncover our roots in this kind of climate and to restore them to their qualitative condition.

Discipleship must always include dealing with its surrounding context, for example, with issues of secularism. But the contending aspects of this effort go deeper than the philosophical issues and moral cultural war many Christians have engaged in. We have to shift to the relational implications and consequences affecting the quality of life, both within the church as well as within the world. In making this shift, what emerges, I suggest, is that our most urgent conflict with evil today is inadvertent church (Christians and the Christian context) complicity with evil. That is, complicity with the quantitative emphases of Satan, reinforcing essentially outward change (*metaschematizo*), which cultivate lies he promotes to distance us from our heart and minimize our intimacy with God.

The relational consequence of all this in the Christian context is that we experience more fear and dissatisfaction than the peace of *wholeness* and well-being, loneliness instead of intimate relational connection, self-interest instead of *agape* love. Self-interest today is disguised and promoted by individualism and privatization of faith – products of modernism and a false sense of freedom and self-determination. In these euphemisms for self-interest, it’s not the related postmodern issue of relativity which is most urgent – though relativity is certainly important regarding truth – but the relational issue which keeps us self-centered, relationally distant and preoccupied with pursuits in a competitive climate where we must all contend for ourselves. This issue is about relationships, how we do them because of the quantitative way we define ourselves, and how we end up doing church. This is about the shift from the qualitative difference of God which distinguishes those who are his. This is the most pressing issue present in the

church, and what is most urgent for us to deal with together with his Spirit. It's the defining issue for our roots – to uncover and restore them.

The Primacy of Intimate Relationships

Jesus certainly radicalized discipleship by what he defined for his adherents in contrast to all other teacher-disciple relationships of that era. He further radicalized the interpretation of the law (to be discussed in Chapter 6) and the practices of the religious community. He was perceived as a radical because he essentially was a radical. Yet, those quantitative-based perceptions did not correctly perceive how qualitatively radical Jesus was. And most Christians do not perceive Jesus as radical either way.

The character of discipleship needs to restore this perception and become radical. But what makes discipleship radical is not, for example, a conflict social ideology, a liberation political agenda, a countercultural lifestyle, or even extreme spiritual disciplines. Neither does methodology make it radical. What makes it radical is getting to the roots of the incarnation and following the vulnerable *person* of Jesus. This gets to the very inner core (the heart) of the matter, not secondary matter but primary: the heart of God and my heart in intimate relationship. This is what makes discipleship qualitatively radical and therefore different. It is a function only of this intimate relationship.

Too often we come to Jesus like the rich young guy (review Mk.10:17-23). The guy made two critical errors for relationship with God. Because he reduced his person by defining himself to what he did (observing the commandments, v.20) and had (wealth, v.22), he only saw Christ in a quantitative way as a teacher for information. He came to learn how to do something (v.17) only as a learner and not as an adherent for intimate relationship – his first critical error, which Jesus tried to correct in v.21. Since he didn't realize how controlled he was by this quantitative focus, he couldn't function as a son while in enslavement. Only a functioning son could inherit (experience) eternal life (knowing God in intimate relationship, Jn.17:3), not a functional slave – his second critical error.

Too often we come to Christ for information to learn to do something, not for relationship; and if we also come for relationship, too often it's not for intimate relationship as an adherent but on our terms. Even when Christians want more intimacy with God, we often don't understand that the experience now of this *more* of eternal life is not available in functional enslavement. As long as we are not actively functioning as a son or daughter with the Father, we are functioning with relational distance to the Father which puts us effectively in a position as a slave, not a family member.

We may question how critical this focus on the Father is, or whether it matters that much, as long as we have an active relationship with Christ. This points to another reductionist view taken by many Christians in their approach to Christ, that is, relate to him by what he had (teachings) and did (especially on the cross). When we relate to Christ from a quantitative perspective (like the rich young guy), our predominant image of Christ is associated with the cross. Not necessarily in crucifix form, but in our beliefs and practice the focal point of Jesus becomes the cross. His purpose in coming is stated

basically as “to die on the cross for our sins”; that’s essentially why our perceptions frequently jump from the manger to the cross, thus circumventing the roots of the incarnation. But this is only a quantitative view of Jesus – albeit an important objective fact and a necessary act that had to be quantified.

When the cross becomes the dominant matter of the incarnation, then we fail to understand the qualitative purpose of the cross. We may understand a quantitative purpose involving our sin. Yet, as usually results in most quantitative emphases, the cross then becomes more this quantitative *end* rather than the qualitative *means* it serves. The full truth of the incarnation, however, is that Jesus came not only to *save us from* but also to *save us to*. Yet, he didn’t save us to some new quantity; this transformation (*metamorphoo*) to a new creation is completely for relationship.

Christ came to bring us to his Father, not to lead us to the cross. This was his primary purpose and function (Jn.17:4,6,26), and the cross serves as the main means to the Father (Jn.14:6). **The cross serves the Father.** The incarnation’s revelation of the heart of God and its purpose to bring us to the Father for intimate relationships with him reflect the qualitative difference (substance) of God which a quantitative perspective of Jesus focused predominantly on the cross does not adequately bring out or connect us to. Consequently, in a quantitative approach the cross (as an *end* to save us from) essentially results in serving us. In the qualitative difference of God, the cross (as a *means*) only serves the Father. We miss or minimize this about Jesus when we don’t grasp the roots of the incarnation between the manger and the cross.

At the roots of the incarnation, Jesus’ person and words cultivate in his disciples the basis to *think relationally*, the means to *act relationally* and the substance to *be relational*. That’s completely how God is (in the flesh or transcendent), how the Son is with the Father, and how God created us and what he created us for.

From the beginning man wasn’t created for *doing something*, though he had a function to work (Gen.2:15). He had a qualitatively different function which was relational (2:18). This creation narrative is usually rendered “to be alone” but the Hebrew can also be rendered “to be apart.” This gives a greater sense of relationship and not being connected to someone else. For Adam it was not just the secondary matter of having no one to share space with, no one to keep company or do things with. “To be apart” is not just situational but relational – about relationship fundamental to human make-up, function and order of life. I thus suggest that this rendering is more reflective of the dynamic process of relationship in God’s created design and purpose.

The Father’s created design and purpose is what Jesus came to restore us to – both with God and with others. Restoration of this function is basic to discipleship and underlies all a disciple lives. The character of authentic discipleship is rooted in heart (the heart of God) and relationship (intimate relationship with God). Without these roots, our person functions with a distant heart and our relationships diminish in intimacy, even with the semblance of form actively present. If we talk about relationship from a quantitative approach – even if the talk is about intimate relationship – we are not going to deal with depth of connections with the heart (the definition of intimacy) but rather substitutes and that which is less than the qualitative difference Christ brought to us.

The issue of the primacy of relationships is critical for us to address in our everyday practice with more honesty and depth. “Making rigorous effort” (*agonizomai*,

as Jesus and Paul said) in this relational work is particularly critical today when our surrounding influences have either avoided, denied or revised the primacy and quality of relationships. For example, relationships suffer directly in proportion to the primacy given to wealth, knowledge and power – and to the preoccupation with their pursuit of work, education and other means of influence, privilege and prestige.

The absolute primacy of relationship in following Christ is demonstrated by Jesus over other priorities in discipleship which can easily serve as substitutes for relationship or distract us from directly functioning in the relationship. Three significant situations, noted earlier, were used by Jesus to establish our top priority. In the first situation Martha chose to serve with hospitality *for* Jesus, while Mary chose to be *with him* as a disciple (Lk.10:38-42). The second situation at a reception raised a conflict of religious practices; the norm was to exercise spiritual disciplines like fasting and prayer, but Jesus and his disciples partied together instead (Lk.5:33-39). Lastly, Jesus was intimately engaged by being anointed with expensive perfume, which some disciples strongly felt should have been sold instead and the money given to the poor (Mt.26:6-13).

Serving Jesus in some way (even though hospitality is not an option), exercising spiritual disciplines (whatever the norm may be today), mission to the needy are all important priorities for discipleship. Yet, in the above situations they minimized or even prevented a deeper and more direct involvement with Jesus. *Doing something* became more important than *being with him*. Misplaced priorities or distorted perspectives can confuse the issue for us. Even positive alternatives and other important priorities will prevent this relational connection when they are improperly practiced.

These situations demonstrate, respectively, that Jesus wants his followers first and foremost: (1) to *listen* to him and to share intimately together, (2) to celebrate new life with him and (3) to appreciate his person and be free in our adoration of God. Jesus doesn't want anything (even other important priorities) to get in the way of more intimate relationship with him because nothing is more important to him than our relationship. This is the relational imperative – its primacy and priority. And the character of this relationship extends out to other relationships.

Discipleship is all about following the heart of Jesus in intimate relationship, thus the heart of the Father and intimate relationship with him together in his family. Without this character of heart and intimate relationship, our discipleship has no significance to God. It is not authentic (Gk. *alethes*) because it does not relationally engage the Truth (Jn.14:6). Though it may have the outward appearance, there is no substance behind it to back it up, no inner basis to make it stand up. The qualitative difference of intimate relationship has no substitute, and God settles for nothing less. Radical discipleship does not either.

Living With Inequality

When the roots of the incarnation are effectively avoided or inadvertently revised, there is no qualitative sense of the incarnation's relational progression from servant to friend to family member. Without this, Christian living has no authentic experiential reality to these relational truths. A quantitative approach usually concentrates on the

functions of servant, and if any further, then on secondary matter of the others. Discipleship labors in this quantitative box and suffers relational consequences (individual and corporate) instead of this relational progression.

If we want to get beyond secondary matter, substitutes and settling for less and truly move toward the *more* of the eternity-substance God planted in us, we have to shift the focus to the qualitative – from the temporal mode of the common to the eternal mode of the uncommon. This shift specifically addresses in our practice how we define ourselves, how we then do relationships and end up doing church.

—Unless *what* we do emerges from *who* we are, then what we *do* will define who we *are*

—Unless qualitative *being* precedes quantitative *doing* in the Christian life, our life will always live faster than (move ahead of) his grace.

The quantitative always uses an outer-in approach while the qualitative always involves an inner-out process.

We gain our basic perspective of what this shift to the qualitative involves by reviewing the underlying reason for the incarnation: John 3:16,17. If we use these familiar, but often oversimplified, verses as our starting point, we first have to appreciate the reality of the inequality present here. God, the creator of all life (quantitative and qualitative) extends himself to us, his creation. In a quantitative framework, we can say he reaches down from the upper stratum of life to a lower stratum of life, but from a qualitatively different context (holy or uncommon) in a qualitatively different process (eternal and relational). In this most basic system of inequality between creator and creature, God initiates loving action downward to bring us together *with him*. His desire is not only for each of us individually but also to be reconciled with the whole of his creation (Col.1:20). This loving action extends further by breaking into human systems of inequality in order to reconcile people to each other (Eph.2:14-18).

It is important for us to understand the quantitative implications of this qualitative process in both our relationship with God and our relations with others. Systems of inequality stratify people. In this process a person or a group of persons is subordinated by another. That subordination evolves from either one of two conditions. In one, subordination is a natural result of the inequality inherent in the nature of the persons involved, as the inherent inequality between God and humanity. Or, in the second, subordination is an unnatural result produced by force of a person or group upon another; although historically, so-called natural inequality between humans has been rationalized by false biological views ascribing inherent subhuman traits to groups of people. Whatever the quantitative reductionism in the second condition, the subordination is unnatural because it is an inequality between persons who are basically and inherently equal.

Certainly, this equality cannot be quantitatively based. Any quantitative comparisons will yield differences. The problematic issue in this comparative process is defining *differences as less*. In human relations any sense of put-down or variation of condemnation of another's differences subordinates that person in a stratified order or

system. Some form of condemning is necessary to initially justify the inequality or in order to maintain it. The relational consequence is that the dominant feel superior and secure while the subordinate feel inferior and condemned.

God's nature and character do not function like this. Unlike humans who use condemnation as the rationale to exert influence and power over others, God judges us for the positive purpose of reconciliation (the critique of hope). Jesus came for this relational outcome. In spite of God's obvious position and power, as well as judgment, he didn't come to perpetuate or to expand the quantitative and qualitative differences between us. In spite of our imperfections, shortcomings and sins, he didn't come to put us down or to condemn us to those differences. Rather, he came in the qualitative difference of his love to free us *from* the bondage of our sinful humanity, the enslavement to the quantitative and from the oppression of systems of unnatural inequality – furthermore, to transform us *to* the qualitative new life.

Yet, our common perceptions of John 3:16 are not adequate to embrace his incarnation. To receive him and the qualitative difference of his love requires first the acknowledgment, affirmation and relational response to the natural inequality of his inherent nature with our inherent difference (which in truth is *less*). In other words, this defines God's action totally in the qualitative terms of *grace*: the favor (in this case, unwarranted) of a superior to an inferior.

His grace initiated in the incarnation is rooted in his qualitative difference, not his quantitative difference. His qualitative difference makes the relational act of grace the most significant contradiction of the Uncommon we need to embrace. This distinction is vital for discipleship. There are times that we all may in effect function as if we are equal to God (e.g., by determining the terms of our relationship). Obviously, any such semblance of equality is unnatural; and unnatural equality always means that one of us is wrong – wrong in elevating our self-estimation and/or wrong in reducing the nature of God.

When our life moves ahead of his grace, when what we do defines our faith rather than our faith being a response to his favor, then our quantitative focus has obscured his qualitative difference and rendered the inequality between us as functionally inapplicable, and therefore rendered God in his qualitative difference as functionally inactive. His grace becomes moot because grace is not a concept, only a relational act. We should never assume grace is in operation just because of the presence of grace as a concept.

When our faith or discipleship is defined by what we do, we also infer that God defines us in those quantitative terms – thereby ignoring, denying or distorting his primary qualitative difference. Such reduction of God increasingly minimizes the natural inequality between us and renders the favor of his qualitative difference essentially in function (not theology) as unnecessary. Grace does not prevail in a quantitative mode.

This natural inequality, however, is irrevocable and by definition is incapable of being reconstituted. We have to live in this structure of inequality with God. If we try to do it with a quantitative approach, we will depend on a *comparative process*. Comparisons are always necessary to give value or meaning to what is quantified – a process, for example, the Pharisees depended on to establish their identity. Besides in relation to God, this comparative process will also be used in relation to others; this invariably gets us into defining differences, stratifying persons and unnatural inequality.

If, however, we live in this structure of natural inequality with God in a qualitative approach, then we will need to engage a *relational process*. This relational process means the only way we can live in this structure with God is by his grace.

Grace brings God to us in the incarnation; grace brings us to God. Grace also keeps God actively involved with us and is necessary for our ongoing involvement with him. Grace is *sine qua non* – not as a quantitative *end* but as the qualitative *means* for relationship with Inequality.

Yet, this inequality does not determine the character of the relationship we can have with God. This is the relational significance inherent in the message of John 3:16. The relational progression of the incarnation takes it much further. In contrast to the *old* or common way of doing relationships which essentially amounts to nothing different from power relations, the qualitative difference of the Uncommon and the *new* characterizes this relationship as one of love, of friendship and of the intimate privilege and prestige of being family together. In the intimate relational context and process established in the incarnation's relational progression, our relationship with the inherently superior God is freed (redemption) to experience (transformation) the reality (reconciliation) of his vulnerable, loving presence, of being intimate friends, of being son and daughter with our Father in his family together.

These are relational truths which are a function only of relationship – the basis and extent of which are the relational outcome of his relational act of grace. For discipleship, more important than the propositional forms of these truths (not to their exclusion) are the relational messages (review them on p.6) from God in the Word, as the Truth. The relational process involved in these relational messages connects us to the qualitative difference of God which is vital for our experience as his disciple, fundamental for our growth as his sons and daughters, and crucial for our function as his church.

Discipleship Further Operationalized

With the functional definition of discipleship formulated at the end of the last chapter (p.65), we can further operationalize discipleship by delineating the following in our practice.

In the relational process of following Jesus, authentic disciples function **with heart** as the *most important quality defining the person*, thus requiring **redemptive changes** from the inside-out (*metamorphoo*) for ongoing involvement in intimate relationship with Christ – not outer-in (*metaschematizo*) change of quantitative secondary matter. The character of radical discipleship further involves the practice of its *functional top priority* as **intimate relationships** rooted in the qualitative difference of God, the *basis* and *extent* of which are the relational outcome only of *his grace*. With this further character, authentic disciples (individually and corporately) honestly function in and qualitatively experience

engagement in *intimate relational work* with God only on his terms in the process of **the relational progression** of servant, friend and family member.

Discipleship is all about relationship and relational work. Just as God working the Big Picture is all about relational work, what disciples practice is all about relational work. This is the only practice which has relational significance to God's heart and his intimate relational nature.

Consider

With all the advances in the modern world supposedly improving the quality of life, it is truly amazing how readily Christians go along with reductions of our *person*. While we may not accept settling for less in secondary matter, we seem to accept – or at least be resigned to – the relational consequences such reductions have on our relationships. We need to make some honest evaluations and then some hard decisions about Christian practice.

Describe the quantitative reductions which operate in your surrounding context; how have they influenced Christian practice in your midst?

What aspects of theology converge in the character of discipleship, making them more functional for our practice?

What constitutes the qualitative difference of God and how does that emerge in our practice to signify authentic discipleship?

5

The Life of a Disciple

“I have come that they may have life”

John 10:10

Following Jesus in the incarnation and its relational progression helps us to understand clearly that Jesus didn't come to establish a new religion, and that he didn't create a new belief system or even a new way of living (code of conduct). He came to bring a totally different *life for relationship* which is unlike anything we are used to and is also contradictory to all else around. This life of qualitative difference is distinct only to the Uncommon and distinguishes the identity of his followers.

The life of a disciple more than mirrors the life of Jesus Christ. It partakes of his life in relationship and becomes an intimate part of it. It is involvement not so much with his teachings but with his words, it's not about his deeds but his relational acts which make it possible to partake in his life and become a part of it. His words and relational acts both reflect the relational work of the heart of his person seeking the heart of our person for intimate relationship.

As *the Life* (Jn.14:6), he pursues us in order that we may have life. We tend to fragment this life into elements which we then perceive from prevailing predispositions and biases. As disciples we need to understand more deeply what this *life* is that pursues us and that we pursue with our discipleship.

Life or Life

The *life* Jesus came for us to have is *zoe*, not *bios* (another Greek term for life). *Bios* involves the quantitative elements of life related more to what we have and do; it refers to duration, situation, manner and means of life, subject to observation and may be recorded, for example, in a biography. *Zoe* is a qualitative term (somewhat metaphysical) which denotes the very life force itself, the vital principle animating living beings. Jesus used *zoe* for eternal life (Jn.3:16; 17:3) and for the relational outcome of “the narrow gate” from its relational work (Mt.7:14; Lk.13:24-27). As noted earlier, this life is eternal relationship with God shared intimately together in love as his family (Jn.17:3,26).

Zoe is the qualitative difference which is only attributed to God's life and, therefore, that which is uncommon and eternal. The life we can have, partake in and be a part of is *the very life of God himself*. This is the *life* of the incarnation and what Christ came to give us – “and have it to the full” (Jn.10:10). “To the full” (Gk. *perissos*) means over and above, that is, that which is beyond – beyond common, ordinary and temporal. This verse is usually rendered with a quantitative term like “abundantly.” But that usage appraises *perissos* in a comparative process and thus only focuses on the quantitative

elements of life. *Bios* should not be confused with *zoe*, nor should the distinction between them be obscure. The perceptions and expectations of a disciple depend on it, as demonstrated by the difficulties the early followers of Christ had in their discipleship.

Bios is not what Jesus came to give us. Disciples need to understand the specific life they are pursuing in discipleship. Jesus came so we can have God the Father, to have *him* in the quality of intimate relationship together in order to partake in his life and thereby become a part of it, that is, transformed into his very qualitative difference – that which is beyond common and ordinary and is the *more* of eternity. This life is *who* pursues us – no substitutes for his own life and nothing less than the very life of God. This life is *what* he recruits his disciples for, not for doing something. This is the *life* of a disciple and *how* they need to live.

Throughout redemptive history God has specifically identified giving of his *self* to his people, which was given “to the full” in the incarnation. It began with Abraham when God specified that he, his own self, was Abram’s portion, reward, wages (Gen.15:1). Abram was quantitatively very rich but he shifted from the quantitative to the qualitative presence of God, thus identifying the process of change for the rest of us. When Israel went into the promised land, eleven of the tribes received land from God for their inheritance. But the priests and Levites didn’t get any land. Aside from some practical provisions for their needs, their inheritance was God, his own self – God alone was their share. “Share” (Heb. *hoq*) means legal right and cut, allotment, and “inheritance” (*nahal*) means to take into permanent possession as one’s acquisition. God was theirs, not land. Though they struggled along the way with other quantitative elements, they and Abraham represent those closest to God. Any apparent distinction of who gets the qualitative substance of God (and who only gets “land”) is dissolved with Christ when he established the priesthood of all believers. God is now ours – “to the full,” nothing less.

This *life* is further distinguished for disciples in “how to live” when Jesus extended our understanding of his life (Jn.10:11ff). Using the analogy of the good shepherd, Jesus lays down his life for us (vv.11,15,17). Our focus on this usually is his bodily death on the cross. “Life” here is a different term (Gk. *psyche*) which involves the soul or inner person. It denotes breath, the vital breath of the soul as the seat of desires, affections and passions which strictly belongs to the person. In other words, *psyche* refers to the whole inner person with the various aspects of the soul. It is with soul (*psyche*) that Mary expressed her song to the Lord, in contrast to the outward elements of lips and speech (Lk.1:46). This all points to *heart* as the seat of one’s life.

However we define the inner person, it goes beyond the quantitative elements (like our body or the workings of the brain) to involve the qualitative aspects strictly belonging to our *person*, for which there is no substitute. Mary lifted her song to the Lord with her whole inner person. That’s what distinguishes this song, not the outward expressions. Likewise, in his death, Jesus gives his *psyche* to us, not just his body; he lays down his heart as well in order to distinguish what love is (see 1 John 3:16).

We cannot adequately perceive the incarnated Jesus from a quantitative reduction which merely puts his body on the cross. Christ gave his heart for us on the cross as well (cf. Mk.10:45), and even more importantly, he did so throughout the incarnation. Jesus laid down and gave all of his person, just as he came with all of *him* (God) – nothing less

and no substitutes. He didn't come to give us quantitative parts of himself – only *him*, wholly *him*.

This is the *life* Jesus came to share with us, and the *life* he expects his disciples to join him to live as well. The *life* of a disciple is to share our heart, to give *me*, not merely quantitative parts of me but me and my heart first and foremost. Yet, how to operationalize this life for authentic experience is problematic to the extent that the function of our heart is influenced, entangled or controlled by substitutes, lies and other reductionist practices. Peter demonstrated this difficulty in his discipleship.

Peter pronounced in the same terms as Jesus that he would lay down his life (*psyche*) for Jesus (Jn.13:37). Along with other pronouncements (see Mt.26:33; Lk.22:33), Peter didn't back up his words with action. His good intentions were there but his main focus was on what he could do because he depended on that to define himself. Peter didn't, however, take into account two key areas in his life: first, how circumstances/situations influence him (which includes the influence of culture) and, secondly, his limitations, weaknesses and sin which reflected his true humanity and what he was. Certainly, the unique circumstances surrounding Jesus' passion could not have been anticipated. Yet, avoiding the second area by Peter reflects a misguided boldness to establish in effect some sense of equality with his Lord, as opposed to the inequality of grace (see the interaction leading up to Peter's declaration above, Jn.13:33-37). In contrast to Jesus' command to love and intimate relational involvement (v.34), Peter focuses on secondary matter (spatial location) and doing something (vv.36,37). Functionally avoiding limitations, weaknesses or sin in one's practice is also characteristic of those who define themselves by what they do.

Both of the above areas influence discipleship, making it problematic to operationalize this *life*. They both affected Peter and kept him from following through on his intentions. That happened because he didn't focus on his *whole* person, only on what he did. That is, he wasn't aware of his heart (despite his pronouncement to lay down his *psyche*) and didn't attend to his heart during Jesus' passion. This counters the relational function of grace and God's involvement.

In the actual function of relationship, Peter was often missing Jesus' person and not really connecting with him (cf. his other pronouncements, Jn.13:8; Mt.16:22). This is the relational consequence of functioning at a distance from our heart and with a lower priority for intimate relational connection. Doing something *for* Jesus was more important to Peter than being *with* Jesus relationally. This relational consequence is an occupational hazard for all his followers. His relational act of grace does not function nor does it prevail in the process – no matter how good the intentions of our commitment or the dedication of our service.

The *life* of a disciple shares in the very life of the holy God. On this *basis* and from this ongoing *base*, disciples extend their hearts and give of themselves for intimate relationships. To withhold heart is not to give one's self; to withhold self is not to experience this *life*. Hearts still *old* yet changing to the *new*, hearts weak yet being transformed, hearts incomplete yet becoming *whole* – this is the relational outcome of the *life* received only in ongoing intimate relational involvement with the Life. A disciple's life has no other authentic identity.

Its Vocation

Unlike other rabbis who had a reputation to maintain, Jesus' call to discipleship broke through religious, cultural and social barriers separating the clean and the unclean, the so-called obedient and the sinful, the dominant and the subordinate. Depending on where you were coming from, his call was either a burden and sacrifice (e.g., the rich young guy) or a blessing and opportunity (like Matthew). Whatever their circumstances it was a call to abandon their old life for discipleship. Their identity was to be changed.

While disciples of other rabbis studied in order to become a master or rabbi themselves, Christ's disciples did not enroll in a learning relationship from which they could depart as a master, a teacher. They engaged a deeper relationship involving grace which paradoxically emphasized the inequality with the Teacher while necessarily equalizing with all others (Mt.10:24; Jn.13:13-17). Such adherence went well beyond any disciples' mere learning of teachings, imitating of behaviors or practicing a code of conduct. As Matthew in particular emphasizes – undoubtedly from his personal experience with radical change – Christ's disciple involves relinquishing attachments (its priorities and hopes, not their involvement) to all other identities in one's total life (e.g., as represented in Mt.10:37-39); the intimate relationship of discipleship is now their complete vocation, adhering to his person and words and the will of the Father in the new identity as his family (Mt.12:46-50). Vocation is not what disciples merely do but vocation is the *life* of relationship, which engages intimate relational work.

This is what makes Peter's denials so painful for Jesus also (see Jn.18:15-27). Peter denied not only being a fan identified with Jesus, a groupie associated with him but also denied direct relational involvement with him as one of *his*. As much as Peter struggled in relationship with Jesus and angered him (Mt.16:23), hurt him (Mt.26:40), frustrated him (Jn.21:22), nothing was more painful than relational denial from one's own. Yet, the relational function of grace did prevail in their relationship; Peter was being transformed such that others soon knew he was *with Jesus* (Acts 4:13).

When our identity reflects the life of Jesus Christ, this is the outcome of a relational process that comes from being intimately involved *with him*. This relational work cannot be engaged at a distance from the heart or through shallow involvement in secondary matter but only in trust, intimacy and *submission*.

We don't have narratives of Peter's transformation between John 21 and Acts 4, but the narrative of that interim time does reveal practices in his discipleship reflecting significant change in Peter. Just prior to his ascension Jesus passed on a command "to wait" (for the Spirit, Acts 1:4). Waiting was not easy for Peter; for example, he didn't even wait for an answer from Jesus whether to defend him with swords in the garden of Gethsemane – Peter just struck (Lk.22:49,50). Yet, now Peter waited (Acts 1:12-14). He also embraced words from God to guide them (Acts 1:15ff), not his own predispositions and biases (though not yet free from all his biases, as noted in Gal.2:11ff). What these now reflect more significantly in Peter's discipleship is submission to his Lord and God. Furthermore, when people were astonished at his healing of a crippled beggar (Acts 3), he said in effect that it was no big deal (v.12); this was the relational outcome of his trust, intimacy and submission to Jesus (v.16). This seems to reflect that Peter turned the corner in how he defined himself – not by what he did but by his intimate relationship with Jesus.

The relational work of submission functionally interacting with our trust and the honesty of our heart is fundamental to discipleship's vocation and its process of intimate relationship with Jesus. It is somewhat ironic that Peter was *with Jesus* after his ascension more than when he was physically present. Certainly, we have to factor in the arrival of the Spirit (which we will discuss later) but he came as Jesus' relational substitute to extend the relational work Jesus started. As noted earlier, God doesn't do all the work in our relationship; we are each accountable for our part of the relational work. Peter's relational work in Jesus' physical absence – despite all his relational struggles during his physical presence – is an encouragement to our discipleship. Together with the relational work of the Spirit, we can expect to experience more with God and anticipate greater outcomes in our discipleship. It's an expectation Jesus had for Peter and he has for us (Jn.14:12).

Its Vulnerability

God made us for relationships and the alternative to that is *independence* – that is, doing our own thing and doing relationships only on our terms. Western democracy has come to mean this independence and being free to do our own thing more than free to be a people. This condition is compounded by a global economy which, for example, increasingly blurs Western boundaries and loyalties. This kind of environment has many subtle influences on Christian thinking, if not beliefs. Democracy is not the ideal of God's kingdom, nor should the independence of democracy be the Christian norm.

Freedom could be used either to pursue our independence and thus “be apart” (with degrees of distance) in relationships; or it could be used to open us to others to connect more and to be involved for intimate relationships. The former in effect abuses freedom for oneself, however socially acceptable that practice may be; globalization of the economy has had this kind of repercussion, as does the use of personal relationships on one's own terms. When freedom is used to open us to others, this effectively shares freedom with others for relationships together; and it also exercises freedom as an opportunity to submit oneself to others for their sake as well as for one's own.

This issue is of huge proportion for discipleship. Paul dealt with the abuse of Christian freedom in 1 Corinthians. Yet, we have to understand this issue more fundamentally than just a situation, a behavior or even a belief. Independence counters the relational design and purpose of God. In the relational progression of the incarnation from servant to friend to family member, it is crucial that the process of discipleship not get stuck in the servant stage. Practices of independence frustrate this progression.

When “servant” remains our primary identity for discipleship and our focus becomes imbalanced with serving, relationship with Christ increasingly becomes about what we do rather than being together. This happens because that is the nature of a servant-master relationship. By definition and structure there are limits to how close the relationship can get and how much can be shared between them. That restricts the relationship from experiencing the qualitative difference of God, leaving a servant essentially with a quantitative focus on secondary matter. The relationship may seem

good on these terms but that is as far as it goes. This, however, is not God's terms for our relationship as the relational progression reveals.

The structured distance in a servant-master relationship parallels the relational distance many Christians experience with God – either intentionally as a comfort zone or inadvertently from a lack of awareness or understanding. Such distance is not God's desire for our relationship, nor is it characteristic of a relationship between friends. It is this progression to friends which is important in discipleship.

A friend is not a title or loose association as it is used widely today. *Friend* is a relationship with a deeper function. In the world of biblical times, the main ideals of friendship included loyalty, equality, mutual sharing of all possessions, but most notably *an intimacy in which a friend could share everything in confidence*. Moses was considered a friend of God because “the Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend” (Ex.33:11). David gives us a sense of the process of being friends: “The Lord confides [Heb. *sod* signifies a conversation among friends] in those who fear [trust] him” (Ps.25:14); the relational outcome of this, as the verse continues, is they will truly know (*yada*) him and his covenant love and faithfulness.

As Jesus said about authentic friends, sharing everything with one another (even deep secrets) is characteristic of being friends (Jn.15:15). A servant (Gk. *doulos*, indentured servant, slave) might be loyal but would never experience intimate sharing as friends. In the process of discipleship the functional change from servant to friend is not automatic, even over time. Such intimate relationship from God is contingent on those who rightfully trust him (as David said) with honesty in their heart – no other terms or masquerade accepted (as Jesus shared). This trust from the heart involves the relational work of submission of our *true* self and our *whole* self.

Intimacy doesn't grow unless we're sharing more and more of our true self in the relationship. Such sharing cannot avoid or mask our true humanity: our weaknesses, inadequacies, mistakes, sins. To keep this from him prevents the intimate connection of experiencing each other, *knowing* him and thus being healed, liberated and changed. Ironically, submission is characteristic of a servant, but in the process of discipleship such submission is only partially given if it remains in the servant stage. The key indicator for this is how vulnerable we make our *self* in the relationship.

Extending trust from our heart also involves submission of our *whole* self, as opposed to giving what we *do* (no matter how dedicated) and/or what we *have* (no matter how sincere). Our whole self does not mean parts of me or things about me but *self without reduction*. No amount of quantitative service by a servant will make up this qualitative difference. The primary significance of friend is not what we do or have but what we share of each other in relationship – that what we share of our self we know we can count on as authentic to intimately experience together.

This trust between friends which submits our whole self expresses itself in obedience (Jn.15:14), yet not out of obligation (as biological family relations tend to become, cf. Prov.18:24b) but from love (Jn.14:21; 15:9,10). This is what friends do – at least what Jesus did. Submission was a distinct function Jesus practiced in his relationships. He himself described his submission to his Father as obedience out of love (Jn.12:49; 14:31; 15:10); Jesus also submitted his self to others to serve (Mt.20:28). When Paul outlined Christ's submission throughout the incarnation, he said in relationship with others “your attitude should be the same” (Phil.2:5-8). “Attitude” (Gk.

phroneo) means to have a mind-set whose actions include will, affections, conscience. Jesus made himself vulnerable to us through submission of his true and whole self; this is how we are to submit ourselves to him and to others as his friends. A servant may obey and do some really good things. Serving Christ, however, is not merely doing good in situations; it is the function of the relationship of following Jesus and intimately being with him (Jn.12:26). A disciple stuck in the servant stage does not make one's self vulnerable for relationship; they are focused primarily on the work of serving. An authentic friend gives priority to the relationship. Obedience only serves this relational purpose, obedience in love functions only for relationship – relationship with God and relationship with others.

While Jesus was physically with Peter, Peter had difficulty being with Jesus relationally. He did in part submit his true self to Jesus in various situations, notably when he stepped out on the water (Mt.14:28ff). Yet, these situational submissions did not involve consistent relational connection with Jesus because for the most part he did not make himself vulnerable in the relationship by submission of his whole self – self without reduction.

The importance of submission both of our *true* self (in the honesty of our heart) and our *whole* self (without reduction) is fundamental to the ongoing relational work involved in discipleship. Like Peter, we can get by in part with submitting our true self in situations while serving. This will focus us on the situation more than the relationship and essentially preoccupy us with secondary matter. That would characterize a servant's life with little expectation, if any, of *more*. Discipleship, however, as *the relationship of following the person Jesus* necessitates submission also of our whole self in order to be open, to be extended and vulnerable for intimate relationship. This leads to the experiential reality of being friends, with the basis to functionally experience more relationally. Lacking or limited submission prevents this relational outcome.

First and foremost, such vulnerableness to intimate relationship makes us vulnerable to love (*agape* mainly but also *phileo*, affection). This love unfolds in the relational progression of the incarnation. The experience of this love is limited for a servant, open for friends and “to the full” in family love together.

Its Witness

Jesus said the most distinguishing characteristic of his disciples is love for one another (Jn.13:35). Yet, love is not something we do; love is what we ongoingly share together in relationship; *agape* is how we are to be involved with others. This involvement is not understood merely from teachings, nor based on following a code of conduct or formula. This involvement is first the relational reality experienced from Jesus in relationship together. Without experiencing his involvement of *agape* in ongoing intimate relationship, disciples can only generate love by what they do, not by relational involvement based on their own relational experience. That's why it is important for us to define Christ's love not merely by what he did on the cross. These are the quantitative reductions of love which minimize the qualitative difference of God. *Agape is relational*

involvement, the outcome of which is a qualitative relational experience.

Jesus used the metaphor of the vine and the branches to describe this relational process (Jn.15). We tend to perceive this as a static structural arrangement that is necessary for quantitative results (“fruit”). This shifts the focus from the dynamic process of intimate relationship Jesus is describing. Three times he mentions the reciprocal effort “to remain” in each other (15:4,5,7). The word “remain” (Gk. *meno*) means to remain, dwell, abide; applied to another person it denotes relational involvement. This is the same word Jesus used to describe his authentic (Gk. *alethes*) disciples intimately involved (“hold,” *meno*) with his “teachings” (*logos*, his essence, his person, Jn.8:31).

When there is this kind of relational involvement, there are distinct relational outcomes experienced in this process. One outcome is to know God intimately, as we noted earlier that only a friend can experience. A further outcome is the experience of *agape* involvement, not only from Jesus but also from the Father (Jn.15:9; 17:26). These relational outcomes underlie the fruit his disciples bear. This fruit does not reflect the quantitative results of what we do; this fruit witnesses to the relational outcome of being intimately involved with Jesus as his disciple (Jn.15:8). The specific relational outcome witnessed to is the experience of God’s qualitative difference in his *agape* involvement. This fruit of the vine, therefore, must be seen as the *agape* involvement with others which Jesus said clearly distinguishes his disciples (Jn.13:35).

“To remain” is a reciprocal effort because it is a relationship involving relational work by each one. Jesus *remains* in us with his *agape* involvement, as he further shared about the progression of the vine (Jn.15:9). But he also said, “Now remain in my love.” God doesn’t do all the relational work, nor do we but we have our part in the relationship. Our relational work includes obedience – the relational act of submission (15:10). This may seem like a contingency to experience his love or to be his friend (15:14). Yet, it is crucial for discipleship to grasp that these really are not conditional statements but relational statements. What comes first in these verses is his love, not our obedience (15:9).

Obedience is the relational way we submit our true and whole self to him for intimate relationship that has the outcome of further experiencing his love (Jn.14:21,23). Love is not some substance he gives us and thus we possess it; love is what we experience from him in how he involves himself with us and treats us. Love is not a feeling; it is what we relationally experience of him in our heart that increasingly transforms it and conducts it. Love is not something we do, or even he does; it is what we ongoingly share together in intimate relationship. Through obedience we submit our self to him for this relationship. As noted earlier, Jesus defines his own obedience to the Father for the purpose of this relationship and remaining in his love (15:10b).

Along with our obedience, it’s important to embrace in this relational work the fact that God delights in those who intimately count on him and always put on him the expectation to love them without failing and without limits (Ps.147:11). Such relational work engages his intimate relational nature and his ongoing *agape* involvement. Though God doesn’t do all the relational work, nevertheless he is always making his effort in the relationship – never passive nor detached. Even when we think he is silent or distant, he is always doing relational work with us. We need to affirm him in how he is and trust him for the relational outcome.

Agape is how Jesus, and now also the Father, is involved with us. *Agape* is what functionally distinguishes him and his qualitative difference. When we express *agape* with others, then we witness to him who is *agape* with us. That's why such loving involvement with others clearly distinguishes us as *his* also. This is the substance of being his witnesses to the world (Acts 1:8). Witness (Gk. *martys* and its verb, *martyreo*) denotes one who has knowledge of something and can confirm it, in this case not as an observer of facts or information but one who experienced Jesus as a participant. To witness to Jesus is not merely to share the propositional truths of the gospel. God cannot be put in a quantitative box. To witness to Jesus is to confirm intimate participation in his life and the experience of his qualitative difference.

In his closing prayer to the Father for all his disciples, Jesus shifted from the vine-branches metaphor to the relational reality the metaphor symbolized: the intimate relationships uniting them together in family love (Jn.17:20-23). The bond of these intimate relationships, which is rooted in the relational process engaged in *agape* involvement, witnesses to the world of the experiential reality in the relational progression of the incarnation (vv.21,23). Jesus redefines our quantitative reductions of what witnessing involves; and he radicalizes our common notions about evangelism by deepening our focus from merely what he did to the qualitative substance of his intimate relational presence.

Obviously, to be this level of witness necessitates remaining in his love. We cannot underestimate this relational issue in discipleship because a great deal hinges on it: the experience of complete joy for the individual disciple (Jn.15:11), the integrity of the corporate life of his followers as the church, what the world can expect from his witnesses. Despite our struggles with secularism, modernism and postmodernism, I suggest we give greater focus to this relational issue. (More on these issues in the next chapter.)

I don't think the church faces more difficult times today than the early church of the NT, though the environmental influences certainly are more complex today. In the apparent struggle with false teachers in the church, Jude urged them "to contend for the faith" (Jude 3). The term for contend (Gk. *epagonizomai*) is an extension of "make every effort" (*agonizomai*) that Jesus (Lk.13:24) and Paul (1 Tim.6:12) used earlier for relational work. Though Jude does focus on the integrity of objective truths in this situation, his main focus goes deeper than that. In these difficult times what he prescribes for them to do is essentially centered on one imperative supported by three complementary (or modal) participles (Jude 20,21).

Imperative: "Keep yourselves in God's love." "Keep" (Gk. *tereo*) means to maintain as opposed to leaving. This signifies relational work, not what one does alone or passively as the three complementary participles indicate.

Participles: "Build yourselves up in your most holy [Gk. *hagios*, separated from the common] faith." "Build" (Gk. *epoikodomeo*) has the sense of building a structure or house, thus involves the corporate relational effort to build God's family, not a church building.

“Pray in the Holy Spirit.” Prayer as relational communication in the presence of the Spirit (Christ’s relational substitute) who helps us intimately connect with the Father.

“Wait for the mercy [compassion] of the Lord Jesus Christ.” “Wait” (Gk. *prosdechomai*) means to receive or take, not a passive mode in the context of a relationship.

Jude also adds further relational work for them in relation to others (Jude 22,23). Yet, in these difficult circumstances their central effort was to keep, remain in God’s love. Such situations, past or present, for the church are not only about issues of diluting, distorting or denying the truth and therefore maintaining doctrinal purity. As important as this is, we lose our primary qualitative focus when we get preoccupied with doctrinal purity. Despite the church in Ephesus’ rigorous efforts (including maintaining doctrinal purity) in difficult circumstances, this was the rude awakening for this church when held accountable by Jesus for relationally distancing themselves from their first love (Rev.2:1-4). In effect, they witnessed to being Christians but they did not witness to the person of Christ and the experience of his qualitative difference in *agape* involvement. Relationship was missing.

Whatever the situation, our top priority as Christ’s witnesses must (Gk. *dei*, by its nature) be about ongoing intimate relationship with God and remaining in his *agape* involvement. The outcome of this relational work needs to be the experience both of each disciple as well as the corporate gathering of his disciples, otherwise known as the church. This is Paul’s appeal to the Father for the local family of God (Eph.3:14-19).

The life of a disciple is able to witness to the life of Jesus Christ because his disciple is not in a traditional learning relationship in which one only gains knowledge (albeit truths) *about* Christ. To be his witness is not the transmission of such knowledge or propositional truths. The authentic disciple witnesses to being Jesus’ own by sharing the God person experienced in intimate relationship, the qualitative substance of which functions with *agape* involvement. The witness of his disciple develops from being *with Jesus* and is a function only of this relationship.

This is the relational nature of the God of the incarnation and the Jesus of the gospel. If we follow this Jesus and involve our *self* with his person, we will follow him all the way to the Father. This is the relational outcome of discipleship rooted in the relational progression of his incarnation.

Its Responsibility and Purpose

Unlike disciples of other teachers, the responsibility of Jesus’ disciples did not consist in maintaining and passing on particular teaching about Christ. After his ascension, discipleship of Christ did not get reduced to the traditional character of other prevailing discipleship. A set of teachings is not the substance of what he left them. John develops in his Gospel that the disciples’ relationship is no longer limited to Jesus’ physical presence (see Jn.13-17). Through involvement (*meno*) in the Word (Jn.8:31) and “in the Spirit” (Jn.14:15-17; 15:26ff), his disciples remain in full relational connection and intimate involvement with him. Followers of Jesus still focused primarily on their

relationship with him, not reducing him to teachings. Discipleship further constituted fulfilling their responsibility to be a witness of his God person in their entire life.

In this so-called information age the accumulation of knowledge (through formal or informal education) is a top priority for “survival.” The main forum for the social transmission of information is relationships. The individual’s pursuit of knowledge refocuses relationships primarily to sharing information with one another. This happens when the quantitative elements of life (*bios*) become more important than the qualitative aspects of life (*zoe*). Teachings, for example, about the life (*bios*) of Jesus take priority over his person and his qualitative difference. This often inadvertent shift in discipleship changes the function of a disciple from a witness of Jesus’ God person to a conveyor of Christian information (however true this information may be). This is not the purpose of truth, which is discussed in the next chapter.

Such reductionism of the whole person and of the primacy of intimate relationships does not allow us to fulfill the responsibility and purpose of authentic discipleship. It doesn’t allow it because the transformation necessary to experience the reality of the relational progression of the incarnation is lacking. This lack of transformation keeps us essentially enslaved to specific areas of our life (e.g., defining ourselves by what we know and do) from which we need to be freed (redeemed) in order to functionally live in the new creation not as servant, not only as friend but as his very own family member.

Any discipleship rooted in reductionism becomes at best the good intentions of a servant and at least one’s self-serving effort. This precludes experiencing relationship with the Father because such relationship requires being free to live functionally as son or daughter – not a title but a relationship. This relational consequence of reductionism should not be lost on us because a quantitative focus ultimately involves a self-focus. These constraints on our person and our relationships make discipleship very tenuous.

If we truly experience God’s qualitative difference, a change takes place in us that involves going from a quantitative focus on ourselves to the qualitative focus on others and involvement with them. John describes this process as the intimate experience of love from the God of love (*agape* involvement); the authenticity of that experience (of *knowing* God and being changed by him) is validated by extending *agape* involvement to others (1 Jn.4:7,8). This reflects a relational process that makes this change a function of this intimate relationship.

This change from a self-focus is not the mere change of outward form and behaviors (as in *metaschematizo*). This includes deeper involvement with others, *agape* involvement as the Father is involved (as indicated by the word “perfect” in Mt.5:48, and based on our own experience, 1 Jn.4:19). Furthermore, this deeper priority for relationship is not made at the expense of one’s self. Indeed, unlike the tendency of many well-intentioned servants of Christ, the *self* is not ignored but more deeply seen in its qualitative needs. John informs us of the relational outcome of this process: God lives (*meno*, remains, abides, dwells) in us and his love is fully realized in us (1 Jn.4:12). Failing to make the distinction between the qualitative and quantitative tends to entangle us in pursuing quantitative means which then minimizes the qualitative fulfillment and satisfaction of our whole self.

In our Christian practice it is important to distinguish, for example, between

discipline and *agape*. Whether it is in practicing the discipline of obedience or the discipline to love – even spiritual disciplines with God – discipline tends to give too much focus to what *we* do, whereas *agape* focuses on *others*. When we try to love on the basis of what we do, then by definition the focus is on the act because the *doing* is necessary to accomplish one’s objective. This is Jesus’ point in the Sermon on the Mount about being unaware (“don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”) of our acts of helping others (Mt.6:3).

Agape focuses on the other person and the relationship, thus how to be involved with them. *Agape* is how Jesus loves us and involves himself in our relationship – likewise how the Father is. Jesus’ life reflects the relational work of submitting his true and whole self to others. This is the relational significance of *agape* – the submitting of *self*. *Agape* is pure relational work, not a deed to perform. Yet, we can’t really submit our *self* without subordinating our self-concerns, without letting go of our self-interests and being vulnerable with the honest reality of our heart. *Agape* does this and involves *self* with the other person. Anything less is a reduction and becomes a substitute in relationships.

Because of its nature, *agape* is also not an act we can merely exercise our will to produce. We cannot love with *agape* without first experiencing *agape* involvement; God doesn’t expect us to, nor wants us to. How we do relationships reflects significantly what we experience in our relationships, past and present, especially with God. At the same time, we need to grasp the nature of relational work with God. It is never unilateral; the relational process with God is always reciprocal. No dimension of our relationship experiences the reality of reciprocity more than the process of love. The awesome relational outcome of this process is the further intimate experience of both the Father’s love and Jesus’ love (Jn.14:21), plus their ongoing intimate presence (“make their home,” *monē* from *meno*, 14:23), indicated for us not only in the future but now.

Experiencing relationship with the Father, as noted earlier, presupposes functioning freely as his child. This relational progression presupposes ongoing transformation from those controlling quantitative elements of being a servant. Yet, the dominant focus of individualism practiced in the Christian life today is an issue of freedom. Individualism and freedom are interrelated; when they become norms of practice it also opens the door to include relativism in practice (though not necessarily in theological beliefs). This obviously affects submission and obedience in how we fall into relational distance and serving, for example, on our own terms. But it also leads to our enslavement to secondary matter in how we define ourselves, do relationships and church.

Here we encounter an important paradox in discipleship. We can use our freedom in Christ to pursue independence with the relational consequence of essentially becoming enslaved to some element of quantitative reductionism; like the West’s intoxication with freedom, this is the enslavement of freedom. Or we can use our freedom to submit our *self* with the relational outcome of fundamentally becoming interdependently bonded in intimate relationships unique to the qualitative difference of God.

In this sense, discipleship cannot be about what we are *in* Christ without being how we are *with him* – in relational practice. As Jesus incarnated, this involves following him in relational submission to the Father. Nothing else is to define the responsibility nor

substitute for the purpose of his disciples.

Submission in the process of this relational progression concludes with the Father, with being one of his very own, permanently belonging in his family. This was the relational purpose of John 3:16 and the relational responsibility Jesus engaged by extending the Father's love to restore us to his family. *This then becomes his disciples' relational responsibility to extend his family love to others for the relational purpose of building his family.* In authentic discipleship Jesus not only calls us to be disciples but also to make more disciples – that is, those who follow him in the relational progression to the Father. This is our commission (Mt.28:19).

Life Decisions

The conflict between submission and relational distance, between being the Father's child and serving on our terms is a critical juncture for discipleship. What direction our discipleship undertakes depends on distinguishing these two; yet, there can appear to be a very fine line between them. In qualitative function they are clearly distinct in their relational significance. Essentially, one cultivates and builds intimate relationships while the other minimizes them, though often inadvertently.

Submission and serving are not synonymous in today's practice, though for Jesus they are inseparable. To submit to others (including God) is the relational process of extending our *true* and *whole* person to another's person, in deference to the priority of their welfare and for the sake of their well-being. In relation to God, of course, submission further includes the relational response to the natural inequality between us. As the outcome of submission, the relational connection is intimate (if honest) and loving (if genuine). And this relational process always includes service: *to submit is to serve, to serve is to submit.* This is how *agape* involvement works.

The alternative to submission is relational distance. This is a frequent alternative because of misperceptions about submission being the sacrifice of self, or the expression of weakness (an object, passive, wishy-washy) or an indicator of being *less* (a subordinate, inferior). Serving from a relational position of strength becomes the substitute, in what turns out to be paternalistic love and spiritual one-upmanship – not the vulnerability of *agape* involvement and the humility of a child of grace.

A position of strength is not how the God person came to serve. Yet, Jesus extended to us the favor of our only Superior in what remains a paradox of relationship. His grace can only be received in the context of this natural inequality. This requires affirming God in his true self and being nothing other than our true self. In other words, grace doesn't allow us to be anything but *what* we truly are with no reductions and no false elevations. Grace demands *me* – nothing less and nothing more. The relational experience of his favor necessitates the submission of *me*. What makes this experience possible as a relational reality is Jesus' submission of his *Me*. Furthermore, without his ongoing submission of *Me*, the relational progression of the incarnation stops at servant.

Jesus redefined strength in relationships from power (influence) and power relations to vulnerability (submitting *me*) and intimate relationships. Being vulnerable is the inner strength and quality of a person who is loved (1 Jn.4:18); this strength and

quality of one's true and whole person is extended vulnerably to others in *agape* involvement.

The submission of the person who is loved is a contradiction for Christian practices maintaining comfortable or safe relational distance. The latter is characteristic of independence (not interdependence) which indicates the presence of relational fear or comparative pride. Submission is also a contradiction for those self-focused Christians whose service becomes essentially self-serving because they are not vulnerable to others. The person who is loved also becomes, like Jesus, a paradox of relationship. They are truly loved by the Father only as a free child of God in the relational progression (1 Jn.4:9; 3:1); yet, they submit vulnerably to others in *agape* involvement (1 Jn.4:16,18).

This is what distinguishes the authentic *life* of his disciple. In discipleship it's not how hard we work but how *deep* we work. The fundamental relational work of discipleship necessitates such vulnerability to intimate relationship, which makes us vulnerable to love. Remaining in his love is a critical practice for discipleship as this love unfolds in the relational progression. Submission in the relational work of *agape* involvement underlies everything we do. This is what distinguishes Jesus Christ and the Father, and why it distinguishes his disciples. As John said, this is how we know we are of him ("the Truth") and that our hearts are further convicted of the Father's continued intimate presence (1 Jn.3:19).

This *life* of his disciples is lived only on his terms. It cannot function in a quantitative box, approach or focus, and it must (*dei*, by its nature) be operationalized in the relational context of the Uncommon and the Big Picture of the Eternal, not the common and the temporal. This is the very life of the Father and his qualitative difference made functional in the incarnation of the Word, as well as operationalized for us in his relational progression by the intimate relational experience of God's grace and *agape* involvement. The sum of this is the relational outcome of his family love – the relational responsibility engaged by Jesus and undertaken by his followers to build his family.

Consider

Zoe and *bios* define two distinguishing operations of daily practice. How do they affect our perceptions of discipleship?

Freedom (and related issues of independence & individualism) is a crucial issue for us to address. What is the significance of freedom in our relationships (both with God and others), and how does submission constitute Christian freedom rather than constrain it?

Outline the relational progression and discuss the implications of its various aspects for our practice.

6

Discipleship Formation

*“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”
John 17:17*

*Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.
1 Corinthians 8:1*

Following the person of Jesus defines a distinct identity for his disciples. If not apparent already, his words throughout his earthly life are critical for this identity formation – none more important, and probably more neglected, than his words in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5-7).

When Jesus finished this discourse, the crowds were amazed at his teachings (Gk. *didache*, doctrine) because he taught with authority (Gk. *exousia*, the power, right, privilege, commission to do something, Mt.7:28,29). If they were talking only about Jesus, we can probably assume that he gave them more than they expected, for example, given his socio-cultural status. But since they put him in contrast to the teachers of the law, this should not be seen as a quantitative assessment; this is not a comparison of who gives the best sermons. Their feelings about this contrast suggest a qualitative difference, not quantitative. This qualitative difference can only be about his *whole* person and could not be observed merely in quantitative parts of him, like his speech or his deeds.

“Authority” is basically the ability to control or influence the behavior of others (cf. the centurion in Mt.8:9). Throughout the OT the prominent perception we have of God’s authority is that of power or force. He demanded total submission (e.g., the Shema, Deut.6:4,5) and people suffered consequences of his power when they didn’t obey. But power relations wasn’t God’s mode; he didn’t have to demonstrate his superiority all the time. Rather what emerges consistently through the multitude of negative situations are his covenant love and faithfulness; this is the persistent mode which reflects his relational nature and involvement with his people. The relational paradox of his favor is the amazing fact and inexplicable truth of God’s authority.

This is the authority now demonstrated in the incarnation. It is this qualitative difference which distinguished Jesus’ authority from the others. He didn’t teach with a power that merely made him better than others on a quantitative scale; that wasn’t his purpose, even in issues of truth. His authority didn’t speak of truths for doctrine but truths of the essence of God, his God person, the Father, all for relationship with him. This *exousia* was about his whole person, not his teachings or the way he taught. As this God person vulnerably shared his true and whole self, what emerged is the qualitative difference of the very life of God.

Jesus’ *didache* is about the *whole* person and intimate relationships. His words are not about truths to keep in a quantitative box and used to separate us from others in false inequality. That’s what some Sadducees tried to do with Jesus in another situation, in which Jesus again amazed the crowds with his *didache* (see Mt.22:23-33). Jesus told the

Sadducees that they were in error (Gk. *planao*, deceived, deluded) because they didn't know (*oida*) Scripture (v.29). Though they studied Scripture, *oida* gives us the sense that they essentially didn't know it internally. Their knowledge deluded them to think they knew what truth was all about. *Truth is for relationship.*

The Use of Truth

The Pharisees also thought they grasped truth by codifying the law with an expanded set of standards, list of rules and rigorous behaviors. Essentially, they tried to quantify truth with this reductionist system; and their quantitative focus turned those practices into a self-serving end (albeit a religious end), not the *means* for relationship. This misuse of truth is an ongoing issue whenever truth becomes the criterion for separation from others (on a vertical scale or in horizontal distance) rather than for relationship. Jesus would put the truth into full perspective for us with his *didache*.

How we see the truth and use the truth are basic for discipleship formation. This issue directly involves the law and the gospel of grace – issues which determine our practice and experience in the Christian life, as Jesus strongly revealed in a previous encounter (Jn.8:31-47). Throughout church history law and gospel have been related in different ways. Keeping the proper balance between law and gospel has been difficult, if not in theology most certainly in practice. Imbalance in this relationship produces some form of either antinomianism or legalism and moralism.

Antinomianism so strongly emphasizes Christian freedom from condemnation by the law that it underemphasizes daily accountability for sin and the ongoing pursuit of sanctification. One consequence of this approach is a tendency toward moral looseness or neglect. Yet, the real issue here is not one of moral responsibility (however important) but one of relational involvement with others, as noted in the last chapter about independence and individualism (a form of antinomianism). While moralism and legalism apparently have been more prominent than antinomianism since the beginning of the Reformation, we seem to be witnessing a hybrid developed between them among some conservative evangelicals. This is the combination of the freedom of individualism with a selective or limited moralism (which we will discuss later as based on an inadequate view of God and actually a weak view of sin).

Despite ongoing conflicts with secularism, relativism, pluralism, among others – not to mention individualism – we need to examine how we use truth. As much as Jesus declared the truth in adversarial situations, it was always to clarify the way and to define the life – the way *to* the Father, the truth *of* the Father, the life *with* the Father. Truth as Jesus incarnated is always for relationship. He doesn't want us to be doctrinaire with the truth of his *didache*. That's not why we have Truth, his person. Discipleship needs to understand the purpose and function of truth.

In the postmodern mind-set (or worldview where it has become such) truth is not important. This is obviously a mistake, as the countercultural revolution of the '60s-'70s experienced. But much of the emphasis on truth today also suffers from error because its emphases depend on the presuppositions and biases of modernism, thus limiting truth to only quantitative dimensions and their analysis. What has been reduced from truth and

de-emphasized (even lost) in the process are the qualitative dimensions of truth. This, in my opinion, is the main reason for the postmodern reaction to the issue of truth.

These qualitative dimensions are the personal (subjective as subject in contrast to objective as object) and experiential (inner as well as relational) aspects which are basic to our humanity but more difficult to quantify with the paradigms of modernism. The qualitative side of the total person (i.e., heart) and of all relationships (i.e., intimacy) have functionally diminished because of the reductionism of the *person* and its consequences on relationships. These everyday manifestations are characteristic of the lifestyle resulting from modernism but are rooted in Adam and Eve's behavior in the garden.

Truth east of Eden always suffers this reductionism – particularly in how we define ourselves and therefore present ourselves, as well as how we do relationships and the primacy we give them as a consequence. When Jesus identified truth as his person (Jn.14:6), he restored the qualitative dimensions of truth. Truth doesn't stand alone here because truth is for relationship. Of further significance, he as the Truth is combined with and sandwiched between the Way and the Life (*zoe*, not *bios*). In Jesus' vulnerable person is the *means* (the Way: the access to the relational process), the *structure* (the Truth: the definition and conditions of the process) and the *substance* (the Life: the outcome of the process) of intimate relationship with the Father and participation in his life complete as his family. This is the gospel Jesus brought.

Truth cannot and should not be separated from *Way* and *Life* because they are all relationship-specific. They are not mutually exclusive but were incarnated together to reveal the substance of God and what is relationally significant to the Father. This is all a totally relational process because it's all only for relationship. That's why the use of truth apart from the qualitative difference of God has no importance to him, even for maintaining doctrinal purity (cf. Rev.2:2-4). Truth must be restored to the person, life and way of Jesus as incarnated. Discipleship needs to see and embrace the Word made flesh and vulnerably revealed in the law and the gospel.

To understand the incarnation of truth is critical for the necessary balance between law and gospel in our practice. Similar to our discussion earlier of the cross becoming an end in itself instead of the means for relationship with the Father, the quantitative preoccupation with truth turns this truth into an end instead of the relational means. The resulting moralism or legalism is functionally no different from antinomianism in that they all suffer the relational consequences of not being intimately involved with the Truth (in the Way, for the Life). The relational consequences are both with God and others.

The Purpose and Function of Truth

The misuse of truth as well as the neglect or avoidance of it are untenable for authentic discipleship. The reduction of truth either way will diminish the qualitative practice distinguishing his disciples. What then is the specific purpose and function of truth?

In the OT the psalmist asks God for his light and truth and to let them lead him to where God is – not just to a holy place where God dwells but to God himself (Ps.43:3). The Hebrew term for truth (*emet*) denotes God's faithfulness, that is, one you can count

on to be who he is. The relational function of truth is evident here.

In the NT there is a strategic shift of God's presence from a place (e.g., his dwelling in the tabernacle) to the vulnerable incarnation of his person. God not only sent light but came himself as the Light (Jn.1:4; 3:19), "full of grace and truth" (Jn.1:14, the OT renders this combination as "unfailing love and faithfulness"). While light has quantitative properties, the light emits who God is and his qualitative difference; therefore, the light contrasts those who are not of him and in darkness (Jn.3:19,20). Truth functions in the light because it reflects who God is, that is, truth always points and leads to God, just as the psalmist asked (Jn.3:21). Truth, as incarnated by Jesus, serves this relational purpose and functions for the relational process.

The balanced emphasis on the qualitative dimensions of truth does not disregard the objective basis for truth. Such quantitative dimensions must not be discounted, nor be our preoccupation if we are to prevent truth from becoming merely an end. Truth must be for relationship; and *as the means for relationship truth needs to be used in three specific interrelated areas:*

- **First**, truth is the basis by which we know *who* God is, *what* he is as well as *how* he is (Jn.14:6, *aletheia*, truth, reality, fact – from *alethes*, true, real, authentic). The truth about God, as noted earlier from the OT, denotes his faithfulness – that is, one we can count on to be who he is (real), what he is (authentic), how he is (true to his nature and word). This truth is not merely in spoken word or written word but now revealed in vulnerable heart and flesh. Incarnated truth is not merely a proposition to distinguish its opposite (falsehood, error, wrong). That often becomes an end in itself practiced in a form of legalism. Truth is vulnerably revealed to us in the God person Jesus so we can indeed *know* God directly, not just know about God for knowledge and information but so that we can have intimate relationship with the Father. Truth is the *relational means* to the real, authentic true God. We need to distinguish this function of truth from only the presence of true doctrine. When we use truth as objective information and quantitative facts for our primary emphasis, we reduce the relationship to a secondary position. This often subtle shift (as the church at Ephesus discovered, Rev.2:4) puts us in conflict with the strategic shift of God's presence in the incarnation. Essentially, then, such truth becomes something to possess (albeit important) but less as the relational means to be *with God*.
- **Second**, truth is not only the basis for God but also the basis for our authentic person and who, what, how we are. Truth tells us both the person we really are plus when we are indeed functioning as that person. This truth of our *self* interrelates with the truth of God and also makes it the basis for relationship (Jn.4:23). In Psalm 15, David describes who is involved with God. One defining characteristic is that this person "speaks the truth from the heart" (v.2) – what David didn't practice with God in relation to Bathsheba that created distance from his heart (his true self) and from God (in his true being). This truth (Heb. *emet*) expresses one's faithfulness, integrity as one who can be counted on to be authentic in the relationship. If we can't really present our self to God (and others) in this honest way, what we do present cannot be counted on to reflect (or reveal) our true person. The difficulty in presenting our real

self, of course, has existed since Adam and Eve and only reflects our enslavement from which we need to be redeemed. Yet, truth doesn't just tell us about our total person and then leave it up to us to function as that person. The truth of self also needs to work with the means of truth provided by God for our relational involvement with him. That is, the Truth is the relational means by which we are liberated from our enslavements for the specific relational purpose and outcome that we can be adopted as his son or daughter, intimately belonging to his family permanently (Jn.8:31-36). But *knowing* the Truth is a relational process of intimate involvement with him, not his doctrine; and he has provided us with the Spirit of truth to help us with the honest relational work in this process (Jn.14:16; 15:26; 16:13). Furthermore, our relational involvement with the Truth (and his word, *logos*, essence, person) will transform us from the reality of our *old* person to the experiential authenticity of our *new* person (Jn.17:17). And this new person is not only for one's individual benefit but for the benefit of others also. Truth is always for relationship – first with God, then with others.

- **Third**, truth is, therefore, also the relational means for quality relationships with others. This is particularly important for relationships among God's family members (the church) but it extends to all relationships. Paul expands our discussion of the importance of presenting our authentic self to others (Eph.4:25) because this is what reflects the truth of the new person we are and the truth of God's being (Eph.4:21-24). The quality of relationships goes beyond being honest with one's true self. Truth extends deeper (based on God's involvement with us) to reflect also the qualitative difference of God in how he wants us to be involved with others: *agape* involvement. "Speaking the truth in love" (*agape*) is absolutely vital for the development and maturity of God's family (Eph.4:15). The church cannot fulfill its purpose without the function of truth relationally exercised in *agape* involvement with one another in the church and with others in the world. Truth is not an *end* to use as quantitative criteria to differentiate ourselves from others (like moralism) but a *relational means* to be involved with them – authentically, without falsehood or role-playing.

Truth is always for quality relationship. Whenever the presence of truth in our practice stops short of this relational purpose and function, we can expect to find either the misuse of truth or its neglect.

More specifically, truth is for relationships of love. We cannot separate the practice of love from the truth. When Paul said earlier "speaking the truth in love" (Eph.4:15), this was in contrast to being inconsistent, wishy-washy, laboring in relativism (v.14). Yet, we can't swing to the other extreme by becoming doctrinaire with the truth as an end in itself. *The purpose of truth is first and foremost to restore relationship, then to build relationship; its function is to define the relational process and to enable persons to authentically experience its relational outcome.* Thus, in its process truth requires the qualitative difference of God, the quality of love, *agape* involvement. Truth by itself does not distinguish Christ's disciples but *agape* love does (Jn.13:35).

Paul practiced in the church what he preached to the church. One important

example of the use of truth with love for the purpose of relationship was Paul's confrontation of Peter (Gal.2:11ff). Though Peter's theological doctrine denying access to the gospel of grace for the Gentiles was clearly corrected earlier by Jesus (see Acts 10), Peter nevertheless had trouble practicing the necessary balance between law and gospel. The reduction of the truth was involved in this situation (Gal.2:4,5). Peter fell into this reductionism with the relational consequence of separating himself from the Gentiles (v.12) and with further relational repercussions of presenting himself with a false front (v.13, Gk. *hypokrisis*) such that others joined him in his hypocrisy (even Barnabas). Paul used the truth to confront Peter in love for the purpose of relationship and the relational integrity of the church (vv.14ff). As Paul later summed up the issue, the only thing that was important was the relational work (faith) of *agape* involvement (5:6).

One could misconstrue Paul here to mean that we are free from the restrictions of the law, thus creating an imbalance skewed toward freedom (or relational independence). Yet, "the truth of the gospel" (2:5,14) is not a license for independence because truth is always for relationship. Relationships necessitate the inclusion of responsibilities. Jesus defined those relational responsibilities as well as the terms for relationship. Paul follows only this Truth and builds with it, particularly in the church; we will expand on this in later chapters.

The Discipleship Primer

The person and words of Jesus are the Way, the Truth and the Life which define the terms for relationship and the relational responsibilities inherent to relationships in God's design and purpose. Authentic discipleship is involved in the specific relational context and engages the qualitative relational process vulnerably established by Jesus.

As noted earlier, Wilkins makes a case for Matthew's Gospel being a manual for discipleship with his frequent reference to *mathetes* (disciple).¹ Yet, John's Gospel seems to expand the depth of the incarnation in God's revelation of himself and the breadth of following Jesus to the context of the Big Picture. While Matthew's Gospel is specific about the disciples (*mathetai*, plural), John's is broader and serves somewhat as the axis for the rest of the NT to depend or build on, especially regarding faith. Discipleship cannot be selective of these narratives and must be inclusive of the narratives of his whole person and complete words.

But all Christian practice must subscribe to his summary words (*didache*) known as the Sermon on the Mount. This authoritative discourse distills the basic life of those who follow Jesus and call him Lord and is the primer for the necessary culture distinguishing God's people. Discipleship formation simply does not happen without it. Like his early disciples, we need to go to him and let him *teach* us (Gk. *didasko*, essentially to change us for relationship, just as he is, Mt.5:1,2).

The pivotal section in his teaching is when Jesus declares his position on the law and the rest of the OT (Mt.5:17,18). The tone is set for this body of truth when Jesus

1. Michael J. Wilkins, *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 126-172.

didn't abolish (Gk. *katalyo*) the law – that is, dissolve its presence and demolish its responsibility and thus release (free) us from the law. The truth of the gospel did not get rid of the law but fulfills (Gk. *pleroo*, to fill, fully satisfy) the law; Jesus accomplished this with the further purpose of his followers also fulfilling the relational responsibility of it with others. His radical teachings do not imply some otherworldly ethics separated from our existing way of life, nor about a process only for the future. Along with the terms of relationship which he outlines at the beginning of this discourse to be discussed shortly (5:3-12), Jesus defines that responsibility.

Like the truth, the law of God is for relationship but the Pharisees and teachers of the law reduced it to codes of external behavior, the practice of which was only self-serving (5:19,20). In contrast (and conflict) with their reductionism, Jesus establishes the fullness of God's law by defining its deeper meaning and relational purpose. He sums this up with the so-called Golden Rule (7:12); and our righteousness must surpass theirs (5:20). This relational purpose and function of truth, the practice of the law and the following of the gospel have to surpass what others have reduced it to. It will, not in quantity (exceeding the rigorous Pharisees) but in quality (rising above them), when the qualitative difference of who, what and how God is in relationship reflects in who, what and how we are in our relationships.

When Jesus definitively said our righteousness needs to surpass theirs, it is important for us to think in contrary terms, not comparative terms. Their righteousness was a product of reductionism based on the quantitative indicators of their outward behavior. We have a tendency to perceive of righteousness not necessarily as an explicit product of reductionism but nevertheless associated with certain outward behavior. Whether one considers oneself righteous depends on the presence or absence of that behavior. Likewise, Christians often only think about moral quantity in relation to being *holy*, not moral quality. Contrary to this is the righteousness of God.

Righteousness (Gk. *dikaiosyne*) is the essence of that which is just or of one who is just, righteous (*dikaios*). Being *dikaios* means to conform in actions to one's constitutionally just character; therefore, it is expected and what can be counted on to be. "God is righteous" essentially means he is in conformity with *what* and *who* he is. For us generally, his covenant is the ultimate functional expression of his righteousness. It is readily apparent that God acts on his covenant because God is righteous (or just) in his dealings with his people – that is, he is in conformity with his character (Ps.89:33-37). This is what we can expect of God and can count on him to be. God is not the covenant, but the covenant is God, and only a partial expression of what God is.

The law is not the covenant either; it is only the charter for the covenant. When we observe the law (or forms of it) in order to define us or to measure up, we in effect function like a legalist and make the law the covenant. This is reductionism, and it enslaves us to what we do. This also fails to understand the relational process involved in the law for the relational purpose of the covenant: intimate relationship with God. As this is put into proper perspective, it all points to what, who and how God is.

Whenever we inadvertently reduce the essence of God from this process, we are left with propositional truths, teachings, standards, codes to which to conform to be "righteous." This is a quantitative substitute rather than the qualitative difference of being

with God and like him. The latter is the authentic righteousness which conforms to what, who and how God is. A quantitative substitute of righteousness basically focuses on *me* and what we do (e.g., moral quantity) while the qualitative focuses on God and relationship with him. This is why God loves righteousness and justice (same Heb. term for both, *saddiyq*, Ps.11:7).

Being righteous is not merely about displaying character traits. Righteousness is not about merely practicing an ethic of right and wrong. It's about relationship – what, who and how to be in relationships – relationship with him and relationships with others as he designed, redeemed and restored for his creation in general and for his family in particular. This is the authentic righteousness that is contrary to and surpasses those who reduce righteousness, the law, and therefore God, to quantitative terms.

This section (Mt.5:17-20) is the foundation on which discipleship formation must be based and the direction it needs to take. From this pivotal point we can work ourselves back to the beginning of this requisite primer for discipleship.

Identity Formation

Our identity serves to tell us who and what we are, and from this we can present that person to others. A lot can go into forming an identity. No moment in time, singular situation or association adequately defines an identity; its formation is an ongoing process of trial and error, change, development and maturation. Just as the early disciples struggled with their identity, the formation of our identity is critical for discipleship in order to establish confidence as his disciples and to distinguish ourselves before others.

Despite the identity crises which seem to be a routine part of identity formation, Jesus focuses us on two major issues making our identity problematic (Mt.5:13-16):

- The first issue is **ambiguity** in not presenting ourselves in our true identity as light (vv.14,15). Identity becomes ambiguous when what we present of ourselves is different from what we truly are. Or this ambiguity occurs when what we present is a mixture of two or more competing identities.
- The second issue is **shallowness** in our identity, which may have the right appearance in our presentation but not the substance, just like the salt without its substantive quality (v.13). Shallowness is guaranteed when we define ourselves by an outer-in approach as opposed to an inner-out process. Subtle examples of this approach include defining ourselves by the roles we perform, the titles we have, even by the spiritual gifts we have and/or exercise.

These two issues need our serious attention and have to be addressed for authentic discipleship to emerge. Identity formation can become ambiguous or be specific. Popular Christian identity is ambiguous, for example, when a prevailing culture and biblical culture are not clearly distinguished. Authentic discipleship identity is a relationship-specific process engaged in the practice of biblical culture. Lucidity of our identity is rooted in *what* we are in functional relationship with Christ and *who* we become

intimately with the Father in his family together.

This light and salt are the relational outcome of this intimate relationship. Any identity formed while distant from this relationship or in competition with this relationship diminishes the fundamental identity of being God's very own (the light) as well as deteriorates its qualitative substance (the salt). Certainly, then, the authentic presentation of self is crucial to his disciple's identity. The alternative of obscuring our *light* is an issue directly related to Jesus' warning to be acutely aware of falling into the mind-set of a Pharisee (Lk.12:1; Mt.16:6). This approach (alternative *didache*, Mt.16:12) was essentially the process of outwardly taking on an identity that misrepresented what one was, or otherwise differed from what one truly was. Like playacting or roleplaying, this approach was known by the Greek term *hypokrisis*, as noted earlier. Yet, the strong connotations given to hypocrisy do not preclude the subtlety of a process which could be engaged with good intentions or even unintentionally. Dual identities (one for different contexts, e.g., at church and at work) and composite identities are commonly accepted Christian practices which in effect fall into this mind-set.

Furthermore, any identity rooted only in the practice of the truth and his law without being relationally connected (cf. "vine and branches") and ongoingly intimately involved ("remain in me," Jn.15) is not an authentic identity of his followers. The salt without its substantive quality is directly related to the issue of basically undergoing only outward change (*metaschematizo*). No amount of this outer-in approach to what and who we are will yield qualitative substance (*metamorphoo*) because that is the nature of a shallow identity – no depth of relationship with God despite even considerable identification with his truth, law and gospel.

"You are the salt . . . the light." This is a definitive statement of our identity and what we are in Jesus Christ. In contrast to how these verses are commonly used, this is not a challenge about what *to do* but it is a further call about what *to be*. Their function is all about relationship: first, intimate relationship with Jesus and what we become in that relationship as we are taken to the Father; secondly, relationship with others as we exercise our relational responsibility because of who and what we are in Christ and how we represent the Father as his children. Salt and light lose their function when they miss out on the qualitative difference of God experienced in intimate relationship, thus are not being transformed in this qualitative substance, and therefore are unable to share it with others.

The process of identity formation is crucial for all Christians. How do we ensure that we are involved in the complete process as well as engaging him in deeper relationship? For authentic identity to emerge, develop and mature, we now go back to the beginning of Jesus' primer for discipleship: the beatitudes (Mt.5:3-12).

Outlining the Process:

The beatitudes taken together establish the identity for his disciple. Rather than each beatitude understood independently, they constitute interdependent characteristics of the basic identity for all Christians in what, who and how we are. Jointly the beatitudes form the outline of the process of identity formation; and it starts by giving us no basis to define ourselves by what we do or have.

Jesus doesn't explicitly state the absolute importance of the heart in the beginning of this discourse but the heart underlies everything he says and all that we do (e.g., Mt.6:21). The inner person (heart) is the most important part of us, and we cannot evaluate what a person *is* based on the outer person (cf. Mt.15:10-20). Authentic Christian identity essentially becomes the process of redefinition of our *self* from "the inside out." When we address redefining our person from the inside out, however, we encounter a major difficulty. What is it that I honestly see of my self as I look inside? This can become an issue we may rather dance around.

■ **First Beatitude** – In the first three beatitudes (Mt.5:3-5) Jesus provides us with the **critical steps** in the process of transformation and identity formation. When we honestly look inside at our *self*, Jesus said we should be "poor in spirit" (v.3). "Poor" (Gk. *ptochos*) means abject poverty and utter helplessness; therefore this person's only recourse is to beg. Just to be poor (Gk. *penes*) is different from *ptochos* because this person can still, for example, go out to work for food. *Penes* may have little, but *ptochos* has nothing at all. *Ptochos*, Jesus said, is the true condition of our humanity. We are not only imperfect and sinful but inadequate and weak. *This is how God sees us; this is what we need to accept about our self.*

Most of us are resistant to operate with this self-definition, especially if we define ourselves by what we do or have. We may be able to accept this spiritually but for practical, everyday practice how can we live in the real world with this self-definition? Any alternatives and substitutes masking this truth may not leave us so vulnerable, yet we will never be able to dance completely around the truth of our condition.

■ **Second Beatitude** – From this starting point Jesus continues, that if we are indeed *ptochos* then our response will be to "mourn" (v.4, Gk. *pentheo*, lament, grieve, deep sadness). If our condition truly is *ptochos*, not *penes*, then mourning would be the natural response of our heart. Yet, too often we insulate ourselves from such feelings. In terms of how we see and feel about ourselves, issues of self-worth revolve around *ptochos*. We don't usually recognize this because our heart is not aware of feeling *pentheo* (grief, deep sadness), only feeling insecure. Essentially, Jesus said: *we need to open our heart and expose the pentheo by fully acknowledging, admitting, confessing our ptochos.* (This may include seeing the condition of humanity in general.) More specifically, these are not persons, for example, who try to be strong, self-determined, self-sufficient. They come to God for comfort, healing, cleansing, forgiveness, whatever, so they can experience his intimate response ("they will be comforted," Gk. *parakaleo*, term used for every kind of call to a person which is intended to produce a particular effect).

God ongoingly leaves himself vulnerable to our humanity and we must (*dei*) likewise. Intimacy with God requires that our heart live in its true humanity. Going from the first beatitude to the second reflects this relational process. These are the moments we let him see us the most openly and give him the best opportunity to be with us.

These two characteristics (beatitudes) are critical to redefining ourselves and the formation of a valid identity. Yet, God didn't let us remain in this gloomy state and perhaps fall into despair. As he did with the tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners, Jesus extended his favor to us in our helplessness, pursued us in our poverty, took us (the

common) back to his family (the uncommon), then cleaned us up from all our *dirt*, restored our hearts to intimate connection with the Father and legally (through adoption) granted us the relational position as his own child. This relational process can best be defined as *family love* – a process based on God’s mercy and grace that continues for his family to experience *more* now as the church. This operationalizes the relational progression.

■ **Third Beatitude** – The actual experience of this relational reality is not so much a linear process as it is reflexive (back and forth). Since God ongoingly demonstrates that we can trust him intimately, the initial experiences of his family love rightfully conclude with only one perception of our *self*. This perception forms **the foundational characteristic** of the redefined self, the identity of the new person in Christ. Jesus reveals this in the third beatitude as “the meek” (v.5, Gk. *praus*), which means gentle – that is, not hard or resistant to live as one really is. The term *praus* involves *the inner attitude and outer behavior of one who demonstrates what he/she truly is*. Contrary to most images of “meek,” this is not timid weakness but humble power, truth of character based on one’s true condition. How exactly this may be expressed or displayed can be described best by the variety of Jesus’ behaviors with others. Whatever the form in a particular situation, the important matter is that *there is no lie or illusion about the self in being meek*.

We experience difficulty when lies or illusions keep us from facing our *ptochos* or feeling our *pentheo*. This may involve a major area in our life or include other problems and needs along the way, all of which we deal with by ourselves at relational distance instead of trusting intimately in God – even in those times we prayed about the facts of a situation but withheld our heart. Thus, we make relational substitutes and act out some lie; we settle for less and live in some illusion. In strong contrast, the meek (along with the poor in spirit, etc.) are “blessed” (Gk. *makarioi*), which means to be fully satisfied because God is present and intimately involved in their life. Their inheritance is not so much the earth (or land, cf. Ps.37:11) but their portion is God himself, as noted earlier for Abraham, the priests and Levites. This is about well-being and wholeness experienced as the relational outcome of God’s covenant love and faithfulness (his grace and truth). This *blessed* experience is not about happiness with one’s situation or circumstances; life is not reduced to our situations and circumstances. In this redefinition of self, the absolute importance of our total person (from the inside out) and the top priority of intimate relationship become the focus. So, the full satisfaction of being blessed has purely a relational meaning which our vulnerable heart experiences about the joy of intimate relationship with God. This is the ongoing relational outcome of these and the rest of the beatitudes and its process of identity formation.

Humility (as meek) is directly interrelated to the first two beatitudes. There is no basis for any other self-assessment, no matter how much one does, has or accomplishes. Humility is also the acknowledgment that one is enslaved – that is, not free from self-sufficiency, self-determination or self-centeredness. In other words, that one needs help, redemption (a payment made for one’s release). This help took place in the relational process of adoption, which otherwise would have left us enslaved. Humility then

becomes the relational posture of submission to the One who can redeem us from enslavement. The lack of humility is expressed by those who don't acknowledge their enslavement, and think they are *free* (e.g., Jn.8:33). They don't have a permanent place and belong in God's family as long as the adoption process is not complete. Adoption has vital relational significance for our identity, which includes not only heir rights and privileges but responsibilities.

In the Roman socio-cultural context of NT times, adoption was an important means by which to maintain a family. This was especially critical when no male successor existed; so gender-specific adoption (females rarely) was the alternative to continue the family name and property. In those days a father had authority (*potestas*) over sons, and in adoption that *potestas* changed from a natural father to the adopting father. By Roman law, all debts of a new son (or daughter) were cancelled and all ties to the old life were broken. It was now a new life for the adoptee to whom the new father laid claim. Whatever privileges and heir rights came with this new family included responsibilities. The adopted son had responsibility to bear the new father's name as well as to represent the father. The new father lived on in the son so to speak, yet according to Roman law not from the time of the father's death but from the time of the son's birth or adoption. Therefore the privilege and responsibility of heirship are based not on the father's death but by virtue of their existing relationship. Birth or adoption, not death, constituted heirship.²

It is with this sense of adoption that Paul spoke of the incarnation and Christ's redeeming work to take us to the Father and the transforming work of his Spirit to establish us in his family with relational intimacy (Gal.4:4-7). With the permanent reality of this relationship as his own children (Jn.8:35) and in the claim and authority (*potestas*) of our Father on our lives (Eph.1:5; Acts 20:28), it is crucial for our identity formation to practice the relational significance of "*the Spirit of adoption*" (Rom.8:15). In actual daily practice, our relationship with God functions either at relational distance due to some kind of enslavement or with intimate involvement as daughter or son. The tension and conflict between these two functional practices reflect the ongoing process of relationship with God in which there are no neutral moments.

■ **Fourth Beatitude** – The relational progression implicit in the beatitudes leads us to the next identity characteristic: "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt.5:6). In experiencing the first three beatitudes and intimate connection with Jesus while being taken to the Father to become a part of his very own family, we need to understand the fourth beatitude in this relational process and the context of adoption.

Righteousness (Heb. *sedaqah*) in the OT is not a matter of actions conforming to a given set of absolute legal standards but of behavior which is in keeping with the reciprocal relationship between God and his people. Paul extends that understanding; God's righteousness is essentially about his covenant dealings with his people, who are constituted, as a relational outcome, a new people (Rom.1:17; Eph.4:24).

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

The term “righteousness” (Gk. *dikaioyne*), as noted earlier, involves the essence of him who is just, righteous (*dikaios*), and thus the fulfillment of who God is, along with his claims and authority (potestas as Father). Being *dikaios* is this conformity to his character and, therefore, it is expected and what can be counted on to be – particularly in the relationship. This is how God is and can be counted on, as we have observed. The basic pursuit (“hunger and thirst” as the prime acts to sustain life and to help it grow) of righteousness is the fundamental relational process of pursuing God, of being like in character (the relational outcome of transformation) for deeper relationship together and of representing the Father in continuing and building his family (the immediate relational responsibilities of adoption). Going after righteousness is not seeking character traits or ethical behavior but pursuing the very essence of God and wanting to participate further in his life. Going after the former becomes merely the righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes but the latter surpasses the righteousness of reductionism, as discussed earlier (5:20). This is what God expects of us and wants to count on us for. Without this depth of righteousness our identity will develop shallowness or ambiguity in what and how we are in relationships. Those who pursue the relational righteousness of God will “be filled” (Gk. *chortazo*, to be filled to satisfaction) because they will experience deeper intimate relationship with God and meet the desires of eternity planted in their heart for *more* (Ecc.3:11). This beatitude is **the growth characteristic** of identity formation.

- **Fifth Beatitude** – Being the relational object of his loving responses and experiencing further intimate relationship together cannot remain a private and solely individual matter. If it becomes contained to the personal level, it will be enslaving, not redeeming and transforming. Thus, the fifth beatitude naturally follows (5:7). With the mercy (Gk. *eleos*, compassion) received from God, his authentic disciples become personal witnesses (as intimate adopted children) and now direct donors of that mercy to others. The compassionate (*eleemon*) is a given characteristic in identity formation, not an option; and that person is blessed (fully satisfied) because they are fulfilling God’s design and purpose for his creation, plus the recipients of further compassion themselves.

- **Sixth Beatitude** – We should never assume the ongoing condition of our heart nor the state of our relationship with God. Intimate relationship on his terms requires an ongoing process of our hearts open and coming together. As noted earlier, the common and the Uncommon are incompatible for relationship. This necessitates the ongoing transformation to a pure (Gk. *katharos*, clean, clear) heart. A heart clear of any relational barriers or distance, clean of Satan’s lies, our substitutes and illusions, this heart will continue to “see God” (5:8). “See” (Gk. *horao*) implies more than the mere act of seeing but involves more intensively to experience, partake of, or share in something, be in the presence of something and be affected by it. This depth and substance of relationship is the intimate process of hearts vulnerable to each other and coming together in deeper involvement. When our ongoing experience (not necessarily continuous) with God is not *horao*, we need to examine honestly where our heart is. If, for example, we don’t dance around our *ptochos* and *pentheo*, our heart responds with greater trust and intimacy. It is only when we deny or bury this part of our *self* that we effectively keep relational distance from God. The early disciples struggled with heart issues and thus had difficulty

seeing (*horao*) God even in Jesus' presence (Jn.14:7-9). Without a clean and clear heart there will be shallowness in our identity formation. We must also never underestimate Satan's effort to distance us from our heart nor be unaware of the subtle presence and working of his lies. Lies and illusions keep us from the truth about our self, with the relational consequence of not living intimately connected to God in relationship. This sixth beatitude is **the contingency characteristic** for our identity.

■ **Seventh Beatitude** – It is not enough for his adopted children to share mercy (compassion) with others. To represent the Father and to continue to extend his family involves a deeper level of involvement identified in this next beatitude as “the peacemakers” (5:9). This is not merely an effort to reduce violence, stop war or create the absence of conflict. “Peacemaker” (Gk. *eirenopoios*) means a reconciler, one who seeks the well-being of others. This means not only to stop conflict but to restore relationships, just as the Father and his Son do. Reconciliation of all his creation is the Father's deepest desire (Col.1:19,20). And being reconcilers is the adoptee's responsibility that fully represents the Father and extends his family. That's why such peacemakers are identified as his sons and daughters.

■ **Eighth Beatitude** – Along with the benefits and responsibilities of belonging to his family as one of his very own come repercussions. These are the relational reactions by others to the practicing representatives of the Father's relational righteousness. This eighth and last beatitude is the consequence of the distinguishing character identifying his people. As the prophets and Jesus experienced, the repercussions (persecutions) and reactions are part of the territory of being in his family (kingdom) and intimately involved with the Uncommon (5:10-12). This may be a difficult identity characteristic to embrace, and we may also have a tendency to limit it to unique situations. Yet, we need to realize that not only is the uncommon incompatible with the common but in conflict with it also. Relational reactions from the common will come in all forms and varying degrees as long as the uncommon extends itself to the common with a critique of hope. We might call this **the consequential characteristic** of our identity. While the prestige of this identity aspect may not be apparent, the privilege of being clearly identified with him and as one of his own children must not be lost in our identity formation (cf. Rom.8:17).

These interdependent characteristics together form our basic identity in what, who and how we are as followers of Christ. They are only, however, the outline of the process of identity formation. Functionally, this process opens our heart to the redefinition of self which Jesus brought, freed us to live, and established us in by his earthly life (person and words), death and resurrection. In the process, he is the one who redeems us *from the old* and transforms us *to the new*. The process is ongoing (as well as reflexive) in its development and maturation. As the identity issues of ambiguity and shallowness become resolved, our identity takes on a distinct presence before others and in the world. That's why Jesus can make such a definitive statement that *we are the salt and the light*.

Established Ways

The remaining sections of the Sermon on the Mount address the function of this new identity and specific practices of the redefined self. While Jesus' *didache* was not a departure from the existing teachings related to God's law, they definitely had a character previously unseen by God's people. These sections contain very specific examples in everyday life. The examples involve how we do relationships with others, how we define ourselves and how we're involved with God – examples with which Jesus is in conflict. These examples, in fact, are uncomfortably close to our own practices today. What they reflect is that there was basically *an established way to do things*, which Jesus countered with his teachings.

Whether or not those who were amazed at the conclusion of his discourse understood his conflict with their prevailing ways, they certainly must have realized it later. One could not become amazed or excited about the man or his teachings without eventually coming to the realization that: (1) what he *is* and what he says both stand in conflict with those prevailing norms; (2) his teachings cannot be combined nor neutrally coexist with those norms; thus, (3) any explicit or implicit acceptance of those norms puts us in conflict with Jesus and his teachings; so (4) we cannot justifiably be selective in what we want to practice of his teachings and what we still want to maintain of those norms; and (5) embracing his *didache* necessitates a corresponding rejection of those prevailing norms. This is what makes the Sermon on the Mount so difficult to embrace without taking specific verses (such as 5:13; 6:33; 7:12) out of the context of his total discourse. The tension or conflict here becomes seeing Jesus through the lens of our predispositions and biases while wanting relationship with God on our terms.

Next to each prevailing norm or established way, Jesus introduces his contrary alternative with the declaration "I tell you" (5:20,22,26,28,32,34,39,44; 6:2,5,16,25,29; 7:23); whether these contrasts are also a pedagogical means, they certainly are a critique of hope for the redemption from substitutes involving *less* and the transformation to *more*. Jesus declared strong opposition to many of the religious values, practices and institutions of his day – and, by application, of our day.

The importance of "an established way to do things" is a critical issue in understanding Jesus' discourse. We know that the established patterns of the Pharisees were legalistic, rigid in their thinking and self-serving in their religious practices. What may not be as apparent is that their established ways would involve quite a loss to them if changed. This loss underlies much of their resistance to Jesus.

The essential nature of their established way of life was a *merit system*. They interpreted God's law as a code to keep for their own righteousness. By doing so they also established further codes, patterns, ways of doing things, the keeping of which would merit certain prestige, privilege or power. This kind of system generates a highly competitive context (in which Jesus was a threat) where values and practices are exercised for self-serving purposes – much like Western contexts today. *Any merit system negatively impacts how we basically define ourselves, what we essentially practice in relationships, how we see God and are involved with him*. These are the specific issues Jesus addresses in this discourse which makes it uncomfortable to take totally to heart.

The conflicts Jesus declares and the contrasts he constitutes throughout this discourse are fundamental to the life of God and his desires and purpose for his family. Any resistance to them reflects the issue we have with *change* – resisting change from our established ways because of our investment in them. Change will always be an issue if it involves *loss* rather than the transformation to *more*.

The Character of Substance

When Jesus declared “But I tell you” (5:22,28,32,34,39,44), he brought forth the substantive meaning of the law and the prophets. The *letter of the law* was the prevailing norm in his day. That practice, however, operated essentially as a system of constraints to keep them from negative acts, without any responsibility for further action. Inevitably, in the process this kind of system focused on outward behavior, not the substance behind it; and it created a process of life practices which served as an *end* for oneself rather than as a *means* to be involved with God and others.

In contrast, Jesus opened up the *spirit of the law* for which to be responsible. This certainly made the practice of God’s law much more involving of our total person, if not demanding. Yet, this further responsibility was not given to burden or constrain us. It represents positive relational opportunities to grow in our new person. The interrelated focus between the total person and relationships always emerges in Jesus’ person and words because they are fundamental to who, what and how God is. As he reveals this here, he is giving us understanding of the primary purpose behind all of God’s directives, the very heart of God’s desires for his people. The spirit of the law conforms to the essence of God and his desires.

We need to understand in our Christian practice where inadvertent alternatives or substitutes have replaced the qualitative substance Jesus presents. Two of the overriding and far-reaching effects of many established ways of doing things (past and present) are: (1) it gives more emphasis to secondary aspects of life than to the primary aspects, and as a result, (2) it does not give top priority to interpersonal relationships. The consequence directly or indirectly for all of us – even if we don’t subscribe to this – is that the *quality* of life is forfeited and substituted with the *quantities* of life.

An underlying concern the Pharisees and scribes had was about doing the “right” thing. Their approach with the letter of the law, however, functioned only to keep them from negative acts; it did not serve to lead them to positive action. As illustrated by the examples Jesus raised (5:21-48), they felt they fulfilled their duty as long as they maintained the limited responsibility defined by the letter – that is, merely avoiding overt negative behavior. Murder and adultery, for example, were only defined literally (by the letter); the deeper implications of God’s design and purpose for these relational principles were not embraced and probably not even considered. Obviously, refraining from negative behavior has some value, but the absence of positive action is of greater importance to God. As the counterpart to legalism, even moralism is not the righteousness God expects from us. Even at best, the moral quantity of moralism only focuses on what Christ saved us *from* without addressing what he saved us *to*. Moralists and legalists are misled in thinking that conforming to the letter is conforming to God’s

desires and therefore to who, what, how he is. This is a reductionist view of God that effectively puts him in a box and redefines relationship with him on one's own terms.

One major effect of this approach to life is to increasingly focus on the outward dimensions of one's action or, essentially, the priority of *doing* over *being* – that is, what we do and how we do it over what we are and how we are. Personal responsibility becomes limited to the external presence or absence of certain activity. Outward presentation then occupies the main emphasis. In other words, what is truly OK is substituted with what appears to be OK; it doesn't necessarily matter whether *image* is consistent with *reality*, whether what truly exists is not what appears to be.

These are practices from reductionism which not only fall short of God's righteousness but become contradictory (by outside-in approach) to what God is (heart) and how he is (inner-out). When this happens, the purpose and function behind God's commandments are lost to one's concern to do the "right" thing; or that purpose and function are constrained in one's narrow definitions of God's commandments. In the relational consequences of the latter, for example, "an eye for an eye" leaves no room to make a positive response to those who unjustly treat you. Functionally in everyday practice, within the limits of this approach, there is no opportunity for quality relationships, no importance for the total *person* and, indeed, no room to love.

There is no greater issue to God than how we do relationships. Relationship is God's nature and intimate relationship is unique ultimately to the Godhead. The issue began after creation in the garden, extended east of Eden through the covenant to the incarnation. Throughout all this, God has done everything for relationships, his desires focus only on relationship, and what he has planned ahead (here and in the future) is for relationships. So, God is possessed with how we do relationships; and how we do relationships emerges from how we define our self.

Spirit of the Law Revisited

Contrary to the quantitative focus of the letter, the spirit of the law returns us to the qualitative importance of the law. This perspective reveals the substantive difference of God and his design and purpose for life.

As we previously discussed in various areas, the *heart* clearly emerges throughout Jesus' teachings as more important than the *mind*, though not at the exclusion of the mind. Jesus also demonstrated the importance of the heart in how he lived and interacted with persons. This is not an argument for an anti-intellectual position; the thoughtful mind is always necessary. It is, however, a position against intellectualism and the dependence on the process of rationalism to establish one's life, which involve the practice of reductionism. Modernism has made us susceptible to these tendencies, either directly as a worldview or indirectly with its influence on our established ways of doing things.

When our faith becomes dominated by the workings of the mind, then the substance of the heart and how God created us for relationship are reduced (if not lost) in faith's application and practice. Even the pronouncements of correct doctrine or the presence of a very active, successful church are not sufficient to fill this gap without this

vital qualitative dimension (as noted earlier about the church at Ephesus, Rev.2). Spiritual hunger and thirst, if recognized, involve the void or the unmet needs deep in our heart, and they seek to satisfy the eternity-substance God planted in the heart. The search for spirituality is an effort to recover our heart; and authentic spiritual formation reestablishes our heart with God.

As the center of our *being*, the heart is more than the emotional base for our feelings; it is also the spiritual locus around which the depth and quality of everyday life is lived. This seems somewhat abstract but its effects are distinctly realized, if not always explainable. Invariably, distance or detachment from our heart has serious repercussions – most notably in the depth and quality of our relationships. (That’s why Satan’s goal for Christians is to distance us from our hearts.) As long as we distance or detach our heart in this way, being vulnerable becomes a place to avoid; and the overuse of the mind is the main comfort zone utilized to keep us from vulnerability. Some Christians justify a rationalized approach because of skepticism or caution about *feelings* becoming too important an element in determining our faith. Yet, Jesus is not leading us into subjectivism, or to antinomianism. With the guidance as well as the critique of the invariable objective Word, Jesus is demonstrating to us the qualitative substance of how God created us and what he desires for us to experience.

Contrary to many of our established ways, the mind should work in *accord with* the heart, not against it. They are not mutually exclusive, yet one can dominate or obscure the other. In God’s created design and purpose, just as *being* is the antecedent for *doing*, the heart takes precedence over the mind. By revealing and making primary the qualitative dimension of the spirit of the law, Jesus pointedly shared the deep meaning of God’s desires for his people. As we reflect on the various examples Jesus set forth to illustrate the principle of the spirit of the law (5:21-48), they unequivocally reveal the primary purpose God has for his people: **relationships**.

In this discourse Jesus countered the established ways of doing relationships with a process of *person*-involved relationships, the depths of which can be very threatening to us as it was to the Pharisees and scribes. We cannot practice the spirit of the law while distant or detached from our heart. The spirit of the law takes an inner-out approach (as opposed to outer-in of the letter of the law) that requires the heart involvement of my total person as well as the perception of others in their total person from inner-out. We don’t truly see our *person* or other *persons* without this inner-out approach. Yet, the importance of the heart can be a blessing or a threat. **With the spirit of the law Jesus revealed to us: one**, what it means to love; **two**, the intimate relational process of love; and, **three**, the dignity and integrity of the *persons* involved in this process. All of these can touch our insecurities, confront our comfort zones and defense mechanisms, while challenging us to change from the *old* to the *new*, because these all deal with the issues in our heart. Those issues, of course, make us vulnerable; and how threatened we are depends on how much we want to change in order to experience the *more* of the new.

Unlike what is implicit in defining oneself by what one does, Jesus doesn’t want us to be scared of doing the wrong thing. Likewise, he wasn’t concerned so much about his disciples always doing the right thing. His primary concern and desires for our practice are to give priority to our relationships and to the *persons* involved in them. In this Jesus wants us to love, yet his way, not ours.

At the same time, Jesus wasn't relieving us of responsibility when he abolished the legalistic systems of his day. To the contrary, he gave us more responsibility (and opportunity). He did indeed relieve us of the burden of responsibility created by the letter of the law as a system of self-justification/righteousness. Yet, he also gave us the further responsibility of the spirit of the law. The spirit of the law does not represent merely a greater flexibility and application of God's law. Its whole design is to lead us into taking positive action in our relationships with others – namely, to care and to love. Jesus is taking us to a further and deeper level of relationships, beyond our established ways of doing relationships. It is with this in mind that he says “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48); that is, as adoptees representing their Father, he defines our responsibility essentially as: **“you are to relate to others as your heavenly Father relates to others, including you.”** His emphasis here is not on *what to do* but on *how to be involved* with others. This is the key verse for the spirit of the law.

Obviously, we cannot relate to others to the extent in quality or quantity as God does. That's not his point. Quantity, like moral quantity, is not the goal of “perfect.” We can relate to others *just as* God does; this is not an unrealistic ideal. “Perfect” can never be the outcome of our *doing* (what we do and how we do it), but “perfect” (Gk. *teleios*, describes one who has reached its purpose, thus is full-grown, mature) can be the expression of our *being* – what, who and how we are as our new person in Christ. This is the qualitative difference of the Uncommon which is distinct from the common (established ways), thus distinguishing those who practice this level of relationships.

What does taking positive action involve? Foremost, it involves taking a caring and loving *depth* of action *relationally* toward the other person. Depth and relationally are key qualifying words. Positive action must always connect with the other person in the context of the relationship, not merely as an activity or as some deed as an end in itself. Further, as Jesus takes us deeper into this process of love (5:38-48), this action does not necessarily involve the expected thing to do or even the polite thing to do. Merely being nice is not the substance of care and love Jesus extends and expects; *niceness* does not require much of a depth of action from us. These kinds of alternatives are more from our established ways of doing relationships and become substitutes for deeper involvement. These tend to stay at the level of the mind rather than get down to the heart level. In this practice we become reduced to *reactors* to others' behavior (“hate your enemies,” “love those who love you,” “greet only your brothers”) rather than being *responders* to the other's *person* with a new action of love (going deeper and beyond what the situation typically calls for).

Distance and shallowness in relationships have always been issues since Adam and Eve wore “masks” and hid in the garden. In the process down through the years we've established patterns of relationships which his people have not done a good job critiquing (historically and currently). We are so far from honesty about our fears of being vulnerable (as Adam acknowledged being afraid of his vulnerability, Gen.3:10), we are usually even unaware of those feelings. Distance in relationships is the implicit expectation we have acquiesced to and settled for – even to the extent of wanting it this way. The consequence is that we get comfortable, set in these ways and resistant to change.

Contrary to this and in conflict with it, Jesus countered how we define ourselves

and do relationships. In the so-called Golden Rule (7:12), he does not tell us to treat others according to how they want to be treated, no matter what prevailing norms or conventional wisdom prescribe. The context for this verse (7:1-12) addresses relational honesty in our involvement with others (vv.1-6) and with our Father (vv.7-11). Ironically, there is a shift in emphasis from the previous chapters that now turns the focus on ourselves first (“first take the plank out of your own eye,” “ask . . . seek . . . knock”).

But the key verse in this section is the Golden Rule: “so in everything, **do to others what you would have them do to you.**” Jesus said this is the sum, what *is*, what the law and the prophets (God’s Word) is all about. This key verse ties together with the key verse for the spirit of the law (5:48). Because of our intimate experience with God’s mercy, grace and *agape* involvement, we know *how* we want to be treated. Now Jesus tells us to go forth as one who has experienced love, healing, redemption, reconciliation, wholeness and, then, to treat others as has been done (and as you want to continue) *for you*. This is the relational reality of the qualitative substance experienced in the new life (*zoe*) in Christ. God’s initiative of love satisfies how we want to be loved and thus establishes our love for others (cf. Jn.13:34).

The depth and quality of the substance prescribed in the spirit of the law have no substitute or alternative. It is within this substance that the top priority of relationships will fulfill the depth of God’s primary purpose for his people. In this substance, no activities, accomplishments, acquisitions or secondary things will achieve greater importance than the *person* and be more qualitatively satisfying for the heart. This is *who* we are with the Father, *what* we are becoming with Christ, and *how* we are to live with his Spirit. This is *whom* we represent as his adoptees, *what* we witness to as his disciples, and *how* we do ministry together as his family in the world. In contrast to reductionists, this is how our righteousness needs to be.

The Presentation of Self

Authentic righteousness directly engages relationships in the presentation of self. All relationships are affected by the specific presentation each participant makes. The quality of any relationship depends on the accuracy of that presentation. Here is where righteousness needs to be conformity to what one truly is, or else we cannot have confidence in what to expect or to count on from one’s person. God’s righteousness is absolutely vital for our confidence in how he will be in the relationship. God cannot present himself in any other way, which is why the incarnation is the ultimate revelation of God’s authenticity. How we present our self involves this issue of authenticity, and what others can expect and count on from us.

In further relational contexts, Jesus strongly expresses his conflict with the established way by using the term hypocrite (6:2,5,16; 7:5). We need to broaden our understanding of this term and address the process behind it. This is crucial because it not only reflects a prevailing norm but a mind-set operating today.

As already noted, the term hypocrite involved playing a role or taking on an identity different than one’s true self. Just like an actor, this presentation of self was made

to a crowd, an audience, observers – before others with interest. Jesus begins this section with a warning for living our righteousness before others “to be seen” (6:1, Gk. *theaomai*, to view attentively, deliberately observing an object to perceive its detail). In others words, this is a presentation to be seen and noticed by others. Related to *theoreo*, the observer functions as one taking in a scene or watching a drama unfold, not for what it’s worth but more so from the wonderment or imagination of the observer. That is, there is a certain effect, image, even illusion, the actor seeks to establish about one’s presentation of self. This practice is further addressed by Jesus in exposing their efforts “to be seen” (6:5) and “to show” (6:16) others – both using the same Greek term (*phaino*) in this context to indicate a contingency effort before others in the hope to become visible, be conspicuous, or essentially recognized by others for one’s presentation about self.

While the term *phaino* comes from *phos* (light), there is no light in this presentation, no substantive truth, nothing apparently authentic. This is how we need to understand hypocrite today – not so much as a blatant lie or subversion of the truth but as the substitute (sometimes inadvertent) for authenticity. We all want recognition, we all need to be affirmed. When recognition and affirmation, however, become reduced to being seen by others and how others perceive our behavior, the authentic presentation of self is subjected to compromise.

Relational functions like acts of charity (6:2-4), prayer (vv.5-7) and fasting (vv.16-18) become subtly more important merely as *doing something* – purpose often unknowingly lost in the practice. In this outward-in approach, relational *means* of involvement turn into individual *ends* resulting in relational distance. Helping the needy is a means of giving one’s self to others for greater relational involvement, prayer is a means for greater intimacy with God, fasting is a means of submission to God for deeper relationship. Instead, they are reduced to activities Christians should do, more as ends for oneself. Consequently, the objectives for these relational functions – or worship, church work, fellowship, and so on – are considered fulfilled merely by just having done the activity, especially before others. In the relational functions of prayer, fasting, worship, Bible study, the reality of such outer-in practice is that relationship with God is actually subordinated and distance is created in the process.

Reductionism deeply affects our righteousness and conformity to what we truly are in Christ because of the outer-in definition of self used as a substitute. Obviously, this translates into our relationships and how we relate to others. In a merit system such as ours, we are not only dealing with prevailing norms but an operational mind-set. Such a merit system depends on image more than authentic reality, on appearance more than substance, that is, on the visibility of one’s achievements (being recognized) or on others’ perceptions (illusions) of them for the achiever. In Christian practice, this includes style (e.g., of worship music) and method (e.g., of ministry). What truly exists is often not what appears to be. All of this involves a presentation of ourselves which lacks authenticity, which lacks quality, which lacks substance, which lacks the inner-out relational righteousness of God. This happens routinely with a mind-set in which the appearance of reality is substituted and settled for over the actual substance behind it.

The recognition of what we are and the affirmation of our *person* are qualitative issues of substance, which are in fundamental conflict with the quantitative reductionism

of these issues. In our personal struggles for recognition and affirmation we have to reject those substitutes and not settle for anything less than the authentic relational substance of God. Jesus presents to us this substance in the incarnation and his *didache* here. Contrary to the reductionist effort to be seen he shares that our Father clearly “sees” (6:4,6,18, Gk. *blepo*). This term is the most basic of a word-group having to do with sight or observation; others include the terms *theaomai* and *horao* discussed earlier. *Blepo* denotes exercising one’s capacity of sight, to look at with interest, to be distinctly aware of – suggesting intention or deliberation (cf. 5:28, the implication of *blepo* as a relational act).

The simple fact is our Father *blepo* intimately “what is done in secret” (Gk. *kryptos*, hidden, unseen), that is, what has relational significance from the inner-out. Our Father doesn’t need to use imagination or wonderment (like *theaomai*) to see what we are, nor does he need deep contemplation (like *horao*) to experience how we are, as we need to about him. Our Father simply *blepo* what truly exists, so he intimately knows what, who and how we are. Then, he “will reward you” (Gk. *misthos*, wages, recompense received), that is, our Father will respond relationally to us, not with quantitative things or secondary matter but with his intimate self, thus clearly recognizing *what* we are and affirming *who* we are as one of his very own.

This is our Father’s intimately relationship-specific involvement with us. This is his authentic presentation of himself to us, with no substitutes and nothing less than what, who, how he truly is. Now the burden of authenticity is upon us in what, who and how we present of our self. We can count on his righteousness and we have to account for our righteousness. Discipleship formation cannot be valid without it.

Pursuing the Father

As Jesus addresses us specifically to our relationship with God, we need to grasp this special quality of relationship which needs to characterize our relationships with others as well. He makes eleven references to “*your Father*” (6:1,4,6,8,14,15,18,26,32). These are not casual, matter-of-fact references; in this relational context he is not just *the* Father, or anyone’s Father, but *our* Father – even more specifically, *my* Father. These are vital relational messages which God is sharing with us about how he feels about us and what the nature of our relationship with him is. From the midst of this apparent litany of prescriptions and injunctions emerge clearly the intimate presence and response of our heavenly Father. In contrast to the relational distance with merely a transcendent God, with a stern or businesslike Father, this is the intimacy with his daughter or son that we can have currently with our Father. In taking to heart the substance of his relational messages (not as information) to us, what a beautiful relationship picture of intimacy we have in this passage.

Our current mind-set may not be readily open to such intimacy, especially since it’s on his terms. Despite how we may deal with it, this is the truth and reality of how God feels about us and about our relationship with him – what we can count on him for. In what may be hard reading to some, in reality, is God’s loving pursuit of our authentic self, our total person (as indicated in the beatitudes). Intimacy is the basis of our

experience with him as well as the baseline for relationships to exercise in our involvement with others. As the relational recipients of the incarnation, it is our position of *privilege* and our unique *prestige* to have this intimacy with God; no one is worth more to him than his very own. Likewise, we have to account for intimacy in the presentation of our self because it is now within our experiential means to cultivate intimacy with others. Furthermore, it is his rightful demand of us: *to relate to others as he relates and to treat others as you want to continue to be treated.*

Intimacy is *the* crucial quality in the new relational order of life in Christ, and what we need to account for, first with our Father then with others. Yet, the mind cannot process and engage this intimacy; it is the workings of the heart. Accordingly, no amount of *doing* can make this intimate connection without the precedence of our *being* (who, what and how we truly are).

In a merit system the external perceptions of what we do and have are necessary feedback to establish one's value and worth. This emphasis, however, does not involve only the individual. For example, outer presentations, as it relates to one's self-assessment or self-image, do not involve just "looking good" but it includes by necessity "looking good in comparison to others." This *comparative process* is essential in establishing one's self-worth; and this issue also overlaps into the next section on judging others (7:1-5). The repercussions on relationships in this comparative process of a merit system are widespread, which will be discussed in later chapters. These relational consequences are Paul's focus in his indicting statement: "Knowledge puffs up but love builds up" (1 Cor.8:1). In principle, this is about the merit process of reductionism in which what one has and does serves to benefit only that individual, contrary to the intimacy of *agape* involvement which builds up others and relationships, particularly God's family.

This begs some uncomfortable questions for us. What motivates us to get an education? What drives us to perform well in our occupations? What influences us even to get married, have a house and raise a family? Have we become more influenced by the self-serving purpose of acquiring prestige, privilege and power from these rather than utilizing them as a means to fulfill the purpose God intends for our lives? Anyone who *blepo* such people of faith would ask, in what do you put your everyday working trust?

In appearance, the holy trinity of our religious ways is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We can build a case, however, to support that the functional trinity of our established ways of doing things (religious or secular) is education, job and family. Without trying to diminish the importance of these three areas, we need to understand the pursuit of such goals as a prevailing norm whether it's in a religious context or other socio-cultural context. This pursuit (not the type) of education, job and family has little, if any distinction between a Christian and secular context. Their pursuit is so prevailing that it dominates our priorities, commitments and attachments. It is this control on our lives that Jesus addresses in the adjacent section of his *didache* (6:19-34).

These teachings reveal his direct conflict with this kind of mind-set and prevailing practices. Certainly, this does not rule out the pursuit of education, job and family. Yet, it does reject the dominant tendency to pursue them without critique, which reflects the dependence on oneself to acquire prestige, privilege and power. Jesus is not just talking about materialism, money or even providing for the basic necessities of life. He is

addressing a way of life the consequence of which reduces the person to secondary matter (defined by what one has and does) and compromises trust and intimacy in relationships (particularly with the Father) for one's competitive pursuit to establish one's self-worth, to satisfy one's desires and needs, to secure one's future.

These established ways and prevailing norms are clearly counterproductive to trusting God. Conversely, trusting God is not efficient for daily practice in the mind-set of a merit system; trusting God is not considered proactive for the individual and too constraining for individualism. The intention to trust God may be there but functional trust is superseded by the priorities, commitments and attachments to the pursuit of what essentially is an alternative righteousness – the alternative and substitute from reductionism. Whether we can recognize it or not, the dominant presence and control this influence has on our lives becomes enslaving.

The issue of controlling influence on our lives is absolutely critical in relationship with God, specifically with the Father. "Your Father" is not a title nor a family figurehead but a function of relationship. This relational function, however, is not unilateral; it is only bilateral and thus reciprocal. That is, "your Father" only functions with "his son" or "his daughter." Any enslavement precludes this relational function as his child. In other words, we cannot relationally experience "our Father" without authentic living and practicing as his very own daughter or son. We don't merely take on a title of son or daughter when adopted but a relational function and responsibility.

From our previous discussion on freedom, enslavement and belonging in his family as his own child (Jn.8:31ff), a slave is not free to experience God as Father and participate in his family as his child. This same process also extends to all Christians functionally for experiential reality, not spiritual reality. That is, we need to be freed (redeemed) from controlling influences on our lives which effectively enslave us. Such freedom, however, is not for an individual *end* but a relational means. Redemption is always connected vitally to adoption. In other words, if we are living indeed free then our practice will function as his son or daughter (Jn.8:35,36). This is the only reason Jesus redeems us.

If we are truly following Jesus, then we must (*dei*) follow him to intimate relationship with the Father. If we are forming authentic discipleship, we must ongoingly engage our Father in this intimate relationship functioning as his adopted children. This is why Jesus came, this is where following him leads us, this is the relational progression of discipleship from disciple to friend to family member. *If our practice does not relationally function distinctly as the Father's adopted son or daughter, then something is enslaving us.*

Controlling influences on our lives effectively constrain our true identity in who, what and how we are in Christ as his followers, and/or essentially substitute an alternative righteousness for the relational righteousness of God. The relational consequence is distance from "your Father." If our righteousness will surpass the righteousness of reductionism (and that of the Pharisees and scribes), we will need to redirect our life pursuit, reprioritize, reorder our commitments and attachments by vulnerably practicing Jesus' ongoing relational imperative: "seek [Gk. *zeteo*, actively pursue to experience] first his Kingdom [rendered his family] and his righteousness" (6:33); **actively pursue foremost the experience of your Father's family and the**

essence of who your Father is for deeper relationship together (cf., fourth beatitude, 5:6), and all else in your life will be satisfied – even in some of the quantitative areas.

This is the key verse for the section that combines with the key verse in the following section (7:12) and the key verse for the spirit of the law (5:48) to operationalize the fundamental practices of discipleship. These three key verses are all about the Father because Jesus came to reveal his Father and to take to the Father those who follow him in the relational progression. Authentic discipleship always leads to the Father and becomes a function of relationship with him. Thus, this is the righteousness we need to account for in our identity as his adopted children, and the authentic presentation of our self others need to be able to count on in our relationships, most notably with our Father.

Summary Accountability

Jesus revealed elsewhere (Lk.13:22-27, as noted earlier) that our most basic practice is *relational work* – reflected in the metaphor of the narrow door. This rigorous emphasis continues in the metaphor of the narrow gate as Jesus concludes his defining discourse by clearly stating the summary accountability for all Christians.

All of life (*zoe*) is predicated on relational work. Whatever life practice or process is exercised involves engagement in relational work. At the heart of Jesus' *didache* is the ultimate relational work which cannot be reduced in any way nor substituted for in any form.

The relational work Jesus has set forth in this discourse is contrary to the prevailing practices and norms (7:13-14) and in conflict with the outward-in presentations of self from reductionism (7:15-20). Authentic relational work is not about doing something (7:22), nor about associations, beliefs or intentions about “Lord” (7:21). The authentic Christian life is only about intimate relationship (“I don’t know you,” 7:23). And the summary accountability of this relational work converges in the relational work of the Father’s adopted children, whom he rightfully claims by redemption (having paid for our release) and over whom he exercises authority as his sons and daughters. It is only this functioning daughter or son **“who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”** (v.21b) who will currently participate in and relationally experience his family.

This is the righteous privilege, intimate experience and relational responsibility of having him as our Father, of representing our Father and extending his family. We are accountable to authentically engage in all the relational work set forth in his *didache* (7:24-27). These teachings are also the primer for the biblical culture of God’s people and the heart of the *uncommon*. It outlines the fundamental beliefs, values and practices which are culturally specific to his family and, therefore, critical to the identity of those who follow Christ and to what distinguishes them from the *common* – even the religious common. This is the relational righteousness which surpasses the righteousness of reductionism.

In his total discourse is the process of discipleship formation for which we cannot make substitutes nor settle for less. Yet, the distinct process of discipleship formation is certainly not linear in its development, as the beatitudes involve. Despite its reflexive nature, there are no shortcuts we can take here or there. His closing metaphor about

building a house warns us that on appearance variations of discipleship may look like valid discipleship. What is crucial is the foundation – the basis for the authenticity of our discipleship and what determines the qualitative substance and the relational order of our lives. Jesus unequivocally states that the certainty of the underpinning for his followers is grounded in practicing all his words contained in this discourse. They are not optional, negotiable, nor can we be selective about which of his words to practice.

The Sermon on the Mount makes discipleship either a burden or a blessing. It is a burden or threat to those who define themselves by what they do or have, and to any other reductionist mind-set. It is a blessing for “the meek” and for those who hunger and thirst for *more* – for their portion is God himself, whose presence and intimate involvement with them satisfies their heart.

As Jesus asked the Father for our transformation from inner-out (Jn.17:17), if there is tension, threat or burden in our discipleship, we need to thoroughly examine *the contingency characteristic* for our identity in the sixth beatitude. His Spirit is here to help us.

Consider

Our interests, no matter how strong, are not the main determinants for our priorities. Our attachments serve to establish what priorities function as primary in practice and what actually become secondary, even though listed as a higher priority in theory. Until we can truly distinguish where our attachments are, we will have difficulty responding to the Father’s will as well as formulating theology of significance not only *about* him but more importantly *to* him, thus *for* him.

In the practice of maintaining doctrinal purity as the top priority, how does this in effect prevent fulfilling God’s desires and purpose for our life?

How do the qualitative dimensions of truth constitute God’s revelation of himself in the incarnation as well as the substance of the gospel?

The ambiguity or shallowness of Christian identity reflects a fundamental problem in identity formation. Along with identity formation, how do we need to define the process of spiritual formation and discipleship formation?

7

The Forgotten Person

“I will not leave you as orphans.”

John 14:18

The relational work necessary in the process of following Jesus was problematic for the early disciples while in his physical presence. Even more so in his physical absence, this relational work becomes a further struggle for discipleship formation when it is undertaken in effect by oneself. Discipleship is a relational process that by its nature is a *cooperative effort* – a reciprocal, reflexive process that goes back and forth between us.

Discipleship, however, is often practiced basically as a unilateral effort. And the person who is forgotten the most in the process is the Holy Spirit, not necessarily in our beliefs or rhetoric but functionally in this relational process. As middle children often get overlooked in family dynamics, the Spirit is commonly perceived as the middle person in the Godhead (triune, not tritheism). If you have been similar to me in my past practice of calling on the Spirit, we tend to use him only to do things. This begs the question for our practice: was the Spirit given for us to *do something* or *be someone*?

Relational Orphans

Our main perceptions of the Spirit emerge from Pentecost and the activity of the early church. Yet, our primary understanding of his presence and purpose is gained from Jesus.

I suggest that the single most significant verse related to the Spirit is Jesus’ promise: “I will not leave you as orphans” (Jn.14:18). The word “leave” (Gk. *aphiemi*) means to let go from oneself, essentially abandon to a condition deprived of one’s parents, which in the context of biblical times was an unprotected, helpless position. This may not have much emotional identification for you if you have parents. But the significance of the condition is more relational than situational. In relational terms, the condition of the relationship can be further described as distant, disconnected, detached, separated. This has more general significance. Whenever, for example, we feel distant from God, disconnected or don’t know where he is, we are experiencing the condition of *relational orphans*. This relational condition can exist even when we are busily doing things for God.

This is an issue for all followers of Christ, which is compounded by his bodily absence. Since Jesus was leaving physically, he would continue to make connection with his followers through the person of his Spirit (“I will come to you”). As Jesus requested of the Father in the bond of their relationship, he “will give you another” (Jn.14:16), “will send” (Jn.14:26; 15:26; 16:7) *the Paraclete*. “Another” (Gk. *allos*) means another of equal quality, not another of different quality (*heteros*). So, the Spirit is defined by Jesus

as equal to himself; in a relational sense they are interchangeable (cf. Gal.4:6). “Paraclete” (Gk. *parakletos*) is one who comes forward on behalf of and as the representative of another in order to comfort, encourage, counsel, help. Whatever title or role you want to give the Spirit, he serves a relational function as **Jesus’ relational replacement**.

The Spirit’s main purpose is relational: to help us to be connected with God (Jn.14:26; 15:26) and to grow in this relationship (Jn.16:13-15). With the departure of Jesus, the Spirit is vitally necessary and important for us in order to continue an intimate relational connection with Christ. He is the extension of Jesus’ person: “He will not speak on his own . . . only what he hears . . . will take from what is mine and make it known to you.” Furthermore, as Jesus’ relational replacement of equal quality, the Spirit extends and completes the relational process that Jesus vulnerably established. He will deepen the relationship and bring the relational progression to wholeness and fulfill all that is involved in making it complete. That’s why Jesus said it was for our *benefit* (Gk. *symphero*) that he went and the Spirit came (Jn.16:7).

Relational work is the fundamental function of the Spirit’s presence and purpose. The perception of the Spirit as a helper to do something is inadequate. As Jesus’ relational replacement, the Spirit’s presence in us functions so we would not be separated from him and the Father in any way as relational orphans. Everything the Spirit does goes toward transforming us to the *new* in deeper intimate relationship with the Father and his Son and building his family together. Therefore, he is absolutely necessary for us in discipleship. We must embrace the Spirit just as we embrace Jesus, and count on his relational work to keep us intimately connected with Christ and our Father. This is the vital transition John’s Gospel provides for us in the farewell narratives of Jesus (Jn.13-17), which is foundational for the epistles.

Without this relational understanding, the Spirit easily gets overlooked in our everyday practice. Since he is present with us at least for the rest of our earthly journey (Jn.14:17b), it is important for us to examine how we relate to him. The Spirit is not a force or a power but a person. As in all relational work by its nature, the Spirit’s relational work is not unilateral; he works cooperatively with us such that he doesn’t do all the work, nor do we. Though he stirs in our hearts and convicts us, he does not impose his work on us as a general rule. So, it is necessary to engage the Spirit in ongoing relationship just as we engage the other persons of the Godhead.

We can constrain his person (cf. 1 Thes.5:19) and grieve him (cf. Eph.4:30). We constrain his person when we only use him to help us *do something*, even if it’s serving and ministry (*diakoneo* as noted in Jn.12:26). We grieve him when we ignore his presence and relational function, which are inseparable. While the Spirit does help us to serve, that involves helping us *be someone* in our relational responsibility – be it in relationship with God or in relationship with others. Likewise, the fruits of the Spirit basically involve relational work (see Gal.5:22-23, and context). To *be someone* is relationship-specific to the Creator’s design and purpose and the Father’s desires for which we need to be ongoingly transformed in order to experience. The Spirit works cooperatively with us for this relational outcome so we will not be relational orphans. We need to build relationship with the person of the Spirit.

Working the Relational Progression

Jesus defines the Spirit as **the Spirit of truth** (Jn.14:17; 15:26; 16:13). The Spirit's person is truth in the same way Jesus is the Truth; this is the nature and character of the Trinity. Yet, the Spirit of truth appears to be described in a subordinate role of truth that defers to Jesus the Truth: "The Spirit of truth . . . will testify [Gk. *martyreo*, bear witness] about me" (Jn.15:26), "the Holy Spirit . . . will remind you of everything I have said to you" (Jn.14:26). As the Spirit of truth guides us into all truth, "he will not speak on his own . . . only what he hears . . . he will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you" (Jn.16:13,14). In this sense, we can say that the Spirit is all about the Son.

But the Spirit's truth is not for more information about Jesus, nor to better formulate doctrine and statements of faith. From our discussion in the last chapter, the purpose and function of truth is for quality relationship. The Truth, in particular, is for relationship with the Father. As the Spirit is about the Son, the Son is all about the Father. The Spirit of truth is for relationship in the relational progression; this is the only function the Spirit has. Though the Spirit may guide us, convict us, teach us, empower us, comfort us, it is all for the purpose and function of relationship.

Reductionism of the Spirit's person (e.g., to a power, helper, comforter) and his function (merely to do something) contradicts this truth and reinforces relational distance. The Spirit of truth will continue to lead us into deeper intimate relationship by taking what belongs to Jesus and to the Father and "make it known to you" (Jn.16:15). "Make known" (Gk. *anangello*) means to tell freely and openly. Here the Spirit of truth is engaged in the relational work of developing the relational progression from an indentured servant (not privy to secrets) to a deep friend (shared intimacies, Jn.15:15). Relational distance is a barrier to the vital transmission of the intimate substance belonging to Jesus and the Father.

The relational progression, furthermore, does not stop at friend. Yet, this relational process for still deeper relationship at the same time requires our transformation of heart, mind and will. Jesus asks the Father to sanctify (Gk. *hagiazō*, make holy with the fundamental idea of separating from ordinary or common usage – e.g., from the prevailing, established way to define ourselves) us by the truth (Jn.17:17). Paul identifies this as the Spirit's relational work (Rom.15:16). While Paul reinforces the interchangeable relational sense of Christ and the Spirit (2 Cor.3:17a; Gal.4:6), he also extends the Spirit's relational work to *transformation* (2 Cor.3:18, Gk. *metamorphoo*, to change from inside-out). **The Spirit of transformation** takes us functionally to the next level of relationship in the relational progression.

The Spirit of transformation includes the crucial process of freedom (2 Cor.3:17b, Gk. *eleutheria*), which essentially involves being able to be oneself without the control of something else. This freedom takes in what Christ *saved us from* but in practice it is often separated from what he also *saved us to*. Consequently, alternative change in our life is substituted and settled for in place of the relational work of the Spirit of truth and transformation. Yet, *metamorphoo* is always qualitatively distinct from mere outward changes (*metaschematizo*). The Spirit is here as Jesus' relational replacement to functionally accomplish the process of our transformation to what Christ saved us *to*, so

that we will live relationship-specific to the Father's desires.

This process is further indicated by Paul in the most relationally significant chapter of the epistles (see Rom.8) when he described the differences in relationship of those who aren't really free (like those in enslavement) and those who truly are (like functioning sons and daughters). A person is basically condemned because they are not justified by Christ and thus are not redeemed, set free (8:3). In contrast, a son or daughter is not condemned because they *are* (8:1-4). Paul's strong contrast here flips back and forth, leading to the ultimate relational outcome. But let's reflect on this distinction as if both were Christians. While we know the implications of this theological truth, the relational reality of being his intimate child is often not our practical experience. The constraints on our person and barriers in our relationship created by condemnation or fear affect us all in one way or another. This directly involves the issue for all Christians of how are we going to live – as a free person or a virtual slave?

The dominant influence of our *old self* develops a mind-set (Gk. *phroneo*) on matters which constrain our person and limit our relationships, especially with God (8:5a). Besides the obvious sins of rebellion Paul discussed, which are hostile to God (8:7), the more subtle areas of our inner person directly relate to the issue of "how we define ourselves." Essentially, the question of "how are we going to live?" becomes (often unknowingly) the issue of trying to measure up, establish our self-worth and, in terms of relationships, be accepted and loved. Yet, as Jesus earlier revealed in the Sermon on the Mount, this effort actually leads to greater distance in relationships (8:7,8), even broken relationships ("death," 8:6a), not to mention its controlling effects on our person from pressure and fear (8:15a). This is not surprising because Satan creates many lies about this effort for us to live by, which are in subtle conflict with the truth.

The presence and relational work of the Spirit of transformation are strongly contrasted with this old self and this effort essentially of self-determination (including discipleship practiced as a unilateral effort). Initially, the overlap work of the Spirit of truth with the Spirit of transformation redeems us ("set free") from the *old* (8:2) and ongoingly transforms us to the *new* (8:5b). His transforming work restores us to intimate relational connection (reconciliation, "life," *zoe*) and to wholeness, well-being, deep satisfaction ("peace," 8:6b). Eventually, the Spirit's relational function in cooperative effort with us makes it possible for us to fulfill God's purpose and desires underlying his law: relationships and intimate connections of the heart which express *agape* involvement. Whereas any disciple influenced or controlled by the *old* is unable to please God, a disciple being transformed to the *new* by the Spirit (thus, *metamorphoo*, not *metaschematizo*) lives in relational significance to the Father and relationship-specific to the Father's desires (8:7,8).

The transformation of the Spirit is comprehensive for any Christian cooperatively engaged in this process. That disciple has a different and opposite mind-set than, for example, those disciples doing it alone (8:5-8). Yet, this mind-set is not merely about perspective and a paradigm shift but about functioning in relationship. Paul said we have "an obligation" (Gk. *opheiletēs*, a debtor, one indebted for favors, 8:12) to define ourselves and do our relationships (two critical issues in discipleship) according to the grace and truth (unfailing love and faithfulness) of Christ's relational work (and relational righteousness) as well as the relational reality of his Spirit's presence and function in us

(8:9-13).

What exactly is this obligation or debt? Jesus is all about the Father, so what he saved us to is first and ultimately for the Father. He redeemed us (paid for our release) from the condition of enslavement in order that the Father could adopt us as his own children for his family. This payment and adoption now obligate us relationally to function intimately as his son or daughter (8:15), to represent our Father in his qualitative substance (8:17) and extend his family to all of creation (8:19,29). This is not an obligation to *do something* but the privilege and relational responsibility to *be someone*, so that the Father can have those who are rightfully his. Likewise, the Spirit comes “from the Father . . . goes out from the Father” (Jn.15:26) and brings us who intimately belong to the Father (Jn.16:15), not to constrain us or enslave us again to fear. He functions as **the Spirit of adoption** by whom we can intimately connect with “Abba, Father” (Rom.8:15), be assured of our family relational position (8:16) and our heir rights, as well as our responsibilities (8:17). Thus, the Spirit’s relational work in the relational progression, like Jesus’, is truly all about and for the Father.

To function as his son or daughter involves a choice by our *person* but it is not a relational reality we can experience merely by our will. We may be able to outwardly appear as such (*metaschematizo*) but not from the inside out (*metamorphoo*). This is the relational outcome only from ongoing cooperative relational work with the Spirit of adoption. Yet, as the Spirit works to bring the relational progression to completion as the Father’s family, our part of the relational work could still be problematic, even a struggle. Despite the Spirit’s presence as a further expression of God’s favor (cf. Heb.10:29, **the Spirit of grace**), we constrain his function by remaining influenced by the *old* mind-set (specifically by still defining ourselves by what we do and have, and doing relationship with the Spirit in that mind-set); we also grieve the Spirit by our unilateral efforts (particularly by trying to measure up to the Father or the Son, and to feel worthy as his family member).

This underscores the Spirit’s total relational work in the relational progression that functionally in our everyday practice is usually not linear but reflexive. We ongoingly need the Spirit of truth which overlaps with the Spirit of transformation in order to free us from our enslavements, heal us from their effects and change us from the inside-out to the wholeness of the *new* person – who ongoingly then is reconciled and restored to the Father to function in his family by the Spirit of adoption. Furthermore, even in our weakness and limitations in this relational work to make intimate connection with our Father at times, the Spirit’s relational work functions with us to help us make that connection especially at those moments in our end points (8:26,27).

This reflects the cooperative and reflexive nature of this relational process that goes back and forth between us. As the Spirit works the relational progression to complete our function as our Father’s very own child in his family, we need to build relationship with the Spirit and work together to make this progression an experiential reality. I think the single most significant issue that interferes with this working relationship is *fear*. That’s why Paul contrasts being controlled by fear with the intimate relational experience of his son and daughter (8:15). Fear, in one form or another (from doubt to distrust), to one degree or another (from hesitation to panic), is the dominant motivating force for human action and a formidable barrier to quality relationships.

Fear can dominate our lives, even unknowing to us. As bold as Peter appeared, fear controlled his life at times and deeply affected his relationships. For example, circumstances brought out Peter's fear (Gk. *phobeomai*) while he was walking on the water in relational response to Jesus (Mt.14:27-30) – fear which disconnected him from Jesus in that intimate moment of trust (v.31). Another example had broader relational repercussions when Peter discriminated against the Gentiles because he was afraid (*phobeomai*) and thus compromised the truth of the gospel, as we discussed previously (Gal.2:11-14). Whether he was aware of it or not, fear controlled Peter's life in various ways. I suspect he was made aware of this in retrospect (and in cooperative work with the Spirit of truth), particularly in his earthly relationship with Jesus. In any case, he later certainly understood (probably from personal experience also) the direct link between control and enslavement when he spoke about a false sense of freedom: “For you are a slave to whatever controls you” (2 Pet.2:19b, NLT).

Whatever its form or degree, fear prevents our heart from being vulnerable, and distances us in our relationships (especially from the inside-out with God) if left unattended. Throughout Scripture we are encouraged not to let fear control us. In varied interactions Jesus identifies fear as the barrier to deeper trust and intimacy with him (Mt.8:26; 10:31; 14:27; 17:7; Mk.5:36). The Spirit's presence and function are critical to help us in all aspects of this relational process (Jn.14:26-27; Rom.8:6).

The Spirit only serves the relational purpose of bringing to completion the relational progression Jesus incarnated and the Father ordained (Rom.8:29; Eph.1:5). The Spirit of adoption must be functionally connected to Jesus' saying “I will not leave you as orphans” (Jn.14:18). We cannot reduce, distort or obscure the absolute relational function involved between Jesus' promise, the Father's fulfillment and the Spirit's purpose – which clearly involves our relationship to our Father as his sons and daughters, and the experiential reality and responsibility which the Spirit serves to help us complete.

Only the Spirit can ensure the ongoing intimate relational connection between the Father and his daughters and sons. The Spirit is the only one who will bring those relationships to completion, transforming us to be like Jesus as *his family*, just as the Father desires (Rom.8:29). This is the relational outcome we confidently know in our hearts (*oida*) and thus can expect, as those deeply involved with the Father (*agape*) and relationally responding to his purpose (*prothesis*, 8:28).

The presence and function of the Spirit's person guarantees this, of course, when not constrained nor grieved. As we engage the Spirit with our relational work, the Spirit also effectively serves as **the Spirit of down payment** guaranteeing the completion of the relational progression (2 Cor.5:5; 1:22; Eph.1:13,14). Only in an experiential sense is the Spirit the initial payment (Gk. *arrobos*) for our redemption and adoption because the reality of the full payment has already been accomplished by Christ. Nevertheless, the Spirit provides us with the experiential reality of this irrevocable relational act of adoption. We are the Father's and the Father is ours. But without the Spirit this only remains a fact of truth in our minds, while seeking for the Father with our hearts as relational orphans.

The Misused Person

Without the Spirit's active presence and function, discipleship becomes the unilateral effort in effect of such relational orphans. Besides being the forgotten person, however, the Spirit is often *the misused person*. When not forgotten, the Spirit still can be misused – in two major ways in particular.

The **first misuse** of the Spirit involves what is represented in *spiritual gifts* and what we do. The matter of spiritual gifts seems to be making a relative resurgence in some Christian contexts during recent years; there is a strong push to find your particular spiritual gift. But a reductionist view of these gifts perceives them with a different mind-set – a mind-set which defines our self by what we have and thus can do. In some Christian subcultures, having a spiritual gift has become the main ingredient to Christian identity. Invariably, when this gift essentially defines what one can do, the comparative system of what we have and do leads to subtle stratification in the church (based on the gift you have) and to implicit differentiation of status (based on what you do). This can be illustrated, for example, if you asked in Christian circles who has charisma, only a select few would be identified and thus be assigned a higher role and status. Gender function in the church also further illustrates this.

A reductionist mind-set (that reduces the definition of a person and the top priority of relationships) that can influence us to relationally forget the Spirit, can also influence us to misuse the Spirit. But we need to understand the contrary mind-set of the Spirit who gives out all the spiritual gifts (1 Cor.12:11).

As the Spirit's presence is the expression of God's grace, every spiritual gift by definition (Gk. *charisma*) means a gift of God's grace (1 Cor.1:4-7). Anyone in Christ has that grace and is not without *charisma*, thus is never lacking of a spiritual gift. Along with the gift of God's grace in the incarnation which we all received, there are specific gifts further distributed by the Spirit (Heb.2:4). The term for "distribute" (Gk. *merimos*) comes from the word *merizo* which means to divide into parts. This implies a *whole* from which the parts come and which they make up together. From this whole, only the Spirit determines (Gk. *boulomai*, designating an inner decision) who gets what part and "gives them to each one" (1 Cor.12:11). "Gives" (Gk. *diaireo*) means to take one part from another (i.e., a whole), again describing the mind-set of how the Spirit works in contrast to a reductionist mind-set.

The distribution of the parts is not uniform (1 Cor.12:8-10; Rom.12:6-8; Eph.4:11). Different gifts are given to different persons (1 Cor.12:4), yet every person is given a spiritual gift which is manifested by the Spirit (Gk. *phonerosis*, make visible or observable, 12:7). The emphasis, however, is not on differences but on their commonality to the *whole*: different gifts but the same Spirit (v.4), different ministries, service (*diakonia*) but the same Lord (v.5), different effects of exercising these ("working," *energeia*) but the same result because of the same God's underlying work (*energeo*) in all the different gifts in all the different persons (v.6,10a).

When we define ourselves by what we have and do, we will overemphasize spiritual gifts, and other related efforts. This imbalance inevitably focuses on differences, which become manifested in our relationships. The need and purpose for spiritual gifts are not minor issues. They get us back to the initial question raised at the beginning of the

chapter: was the Spirit given for us to *do something* or *be someone*? and now its variation, are spiritual gifts given to us to *do something* or *be someone*?

As the Spirit determines who gets what gift by his inner decision (*boulomai*), it always reflects conformity to his purpose and function as *the Spirit of truth*. Distributing spiritual gifts is not an independent function or auxiliary duty but directly related to the purpose of the Spirit's presence. That purpose is completely relational and all about and for the Father and his family. The Spirit does not give spiritual gifts for any other purpose, therefore they are not given for individual benefit but "for the common good" (1 Cor.12:7, Gk. *symphero*, to bring together for the benefit of others). More specifically, these gifts are for building up God's family (Eph.4:12,13). This is the *whole* of the Father's desires and his favor fulfilled in the incarnation, and further extended in the Spirit – the whole from which *the Spirit of adoption* works and distributes gifts.

In other words, spiritual gifts are designed and given only to serve toward fulfilling our responsibility as his adopted sons and daughters to represent our Father and extend his family. This is the *someone* Jesus made it possible for us to *be*, this is *who* our Father wants us to *be*, this is *what* the Spirit of adoption will help us *be*, and this is *how* spiritual gifts serve to *be* this *someone*. When these gifts of God's grace become reduced in function (if not also in perception) to merely *do something*, however sincere in practice or with good intention for God, then we effectively misuse the Spirit.

This overlaps into the **second misuse** of the Spirit. How we define ourselves always translates into how our relationships will be. The influence of reductionism on our identity consistently emerges, for example, in negative patterns of relationships from indifference to obsession. Whatever the extent of the effect, we can be certain that relationships will be shaped by how we define ourselves.

The pressure, need or responsibility to perform, to produce, to measure up, to justify (e.g., God's love, grace, promises, and so on) are the established ways of reductionism and individualism. This creates an ongoing tension and conflict with the Spirit. Since the Spirit is all about the Father, relationships as his children and his family, *the Spirit is not here for the individual*. The Spirit works the relational progression to completion in order that we won't stop or get stuck in the process. *The Spirit is not here to assist in self-determination*, but only for relationship together as his family.

Reductionism and individualism resist the relational purpose of the Spirit and try to change the Spirit's function. In their mind-set and process, the Spirit is reduced to serve the individual and to assist the individual basically to *do something*; thus spiritual gifts, for example, become more self-serving than the relational means to represent the qualitative difference of the Father and to build his family. If the Spirit of truth and transformation is not forgotten in the process, *the Spirit of adoption is misused to help merely the individual*.

It's About Relationship

While freedom, individualism and relativism are prevailing practices in Western cultures, the reductionist mind-set is ongoingly confronted by the Spirit as Jesus' relational replacement. This conflict is not about doctrinal purity nor about the battle for

truth but totally for relationship – its implication, its restoration, its repercussion (Jn.16:8-11). The Truth (along with the Way and the Life) is always about relationship and the Spirit of truth works with us to not get stuck at the individual position in the relational progression. Relationships always suffer from the individual's efforts to define oneself by what one does or has.

Addressing this crucial relational issue, Paul identifies the most important quality by which any and all individual gifts and function need to be exercised: love (1 Cor.12:31ff). This qualifies all that we do. Yet, love (*agape*), as the ultimate practice for the individual is not about *what to do*. Love, as Jesus practiced and taught (especially in the Sermon on the Mount), is about *how to be involved in relationships* – especially as his family (the church).

Agape involvement in relationships is the fruit of the Spirit's relational work with us (Gal.5:22). Building relationships defines the Spirit's presence. And the Spirit of adoption establishes us in the Father's family through his relational work (which includes signs and wonders) and by providing us with the means for our relational work (which may or may not include signs and wonders). As parts of this *whole*, the vital understanding we need to embrace for practice is that we don't find our place in the body of Christ by what we do but only by relationship-involvement as his son or daughter (Jn.8:35). Relying on one's part in the body to establish one's place and belonging is not the purpose of Paul's metaphor of the church (1 Cor.12:12ff). Such individual effort is the mind-set and approach of reductionism, the practice of which becomes controlling and thus enslaving – with the relational consequence of an inability to intimately function as son or daughter.

Authentic discipleship cannot survive forgetting the Spirit, nor develop misusing the Spirit's presence and function.

Consider

Theology in general and a theology of discipleship in particular suffer a lack of coherence, thus inadequate formulations of wholeness, when the presence of the Spirit is absent or the function of the Spirit is misperceived.

The *whole* of God, of whose being the Spirit is an ontological part (not separate), is what (and whose sovereign desires) the Spirit fulfills relationally by his presence and function in bringing us to completion in the relational progression of God's eschatological plan.

Without this trinitarian understanding of who and what God is, along with experiencing how God is, we are only left with reductionist alternatives, with substitutes for the qualitative substance and difference of God and his mystery. As followers of the Word, can we justifiably continue to settle for less?

8

The Discipleship Transition

*“May they be brought to complete unity.”
John 17:23*

Discipleship cannot be an individual or unilateral effort, no matter how sincerely it is practiced or how many are gathered to practice it, since it is only a function of relationship. At the same time, *following Jesus cannot be about the relationship of only following Jesus*. That is, any authentic relationship with Jesus Christ involves following him in the relational progression to relationship with the Father as a part of his family. Just as discipleship cannot survive this relational process without the Spirit, following Jesus has no valid relational progression without the Father. Without the distinct relationship between the Father and his adoptees as family, discipleship becomes following some limited perception or notion of Jesus, not the full incarnation of the Son of God. To stop short in this relational progression in effect is to stop following Jesus.

In his farewell prayer, Jesus asked his Father that all who believe in him may be *one*, just as his Father is in him and he is in his Father (Jn. 17:20-21). This *one* cannot be limited to the spiritual realm but must be understood in its relational function for our practice, just as Jesus incarnated of his relationship with his Father along with the relational progression. What this *one* is and how it functions in our daily practice is fundamental to the completion of discipleship and the *wholeness* of those who follow Jesus.

In Transition

John’s Gospel has already been noted as the transition to the rest of the NT. In John, *mathetes* expands to refer to the Christian community (e.g., 8:31 refers simply to all Christians); *mathetai* (pl.) comes to stand for “the gathered community” in the absence of any word for church. This transition is operationalized in the narratives of Jesus’ farewell words. When he prayed for our “complete unity” (17:23), “complete” (Gk. *teleioo*) means to complete by reaching the intended goal. “Unity” is the *one* (Gk. *heis*), or the *whole* – the “goal” of the Father.

As we move into the Acts of the Apostles, we need to focus on reaching this intended outcome, which is not limited to our usual notions of spreading the gospel and witnessing to Christ. Since the Spirit is not given for the individual agenda, discipleship is about to undergo **its major transition**: *the transition from the individual to the corporate process of community, to the corporate nature of church, to the corporate function of family*. The Father’s design and purpose for this *whole*, from which and for

whom the Spirit works, emerges in dramatic ways in the book of Acts. So much so that the drama often tends to be observed only as early church phenomena than as the corporate relational process by which all disciples can and need to live.

Next to intimacy in relationship with God, the transition to the corporate level creates the most tension and struggle for the individual disciple. This transition historically has been problematic for the individual whether the corporate aspect is community, church or family. Let's briefly touch on some of this before these corporate aspects are developed throughout the remainder of this study. They certainly are not mutually exclusive and overlap in crucial interaction to influence the corporate process.

As we examine these corporate aspects of community, church and family, we need to keep clearly in focus the intended relational outcome Jesus prayed to the Father for our completion. If we lose sight of this, then we easily subordinate the relational purpose of the corporate *whole* of the Father and become distracted, controlled or distorted by secondary corporate elements (such as type, place, activities, statistics). A related issue to understand for discipleship is how the individual is influenced or affected in the relational progression by the presence or absence of these corporate aspects.

Community: The broader context and setting of the NT certainly was neither only Jewish nor only religious. Roman rule dominated the whole Mediterranean region and Greek culture permeated this Empire. When we consider associations of persons in this Greco-Roman context, Robert Banks identifies two main types of community: *politeia*, the public life of the city or state to which persons belonged; and *oikonomia*, the household order of which they were a part by birth, adoption or otherwise attached.¹ What characterized these communities, however, was *exclusion*. Access to participation in them was not available to just anyone, particularly not to the socially disadvantaged.

This led some (Greeks, Romans, Jews) to formulate the idea of and to attempt to practice a more inclusive social order, society and community. On the more practical level of such ideals, the social condition led to the formation of a variety of voluntary associations in which the less advantaged could participate. They apparently operated on the principle of *koinonia* (voluntary partnership) and created relationships between persons of different backgrounds, though that did not always mean access was open to all.

Exclusion was not the only major issue about community. Dissatisfaction presented another source of motivation to seek other alternatives for more. This involved the individual in their deeper needs (even spiritual) as well as in their access to opportunities previously denied them (e.g., because of nationality, gender, slave status). A cosmopolitan mind-set led, for example, to dissatisfaction in the religious community among stricter Jews. Like multiculturalism today, a more inclusive worldview and approach can be a threat to the stability of one's belief system, or it can result in ambiguity to one's identity. This was instrumental to the development of more rigid communities like the Pharisees and to the formation of separatists like the various Essene communities, including the Qumran community.

This is a simplified overview of the NT climate and how the individual was influenced and affected by community. It provides us with a further basis by which to

1. Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, rev. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publ., 1994), 6-8.

understand the responses and the reactions seen in the book of Acts and the early church.

If we fast-forward to the latter half of the 20th century, we can observe similar tensions and conflicts between the individual and the prevailing forms of *politeia* and *oikonomia* communities, which included the established religious community. This social movement converged in unlikely places and detonated the so-called countercultural revolution of the 1960s and '70s. Individuals formed all sorts of associations and collectives, the most distinct of which was the pursuit of a utopian community in the form of communes. Established communities (institutions), like the church, were the constraining contrast, as well as the focus of their conflict of dissatisfaction. In these new communities everyone basically had the opportunity to do their own thing, as it were, but under such conditions with little constraint relationships inevitably broke down and tore apart the community.

Research comparing those nontraditional communities with traditional ones showed an important distinction for us to reflect on for the church. Traditional communities, groups, organizations, institutions tended to be strong in group *constraints* but weak on *opportunities* for its participants to grow and develop. The constraints were significant to maintain group cohesion, stability or unity but were also the reason for the dissatisfaction of its members – not only in terms of opportunities but also in the quality of relationships. As you can anticipate, nontraditional communities were strong in providing *opportunities* for its members but didn't have the necessary constraints in place to build their relationships – due mainly to the absence of a common truth base to which members would adhere. Individual freedom ultimately was more important than relationships, despite the emphasis on community and love.

The tension and conflict between the individual and community are important for us to understand and to address in the practice of discipleship. Exclusion, constraint, dissatisfaction and opportunity are issues which involve all of us, individually and corporately. When we think of what Jesus wants his followers *to be*, this becomes imperative to deal with.

Church: As a voluntary association, the emerging early church was not necessarily unique in the broader social landscape, given the variety of associations which existed or that came and went (cf. Gamaliel's advice in Acts 5:34-38). But its purpose and function soon set it apart from other associations. On the one hand, this was attractive to anyone wanting more, particularly the excluded, the dissatisfied, the enslaved. On the other hand, it was threatening to those with a vested interest in the existing religious, social, economic and political order, and whatever related associations would be in conflict with this new community. Maintaining the status quo was a dominant concern, while the emerging church was about change.

Yet, within the emerging church itself there was this ongoing tension and conflict between the individual and the corporate body. This new community was not just about opportunities for new life for the individual, it included the responsibility and accountability of a shared new life together of relationships with God and with each other. These relationships are defined by God on his terms, which qualify individual freedom and participation. So, for example, Ananias and Sapphira did not have liberty to

define their relationships on their terms (Acts 5:1-11); Simon was not able to participate for his own agenda or self-interest (Acts 8:18-21); even Peter himself was not allowed to maintain his bias (culturally conditioned) to exclude others from access to and participation in this new community (Acts 11:4-17; Gal.2:11-14); Paul ongoingly dealt with this tension and conflict throughout his epistles.

The tension and conflict between the individual and corporate community have existed historically in the church from its inception. Whether due to external pressures (e.g., from persecution or competing ideologies) or in response to internal conditions (e.g., maintaining doctrinal purity or church discipline), or a combination, the apparent focus on unity by the church seemed to lead eventually to the static structural (increasingly hierarchical) condition of institutionalism. This certainly developed more constraint than opportunity, less access and less satisfying participation. As a sweeping generalization, the church had become a stark contrast to its NT roots and the dynamic relational process inherent (by God's design and purpose) to the nature of community and family.

The Reformation represents the prophetic critique of the constraints and abuses of the institutionalized church. I don't know if it was also a critique of hope because while it clarified what Christ saved us *from*, the magisterial Reformers didn't clearly define and practice what Christ saved us *to* with a transformed ecclesiology. Thankfully, the Reformation once again opened up direct access to God, but it also opened the door for the radical Reformers. This release (at least ecclesiastical if not spiritual) led to freedom which swung the pendulum too far in its reaction to Roman Catholicism. This effectively opened the door to individualism, left emerging churches susceptible to the controlling influence of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and modernity; essentially, this led to the development of the so-called Protestant work ethic and the legitimation of the spirit of capitalism.

The Reformers rightfully rejected the constraints of Roman Catholicism but many of them discarded its emphasis on unity in the process. The Roman Catholic Church represented a unity of structural institutionalism (hierarchical and patriarchal) supported by false and misguided practices (such as indulgences) which served itself, not the nature and purpose of the unity that Jesus prayed to the Father for. We cannot lose focus of the intended corporate relational outcome Jesus defined for our completion. Yet, I suggest that how we do church today is a relational consequence of having thrown the baby (unity of the Father's *whole*) out with the dirty bath water. In a definite sense, churches have become an artificial representation of the *whole* Jesus started and what the initial church experienced in being *one*.

Jesus didn't start this with his farewell prayer but he practiced it as early as age twelve (Lk.2:42-49) and vulnerably taught it for others to experience (Mt.12:46-50). It is to this relational context that all Christians and all churches need to return.

Family: Based on our redemption and adoption, God's people only adequately represent the Father in the relational unity of his family (the church) as his sons and daughters. Access to God the Father comes only in the context of this family relationship – a relationship which cannot be experienced functionally under the condition of enslavement, nor while under controlling influences constraining our person and practice.

The Reformation has resulted in releasing us from the enslavement of certain constraints (though it has cultivated others like the individual work ethic), while inadvertently discarding, discounting or distorting the relational unity of the Father's family for which our release (redemption) was made – that is, adoption as his children in order to share in his life, represent him and extend his family. Individualism is contrary to this purpose and functions in conflict with building family.

The individual in the broader ancient context didn't have nearly the prominence the individual has in a modern Western setting, particularly in the United States. A kinship system defined, determined and essentially dominated the individual (especially females). While it would seem natural and easy for the early followers of Christ to transition from one kinship network to a new one, the tensions and conflicts of the individual still raised issues needing to be addressed, not to mention the competition of old kinship ties. The balance between individual opportunity and relational responsibility and accountability was always an ongoing process needing to be defined.

As a dominant norm in the Mediterranean world, kinship (by blood or by law) demanded primary (if not total) obligation to the family network where brothers and sisters experienced the closest bonds of loyalty and affection.² Anything outside the kinship threshold was considered in competition or conflict with kinship welfare. Family honor-shame was a critical value each individual member was bound to practice. In addition, characteristic of the kinship system was patriarchal dominance. It is within this prevailing kinship context that we see the new kinship of the Father's sons and daughters in Jesus' family developing together as his brothers and sisters. Yet, just as Jesus revolutionized the prevailing disciple-teacher relationships, he and his Spirit transformed the prevailing kinship tradition with a new family which redefined the individual and deepened the relationships between brothers and sisters, along with transforming the relationship with their Father. This was not about the usual kinship obligation upon the individual to *do something* but the privilege and prestige of his adoptee to *be someone*, who was also empowered to extend his family.

Historically for the biological family, whether in the form of a kinship system (as described in the Mediterranean world of the NT), other forms of extended household (of pre-modern era) or the nuclear family (of modern Western contexts), the tension and conflict between individual vs. family is ongoing – with the individual often having been sacrificed or lost in the process. The development of the nuclear family, however, marks a shift to more individual freedom, opportunity and relative dominance of their relationships. Though its initial development was precipitated by the contextual changes of industrialization and the restructuring of labor in the marketplace, the nuclear family opened the door wide for individualism.

When work shifted from the family dwelling to the factory and city, the laborer naturally followed it. This imposed change on the family unit, and gave more and more focus to the individual. Extended families could no longer physically stay in the same household because work took them to different areas – with some members

2. For further contextual considerations, see S. Scott Bartchy, "Divine Power, Community Formation, and Leadership in the Acts of the Apostles" in Richard N. Longenecker, ed. *Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today* (Peabody, Hendrickson Publ: 2002), 89-104.

geographically so far removed that even maintaining contact became difficult. The sense of family as a function of kinship relationships has become essentially an anachronism in modern Western contexts today. One's particular culture of origin may still define greater significance to kinship ties, but in actual practice this is now often more form than function.

With this mind-set we now assume that family is for the benefit of the individual and on this basis the individual goes out to build one's own family. While the individual is less defined in the other forms of family, the basic issue of who will be served remains the same. Effectively, the biological family in all forms has become an *end* to serve our own self-interests, for our own self-determination, self-worth, and to extend our own "name" and extend our own family. We forget that Adam and Eve originally were given family for God's purpose, that Abraham was given family to build God's family, that Israel represented God's covenant family, that followers of Jesus formed community, his church, with the help of his Spirit to be his Father's family and to extend the Father's family to all his creation. In other words, the biological family is not a self-serving kinship but a *means* to build the greater kinship of God the Father's family.

It is with this backdrop of kinship and the function of family that we need to perceive the emerging church following the ascension of Jesus. The narratives of what developed in the post-resurrection period are given for us to understand for our practice today because that post-resurrection period extends to our time as the Spirit continues to work to bring to completion the relational progression to the Father. We urgently need to return to this understanding for how to do church, tradition notwithstanding.

A Brief Note on Tradition

While we definitely need to learn from tradition (especially to enhance our understanding), we cannot look to tradition (pre- or post-Reformation) for the basic determination of how to do church, but we need to depend on the full scope of Scripture with all available contextual considerations.

Likewise, tradition cannot determine our perception of the church as family. Unlike kinship systems, which use tradition to define position, roles and obligations of its members, the church cannot turn to such tradition for these definitions. As noted in the last chapter, the Spirit distributes these responsibilities from the *whole*, not according to tradition but in accord with the Father's desires for his family. Tradition tends to put artificial constraints on this relational process and, for example, precludes opportunities for certain individuals.

At the same time, in the absence of tradition many modern churches have established nontraditional traditions not only in how to do church but in how church is seen. Reliance, for example, on methods and techniques unique to generating products, profits, information and virtual experience have emerged increasingly in how churches function. The results for the church are more about how to do something efficiently than how to be relationally involved as family. This is a quantitative dominance of reductionism which functionally redefines the person, relationships and what church is as a substitute for the qualitative difference and substance of God the Father revealed in

Christ the Son definitively in Scripture.

Tradition needs to be respected, though not necessarily by its observance. Our traditional antecedents may be informative but ultimately we need to return to our Scriptural roots.

Roots of Family

Following Jesus' farewell prayer to the Father for us to be brought to complete unity, Jesus shows us how this will be experienced among us. In order to establish his disciples in the new kinship relational process, Jesus demonstrated during his crucifixion what it means to be his family, in a pivotal scene usually overlooked. The pain and agony of his crucifixion do not obscure this relational reality but highlight the experiential truth of being his family. While on the cross, Jesus teaches us what his family means: how to see each other, how to be involved with each other and how the individual is affirmed in submitting to him for it.

For Jesus, kinship involvement is based on *agape* involvement, so being his family cannot be understood from our usual perceptions of family involvement or feelings of obligation. In the most touching moment on the cross occurred the most beautiful example of the corporate process of family. While Jesus was in anguish and those closest to him were deeply distressed, an unimaginable interaction took place which embodied the family love to be practiced by his church.

We know that despite his pain and agony Jesus was not controlled by self-focus or even influenced by reasonable self-concern – he took the initiative to forgive others. But with even deeper *agape* involvement, he focused on his mother, Mary, and the disciple he loved in a special way, John (Jn.19:25-27). Then, remarkably, he said to each of them with love and affection: “Here is your son,” “Here is your mother.” How was he telling them to see each other? How was he saying to be involved with each other? How was the individual affirmed in submitting to him?

Keep in mind the relational progression of the incarnation. In response to Jesus' words, John acted beyond being merely a disciple, even a friend, and took Mary into “his own” (Gk. *idios*, one's own, denotes special relationship, v.27). He didn't just take her in his house; he embraced Mary as his own mother (or kinship sister). She must have embraced him also as her son (or kinship brother). There is a lot for us to reflect on here: circumstances, culture, family, Jesus' promise to his disciples. All of these make this a truly remarkable moment in Jesus' life and in the development of his church. The narrative represents undeniable roots for the function of his disciples.

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

Though circumstances, culture and family converge on this scene, they don't each exert the same amount of influence. We cannot let contextual considerations limit our understanding of this pivotal point of discipleship. I suggest that Jesus wasn't fulfilling his duty as the eldest son, nor bound by the circumstances. As he has consistently demonstrated throughout the incarnation, Jesus is taking his followers beyond culture and circumstances, even beyond family as we commonly view it.

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

Just as Jesus didn't merely see Mary as his earthly mother, a widow, a female, he didn't merely see John as a disciple, a special friend. They were his Father's daughter and son, his sister and brother, his family together in the relational progression. And that is how he wants us to be involved with each other, not stopping short at any point on this progression – no matter how well we have been servants together, nor how much we have shared as friends. This deeply touching interaction was Jesus' involvement with and response to *his family*. It was the beautiful outworking of family love in the corporate relational process of *being* family and building it. Nothing less and no substitutes, just as Jesus lived and went to the cross.

For this definite reason and unequivocal purpose, Jesus' act was just as much for John's benefit as it was for Mary – both in provision and opportunity. In response to what each of them let go of in order to follow Jesus, he promised them an even greater family (Mk.10:29-30). True to his words as ever, he was fulfilling his promise to them. This is the relational outcome for each individual who submits to him for his family. No greater satisfaction of being accepted, no fulfillment of the individual's self-worth, no certainty of one's place and belonging can be experienced by the individual outside his family.

Even beyond that, in this pivotal moment Jesus established them in the corporate relational process which is necessary to keep fulfilling his promise and to extend this relationship to others. This is the further relational significance of *agape* involvement in the corporate process. This process not only extends it to others but it also fully contextualizes it to the uncommon and eternal of God's big picture. This further redefines the individual and more strategically defines how to do church. In God's plan for redemptive history and all of creation, individuals alone are incapable of fulfilling his mission – no matter how many individuals and how much involvement. This can only be accomplished by the relational work of the church functioning corporately as family. In authentic discipleship, this means functionally redefining our individualistic ways to the *whole* of family, which certainly requires a deeper *set* of relationships to be discussed later.

The significance of this set of words by Jesus on the cross establishes the roots of his family – roots which also go back to the OT and God's covenant people. His words

characterize God's kingdom, what is involved to become a *community* of his followers and how to build his church. With this new kinship relational process, we examine the emerging church in Acts.

Post-Resurrection Dynamics

As we transition into the book of Acts, what emerges is the corporate dimension of discipleship. Jesus gave importance to the whole person and gave primacy to relationships. Following his ascension these priorities are extended in practice within the relational context of his corporate body of followers. Increasingly, the importance of the individual is absorbed into the importance of this corporate body, the church.

The first disciples had less than successful careers as his disciples at this point. Their recent experiences during Jesus' passion were distressing. Of course, the resurrection renewed their spirits, though the significance of his death and resurrection had yet to really take effect. Their confidence and expectations probably were low. Plus the fact that Jesus had just commissioned them to take over his mission to the world must have added to the ambivalence in the opening scene in Acts.

What does a group of individuals with an unimpressive track record do when given such major responsibility?

As individuals the first disciples of Jesus were different from each other. In the narratives of Jesus, we don't have any sense that their differences complemented each other, except possibly reinforcing negative patterns. Their differences probably could be described essentially as establishing them in somewhat individual approaches to a common venture.

Two approaches in particular distinguished themselves as basic models. They are reflected in the lives of Thomas and Peter. Thomas, as we know (from Jn.20:24-29), would not believe unless he empirically saw and touched. For him, he had to *know* intellectually, in full objectivity before he responded or acted. In his dependence on objective sight and reason, the relational trust factor we know as faith had little opportunity to function in relationship with God. Consequently, *action* did not come readily for Thomas, especially involving relationships. He can be described as the cautious, distrustful, passive or fearful individual who is involved in more than just thinking. This person does not think in the productive sense, often resulting in his whole person effectively becoming immobilized or distant in relationships. With a tendency to use thinking as a smoke screen, this is symptomatic of a life not made vulnerable – a life, therefore, slow to act or to be involved.

Obviously, this description did not completely control all of Thomas' life, or else he wouldn't have been a disciple of Christ. But this approach is reflected in significant parts of his life to distinguish him in this manner (see also Jn.14:1-7) and at times in the lives of some of the other disciples as well. Its most significant consequence is on the quality of relationship.

Peter, as we previously discussed in part, represents somewhat the opposite approach. He was often too quick to act and to commit himself, though not necessarily to

make himself vulnerable in relationships as he did in situations. His action appeared to be based on emotional reaction or, at least, on a hastily made subjective decision, unlike Thomas. This type of person tends to have shallower involvement of the self because one's whole person is not always behind the action. Such a person has not meaningfully assessed the situation or the cost before acting.

What we see in Thomas and Peter are basic approaches many Christians take to a life of discipleship. These approaches counteract faith as the relational act of trust in God. As a relational substitute for trusting God, each of these has a subtle reliance on self for their response and life action. Luke begins the Acts narrative reiterating Jesus' words countering these tendencies by the disciples: "wait for" (1:4) and "not for you to know" (1:7). The relational significance of these statements should not be overlooked. For the likes of Thomas, it was not necessary *to know* that information in order to take up their relational responsibility. Situations may need information, but relationship with God needs trust and to represent him requires relational work with his Spirit (1:8). For the likes of Peter, it was necessary *to wait* before taking on their mission.

Jesus confronted them to trust him and his promise rather than rely on their own self, abilities and resources. Clearly, the enablement of the Spirit was not to be forgotten but claimed first in their relationship before the disciples acted to extend his family. In addition, they were not to misuse the Spirit but needed to fully understand that it was the relational work of the Spirit, not the resource of knowledge, which would make them adequate for any and all life actions. This didn't preclude the place and function of knowledge in their lives, just its primacy as the resource they would depend on to act.

The relational process Jesus established with his disciples is to be fully operationalized by his Spirit for all his followers. The relational progression Jesus constituted for all his followers is to be brought to completion in the corporate reality of God's family.

What does an unimpressive group of disciples do when given such major responsibility?

Given the situation, they first needed to stay relationally focused and not get distracted by the circumstances (1:10). A key word from God helped them regain that focus: "Why do you stand here . . . ?" (1:11; see a similar question asked of Elijah in 1 Kings 19). Reawakened to the truth of God's word, in that moment of ambivalence and uncertainty they were brought back to the relational reality of God's presence and work in their lives.

Despite the likely presence of self-doubt about their adequacy or of nagging reminders of past performance, they didn't mope, labor on their failures, mistakes and assortment of sins. Likewise, there is no indication that they reinforced in themselves or in each other how inadequate they were. They went back to Jerusalem with great joy (Lk.24:52) and joined *together as one* (Gk. *homothumadon*, same mind, of one accord) continuing faithfully and steadfast (Gk. *proskartereo*) in prayer (1:14). These were defining moments for them – both in their identity and their transformation.

Was this a typical prayer meeting of the missions committee? Did they pray to *do something*, or *be someone*? Though we don't know the content of their prayers, they must have followed Jesus' lead in his prayers and opened their hearts to the Father. I suggest

that nothing mystical happened in these prayer meetings, nothing extraordinary except for the honesty of hearts coming before God and before each other. In this vulnerable process, every feeling (e.g., of fear or inadequacy), every need for healing (e.g., from past failures, rejections or pains), every sin, every effort to be accepted and loved could be ongoingly addressed and deeply attended to.

In the dynamics of the post-resurrection period, these followers could not depend on mind-games and their beliefs to move to the next step of discipleship. They had to apply to their hearts what their belief system defined in their minds. God's grace could not be a concept, the resurrection had to have meaning beyond mere fact, God's love had to become an experiential reality. And all of this had to have relational significance here and now, not in eschatological fulfillment; there was no time to wait for a future transformation.

The immediate yet ongoing result of post-resurrection dynamics for these early followers of Christ was redemption, healing, reconciliation, being made *whole*, stepping out as new persons in the new life order established by Jesus. Nothing about them was indelible to the grace, power and love of God; the process of transformation to what Jesus saved them *to* had begun. What started in these prayer meetings, the Spirit continued, extends to other followers and will bring to completion.

Joining together as one was also significant for their identity. What happened from this point were not merely the dramatic changes of individuals. Even more significant were their changes as a group. Consider their history together up to now. Though most of them had been together for almost three years, it's hard to get a sense of the disciples as anything more than a collection of individuals. That is, even though they undoubtedly bonded with one another in all they went through, you still don't get a picture of them in the Gospels as really working interrelatedly as a group with a common, singleness of purpose.

Essentially, they were a collective which had yet to distinguish their corporate identity. What they had in common until now was not sufficient to establish their corporate relational nature. Whether this was due to self-interests or competing interests, it is apparent that self-concerns kept the disciples from coming together deeply in their life together. Self-concerns also reinforced a self-serving comparative and competitive process among them which would stratify them more than bring them together. For example, their concern for who was going to be first among them, about having a special seat in Christ's kingdom and about the favorite place John held with Jesus, as well as who was going to betray him all reflect the priority of the individual over the group. And just exactly how they supported each other in a positive process, how they built up one another, or whether they experienced the synergism of being involved together as a group until then are all not apparent.

That is, of course, up to those prayer gatherings. This marked the beginning of "being one" that Jesus had prayed for (Jn.17:21-23), the start of the *whole* of the Father which the Spirit was about to come to bring to completion. From this point in Acts the changes in the character of the disciples took place dramatically in them as individuals and among them as a group. These followers went from being a collection of individuals to an interrelated, interdependent unit called the community of faith known as the Way, the family of God's people. In other words they were not only transformed individuals,

they became a transformed *people*.

What does a transformed group of disciples do when given such major responsibility?

They become the transformed church. Here is where we see the relational progression in the incarnation operationalized and where it converges with the Spirit of truth, transformation and adoption in order to develop the relational and experiential reality of God's family. In the post-resurrection dynamics, it is important to grasp for discipleship that the transformed new life Jesus saved us to does not function in individuals without functioning in the community of believers which those individuals make up. The process of this new life both for the individual and for the church are corollary processes. They are inseparably interrelated, with the process for the individual dependent on the corporate process in order to reach the individual's full earthly promise. Likewise, the Spirit of adoption is given to complete the *whole* of the Father, not for the individual.

Yet, the emphasis today is strongly skewed to the process for the individual – often even sacrificing the corporate process for the individual. We seem to be under the illusion that the life of the individual can vitally function apart from the dynamic life of a transformed church. When churches defer to this mind-set, however, they fail to realize that subordinating the corporate process for the sake of the individual in truth retards the individual's process of growth and development. By necessity then, authentic discipleship must (*dei*, by its nature) involve a definitive biblical ecclesiology which is relationship-specific to the relational progression Jesus incarnated and the Spirit perfects, and which has relational significance to the Father. (I seek to outline this in the following chapters.)

The local community of believers was neither another voluntary association in the Mediterranean world, nor an auxiliary group in the book of Acts. An examination of the beginning six chapters of Acts gives us the foundational elements involved in the dynamic life of these early followers (later to be labeled Christians). What is clearly evident in this narrative are the two primary means God gave to his people to fulfill their purpose together: one is the relational function of the Holy Spirit, the second is the intimate involvement and relational support of the local body of believers. These two are not mutually exclusive. Nor can we underestimate the function of either. They both are absolutely essential to the life and mission of God's people.

With a newly formed singleness of purpose, the early disciples proceeded to build on the necessary foundation Jesus started for a *shared life together*. As we expand our discussion of discipleship from the individual to the church, there are essential characteristics and elements of this corporate transformed life observed in the condensed history of Acts. In the first seven chapters we see the church and its identity being established. From chapter eight, the church takes a new direction, as it is forced out of its provincial context and made even more vulnerable.

Aside from valuable historical information, how seriously do we need to take our observations? Whenever a biblical narrative gives us some descriptive account of a practice, there is always the issue of how normative does that practice need to be taken across time and context; in addition, if considered normative for practice then how literal

is the practice, or is it a matter of principle? Determining whether a narrative practice needs to be taken as normative for today has to be a function of its reinforcement or its fulfillment of what the truth (of a matter, an area or the whole) is based on in the total context of Scripture. Such a conflict arose for the early church over the issue of circumcision. Today we would never consider circumcision as normative for church membership, for what should be obvious reasons. But what about those early church practices which did reinforce and fulfill the truth specifically about the church (the family of God) as Jesus and Paul defined? This is an issue facing us as we examine the transformed church in Acts.

The Transformed Church

As we identify the characteristics of their shared life together and assess their role in the life and mission of God's people, two matters will hopefully become evident. First, these characteristics are not restricted in time and context to a certain period of history; secondly, their application cannot be limited to fit into only certain social, cultural, economic or political conditions. As these early disciples realized quickly in those prayer gatherings, discipleship today has to embrace the truth that transformed persons need a shared transformed life together – no matter what the circumstances are. Having said this, we must be aware in our observations of not defining a code of practices to follow somewhat in effect as an end in itself. Such reductionism will only constrain persons and the church, not transform them. As Jesus clearly defined in the Sermon on the Mount, we are always accountable to surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes.

Joining together, the early disciples became interrelated *to* one another and interdependent *on* each other so profoundly as to be described as having “one mind or accord” (Acts 1:14), as being of “one heart and soul” (4:32). As deeply spiritual as this certainly means, we should not spiritualize our perceptions of how this was in function. Their shared life together operationalized very specific and necessary characteristics foundational for the transformed life of the transformed church.

As we just discussed, the first area these followers shared deeply in together was prayer. Here is where we need to think of prayer in less spiritual terms and in more relational perspective. It was understandable for them to go to prayer after Jesus ascended. Yet, we can't just focus on the situation, nor let situations control or determine practice. Prayer was not a situational matter for them; it was a functional part of their shared life together (2:42ff). Prayer for them was not an activity scheduled into their week or day. “Constantly in prayer,” of course, did not mean they were praying all the time, though I am sure some of them practiced “the continuous presence of God” long before Brother Lawrence (a seventeenth century French monk who learned how to operationalize this).

Whatever the amount of time spent in prayer, their involvement illustrates how prayer functioned in their midst. Rather than just an activity, prayer involved two essential elements: (1) relationships, (2) a process.

Prayer provided the dynamic link of communication with God. Spiritually, we understand this but often come away from prayer with the feeling that we've only been

talking to ourselves. This has a lot to do with being engaged in an activity (albeit sincerely and consistently) rather than engaging in relationship. Prayer is always relational work. Prayer for them also was not merely an individual relationship with God but a corporate relationship as well. Through this means for relational connection, this community of believers shared in its intimate communion with God, shared openly in its petition and intercession before him. As they were relationally involved with God in the honesty of their heart, they simultaneously set into motion a relational process of deeper involvement with each other – particularly, for example, when they deeply supported each other in prayer. Their relational involvement also extended outward to others beyond their immediate fellowship for whom they interceded.

Whatever was expressed to God in prayer (worship, petition, intercession), they shared it in common with him and with each other. In relational perspective, nothing was more vital to their relationships with God and with each other than prayer. It became, for example, not only a means to call forth the power of God but a way to love each other, to exercise compassion to others and, generally, concrete opportunities to exercise their relational responsibilities as the Father's sons and daughters as well as to experience being brothers and sisters in his family. In this relational process for the individual and the corporate body, prayer involved all aspects of their lives; nothing was too minor, major or irrelevant to be involved together in prayer.

When prayer in the life of God's people is practiced as a function involving these relationships and this kind of process, then it's understandable why their shared life together was necessarily characterized by: **ongoing relational involvement in prayer**. This became a natural part of their life that was exercised spontaneously just as much as it was scheduled or structured.

In this characteristic and others we will observe, the function common to all of them is relational work. Two other characteristics of their shared life together also directly involved their relationships with God. These can be defined as **the ultimate priority of worship** and **the relational centrality of his word**.

The statement "our lives are for the glory of God" is more frequently considered from what we do than how we function in relationship with God. When the relationship is the focus, there is no greater function we can exercise than the affirmation of God in worship for who he is and what he does. Luke identifies the disciples immediately after Christ's ascension as prostrate, worshiping him (Gk. *proskyneo*, Lk.24:52) and later as continually praising God (Gk. *eulogeo*, v.53). Praise (Gk. *aineo*) characterized their daily corporate life (Acts 2:46-47). The different words suggest that it wasn't the form of worship that was important but the relational process of involvement with God in affirming him. This expands our perceptions of worship.

Like their relational involvement in prayer, praise and thanksgiving were not merely the scheduled and structured outworking of this community of believers. Worship was a natural part of and expression in the ongoing life they shared together in common. Even in tense and needy circumstances, one of the first things we see this local body do is worship God (see Acts 4). There was nothing more urgent or of greater priority in the life and mission of God's people than worship. And the true posture of worship together also involved submission and service to him (2:42-45; 4:32-35), which is further expressed in other ways throughout Acts.

In the post-resurrection apostolic period, worship appeared to center on the Lord's Supper – communion, the Eucharist. The term “Eucharist” is the anglicized form of the Greek noun *eucharistia*, which means gratitude, thanks. Eucharist and thanksgiving are synonymous; no greater expression of thanksgiving and praise could be evoked than for the sacrificial relational work of Jesus on the cross. No other basis for the redemption and transformation of the individual and the corporate life of the church exists. And communion (derived from the same Greek root word *koin* as fellowship, 1 Cor.10:16,17) involves “having a common share in.” All persons in Christ held in common his redemptive work on the cross for them; they thus together shared in his death and resurrection (Rom.6). It was only natural, then, for transformed persons to join together to celebrate this reality and relationally respond to their Benefactor.

Ongoing participation (relational, not ritual) in communion served two vital relational outcomes. The gathering of believers at the Lord's table constituted: (1) their greatest qualitative expression of worship possible and (2) the greatest qualitative experience and relational dimension of their shared life together. In participating in this relational act, nothing was to bring them more intimately before God. In so doing, nothing was to bring them into greater commonality (fellowship) with each other than this moment. The transformed church was at its peak while intimately partaking of the Lord's cup and bread as they celebrated their new life together in **the ultimate priority of worship.**

From their relational response to God in prayer and worship, we turn our focus to the special response from God revealing himself to us not only vulnerably in the Word made flesh but also in the documented form of his Word called the Scriptures. Paul defined “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim.3:16, Gk. *theopneustos*, breathed out by God, produced by the breath of God), that is, as an expression of himself to be distinguished from merely human origin. The Scriptures constitute relationship-specific revelations from God through a human medium. As we previously discussed about the use of his Word, we have to approach this first with a relational perspective.

When Satan tried to tempt Jesus to reduce his life to quantitative aspects like the situation (his hunger) and to resources (bread), Jesus countered that: living is not merely quantitative (“on bread alone”) but living is relationally qualitative “on every word [Gk. *rhema*, that which is spoken] that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt.4:4). Later, in his farewell prayer Jesus shared with his Father: “I gave them the words you gave me” (Jn.17:8). It is this relational context and process which Jesus operationalized for his disciples. After his ascension, the early disciples easily could have let their situations and the need for resources control their lives. And it may appear that way when they filled Judas' vacancy among the apostles. Yet, when Peter stood up in their midst to say “the Scripture had to be fulfilled” (Acts 1:16) and “it is written in the book of Psalms” (1:20), he was putting their situation into the broader context of those words from God. Since God shared it, they responded to him, not the situation. His words established them in what they could expect (cf. Rom.15:4).

From the very beginning this community of believers looked to the Scriptures to guide them in the process of the emerging new life order. Whether it was related to filling a vacant apostolic position (as in the above account) or involving the public proclamation of the gospel (*kerygma*) or sharing ethical instructions (*didache*) with God's people, the

Word from God became *the* basis for authority in the transformed church.

It was upon this stable authoritative base that the life and mission of God's people were established. In his charge to Timothy for his church work, Paul defined the Scriptures as the means for authentic righteousness and making us adequate, competent, resourceful for whatever work God gives us (2 Tim.3:16-17). Yet, the Word from God was neither a source book for theology and doctrinal creeds, nor an ethical code book; this was about the relational expressions and workings of God.

The place and use of the Word are about relational work. It is God's special relational response that we must engage with relational work, not merely as a divine source of knowledge and information. Some persons can't get past the human medium of Scripture to see or hear God. Others listen to, read, even study the Word without engaging the One who *breathed* those words. Because of the absolute nature of the Word from God – qualified by the context and limitations of the human medium – it is within the relational context and process that: the mind of God could be distinguished from the mind of the people, or, for example, the creative minds of false teachers; the relational messages from God's heart could be determined apart from our biases and self-serving declarations.

It is clearly understandable in this early community of believers why his Word (in its written and oral form) became central in the operation of the transformed church (Acts 2:42). The transformed church was characterized by **the relational centrality of his Word**. And the responsibility for his Word and its ministry was given one of the highest priorities within the body (6:1-4).

God relationally reveals himself in prayer and through his Holy Spirit. But with the least equivocation God reveals himself relationally in his Word. Whether in the individual's relationship with God or the corporate body's relationship with him, no involvement with God is complete without the relational presence of his Word. In the ongoing, intimate communion with God all three characteristics – **(1) ongoing relational involvement in prayer, (2) the ultimate priority of worship, (3) the relational centrality of his Word** – are basic foundations for the transformed church's shared life together. Further characteristics of their shared life emerge from their relationships together.

The Church's *Shared Life Together*

Up to now we have been examining characteristics of the early followers' corporate life which deal primarily with their relationship with God and secondarily with their relationships with each other. Now we will consider what was characteristic of primarily their relationships with each other. This is an area which may stir in us the most.

In the process of the new life order of the transformed church, the three characteristics above precede this next characteristic. The actual development of this process, however, certainly doesn't always go from one characteristic to the next and move only in linear fashion. All the characteristics of the *shared life* are vitally interrelated to each other. With this kind of interconnection, these characteristics do not

function separately from each other, nor are they unaffected by how the others are operating.

As we observe their relationships with each other, their intimate communion with God (the relational outcome of the first three characteristics) is seen to lead this gathering of believers to intimate fellowship with each other. This intimate fellowship didn't just happen spontaneously by itself.

The fact that these early believers are described as *one* should have significance for us beyond what is commonly perceived as spiritual. This is not a mystical process, though there is certainly mystery involving God; and this condition does not just happen by circumstance. The outcome of this process is a function of their relationships. In those formative days of becoming the church, they are also described as “together and had everything in common” (Gk. *koinos*, common, belonging to several or of which several are partakers); in addition, that “no one claimed any of his possessions was his own” (Gk. *idios*, “his own” denoted property or special relationship, 4:32). When John took in Jesus’ mother as *his own* (*idios*), she didn’t become his property but a special relationship. Here in Acts it refers to property (“possession,” *hyparcho*), which we often develop a special relationship (attachment) to and become possessive about. The significance here of *who* is important to God and *what* is secondary cannot be ignored for the priorities of discipleship.

This new practice brought out the full meaning of stewardship in the corporate process of God’s big picture, not merely individual stewardship. In the *corporate context* of Christ’s body and the Father’s *whole*, “they shared everything they had” (4:32) – “shared” (Gk. *koinos*) is the same word as “common” in 2:44. Whether “everything” became common ownership (unlikely) or still owned by someone yet shared as if it were everyone’s, the important issue is to share in it all together without individual privilege being unequal and thus benefits among them inequitable (2:45; 4:34-35). This is clearly demonstrated when an inequity arose among them (see 6:1-5).

The terms for common, commonality, have in common, share in it and partake of it, fellowship, communion are all part of the same *koin* family of words. This is the set of words used to describe the transformed church. Obviously, this community of disciples had beliefs in common but that would not have had any significance beyond an association unless those beliefs had been exercised in their relationships – both with God and each other.

When we consider the organic structure of the transformed church – as Paul described in the metaphor of the body (1 Cor.12) – we can observe how closely connected this body of believers was. They were deeply interrelated to one another in a process of *interdependence*.

This process of interdependence is vital to the shared life together. From an operational sense, interdependence can be complex, but from a descriptive sense it is rather simple. Basically, *interdependence means covariation*. That means the members of that body are so closely involved and interrelated to one another such that when one part of the body moves, corresponding parts, if not the whole, of the body move accordingly. To use Paul’s words: “if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Cor.12:26). This goes beyond merely being aware of each other or exchanging information about each other. This is a

level of relational involvement with one another requiring a commitment most churches do not expect of its members – a commitment beyond merely participating in activities.

We cannot, however, minimize nor ignore the presence of covariation in the transformed church. Without a particular predisposition or bias about its form, covariation is an essential element to the life and development of the church. Yet, this can stir us in different ways. The implications of covariation are such that it would threaten most Christians and churches on the one hand while appeal to them on the other hand because of their deeper desires and unfulfilled needs. Here we encounter that ambivalence which often comes up in discipleship.

We can understand why the ambivalence as we examine this process further. The process which results in covariation involves: (1) a certain structure and (2) a particular kind of relationship. The structure of their shared life together is outlined in Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35, which, as noted above, cultivated a different mind-set in how they perceived each other, a new lifestyle in how they used their resources, a deeper identity in how they were *one*. Variations of that structure are possible as long as the underlying principle for the structure is maintained. That means being a part of this community of believers involved more than, for example, membership, attendance at meetings and tithing. Essentially, the structure they established minimized, if not eliminated, the independence of the believers from each other. Though individualism was not a part of the early disciples' culture, the kinship system foundational in their culture was given new meaning. Their shared life together would be unlike any kinship network they had experienced. This basic structure needs to formulate our ecclesiology.

This certain structure was not to take away the uniqueness of individual believers or to dissolve the diversity of *gifts* God invested in his people. It was, however, necessary to align this gathering of believers to one another in such a way that they would be relationally accountable to each other. Furthermore, it was vital for their shared life together that “its [members] should have equal concern for each other” (as Paul said in 1 Cor. 12:25) with the relational outcome that “there were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:34). Independence or selective involvement determined by the individual – the norm in churches today – are at cross-purposes to this structure. They counteract the whole process of interdependence and, consequently, produce wide variation in the relationships (from loosely connected to unconnected individuals) in the local churches rather than covariation. Wide variation or covariation – both happen by design, not by accident. Covariation is relationship-specific and -significant in its outcome because it is intentional.

Within this structure the responsibility and opportunity to vitally care for one another in all aspects of life (spiritual, emotional, social, physical, economic and so forth) in a total way was made a reality. It wasn't theory, theology or merely ideals, it was experiential. Such a structure is necessary for the process of interdependence to reach the relational outcome wherein members care for each other and attend to their needs. What else would have been sufficient to bring this result? Even good intentions of individual discipleship could not produce this outcome. The argument can be raised that such participation should be voluntary, that is to say, left up to the individual to decide their level of involvement. The church, however, is not in reality a *voluntary organization*, though voluntary in association; and we need to stop operating the church as if it were

any other organization in society at large. And accountability here is not the constraint of the whole to conform but the opportunity for the individual to grow to fullness by functioning as a part of the Father's *whole*, that is, his family.

The transformed church cannot be dismissed no matter what any other prevailing views and practices of the church may be. Later church history and tradition do not have precedence over this and how to do church. It was within this very structure that the early disciples went from being a collection of individuals to an interdependent unit of believers called the body of Christ, the community or family of God's people. Yet, even though this structure of their shared life together was necessary for interdependence, structure alone was not sufficient for this unit of believers to become a vital *community* or *family*, the organic body of Christ. Church (universal and local) was not about doing something according to a certain order but about being a specific people.

What is further required to complete the process is "a particular kind of relationship" among the believers. To use another word for this vital involvement of believers is the term *fellowship*. Unfortunately, we have developed in the church some peculiar ideas about fellowship. We've designed fellowship as some type of group activity rather than as relational involvement and experience. Whatever prevails, we must refer back to the root of the word and still understand *fellowship* as related to *communion*. Fellowship is synonymous with a common, shared life. And it is in the actual sharing of life together that "the particular kind of relationship" is identified.

To share anything in common together in a significant and sustained way is not the result of a structure, a condition or a circumstance; it is a function of relationships. Furthermore, to share *life* together in common is a function of *intimate* relationships. This is what Jesus revealed about the Godhead and how he demonstrated relationship with his disciples in the relational progression. Extending this to his body, it follows that another necessary characteristic of the shared life of the transformed church is **(4) the intimacy of the fellowship.**

As with our ideas about fellowship, to be *family* together has come to mean many things in our thinking. Many biological families are together because of a structure, a condition or a circumstance; but they don't experience ongoing intimacy among themselves in spite of being together. More often than not what families are today, intentionally and inadvertently, sadly does not include *intimacy*. We do find some covariation in these families merely because of family economic and authority structures, as well as a result of the routine family patterns established down through the years. Fortuitous bonds happen routinely in families. Yet, any covariation is limited because it is not based on the intimacy of their relationships.

If a unit of persons is going to be so vitally interrelated to one another as to be truly *family*, then the level of their involvement with each other has to be: (1) deep, (2) ongoing and (3) across the various aspects of life – listed in order of importance but not to be taken apart from the others. This means *the intimacy of relationships*. Family in name is one thing, but to be truly *family in function* involves so much more. To what extent do biological families live like this?

In no other way can a unit of persons experience a common, *shared* life together. In no other way can a *shared life* together be meaningful. Along with the intimate communion with God, the *shared life* of the transformed church must include **the**

intimacy of the fellowship. This intimacy with one another evolves from their intimacy with God because one cannot experience and be affected by how God relates to us and cares for us without extending that life, the nature of that relationship and that treatment to others. Agape involvement transforms as it is received and shared.

The new life order in Christ – be it of the transformed individual or the transformed church – functions with intimacy. If this is not the experience, then “[the veil] has not been removed . . . a veil covers their hearts” (2 Cor.3:14,15). In today’s language we would describe this as distant or detached from our heart and, likewise, in our relationships. This is reflected in our tendency to see the person from the outside-in and thus define ourselves by what we do and have. Relationships based on this will always have less intimate relational connection – if in fact there is opportunity for connection at all. This characterizes the modern world today; and how much of this influence do we see in our churches?

In the dynamics of the post-resurrection period “the veil is taken away . . . there is freedom . . . we with unveiled faces are being transformed” (2 Cor.3:16-18), “[so] anyone in Christ is a new creature; the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor.5:17). The person is redefined from the inner-out. In their shared life together the early disciples lived out this truth, not as a social, economic or political necessity, nor as a historical anomaly but because that’s *what* they now *were* – individually and corporately – in Christ Jesus. The greatest impact of this transformation can be seen in their relationships.

Transformed persons by God’s design live transformed relationships. Together *the intimacy of the fellowship* revolutionized kinship, brought renewed reality to God’s covenant people, created substance for the body of Christ. Though certainly not perfect, the fact remains that as a unit of such believers they were *community, family*, the organic body of Christ. This was the reality of their experience together. This is what it means to *share* life together as the church. As followers of Christ, is this how we need to do church today?

The Vulnerable Process of Confidence and Conviction

In knowing and living their true identity together, however imperfect, they never forgot the purpose of their shared life: to witness to Jesus Christ, to represent the Father and to extend his family. While neither segregated from the rest of the world, nor disconnected – mentally, emotionally, practically – from the needs and problems of humanity, they went forth from their “home-base” into the world (sometimes forced to by circumstances) without equivocation about whom they served. They also knew that as much as they received, this new life was not to be lived for their own interests.

This may seem simple enough theologically. Yet, this was not about merely proclaiming the facts of the gospel, following a system of belief, maintaining doctrinal clarity. Their purpose was about persons and ongoing intimate relationship with these persons: the person of Jesus, the person of the Father, not to forget the working relationship with the person of the Holy Spirit. This purpose involved the primary task of relational work with the heart. All other tasks (theological, spiritual, ecclesiastical) must be predicated on this relational task. Furthermore, their purpose, which also relationally

extended to others, involved becoming vulnerable to not only physical dangers but also, and even more so, to the personal and relational risks for the heart. For most persons the vulnerability of the heart is more of an issue than the vulnerability of the physical body. In the contrary demands of everyday life, in the pressures to conform to the prevailing norms, with the pull of competing interests, relationships, even beliefs, with the seductions of the *old* life and the lies of Satan, there is much which comes to bear on the disciples of Christ that effectively could divert, distort or neutralize their *witness* in the world. No one in human time and space was exempt from exposure to these influences of relational compromise – not even Jesus. Many well-intentioned, strong-willed persons (like Peter) have fallen victim to such influences. This vulnerability is an issue not usually recognized in the formation of discipleship. It is important, however, to understand that these self-concerns minimized making ourselves vulnerable in relational work, particularly in our true identity. This, in turn, confuses the issue of who is being served.

Yet, the early disciples, even under extreme antagonistic pressures, boldly kept extending their mission into the world without ambivalence or ambiguity about whom to serve. Though they obviously had tensions and fears, with clarity and conviction they answered back: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Whatever hassles they encountered, they would not abdicate *what* they were in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:19,20). This was not about *doing something* but about *being someone*. They lived with the growing *confidence* of their true identity and, thus, with the increasing *conviction* of whom they served. These are further foundational characteristics of their shared life together: **(5) the confidence of their identity and (6) the conviction about whom to serve.**

Going back to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus defined the identity of his disciples as being without ambiguity and shallowness. This is an inner-out identity based on the relational righteousness which surpasses the reductionist righteousness of the Pharisees and other reductionism. Any identity not engaged in relational work becomes ambiguous or shallow; any service rendered without relational work fails to surpass the righteousness of reductionism.

The early disciples did not, however, suddenly draw from their inner strength in order to live like this. To believe was not a mind game, to serve was not gritting one’s teeth. Likewise, though some of them were martyred, they didn’t live by the energy often generated by martyrs. Their ongoing transformation as persons really didn’t turn the early disciples into extraordinary persons with a high level of self-confidence and conviction. Furthermore, they didn’t live as such solely because of the power of the Holy Spirit working *within* each of them as individuals. What is crucial to realize here is that the relational working process of their *shared life together*, including with the Spirit, enabled them to grow in this confidence and this conviction.

This is demonstrated in the narratives of their life together. We can observe this process, with the six essential characteristics discussed, come together and beautifully unfold in one particular example of their body in action (Acts 4). In this account Peter and John had been carrying out part of their mission when they were confronted, threatened and, then, monitored intensively by Jewish leaders.

The disciples were not immune to the effects on their lives of suppressive activity or other conflicts. Contrary to other approaches which don’t attend to the heart, they

didn't merely ignore it, or grit their teeth, and move on. Being vulnerable was a necessary part of living with an open heart. Any and all feelings resulting from such situations needed to be attended to if the heart was going to experience the well-being and wholeness indicative of God's love and peace. So, when Peter and John were released from detention in the above situation, they immediately went back to their *own* community-family of believers to share all that took place (see Acts 4:23ff). Yet, this wasn't a time of reporting information. It was a time to share their hearts, share their lives with each other and with their God.

In the spirit of *koinonia*, the first thing this community-family of believers did was to embrace for themselves what had happened to Peter and John. That is, they all *shared in* it together; it wasn't only Peter and John's matter, it was *their* matter together (4:24, Gk. *homothumadon*, with one mind, same as in 1:14). Then, together, they affirmed their God – not just intellectually, but with open hearts they came together and poured themselves out to him (engaging **relational involvement in prayer**). As they shared their hearts, they also praised God (**the ultimate priority of worship**) and further gained assurance from his Word (**the relational centrality of his Word**). After sharing in all this, they prayed for comfort in how they were affected and also for greater confidence to be *what* they were in Christ and boldness to serve him in a contrary world.

How vital it was for them to come together in this way. Not only did it provide these disciples with the deep experience of the transformed life of God's people, it also made a powerful witness to all others about the new kinship of God's family love. In their shared life together they cared for each other corporately and they embraced their identity corporately through intimate relationships (**the intimacy of the fellowship**). How affirming, healing and empowering this was – especially for Peter and John. And as the community-family of believers trusted in the sovereign will and power of God, they *waited on* him to receive his response.

He did not disappoint them. It is important, however, to see that God's response was to the total unit of believers, not just to Peter and John. The Holy Spirit and the *body* came together (4:31); the Spirit is not here to serve the individual apart from the relational progression of the Father's family, the corporate body of Christ, the church. Consequently, through this *shared* process and experience this family of believers grew even more deeply united with God and one another. With this greater **confidence in their identity and conviction of whom they served**, they continued forth boldly in their mission.

As we observe these six essential characteristics of the transformed church converge in this common corporate process, it is not a "sign and wonder" that in the next chapter of Acts we find them declaring unequivocally when confronted again by the same hostile group (5:28,29): "We must obey God rather than men."

Post-Resurrection Transition

What happened in this critical period was the foundation for the shared life of the transformed church, which the early disciples established by their corporate practices following Jesus' ascension. Their redemption and transformation were set in motion from

the resurrection. In the transition from the individual to the new kinship of God's family, the observed characteristics of this foundation are all about relational work; this was in contrast to a code of practice characteristic of the pre-resurrection period. These characteristics affirm the importance of the whole person and the primacy of intimate relationships.

In discipleship we must always account for Jesus' expectation of our righteousness surpassing the righteousness of reductionism. Any forms of reductionist righteousness not only constrain the person from wholeness but it also works against corporate identity, the nature of the church, and the process of family. The individual is the priority in reductionist righteousness. This naturally leads to how we do relationships in a comparative way such that they are characterized by relational distance and stratification rather than intimacy and equality. There is no well-being or wholeness under these conditions – both for the individual and the body. And transformation is not an experiential reality.

Wholeness of the individual is not found only within the individual. That is, one doesn't experience wholeness by oneself nor by what one can do; likewise, reaching one's full potential is not a matter of accomplishing all one can do individually. Wholeness defines the term for peace (Heb. *shalom*) which involves the well-being of a community. Wholeness for the individual comes when the individuals in that community deeply unite together with the relational outcome of well-being among and within them. This well-being occurs for Christ's followers when they join together as the *whole* of the Father and his family.

This new relational kinship process involving the identity of the new person in Christ (from the inside out and with *agape* involvement, cf. Gal.5:6) subordinates the individual to the *whole*. More so, it directly makes the meaningfulness of the individual contingent on his/her rightful function in the corporate body. Certainly, this doesn't mean that the individual is not significant to God. Yet, in God's scheme of life in the big picture of his redemptive plan for all creation and history, the individual has little meaning apart from the operation of his family, the body of Christ, the church. This reflects the being and nature of the relational God of heart to whom intimate relationships have the most significance and for whom being his family together is his only desire.

This transition to the corporate process of community, the corporate nature of church and the corporate function of family is a fundamental necessity for discipleship. Not to make this transition is to follow a Jesus different from the incarnation and, thus, to be relationally disconnected from the Son who takes us to the Father as his family. Jesus focused his farewell prayer on this relational outcome for all his followers. Without this "complete unity," discipleship fails relationally *to be his*, no matter how much it accomplishes *to do for him*.

In other words, discipleship cannot truncate this relational progression and still rightfully be discipleship. Jesus is all about his Father; and if the relational process of his Father's family is not directly engaged in our practice, our discipleship has no relational significance to God. We may think we are following Christ, but we are not relationally functioning where and how he is (Jn.12:26).

Any tension or conflict between the individual and the corporate body are vital for us to address with the redemptive and transforming work of the Spirit. This joint

relational work is the means God provides for us so that we can experience the full relational progression Jesus *saved us to*. The new kinship family of God is the opportunity of every individual disciple to be an important part of this *whole* as well as the opportunity to be made *whole*. This remains the post-resurrection transition until it is brought to completion.

Consider

In our Western contexts it is difficult for us to formulate a functional corporate process of community, corporate nature of church and corporate practice of family which have relational significance both to God and to ourselves. This difficulty is to be expected when we are influenced, controlled or even enslaved by the biases of freedom, individualism and subtle relativism.

How does the *whole* of God define our life, and how has reductionism functionally redefined it in our practice?

How is the discipleship transition inherent in the relational progression and how is authentic discipleship the completion of this progression?

Is post-Reformation church practice prevailing today characteristic of a post-resurrection dynamic or a pre-resurrection period? How so?

9 Practicing Relational Connection

“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.”

John 17:22

There has been talk related to postmodernism that any transition from modernity will require a “paradigm shift.” Yet, as much as modernism has influenced our personal predispositions and biases, cultivated a *common* mind-set and worldview, Christians need to understand that the consequences of modernity on the quality of life go much deeper than philosophy, ideology and the workings of the mind. I suggest that postmodernism, in its idealism, is searching for the heart, that it is seeking intimacy, both of which have been reduced by modernism. In this sense Jesus would be the quintessential postmodernist, and he could be the hero of postmodernism – depending on how his disciples function.

The recovery of the heart and the restoration of intimacy in relationships are the proper functions of all Christ’s followers and are characteristic of their discipleship, individually and corporately. Yet, modern day disciples have to undergo change from modernity also, wherever reductionism has minimized the heart by defining us from the outer-in based primarily on what we do and have, and whenever intimacy in relationships has been displaced by other priorities or substituted for with secondary matter. This necessary redemptive change has less to do with our minds and everything to do with our hearts and our relationships.

The paradigm Jesus brought in the incarnation came directly from the Father. It starts with his glory, the glory of God, in which he made the Father known (Jn.1:14,18). The word for glory in Hebrew (*kabod*) comes from the word “to be heavy,” for example, with wealth or worthiness. The concept of “the glory of God” denotes the revelation of the transcendent God’s being, his nature and presence to us; Jesus did exactly that – revealed God’s being, his nature and his presence to us. Jesus was “heavy” with the Father’s being, nature, presence.

As discussed earlier, Jesus incarnated God’s glory: his *being* as the God of heart; his *nature* as intimately relational; his *presence* as vulnerably with us. This is how Jesus functioned in his person and with his words every day he was with us in the flesh. By living God’s glory Jesus operationalized what it means to be a *whole* person with heart and how to have intimacy in relationships. And the ultimate paradigm for this new life process is based on the relationship between him and his Father, which he revealed vulnerably to us. Now the Spirit is here to help us through this paradigm change and to complete the process of this relational progression.

Whenever we use the term glory, it must take on its relational meaning and

context. Glory as a concept does not yield the relational outcome of *being one* that Jesus prayed for (Jn.17:22). But Jesus didn't give us a concept of glory, he vulnerably gave us his *person* and the Father's person in intimate relationship. This is the glory he gave us as relational reality, which as we practice will make us one as he and his Father are.

As we discuss the serious practice of discipleship, the question of what is authentic will be an ongoing issue. When we examine our own practice, it is important to understand what emerged from our roots in Scripture, what was based on church tradition, and what is a result of other influences surrounding us today. This understanding of our practice will be helpful in the examination of three major areas involved in all practice: (1) the presentation of self, (2) the content of communication, and (3) the level of relationship engaged in. When we examine these three areas in the individual and corporate practice of the foundational characteristics of the transformed church involving prayer, worship and the Word, we will have a better grasp of the functions critical to authentic discipleship.

Practicing Relational Involvement in Prayer

The mere act of prayer is not complicated. Like communication, prayer happens whenever we engage in it. Yet, also like communication, not all prayer is meaningful nor does it always fulfill the function for which it was intended. How significant prayer is depends on what is engaged. When we understand that prayer involves relationship and an ongoing process, both of these are seen as critically interrelated to *living* – the everyday living of Christ's disciples.

How do we present our self when we pray? Exactly what are we communicating in our prayer? What level of involvement in the relationship are we engaging with our prayer? These are important issues in the practice of prayer.

A lot of people besides Christians pray. Few, however, pray in a relationship context – even less so when prayer functions in a routine process. For the most part prayer is experienced merely as a structured activity or is reduced to something one does, along with many other things in the schedule. In such practice prayer often is not well-integrated to one's total *living* even though prayer may take up a relatively large quantity of time in one's life. The result is that one tends to pray merely according to a schedule, dependent on style, form, or by the needs of a situation. Consider what kind of relationship operates by a schedule and is based on situations.

Unfortunately, this is how many Christians see or experience prayer. Within this approach implicit limits are created by schedules or style, and inadvertent constraints imposed by situations which prevent a deeper relational involvement in prayer. For example, we may not think of praying at other moments during an activity when in our minds prayer is scheduled only at the beginning or end of the activity; or a certain style or form predisposes us to pray in a limited way. Likewise, prayer may be inhibited because it isn't perceived to fit the definition of the situation. Relationship with God suffers under these conditions, often unknowingly. The level of involvement in the relationship does not have as deep a connection because the self presented in prayer or the content of the prayer is not free to be natural, no matter how normative the practice. That is, we can't be

as real, therefore, as authentic, in prayer when we labor under limitations and constraints preventing deeper relational connection. We may appear real or sound real in our prayers but only relational connection determines authentic prayer.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said not to pray like the hypocrites (Gk. *hypokrites*, one who pretends to be someone, like an actor, Mt.6:5). Beside the obvious connotation of hypocrite, how does a hypocrite pray? More importantly and specific to Jesus' instruction on prayer, how does a hypocrite function in prayer? One who pretends to be someone essentially presents a self which is not genuine or open (honest) in prayer. This does not mean necessarily that one is insincere in the display of prayer; the issue is not the sincerity of the display but what that prayer represents. What is important for us to grasp here about prayer is *the outer expression being consistent with the inner person (or the heart)*. In other words, prayer needs to be truthful of the self presented and a trustworthy expression of one's *person*.

Certainly, the presence of sin in our heart creates this incongruity, which is why God rejects such prayer. We cannot overlook, however, those prayers lacking honest presentation of self or authentic communication from the heart; such prayers are dissonant to God also and have no relational significance to him. Prayer is a function of relationship, the quality of which depends on honesty (or trustworthy); and intimate relationship requires the honesty of the heart.

When Jesus contrasted dissonant prayer with substantive prayer, the alternative he described was not about privacy but intimacy (Mt.6:6). He certainly didn't reduce praying to a particular place nor to a mode; private prayer does not guarantee honesty of self and heart. He was emphasizing the importance of the inner person and sharing that person with the Father. Furthermore, he not only defined how to pray but what to communicate.

What do we communicate in prayer – not what do we pray for, but communicate? In a verbally-oriented social context like ours, we depend heavily on words. The information age and its technology exponentially compound this dependency. We even become enamored with words in prayer – especially with certain words in public prayer. Verbose communication is the norm today because the alternatives of silence or nonverbal communication make us too vulnerable. Though Jesus doesn't discuss the mode of silent or wordless prayer here, he addresses our dependence on words (vv.7,8). Do we depend on external words and quantity in prayer, or what we mean from the heart? How we present our self affects the content of our communication. When our words are more about form and style or when what we share is merely information, communication becomes shallow. We should not confuse words and information with substance. Any form of reductionism encourages us to pray in effect like a hypocrite by minimizing the heart and distancing us in the relationship with a quantitative approach from the outer-in. That is also Satan's goal for our prayer life.

Jesus clearly defines that prayer is relational communication with the Father (vv.6,8,9). It is this intimate relationship with the Father as his daughter and son which constitutes the relational process of prayer. This process is not about sharing information

(the Father already knows that, v.8) but about sharing one's true self with him. This true self in Christ is now the new self which Jesus redeemed for the Father to be his very own in his family. Whether we share our new self with our own words, recite the Lord's prayer, pray the Scriptures, use other prayer books, or even share in silence, this relational function as daughter or son cannot be experienced from a condition of constraint or enslavement. This intimate connection is the relational outcome only of ongoingly experiencing the relational progression, which is why Paul tells us to "pray in the Spirit" (Eph.6:18).

Paul further said to pray "on all occasions [Gk. *kairos*, opportunity, not about situations or events] with all kinds of prayers [Gk. *proseuche*, general term for the variety of prayer], and requests [Gk. *deesis*, specific prayer for benefits] . . . always keep on praying" (Eph.6:18), not to mention to pray for him also (v.19). Along with other Scripture (like Lk.18:1; 1 Thes.5:17), these accounts of prayer point to such a comprehensive participation in prayer that it suggests most of our time should be occupied with prayer. That could be the conclusion when we approach prayer as an activity or merely something we do. Praying as a relational process, however, focuses on our ongoing involvement with God in relationship. Reductionist tendencies focus more on the quantitative aspects (including time) rather than the relationship. Though quantity of prayer is not precluded from this relational process, it is "prayer as ongoing relational involvement" which characterizes the qualitative transformation of Christ's disciples, individually and corporately.

How we are used to doing relationships influences the prayer process. Interaction is vital for any relationship, yet many cultures, for example, put limits on that interaction by de-emphasizing direct, open communication. The result is presenting a self which is less than authentic. Constraints on relational interaction are also imposed when the expression of feelings from the heart are discouraged – for example when boys are told not to cry. What does get expressed is not a trustworthy indicator of the person. Contrary to common assumptions, what you see (and hear) is not always what you get. Do a role-reversal and consider what God is experiencing as he listens to your prayers.

Despite occupying space and time together as well as sharing activities together, families still have trouble making relational connection because deeper interaction is limited or constrained. So many of our prevailing ways of doing things, our established traditions, even some of our interpretations of Scripture keep us from openly sharing with and listening to each other, or just being more quiet with one another.

In the everyday life of Jesus' disciples, prayer is that vital interaction in relationship with God. The authentic disciple prays (interacts, communicates) often and ongoingly, but not because it's the right thing to do; prayer is to the relationship what breathing is to one's life. In other words, prayer is *the* vital sign of our functioning in the relationship, that life is present, that living is in progress. Like breathing, prayer is absolutely essential to the life of the relationship. Prayer, then, characterizes not what a disciple does in the relationship; prayer characterizes engaging God in the intimate process of the relationship. This level of engagement constitutes prayer.

No matter how much we "do prayer," it only has significance to God when we engage him in relationship. This interaction has an important relational outcome, as open communication would in many other relationships. In other parts of Scripture,

particularly in the Psalms, those who *knew* God prayed, those who didn't pray didn't *know* God. But the issue of *knowing* here is less about the quantitative matter of conventional epistemology (cf. Jn. 14:5-9). Knowing beyond information involves more the deep experience of the heart which could only take place in our intimate relationship

with God. Such a relational connection of hearts open to one another and coming together always has the outcome of truly knowing each other. The ongoing relational involvement of prayer is what provides the opportunity for this relational outcome.

The interaction of prayer also serves further specific purposes which integrate a disciple's life. Faith as trust underlies all relational response to God's mercy, grace and love. Prayer is the most substantial way we operationalize our trust, such that we would not be passive in the relationship. Not only is prayer the vital indicator that we are alive in the relationship but more importantly that we are functioning as the redeemed sons and daughters of his family. And as his adopted children, responsible to represent their Father and to extend his family, this interaction through prayer serves as: (A) an act of **communion**; (B) an act of **compassion**; (C) an act of **advocacy** or opposition; (4) the process of **being family**. As will be apparent, these aspects overlap and are vitally interrelated.

A. Communion

As we have been discussing already, prayer is fundamentally an act of communion with God first and foremost. Given that the substantive meaning of communion implies sharing in common with each other, the word expresses an inner relationship involving intimacy. The full range of our relational responses to him in this act include: worship, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, other sharing and even the daily give-and-take of our life together. Since the quantity of participation needs to be distinguished from the quality of involvement in these acts, the mere outward presence of such activity should not be our primary indicator that communion with God is taking place. Anything which minimizes direct relational involvement during these acts results in distance or disconnection from God – quite a contrast from communion. Yet, our participation in many of the above responses is often in this manner by reducing the act of communion as prayer to an activity.

Many of our prevailing ways of doing things and established traditions cultivate relational distance. Since intimate connections of the heart are not easy to make, we've established patterns to avoid such opportunities, making it even more difficult for us to connect. We may not overtly hide as Adam and Eve did in the garden, but our masks are much more sophisticated than the fig leaves they put on. For example, if it's not some activity replacing the opportunity for conversation, then indirect expression of thoughts and feelings substitute for more direct and open communication. In today's climate, information about ourselves has become the dominant substitute for sharing our person more deeply. Direct sharing is even further lost in the art of communication. If our practice is rooted in Jesus' teaching (as noted earlier) and not based on traditions and prevailing influences, the content of our prayers in response to the Father will not depend on words and information.

Not only is indirect communication a barrier to communion, the absence of silence is another important barrier to address. Silence is also virtually lost in modern lifestyles and U.S. culture. The issue is twofold. On the one hand, we've become uncomfortable with silence in general, so we fill up silent moments as much as possible, for example, with activities, music, TV. In relationships, on the other hand, we get tense (knowingly or unknowingly) with silence because it makes us more vulnerable to intimacy (not to say that silence always leads to intimacy). In the tension of this perception, we fill such moments, for example, with a lot of *talk* – assuming, of course, we haven't ended the interaction. We're not really communicating with each other, just talking; the relational connection is not being made, the process of communion is blocked. In effect, there really is "silence" in the relationship because nothing of substance is said. Yet, the alternative of any real silence would be disconcerting if it is not occupied. Some romantic couples turn to sex in such moments, often with the illusion of experiencing intimacy. Whether we talk or not, the issue of silence dominates the practices in more and more relationships. And these practices influence how we present our self to God, what we communicate and, certainly, the level of our involvement in the relationship.

Relationships, if they are to be vital, necessitate intimate communion. Without this connection relationships lose their substance. That's how God made us. Our primary intimate communion with God is prayer. This practice has a tradition of methods and styles which you may find helpful but should not confuse with the relational connection of intimacy itself. Furthermore, the act of communion in prayer is not a moment of separation from the routines of everyday life. It may indeed be necessary to go into quiet retreat in order to pray. In fact, it is often necessary to do exactly that. Yet, the mere act of separation also should not be confused with the act of communion. No method, style, place or time in itself ensures intimacy; they may help but this connection is the relational process of hearts open to each other and coming together.

Because this is a relational process, this act of communion is not unilateral but is reciprocal. That is, prayer involves not only sharing ourselves openly with God but letting him share openly with us. We all have experienced times when God seems to be silent in our relationship. There are times God apparently is, in fact, silent. Many other times, however, God only seems to be silent because I don't hear him. How much am I listening to him? How much opportunity do I give him to speak? Some persons don't even allow for a transcendent God to have an active "voice."

Prayer includes giving God quality time to speak to us also. This means that prayer necessarily also involves paying attention to him, concentrating on him, listening to him (his person, not a voice). If we are talking all the time or can't be silent with him, he doesn't have the opportunity to share with us. This results in a loss for us as well as for him. It is here, along with his feedback, guidance and revelations of his will, that his relational messages are the most important for us to receive from him. For relational messages (what he says about us, about our relationship, about himself) to have significance, it implies our God is an impassioned God. I realize this is problematic for some but, then, the whole matter of intimacy for them would be also.

When David said his God "delighted in me" (Ps.18:19), the Hebrew term used (*hapes*) means to take pleasure in, have affection for and denotes a strong positive

attraction for. Our initial reaction may be: “how can God, almighty and holy God, delight in, take pleasure in, have strong affection for *me*?” This is a fair question but, nevertheless, this is not about *me*. If it were about me, God wouldn’t feel this way for me. However we may struggle with it, this is all about God and how he feels. These relationship messages communicate his being and *person*, not mine. In this intimate communion, this is what we need to hear from him and whom we need to receive deeply in our heart.

This intimate communion extends to those with whom we share in prayer, just as witnessed in the early transformed church. Far beyond participating in an activity we *do*, however frequent, prayer is fundamental for the integration of the various aspects of the individual and corporate life of Christ’s disciples. It is not just one part of that integration, it is the primary relational mode by which the integration of the new life order is experienced. This can be understood further as we examine the practice of prayer as an act of compassion, prayer as an act of advocacy, and prayer as the process of being family.

B. Compassion

As discussed in part earlier, in order to live as authentic disciples Jesus said we need to learn “I desire mercy [compassion], not sacrifice” (Mt.9:13). He repeated this not only because it is the needy we are called to but to define the new life we are called to. In response to the need to live this new life, Paul urges all in Christ (without differentiation) “as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion” (Col.3:12). Clearly, the life of Christ’s disciples means living as an act of compassion. This compassion is demonstrated by the good Samaritan in the parable Jesus used to define loving others (Lk.10:33,37).

When we think of the call to compassion (particularly with the good Samaritan as our role model), our tendency is to start thinking about what we should do in a situation and not be like the priest and Levite. Rightfully, compassion must translate into concrete, observable actions on behalf of others; good intentions are not enough. Compassion, however, means less about what we can do and more about how we can *be* and live – based on the new life in Christ. It is one thing merely to *do* compassion. Many people other than Christians have accomplished that. Yet, to go beyond that requires *living* compassion, not only *doing* it.

What is crucial in *living* compassion is the following: being the recipients of God’s mercy (compassion) and grace, we can go forth to share his compassion with others; but this must be done within the context and the process of our relationship with him. This relationship is the new life we are called to and what Jesus was defining in his statement above. Compassion focuses on this relationship and reciprocates with what is relationally experienced deeply in it. Sacrifice focuses primarily on the individual and what one does – particularly from the outer-in. God only wants what is relationship-specific; anything else we do is not relationally significant to him.

To separate ourselves (inadvertently or intentionally) from this relational context and/or to temporarily suspend this relational process are effectively to disconnect ourselves from interacting with God. This has serious implications. Whenever we reduce

or minimize our interaction with him, we are communicating (indirectly more so than directly) three relational messages to him about: (1) how we see our relationship, (2) how we feel about him, and (3) how we feel about ourselves.

If we are disciples of Christ, then the most authentic and conclusive characteristic bearing witness to that fact is not what we are *doing* from the outside-in. It is how we are *living* – from the inside-out. What distinguishes this inner-out living as his disciples is first and foremost a function of our relationship with him; this means specifically interacting together, communicating with each other. We may have a relationship in *form* without this deliberate interaction but we cannot have it in *function*. *Interacting together* is what the life of his disciples is based on. This process may be obvious, yet too often what we are doing in practice minimizes this interaction of living in ongoing relationship.

It is from this *living* that observable actions emerge from his disciples on behalf of others. Yet, all of these actions ongoingly need to be done within the context and the process of our relationship with him. Our first response, then, of compassion for others – whether in the church or out in the world – cannot be in that situation without first having lifted those persons, needs, issues, matters up to our Lord in prayer. We follow him as his disciples; and compassion for others’ needs, as a matter of priority, must be raised to him before anything else. To neglect or circumvent this interaction is to disconnect ourselves from the function of our relationship with him and, thus, essentially to reduce it to form only. This contradicts our discipleship, at least on his terms. Even though we rigorously may be following Jesus’ principles or philosophy, we are not following his person. Authentic discipleship ongoingly interacts and is intimately involved with the person of Jesus; it does not merely relate to his principles.

Whenever we make this disconnection (however transient) we do not act together *with him*. We are *doing something*, albeit with good intentions, but we are not *living together with him* in the process. The implied message communicated to him about our relationship in such moments is that either it doesn’t matter, it’s secondary, let’s suspend it for awhile or something to that effect.

For his true disciple, nothing takes priority over this relationship. No matter how urgent or crucial a need may be, this relationship is not subordinated. A disciple serves him and that means to follow him in intimate relationship (Jn.12:26). Therefore, our first response must always be to him. To ensure we are sharing in this effort of service together with him – just as the disciples were told prior to his ascension – we need to “wait for him” as we wait on him. This also helps to put the immediate situation into the context of God’s big picture.

This is demonstrated powerfully by Jesus in his relationship with the Father during a critical situation (Jn.11:1-14). Lazarus was dying and Jesus was asked to come to heal him. The situation was clearly urgent, and Jesus personally felt much love (*agape*, v.5) and warm affection (*phileo*, v.3) for him and his sisters, Mary and Martha. From this human dimension alone we could easily have expected Jesus to drop everything and respond quickly. That would have been the reasonable thing to do; certainly, Lazarus’ family expected a quick response. But instead, Jesus purposely waited two long extra days before responding to the need. If he had responded immediately, he could have prevented Lazarus’ death. Why did he wait? Because God his Father had a greater purpose in mind for this situation; and Jesus was directed by his relationship with his

Father, not by the situation. In spite of the need and the strength of his feelings for this family, his first response was to his Father, not to Lazarus.

This brings out the further need for our initial as well as ongoing interaction with our Lord. When disciples consider responding compassionately to others (or in advocacy for others' needs in the world), there is a susceptibility to dilute or abdicate our unique identity as God's people because of prevailing influences from the surrounding context. If this happens, then our response to help others would be no different from any other source of help. Again, this can be observed in function but not necessarily in form. Pressures which generate from the urgency of a need, the immensity of a situation or the multiplicity of issues can easily exert a dominant influence in our lives and result in a loss of perspective, thus ambiguity or shallowness in our identity.

God, however, may have different plans for his disciples. Our interaction with him is crucial to be able to discern this. Going to him initially and continuously on matters of compassion and advocacy reflect that our relationship with him is *the* determining factor in our lives, that situations don't define us. Therefore, for example, the priorities of the world's needs, the method of our responses to them and also the timing of these responses are all determined, controlled, influenced by him as he works the big picture – not by the world, nor by the urgency of any need or situation. That's why Jesus waited before going to Lazarus. This is what the life of his disciples involves and how it functions. It's this interaction in the relationship which directs his disciples' living. Along with the function of his Word in our lives, prayer is that interaction.

When we disconnect from him during our acts of compassion, we are further communicating a relational message about "how we feel about him." Basically, if we don't engage him on these matters, we are saying that his role is minor or is not urgent. Moreover, we may be inadvertently implying that we don't need him, that our resources, love, power, etc., are enough or that we are putting him on hold for now. Whatever the exact message that is implied in our communication to him, we reduce the presence and/or the function of our Lord to something less than primary. This is what we're saying in how we feel about him. Here again, we don't say this directly with words but indirectly by how we're living.

At the same time, we are also saying something specific about "how we feel about ourselves." To go forth to act in effect separately – whether in compassion or advocacy – without prayer is presumptuous. Whether we feel we could make a positive impact without him or whether we place a higher value on our own resources than is justified, not to engage him at the very core of our efforts means to act independently as a disciple. Peter fell into this with Jesus at times. Such lofty self-appraisal, due to arrogance from ignorance or more likely arrogance from pride, counteracts also our prayer as acts of general communion with God. There is less reason to pray.

We are susceptible in practice to act on our own (albeit appointed by God) as the agents of healing, redemption, reconciliation, change. Yet, we would not argue that God in his mercy and grace is the hope and the power for any of these changes. To whatever extent we may affirm this in our minds, we need to ongoingly function like this in our relationship with him. There is no substitute for sharing in this effort together. Therefore, relational interaction with him is the *key causal variable* in the process of change – that is, redemptive change. Prayer is the only interaction leading to this conclusion.

Unfortunately, prayer is not an involuntary response like some functions in our physical body. But, then, a relationship would not be meaningful if it had to depend on involuntary interaction. We can be thankful that our relationship with him is based on

volitional obedience and love. Yet, prayer, like good communication, takes work; and we have to cultivate its development. We need to demonstrate further in our practice that the extent and the priority of prayer in our lives are vital to *living* as his disciples. Without prayer we are in subtle distance or detachment from what makes us disciples: the dynamic relationship of following Jesus. And as he said, any service to him must be predicated on this ongoing relationship (Jn.12:26).

In other words, any aspect of *living* as his disciple does not take place outside of the specific context and the ongoing process of that relationship. Any act outside of this – no matter how seemingly righteous or how well meaning – is reduced to *doing something*. This is a susceptibility especially for those who tend to define themselves or justify themselves by what they do. When God communicates, however, “*to obey is better than sacrifice*” (1 Sam.15:22), “*I desire compassion, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings*” (Hos.6:6), “*compassion, not sacrifice*” (Mt.9:13; 12:7), throughout his Word he is pointing us to this relationship. This is because God *is* relational; this is his nature. Our response must be to that relationship and to his vulnerable presence. Such a relational response is the vital difference between *doing* (sacrifice) and *living* (obedience, compassion).

Every revelation from God points to himself, to our relationship with him and to how he feels about us. Together these relational messages communicate his deep desire to share life with us, to share it *together* and for us to go forth into the world together with him in order to share this life with others. *Living* as his disciple is the relational outworking of this process. Disconnections along the way reflect a contradiction of this life; in spite of the ups and downs of this relationship due to our imperfections, his grace is always sufficient for our forgiveness and reconciliation. But, here again, this act of communion requires prayer.

C. Advocacy

As prayer is the vital interaction basic to our relationship with him, it also becomes our most basic action in relation to the world.

When Paul was entrusted with the gospel to the rest of humanity, there was only one stipulation given to him: to remember the poor (Gal.2:10). Later he urges Timothy to pray for the well-being of everyone (1 Tim.2:1). In Jeremiah we are given the words of the Lord to pray for the welfare of the city (29:7). And Bruce Winter argues that Jeremiah 29:7 serves as a paradigm for the role of the Christian in society as defined in 1 Peter.¹ So this would not be spiritualized, James reminds us that discipleship must translate into overt action beyond words, that our compassion and advocacy must be supported by direct concrete response to those needy persons in order for our faith to be alive (James 2:14ff).

1. Bruce Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), ch.1.

What this presents for us is not an “either-or” alternative for action. Rather, we have a “both-and” responsibility which calls for both prayer and tangible response to the various needs of the needy, of which making disciples for Christ is foremost. Whether as an act of compassion or of advocacy, prayer evokes God’s response to the need, to those persons with the need and to the situation. Our tangible direct action evokes our complete response.

Yet, in another sense prayer serves a greater function than evoking God’s response. Prayer can also represent our most basic response of compassion and advocacy. Initially, we may not always know which is the best way to concretely respond to a need, an issue or a matter. Or we may feel too inadequate to respond at all; we could also feel too scared to respond. Whether we are lacking knowledge, experience or other emotional resources to respond initially to a need, in the meantime there is always one immediate way we can respond and be involved: to pray. It should be understood, however, that prayer is not the alternative disciples turn to as a replacement for direct overt action. At the same time, action of prayer is often how compassion and advocacy eventually emerge in his disciples and reach their complete depth. For it is while in the process of prayer that many things can happen to us.

Prayer is the opportunity to start acting with compassion and advocacy. By lifting up to our Lord in intercession a particular person, need, issue or matter, we can begin to evoke our own *person* in response to the world. That is, prayer becomes the means for us to get involved. Yet, prayer is not just the mode by which our response to the world can begin. It is also the relational context through which the fullness of our hearts could be brought forth in compassion and advocacy. This also includes our response of opposition to, protest of or conflict with parts of the world on behalf of others in need. So, prayer is the opportunity to express how we feel as well as the opportunity to have more of our heart emerge. Let’s look further at this process.

As the process of prayer continues in acts of compassion or advocacy, very definite things happen to his disciples. Prayer first becomes our **baptismal ground** as we initiate action to a need. Progressively, prayer is the **developmental ground** where our action in these areas takes on greater hope and substance. This is important especially in terms of submitting to God to determine the priorities of response, the method of response and the timing of that response. Next, prayer becomes the **proving ground** (or testing ground) for his disciples’ action. In persevering with our Lord in prayer we can find out how serious or committed our action is. Or we could find out the purity of our motives – for whose sake we are doing this. Prayer, then, becomes the **maturing ground** for our action – refining it, stabilizing us, and generally establishing us in the rightful context and process of our relationship with him where compassion and advocacy must be generated.

Other specific things happen to his disciples in prayer. Many times we find ourselves participating in prayers for others but in a matter-of-fact manner. We may be consistent and even frequent in praying; yet, we know that we are more expressive at other times or more involved regarding other things. This is not the process of prayer or the experience of *living* his disciples are involved in while truly interacting with him. If it were, very few meaningful things would happen to us.

Whenever we call forth God’s mercy, hope and power, we are challenged to

engage him on behalf of others with our *total* persons. In relation to him that means authenticity – an honesty of heart to share with him all that we feel or exactly where we are. This includes our fears about taking action, our doubts, our lacks, even our disagreements. These are shared in order to open the door for our hearts to come forth more fully.

In relation to others, to engage him in prayer with our *total* persons means exercising an empathy with those in need such that we ourselves would start to feel some of their need, pain or suffering with them. This could not take place routinely or as a matter of fact on the mind level. It is only possible on the heart level, which means we have to open up our hearts to unpleasant feelings, start to get our hands dirty and risk the consequences for even our *person* being exposed and affected. Understandably, making ourselves vulnerable like this is not easy. But, since this is exercised in the context and process of our relationship with him, and hopefully with his people, we do not go through this alone. On the contrary, as authentic followers of Jesus we join together *with* him who has already entered into their need, pain and suffering. Sharing this together provides us with a deeper communion of intimacy as well as results in a greater depth of compassion. All this then translates into more direct concrete action toward the needy.

As noted earlier, elements of pride counter prayer as an act of communion and as an act of compassion. Also of equal consequence, any sense of resignation in his disciples counters prayer as compassion and prayer as an act of advocacy, protest or opposition. To feel helpless or hopeless about a matter, or that our efforts wouldn't make a difference, or that God doesn't want to do something about it, is to resign ourselves to the point where we may either give up, fall into despondency or become somewhat indifferent.

There is a compelling example in the Bible that witnesses to both the unlimited outcomes of the prayer process as well as the abortive consequence of disconnecting prayer due to resignation. In James' call to the church to pray (Jas.5:13-18), he recounts the prayers of Elijah. Elijah prayed as an act of protest and opposition to King Ahab (see 1 Kings 18). As James describes him, "*he prayed earnestly*" (5:17). Elijah's heart came forth with great intensity; and this led to greater prayer and his action of direct visible confrontation of 450 prophets of Baal and their defeat. Elijah stepped forth with his total person on the line, and God's power was evoked.

In dramatic contrast, however, Elijah runs away from the threats of Jezebel because of this situation (see 1 Kings 19). Resigned hopelessly to this circumstance, he doesn't even tell God where he is going. Elijah disconnected all communication. He could only feel self-pity and powerless. He could see only one recourse: total escape through death. Prayer, even for his own life, was no longer effective for Elijah because in that moment of disconnection he no longer shared in this together with his God. Victory in the previous situation did not carry over to the next situation when the relationship was disconnected.

Whether the outcomes are unlimited or abortive, we must take to heart James' emphasis of Elijah's humanity. He was a person just like us (Jas.5:17). On the one hand, then, the process of prayer can yield unlimited relational outcomes for us as well because it depends not on what we're able to *do* but on how we *live*. On the other hand, we are equally capable of experiencing an abortive consequence because the opportunity to disconnect our interaction with our God exists any time.

D. Being Family

Prayer as a corporate act has even greater significance to God than as an individual act. This involves the process of being family – his functional family. In the above passage, James calls forth the body of believers to pray with one another and for one another. This is vital to the church but, again, not as an *activity*. This is essential for the family of God – yet also not because it's the right thing to *do*. In his call, James continues to distinguish mere words (faith) from action. Prayer as an act of communion is the mode by which disciples share their hearts with God and also with each other. It is this process of intimacy that makes prayer so vital and necessary for the family of God. That's why James exhorts us to share our needs with the body of believers (Jas.5:14). That's why he exhorts us to forego our self-protectiveness and open our heart – with all its wounds or sins – to one another (5:15,16). In this the church is intimately drawn together as *family* and lifted up to him by each other.

The initial outcome of this process is healing, with the continuous transformation to be *new*. The ongoing outcome is the transformation of the church from a collection of individuals to an *interdependent* unit of believers as community, to the intimate process of his sons and daughters (brothers and sisters) as family. The new life order in Christ develops in this process. But, this could not happen apart from the intimacy of opening up our hearts to him as well as to each other. It doesn't happen merely because we are *doing something* together called prayer.

It is certainly easier to do something together than to share our hearts together. We put ourselves in a vulnerable position when we share our wounds or sins. It requires trust, and misplaced trust could always lead to being hurt or betrayed. Yet, first and foremost, our trust needs to be placed in him and the work of his Spirit. In trusting him and submitting to his sovereignty, we can yield our hearts to others, even with the distinct possibility of being disappointed by them, knowing that *he* will not disappoint me nor let me down. If we are not willing to yield our hearts to others, it is because our trust in him is limited and conditional.

Prayer as living – be it in communion, compassion or advocacy – is the dynamic interaction necessary in our relationship with the Lord God. This is not merely an individual relationship with God but a corporate relationship as well. Through this relational process the body of believers *shares together* in its intimate communion (in part as discussed above) and shares in its petitions and intercessions before him. As disciples interact with God in this manner, they simultaneously set into motion a process of deeper involvement with each other – for example, when they support each other intimately in prayer. A similar kind of relational involvement further extends beyond themselves outward into the world to those persons for whom they are interceding. The eventual impact on those persons is both with the outpouring of Christ's love for them as well as witnessing the love God's people share intimately with each other as family.

Whatever the matter brought before God in prayer, his disciples share it in common with him and with each other. This was the beauty of the shared life together the early disciples had in Acts. We cannot underestimate how vital the interaction of prayer is to our relationships with each other. It's not only a means to call forth God's mercy or

power but a way to engage each other in love. In the relational context and process of this kind of interaction our hearts open up, come forth and draw together more than in any other way. As the God of heart and intimate relationships, he designed life for his followers to be lived and experienced this way. Furthermore, he makes himself intimately vulnerable to us for this relational interaction.

This whole relational process of prayer becomes the norm for how disciples can and need to live in all aspects of their lives. In our daily *living* we cannot function as authentic disciples apart from the intimate interaction of our relationships; and that intimate interaction cannot take place for the most part without prayer. So, *prayer as everyday living* is basic to our understanding of discipleship. And how we present our self when we pray indicates what part of us is involved. This part of us will determine what we communicate in our prayers and what level of involvement in the relationship we are engaging as we pray. Prayer simply reflects how we live – with frequency, verbosity or eloquence in prayer having no qualitative significance.

In its process prayer becomes these defining moments: creating, generating, cultivating those aspects of the new person in Jesus Christ. Prayer is how we begin and learn many things like being intimate, compassionate, advocates, or just being. It's how we learn to be rigorous and tenacious. It's how we learn to be persevering, how to pour out our hearts to him and to each other. It's how we learn to live as his family. *It's how the many aspects of our living are integrated.*

For these reasons, plus others not stated here, the new life order of the transformed church of Jesus Christ is necessarily characterized by **ongoing relational involvement in prayer**. When the practice of prayer in the life of God's people is approached as a matter involving these relationships and this kind of process, then it's also understandable why the early disciples' *shared life together* first and foremost ongoingly practiced this intimate interaction.

For his disciples, *to pray is to breathe their life*, for which there is no substitute.

Practicing the Ultimate Priority: Worship

In no other aspect of discipleship practice are the three major areas (how we present our self, the content of our communication, the level of relationship we engage) more significant than in worship. To help us further understand these issues we need to examine whether our worship (both individual and corporate) is rooted in Scripture, based on church tradition or a product of other surrounding influences today.

A. Relational Clarity

Worship is not an activity or an event with a figurative God. If our worship is adequately rooted in Scripture, the object of our worship will have clarity. Yet, clarity in the worship of the God revealed in Scripture is not just a matter of correct doctrine or sound theology. Worship is the ultimate response to God who so revealed himself and

who continues to share himself vulnerably. However we may perceive this response and whatever the context for it, worship is simply only this act. Yet, if any worship rooted in Scripture is not constrained by certain traditions or redefined by prevailing influences, then that worship is not merely an act (or shallow response) but a distinct *relational act*. **Relational clarity** is this distinguishable relational act. It is this relational act of worship which provides the opportunity for the deepest relational outcome of intimacy with God.

If our worship practice is genuine to the God of Scripture, these acts will have relational clarity. Satan may not discourage us from participation in worship but he certainly tries to influence ambiguity in our response. By ambiguity, I'm not referring to doctrine but relational significance. When I think about the relational significance of our worship, I often wonder how we would feel being in God's shoes. If we were the honoree, or the one receiving what God is often "given" in worship, I think we may have some of these feelings: bewildered that in spite of my presence as the honoree, I am addressed primarily in the third person; slighted that I am sung *about* more than sung *to* (in the second person), that the focus is on information *about* me rather than being *with* me; hurt by the indirect communication and references to me which push me to the periphery of the time rather than at the center of attention; discouraged by all the unrelated subject matter and detractions from this gathering to honor me.

In serious reflection, I don't think any of us would appreciate nor like to be treated as God often is in our worship. This is not to humanize God and reduce him to our level. But this is the relational consequence when our worship does not have relational clarity. Much of what is involved in social interaction and relationships goes toward wanting to be acknowledged and affirmed. Rightfully and justly everyone needs to be acknowledged and affirmed. Yet, this cannot be reduced merely to what we do or have attained; this has to be primarily about the relational acknowledgment and affirmation of our *person* – not based on the secondary matter of what we do or have. This is the nature of the person and the relational beings we are which God created. This is the working of our heart made in the image of the God of heart. Consequently, we have this need.

In this sense God wants to be relationally acknowledged and affirmed by us – not only for what he does but even more so for his personal being, for what he truly *is*. This also is a part of his being as the God of heart and his intimate relational nature. Certainly, we cannot say that God has a need for this as we do. Yet, he strongly desires and expects, even demands, to be acknowledged and affirmed by us. This is fulfilled by our worship of him with our praise and thanksgiving, which also involves submission and service because *in function worship is the natural relational treatment of one who is superior*. Not every expression of worship, however, fulfills this.

Relational acknowledgment and affirmation are further expressed in the relational messages implied in our practices. *Relational clarity requires relational significance*. This significance involves much more than the overt expression of worship but also involves what we present of our self in that expression, what we mean by the content of that expression, and what level of relationship we are engaging as we express it. Our relational messages tell God how we actually feel about him in that moment we make the expression, what our relationship means to us at the time, and maybe how we feel about ourselves. Go back to the above examples of being in God's shoes and consider what the relational messages implied in those practices are.

Relational messages define where our heart is. That's why these relational messages are important to God. If we want to deepen our relationship with him, we need to be aware ongoingly of the relational messages we are sending to him particularly by our worship practices. Furthermore, God's relational messages to us define his heart also. This is why it's extremely important for us to be aware of his relational messages. Without receiving those messages, we can easily miss his acknowledgment or affirmation of us; then his relational connection with us will seem distant.

B. Jesus the Worshipper

The incarnation of the Son is the most obvious clarity of God available to us. Yet, this is not informational clarity to store in our creeds and to have available in our belief files. Jesus not only brought the transcendent God vulnerably into our presence but he specifically revealed the Father in all aspects during his earthly life. In other words, the incarnation is totally relationship-specific to the Father. Jesus incarnated relational clarity to the Father. It is this relational significance which needs to be the basis for the relational clarity of our worship practice.

Since true worship involves the functional posture of adoration, submission and service to one who is superior, it may be confusing to consider Jesus as a worshipper. After all, he should be worshipped by us without equivocation. Yet, though Jesus is God, and the Father is not ontologically superior (nor differentiated in being), the Son is functionally subordinate to the Father (as the Spirit is to their persons). Jesus lived in this posture before the Father throughout the incarnation.

The incarnation is the relational progression to the Father because Jesus effectively worshipped the Father. He brought the Father glory (Jn.17:4) and chose to go to the cross in order to glorify the Father (Jn.12:27). He specifically revealed the Father (Jn.17:6) and is all about making the Father known to us (17:20). Additionally, Jesus loves the Father and does exactly what his Father commands (Jn.14:31). In fact, everything he said is just what the Father told him to say (Jn.12:50). All of this demonstrates the relational clarity of Jesus' person and words. He ongoingly exercised total affirmation, submission and service to his Father. Situations (like his pending death) and circumstances (e.g., Satan's temptations) never diminished this relational clarity nor compromised the relational significance to his Father.

This is what worship is. Jesus practiced worship with others, he went off by himself to worship, he practiced it while doing ministry, performing miracles, fellowshiping, resting, while in emotional pain, while dying. Worship wasn't something he did at a particular time or in a special way, nor was it simply a lifestyle. For Jesus, *worship was an ongoing life in relationship – in intimate relationship with the Father.*

Discipleship necessitates following Jesus the worshipper. This involves worshipping Jesus in the relational progression to the ongoing worship of his Father. Worship that gets fixated on Jesus eventually puts him in a box and impedes the relational progression. The Son receives his glory from the Father (Jn.17:22,24), thus authentic worship ultimately focuses on the Father. This is what our Father wants from us, both individually and corporately. This is the relational clarity for which the Spirit is absolutely necessary to help us experience and complete.

C. Attachment and Priority

The ultimate priority of worship is not a future orientation but a current practice which maximizes life in relationship with God. Basically, worship is the relational treatment of God any time in any place – not reserved for a particular time nor limited to a special place. Without hesitation, flexibility or compromise on his part, God expects to be treated like this all the time. In this sense worshipping God is not special or unique; conversely, we are not really treating him as special or unique by scheduling worship to only certain moments in the relationship. Certainly corporate worship is a further dimension of this relationship, which we will discuss in the next section. Yet, we have to grow out of this false distinction such that increasingly we don't separate worshipping him from our prayers, our service, our play, when we eat, even when we sleep. Everything we do includes an act of worship, that is, the rightful treatment of and expression to him alone who is worthy.

Paul makes it imperative for us to give thanks in everything because this is God's will for us (1 Thes.5:18). This may seem unrealistic, similar to the verse prior to it when Paul said to "pray continually." And Christians become unreal in the presentation of their self when they focus on this as *doing something*. As noted earlier about praying continually, it's not a quantity of life which is prescribed here. The emphasis is not on what to do but rather on the relationship and engaging God ongoingly.

We cannot, however, engage the persons of the triune God in relationship if we don't get beyond our situations and circumstances in order to see God involved with us in steadfast love and faithfulness. Despite what those situations or circumstances may seem to imply (which Satan readily reinforces), we are called to a life of faith which authentically functions only as relational trust within the context of our intimate relationship with him. Loss of relational clarity renders us passive or distant in the relationship. No vital relationship can be static, nor merely situational. It must by necessity involve the ongoing dynamic process of *living* in which worship and prayer engages us.

Authentic worship facilitates our focus on the personal being of God and inspires our involvement with him in intimate relational connection. Worship, then, properly shifts us from situations and circumstances, and more importantly from ourselves, to him. Worship subordinates all of this (including time and space) to bring us before him more freely face to face, more openly heart to heart.

When it comes to the everyday functional posture in our life of what truly signifies worship, we have to ask ourselves: in actuality what/whom do we defer to and what/whom are we loyal to with greater attachment and priority than God? Compromise in our worship of God is not easy to acknowledge, especially if such compromise is not obvious to us. If we faithfully attend worship service and participate in it to the extent available to us, we tend to feel that we worship God. And in these brief moments we may in fact have worshipped. Yet, it is always easier to fulfill our perceived duties and obligations when we define an area like worship in such a limited way and maintain this false distinction from the rest of our life.

To understand that worship is a relational act helps us to see the presence of compromise and its consequences on the relationship. We need to respond to the

prevailing influences of our surrounding contexts just as Jesus rebuffed Satan; he didn't just apply the truth to a vulnerable situation but exercised what is basic and vital to relationship with God (see Mt.4:10). As discussed previously, true worship functionally also signifies *submission*, which then would involve *service* to the superior. *To submit is to serve*; the two go together naturally and should not be separated. Jesus wouldn't even entertain such a compromise – even when the situation turned from hunger in the desert to distress of death in the garden of Gethsemane.

This relational act clarifies for us when the relationship is rendered to compromise. For example, to only praise God as the expression of our worship doesn't guarantee submission, and thus service to him; to give thanks alone does not either. How we treat him ongoingly the rest of the week reveals the extent of our worship. Public worship, in fact, may be the weakest indicator of what is happening in the relationship. Likewise, to only serve God doesn't guarantee submission either if it doesn't include the relational act of worship. Not all Christian service comes from relational submission to God as a part of one's worship. Though it may have the appearance of glorifying God, service without worship has no relational significance to God (cf. Jn.12:26). Such service could merely be how we define ourselves or establish our worth, and thus tends to be self-serving.

The level of relationship engaged in worship always determines our worship practice's significance to God. Authentic worship has to be relationship-specific and its presence or absence tells us a lot about the relationship. *The functional posture of worship serves as the primary determinant for what the relationship means to us.* Nothing reveals the compromise of this relationship more than our worship practice. It distinguishes in our practice, for example, what we have attachment to (in our heart) from that which only has our interest (primarily in our mind or for our sensory experience). Our attachments determine our priorities; interest alone is not sufficient to establish priority, much less practice the ultimate priority. As the worshipper Jesus lived for us to follow, worship is the benchmark for relationship with God because it expresses who is important to us and what the relationship means to us.

D. Corporate and Public

In the context of the relational progression, it is not the individual's relationship with God that has the most significance. It is the combined relationships of the Father's daughters and sons as his family which is uppermost. Worship follows the living of this relational progression and flows from the life of its corporate process. This means that worship is not primarily an individual or private matter. It is meant for God's people to corporately exalt him, and for different parts of the church body to be able to join in each others' praise and thanks, as well as for others to be edified. God is fully glorified when his family is exalting him together. When they do, his people also share in his glory in a way no individual could experience alone.

In our practice corporate worship could mean an activity, an event, a gathering, a collection of individual experiences, a group contagion experience, or intimate family moments with God the Father. Structural constraints and contextual influences greatly

shape corporate worship today. Given that God vitally bonded members of the body of Christ in interdependent relationships to one another, the individualistic orientation of many Christian perspectives undermines the very nature, structure and process of the church as the embodiment of God's family. While individualism does not preclude individual relational acts of worship, nor individuals worshipping in the same gathering, it does minimize or virtually eliminate the experience of *oneness* as his family, along with the synergism (where worship by the whole is greater than the sum of the individuals) by which God is glorified the most – not to mention by which our worship experience is the greatest, beyond group contagion.

Worship is the heart of the transformed church; it supplies the church its lifeblood. This lifeblood is vital to the life and purpose of any church. We can see this in the church which emerged with the early disciples. That church was not a consensus group of society. In some respects it was a divisive, disturbing, even revolutionary force in the Mediterranean world; like Jesus, they were countercultural. The church operated this way because an essential part of its function was to deal with sin and evil, call people to repentance and proclaim the redemptive hope that is in Christ Jesus (Lk.24:47,48). Carrying out that purpose created various degrees of tension, reaction and conflict with those who subscribed to the traditions, values and systems rooted in this sin and evil. Yet, even in tense and needful circumstances, one of the first things we see this body do is worship God (see again Acts 4). Unfortunately, that tension and conflict could also arise with other Christians who still embrace elements of the old order, as it did with the Judaizers. (Issues of form and style of worship have created similar conflicts within churches through the years.)

This grace and hope for new life, however, are not only for his disciples to proclaim to others but also to continue to experience for themselves and to share further with each other. As persons who still sin and live imperfectly, we all ongoingly need his grace for forgiveness and the encouragement of his hope that the *new* person in us is rising, that the Spirit will bring our transformation to completion just as he raised Jesus from the dead. In the total process of Christian living in discipleship with the primary purpose to glorify God, worship is the primary context in which all these various aspects can operate. Whereas prayer is how the many aspects of our *living* are integrated, *corporate worship is where they can all operate together as the function of family*. The process of corporate worship needs to involve this *wholeness*.

Yet, this process of worship doesn't happen automatically or mysteriously. An open and honest presentation of self is necessary for this outcome. To experience more of his grace, for example, means that submission needs to be a part of corporate worship, specifically as a time of confession. *Submission along with humble adoration make up the natural content* (not necessarily an order) *of worship, which should conclude with opportunities to serve* – for example, during the worship service by praying for others and with challenges to serve during the week.

We cannot minimize the importance of how we present our self in corporate worship, the relational content of our worship and the level of relationship we engage in our worship. The holistic worship by the early church – particularly during its needful periods – was both the praise and thanksgiving of their hearts as well as the

encouragement, renewal and further uniting of their hearts with God and with each other. Worship was the ultimate time to share further in their commonality of the grace of God, the fellowship of sharing in Christ's life and suffering and the power of his resurrection (Phil.3:10), as well as to affirm their oneness with the church of Christ around the world (1 Cor.10:16,17). Their participation together in the Eucharist served this purpose, with the relational outcome that they were not alone. They were joined together *with* and *in* Christ, joined together with his church around the world.

Worship was a process in which the church as catholic (not Roman Catholic) witnessed to its *living* and *light* as it exalted the source of its life. This relational outcome may seem somewhat mystical; and the Spirit's relational work bringing to completion the relational progression has mysterious aspects. Yet, the base of commonality the church shares with Christ and with each other is the same grace, power and hope which resurrected Jesus from the dead. This truth of the new life ongoingly must be affirmed and further embraced by God's people. Corporate worship provides that opportunity and develops this experiential reality. Without this function of worship in a church, that church strains to be different from other social institutions in society, its witness fades as the source of hope in the world, it even struggles for its very life.

E. Traditional or Contemporary

The ultimate priority of worship must be restored today in the mind-set of our Christian perspectives, in the operation of our churches and in the total process of *living* as Christ's disciples, as the Father's sons and daughters, as God's family. Yet, we are detracted from such practice by various issues, not the least of which is the tension between traditional and contemporary worship.

The common variable to both these worship contexts is the individual: how the individual is perceived and how the individual is presented. Directly related to this is its effects on the corporate dimension of worship. Worship is very personal and should be intimate, yet it is also corporate. Historically, the church has suffered through periods of having only one aspect or the other; and even the presence of the one aspect was often not carried out well.

The liturgical movement in the 20th century had as its major purpose the restoration of corporate worship as primary and essential to Christianity, the church and the Christian life. How significant this effort has been is not apparent to me, especially in mainline denominations. Given the relational nature of the Christian life, however, any such effort must adequately nurture the personal relationship inherent to worship as it seeks to edify its corporate aspect. At the opposite end of the worship spectrum, the Jesus movement of the 1960s and '70s revolutionized worship (for better and worse) with its countercultural approach and by its intentional or inadvertent disdain for the constraints of institutional structure. This relative freedom led to greater opportunity and spontaneity in worship but also to greater individualism and spiritual ambiguity. It wasn't always the Spirit who led in those gatherings. In recent years there have been efforts among various evangelicals to recover some of the early tradition and ritual of the church fathers. In worship, this is the search for more substance and consistent depth than is experienced today. But we must also see this effort as a developing reaction to individualism as well

as to the current shallowness in the presentation of self.

Of course, individualism in the church formed its roots well before our contemporary context. The shape of many Sunday morning services, with its emphasis on the individual, historically goes back to Zwingli and the Swiss Reformation (16th century). Western Christianity was strongly influenced by this movement in its subordination of corporate worship for the sake of instructing the individual. The latter was carried out by dominating the morning service with the sermon.

The individualism of Christian perspectives must also have some roots in 17th - 18th century Pietism whose primary character was personal subjective experience. Pietists placed personal prayer and Bible reading ahead of corporate worship and church order. It is deficient, however, to perceive these as compartmentalized aspects of the Christian life. Though each is a process in itself they all are parts of one total process of the new life order in Christ – one relational process with only one relational purpose. This will be seen further in our discussion on the relational centrality of his word in the next section.

Many policies or methods have passed through the church over the centuries. Exactly how your local church has been influenced by these developments may differ from other churches; and the traditions and prevailing influences which helped to shape it and which it still embraces should be of interest to us. Whatever these influences may be, we can observe a definite pattern for worship practices. When these practices are repeated often enough without their full relational significance, they inevitably fall into mere forms or rituals without substance. This needs to concern all Christians, both the individual and the corporate body of believers.

The following generalizations may be helpful to put this issue into sharper perspective. Traditional worship operates with structure more than spontaneity in order to formalize its order; in practice, it effectively discourages freer expression. Whenever structure prevails over spontaneity, the individual as a whole person tends to get submerged. This is not the same as emphasizing the importance of the corporate body over the individual – a perspective which some tradition correctly nurtures in contrast to contemporary worship. The individual in a structured worship context is perceived in a limited way such that, for example, the order of worship becomes more important than the individuals present. The structured format in effect becomes served by the individual rather than the order serving the gathered individuals as a means to be with God. Under these conditions, the church historically has conducted its corporate worship in more symbolic fashion than meaningful function for the individuals present. In such traditional worship (with or without the presence of liturgy and ritual), the consequence has been to make spectators out of the individuals in the congregation. Furthermore, the individual tends to enter this worship context with little more expectation or accountability than that of a spectator, consequently presenting one's self with limited depth of involvement. As a relational act, what is the significance of this worship with regard to what God receives; putting yourself in God's shoes again, how would you like to be honored in this manner?

In terms of the individual's whole person, the alternative is not necessarily contemporary worship. The individual certainly has more opportunity for varied participation in this context, especially when spontaneity is cultivated. Yet, we have to understand how the individual is perceived here and thus presented in function. Davin Seay, senior editor of *Worship Leader* magazine, correlates the origins of contemporary

worship and its roots to the rock concert.² I think we can add a partial analogy to sports events. While traditional worship makes somewhat static spectators out of the congregation, contemporary worship tends to make participatory spectators out of those present. Obviously, the intensity and involvement is much greater, as it is at sports events and rock concerts. As strong and as long as the participation may get, however, the individual is still only a fan, not a “player”; collectively, they are merely the audience prompted by (and often for the sake of) the real players and the stars. Whatever is overtly displayed, the inner person is still spectating before God.

The process of contemporary worship may not yield the relational outcome of connecting with God any better than traditional worship; in some aspects they are indistinguishable. Participants may not depend on a formal structure like traditional worship, yet they depend on worship leaders and bands, along with their own rituals, to bring them to God. Seay points out that like rock stars, worship leaders and bands serve as “de facto priests” who mediate our worship experience. And the structure of contemporary worship contexts reinforces this with worship leaders and bands at front-and-center stage.

This has created its own set of problems in the practice of worship. As further commentary on how the righteousness of his disciples must surpass that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (Mt.5:20), Jesus specifically focused on not worshipping the Lord “in vain” (Gk. *maten*, invalid, falsely, fruitlessly, Mt.15:9). What validates worship is not what honors him from our lips but what comes from the intimate involvement of our heart, as Jesus emphasized (Mt.15:8). From the Old Testament (cf. Is.29:13) through the New Testament, this is the only worship significant to God.

Contemporary worship appears to think of fidelity in worship more in terms of sound than the presentation of the whole person and the content of what is communicated in this relational transaction. Fidelity is produced by amplification and other electronic modifiers. The ambiance cultivated by contemporary worship lends itself to emphasize style and experience. Style is an outer-in approach that tends to get distant from the heart. Experience in this context tends to focus too much on oneself (and what I get out of it), and thus loses focus of worship as a direct relational response to God – particularly as his family. The combination of style and experience inadvertently leads to distance from our heart and a lack of intimate connection with God. This happens despite the engrossing nature of the sound and the participatory extent of the experience; we should not confuse sensory stimulation and stirring experience with intimate relational connection with God. If you’ll permit the analogy, the experience of orgasm in the act of sex often has little if any actual relational intimacy for its participants; the association with intimacy may be perceived but the experiential reality is absent.

Whereas traditional worship (with its emphasis on structure) often seems to lack heart and substantive experience, contemporary worship (with its emphasis on style and experience) often seems to lack relational clarity. This clarity is a functional focus, the depth of which is not merely experience as an end in itself but experience as the outcome of intimate relational connection with God. Worship leaders who merely mediate a worship experience not only rob God of what is rightfully due him but also shortchange

2. Davin Seay, “Rooted in Rock: the Origins of Contemporary Worship Ritual,” *Worship Leader*, Nov/Dec 2003, vol.12, No.8, 19-20.

us of this ultimate relational opportunity. Still, we are all accountable for our relational work.

The lack of relational clarity lends itself in effect to masquerade (*metaschematizo*, which, if you recall, is only outward change), with a tendency to present our self in a role different from our true self. What becomes simple role-playing, even if unintentional, is still identified by Jesus as the leaven of the Pharisees and defined in Scripture as hypocrisy. While earlier traditions may have ritualized form away from substance, contemporary worship in various ways has fictionalized worship as performance and theater. Corporate worship today provides an identity that replaces the relational clarity of the Light with ambiguity, and the distinctive substance of salt with shallowness. This is not the next level of righteousness Jesus said his disciples need to step up to.

If our worship practice is to increase in relational clarity and depth, then we need more change than contemporary worship provides for us. Authentic worship, whatever the context, requires inner-out change, redemptive change; this process necessitates ongoing transformation (*metamorphoo*) which is predicated on redemption (being liberated, e.g., from the issues above).

F. In the Relational Imperative Only

As a relational response, worship must be engaged on God's terms. Whatever the context of our worship practice, God does not want our stirring music, our intense words or eloquent prayers. He only wants *us*; that is, the whole person is the only substance that has significance to him. Yet, no matter what we do in worship, God doesn't have our *person* if our hearts are distant. Nothing else in worship substitutes for the presentation of our heart in open response to the heart of God. He only wants of us what he created in his image as the God of heart; and that is what he vulnerably gives of his *self* intimately to us first and then in return.

From a relational perspective, nothing else in worship really makes sense. When we truly make connection with the personal being of God and not the idea of God, then the natural outcome in that moment is worship. His being evokes worship – awe, reverence, submission. If God is not impressive to us in this way, he isn't much of a god. If we are not impressed with God to respond in worship, we are not genuinely relating to the transcendent and holy God. Though transcendent and holy may in fact be our idea of God, actually relating to this transcendent, holy God involves relational clarity which can be problematic for us. This is where we must address the issue regarding on whose terms the relationship will operate. When our perceptions of God don't tend to evoke worship, it is often because we have essentially reduced him in some way. Effectively putting God in some kind of box may serve our comfort zones in distancing ourselves, for example, from his transcendence and holiness, but it does not result in the natural function of worship.

Authentic worship flows when we let God be his *self* and we open our *self* to who and what he truly is. Worship is not the practice of a belief system; we don't exalt a concept but a transcendent, holy person-being. Worship then can only be the natural function of this relational encounter, which is relationship-specific by its nature to only his terms.

This intimate relational connection, however, requires our transformation for worship to be on his terms. The holy (separated from the common) and eternal God does not do relationship on the basis of the common and temporal. Since this is all we know, in order to meet him on his terms in the context of the uncommon and eternal we need to be ongoingly transformed from the inside-out. This is not merely a matter of becoming countercultural. No amount of outward change can substitute for the substance of a transformed person, nor duplicate it.

Worship must (*dei*, by its nature, not as obligation, cf. Jn.4:24) involve this transformation of our heart opening up and coming before the heart of God in humble reverence, submission and service. This may necessitate surrendering our masks, our titles, our roles, maybe even our culturally influenced gender in order to bow down to him as we truly are. Whatever impedes this connection has to be redeemed and transformed. In relational practice nothing connects us intimately to the heart of God as much as worship does. Yet, the transition of our heart in worship is an ongoing process for which the Spirit is absolutely necessary to develop to wholeness and bring to completion. In his relational work, the Spirit transforms us and establishes us in the relational progression with the Father in his family. That's why we need to worship primarily by the Spirit and secondarily by traditional or contemporary means (cf. Phil.3:3).

Jesus vulnerably revealed to the Samaritan woman that worship is not here or there, this way or that way (Jn.4:21-24). He took worship and its fundamental relational connection out of quantitative (spatial or behavioral) terms and constituted it in qualitative relational terms. Relational connection was not in a location or a behavioral mode such that we could merely present ourselves in body and participate in outer-in activities such as singing and offering (Mt.15:8; Ps.51:6). Worship is the function only of the context and process of relationship. He clearly defined **authentic worship** as relationship-specific to the Father (person to Person) and as practiced in "spirit and truth" – rendered relationally as "heart and honesty" and operationalized as "the honesty of our heart" which the Father can count on to be our authentic self (not a role-play). This is the only kind of worshiper the Father seeks. This is a *must (dei)*, because this constitutes the intimate relational connection and involvement which Jesus brought and makes possible with the Father. It's the relational imperative.

To paraphrase Paul (cf. Gal.6:15, NLT): "it doesn't make any difference whether our worship is traditional or contemporary. What counts in worship practice is whether we really have been changed into new and different people."

Practicing the Relational Centrality of His Word

The place and use of the Word are also about relational work. Since God's Word, his law (Heb. *torah*, instructions), his statutes (Heb. *edut*, testimonies) all represent words of revelation from his mouth about his self (cf. Ps.119:88; 2 Tim.3:16), no involvement with God is complete without the relational presence of his Word. In our modern context, they could be compared to emails and voice-mail from God. Yet, the dominant mind-set with which we perceive Scripture is more literary than relational. We tend not to

approach the Word: (1) as God's presentation of self, (2) as the content of his relational communication, and (3) as his engagement of us in intimate relationship.

A. Reductionism

God has vulnerably shared his self with us; the primary way he communicates his desires is through his Word. Not only must we deal with him but we must ongoingly decide how we are going to present our self to him, personally determine the substance of our communication and the level of relationship we're going to engage. His greatest sharing of his self and our deepest connection with his communication occur in Jesus. What distinguishes the Word as relational communication from God – as opposed to merely literary content – is the incarnation: when the Word became human and lived among us (Jn.1:14).

The incarnation clearly established (and fulfilled) the relational context and process by which God is involved with us. The narratives of Jesus were not propositional truth but unequivocal historical fact of God's presentation of his self and his relational vulnerability. This became an experiential reality for those who received him. It becomes a relational reality for those who trust him. It is an intimate relational experience for those who are involved with him. The Word is for relationship, not knowledge and information. This is how we need to interact ongoingly with God's Word (and his law, his statutes, and so on) and practice its relational centrality in our everyday discipleship specifically.

The alternative to this relational involvement is some form of reductionism. This is the conflict Jesus discussed in the Sermon on the Mount about those who separated or diminished the qualitative aspect of God's words with quantitative relativity (Mt.5:17-20 with specific examples through the rest of the chapter). This quantitative relativity could be a code of behavior or ethics which is narrow in its application or flexible in its interpretation. The tendency here, for example, is to think of commandments (Gk. *entalma*) merely in its content, in contrast to focusing on the term command (Gk. *entole*) which stresses the character of God's desires as possessing an enjoining quality and directive power – and that it also leads to eternal life (Jn.12:50). Acting on *entole* is distinctly a relational response, which is Jesus' emphasis (Mt.5:19; cf. Jn.13:34), whereas practicing *entalma* tends to become merely the quantitative effort of the individual apart from this relational response.

Such reductionism of God's Word takes place today, for example, by those Christians who define themselves by what they do. Similar to Paul's discussion in the Roman's epistle about the law versus faith, these Christians today have replaced the old law (and its legalism) with what becomes in effect a new set of standards by which to do things and be defined – still primarily from the outer-in approach. Any apparent relational response to God's desires is the individual's effort to gain approval, not to please God. Yet, whatever sense of identity and worth derived from this new "law" also suffers under the implications and repercussions of the old law Paul argued in Romans.

Any reductionism of God's Word always directly affects the qualitative aspect of the relational context and process by which God is involved with us. This in turn constrains what we perceive of his self presented to us and filters his relational

communication, both of which effectively put the relationship on our terms. Whereas God is sharing his self with us in order to have intimate relationship, we are maintaining relational distance by not being involved with his words in this relational context and process. This distance can exist inadvertently, even while intensively studying the Word.

B. Perceptual Framework

Early in our study we discussed what determines how we perceive things and the prevailing influences underlying the basis for our perceptions. Surrounding cultures, in particular, are a major source for constructing our perceptual framework. They compete with the Word to tell us what we should pay attention to and what we should ignore. The power of culture is this highly selective screen it provides between us and the real world which acts like a filter. Similar to the lens of the eye, such a filter either sharpens or distorts, clarifies or colors our perceptions; in the process we construct “our own little world” of reality, whether valid or invalid.

The Word provides a relational framework for our perceptions, which, I suggest, signifies its own culture. How we perceive the Word and how much influence the Word has on our perceptions of the world are vital issues for all his followers and fundamental for discipleship. Competing cultures continually exert a reductionist influence on the Word, either by trying to take some aspect away from it or even by adding something to it.

For example, if you were able to reconstruct the scenario for the earthly life of Jesus, how would you present the son of God? I would imagine the narratives would include more dramatic events and dominance surrounding his character, probably more splendor and prestige – that is, generally more significant visibility and attention to match his status. Yet, what do these perceptions signify? We would probably construct a scenario which in effect reduces the being, nature and presence of God’s glory, not reveal it in its qualitative difference. Though we don’t have liberty to reconstruct the Word, we often take license with our perceptions and effectively impose relational constraints on the Word. Remember, Peter had his own perceptions of Jesus which initially would not let Jesus go to the cross for him (Mt.16:22), nor allow him to wash his feet (Jn.13:8).

How we perceive God as well as how we perceive others will essentially be determined by our perceptual framework. To illustrate this process in relation to others we can examine the matter of racial differences, or any other human differences. According to biblical culture, the redemptive work of Christ’s death and resurrection dissolved these differences and the relational barriers associated with them (Eph.2:11-19; Gal.3:26-28). So, apart from the obvious natural physical differences, where do these human differences we “see,” feel or live by come from? Any of these differences are cultural constructs – that is, prescribed ways to “see” others – which are products of a cultural perceptual framework, effectively generated or reinforced by the media. This framework shapes our perception of how others *are* (no matter whether valid or invalid, true or false) and ascribes meaning and value to those differences (e.g., judged as bad, inferior or otherwise less). Remember, Peter had this negative perception of Gentiles, which Jesus had to correct (Acts 10) and Paul had to enforce (Gal.2:11ff).

If I were to ask you “what color are you going to be in heaven?” and “are there going to be Latinos, Africans, Asians, Anglos, etc., in heaven?” what would you answer? From a biblical framework, I suggest the answer to the second question is “none of the above,” while the answer to the first – assuming we will have similar bodies in heaven as we do now – is arguably “whatever color you are now.” Perhaps you perceive it differently.

I assume there will be color in heaven because that is how God created us. Though our bodies will achieve wholeness in heaven, I have no biblical basis to conclude wholeness implies a particular color (or the lack thereof) – which, of course, if wholeness did, then it would imply white by our prevailing culture’s perceptions. There will not, however, be race or ethnicity in heaven. Race/ethnicity is a creation of humankind – a construct of cultural perceptual framework based on particular assumptions (usually false beliefs) about human differences. God doesn’t say this about the different peoples, we do.

These are reductions of the Word which are in conflict with the relational perceptions of the whole person from the inner-out demanded by God in how we see his self, our self and others. The relational demands of God’s desires expressed in the Word involve a greater proportion of what he saved us *to* than saved us *from*. This is about the relational quality of the new covenant and new creation, not the quantitative limits of the old. The biblical perceptual framework challenges us to change or expand “our own little world” and thus threatens our comfort zones. This makes the Word susceptible to reductionism.

The practice of the Word was always subject to reductionism in the early church, even its ministry. Paul counteracts this by ensuring that his ministry team does not “distort the word of God” (2 Cor.4:2); the Greek term *doloo* means to adulterate, dilute, water down, cheapen. Contrary to what apparently was a norm in that period, they also did not “peddle the word of God for profit” (2 Cor.2:17). That is, the term (Gk. *kapeleuo*) means to merchandise it, treat it like a commodity and utilize it for one’s own ends. These reductions basically serve to popularize the Word and make it more palatable for a prevailing perceptual framework. Even with good intentions, these are normative reductions we see practiced today.

The Word constructs a new perceptual framework which is qualitatively distinct from all other perceptual frameworks, as long as the Word’s relational context, process and content are not compromised.

C. Feedback

After Jesus clearly shared the Father’s word with his disciples, he prayed on their behalf and identified them unmistakably as no longer being *of* the world (Jn.17:14,16; cf. 12:49,50). Though they are now the Father’s own possession, he does not ask the Father to take them *out* of the world (v.15); in fact, he sends them *into* the world to continue his purpose (v.18). Yet, Jesus fully realizes the tension which is produced by not being *out* of the world but *into* it; he also personally understands the conflict created by being *in* the world while not *of* the world. This can only be resolved by his disciples clearly distinguishing and relationally incarnating their new identity in Christ. For this reason

Jesus asks the Father to use his word to establish them in this (v.17). When a discipleship is predicated on being *in* Christ and thus *of* the Father, these followers are different from those whose life and possession are of the world. Yet, even for his most committed followers this *difference* (qualitative more so than quantitative) is not a simple matter to maintain.

Psalm 119 is an important passage of Scripture for those who seek to maintain or struggle to maintain this substantive *difference*. The writer shares his feelings about various situations which have affected him while seeking to follow God. What we can learn from his experience is that: (1) the general feeling for his situations is the strong, sometimes painful, realization that he is different from those around him – a condition he has to affirm and embrace; and (2) God’s Word (in all his desires) is absolutely necessary for him in order to continue to maintain the identity and the integrity of his *being* – who he is and whose he is.

This is the reason the writer immersed himself so comprehensively in God’s Word. It may appear somewhat obsessive or compulsive; this, however, was not about quantity but qualitative involvement out of necessity and affection. Beyond the acquisition of knowledge and information in order to do something (e.g., *entelma*, merely keep the content of God’s commandments), the dominant mode of involvement expressed in this passage is intimate meditation on God in his Word. The outcome of his involvement with God’s desires essentially reveals the focused concern for enabling a person to live fully in response to God’s purpose on this earth.

God reveals his self in prayer and through the Holy Spirit. Yet, the most unequivocal way God reveals his self is in the Scriptures. Here is the objective presentation of his self and the content of his communication which defines his desires. In these desires are the objective criteria for discipleship, the quality of which is unequalled by the world (and all that is common and temporal) and which stands consistent throughout the course of human experience. These criteria are necessary for God’s people to maintain the identity and integrity of their *being* and, thus, to fulfill God’s purpose on this earth.

In the process of practicing the relational centrality of his Word, we are further opened to the unique “feedback system” God provides for us as a privilege in this relationship. He lovingly shares his self with feedback for us as ongoing input necessary to fulfill his desires. The main vehicles for feedback in this process are: (1) the corporate body of believers, (2) the Holy Spirit, and (3) the Scriptures. Though listed in ascending order, these are three interdependent feedback sources provided by God for his followers. As extensions of God the Father, they must by necessity be intimately linked one to the other with deference given to the next higher source of feedback. For example, the body of believers must defer to the relational work of the Spirit and the authority of Scripture. That is what the early disciples demonstrated immediately after the ascension by waiting for the Spirit and filling a vacant apostolic position. Furthermore, the word of God defined their message (*kerygma*), their teachings (*didache*) as well as became their highest priority of ministry (Acts 6:2,3).

In terms of communication in our relationship, the Scriptures consistently provide us with the objective feedback from God needed in order to know where our hearts are

really coming from along with what our hearts need (see Heb.4:12). This is the sanctifying work Jesus prays for all his disciples in order to distinguish being *in* the world, yet not *of* the world (Jn.17:16-19). This feedback also provides the necessary perspective to know how to proceed *into* the world.

In other words, this relational feedback process enables God's family to maintain the identity of *who* they are and the integrity of *whose* they are. Because of the authoritative nature of God's word, with its objective character, the mind and heart of God can be distinguished from the mind of the people. The objective presentation of his self in this communication process counteracts or exposes the subjective tendencies of those who would reduce God in some way or co-opt the relationship on their terms.

D. Unity

When Jesus incarnated the truth, this was not a proposition. This was the vulnerable presentation of God in his person. The relational significance of the Truth is how the Word needs to become flesh in our lives. The issue of truth cannot remain only a doctrinal issue. Truth must also involve its relational counterpart, which is honesty. The relational issue of honesty in our relationships – foremost with God (cf. Jn.4:24) – is basic to the Word in its nature and function. If we cannot have confidence that the Word is the truth of God's self as presented and his words are the honest communication of his desires and feelings, our relationship with him would be characterized by a lack of trust, by ambiguity and shallowness. This is not about just the critical issue of authority but about the primary issue of relationship.

Just as the Word reveals God to us, we now have the relational responsibility to use his Word: (1) for the purpose of presenting our self in the truth, (2) to help us communicate truthfully to each other, (3) in order to live in honest relationships, the truth of which must involve heart and intimacy. The relational significance of this truth is how the Word becomes flesh in our lives. When God's people live with each other in this truth, relational distance will not characterize our relationships by a lack of trust, ambiguity, shallowness.

If the use of God's Word gets imbalanced for the sake of beliefs and doctrine, we will constrain its relational practice in our lives. This in effect becomes the reduction of truth, not its safeguard. Such reductionism does not set us free to live as sons and daughters of the Father's family but impedes this relational progression with relational constraints (see Jesus' discussion on truth, Jn.8:31ff). Doctrinal purity, for example, may give a false sense of being free but its valid indicator is the relational reality of belonging to his family (Jn.8:35). This is experienced only in living relationally as son and daughter with the Father, as well as living relationally as sisters and brothers with each other. If this is not our practice, then the Word has been reduced from the Truth, the Way has stopped short of the Father, and the Life has become the quantitative *bios* as a substitute for the qualitative *zoe*.

It is not sufficient for his Word to be central in our belief system. His Word is necessary for what we present of our self, for the meaning and substance of our communication, for the depth of relationship we engage. That is, his Word needs to have

relational centrality for our ongoing practice of discipleship, both individually and corporately.

Paul summarizes the relational significance of the Word and points to the outcome of the relational progression.

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity [Gk. *autos phroneo*, the same mind-set of biblical perceptual framework] among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom.15:4-6).

The Word challenges, encourages and directs God's people in this relational progression with hope. Hope is not abstract but the expectation of the relational outcome Jesus incarnated. Thus, this relational process must lead to uniting Christ's disciples into the shared life together of the transformed church. This is God's desire for his followers: one mind, one heart, one voice. To be transformed individually and corporately, however, has many implications for how we live today. These implications can be both threatening and demanding, which we will address in the following chapters.

Consider

The paradigm Jesus incarnated for the three major areas in authentic practice: (1) in the presentation of God's true self to us, (2) by communicating the Father's specific desires directly with us, and (3) engaging us in intimate relationship – signifies God's vulnerable involvement with us and constitutes the authentic practice of reciprocal relational involvement he expects us to make operational in our living both individually and corporately.

Distinguish in your context the various influences on these three major areas (1. presentation of self, 2. content of communication, 3. level of relationship engaged) and how they affect your involvement in the practice of prayer, worship and his Word.

10

Following *Together*

. . . so that his Son would be the firstborn,
with many brothers and sisters.

Romans 8:29 NLT

Following the person of Jesus always involves adventure, no matter the period or context. Yet, this experience is related less to situations, and more to relationships. At times the practice of discipleship may indeed seem lonely. Many of those times, however, may be the consequence of individualism in our practice which inadvertently promotes relational distance, leaving us feeling alone even when our efforts are among other Christians. In contrast, as Jesus approached his death, the adventure of the situation left him isolated in increasing distress, even with his disciples surrounding him. Yet, though his disciples didn't adequately support him, relationally he was not alone because "my Father is with me" (Jn.16:32). Except for that eternal moment on the cross when his Father had to forsake him (Mt.27:46), they were *together*.

Following Jesus in the relational progression to the Father is probably the most difficult transition to make in discipleship. Not only must (*dei*) we be freed to relationship-specific practice as son or daughter, but we must also follow him *together* as his family in relationally specific practice as brothers and sisters. Paul revealed that this has always been the Father's desire and plan for us: *to be exactly like his Son (relationally, not ontologically) in his family together* (Rom.8:29).

This transition to the new kinship family of God is problematic whenever prevailing practices minimize the *whole* person and constrain the quality of relationships experienced – particularly as cultivated by individualism. Yet, this new kinship family is the only opportunity for every individual follower to be an essential part of God's *whole* (and his redemptive plan) as well as the unique opportunity to be made *whole*.

The transition to the corporate process of community, the corporate nature of church and the corporate function of family is fundamental for discipleship. Any development of a biblical theology of discipleship must include a distinctly defined ecclesiology (the doctrine about the church). This is not merely a doctrinal exercise or theological task about what the church is for the sake of our belief system. This is a functional approach about what the church practices for the sake of our authentic identity in who we are as followers of Christ and whose we are as the Father's.

This is about how we actually do church, not think church, talk church, intend to do church. Ecclesiology is the practice of church, which constitutes the remaining aspect of discipleship. No practice of discipleship can ever be complete without it.

Our Ecclesial Roots

However we do church today we have all been influenced by a particular ecclesiology (structured or free) and tradition (high-church or low-church). We need to understand this influence and ongoingly examine our predispositions or biases about church. While evangelical ecclesiology has been elusive (leading some to think it is nonexistent), there is nevertheless an ecclesiology being practiced – though not always clearly defined or articulated. Many evangelicals subordinate ecclesiology, church order and polity to individual piety, and thus make it secondary to the gospel itself (e.g., see Roger E. Olson¹). Yet, this should not confuse us to think that how we do church can be separated from or is subordinate to the message of the gospel. Ecclesiology reflects the substance of the gospel we believe; how we do church reflects the reality of the gospel we practice. Therefore, any ecclesiology which is poorly defined or inadequately articulated creates ambiguity or shallowness in our identity – the vital issues Jesus raised in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5:13-16). If the righteousness of his disciples will indeed surpass the reductionists, then **discipleship must integrate authentic spirituality and functional community** not in concept but in practice.

Though our thinking about church is apparently moving beyond seeing church as a place or building, there is still ambiguity in the perception of church merely as a gathering. Building on our discussion from Chapter 8, the NT church was not just any type of gathering or mere voluntary association. When Christ said he will build his church, he used the term *ekklesia* (Mt.16:18). The term meant the assembly or gathering of those who were called out (*ekkletoi*). *Ekklesia* also has roots in the OT, which the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT (the Septuagint) uses for Israel as the covenant community. This sets the Christian church in the context of God's dealings with his chosen people and their covenantal relationship (Ex.19:5; Deut.7:6; Heb.8:10; 1 Pet.2:9-10). The NT extends this redemptive history as the Father pursues a people for himself (Lk.1:17; Acts 15:14; Tit.2:14; Heb.4:9).

Jesus established the reality and substance of this covenant relationship. Yet, the identity as God's chosen people is more of a concept (albeit valid) than an actual function when the church is based solely on soteriology, particularly in only what Christ saved us *from*. This gives us a truncated understanding of the gospel and what his church is about. The incarnation, however, reveals a total Christology, which also includes what Christ saved us *to*, and constitutes the truth of the gospel (what Paul confronted Peter with in Gal.2:11ff), which includes all of us *together* in relational progression to the Father as his family. Christ's church or body must (*dei*) be rooted in the Christology of his total person and words, which then encompasses his Spirit.

The word *ekklesia* itself appears to have only limited descriptive value for what the church is and does. Robert Banks suggests that Paul's usage of the term has less

1. Roger E. Olson, "Free Church Ecclesiology and Evangelical Spirituality: A Unique Compatibility," in *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 161-178.

theological significance than we should assume.² As far as function is concerned, *ekklesia* is a static term which is not useful to define the church (local especially). We need a more dynamic understanding for the church's function than merely a gathering. This dynamic process is gained from the narrative life of Jesus and Paul's use of other metaphors for the church.

Jesus' person and words provide us with the relationship-specific nature of connection with God and the identity of his people; they also give us the understanding of the relational significance our involvement must engage – individually with God and corporately with each other. What we have discussed consistently throughout this study forms the relational context and process for Paul's metaphors of the church. In making this application to Paul's metaphors, we can arrive at a more dynamic understanding of church in its vital function. This will necessitate integrating authentic spirituality, and its importance of the whole person as well as of intimate relationships, with the corporate process of community.

To view the church as community is to see the church as dynamic, not static, and to see the church as a function of relationships, not a function of an institution or organization. This envisions the church as a people, not a place or building. With roots from the people of God in the OT, the church transforms this localized gathering (or voluntary association) and their somewhat quantitative practice into the qualitative difference of God's family in relational function and significance, both local and universal, visible and invisible.

As we envision a functional church, we should keep in mind the three important issues of practice discussed in the last chapter because they underlie how we do church: (1) how we present our *self*, (2) what the content of our communication is, and (3) what level of relationship we are engaging. These apply to our individual and corporate practice.

Corporate as *Together*

Church signifies the corporate dimension of the Christian life. Yet, the shift to a corporate perspective can deter God's plan because there are two contrasting ways to make the corporate functional. Most of our perceptions of *corporate* probably come from an institutional framework. This mind-set tends to predispose or bias us to see and do church in a limited way. Institutions and most organizations are a function of structure and systemic processes. While the church has organizational properties of structure (namely interdependence) and systems (e.g., covariation), the authentic church cannot be a function of organizational aspects. The apostolic church was not based on an organizational paradigm even though it had organization. At the core of the church is *relationship*: a covenant relationship (from the OT) and a transformed relationship (in the NT). The church is a function only of these relationships, and any structure or system serves only as secondary functions for these relationships. The "organizational cart" should never be put before the "relational horse," and the "organizational tail" should

2. Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, rev. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publ., 1994), 46.

never was the “relational dog.” This is the biblical perception of corporate which comes from a relational framework – both of which involve transformation to distinguish this corporate gathering from any other in the world. This is the **relational paradigm** inherent in the relational progression incarnated by Jesus. When his church incarnates this relational paradigm, it presents itself as *light* without being ambiguous and it communicates and engages with the world as *salt* without being shallow.

As we approach the corporate process from this relational perspective, what does it mean for God’s people to *come together*? Whenever his people converge together to do church, the ongoing issue remains whether this convergence is merely to a common gathering or more significantly to a shared life – redeemed, transformed and therefore new. Common faith may bring persons to church to share in a common place. Yet, the development of faith as the relational responses of *trust and intimacy* will not limit relational connections, for example, to the activities participated in at church.

The practice of faith as trust and intimacy will not allow the relationships between God’s people to remain distant, shallow or independent. As Jesus vulnerably revealed in the presentation of his self in the incarnation, such relationships are not of the God of heart and his intimate relational nature, nor do they reflect the relationships between the three persons of the Godhead. Indeed, God doesn’t do relationships on these terms, thus he does not accept such relationships from us. This is the critical foundation on which we need to construct a functional ecclesiology.

Paul brings together various metaphors for the church (God’s people, God’s household or family, a building) which serve toward the metaphor of the temple (Eph.2:19-22; cf. Peter in 1 Pet.2:5). The temple in the OT was God’s dwelling place, but in the NT God’s presence has more direct and intimate relational significance, first in the incarnation and then in the person of his Spirit. The church is to *come together* (not just gather) in order to be transformed “to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph.2:22). But this is not the corporate offices over which God presides; nor is it merely God’s place of residence. God intimately lives by his Spirit *within his people*, as Paul said further about the nature of the temple (1Cor.3:16), not in a place, structure or system. And how he lives with his people is solely on the basis of the relational process, not on organizational terms.

The temple metaphor does not define this relational process for us. That’s why Paul uses other metaphors to complete our understanding of what constitutes coming together as the church. The metaphor of household or family provides us with this relational significance (Eph.2:19; Gal.6:10; 1 Tim.3:15; 1 Pet.2:5); the Greek terms (*oikeios* and its root *oikos*) used here, along with their significant cognates (*oikodomeo*, Mt.16:18; *oikodome*, Eph.2:21; *oikonomos*, 1 Cor.4:1), all point to the new kinship family of God and building his family together. This gives us the vital relational context and process for how to do church. Yet, this is not the household from industrialization or the nuclear family of today. God does not preside over this family in the role of figurehead nor does he merely dwell in the household. Unlike how we tend to do family, God’s household and family involve the intimate relational process of the Father building relationships with his adopted children as family together. While his Spirit lives within each individual son or daughter, he does not work for the individual’s self-autonomy or self-determination but for the *whole* of God’s people as realized in the relational reality of

God's family. This is the relational outcome covenanted by the Father and incarnated by the Son in the relational progression, which the Spirit brings to completion with his relational work.

It is God's **family love** which institutes the church. Family love is his love that reaches out to us, seeks to take us in and makes us a part of his own family. This is the love with which Jesus loved us and thus led to our place in God's family as his very own. This is the love which defined his purpose and our calling, and which cannot be stated only in terms of propositional truth. Family love cannot be fully communicated by or experienced with only the individual. This is the relational love of God's family, his people, the church.

His church comes together with him only for these relationships – to be his family. In the process of family love the church builds his family and extends his family love to the world. The authentic church cannot be a function of anything less than relationships, family relationships, living by his family love. This is what it means for his adoptees to represent the adopting parent and to extend his name; this is also the nature and substance of their inheritance, of which the Spirit is only a down payment (2 Cor.5:5).

Functioning Together

When we think about Christians, we tend to think of individuals, not an organic body of believers. When the thought is about church, the dominant idea in the modern mind is a voluntary collection of individuals (however structured or ordered), not a family. Though these may accurately describe current conditions, the presence of these images indicate problems in the development of discipleship.

Since the individual and a collection of individuals tend to dominate our notions of church, even when we do perceive the church as some kind of system we don't usually understand the relational significance of this. The church is certainly much more than individuals; it is also more than the sum of those individuals. To continue our discussion (from Chap.8) of Paul's metaphor of the human body (1 Cor.12), the church is a *whole*, a system similar to biological systems. Paul wasn't describing anatomy but a system having synergism where the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts. Yet, this synergistic effect doesn't happen automatically, regardless of what the individuals do or don't do. Nor is the synergism in a church attributed to the unilateral "signs and wonders" work of the Spirit. The church is not a mystical system but a relational system. And, of course, the relational work of the Spirit is the most important reason why this system works.

Beside the problems an individual perspective of church creates for functioning together, there is another basic change needed in our common perception of church. In terms of the voluntary aspect of membership and participation, there is too much Western connotation assumed for the meaning of voluntary. For example, optional, selective, relative and conditional are assumptions we make about church involvement based essentially on the determination by the individual. While the early church emerged in the social context of the Mediterranean world as another voluntary association, we would be

in error to base our perception of the apostolic church on the sociology of a voluntary association or organization. Nothing that Jesus did and said or that his disciples effectively went on to enact, suggests the connotation of voluntary we give the church today. Even though the voluntary associations of their day did not have the loose associations most voluntary organizations have today, Jesus and the early disciples transformed this association to be different from any other in its time. As such, many could no longer continue their association with Jesus (Jn.6:66), while others gained a deeper respect of what it meant to be so aligned (Acts 5:11).

When Paul used *ekklesia* for the local church (e.g., Gal.1:13), he may have at times focused on a voluntary association. When he used the body metaphor to describe the church, he is no longer focused on a voluntary association because everyone in Christ belongs to it. This was not optional, though it does not become a reality unless we participate with relational reciprocity.

If voluntary had been the determining characteristic of the early church, the identity of God's people would have suffered ambiguity and shallowness. What happened to Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) touches on various issues, but here it points to the relational responsibility of the kinship family of God which limits the freedom of individual determination. This issue was not about the unethical behavior of individuals but about betrayal of the kinship family trust underlying their relationships. This betrayal was a relational action which had consequences, foremost relationally with the Father and his Spirit (5:3,4,9). Membership in God's family constitutes significant relational involvement, the quality of which cannot be adequately fulfilled by voluntary, optional, selective practice. The latter practice signifies only the terms determined by the individual, not the Father's terms for his family *functioning together*. The relational significance of the Father's terms evoked deep respect as a result of this situation because those in the church experienced the importance of this new kinship family – a family they permanently belonged to and could count on (5:11).

In the reality of redemption by Christ, God's people were not redeemed to be merely free; that would in effect only involve what Christ saved us *from*. The redemptive plan of the Father is that we are now his. Being in the body of Christ is what Christians *are*; this is what *exists* by being in Christ, whether we volunteer or not. Yet, this is not merely a descriptive condition. In the relational progression, Christ saved us *to* the new kinship family of his Father. This is a relational function (as well as condition) which involves presenting our self as authentic daughters and sons and engaging intimate relationships truly as brothers and sisters with family love. And for the individual, the Father has created a specific *place* in his church for each of us to fulfill, the design of which is not a function of individuals but a corporate function of family relationships.

The identity of Christ's disciples (who we are) does not end with the Son as a collection of individuals but our identity develops with the Father (whose we are) corporately as his family. Each of Christ's disciples has decided to follow him and be a member of his following, but it is the Father who chose us and adopted us for himself to be a permanent part of his family. This favor extended to us by the Father, enacted for us by the Son and being completed in us by the Spirit is totally a function of relationship that precludes our individual and voluntary determination.

Though the Western family norm today revolves around the individual (the

consequence of which is fracturing the family), few would subscribe to family membership as voluntary. A meaningful family does not function together on this basis. Yet, this is how we tend to do church because we approach it more with an organizational framework than a family relational process. Just like the biological kinship family, there are fundamental principles and processes which go into the meaningful gathering of God's people – regardless of the particular church order (free or structured) a gathering may have. How well a church *functions together* is not a by-product of organization but the relational outcome of intimate family relationships.

Each of us has been chosen to be in the Father's family, so we are called to come together as his family. The church is the gathering of those called together to be his family. The authentic church is not defined by what it *does* (e.g., missions), nor by what it *has* (e.g., doctrine), though it does or has each of these. The church is defined by what it *is*: his family. Family needs to be the function and practice of intimate interdependent relationships. If a family concentrates, for example, on the pursuit of vocational enterprise (what it does), it will substitute secondary matters for the primacy of family relationships; if it concentrates on the practice of tradition (what it has), it will reduce the significance of family relationships to forms and roles without the substance of relational connection. Likewise, if church becomes, for example, merely the pursuit of a missional ecclesiology (what it does) or narrowly the outworking of a creed (what it has, particularly the Nicene Creed's "one, holy, catholic, apostolic church"), it will substitute quantitative elements for the qualitative difference of the intimately relational God of heart, or reduce the purpose of doctrinal purity to practice without relational significance to the vulnerable presence of God.

Both of these practices of church effectively redefine the church away from its relational process and function as his family. Missions and orthodoxy, however valid and necessary, are not sufficient in themselves to develop God's family. Orthodoxy should lead to his family and missions should reflect the extension of his family, but they do not often function for that purpose. Christ's words to the church in Ephesus (Rev.2:1-5) and to the church in Sardis (Rev.3:1-3) pointedly address these issues with the summary critique of these very active, successful churches: "You have forsaken your first love" (2:4), and "I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God" (3:2). No amount of missions or doctrinal purity can substitute or make up for the relational process and function as his family. This is first and foremost: what the church is, what we are called to be, what we come together for. **Family process** is how the church functions together in relational significance to God.

Operationalizing Family

The church is not a static dwelling (temple) of God in which he merely observes his people doing mission or monitors their beliefs and traditions. He is vulnerably present for doing relationship and is ongoingly engaged in building his family. Church practice must be actively involved with him in this family process. Paul summarizes this calling for the church in Ephesians 4, with a particular emphasis on the purpose of every Christian's *uniqueness* as a person gifted by God integrated into the corporate identity of

our *specialness* together in Christ: “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up . . . and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (4:12,16).

The uniqueness of the individual person has the purpose to prepare oneself and others for “works [Gk. *ergon*, calling, occupation] of service [Gk. *diakonia*, ministry].” This can be taken as the common notion of doing service, doing ministries, doing missions. Yet, these works (calling or occupation) are all for the purpose of the relational outcome of building up (Gk. *oikodome* and its cognates) the body of Christ. Obviously, what is built up is not a place or building, and this goes well beyond edifying a gathering. Paul uses the metaphors of body and household to define the corporate experiential reality involving the distinct relational process of building God’s family.

This new identity, rooted in Christ and the relational progression, forms in the development of this new kinship family. Clearly, this new life leaves no room for individualism. Though there is a definite unique place for the individual, it serves for building up his family (4:12). Each individual’s gift from the Spirit is not for an individual interest or agenda but for the purpose of this common good. More importantly the outworking of each individual’s faith is rooted in the structure of the body (and its interdependence) and the process of its corporate faith as family (4:15-16). Along with Paul’s use of the body metaphor (cf. Rom.12:3-8), this suggests that: *Christian identity is special but not unique for the individual; Christian function is unique but not special for the individual.*

This becomes an issue for identity formation in the Western world today. The relational process involving the identity of the new person in Christ not only subordinates the individual to the church, but even more so it directly makes the meaningfulness of the individual contingent on his or her rightful function in the corporate body. This certainly does not mean that the individual is not significant to God. Yet in God’s scheme of things, in the total eschatological picture of his redemptive plan the individual has little meaning apart from the function of his church. We tend to give little meaning to the church apart from its function for the individual; in doing so we operationalize church as a collection of individuals.

One of the aspects of cultures in antiquity and in some cultures today (e.g., Asian and Middle Eastern cultures) is that the individual is not a separate identity. The individual does not represent oneself but represents the family, the kinship-community of which she or he is a part. In one sense – an aspect partly negative, especially for women – the individual does not exist apart from the family. Furthermore, the issue of family shame (a critical value) is a major means of controlling individual members as well as a main source of influence to counteract individualism.

There are some similarities of this family in concept and principle to the design of the church as family; and the individual Christian in the Scriptures deferred to it. In the biblical function of the church family, however, the individual is not lost, as tends to happen in many of these other families. To the contrary, the individual is enhanced in the process of God’s family. Individuals find their complete meaning and experience their full potential by actively taking up their unique function in the body of Christ – an outcome which cannot happen without the relational support from the body. This involvement redefines exercising one’s so-called spiritual gifts; it involves the ongoing

relational work with the Spirit to present one's self openly to engage each other in intimate family relationships. In this specific relational work, the meaning of **together** (coming together, being together, functioning together) takes on the deep significance of **belonging** – a well-being of the heart which the individual cannot achieve alone but only in permanent intimate relationships with others as a part of a *whole*.

In Paul's metaphors of the "body of Christ" and "family of God" we have the metaphorical truths for the church which together are necessary in constructing a functional ecclesiology and the operational model for the church. Body and family provide different aspects of this model, aspects which are vitally and inherently interrelated. Thus, each metaphor by itself is not as useful in helping us to grasp a complete understanding of the transformed church.

As we initially discussed in Chapter 8, "body of Christ" defined a certain structural dimension for the church. This metaphor emphasizes the interrelation and interdependence of its members, yet not merely for a static description. For its dynamic quality, "family of God" takes us beyond the structural to define the process by which this certain structure needs to operate in order to become functional. This specific process of interdependence necessitates the particular relational connections which result in covariation. You don't get covariation among the members (as Paul described in 1 Cor.12:25-26) unless those members live with one another in deeper relationships and broader involvement. This requires more vital intimate relationships not preoccupied with self-interests over the interest of the *whole*. This involves the family identity of a corporate personality in covenant relationship, as opposed to the first priority of individual identity found in U.S. and other Western cultures.

When we join together to follow Christ, we don't just become co-workers, we aren't just partners in faith. Following him in the relational progression we become family – the Father's family based on his terms in a new kinship family context and process. The key to this family process and to fulfilling our calling (and occupation) of discipleship goes back to what Paul focused on with the words "to prepare" (Eph.4:12). The term "prepare" (Gk. *katartismos*) is used only here in the NT and means "to restore to former condition, put into proper condition." This implies that our usual (prevailing or natural) condition is not sufficient to fulfill our calling. We need to understand this as more than a spiritual condition but also in functional terms involving our actual relationships. In particular, the function of the actual relationships with one another in the body is strongly defined by Paul as the crucial indicator of the spiritual condition of "the new self in Christ" (4:24ff).

This calling from God (cf. 4:1), for which we need to prepare (restore or put into proper functional condition), involves God's original design and purpose. As Paul goes on to define and the Greek terms for "unity . . . knowledge . . . mature . . . fullness" describe (4:13), God's whole purpose (and original design for human creation) involves the process of building and experiencing intimate relationships. First and foremost, of course, is an intimate relationship with him so that we come to truly *know* him (the true goal of spirituality and what eternal life is about, Jn.17:3). Yet clearly and by necessity God's purpose also includes intimate relationships with each other in building together his family. That's how God made us in his original design and purpose. And this is the *former* condition to which we need to be restored, the *proper* condition into which we

need to be transformed in order to fulfill our calling, both individually and corporately.

Intimacy is the qualitative base for relationships which reflects the very qualitative difference of God (as in the Godhead). Relationships without intimacy get reduced to quantitative aspects focused on secondary matters. The church is intentionally designed for intimate relationships. *Body* and *family* are metaphors of the corporate nature of intimate relationships. Functionally, this does not mean we will have ongoing intimate relationships with everyone in church; but it does mean we can and need to have intimate connections with each other, however brief.

Our return to actually functioning in intimate relationships is the key to any family process, but for God's family it is an absolute necessity. His family, otherwise known as the transformed church, cannot be operational without these relationships. But this assumes two other necessary conditions as Paul discussed: (1) the transformation from our "old self" and how we define our self from the outer-in particularly by what we do and have (Eph.4:20-22) to the presentation of our "new self" from the inner-out as a person of heart (4:23-24); and (2) the transformation of how we do relationships based on the old definition of self to honest and vulnerable relationships reflecting family love (4:25).

Given the state of relationships since Adam and Eve east of Eden, intimate relationships only mean transformed relationships in which hearts are opened to one another and *coming together*. This is a dynamic relational process, not a static condition. Such open hearts mean the ongoing process of transformed persons who are redeemed. God's family is the context and process for reconciliation of these persons in these relationships. *The church and its transformation, then, are predicated not only on transformed individuals but also on transformed relationships*. Through the relational processes of redemption, transformation and reconciliation, the function of God's family is operationalized by interdependent and intimate relationships.

Functional ecclesiology involving discipleship in the relational progression is constructed with intimate relationships. Yet, the practice of intimate relationships as transformed relationships by transformed persons raises various issues which are important to address.

Issues About Intimate Relationships

The simple fact is that intimate relationships are problematic. Not only are they difficult in church but intimate connections even elude marriage relationships, and they are illusions for many families of origin. Even in a period when the church appears to be more conscious of relationships, we should not assume that the current vocabulary used about relationships is the same language for transformed relationships. The fundamental process is that only transformed persons can practice transformed relationships. While participation in transformed relationships also further transforms those individuals, transformed persons must initiate the process of intimate relationships and the connections necessary to build them. This makes transformation and individual change necessary – ongoing necessary change, including some vulnerable issues many individuals tend to avoid.

Intimate relationships, and the ongoing intimate connections necessary to build them, have been distorted, denied or displaced by the everyday workings of sin throughout human history. This involves the practice not only of the individual but also includes the macro-level operations of institutions, societal structures, even global systems. Modernity has been especially detrimental to human relationships and has made us more sophisticated in maintaining virtual relationships as a substitute. The key issue here is how the individual becomes defined by a reduction of one's wholeness and with increasing separation from the heart, resulting in relationships which effectively promote relational distance and interfere with intimate connection.

These relational consequences occur among Christians despite their good intentions, and even happen inadvertently, because some underlying presence or influence of the *old* still needs to be redeemed and transformed. This could be something personal about the individual or something from the surrounding context affecting the individual, or a combination. Whatever these issues are, they need to be addressed so change to the *new* can emerge – redemptive change.

It can be helpful to consider some historical factors in order to better understand the operation of many churches today, and possibly our own perspectives on the matter.

There has been a strong influence of Western thought on the church which would be useful to examine in part. This involves further diminishing and compounding the place, function or sanctity of human relationships in everyday life to a level less meaningful and obviously less than God originally created us to experience, but which supposedly were reconciled through Christ in the new life order.

This influence has its roots in the Renaissance worldview in which *nature* becomes the domain of humanity's self-realization. Such a worldview is predicated on the belief that humanity's destiny finds its fulfillment primarily in our relation to the natural *things* of this world and not in relation to other humans. Along with the development of humanism, this marked a transition in human thinking which had at its core a basic confidence in the power of human intellectual and cultural achievement. While this shift may have freed the person from predisposing and biasing constraints (e.g., from the Middle Ages), its increasing quantitative approach (deduction and reductionism) had a major impact on the qualitative function of human relationships. This transition led to the Enlightenment, modernism and our underlying mind-set of progress which have had far-reaching relational consequences. Christians, along with the church, influenced by this Western thinking have been nurtured and socialized, directly or indirectly, in a process that comes into clear conflict with the relational process of the transformed church which gives primacy to interpersonal relationships.

Bob Goudzwaard identifies this historical point and how it has restructured our lives.

The centrality of the relationship of man with nature, however, is one of the most characteristic features of western culture since the Renaissance. In the modern age, the value of human personality and the social order depends to a great extent on our individual or collective ability in the areas of productive labor, economy, science, technology, and art. We distinguish ourselves as human beings primarily by the shape we

give to this world through thought and creative activity rather than by the meaning of our lives to other persons.³

This orientation of modern society works against the interdependent organic structure of the transformed church which links its members to each other through a vital network of intimate relationships. This vital network also is in contrast to churches which link its members through activities, goals and other areas of productive missionary labor. Yet, such a vital arrangement of relationships essentially is counterproductive to the goals influenced by modern progress and production. *Whenever human production supercedes human connection, there will be a reduction in the quality of relationships with the consequence of less opportunity to experience intimacy.*

Prioritizing relationships is time-consuming and thus is not efficient in the mind-set of modern progress and production sanctioned by the so-called Protestant ethic. This mind-set generates a very individualistic orientation to life – even within the context of a cohesive organization – which seeks to secure one’s own position in life and not the good of the whole. This already has led to the demise of a functional extended kinship family and continues to disintegrate its substitute, the nuclear family.

This individualism is illustrated further by Goudzwaard in how a Western economist would view the market not “primarily as a meetingplace for people, but rather as a meetingplace for each separate individual with a given price. In such a worldview the market is ultimately nothing but a mechanism. Similarly, human labor is not regarded first of all as a reciprocal human relation and an expression of communal action, but rather as an individual effort to be performed by means of a particular combination of labor, land, and capital.”⁴

How easily we could substitute “church” for “market” in these statements, with a particular combination of “spiritual gifts, building and church budget, and programming.” As difficult as it may be to accept these parallels, the operation of many of our churches today witnesses to little more than a mechanism for individuals to use. Any difficulty with this parallel may be in our thinking and what many Christians have uncritically embraced as the “best”, the most “productive” and even the “morally right” approaches to life and everyday living. It goes back to living without a complete critique, which Jesus and the prophets provide.

Essentially, what we see operating in many of our churches today are modifications of the church resulting from these kinds of perspectives, worldviews and mind-sets. While evangelical theology may have adequately met the philosophical and theological challenges of the Enlightenment and modernism, evangelicalism in substance and practice has not sufficiently dealt with the social, economic and political ideologies characteristic of modernity. To acknowledge modern church operations as in conflict with the model of the transformed church – as set forth by Paul and operationalized in Acts – would also by necessity require us to uproot these perspectives, for example, on progress from our thinking and what we depend on to define our self. Intellectual changes

3. Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 24.

4. *Ibid.*, 25.

alone may be less difficult, but many of these have become deeply-rooted predispositions and biases with resulting lifestyles which we hold dear to our very existence and well-being. These are matters from which we need to be redeemed.

Whenever we examine the operation of a church, its order and system, we must also look at the surrounding systems to which the church is directly connected (e.g., biological families), interrelated in some way (e.g., social institutions and other cultures), as well as systems more indirectly connected (e.g., economic and political). These surrounding systems need to be factored into our examination because they all come to bear on and can significantly influence a church operation and its members. How that happens, how that affects the members is important to understand. For discipleship it is imperative for us to deal with them because they undermine the fundamental relational context and process of the church as the body of Christ and the family of God: intimate relationships in family love.

There is a basic principle for us always to keep in focus: *we are always participating in something larger than ourselves – whether that be social systems and/or the redemptive plan of history orchestrated by God*. While this immediately tells us that life doesn't revolve around *me*, the individual (however well-meaning my self-interests may be), it addresses us to the broader realities of life for which we need to account beyond just spiritually.

Furthermore, participation in the transformed church system while also participating in its surrounding systems (e.g., culture, society, the world) is not by “taking the path of least resistance” in those surrounding systems. Unfortunately, participation often merely follows the dominant norms and values of our time, or the way things have been done – both within the church and outside of it. Being *different*, for example, from prevailing culture, is minimized and any related tension or conflict is circumvented. But participation in the transformed church is based on following Christ; his total life and words determine the way of participation for these transformed persons. When we examine Jesus' life and also the early church, we see them often in conflict with the way things were done, whether in a social setting or about a cultural issue. They did not opt for the path of least resistance, which would have diminished their identity and purpose in who they are and whose they are. This means transformed persons functioning in transformed relationships within the relational context and process of the transformed church – all of which functions with intimacy.

Fears of Intimacy

Though the fear of intimacy emerged with Adam's insecure response to God in the garden, the modern social climate generates more resistance to intimate relationship than motivation to pursue it. I suggest that this resistance and fear appear to be greater in the modern church than in any other human institution, including marriage. Even though we remain the social beings God created us, we function as (to use an oxymoron) “individual social beings” who are not truly connected relationally in the fellowship. We can readily experience being “lonely in the fellowship.”

This relational consequence occurs by the will of the individual as well as often

by the inadvertent design of a church. Both the individual and the church suffer from the long-term effects of modernity and struggle under the influence of individualism. Yet, while churches tend to accommodate the prevailing norms of individualism with an identity and purpose contrary to the transformed church, the individual continues to resist deeper involvement, commitment and accountability in relationships at church. Such relations are perceived (probably accurately) to have little significant outcome compared to other associations, and with more personal consequence (mainly sacrifice).

Two dominant issues in individualism create fears of intimate relationships for individuals in the church. These issues for the individual are: (1) a loss of freedom and (2) a loss of uniqueness. Unfortunately, these are issues which churches do not adequately address with the individual, either because they are also reinforcing individualism's freedom and uniqueness or because they do not understand the issues sufficiently to address them meaningfully.

The issue of personal freedom, of course, is not unique to the modern church. Paul found the related issues involving Christian liberty to be a source of major problems in the church (e.g., at Corinth) and destructive in the operation of the church's true purpose as well as of the church's integrity. The repercussions for the church were so important that Paul responded with imperatives to the Corinthians calling them back to church discipline, Christian love for the sake of one another and to those functions which go toward the building up of the church as a *whole*, not toward the building up of individuals (cf. 1 Cor.8:1 and the individual's use of knowledge today). Everything was directed toward the new kinship family of God.

Yet, the idea of family or anything corporate raises tension in many individuals. Whether it's due to constraining experiences (e.g., biological family or other group associations such as at school or work) or due to prevailing norms and culture, this tension results in maintaining relational distance and in cultivating fears of intimacy when left unattended. Addressing our fears of intimate relationships can help us understand that the issues usually go deeper than the loss of freedom or uniqueness.

The loss of freedom tends to be confused with the loss of *control*. The control issue is not only about self-determination and the freedom to make one's own choices. As social beings this goes deeper to needing to have sufficient control such that relationships will be essentially on one's own terms. Here again this is not necessarily about having one's own way all the time but more so about how much of one's true self is required in the relationship and thus how vulnerable a person is going to be. This involves how secure a person feels about one's self and how willing the individual is to risk being that self in relationship with others. The risk is minimized or eliminated when the individual can determine the terms for relationship.

In other words the fear of losing control is directly related to intimacy. When Adam and Eve lost confidence about their persons, they put on fig leaves to try to gain control of the relationship. When God approached them, they tried to keep relational distance and to present their self without being exposed. Obviously, their control didn't work with God. As the prototype, however, for human masks – presenting a less authentic self and maintaining relational distance – they successfully set in motion a relational process in which we have progressed a long way from the use of fig leaves.

We all certainly exercise some control in our relationships; some control is

necessary in certain relationships. Yet, the basic approach to relationships where involvement is always measured by the individual is not the way God does relationship. Measured relationships and “measured intimacy” (another oxymoron) are relationships focused on the priority of the individual and not focused on others; thus they become self-centered relationships rather than the *agape* involvement and family love characteristic of the relational nature of God and the relationships of his family. Unless we address and resolve the underlying issues in how we tend to do relationships, the issue of freedom will remain a comfort zone in which the individual could avoid intimacy and the church would be counterproductive to building intimate interdependent relationships.

Similarly, the loss of being unique tends to be confused with the loss of being special. Anyone can be unique in a vacuum but when uniqueness is sought relative to others, that comparison has more to do with the need to be *special*. That is, there is an acknowledgment from others (or another) needed which would imply the designation of being “special” for that individual. Such individuals rarely display uniqueness in isolation but effectively in the context of relationships for the attention of what may appear to be no one in particular yet is invariably for the affirmation of another from significance. Quite often this confusion is also present in our desire to be loved. When the concern for love does not, for example, focus on the quality of love received nor require integrity from the other person giving love, as well as demand being loved for what one truly is (without embellishment), then this is not so much about the desire to be loved as the need to be important.

When persons in the church seek to be special or important, for example, by exercising their spiritual gift or fulfilling a particular role, they demonstrate the lack of specialness and importance supposedly experienced in the relational reality of Christian identity and being in Christ. Yet, the individual’s importance only becomes an experiential reality within intimate relationship with God, not as an individual effort; and the individual’s specialness only becomes an experiential reality within the community of intimate relationships as his new kinship family, not only in relationship with God. Individuals and churches need a new operational paradigm. Individual Christians cannot continue to seek to be special or important merely by exercising a specific function, nor can churches continue to seek for an individual’s place in the body without having established the corporate identity of the body as God’s family. It should be axiomatic in the Christian mind-set: Christian identity is special but not unique for the individual; individual Christian function is unique but not special for the individual.

The issues of freedom and uniqueness clearly overlap and are interrelated. We have to understand the underlying needs for these matters and sort them out for us to attend to, both individually and corporately. In the needs for control and specialness, we have to understand that we will only fulfill the need for being special within the experience of intimate relationship(s) but that experience is minimized (if not prevented) by our need to control relationships on our terms. Something certainly has to change in this process for the latter need to be resolved, so that the former need has the opportunity to be fulfilled.

The fears and struggles we have with intimacy need to be made our top priority because discipleship and ecclesiology, and all their related aspects, are predicated on intimate relationships. We need to continue our deliberations with this in mind.

Trust as it Relates to Intimacy

Trust, and its generic term faith, tend to be grossly oversimplified as well as isolated to what an individual does or has. But, trust (heart-level belief) is the relational act of opening up my true self to another and giving (submitting) my self over to that person whether it's God or others. Such vulnerability is not a singular act (e.g., at times confused with conversion) nor a static condition (often confused with intellectual belief) but an ongoing relational response process fundamental to any deep relationship. Trust must operate for any relationship to be intimate; trust must be given for intimacy to be experienced. Without such submission faith is only a belief, not relationship.

Yet, how do we exercise trust and give our trust in relationships when (1) we feel something vital is going to be taken from us, or if (2) we feel we will be rejected for what we really are? These are two crucial issues which must be accounted for ongoingly if our relationships (both with God and with others) are going to function with the trust necessary to experience them as intimate relationships. The alternative, of course, is to maintain control of relationships on our terms such that they are not a function of our trust but a condition of our measured participation.

Something Taken Away From Us:

This first crucial issue includes the issues of constraint and opportunity previously discussed (Chap. 8, p.137) about traditional organizations (such as the church) and so-called countercultural alternatives (like communes). We need to revisit these issues for this particular concern affecting trust. As discipleship integrates spirituality (intimate relationship with God) with community (the corporate set of relationships in the body of Christ), we also have to further examine the body's structure of interdependence. This individual-to-corporate transitional process must be integrated on the following levels of a local body: theological, authority, relational and emotional.

In Paul's explicit accounting of Christian practice in Romans 12, he emphasized the qualitative substance of these practices in contradistinction to the surrounding world. A major point in the chapter is the conflict authentic Christian practice has with the inequitable distinctions of persons the world makes based on an outer-in merit system, as well as its conflict with a disparaging competitive system evolving from it. These merit and competitive systems provoke the same self-concerns in which individualism is rooted. Though the individual in Paul's time did not receive the focus of attention in social terms as in a modern Western setting, nevertheless the underlying dynamics were there. Self-image and worth were based on what an individual possessed (by law, kinship or accumulation) or had achieved.

Within this type of context and being subject to these prevailing norms, there was understandable reason for self-concern – particularly for those on the fringes of society who did not have equal access to valued resources. Authentic Christian identity, however, counters these systems, worldview and mind-set by not grading the value of a person in these outer-in terms. The individual does not stand out in the world's sense, because she/he is relationally in identity with the corporate body. "Relationally in identity" is not the same as the individual being submerged or suppressed because the person is not lost

in the body as often happens in other kinship systems. This is where we need to sort out what it is we don't want taken away from us and to grasp what is vital for us to have.

Authentic Christian identity is a function of the intimate interdependent relationships of the new kinship family of God. A common perception among Westerners is that corporate identity takes away individual differences and individuality. While the loss of individuality (depending on the definition) may be arguable, differences among individuals in the body do exist – natural differences, developmental differences and other God-given differences. Yet, these differences exist not as grades of distinction which further relationally distance and stratify individuals from each other; rather they serve to bring out the necessary diverse make-up which goes into an organic unit. As Paul said in Romans (12:4) all the members do not have the same function. The unique function of the individual is preserved for every Christian in the relational structure of interdependence. Yet, this uniqueness must be distinguished from specialness because that function does not make the individual special. Specialness is received and experienced from the corporate identity of intimate relationships as his family.

Homogeneity among individuals is not the goal of the transformed church, contrary to one major approach of church growth principle. Such homogeneity, in fact, would not only make the church dysfunctional (as Paul defined using the body metaphor, 1 Cor.12:14-26), it would also redefine the purpose of the church (to be expanded in Chap. 12).

In terms of trust, any misgivings or apprehensions about church involvement also have a lot to do with a particular church's ecclesiology and practice. When Paul's metaphors of the body and the family do not define the basic function of the church, then the *form* of church practiced determines how that church will *function*, not *form* following *function*. This paradigm has always been problematic in many areas of life.

Some see church as the apostolic church defined by the traditions of the church fathers, thus giving greater emphasis to its structure. Others see the apostolic church as a free church emerging from the spontaneous work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of Christians. Both are inadequate for a functional ecclesiology that can account for the two crucial issues involving trust. The free church view tends to reduce or overlook the important dynamic of covariation in the corporate body and, thus, upholds an individualistic approach to Christian faith and practice. This approach negatively affects how we present our self and do relationships, both of which are strongly related to the second issue involving trust (rejected for what we are). Those who emphasize the church's structure tend to have a static approach to the body of believers which does not adequately account for the dynamic expressions of personal spirituality and the dynamic relational process of the community of relationships as family. This approach tends to trigger the first issue of trust (something taken away) when constraint becomes an issue because of the concern for lack of opportunity.

Paul's metaphors don't necessarily suggest a singular form the church must have; but whatever form a church takes needs to follow the necessary functions defined by those metaphors. In the challenge to formulate evangelical ecclesiology, Richard Beaton makes a similar observation that "if the church is to reimagine what an ecclesiology might look like in the twenty-first century, it seems that part of that exercise will require

a return to the biblical metaphors that have contributed to the structuring of the identity of the church throughout its history.”⁵ Yet, Paul’s metaphors imply a functional ecclesiology which defines relational structure more than institutional structure. And one of the most vital functions defined for the church is the interdependence of its members.

The earliest church seen in Acts was not a group of believers who were merely brought together without organization by the work of the Holy Spirit. There was a fluid character to this group which tends to give us the impression of the church as a very open system or even without organization. Despite that appearance, the transformed church had definite organizational aspects and a necessary structure in order to function as an interrelated group resulting in interdependence.

In Paul’s use of the body metaphor, he also described the structure of the church as having a wide distribution of labor or functions (1 Cor.12:12-20). In our familiarity with the “one body, many parts” concept, the individual should not dismiss the important fact of truth here: the diversity of the church’s distribution of labor is necessary for the church system to achieve optimal operation. The further fact of truth is that God arranges the make-up of the church that way (v.18; cf. Rom.12:3-6). Yet the fact of concern also remains for the individual: is this all about the individual making sacrifices for the corporate body; what does the individual gain in this arrangement? This is a legitimate concern for a church to respond to.

In the early church, given the existence of relational distance and barriers (e.g., between Jews and Gentiles) plus the human tendency toward self-interests, their structure essentially had to minimize (if not eliminate) the independence of the gatherers from each other. This was done not to take away the uniqueness of individuals nor to dissolve the diversity God invested in his people; that would have been in conflict with God’s plan. This was necessary to align this gathering of believers to one another such that they would be accountable to each other for the reciprocal relationships of this new family. Accountability, however, can be a restriction or an affirmation for the individual, a burden or a blessing. It depends on how that structure functions.

Interdependence of the body should not be confused with fostering dependence in its members nor with constraining the wholeness of a person, though it certainly limits the independence of the individual. Contrary to some perceptions, interdependence actually affirms the *whole person* (from the inside-out) as important without grading, for example, the person’s role or performance in the body. As Paul said, each person is indispensable regardless of how others perceive (Gk. *dokeo*, “seem,” subjective estimate or opinion) the individual from the outside-in (Gk. *asthenes*, “weaker,” less ability, 1 Cor.12:22), and thus is important. Furthermore, interdependence establishes every person (regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, age) within the body in a common significant value without stratifying their place based on any of these characteristics (12:24b-25a). What interdependence does effectively in function is: (1) it provides the relational context for all persons to be equalized with each other, and in doing so, (2) it opens access to the relational process of intimate relationships with each other “so that there should be no

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

division [Gk. *schisma*, relational separation or distance] in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (12:25). The relational outcome of interdependence is covariation (v.26), such that “there were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:34). Obviously, this reciprocal relational involvement is especially vital for the transformed church’s shared life together, otherwise described by the term *fellowship* (which expresses a reciprocal relationship between the members based not on an external relationship or some common venture but on a deeper shared participation in the close bonds of intimate relationships).

Historically, church structure has constrained the individual and made it difficult for the person to experience wholeness. The magisterial Reformers applied “the priesthood of all believers” to soteriology but not really to ecclesiology. This still left the individual participating in a stratified church context with relational uncertainty about one’s value and function. The free church alternative extended the priesthood of all believers to ecclesiology but in actual function today most so-called free churches still rely on professional staff and other trained leaders to fill the main roles of the church. This still defines individuals by what they do or have and in effect grades the members in a stratified system of more or less value in the body.

A church needs to functionally perceive and relationally embrace all of its members as *persons* as well as needs to address their relationships in practice with each others. If it doesn’t, it could at best only remain an organization. To move toward family a church must redefine each person from the inside-out and take each person seriously as a new creature in Christ, as a daughter or son of God’s family and thus be treated as a sister or brother. This means relational distance, separations and barriers need to dissolve (no *schisma*). In specific practical terms this means every member, female or male, young or old, able or challenged, whatever race, culture or class, must be nurtured and given the opportunities to assume an indispensable place in the body and to serve a unique function for the whole. Otherwise, participation in the church becomes a restriction for many individuals, even a burden with little substantive benefit.

Regarding the concern of something taken away, an individual must decide if he/she wants more than self-autonomy and self-determination. In many respects, these are really illusions of individualism which represent false hopes for underlying needs often left unattended. If it is wholeness and fulfillment as a person that the individual desires, then being whole cannot be achieved as only an individual. **Wholeness** is rooted in the Hebrew term for peace (*shalom*) which signifies the well-being of a community or corporate body. Wholeness, well-being and fulfillment for the individual come from being a functional part of that group in which there is peace.

The individual was never created just to be an individual. God’s design and purpose for the *whole* person was always to be in relationship with others in the *whole* of his creation. The whole person cannot be whole apart from the corporate whole. This involves the person being created in the image of God as a person of heart for intimate relationships. Further understanding of this can be gained from a limited parallel to the being of God, the Trinity and how the Godhead is. Each of the persons of the Trinity is God. Yet, while each is distinct from the other, each of them individually or separately in

a sense is not completely who God is. The *whole* of the triune God is the Father, the Son and the Spirit together ontologically (not tritheism); and, for example, the whole of the Son is not whole apart from the whole of God. Their intimate relationships with each other in interdependent structure and in intimate function demonstrate their wholeness together as well as reflect the wholeness of each of them. This wholeness and the intimate relationships inherent to it are how God created us and what his redemptive plan restores us to.

The individual needs to grasp that one can only be *whole together*. Individualism, and the self-autonomy and self-determination expressive of it, is the antithesis of God's design and purpose for the person (both as created originally and as a new creation in Christ). The individual becomes whole only in the wholeness of God and with the whole of his family. Or to paraphrase Augustine, God has made us for himself (and like himself) and our hearts are unfulfilled (not whole) until they find their fulfillment (wholeness) in him. (This also is related to the eternity-substance God planted in our heart which cannot be fulfilled by the temporal and common [Eccl.3:11].) Basically, the individual needs to understand what is taken away or denied by self-effort and what is gained in submitting to the corporate whole of God. And this wholeness is rooted in and a function of the intimate interdependent relationships distinguished only in the Godhead and operationalized only in his new kinship family.

There is a lot at stake here for both the individual and the church. The issue of losses and gains must be accounted for in our practice. A church, for example, cannot offer to any individual what it does not practice together. An individual cannot anticipate a loss of what one doesn't have to begin with. Both gain when their practice becomes a function of intimate relationships with each other in family love. We examine these relationships further in another issue of trust regarding the second concern of being rejected for what we really are.

Rejected for What We Really Are:

Both the individual and the church cannot continue to define themselves and each other by what they do or have and still expect to be the church redeemed by Christ and transformed by his Spirit. These reductionist secondary definitions promote perceptions which control doing relationships still in an old way (as described by Paul in Ephesians) and thus not function together as the transformed church. Furthermore, these essentially quantitative definitions (from the outside-in) will also affect our relationship with God because these perceptions create subtle illusions about ourselves such that our practice effectively is no longer by his grace (as Paul described in Galatians) – but practice based on “what we do or have.”

It is crucial for the individual and a church to understand that this way of defining ourselves implies the use of a **deficit model**. Implicit in all such assessment is the pursuit, motivation, desire, feeling to *measure up* to some explicit or implicit standard. Anything which does not measure up is considered deficient in some way. Whether in self-assessment or in assessing others, whenever we consider someone to be *less* because of this lack (usually in what we do or have) we are using the deficit model. The Gentiles were the objects of the deficit model as used by Jewish Christians (including Peter).

Minority peoples and women have suffered from a deficit model in many contexts historically.

Yet, the most significant consequence of the deficit model is in relation to what we truly don't measure up to the most (and never can) but with whom we have the least reason to feel less (and never have to). This is in relation to God and intimate relationship with him; despite his grace we continue our subtle efforts to measure up before him, to justify having the relationship, to feel worthy of his responses. These practices with the use of the deficit model are substitutes we make for the ongoing relational trust necessary for intimacy with God. These are practices which render his grace in effect unnecessary for ongoing relationship. As he was in Galatia, Paul would continue to be astounded by our practices today which have effectively displaced trust.

If it hasn't already become apparent to you, God makes himself vulnerable to us without first having to establish our trustworthiness. He opens himself up to us first, regardless of our condition, our track record or the consequences of how we may respond. Yet, he doesn't expect us to be open and vulnerable to him, and to trust him with our true *self*, without establishing his trustworthiness first. God knows he can be unilaterally vulnerable in the relationship but that we can't; and that we need a definite basis or assurance about him before we will trust him.

Trust is a necessary function to have in any human relationship in order to have intimacy. In human perception trust involves an assurance that we won't be rejected or let down by the other person(s), for example, even if the situation may be negative or when we don't measure up. In relationship with God, trusting him doesn't preclude experiencing hurt or prevent rejection in other situations, but it does involve the God who will relationally always be there to intimately share in it with us. Whether with others or with God, trust essentially requires the assurance that I will not be rejected for what I really am regardless. His grace in its relational significance is what God provides us in order to trust him and enter into intimate relationship. With the ongoing experience of his grace, this is what we provide each other for the trust necessary for intimate interdependent relationships as his family. To make this grace operational we need to extend ongoingly to each other the most relationally-significant function of grace: forgiveness, both in giving and receiving.

The concern about being rejected for what we really are is an ongoing reality. There is valid reason to have this concern, just as Adam and Eve had reason to hide in the garden. Unless this concern is dealt with directly we will not have deep relationships. Certainly, we can have relationships without intimacy. We may even be able to have a good relationship without intimacy. But we cannot have a deep relationship without intimacy. More importantly, it is impossible to have a transformed relationship without intimacy. If it were possible, we did not need Christ to come. Jesus establishes us in an intimate relationship with God where God's heart and our heart are joined together. In the OT, the idea of closeness or having close association (Heb. *haber* or Gk. *koinon*, from which the term fellowship comes) is never used in relation to God, with a few exceptions (notably Abraham and Moses). Instead, the OT seems to express the sense of distance which the righteous Israelite feels from God as a servant in dependence on God, not as

the friend of God.⁶

This radically changed when Christ's work on the cross tore down the veil in the temple between God and his people. This transformed our relationship with God and opened the way for deep and intimate communion together (which is exalted in celebrating the Lord's Supper). Yet, in the dynamics of the post-resurrection period (cf. 2 Cor.3:16-18), this redemption and reconciliation are not mere propositional truths but also restored relational realities forming both the model for our other relationships as well as the experiential base on which to build these relationships. They restore the relationships in church to the intimate communion of authentic fellowship.

Intimacy demands that our relationships operate predominantly on the heart level. As the God of heart, this is the only way he does relationships. We should not expect to *come together* in deep meaningful relationships unless they are being established at the level of our hearts. In order for us to build intimate relationships, our hearts will require new levels of honesty with our own self as well as with each other (which is why the first three beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount are so crucial to our identity and our relationships). Paul made it imperative for transformed persons to have transformed relationships by "putting off falsehood and speaking truthfully" to each other (Eph.4:25). We have to see this beyond ethics and morality but also to the context and process of relationships basic to transformed living, particularly as the transformed church. The term Paul uses for "speak" (Gk. *laleo*) is not about the content of speech but expression identifying one's person. Presenting our self truthfully is imperative in the new life order because of what it says about our person; that would be in contrast to the relational distance and deception of the old self. This means functionally as new persons in Christ we have to be resolved to an unavoidable condition: **to live at the level of our hearts is to live openly in the fullness of our humanity, which includes being vulnerable with our weakness, fallibility and sin.**

Now these are definite reasons for the heart to keep its distance or hide. These are also areas of our lives which, when left unattended, distorted or hidden, greatly reduce the quality of life for our self as well as for those we have relationships with. Living in our true humanity is especially problematic for those who define themselves by what they do (or have) and use a deficit model because exposure of any deficiencies always means being *less*, in their perception.

But his grace is always to the contrary. Whenever we honestly and humbly present our full humanity to him, his vulnerable response is forgiveness – the relational processes of redemption and reconciliation which engage the relationship in further intimacy. The contrast of "exposure with the consequence of *less*" with "vulnerable with the outcome of *more*" is of critical significance for the concern of trust and the experience of intimate, loving relationship. The latter was the prostitute's experience in anointing Jesus (Lk.7:36-50). The relational truth is: *the person who is forgiven little loves little.*

This is certainly not a singular experience only at the onset of the relationship. As an ongoing process, living in our humanity provides us further opportunities to

6. See Kittel's discussion on the *koin* words in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol.III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 791-801.

experience and grow in this *more*. To distance or hide our heart is to prevent these opportunities to realize more of our transformation – as a person, in our relationships, corporately as his family. Vulnerability is a key aspect in this process to functionally becoming new. By its nature, defining ourselves by what we do or have and using a deficit model would be in conflict with being vulnerable with our true humanity.

There is no legitimate way for followers of Christ to get around living in the fullness of their humanity, if they are indeed to practice authentic discipleship. Jesus came to us in the incarnation on intimate terms – not detached, at a distance, guarded or in his superiority. In so doing Jesus made himself vulnerable to us and our sin, thereby initiating the relational process for his disciples to follow. Love does this; it makes oneself vulnerable to the one being loved. And Jesus wants us to love as he loved – as he loves us.

His grace opened the relational door to his family and dissolves any reason to withhold trust in family relations. Following Jesus' lead in this relational process means in effect that *participation in the transformed church should bring out the worst in us* (as in our brokenness, insecurity, fear, selfishness and other areas of sin) *and, then, this needs to lead to the best in us*. The worst in us opens the way for healing and purification and wholeness to take place. In actual practice, the worst in us means that if a group of believers is going to be able to grow (or even survive) it must have a new “mechanism” which adequately deals directly with their shortcomings and the sinful aspects of their humanity. Commonly used defense mechanisms which distance us from our hearts or from each other are unacceptable for the transformed church, besides being inadequate. Shortcomings and sinful aspects of our humanity cannot be hidden or avoided in any life shared together. They emerge in relationships and negatively impact others in the body – an increasing condition if left unattended.

Since we cannot be human (i.e., what we really are) and intimate with each other at the same time without our sin impacting each other directly, **the most vital means in the process of building intimate relationships has to be forgiveness**. For the transformed church, this forgiveness which is extended from the ongoing experience of God's grace is the only relational means to adequately deal with our concerns over the issue of trust necessary for intimate relationships – be it the concern about rejection or for acceptance, be it of one's self or of others.

The Process of Forgiveness

In our practice we may tend to highlight mainly our positive aspects – not in explicit pride but in presenting our self apart from its full humanity. Such presentation circumvents Paul's imperative to present our self truthfully. This is the dominant norm which makes the presentation of our identity either ambiguous or shallow. But God always relates to us in our total person. In addressing us without reduction of what we really are, he judges us accordingly in love. When God judges us, he is saying *“I know you, and I want you to be whole – this is the way.”*

In confronting us in our total person, God is loving us to be *new*, to be fully restored in communion. His grace accepts us and, therefore, allows us (even demands of

us) to be exactly what we really are without falsehood. The defenses we put up, the substitutes we use or the alternatives we turn to for our person are no longer necessary because in forgiveness the change from the *old* to the *new* is assured. We must learn to speak this kind of truth to each other in the church if it is to be transformed – or because it is transformed, as Paul said.

This loving confrontation always opens the way to God’s grace. This is “the critique of hope” discussed previously; without his grace judgment is only negative. His grace is the hope that makes our vulnerability in repentance more than a confessional. Grace always unites forgiveness to repentance. *In the promise of God’s way of doing relationships, forgiveness means reconciliation and, therefore, restored communion.*

As the essential “mechanism” in the life of the church for it to grow as family or even to continue as a body, forgiveness is the clearly tangible, visible relational means by which God’s grace is imparted among his people. It is also the real and immediate experience in which healing, purification and wholeness take effect. Thus, to be forgiven by God and by each other allows the process of intimacy to yield its joyful outcome of fulfilling relationships. These are the relationships God wants his family to enjoy and, in turn, to share with others in the world.

How does forgiveness work toward this end? Forgiveness is difficult for most persons to enact; thus, it is usually oversimplified and too loosely defined. The purpose of forgiveness is not primarily an absolution from guilt but rather forgiveness involves restoring communion, reconciling broken relationships. In this perspective forgiveness involves not merely a phrase spoken, a feeling felt or an isolated action done. Much more it is a process ending in reconciliation and, therefore, a way of life lived within God’s family.

To ask for forgiveness is not just a statement one declares about something in the past, seeking to correct some misdeed. If forgiveness were merely this undoing of a past deed, it would only serve to return things (in the relationship) to the old way it was, without any change. It would not lead to what Christ saved us *to*. This is not sufficient. **Forgiveness involves both *dying* and *rising*: dying of the old and rising of the new person.** So, for the asking of forgiveness to be sufficient and complete it needs also to be a statement about the present. That is, seeking forgiveness includes the act or effort to make the relationship better than it was. This is not the same as trying to make it up to the forgiver. That’s a form of payment for misdeeds that doesn’t produce change. Rather, forgiveness is the commitment to open oneself up further in the relationship and, thus, the commitment to change for deeper relationship. Restoring communion is not maintaining the status quo but building intimate relationship.

This statement about the present also enables the forgiver not only to forgive the past deed but also to expect some change in the relationship from what existed before. This opens the relationship for both sides to experience more. God doesn’t merely forgive us of a sin and then send us back to continue our life as it was before, though that’s what many of us do. God both forgives us and purifies us; that is, he also makes us *new*. So he also expects us to change and to live *new* in our relationship with him, and to what Jesus saved us to.

At the same time, while forgiveness includes statements about the past and the present, forgiveness is not a statement about the future. Asking forgiveness implies or

guarantees no future success of changed behavior. Failure may (or will) come again. For anyone asking forgiveness to say “I’ll never do it again” is an empty promise about the future. That person is neither focused on the relationship in the present nor lovingly working on change in some way. To make this promise is really motivated more out of one’s self-concern or interest. True forgiveness focuses on the relationship being lived in the present, not on some idea of the relationship. Change in relationships happens only in the actual practice, not in our intentions.

We generally understand that *forgiveness always comes at a cost*. Of course, the main cost was paid by Jesus on the cross. Essentially, the forgiver pays the cost in forgiveness. In the church family’s relationships with each other this cost should not be minimized, because in spite of Christ’s sacrifice the forgiver in these relationships must bear some cost also. That cost for the forgiving person also involves, similar to the forgivee, both *dying* and *rising*. For reconciliation, we are not merely dealing with a situation in which a forgiving person has been wronged, hurt or negatively affected. We are restoring communion, healing a brokenness in the body of Christ. As difficult as dying to this situation (the old) may be and letting it go, that is the cost of forgiving the other person(s). That is the cost Jesus paid to forgive us.

Yet, that is only one part of the cost. It is not sufficient in forgiveness to merely let go, for example, of anger or hurt, then cancel a debt and clear away the old to move on in one’s life. After the *dying* must come the *rising*. Forgiving someone, especially in the body of Christ, includes the rising of the new. In this moment of newness forgivers are not only extending love to mend relationship but also responsible to love further for deeper relationship together.

Sometimes paying this cost is burdensome. It was for Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross when he cried out “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.*” Yet, for Jesus, and hopefully for his followers, the *self* is not something to possess (cf. Phil.2:1-11), but like him our *self* is for self-giving. As it was for his Son, in the Father’s accounting for his family *the cost of forgiveness does not leave a debit*. Cost also directly results in significant gains; self-giving also included self-receiving. For transformed persons building transformed relationships as the transformed church the gains from forgiveness are immeasurable.

Since forgiveness is the relational process resulting in reconciliation, it is the most basic relational work necessary to engage in for Christ’s disciples, both in their relationships within God’s family as well as in the world. Restoring communion essentially means more love can flow, that hearts are coming together, that intimate relationships are experienced together.

In one very real sense discipleship can be simply reduced to either (1) *working for reconciliation and building on it*, or (2) *living in brokenness and reinforcing it*. There is no neutral practice in this matter, no middle ground. We can’t, for example, be building fellowship in the church while living with distance in our relationships; also, we can’t be working for reconciliation while reinforcing broken relationships. For the followers of Christ, (2) is not an option.

This raises an important related question. Can forgiveness be unilateral, one-sided? For forgiveness to be consummated it must be received as well as given. However, as persons who have been forgiven by God, we can’t wait for someone to ask us for our

forgiveness or to receive our forgiveness before initiating the forgiveness process, especially within the church. To wait for the other person stops the flow of love in us because the old is still there for us as a relational barrier, thus preventing love from growing. In the meantime, we are living in brokenness and, consequently, reinforcing brokenness by not engaging in our part of this relational work. By giving forgiveness, even though not received, we not only allow the old to die but also now can let the new further rise and live. This is vital to continue to establish the relational context and process necessary for building intimate interdependent relationships.

This new kinship family rising and living in family love functions by relationally working and extending itself for reconciliation. This is what God wants for his family; this is the purpose he gave to transformed persons as the transformed church (2 Cor.5:17-19). This is “the best in us” directly related to “the worst in us.” That’s the excitement, the challenge, even the struggle and, eventually, the joy his followers have in living this new life order.

With so much at stake the importance of the operation of forgiveness in transforming the church cannot be overemphasized. The *new* rises only after the *old* dies; and what Christ saved us from needs to lead to what he saved us to. Therefore, we can **expect the depth and extent of the relationships the church experiences in its fellowship** – both with God and each other – **to be directly proportional to the amount of forgiveness taking place.** This is not some theorem to observe in human relations but a distinct relational truth revealed by Jesus for his followers (Lk.7:47b).

The Transformed Church Operationalizes Discipleship

Following Jesus together is following him to the Father and becoming his new kinship family, the transformed church. This corporate gathering is not a function of creeds, activities or any organizational aspect, nor can it function under the quantitative emphases of reductionism. As the context in which God dwells vulnerably, the church must function as God functions in order to *come together* in intimate relational connection.

Unlike any other kinship group or corporate association, the transformed church is a function of transformed persons building transformed relationships together. This common shared life bonded together by intimate interdependent relationships witnesses to the new life order initiated by Jesus and being brought to completion by his Spirit. In contrast and conflict, the existing old life order does not uphold the integrity of the whole person nor give top priority to the practice of intimate relationships.

Whenever the practice of church cannot be clearly distinguished from the influence of the old, the identity of God’s people becomes ambiguous or shallow. Who we are and whose we are may be identified in doctrine but this identity does not function distinctly in practice. If Jesus is indeed to be the first in importance of many brothers and sisters (Rom.8:29), then to be his authentic disciples together necessitates changing to: (1) how he defined the person, (2) how he did relationships, and (3) how he practiced family. In the incarnation he defined the transformed person, he lived transformed relationships, he initiated the practice of the transformed church. If our righteousness is to

surpass the reductionists, we must function as he did. If our ecclesiology is to be functional in substance, it must be based on transformed persons living transformed relationships together in the transformed church.

The substance and relational significance of Paul's metaphors for the church also clearly form these truths. The substance that emerges from his metaphors is a distinct relational paradigm, not an organizational paradigm. In understanding this, what this points to and serves is the new kinship family of God. This family process in family love is how the transformed church functions together in relational significance to God.

The reciprocal relational responsibilities of being family together are opportunities for each follower of Christ to become *whole* and to *belong* experientially to the Father as his daughter or son and to his family as sister and brother. Accountability in these reciprocal relationships is the affirmation of the person's importance to this family and the necessity of each person's unique function for the transformed church.

Discipleship cannot be adequately defined apart from this intimate interdependent set of relationships and without this reciprocal relational process.

If we truly follow Jesus, we must (*dei*) follow *together*.

Discipleship Operationalized *Together*:

Discipleship integrates spirituality together with and into the community of God's people by the ongoing practice of:

- (1) openly trusting one's *whole* person to intimate relationship with Christ, and
- (2) following him in the relational progression to intimate relationship with his Father by functioning as his own daughter or son, while
- (3) extending this relationship to his family with love by entrusting our true self in intimate relationship as sisters and brothers and by practicing forgiveness, as well as
- (4) being accountable for a functional part of the reciprocal interdependent relationships intimately connected in his *whole* as the new kinship family, signifying the transformed church relationally redeemed by Christ and being brought to completion relationally by his Spirit.

This relational process of discipleship is not necessarily linear but operates usually with reflexive action and always with reciprocal involvement.

Consider

Even as an individual disciple not directly engaged in the decision making of a church, it is important to formulate a distinct ecclesiology in order for discipleship to be complete and not to be reduced. Whether as an individual or as a group this issue of

following *together* is critical for grasping God's revelation of himself in the incarnation of his Son and for understanding the significance of the gospel in what Christ saved us *to*.

Of most significance is following Jesus in the relational progression as his new kinship family. In his study of the NT house church Roger Gehring observes that the image Jesus preferred for the new people of God was the eschatological family of God. He concludes that this was most likely because family of God best communicated the theological essence of what Jesus was trying to impart.⁷ We can add that the function of this new kinship family (not necessarily in the form of a house church) is the practice of God's people everywhere and how to do church anywhere regardless of its tradition, even in the 21st century Western world. Christian community formation (past, present or future) is more significant than a house, a household or even a conventional family. It is a new creation unlike any experienced before, even as covenant people of God. And as transformed persons involved in transformed relationships with family love, its practice raises issues for us which need to be resolved both as individuals and as a church community.

Theology informs us of God's activity in history, his revelations in Christ's life and work, his continued presence in his Spirit and his unfolding eschatological plan; and such theology coheres in his new kinship family for us to experience as a relational reality. Define all the aspects of theology (only one part of which is ecclesiology) which go into his new kinship family. What are the implications of leaving out some aspect or reducing it?

7. Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publ., 2004), 47.

11 God's People Distinguished

"I pray for them . . . for they are yours."

John 17:9

In some respects discipleship would be less problematic if Jesus had not prayed to his Father the above prayer for his disciples. Besides eliminating the options of individualism and voluntary association in the church, Jesus defines the gathering of his followers as both special and distinct. These special and distinct aspects of this intimate fellowship directly involve the issues of *identity* and *redemption*.

Being special and having distinction would be appealing to anyone. But when you put them into the context Jesus prays about, they can easily become a source of tension and a reason for our resistance to be relationally involved as his followers. We need to examine further the issues of identity and redemption in order to ensure our integrity as God's people and to practice what truly distinguishes the church Jesus established. In discipleship the integrity of the individual is deeply interrelated with the integrity of Christ's church; likewise, what the individual and the church each practices has a direct and reflexive relation to the other. The influence and impact on each other are particularly important to understand in the issue of identity and for the ramifications of redemption.

Distinguishing Identity Formation

Identity formation is a foundational issue in Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. This is understandable because "who we are" primarily determines how we will live. As discussed in Chapter 6, however, identity formation is problematic when it takes a reductionist approach basing "who we are" essentially on what we do. This was the conflict Jesus had with the Pharisees who defined themselves as an association following a code of behavior. The problem with any identity emerging from something like a code (even if the code is correct, which it wasn't for the Pharisees) is that such an identity is always incomplete – thus, Jesus' discourse on ambiguity of the light and shallowness of the salt (Mt.5:13-16) and the necessity of Christian identity to surpass the reductionists (5:20).

Identity formed from what we do and have is always insufficient because it does not account for *what we are*. Inherent in "who we are" is "what we are," that is, created in the image of God (as persons of heart) for intimate relationships. Any reduction of "what we are" inadequately bases "who we are" from the outside-in. When we properly account for "what we are," identity formation takes place in the process of relationships, not based on an association from the likes of a code or any other secondary aspect.

Identity cannot be complete apart from the primary function of relationships. For

the identity of Christ's followers, these are not just any kind of relationships but very special and distinct ones. When Jesus defined "who we are" in his farewell prayer, he told his Father that "they are yours" (Jn.17:9). When Christian identity is based on this special relationship with the Father, we will live in a distinct way such that we will reflect our Father to others and they will praise him (as Jesus said of the light, Mt.5:16). This relationship-based identity also encompasses the special and distinct relationships of his family in intimate corporate involvement (Jn.17:21-23). To ensure the integrity of this identity for his followers, Jesus prayed for us to be in clear contrast to the prevailing context (17:15-16). In other words, *authentic Christian identity* necessitates transformed persons living transformed relationships together in the transformed church functionally as his Father's family (17:17-19).

When Christian identity forms in the process of this relationship, "who we are" can never be separated from nor have meaning apart from "whose we are." Who we truly are only emerges from "whose we are," not as a propositional truth but as a relational reality. This is **the first distinguishing characteristic of Christian identity**. Because of the full incarnation of Jesus (from the manger through the cross), we are unequivocally the Father's. If our practice stops short in following Jesus in the relational progression to his Father, our identity will not have experiential clarity of "whose we are" – much less have confidence in who we truly are and conviction about whom to serve in the prevailing context Jesus prays about.

To be the Father's necessitates functioning as his daughter or son. Yet, to be the Father's also means to be his family's, which includes functioning as sisters and brothers. Christian identity is not unique (and therefore special) for the individual but its specialness comes from the corporate identity as his new kinship family. Authentic Christian identity formation always develops this corporate identity, **the second distinguishing characteristic of Christian identity**. This reciprocal relational responsibility becomes problematic, as we discussed previously. One of the repercussions of individualism in Christian practice (by the individual and the church) directly affects identity formation. Though individuals may hold certain beliefs and values in common with others in a church, they do not experience the specific quality of "belonging" which is the outcome of deeper relational bonds from ongoing intimate involvement together (cf. Jn.8:35). Consequently, these individuals tend to look elsewhere for their identity – that is, to fulfill the needs of "what they are," though they may still appear outwardly to identify with a church for "who they are."

When a church doesn't provide for "what they are," they turn to their membership in a family, group, culture or some other social area or category. God's family or church body is not their primary source of identity – whether due to individual choice or a church's lack. This is problematic for any level of discipleship because our perceptions of "what we are" are primary determinants for how we will live. Furthermore, any gap or deficiency in Christian identity formation will strongly influence how we feel about ourselves as Christ's followers and the sense of worth we have as a part of his family.

We should not minimize these issues which effectively reduce the presence of authentic Christian identity. Racial and ethnic identity, class identity, gender identity

formation, among others, all demonstrate the importance of how we feel about ourselves and our sense of worth as persons. The negative causes and effects on these identities are issues which all Christians face, knowingly or unknowingly. Yet, for discipleship, identity formation as the Father's and his family's is even more important – not at the exclusion of other identities but as the primary determinant for how we will live. And that means this must be examined directly in terms of the surrounding context in which we live.

What prevails in our lives? Multiple problems arise, for example, from a lack of confidence in the identity we have. What distinguishes us always becomes a question mark. Besides the difficulty demonstrating *what* one truly is as a person, there can also be confusion or conflict regarding the deeper purpose of one's life. For Christians this identity problem leads to an ambiguous presence (re: light) and shallow function (re: salt) in the prevailing world surrounding us. This prevailing world is the context Jesus prays for us to be in contrast to (Jn.17:14-16).

This is the part of Jesus' prayer which probably makes discipleship the most problematic for us. To be distinguished from what prevails around us is to be in *the minority*. If minority status meant being special and having distinction in the prevailing context, this would be appealing. The experience of minority peoples historically, however, has been invariably the experience of being different from what prevails and thus rejected as *less* – the stigma of “different thus less.” Yet, in effect to be the minority is the contrasting identity Jesus defines for his followers (Jn.17:14). Contrary to many prevailing notions about Christian identity (particularly in the U.S.), authentic Christian identity is distinctly a minority identity – **the third distinguishing characteristic** defined by Jesus.

It would be easier to be Christian apart from what Jesus defined about our identity; or, at the very least, it would be more comfortable if we could be selective about these three characteristics. But Christian identity is not about me (the individual) nor merely about us (the corporate). It is profoundly about us in relationship, and it is about a *different* us (transformed) living in *new* relationships (transformed) together as his family (the transformed church). Furthermore, Christian identity formation develops all this while it specifically functions in the broader prevailing context to extend the Father's purpose.

When we lack confidence in our identity vis-à-vis the prevailing world around us, this reflects the absence of experiencing the relational reality of “whose we are.” This directly leads to a lack of conviction (functional, not theological) about just exactly “whom to serve” in the process. Such ambivalence, ambiguity or shallowness must be honestly addressed and deeply attended to in order for discipleship to continue in the relational progression as Jesus prayed for (Jn.17:24-26).

The Basic Model of the Early Disciples

The early disciples of Christ, as seen in the book of Acts, didn't seem to lack either this confidence or conviction. At the same time they were not extraordinary

Christians, given their track record up to the moment of Christ's ascension. Yet as we look further at the transformed church, we can see in their *shared life together* how these early disciples lived out their true identity as the family of God. They were being "who they were" by exercising "what they were" individually and corporately, in Jesus Christ. Thus, as a corporate unit of believers living in their true identity they were *family*, *community*, the organic body of Christ.

In knowing and living out together this identity in the prevailing world surrounding them, they never forgot the purpose of their shared life: the mission of Jesus Christ. Not segregated from the world, nor isolated or disconnected (mentally, emotionally, practically) from the needs and problems of humanity, they went forth from the "home-base" into the world without ambiguity about their identity and without equivocation about whom they served, nor shallowness in function to represent the Father.

This may seem simple enough in principle. Yet, with the contrary demands of everyday life, with pressures to conform to the norms of the majority or dominant group, with influences of the old order reducing the quality of life, there is much that comes to bear on Jesus' disciples which effectively could divert, contaminate or neutralize their *witness* in the world. This also includes overt pressures created by the intimidating efforts of force, violence and other power relations which seek to suppress God's people – even extinguish them. Historically, no one has been exempt from exposure to these influences and pressures, not even Jesus.

The early disciples were certainly objects of extreme reactions from the broader context. Yet, even with the mounting pressure on these disciples, we see them growing in the confidence of who they truly were. Contrary to the status and prestige of esteemed credentials (e.g., from a rabbinic school) and the most commonly accepted standards of the prevailing Mediterranean world, their confidence was not based on their education, formal training or knowledge. Their antagonists marveled at how confident such uneducated, common, ordinary laypersons could be simply because of *being connected with Jesus* (see Acts 4:13).

Since these disciples did not operate according to the prevailing common standards and values, they were freer to operate in their true identity. Certainly, how they functioned was also the outcome of their redemption. So, for example, even under extreme antagonistic pressure to conform to prevailing beliefs, the early disciples boldly kept extending their witness into the world without ambivalence about whom to serve. With clarity and depth they responded back: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Whatever hassles or hostilities they encountered, they would not abdicate the truth of who they were as God's people (Acts 4:19,20). This outcome was not from the practice of mere individuals but from the intimate interdependent involvement of the corporate body (as the rest of Acts 4:23ff describes). This growing confidence made their corporate identity more and more distinct from the alternative identities of the world – a minority identity designed to change the world. Living in their true identity by their distinguished presence and function in the prevailing context thus further deepened their

conviction about whom they served.

The characteristics of their confidence in their true identity and their conviction about whom to serve, along with the other four characteristics (all introduced in Chap. 8), became foundational for distinguishing the shared life together of the transformed church. While the early church model does not indicate a normative pattern to structure and order the church in a particular way to follow like a code, it does reveal the necessary relational functions vital for the practice of every church in its identity as God's family – regardless of its church structure and order. They serve as guidelines for distinguishing the church within its prevailing context.

The Roots of This Identity

As we have discussed at different points, how the early church presented itself can all be seen as the fruit of Jesus' farewell prayer on behalf of his disciples. Throughout the incarnation Jesus established the relational context and process of being his followers. In his prayer this all converges profoundly to reveal his deep desires for his disciples, particularly in relation to their identity and purpose as his Father's.

The identity of his followers is grounded in his identity (Jn.17:14b,16). Yet, ultimately *Jesus reveals his own identity to be rooted in the Father* – an identity in strong disparity with the world. Having nurtured his early disciples in the same relational process reflected in his relationship with his Father, he prayed that they be established in this same identity. Now that they were his *own* they could no longer be identified as *of the world*. Jesus, however, didn't ask that they be taken from the world; he sent them back into the world to extend the purpose his Father gave him (17:18). These nuances with the prevailing context are crucial to the practice of authentic discipleship.

Yet, Jesus knew that their presence and function in the world could only be properly fulfilled by living in their true identity as God's family. Since he was leaving them, he invoked God's transforming work through the Spirit of truth to continue to establish them in *what they were* (17:17). The Spirit's relational work and the intimate involvement of the corporate body were necessary for this new identity formation, because Jesus understood that to take on this identity would result in antagonistic reactions from prevailing forces in the world (cf. the eighth beatitude, Mt.5:10,11).

This prayer reveals how deeply interrelated mission is to identity. Jesus clearly fulfilled his mission in his own earthly life (17:3-4,26); all his followers likewise now have that same mission (17:21,23). Generally stated, their purpose is: **“to reveal the Father to the world.”** As the Father sent his Son into the world, Jesus sends his followers; as Christ represented his Father and revealed him, that is their purpose also. This mission became a function of identity in Jesus' life through the unity, the intimate closeness, the oneness between him and the Father. Being so rooted in the Father – ontologically, structurally and relationally – Jesus revealed God the Father throughout his life as he vulnerably lived out *what he was* (cf. Jn.1:18). This is the epistemological point Jesus made earlier to Thomas and Philip in John 14, as we discussed in Chapter 1.

In the same way, mission becomes a function of identity for his followers in the relational process of the unity, the intimate closeness, the oneness between God and them, as well as among themselves. This unity, intimate closeness and oneness witness to the world that they are the Father's. The outworking of this unity with deep love demonstrated *the truth of the gospel* (cf. Gal.2:14) and that they are his, because the unity comes from and is modeled on the unity between the Father and the Son, and because the Father loves them even as he loves the Son (17:23). But, this is not the relational outcome for those who don't live in their true identity as the people of God. To reveal the Father is to live as his *own* – not as the world's, but intimately as God's people, his family, the transformed church.

In order for Christ's mission to become a function of identity, his followers together must take on a clearly distinct identity rooted in their intimate relationship with the Father and with each other as his family. The nature of this identity is that it is foreign to the world, uncommon in a common context, eternal in a temporal mode – in other words, *different*. Yet, Jesus prayed for his disciples to be more than sojourners to a heavenly kingdom in the future (cf. Heb.11:13-16); he fulfilled the Father's promise to establish a new life order that is in effect now. Thus, his followers are to be “**alien residents**” in the land; Peter described this with two terms (“alien,” Gk. *paroikos* and “strangers,” Gk. *parepidemos*) which mean sojourners but, as *parepidemos* in particular implies, not simply those who are passing through but as foreigners who have established residence among the indigenous people, however temporary (1 Pet.2:11). They have a purpose to fulfill for the Father in this context. Furthermore, this identity was also foreign to the dominant religious identity in Jesus' time. *It wasn't a popular identity, a majority identity, but in reality and practice was clearly a minority identity*. Nevertheless, this new identity, foreign as it was, gained rigorous and devoted followers. This was largely because the identity was predicated on a miracle – the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ – which involved a relational reality leading to the experiential outcome of belonging to God's family as the Father's very own.

Influences on That Identity

When anyone is expressing their identity – either in a foreign context or an identity foreign to the prevailing context – one important issue must be examined. This issue is the extent of influence on that identity by the dominant groups and prevailing culture in that context or society. For example, does a dominant group exert some control over that identity? Does intimidation limit expression of one's true identity? Does the influence of a prevailing culture diminish the identity?

These were questions faced by the early Christian community in the Mediterranean world. They had various unique ethnic identities. Even among themselves, the old religious identity and their other cultural differences were cause for dispute. Yet, what was mainly at issue was not about those reasonable practices and expectations of a particular culture and its uniqueness for its people, though some in the early church

pushed for homogeneity. But other negative processes in the surrounding context often contaminated the process of identity formation and its maintenance, leading to conflicts in the early church. One such major negative influence was power relations from which unnatural stratification and systems of inequality result. This was seen in the dispute at the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15), even after cultural and structural discrimination against non-Jews were redeemed (read Acts 10:34ff).

It was imperative for the Christian community to abandon these practices of the prevailing context – practices which essentially were used to establish one’s worth and identity, often at the expense of others. Power relations was only one of those practices. Paul identified intellectual arrogance as another (see 1 Corinthians). Wealth, possessions, external appearance and other forms of status were also exposed for their inequitable, deceptive ways.

These are practices common to peoples of all cultures and backgrounds. They don’t represent the reasonable characteristics necessary to preserve the uniqueness of a people from a particular culture. More importantly, they don’t represent elements which are legitimate for the integrity of our true identity and for our dignity as the people of God. On the contrary, it is from these negative processes and the systems of inequality they produce which Christ has redeemed us. It is from the likes of these that Jesus calls (and prays for) us as his disciples to extricate ourselves in very specific ways. We are to take on a new identity which is foreign to the surrounding context, which is in conflict with the prevailing ways of the world, and which is – as our true identity – rooted in the oneness and love of God himself and, thus, which witnesses to a new life order.

The early disciples were vulnerable to these influences. They didn’t quickly resolve all of the problems related to this issue, as their relations with Gentiles reflected. But they knew what was involved in being God’s family, that if they didn’t assume their true identity, what was at stake: the purpose Jesus extended to them as his Father’s. To that end they remained obedient and faithful, working out their differences, being reconciled in their sins and jointly handling the extreme external pressures which bore upon them. Even in the aftermath of violence, they would not be intimidated to abdicate their identity (e.g., in Acts 14:19-22). The resilience of faith was consistently demonstrated by God’s people throughout Acts. They would not reduce what they were; they kept growing in the confidence of their true identity and the conviction about whom to serve.

As Jesus prayed, all his followers need to actively work on being different from the world and not to embrace its ways of doing things. Yet, living as **“alien residents”** also *comes with the responsibility to help reconcile the world to God’s original purpose and plan*. This engagement with the world cannot keep us as separatists or exilists without responsibility to this world, or to merely spiritualize the ministry of reconciliation. “To reveal the Father to the world” by extending Christ’s mission, his followers need to establish essentially a **culture of reconciliation** in which the primacy of intimate relationships is restored. To do this they need to be active agents of reconciliation *in* the world while maintaining a church system not *of* the world. This is the identity distinguishing God’s family for which Jesus prayed.

Prevailing and Dependent Identities

Certainly, to whatever extent the identity of who and what we are is rooted (directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly) in the negative processes of the surrounding context, then to that extent we will have problems living out our true identity as God's family. To take on this new and foreign identity creates conflict with alternative identities and often threatens what we've based our lives on – for example, security based on some aspect of power (social, economic or political), self-worth based on personal abilities or resources. These tensions bring out any resistance we have to this new identity as well as expose those areas of our everyday identity rooted in the prevailing reductionist paradigm of defining ourselves by what we do and have.

As we consider any dominant group influence on our identity as a Christian, we must examine the impact of Western influence on that identity. What the Western worldview does is root our identity in what we *do*, in the goals we accomplish, in our resources and in *things*. It is critical to understand the impact of this on our identity. As discussed earlier, Asian and Middle Eastern identities, in contrast, are defined more in terms of human relationships. Though those relationships may not be edifying ones, nevertheless these identities are still related to *people* and not to the impersonal indicators of modernity and Western thinking.

Consider the practice of many churches. Their priorities tend to get focused on how *many* (e.g., members, attendance), how *much* (e.g., achievements, offerings, budget), how *long* (e.g., experience, longevity, seniority) and the primary focus on methodology. This is the use of a reductionist paradigm and is mainly about quantity, not about quality. When Jesus observed “church” (temple) practice, he singled out a poor widow during the offering collection (Mk.12:41-44). She gave all she had (Gk. *bios*, the goods for living), but this wasn't about the quantity of “all she had.” *Bios* was secondary to her because there was something more important: the quality of *zoe* in her relationship with God and giving all her heart to him. What distinguished the other givers was the prevailing quantitative practice, that is, the *common*. What distinguished her was the qualitative difference of the *Uncommon*, that is, the heart and intimate relational nature of God. He does not measure amount, life, us, the church by a reductionist paradigm of quantity. This practice is not of God.

When a Christian identity incorporates a Western worldview, the true identity of God's people becomes an entangled, complex problem. To distinguish between the legitimate and illegitimate elements of that identity can involve emotional debate and issues of socio-political ideology just as much as, and maybe even more than, matters of theology. The white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa was a specific example of this kind of insidious process which legitimated the systematic oppression of blacks, including black Christians.

This process operates less blatantly in various ways throughout the world, especially in the United States, since it is the guardian of democracy and the Western world. Christian identity is held as synonymous with many elements of Western culture and worldview, and so the influence and dominating factors shaping our identity are pervasive.

Unless Christian identity is uprooted from such prevailing determinants, the true identity of God's family cannot clearly distinguish itself. In this system identity formation and maintenance become increasingly dependent on alternative sources to determine what it should *be* or do, whether it is OK, or how it should live. This process puts the Christian identity essentially under the control of, for example, a social context.

An identity which looks to outside sources for its affirmation is an identity shaped into the design of someone else. This is experienced at various levels of life. On the societal level, the process of assimilation into a society can create this problem. In this process we seek to establish a place for ourselves in the society while usually taking an uncritical approach to the society's consensus values and practices (established ways of doing things). Assimilation breeds this uncritical approach particularly in minority peoples. As alien residents, for God's people to live without critique leaves them very susceptible to compromise. This may result in a compromised position (knowingly or inadvertently for the Christian) of trying to *make it* and be accepted (in effect establish one's identity) according to the social criteria of a value system subtly in conflict with the Scriptures.

Paul strongly warns us against such compromise, assimilation and an uncritical mind-set which leave us with an ambiguous or shallow identity unable to distinguish what is of God (Gk. *syschematizo*, conform vs. *metamorphoo*, transform, in Rom.12:2). In U.S. society identity formation becomes a complex problem because various elements of this society are misperceived to be anointed by God or synonymous with being his. Consequently, the emergence of the true identity of God's people as alien residents is problematic; for some in this society even the suggestion of a "true identity" may be considered non-Christian and probably be labeled as radical or even subversive.

The process of assimilation compounds the problem further. Uncritical participation in this process reduces the opportunity for Jesus' followers to achieve an independent function not tied directly to society's control. In this way assimilation effectively becomes a legitimated means to control the presence and function of God's people. This suggests Satan's encouragement of us to assimilate into the prevailing context.

For Christians to embrace this process is to allow our identity to be shaped into the design of the world – in this case the design of the dominant group of this society. This has been exactly the experience of minority peoples in this country; but, then, we need to understand that the process of assimilation is designed exactly for this purpose by the dominant group. Yet, for the followers of Christ, as a minority people alien to the world, we are always faced with this dilemma: **to emerge or submerge.**

Historically, with slight variation, this has been the process used on Christians, for example, in the past in the Philippines, South Korea and more recently in mainland China. The presence and function of God's people have been systematically controlled by the government. As long as Christian activity promoted nationalism in those countries and did not interfere with government policies, then Christianity was encouraged or allowed. In this way Christians had even been used in the past to legitimize injustices in the Philippines and in South Korea.

Along with constraining or even altering the true Christian identity, this process confounds the issue about *whom to serve*. Who *is* going to be served in this: myself, society, the dominant group, God or someone or something else we set up in place of him? Under these conditions how does a Christian have confidence in his/her identity and conviction about whom to serve? The issues Jesus raised about the light and the salt become more urgent in these circumstances.

At other times the external influence on Christian identity is not so complete. The formation and maintenance of identity are often a somewhat “schizophrenic” operation for many Christians. This is the dual or split personality type who tries to maintain or integrate conflicting identities. This is an experience similar to what other minority peoples experience in a process I call “**bifocal identity**”: the formation and maintenance of conflicting identities into a singular system of practice like bifocal glasses where one identity is used for general areas (usually more public and secondary) and the other identity used for closer, private areas (deeper and primary).

The closer private areas of our life bring out another level of life where Christian identity is often shaped by another’s design. This can happen when and where we depend on extraneous sources for our affirmation or to legitimate our life. The most obvious source for this affirmation is our biological family. Relationships with other “significant others” along life’s journey can create other sources. *Any relationship we depend on for affirmation or legitimation becomes an important context of influence or control on our identity.*

For example, for a Christian to depend on the biological family for the primary affirmation of his/her identity opens the door for the family’s determination of how that person will *be*. Though parental influence is well-known, much of this control often is subtle or indirect. This especially involves the influence on or even control of one’s deeper Christian identity.

The dynamic at work here is that dependence on extraneous sources for affirmation or legitimation generates loyalty in that relationship. That loyalty makes us susceptible to compromise our own beliefs and desires. The attachments these relationships engender then determine our priorities in life. The guilt, for example, produced in the children when they don’t meet family expectations is one of the concrete indicators of family influence or control. When this kind of loyalty is confused with primary Christian duty, it also confounds the issue about *whose we are* and thus *whom to serve*. Therefore, in any situation where willful dependence on extraneous sources for affirmation and legitimation exists, Christian identity can be expected to be shaped into another’s design.

To Emerge in Our True Identity

The identity of God’s family transcends nationalism, ethnocentrism or any other association and relationship which would reduce its presence and function in the world. At the same time this identity does not deny the unique aspects of a people or person –

aspects which do not take away from the true identity as the Father's nor subordinate it in a dual identity. While affirming those aspects which meaningfully enhance the uniqueness of a people in the surrounding context, this new identity as God's people still demonstrates a substance and truth against which the world reacts. More specifically, the reaction will come from those who uphold negative processes of a prevailing context, or from those who are avoiding dealing with (or admitting their) sin.

Even in contexts where strong efforts at control or intimidation are made, even in the face of violence, the substance and truth of God's people can distinctly emerge. As Jesus shared in his farewell discourse to his disciples just prior to his farewell prayer, there are three realities about his family which he juxtaposes with three other conditions characterizing the world. First, in relation to feelings of distress he counters with his *peace*; the reality about his family is that there is *peace* in us, that is wholeness, well-being, reconciliation with God through Christ, no matter what else is happening (John 14). Then, in relation to the hate and violence of the world, he counters with his *love*; the reality about his family is that we are intimately loved, we have love and, thus, can share love – bearing witness to our true identity (John 15). Lastly, Jesus identifies the world as his antagonist and sets himself up to redeem it; the reality about his family is that we are his *own*, privileged to share in what is his and no longer having to be controlled or intimidated by the world because he has overcome it (John 16).

The early disciples lived this out with both an eschatological worldview and a functional relational presence in the realities of the surrounding context. They took to heart not only Jesus' words but faithfully received the new realities about their lives brought about by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and now extended by his Spirit. Consequently, **their true identity as God's family distinctly emerged** in spite of antagonistic contexts, situations or adverse conditions **because of the following factors:**

- (1) their identity was predicated on the miracle of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ;
- (2) their identity was rooted in the intimacy of their relationship with the Father, as his very own;
- (3) their identity formation was enabled by the Holy Spirit;
- (4) their identity was supported by and interdependently belonged to the *whole* of God's people as family in the organic body of Christ.

Without minimizing the importance of the other factors I want to emphasize the fourth factor here. The identity of God's people is not to be individualized; it is a corporate identity. But there is a practical reason to point this out also. We cannot identify some inner strength of the early disciples that enabled them to live confidently in their true identity and with the strong conviction about whom to serve. Also, it would be an overstatement that they lived as such solely because of the power of the Holy Spirit working within each of them as individuals. The crucial factor to realize here about the transformed church is that the everyday working relational process of their *shared life*

together enabled them to grow in this confidence of *what they were* and this conviction of *whom they served*.

How vital it is for God's people to be joined together in this way. In their shared life together they care for each other corporately and they embrace their identity corporately. It is this *certain structure* (interdependent relationships) and the process of this *particular kind of relationship* (intimate involvement) which cannot be underestimated. The support and synergism of the transformed church are absolutely indispensable in order to grow in, to maintain and to extend the true identity of God's family *in the world*. This is the purpose in Jesus' farewell prayer. Within this petition to the Father, the unity and the ongoing intimate involvement of his followers are emphasized in order for God's family to fulfill their purpose in love by demonstrating the *truth of the gospel* and *to reveal the Father to the world*.

It is this identity, both in substance and in form, which distinguishes God's people and will determine *how* they will live and *what* their mission will be in the world.

Distinguishing Redemption

These special and distinct aspects of God's family also involve the issue of redemption. We further need to understand how redemption functions for our integrity as God's people and for distinguishing the practice of the church.

The church cannot turn to prevailing common sources (e.g., market analyses, corporate business practices, public relations, therapeutic models, even Gallup or Barna surveys) for how to be the church and expect to distinguish itself as God's family. To be of any relational significance to God the church must rely on the practices of Christ and the gathering of his early disciples in Acts.

Turning to prevailing common sources tends to enslave churches. This is true however "successful" the results may seem, whatever gains appear to have been made. Almost all methods, techniques, models for doing church come with their success stories. This was even true for the early church. Despite facing what was probably intense persecution, by the end of the first century the Christian church was establishing itself. This was not, however, without internal problems involving its identity and redemption. In Revelations 2 and 3, John records a revelation to various churches (in what is now Turkey) about their struggles, in particular holding some accountable for having made compromises. This part of Revelations could easily have been written to churches today.

There seems to be an observable pattern: as churches get established their source of influence tends to shift. That is, in the early development of churches, it is their religious belief system which is the predominant factor in their legitimation. Yet, as a church establishes itself, there is a tendency for the socio-cultural belief systems of the surrounding context in which the church is located to implicitly replace (functionally, not doctrinally) the religious belief system as the most influential source guiding that institution. Sometimes this shift takes place more openly. For example, look at the quantitative model for success many churches utilize today; where does it come from?

Although usually done with good intentions for the sake of the gospel (or at least to be more contextually relevant), where does the church receive many of its cues for its programming, or program modes?

To critique this is not to eliminate the use of secular resource developments and better techniques. Even in the so-called information age with its evolving technology, Paul's critique remains relevant, both for the individual and for churches: "while knowledge may make us feel important [relevant or acceptable], it is love that really builds up the church" (1 Cor.8:1, NLT). There are crucial issues to keep in perspective here, not the least of which is the issue of what *means* are used and whose *end* is sought. Like the "successful" churches John records in Ephesus (which lost its relational significance) and in Sardis (which had illusions about its popular reputation), many church operations cannot be distinguished together with Jesus in the incarnation and with his followers in Acts.

Unfortunately, churches are often found coexisting with the prevailing context, essentially maintaining a distinct identity merely on narrow moral grounds, doctrinal purity or merely on the general social classification of religion. In these conditions a church's operation does not bear witness to the distinct relational character essential for the fulfillment of its God-given purpose and commission *in* the world.

This distinct relational character involves redemption and includes the holiness and righteousness of God's people. Paul discusses righteousness and holiness as conjoined (Eph.4:24, used together in the NT only here and in Lk.1:75), and they need to be understood relationally for practice in the new life order. "Righteousness" (Gk. *dikaiosyne*) fulfills God's claims on us and conforms to his authority, or essentially to be like God. It is an opposite of lawlessness (*anomia*), which essentially is doing whatever one chooses to do. *Dikaiosyne* denotes this right inner relation outwardly expressed in relationship to others. This means to relate to others as God relates – with heart and love, as Paul has been discussing in Ephesians 4 (cf. Mt.5:48). To have righteousness has no other alternative for relationship.

"Holiness" (Gk. *hosiotes*) is related more to keeping of ordinances than to character of life (*hagiotes*). Holiness or piety is seen relationally in carrying out sacred duties as "piety toward God," having integrity and fidelity in our relationship with him, and thus denotes fulfilling the responsibilities which come with being intimately joined with God. To practice holiness requires separation from common usage and prevailing ways (Eph.4:22; cf. 1 Pet.1:15,16). In both holiness and righteousness, the new person in Christ can't claim to be new and then present one's self in relationship with others (the practice of righteousness) in ways, for example, which are convenient, easier or whatever level of involvement one chooses. To have an intimate relationship with God requires heart and comes with relational responsibilities (the practice of holiness) to live with God as God lives and to relate to others as God relates.

This distinct relational process of holiness and righteousness also involves the matter of sin and evil. Paul insisted that we address this matter to help us understand the prevailing influences it can have on our lives, and to discontinue the subtle substitutes and compromises made for the new life order (Eph.4:17-19). It is ironic that on a matter

the church would be expected to hold the strongest position – against sin and evil – it is often found weak. Whether due to an incomplete understanding of the scope of evil, an inadequate perspective of the nature of sin or a limited view of God, a church’s weak position directly influences the nature, degree and extent of its witness to others, not to mention its ministry to its own.

What distinguishes his church is family. But a church cannot function as the family of God without living as sons and daughters. That is, we can’t be a functioning daughter or son while living in enslavement to something; Peter says we are slaves to whatever masters us (2 Pet.2:19b). That could be some influence from the prevailing context that occupies, dominates or controls us. The attachment such an influence engenders precludes intimately experiencing God’s love and the relational experience of *belonging* to his family. The latter experience is the relational outcome only from being set free (redeemed) that Jesus defined in the relational paradigm of being involved with him as the Truth (Jn.8:31ff). This ongoing experience and subsequent practice are absolutely critical to function as his daughters and sons, thus live as his family and be distinguished as his church.

This means it is vital for all churches to understand their enslavements and to work with its members for redemption. If we are not redeemed from prevailing influences and transformed to the new life order, we cannot expect to function truly as his family (cf. 2 Cor.6:17-18). Understanding our enslavements is not merely a spiritual exercise.

Understanding Our Age

One might say, maybe with a certain degree of validity, that it’s a lot harder to deal with sin and evil today than in the age of the early church. To the extent that this is true, two factors heavily contribute to this condition. One factor is contextual and the other is structural. They operate separately and in combination. The church today needs to understand these operations if it expects to be distinguished in its practice.

The contextual factor is the increasing normative character of sin. This is well illustrated by a cartoon from years ago which I vividly recall. The scene takes place in hell where a junior demon is consulting a senior demon about his work on earth. The former is a little confused about human behavior and asks the senior: *“If they’re all doing it, is it still sin?”*

Of course, in the Screwtape tradition of C. S. Lewis, we can imagine the senior demon’s response would be something like: *“Well, it sure is, but don’t let them know that – let them think it’s OK.”*

Without going into detail about specific contexts producing this kind of effect, we need to realize that the growing frequency and extent of any negative behavior or practice create conditions for redefining those more favorably. And our perceptions of what is unacceptable are being redefined continuously – some for better but mainly for worse. With the relativism of a postmodern context or in a climate of blanket tolerance, distinguishing sin and evil becomes even more difficult. This process can also be seen as

a reaction to forms of Christian legalism with its rigidity and dependence on constraints – particularly reactions from less conservative Christians. In this process Christian liberty is exercised, and somewhat abused, in a manner influenced more by its social context than its redeemed nature and purpose.

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

It is in this area that our understanding of sin and evil must be further developed – both for the outworking of our own life together as God’s family and for the application of our faith in fulfilling God’s purpose and commission in the world.

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

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

Jacques Ellul commented back in the mid-20th century about such a systemic process: “A major fact of our present civilization is that more and more sin becomes collective, and the individual is forced to participate in collective sin.”¹ This process continues today in increasing global conditions which broaden and compound our participation in sin and evil. Child labor and slave-like factory practices, for example, which would not be tolerated in the U.S. become tolerable overseas to serve U.S. consumer interests.

The net effect of this structural factor on Christians is the responsibility for directly or indirectly propagating sin and evil by either knowingly or unknowingly being in complicity with the operation of such an institution, system or structure. Of course, it should be clearly understood also that this collective nature of sin does not take away the individual’s accountability for sin and evil. But it does reveal the extensive reality of sin

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

and evil and the church's need to address their full scope, both for the church's own transformation and for its redemptive purpose in the world.

Incarnating Redemption Today

The development of the church's purpose in actual practice is directly related to the strength of its position against sin and evil. In prevailing conditions, the normative character of sin and the collective nature of evil interact to confuse us of the presence of sin and evil, to distort its operation in everyday life and to create illusions about the benefits of its results. All the harm which has been incurred for the sake of "progress" is a prime example of this consequence. Yet, despite these conditions it is really immaterial whether it is more difficult to deal with sin and evil today than before.

When Jesus told his Father in the prayer for his followers that "they are yours," in a sense he was making some assumptions. Technically, since Jesus had not gone to the cross yet, he had not paid the ransom to secure their liberation from bondage as a slave to sin – that is, to be redeemed. Relationally, he was also assuming that his followers would not live in any enslavement, but would ongoingly function as his Father's daughters and sons. These were valid assumptions because Jesus did redeem them and reconcile them to his Father as his very own. But he does not assume that they can function as daughters and sons and can be distinguished as his Father's family while participating in the prevailing context without a qualitative practice against sin and evil – including normative and collective. That would be a totally invalid assumption, which conventional Christian wisdom erroneously tends to make.

In Paul's letter to Titus, he gives Titus the charge to restore the new life order to the church in Crete. The primary thrust of Paul's focus is on the need to distinguish themselves from the prevailing beliefs and practices (even religious ones) and to be redeemed from doing whatever they choose (*anomia*) in order to be purified for God to be "a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Tit.2:14). "Good" should not be confused with a quantitative list of constraints or deeds; the term (Gk. *kalos*) means good, beautiful as to quality and character – that is, that which reflects him and being his.

The church in holiness is called to be rigorous in doing good. But the purpose of this practice is not for the church to show itself righteous. This distinct character of the church serves not its image in the community but *its distinct function to bring the hope of redemption to those who are engaged in, controlled by or otherwise affected by evil and sin.*

As Jesus demonstrated throughout his incarnation about his purpose, the church also is not here to be served by its practices (Mt.20:28). Its practices *serve*; and like Jesus, the church serves by giving itself over to the redemptive purpose of God. Just as Jesus incarnated the redemptive means and plan of his Father to rescue all from "*the present evil age*" (Gal.1:4), so the life of the church and its *good* practices incarnate this redemption. There is nothing mystical about God's people incarnating redemption. It is also not a complex theological concept.

The church incarnates redemption by how it lives. Since redemption effectively involves liberation from some enslavement, the reality of redemption made flesh in our lives is reflected by our decreasing participation in sin and evil. Yet, God's people cannot witness merely to a redemption totally in the spiritual sphere, the outcome of which is only in the future. This redemption from sin and evil can and must be indicated in how we live ongoingly in distinction from the prevailing context.

At the same time the church incarnates redemption by how it lives in and to the world. Now, more than being the *objects* of Christ's redemptive work on the cross, God's people need to live as *subjects* in the redemptive process – which includes both what Christ saved us from and what he saved us to. That is, God's people actively serve as agents of redemption and reconciliation, bearing the hope of the new life order both by clearly demonstrating God's grace through Christ and in the visible results of God's redemptive work of reconciliation witnessed in the everyday lives of his people as family. This function effectively as salt and light is done not shallowly in relation to sin and evil, nor by an ambiguous presence to areas of sin and evil but by initiating loving confrontation of all its manifestations. As mentioned in Chapter 10, redemption and reconciliation are not mere propositional truths. These are indeed also the relational realities forming both the model for our other relationships as well as the experiential base on which to build these relationships.

Doing good has little meaning or significant value apart from this redemptive process. Yet, for distinguishing redemption it is necessary to grasp: **the issue of redemption is predicated on our understanding of sin and evil.** If we perceive it in limited moral terms and/or “spiritualize” all aspects of sin and evil, the tendency will be to deal with it only for the individual, in the spiritual realm and for the future. On the other hand, if we perceive sin and evil merely as external behaviors of humanity and/or only in terms of social, economic, political operations without an underlying sinful human nature, the tendency will be to overly humanize Christ's redemptive work or universalize the outcome of the gospel's promise of new life.

Whatever the variations of these perspectives, there is a direct association of our understanding of sin and evil with how we, as Christians, function in the world. Therefore, our position on sin and evil is crucial in the development of Christian practice, both individual and corporate, and the action we feel responsible to take. And, generally, the most prevalent position taken by Christians can be described as *weak*.

Having said this, the process of incarnating redemption always needs to be qualified by the relational context and process vulnerably established by Jesus. We cannot be fixated on responding to sin. That effort can become an ethical task somewhat as an end in itself. As much as God hates sin, that is not the purpose of his family. The purpose of this redemptive process is entirely about relationship. For this reason *the work of redemption should never be separated from the work of reconciliation.*

The process of this relational purpose always establishes the *whole person* and intimate relationship as the most important priority. The redemptive process must (*dei*, by its nature) emerge within this relational context. Of course, the ultimate priority here is the person(s) of God and intimate relationship together. When Mary's anointing of Jesus was disputed as wasted resources which should be given to the poor, Jesus put our

purpose into the deeper perspective of God's big picture (Jn.12:7-8). The effects of sin (e.g., the poor) will always exist in this unredeemed context. The priority above responding to those important issues is *him*, God's person, and responding to him. He, and intimate relationship with him, is always the most important purpose and action in which we can engage. And just as he has this special and distinct importance, his followers will be important (particularly to his Father, as Jesus prayed) beyond any of our deeds, situations or circumstances. This is how God designed life; such are the priorities of the new life order and the practice which distinguish being his and his family.

Reductionist Alternatives

The warmth and sensitivity of the apostle John in his first epistle also reveal strong opposition to such a weak position on sin and evil. "If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk [continue to participate] in the [processes of] darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth" (1 Jn.1:6). *Fellowship* is one of John's main points in this epistle, which by definition (as discussed in Chap. 10) involves having a shared interest, sharing something in common, sharing in it together, implying inner relationships between its participants.

Fellowship is the corporate relational context and process basic to the incarnation of Jesus and the relational progression to the Father, which John experienced intimately (1 Jn.1:1-4). For him, fellowship with God and with other Christians was not just an objective truth but this intimate relational experience. Characteristic of his heart-level approach to discipleship this fellowship was not something which could be reduced from this relational process. The presence of authentic fellowship, for example, is not a label put on church activities, a category of church programming or the status of a group. In relational function, *fellowship is at the heart of the life of God's family* – whether in the worship or the service of their Lord. Nothing can substitute for true fellowship and nothing less than it should ever be settled for. All those other efforts in the church make any semblance of fellowship in Christ counterfeit.

Reductionism and its counterfeit replacements are ongoing issues which are critical to address. This is why John dealt so strongly with sin and evil, whether in relation to the early form of Gnosticism or any other prevailing influences. **The antagonist to authentic fellowship is sin.** In other words, relationships in the church always suffer harm from the presence of sin – not in the common perception of brokenness but in relational distance. Sin reduces the whole person by distancing us from our heart, and it creates a process of direct or indirect deception in relationships as a substitute for intimate connections. Direct is knowingly being deceptive; indirect is not being aware of the use of deception to disguise one's true self, whether from being exposed, to avoid being held accountable, or because of the fear of deeper relationship. This is the reason forgiveness is such an indispensable practice for church life.

There has been valid concern within the Christian community about the influence of secularism. Yet, the major perception of secularization (at least among conservative

church leaders) is seen in the theological areas of the gospel. This concern needs to be broadened to include all of its biblically contrary influences. I even suggest that the more primary issue involves the influence of reducing how the person is now defined – by what they do or have – and how our practice of relationships has substituted for intimacy, and how this secularization of God’s design and purpose has permeated how we practice church. If church practice in effect reproduces many of the dominant values and practices of the surrounding context, then that church has been secularized as well as institutionalized socially. This constrains the function of the church by defining its practice more and more according to the prevailing context.

Individualism is the most significant element of secularism that the Western church has failed to adequately address. The reduction of the corporate identity of God’s people as his new kinship family has left these local churches struggling to be distinguished in function from any other community organization in the surrounding context. Despite any of its pronouncements, this failure to establish the individual into the relational context as a functional part of the *whole* of God has left us with a **truncated soteriology**. That is, individualism in soteriology only addresses and deals with what we are essentially *saved from*. When our soteriological practice includes what we are *saved to*, then our theological focus must address and deal with sanctification and ecclesiology as equally important. This engages discipleship in following Jesus distinctly in the relational progression to the Father, intimately establishing us as his very own.

The relational progression involves the complete Christology on which our ecclesiology must be constructed in order to be distinguished as being his and his family. When this corporate identity is reduced to the individual and when individual priorities substitute for the priority of his new family, then the church’s distinction becomes lost in secularization. This practice leaves churches susceptible to two further reductionist alternatives: **(1) the tendency for masquerade, and (2) the mythologizing of relationships.**

In the process of reduction the most prominent shift taking place is observed in our focus from the qualitative to the quantitative. In human interaction the perception and concern for what is quantitative increasingly becomes focused on outward aspects of behavior, such as how it appears, its form, image or merely the idea of it, for example, as virtual realities provide. This certainly replaces the qualitative aspects of inner substance which gives significance to the behavior.

In order to compensate for the absence of inner substance, what is displayed outwardly must simulate that substance as close as possible. This process of simulation is what the Bible calls “**masquerade**” (Gk. *metaschematizo*, to take on or change the outward form or appearance without the inner change).

Simulation in the church is a critical issue, even in the early church as Paul addressed in the Corinthian gathering (2 Cor.11:13-15). The integrity of what we present of our *self* to each other, the validity and meaningfulness of the content of our communication, as well as the level of relationship being engaged, all come into question in any presence of simulation. When masquerade is not addressed, it is outwardly nearly impossible to distinguish what is authentic. Given that Satan himself masquerades as an

angel of light and his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness, church practice based on a reductionist paradigm leaves the church susceptible to falsehood and becomes extremely critical to deal with – as we discussed in particular in Chapter 4 as a substitute for inner change (*metamorphoo*).

Yet, the issue here does not involve necessarily our theological beliefs as much as our relational practice. The quantitative focus by which we often do church – that is, in actual function minimizing the heart and misperceiving intimate relationship – is susceptible. But this susceptibility is not as much to doctrinal impurity as it is to masquerade. In Christ's critique of the church in Ephesus, he acknowledged their effort in exposing false apostles (Rev.2:2). Yet, the quantity of hard work and dedication in difficult situations still was not enough to compensate for the lack of qualitative substance. That quality was about relationship – intimate relational involvement with God and each other, which was replaced by the quantitative concern for doctrine, ministry and missions. None of that was able to simulate the qualitative difference of God – the substance of which is heart (his being as God of heart) and intimate relationship (his nature as intimately relational).

The simulation of this inner substance is not a “hot issue” in the Christian community today because it doesn't create cognitive dissonance in our quantitative perceptual framework as theological apostasy and immorality do. This reflects the influence of the prevailing context and the secularization of how we define ourselves, do relationships and do church. Furthermore, the fact that we can practice masquerade (often unknowingly and even with good intentions) and not hold each other accountable for more substance is in effect to practice relational deception and, thus, falsehood in being his and his family. These kinds of relationships do not represent the Father. I suggest that this reductionist alternative needs to be addressed with more urgency than any other issue facing the church today. The integrity of our identity and the validity of our fellowship depend on it.

Compensating for the lack of substance is further pursued by another reductionist alternative: **mythologizing relationships**. This is primarily the effort to create illusions to compensate for the lack of experiential reality in relationships. Myth-making, if you wish, has been common practice, for example, in marriages where a spouse overstates the positive attributes of the other spouse or the experiences in the relationship. Sometimes these illusions help couples get through difficult periods in marriage. Yet, illusions create a false sense of what actually exists and they prevent a deeper reality from being experienced.

Churches seem to be talking about relationships more, some even making it a priority. I suspect that much of this emphasis still remains within the quantitative perceptual framework of the prevailing reductionist influences. These predispositions, biases and mind-set tend to use the same vocabulary for relationships (such as intimacy, love, community) but in actual function their vocabulary doesn't come with the inner experience. It connotes quantitative activity, not qualitative involvement.

This lack of experiential reality is particularly notable in relation to God's love. Probably no greater Christian testimony or witness is expressed than about his love. Yet,

how much of this can be attributed to mythologizing God's love? Any such myth-making does not alter the truth that God does in fact love us, but that Christian talk about his love is often without any relational significance and thus lacks experiential reality. The language of love, relationship and intimacy may be there but not the experience of those words. The conventional Christian forms may be present but not the substance behind them. They become like the illusions of a spouse overstating the positive attributes of the other or the experiences in the relationship. And, of course, with this predisposition, even bias and mind-set, there is more ascribed to God or interpreted about his actions than his actual involvement validates – his grace and love notwithstanding. Even when associated with propositional truth, such illusions (e.g., about some answers to prayer) only serve to obstruct the relationship from deeper experiential reality.

When Jesus was describing the end days among his followers, he said “because of the increase in wickedness, the love of most will grow cold” (Mt.24:12). “Wickedness” (Gk. *anomia*) is the opposite of righteousness and means lawlessness – which essentially is doing whatever one chooses to do, which effectively is similar to the practice of individualism today. In this context Christian love will “grow cold” (Gk. *psycho*, grow cold in a spiritual sense); that is, love will lack inner substance, not necessarily be absent in outward forms, appearance or the idea of it. In other words, the experience of love will diminish because of what is practiced. With these conditions (which are similar to what we face today), the most susceptible course Christians may take is to compensate for this lack by mythologizing relationships. It is always more comforting to believe something exists than to feel the lack. The paradox of this is that this reductionist alternative is exercised as a substitute for *faith as relational trust*.

This reductionist alternative becomes especially useful in church relations. Myth-making functions not always to gloss over difficulties or to avoid conflicts; but in such situations it can serve to minimize deeper encounters. One area where this is observed involves forgiveness. Christians generally have in their minds to forgive; that this is the Christian thing to do and they just have to do it. Basically, that is often where our forgiveness comes from – the level of our mind. Because forgiveness is what God wants, we do it in spite of what we may be feeling. Such forgiveness is actually more problematic for relationships than none at all. This is not the level of God's forgiveness of us nor how he wants us to forgive. Valid forgiveness has to come from the heart; we also have to receive his forgiveness in our heart for its relational reality. In this process the heart needs to be attended to for forgiveness to be possible. Whether we are the forgiver or being forgiven, in this relational process our heart has to be vulnerably involved for there to be a dying to the *old* and a rising of the *new* (as discussed earlier about authentic forgiveness in Chap.10).

Yet, what passes for forgiveness in many of our relationships is often only an illusion of this experiential reality. By intentionally or inadvertently practicing this reductionist alternative, we minimize having to deal with the deeper aspects of relationships involving the level of our hearts. This only prevents the experience of more intimate relational reality between us, both with God and each other.

As we hear more church discussion about the need for relationships and about

being community, we must account for any tendency to masquerade and the presence of myths in our practice. The normative practices of simulation and living with illusion in the prevailing context must not define how we see the *person* and engage in relationships, thus ultimately practice church. We cannot fully come together and be joined together in deep meaningful relationships unless they are established at the level of our hearts. In this sense reconciliation is not the same thing as harmony. Reconciliation involves the intimacy of equitable relationships – coming together and sharing together at the heart level, for which there is no simulation or illusion. Harmony could reflect anything ranging from a mutual coexistence to a cooperative agreement or structure based on practical functions or roles but not necessarily include deeper interpersonal relationships. Such harmony can be witnessed in many marriages and families today, and on a larger scale seen in an industrialized society's division of labor. Harmony is easier for relationships than reconciliation, and masquerade and myth in such relations are common practice, arguably a necessity. But for transformed individuals and the transformed church, mere harmony is never sufficient either for their own life together or their purpose in the world. Jesus gives us a qualitative *different* substance from what the world gives (Jn.14:27).

The Full Redemptive Witness

Reductionist influences diminish the qualitative difference of God's people to an ambiguous function and shallow practice. Whether breaking down the *whole* of God, reducing the *whole* person, constraining God's design and purpose for relationships, minimizing quality and inner substance in life, or even eliminating faith, reductionist practices take something away from what is authentic and replace it with a counterfeit substitute. If a church's identity as God's family of alien residents is not to be co-opted by a reductionist process – shaping it, for example, as another social institution among others, or assimilating its members into a prevailing context – then church practice must make more explicit and heighten its conflict with reductionism and must be true to the redemptive process. For Western churches the most prominent area to address is the influence and control of individualism. Nothing appears to be more urgent for the issue of Christian identity and the ramifications of redemption in our life.

The individual Christian alone is capable of only a limited witness to the meaning and direction of God's redemptive plan for all humanity and history. In understanding the Father's redemptive action – specifically in the relational progression of his Son's incarnation – we can see beyond his deep desire to redeem us from evil. His deeper desire for us is evident in the Father's desire to take us in and establish us as his daughter, son – that is, as his very own and fully as his family (Gal.4:5-7; Tit.2:14). This is what Jesus saved us *to*, which the individual alone cannot completely express. We also cannot witness to what we are not participating in as an experiential reality. What we are saved to can only be the full witness of the transformed church; this really needs to be the main witness of the church, not what we are saved *from*. “What we are saved from” by itself

does not necessarily imply what we are saved to. The latter, however, always involves being transformed from what we are saved from. When our witness is primarily focused on the “from” aspect of salvation, we engage in a reductionist practice that takes away from God’s deeper desires for us.

Fundamentally, then, God’s redemptive action was: **to reach out to us, pay the cost for the release from our plight or condition, take us into his own household and clean us, heal us, make us whole and, then, make us a part of his very own family by adopting us with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities of his children.** In its pure essence, this is the ultimate relational process of **family love**, as we discussed earlier.

Family love is the love which Jesus Christ incarnated with the relational progression, made us the objects of and, consequently, led to our place in God’s family as his very own. Family love is the meaning and direction of God’s redemptive plan and his desires for all humankind in all history. Family love is the love which defines God’s purpose and the calling for his people. By its very nature, family love cannot be fully communicated or expressed by only the individual, regardless of how well that individual functions. Family love is not only about heart and about intimate relationships but about intimate interdependent relationships functioning together ongoingly as his family. No individual alone and no number of individuals can simulate the family love of God’s people. Individualism is the qualitative opposite of this love and can only be in conflict with it.

Family love further defines for us the new command Jesus gave his followers and operationalizes the *agape* involvement which distinguishes us as his (Jn.13:34-35). *Agape* involvement as family love not only demonstrates to others that we are Christ’s followers but it also shows we are the Father’s sons and daughters. *Agape* signifies the nature of God (as intimately relational) and how he is involved with us. And his love, nature and involvement with us is an extension of how the Godhead is within itself. Since Jesus incarnated this relational progression in the function of family love, whatever is distinctly about the Son is about his Father and his Spirit. Family love clearly distinguishes the *agape* involvement Jesus had with his followers; and how he has loved us is how he wants us to love each other. This is the practice which distinguishes us as the Father’s.

The new kinship family of God’s people is a present relational reality (whether or not synonymous with his kingdom), which in the practice of the transformed church embodies this family love. Above all of its pronouncements and doctrinal positions, the church witnesses to the redemptive meaning and hope in Christ by sharing this profound love both among themselves and with others in the world. This is where redemption becomes incarnated for the needy, the dispossessed, the sinner, the sinned against. Family love is where the Truth is experienced as relational connection of the heart and intimately known.

As John starts out his first epistle he seems somewhat strained, or at a loss for words (1 Jn.1:1-3), to adequately communicate the depth of this new family life in fellowship with the Father and his Son. Words or propositional truths were insufficient to distinguish this intimate communion they had in common with each other as well as with

God. Only as it is lived, incarnated with one another could this be fully seen and realized. This can be experienced only as a relational reality, not as doctrinal truth.

Clearly, this holy fellowship is the relational outcome of the redemptive work of Christ which transforms us to be a people as his very own (1 Jn.1:7). This family love of God can rightfully and by necessity only be lived out and experienced in the corporate life of the transformed church. **Family love is what distinguishes God's people, the church.**

This is the direction and hope the church gives to human history by living out its own life in family love. The consistent witness throughout human history is that sin and evil reduce, separate, alienate, wound and lead to darkness and death. Family love, however, reaches out in relational connection, takes into God's household, heals, reconciles and restores to *whole* as a part of God's very own family. *In this process of family love, the church offers and models the relational and systemic processual context for human life, as well as the means to live it.* In this the church becomes distinguished as the light and the salt, as the Father's.

Discipleship Further Distinguished

As we follow Jesus in the relational progression, this necessitates being involved in the redemptive process. Redemption is the Father's deep desire vulnerably enacted by his Son "to reconcile to himself all things . . . by making peace through his blood shed on the cross" (Col.1:20). To join him in this redemptive process God intimately shared his own Spirit to be with his people. The relational outcome was the raising up of his church – the transformed fellowship of transformed persons living transformed relationships with family love.

Therefore, in the practice of discipleship, the **redemptive outcome** for God's people and his church precludes taking liberties with participation in any form of evil and to operationalize a strong position against sin and evil. The **redemptive conclusion** for us necessitates taking liberty in being agents of redemption and reconciliation, incarnating family love, paying whatever necessary costs to bring it to others and, thus, living out in ongoing relational trust *who* and *what we together are* in Jesus Christ and as his Father's.

As discipleship integrates intimate relationship with the holy God (spirituality) with the community of intimate interdependent relationships as his holy family, discipleship is ultimately distinguished by operationalizing the practice of family love.

How the transformed church further operationalizes family love is the focus of discussion in the next two chapters.

Consider

Contemplate being his very own and being his family, along with family love, and then making substitutes for this and settling for less. What does your theology define and your practice distinguish?

12

The Church as Equalizer: Equalizer Within Itself

“My house will be . . . for all nations.”

Mark 11:17

The redemptive process for God’s people is ongoing – in its joyful experience, as a challenging privilege and with its rigorous relational work. In further defining this process the functional meaning of discipleship is made complete. In its practice his followers participate in advancing the full witness of Christ and the wholeness of his purpose.

His mission and commission are the *mutually shared* divine vocation for each of his followers – without exception, whatever their background, abilities or gender. This purpose became not something the early church merely would do or engage in. It became the substantive expression and qualitative extension of their life together: *what* it is, *whom* it’s about, and *why* it is so. Unlike today, mission was not compartmentalized from their intimate fellowship as just another aspect of their total church program. Furthermore, unlike the conventional Christian mind-set today, mission was not an option or an avocation. As their mutually shared vocation (in life purpose, lifestyle and life experience), it was also not a practice primarily for the more adequate, mature or trained disciples. In other words, distinctions like the clergy-laity division were nonexistent.

A mutually shared church operation may sound good in theory but it is not the kind of ideal many churches (mainline denominational or free) would actually practice. Even the magisterial Reformers did not subject their ecclesiology to the priesthood of all believers. This issue, however, is not whether the practice of the church should be left to anybody, but whether it can be the practice of *everybody*, that is, the *whole*. It continues to elude the grasp of conventional Christian wisdom how the church can operationally function in *unity* (whether according to the Nicene Creed or organization principles) with the participation of all its existing diversity, and how the church can operationally function with *efficiency* along with the range of differences among its members. How we approach unity and what priority we give to efficiency will determine our understanding of the practice of the transformed church as transformed individuals living together in transformed relationships. More importantly, from what framework we perceive of diversity and what meaning we give to differences will indicate the extent to which we are engaging the redemptive process.

Its Foundation

Paul describes the process of building the church as full members of God’s household as his new kinship family in which God intimately lives by his Spirit (Eph.2:19-22). God’s household is built on the foundation of the incarnation of Jesus: his

person, his words, his redemptive relational work. Yet, Paul also includes the apostles and prophets as part of the foundation (v.20). Jesus is also defined as the apostle and prophet (Acts 3:22; Heb.3:1). Certainly, the first church was established by the twelve core apostles, with the addition of Paul and an expanding corps of apostolic witnesses (Eph.4:11). Their faithfulness to the person, words and works of Jesus demonstrated true apostolic character.

What is significant for building God's household is not the positional order of those apostles, nor their *charisma* (gift). I suggest that it wasn't their role but the function they represented which is the vital sign of life for the church. Paul adds vital sign of the function of the prophets as foundational for the church's life. In function, the transformed church Paul defines is both *apostolic* and *prophetic*. We need to revisit these two foundational functions.

As the ultimate apostle and prophet, Jesus' person, words and redemptive relational work established the church for his disciples to follow. The term apostle (Gk. *apostolos*) means one who is sent as an authorized representative, commissioned agent, delegate, emissary to represent another. The Father sent his Son into the world to represent him. Likewise, Jesus sends his followers into the world to represent him and the Father. The church assumes its apostolic function by going forth to represent them. Yet, we have to grasp the type of commissioned agent that serves the authentic apostolic function. As agents of (as well as in) the redemptive process, this goes beyond the traditional perceptions of evangelism.

In representing his Father, Jesus vulnerably engaged us in the relational progression which took us to the Father as his very own in his family. By enacting this function Jesus also served the prophetic function. This function is not about a reference to time (and predicting the future); rather, a prophet (Gk. *prophetes*) is one who speaks openly before anyone about God's desires. This is what Jesus fulfilled – the apostolic and prophetic functions. In other words, Jesus functioned both to save us from the old life order as well as to save us to the new life order. These NT functions must be understood together as foundational for the practice of church.

To be able to function as a prophet is not about the ability to do something. It is a function of relationship with God and implies that the quality characterizing a prophet is intimate communion with God for such divine communication of his desires to be received. Yet, this intimate communion is not characteristic of relationship between servant and master, nor is it merely the sharing between friends. Such intimate relationship is only between the Father and his Son, between the Father and his daughters and sons – that is, the function of family relationships. It is the ongoing practice of intimate relationship with him as our Father and intimate interdependent relationships with each other as sisters and brothers in his new kinship family which openly expresses best before anyone else and beyond anything else about God's desires for his creation, humanity and all history.

Nothing visibly incarnates the prophetic message and the proclamation of the good news revealing God's desires – which the Father shared through the vulnerable incarnation of his Son in the relational progression – than the transformed church functioning in family love. On this apostolic and prophetic foundation the church builds his household, in which he intimately lives with all his adopted children (Eph.2:22).

Its Functional Basis

Paul began this passage on building the church by identifying those who constitute it as full members of God's household, in contrast to outsiders, visitors, peripheral and measured participants who do not have a sense of belonging – rendered “aliens” in NIV (2:19, Gk. *paroikos*, a temporary dweller not having a settled home in the place where one currently participates, though not to be confused with the same word Peter used to define God's people as sojourners, 1 Pet.2:11). Many churches are made up of such “dwellers” who don't experience *belonging*. Part of this has to do with how churches approach unity and another part involves the priority given to efficiency. There is a fundamental difference between a quantitative and a qualitative process for how churches function.

Contrary to a traditional evangelism paradigm (and outreach effort or membership drive), the process of family love not only reaches out to others and takes them in as the Father's very own. It also nurtures, builds up and establishes each person: (1) in the reciprocal relational responsibilities of being his and his family, and (2) in the mutually shared vocation to represent him and to build his family for *all* to experience (as Jesus said). This constitutes the process of making disciples.

This prompts two questions for churches to address. One is, how does a church become transformed? The second is related, what does it mean for a church to practice transformed relationships? It starts with transformed persons, which is where Paul began the second chapter leading to the above passage and subsequent passages involving the church and its relationships.

The truth of Jesus' person, words and redemptive relational work clearly demonstrate that he traversed the natural inequality between the holy, eternal God and all humans. The importance of this inequality is necessary to grasp for both our theology and our practice. Despite God's obvious position of superiority and power, Jesus didn't come down to our level to condemn us, though we are indeed *less* (whether quantitative or qualitative), nor did he expand the ontological difference between us and God. Jesus came to redeem us from the barriers and difference separating us and to reconcile us with God in a new relationship no longer constrained by the character of a system of inequality. That is to say, though God always loves downward (to our stratum), the inequality between God and us does not determine the character of our relationship with him. As Jesus vulnerably demonstrated in the incarnation, even though the basic and inherent inequality between God and us can never be equalized, the essential function of our relationship together is: intimately *heart to heart*, effectively united as the Father is with the Son, experientially loved by the Father as he loves the Son. What invariably is the relational consequence in any system of inequality – that is, relational separation or distance – now becomes transformed to the relational outcome of the new order characterized by relational closeness or intimacy. God does not define us by the prevailing criteria of inequality, nor does he do relationship with us by the process of inequality. Given the absolute inequality involved here, this starts to inform us about what it means to practice transformed relationships in a context of diversity and differences.

The intimate knowledge of God and his grace as the ultimate benefactor were

incarnated by Jesus in the relational progression before he went to the cross. This is why it is important to grasp (*theaomai*, to view attentively to perceive correctly, as John said, Jn.1:14) Jesus' person, words and relational work between the manger and the cross. But the redemptive process necessary for us to be the Father's as a relational reality begins at the cross. It is in the function of the cross that Jesus' followers join him to begin the process of transformation as individuals and as the church. The initial experience of God's grace intimately changing us is best summarized by Paul in the first part of Ephesians 2.

Here we find God's people going from death to life, from the old order to the new order in what can be described as **"the equalization process."** Whether our life is characterized by independence, self-indulgence or conventional arrogance, or, in the implied converse, whether we are living in the hurtful effects of sin, we all need to be equalized. That is, we either need to be brought down to the level of our true humanity, or we need to be raised up to be made *whole* (cf. Ps.75:7). Whatever our condition or circumstances, we experience consequences which need redemption.

These matters needing redemption always involve our relationships, so the redemptive process must address relational consequences. It is inevitable in human relations that comparisons are made. When comparisons come from a reductionist mind-set, quantitative distinctions are generated with some subjective value attached such as good or bad, better or less. Obviously, this process is never well-intentioned or neutral but is always used to gain an advantage in relationships. When the process is formalized (be it with a family, friends, a society or nations), a system of inequality develops stratifying persons. In such a system a person or group is unnaturally subordinated by others. This subordination is unnatural because it is an inequality between persons who are basically and inherently equal – as all members of humanity are.

All such relational systems stratifying persons are a result of some variation of power relations – ranging from the misuse of authority to the use of force. Power relations is the outcome of sin and evil ever since Adam put down Eve for influencing him to disobey God. In order to have an upper hand in a relationship some form of condemnation (or judgment) is imposed on the "subordinate" either to initially justify the inequality or to maintain the inequality. Unlike God who judges us with the critique of hope for the purpose of reconciliation, humans use condemnation as a rationale to exert authority, power over others to separate or distance relationships. This vertical ordering of relationships makes the dominant feel superior, better and secure while the subordinate feel inferior, bad or condemned. Both need to be redeemed and equalized.

When joining Christ for the process of our redemption is a relational reality, two vital changes in our relationships are established and set into motion. First, having been justified before God, we have reconciliation with the Father as his very own in his family. Secondly, there is an equalization of all other relationships, without false distinctions so that "there is neither Jew nor Greek [race, ethnicity], slave nor free [class], male nor female [gender]" (Gal.3:28). These distinctions, plus many others including clergy-laity, cause divisions which fragment the *whole* of "you are all one in Christ." The relational outcome of Christ's relational progression is that no person is secondary or less but only full members of his family.

The relational transformation of this equalization became an established reality

when Christ destroyed the barriers to the intimate relationships of his new family, both the horizontal barriers on keeping relational distance and the vertical barriers of division separating relationships (Eph.2:14). Yet, the fact of this new condition can remain static in church doctrine, which is certainly insufficient to fulfill God's purpose (as the church in Ephesus later learned, Rev.2:4). What must also be set into motion here is the dynamic process of relationships; this process necessitates operationalizing the ongoing relational work of eliminating separation and distance in our relationships along with building greater trust, intimacy, wholeness and well-being as his family. Equalization, then, becomes the clear qualitative functional indicator that we are redeemed from the *old* ways, as well as the qualitative relational indicator that our practices are transformed to the *new* life order (cf. Paul's concern in Gal.4:9 and Col.2:20). **Transformed relationships are not only intimate relationships but equalized relationships.** And inequality separates, distances, fragments.

Whether we have been humbled, lifted up, or both, we are reconciled to God through Christ's redemptive relational work. In being transformed by Christ's resurrection through the relational work of his Spirit, we are equalized with one another before the Father in his family. It is with the intimate experience of God's grace in the ongoing relational process as his family that his followers corporately are able to witness (Gk. *martyreo*, one who bears testimony, not a spectator) to being his in their apostolic and prophetic functions. Their mission was based on having first-hand experience in this equalization process. As the function of transformed persons practicing transformed relationships, the purpose of the transformed church has to be its relational experience first before it becomes its mission, before it can fulfill its purpose to reveal the Father and extend his family to the world.

A church's witness and purpose is the substantive expression and qualitative extension of its shared life together: what it is, whom it's about, and why it is so. Grasping this basis for the mission of the transformed church is indispensable for our understanding of the nature and scope of church function in the new life order.

Redeemed to Equalize

How God in Christ vulnerably involved himself with us for intimate relationship provides us with the relational experience to operationalize the practice Jesus required in our relationships with others. His family love clearly reconciles us to his Father and equalizes us in his own family; the experience of his love is the basis to operationalize our practice to love each other (Jn.15:12). Throughout his incarnation, Jesus was engaged in relational work to restore equitable human relationships and reconciliation. In the relational connections he made in his earthly relationships, persons did not feel condemned, distant or less though they were different. We are experiential witnesses of how God seeks to reconcile the diversity of persons to himself in order that all persons and relationships have the opportunity to be restored to the Father's desires and purpose.

Equalizing is another matter that is a blessing or a threat. It's a threat for those who depend on what they do, accomplish and have, in order to establish themselves. It's a blessing, however, for those who need grace. Since Jesus equalized by extending the

relationship of his Father to us, what distinguishes his followers, his church, his family is to equalize by extending this relationship of family love also.

Equalization and a reductionist framework are irreconcilable. When soteriology is truncated, our practice becomes operationalized by a reductionist mind-set of what Christ saved us from. To operate from the full soteriology includes embracing, living and experiencing what Christ saved us to in the relational progression. This necessitates a whole Christology which involves before the cross as much as from the cross.

Paul said there are no “foreigners” and “aliens” in the church (Eph.2:19). Why? Does this mean all diversity and differences have been eliminated? Yes and no – yes in terms of conventional function and no in terms of transformed relationships. This will be expanded later, but for now it is important to understand that no “foreigners” and “aliens” exist in God’s family because they have been taken in (not the same as assimilated), accepted (not the same as pluralism) and equalized (not the same as reformed) as full members of his family, without distinctions.

This equalizing process was initiated by Jesus before the cross. One interaction he had demonstrates various aspects of this process. A Canaanite woman boldly intruded on Jesus for help to free her daughter from a demon (Mt.15:21-28). Canaanites were the most morally despised people by Israelites in the OT. As a pagan woman who was assimilated into Greek culture (cf. Mk.7:36), she was not a likely candidate to receive God’s redemptive response. Jesus indicated as much by his response about the primacy of a family’s children over dogs. Dogs were considered scavengers in the Jewish community, yet in Greek custom at times dogs were pets. The woman was not a scavenger looking for some handout (not that Jesus was implying such), though she accepts the analogy of the children’s priority to eat before pets. Nevertheless, she didn’t seem to define herself in those quantitative terms but she continues to impose herself on Jesus. This suggests that on the relational level she boldly approached him to receive in effect as an equal to others in his family (“lost sheep of Israel,” v.24).

The fact that she boldly presented herself as one who could receive the same blessings from God as Jews effectively placed her on equal terms with them. By vulnerably presenting her person (his disciples wanted to reject her) without even knowing yet that she could be equalized by Christ, she certainly must have amazed Jesus and demonstrated the quality (not necessarily quantity) of her faith. Despite being different she didn’t define herself by how others did, nor did he see and define her as *less* in her difference – because *Jesus is the equalizer*.

This opportunity to experience the importance of the *whole person* (without reduction) and the primacy of intimate relationships (without substitute) as God designed, desires and covenants is the apostolic and prophetic function of his very own, the transformed church. This function as agents of redemption and reconciliation is operationalized by family love. Just as Jesus, in the context of the world where the consequences of sin and evil produce distant relationships and systems of unnatural inequality, the church lives and functions to be **the equalizer** – a relational work both within the church as well as in the world.

Returning to Paul, it was inconceivable to him that the church could function apart from equalization (though some of his contextual prescriptions seem to confuse this). This was the very *truth of the gospel* over which he confronted Peter in order to

firmly establish the equalization of Gentiles in the church (Gal.2:14). Furthermore, this equalization was *the mystery of Christ* personally revealed to Paul for the apostolic and prophetic functions of constituting the church (Eph.3:4-6), which he was “to make plain” (Gk. *photizo*, illuminate, make us understand) for its “administration” (Gk. *oikonomos*, management of God’s household, 3:9). To be authentically redeemed resulted in a process of reconciliation to be one with God as in the Trinity and thus also in his people. The distinctions coming from inequality cause division which fragments this unity; equalization is a necessary function from redemption for the church to be one as family (Paul’s thesis in Galatians, Ephesians and Corinthians).

In Banks’ study about the early house churches and Paul’s formulation of community, he concludes: “for Paul equality was subservient to the more fundamental idea of unity. For this reason the idea of equality itself could never become a leading motif in his thought.”¹ Yet, despite his positive observations of the principle of equality in Paul’s formulation of community, Banks does not adequately perceive that equalization is inherent to authentic unity, not the structural unity of the institutional church but the functional and relational unity of the transformed church.

Perhaps the confusion comes from the perception of equality as not only the basis for all church members to assume personal responsibility for the operation of the church but also as a rationale for individualism. This is certainly an issue. For example, while the priesthood of believers equalizes all of God’s people, evangelicalism has used this (intentionally or inadvertently) to foster individualism. This happens when intimate relationship with God (spirituality) is not integrated into the relational progression, which necessitates taking one’s personal place in the reciprocal relational responsibilities of his family. Paul never separates the individual from the function of the whole. In addition, his metaphors for the church and the processes he describes for its function do not suffer from such a quantitative perceptual framework. He doesn’t talk about equality in quantitative terms of what the members do (though it can be possible) or what they have (though it may at times). Paul defines equality in qualitative terms of *what* the members (individually and corporately) *are* in relation to God (Eph.2) and *who* they *are* in relation to each other (Gal.3). Equalization doesn’t reduce living to the notions of the individual, but it brings us to the depths of the true heart of the person and opens the way for our hearts to come together, first with God then with each other. This process establishes the new redemptive order in Christ where equality prevails (cf. 1 Cor.11:11-12) and divisive distinctions like race/ethnicity, class, gender are transcended. Reductionist alternatives (even for unity or efficiency) cannot substitute for the relational qualitative difference Jesus incarnated.

Equality is the qualitative function of transformed relationships and is fundamental to how God is involved with us and how he wants his very own to be involved in their relationships and with others. The unity or oneness of the church Paul describes is the relational outcome of this intimate reciprocal involvement of equalized relationships which thus form the qualitative interdependent bonds of his family characteristic of the Trinity. There was no tension for Paul between equality and unity. The process of equalization is the relational opposite of individualism; and equalizing

1. Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, rev. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 138.

functions always in direct conflict with any form of *anomia* (basically doing whatever one chooses for which some use Christian freedom as a rationale – an issue Paul countered in 1 Cor.), or with any other reductionist alternative.

Evangelicalism in the free church tradition has been justifiably criticized for its low priority of church unity, or even ignoring it, thus inadvertently fostering individualism. While this remains an issue, we are also faced on the other end with the issue involving from what framework unity is perceived. For example, when the Nicene Creed (“one, holy, catholic, apostolic church”) provides the standard by which to measure the validity of our present notions of church, we cannot use quantitative indicators to define “one,” or even “holy.” Doing so tends to aggravate false distinctions and often reinforces in principle prevailing perceptions of “differences as *less*.” This makes the formulation of unity unable to relationally absorb differences or to functionally account for diversity; likewise, holy becomes more quantitatively rigid and less qualitatively substantive. The relational consequences are that we have institutions which have little relational significance because they make few deep relational connections, as well as emphasize ritual practices which distance persons from their heart because the approach is from the outer-in. Of course, free churches are equally susceptible to these reductionist practices, as evidenced with individualism. These remain issues from which we need to be redeemed.

For Paul, to be redeemed is to be equalized (Eph.2:12-13) – not merely as an individual but as the Father’s very own family in which he intimately lives by his Spirit (2:16-18). In this redemptive process Christ indeed was *the* equalizer; and the church which follows him in the relational progression with the relational work of his Spirit also lives and functions with him as the equalizer. This is the functional operation of family love which the Father initiated and now extends in his very own.

The Work of Equalization

We should not have any romanticized illusions about equalizing. The process is rigorous. Whether within the church or in the world the process of equalization is a rigorous work. When we contemplate intently on the holy, eternal God and truly grasp what the Father did in his Son and continues to do in his Spirit for its completion, we can understand that this equalization process is rigorous relational work. All that the Godhead engages goes into destroying the barriers between us in order to bring us together as one. And Jesus’ person, words and relational work in particular provide us with the way to equalize.

As noted earlier, reconciliation is not mere peaceful harmony. We cannot fully come together as one in deep, meaningful relationships unless they are established at the level of our hearts. We have to reexamine the ministry of reconciliation God gave us (2 Cor.5:18) and how we practice it within the gathering of the church. We will expand this discussion to extending it to the world in the next chapter.

The Greek term for **reconciliation** (*katallege*) denotes: to change from one condition to another by taking away the root cause of a broken (or distant) relationship and, thus, leaving no barriers to restoring communion. This restoring to communion is

hearts coming together; in other words, this is intimacy. *Intimacy is the relational process which underlies all reconciliation.* Clearly then, the ministry of reconciliation involves specifically the building of intimacy. This is what becomes such a vital and imperative work (even struggle) for all his followers. This building of intimacy substantively establishes the functional life and practice of the transformed church – be it in its communion with God, in its shared life together, or even in its purpose of reconciliation in the world.

The bulk of this practice must (*dei*) begin within the church itself and the relationships among its members. Eliminating distance in relationships and establishing closeness with one another doesn't happen automatically or mysteriously, nor even necessarily over time. It takes intentional work and *relational work* we are more than likely not used to engaging in. Some would find it easier, for example, to conjugate biblical Greek verbs than to conjugate in deeper church relations. Many persons simply would rather not participate in much of the beginning stages of this process of intimacy, particularly with the adjustment to diversity and the embracing of differences in the church which requires us to come out of our comfort zones and change. Yet, such transformation is fundamental to Jesus' relational progression and what he saved us to. And yet transformed relationships necessitate practicing intimate and equalized relationships in which God's design and purpose for life begin to be restored and the church's purpose fulfilled.

How the church functions within itself must be distinguished by this change and cannot mirror the surrounding context. Despite all the human differences catalogued under humanity, pluralism is not the dominant structure ordering human life. In contrast to the horizontal structure of pluralism (where differences are accepted), the vertical structure imposed on human differences is what dominates. Divisions in human relations, for example, caused by human differences are not merely horizontal partitions. Implied in most divisions is vertical structuring. That is, we see human differences in a comparative manner on a human totem pole. This is not just human tendency but the dominant way of human life.

Since God intervened in the human condition, the action he initiated by his grace constitutes the church in this process. Jesus led the way to equalize in order to change this old order; the whole nature of the cross reflects this process of equalization. Indeed, the whole week of Jesus' passion demonstrates this equalization.

Holy Week begins with his entry into Jerusalem without the usual pomp accorded royalty; Jesus wasn't separated or distant from the people, nor was he above them in his sovereignty. In contrast, Jesus' triumphant entry of humility set the tone for the week and the equalizing nature of the whole of Christ's relational work, purpose and his church to follow. After the King of kings entered Jerusalem on Sunday at the common people's level, on Monday Jesus cleansed the temple of its system of inequality and opened God's house for all people. When he washed his disciples' feet on Thursday, he demonstrated a new relational order in which they must both not consider themselves more important than others but must also humbly serve others – a relational involvement which means to be willing to subordinate one's life for another. Of course, the ultimate demonstration of this love came on Friday.

We should also not overlook Wednesday of this week, even though the gospel

accounts do not record any events on this day. The absence of activity strongly suggests that Jesus separated himself in the solitude of prayer. For him the need to do so was obvious and resumed on Thursday in the garden of Gethsemane. For us, the solitude of prayer is a place of equalization. In this place away from everything else in daily life, we each are equalized – equalized before God and with our *self*. With no one else to be compared to we have no importance or prominence in life (no work or role to define self) other than the fact that we (in my person) *are* – nothing more and nothing less.

This is the week the world and all history became equalized, when the *old* died and the *new* was raised up, where God’s creation can be restored to our true purpose. The redemptive outcome of all this is that **grace does not allow us our distinctions and takes away differences** (Gal.6:15; 5:6). Grace, therefore, changes our perception of ourselves, of others and also of God.

Our perception of *differences* is an important process in following Christ: how we perceive our own personal differences and self-evaluate, how we “see” others in comparison and make judgment, how we look at God and, therefore, treat him. Our perception of these differences exerts controlling influence on our relationships. So, we need to deal again with the question about cultural perceptual framework: what determines how we, as Christians, perceive things? More specifically for this chapter, how do we “see” each other?

Do we see human differences, for example, according to prevailing cultures and value systems? Or, do we see others according to God’s grace and his view of us? As you recall from our previous discussion, the culture influencing our lives determines what we should pay attention to and what we should ignore. This process obviously affects our relationships and *how* we relate to others. Stereotypes, for example, certainly either dominate, control or strongly influence how we relate to a particular human difference. As a preface to the ministry of reconciliation, Paul redefines the framework for this work by saying “from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view” (2 Cor.5:16). “Regard” (Gk. *oida*, recognize) and “worldly point of view” (Gk. *sarx*, flesh) can be rendered respectively “perceive” and “reductionist perspective” – that is, perceptions from a reductionist framework. Changing to the new person in Christ necessitates “*no longer perceiving others with the quantitative distinctions of a prevailing reductionist framework.*” This change becomes a necessity to engage the ministry of reconciliation.

We all live in a context that in daily function we limit to what becomes essentially “*our little world.*” Whether that world comes from family, neighborhood, school, work, a segment of society (e.g., the media or entertainment world) or a combination of these, we remain in this world we construct of ideas and beliefs. Rarely, do we go beyond “our world” to see what’s out there and, more importantly, to understand how what else out there is connected to “our world.” That’s because this world or “box” we live in, this reality constructed from cultural stuff, tends to define things as essentially the sum total of the way life is. Anything beyond this is always interpreted through this “box.” Culture exerts this extensive influence on our lives.

Sociology helps us to understand the relationships involved in all this. Yet, useful as it is, sociology is limited in giving us understanding of the relations that make up *life* – particularly its qualitative aspects.

The understanding from sociology that “each of us is a part of something bigger

than *self*” can be expanded and deepened. The “box” we live in is the clear result of cultural stuff derived from our social interactions. While the “box” of a world expands us beyond our own *self*, it also limits us to that specific cultural stuff. An even deeper context, however, in which all humans find their *self* is **the created context of interpersonal relationships** (*the relational context*).

God created Adam initially without this human *relational context*. Revealing that this is not the way created human life was meant to be (Genesis 2:18), God created Eve to complete the interpersonal relational nature of human life (which implied also the nature of our life with God). Into this deeper context of interpersonal relationships we all were created and for this purpose our lives are designed. This is the deeper and expanded world which comes from biblical culture. From it we form perceptions of the importance of every person and the primacy of interpersonal relationships – perceptions based on the revelations and truths from the author, creator and sovereign Lord God of all life. Therefore, despite being in different contexts (for example, the various cultural contexts in which we live) we all are a part of and share in this common *relational context*.

On the human side, essentially every human activity since Adam and Eve’s disobedience has been to diminish, distort or deny the primacy of relationships. On God’s side, everything he has done is to restore relationships to his original design and purpose. In the process of redemption, Christ takes us first down and inward to the core (heart) of our being, exposes what that core is and what is necessary for new life. At the point of our redemption emerges a resurrection of the core of our being (new creation, new heart) which reconciles us to God. This whole process works totally in the context of interpersonal relationships in order to restore our relationships to God’s design and purpose.

In looking at the bigger picture, we could conceive of this resurrection as an explosion that thrusts the core of our new being out beyond “our little world” into the far corners of the “universe” of life – life as it was created, then broken, yet as it is still meant to be and can be through the redemptive and reconciling work of Christ. The thrust out beyond “our little world” is the equalizing process of the ministry of reconciliation, the relational extension of God’s family love.

This thrust out, however, involves change – major changes both individually and corporately. These changes are necessary if, in actual practice, the purpose of the church engages the relational process of family love in which persons who are *different* will be embraced into God’s family. The interpersonal relationships involved in this process and the dynamics needed to enlarge “our little world,” to extend beyond our “box” – that is effectively transforming “our world” in the church – all help us to understand the rigorous relational work necessary to constitute the diversity (multicultural nature) of Christ’s church and the church’s function as the precursor or presence of the kingdom of God.

Building Infrastructure

The work of church growth and development must be examined more deeply. In many of its functional aspects, the objectives involved in church planting, church

building and growth tend to get reduced to quantitative goals in actual practice. Unlike most of how modern society operates today, the transformed church is not “goal oriented” – *goal* as defined primarily to production and the activity (labor) connected to it. The church’s purpose is not the outgrowth of such goals nor are goals the object of its mission involvement.

This suggests that our efforts in church growth need to undergo a paradigm shift. Church growth needs to concentrate on building **the infrastructure of the church** (transformed persons practicing transformed relationships with family love) rather than erecting the superstructure – increased quantities and the buildings to accommodate them.

Understanding the nature of Jesus’ purpose throughout the incarnation needs to determine the working priorities for church practice. By his own behavior in many of what turned into intimate interactions – many of which were unplanned, untimely and even disruptive to his original plans – he demonstrated how to function in the process of the new life order. This often caused consternation for the disciples due to their working priorities, particularly from their perceptions of different people. Nothing was more important to Jesus than *persons* and *relationships*.

His working priorities were not about goals to fulfill in a divine mission, because his whole purpose was a function of relationship: its origin, its initiation, its enactment, its fulfillment, its outcome. Grace and the incarnation were relational acts. The process and outcome of redemption and transformation are relational functions. The church as an organic body, as the family of God, as the fellowship of believers is a direct function of relationships. The whole Christian life is a relationship. Reconciliation and problems of human inequalities are fundamental relationship issues. The basic theme of history is a relationship matter. Jesus did not function outside of this relational context and process.

Likewise, the nature of the purpose for the transformed church must find its sum and substance in relationships – the very nature of God as intimately relational. The structure and process of the new order are based on this priority of relationships. Its mission is an extension and expression of this qualitative substance. When authentically practiced, *the transformed church’s purpose deals with relationships: their alienation, their healing, their reconciliation, their restoration*. This builds the infrastructure for the *whole* of God’s people to fulfill its purpose. This purpose is fulfilled as the transformed church ongoingly engages the practice of family love and becomes equalized in the multicultural church.

If the church is to be a household for “all nations” as Jesus defined, churches cannot be selective about the specific persons whom it involves or to whom it reaches out. The church must not bypass some persons in order to include specific other persons. In other words, the practical operation of a gathering of God’s people must not discriminate between persons, no matter how efficacious it may appear in the process of church growth, development and mission.

“*All nations*” is an inclusive approach and suggests no discretionary models or expedient strategies to fulfill God’s desires as revealed by Christ and later revealed to Peter and Paul (cf. Acts 15:8,9). More importantly, God’s family is inclusive and cannot be the transformed church without the explicit and ongoing effort to be inclusive (read all of Peter’s argument before the Jerusalem council in Acts 15). In its practice of family love the church takes in “*all nations*,” overlooking none, neglecting no one, and

especially avoiding no persons. God's people cannot legitimate any other approach to God's desires – with even language only a conditional exception for ethnic churches.

As beneficiaries of God's equalizing actions, we can only extend his favor to others as agents of redemption and reconciliation by humbly relating to all his creation on a horizontal plane (not vertical), reaching out to "*all nations*" without discrimination and working to equalize every person just as we've been equalized. In this total process the church naturally and by necessity becomes the multicultural church. So, we can see that the *church's purpose as equalizer* needs to take place both within the church and out in the world.

This is "the truth of the gospel" invalidating discrimination in the church and "the mystery of Christ" precluding stratification in God's family. These are not codes from biblical culture but its revealed qualitative framework shaping not only our perceptions but requiring our obedience in the practice of the church.

Functionally, this means, for example, any homogeneous model of church growth is a critical error in building the body of Christ. Even with the presence of some aspect of infrastructure, this process becomes only a simulation or substitute for the qualitative substance and difference of God. Relational simulation or substitution is not the infrastructure for the transformed church. The implicit quantitative nature of any homogeneous church growth approach not only reduces the quality of disciples making up the church, but it also reinforces (intentionally or unintentionally) the exclusionary practices characteristic of a system of inequality. As Paul clearly defined the truth for biblical culture in application to exactly this issue (Eph.2:11-22), Christ wiped out the relational barriers separating and stratifying us and made us all **one** – that is, "one new *anthropos*" (Gk. human being without respect to gender, and thus to any other distinction, v.15) with all the human differences structurally and relationally into one new family. No more "homogeneous models," no more "separate but equal" models, no more "deficit models."

Knowing Our Context

While being involved with or engaging "all nations," the church must be extremely cautious not to use a "deficit model" for any human differences. The "deficit model" is the treatment, however subtle, of others who are different as being essentially *less*. Historically, in its extreme forms this was perpetrated by colonialism and manifest destiny while its more common form is displayed (even today) by paternalism. This stigma is even attached to the needy and the disadvantaged. Whatever the difference, they are perceived as less because ostensibly they don't measure up to our standards. Yet, these standards themselves, not only their application, raise the question: are these standards based on prevailing cultures, or biblical culture? Of course, this is directly related to what determines our perceptions.

Unless you are a "biblical reductionist" who narrowly interprets the Bible to a list of codes or creeds practiced by a separatist or elitist approach, you probably have struggled with some ambiguity or ambivalence about your belief system. Part of this struggle can be purely over theological issues. Yet, I suggest that the dominant part of our

struggle is a contextual issue. That is, this mainly involves not the effort to contextualize the gospel for others but the struggle to translate our beliefs into the contexts of our everyday living such that it makes a difference, is satisfying and even enjoyable. The tendency for most seems to be: mainly an intellectual difference; some possible satisfaction from merely some activity involving those beliefs, doing something indirectly related to them or satisfaction from elsewhere; and most enjoyment comes from another unrelated source, though at times God is thanked for it.

When our faith is not contextualized comprehensively into the full scope of our daily life, we are susceptible to having our faith contextualized by those influences in our daily living which do make more of a difference, have a deeper satisfaction and bring enjoyment. Difference, satisfaction and enjoyment are issues directly involving the whole person (with the heart) and significant relationships (with intimacy). While secular sources of influence don't necessarily address these two basic areas any more than many churches, they can frequently better simulate or substitute for them with more convincing reductionist alternatives. These competing sources of influence are not only problematic for the church, but they serve as critiques exposing a church's lack to establish the ultimate context for the whole person and intimate relationships, as well as the relational process for growth which qualitatively makes a difference, results in satisfaction and even brings enjoyment.

Despite all the current activity taking place about contextualization (and the effort to place the gospel into a different context), we need to understand that the gospel of Jesus Christ itself creates a context of its own in the formation of the church. Unless this context is functionally developed in a church's practice, the transformed church and the truth of the gospel have not been distinguished. If this lack is the condition from which other contextualization takes place, the only indicators available to distinguish the church or the gospel from the surrounding context are quantitative indicators, such as the representation (not meaning and substance) of doctrine, creeds and ritual practices, not to mention buildings. Such indicators alone become barriers and preclude meaningful connection with others – no matter how much they are contextualized to the culture of others.

The authentic context of the transformed church (and thus the truth of the gospel) is the outcome of the relational work of redemption and reconciliation by Christ. "All nations" is not a goal for missions or a church policy but this relational reality functioning with family love. In its authentic practice this context not only generates the ministry of reconciliation but it also generates a distinct **"culture of reconciliation"** clearly defined by biblical culture. This culture is about restoring *wholeness* to the person and to all relationships according to God's design and purpose.

The transformed church creates a context which functionally, on the one hand, equalizes differences while, on the other, affirms differences which are both important and necessary for the body of Christ, and perhaps even of secondary import for the diverse family of God's people. The function of biblical culture defines from the qualitative framework of God what differences mean, what differences are significant, which ones are not necessary or are unacceptable. Prevailing cultures should not define this for the church. We need to understand specifically from what context, for example, our standards come and our perceptions are determined.

Knowing the context which informs our approach to church unity and which determines the priority we give to efficiency in its operation becomes vital for the practice of any church. In the truth of the gospel, the transformed church context precludes homogeneous models, deficit models and any other success models which generate growth primarily in quantitative terms. Building the transformed church and establishing God's family (or even kingdom) involves the process of making, nurturing and developing disciples in the *relational context* of biblical culture and in the *relational process* of the culture of reconciliation. In other words, it is the reconciliation of all God's creation, all nations, to his purpose: transformed persons living in transformed relationships together in his new kinship family. All the created differences, contextual differences and the gifted (from God) differences, as well as the consequential differences we have to live with until total wholeness and well-being are brought to completion in heaven, all need to be reconciled to him and to each other (however difficult and inefficient) in this new context with a new culture. It is in this new context where legitimate diversity is seen (through the perceptual framework of biblical culture), affirmed, experienced together, given its full and rightful place in God's household and intimately enjoyed. This is fundamental to the covenant promise of the mystery of Christ (Gal.3:6).

The authentic church of Jesus Christ is both local and universal (catholic as defined in the Nicene Creed). The integrity of this twofold character of the church must be dynamic by nature and not static where local has no functional meaning. That necessitates a biblically orthodox (monocultural) ideological core for our belief system as "one new *anthropos*"; but this core also includes a functional multicultural framework in secondary areas (defined by biblical culture) for the operation (not the identity) of the church in its unique local settings. The church universal transcends surrounding cultures with its own monoculture while the church local accounts for the diversity of persons and peoples and aspects of their culture within the limits of this framework for secondary matter. Biblical culture maintains the unity (one) and universal (catholic) attributes of the Nicene Creed and the traditional characteristics of the church, but it does so with a dynamic integrity, not a static integrity of institutionalism. In doing so, biblical culture also accounts for the diversity of the multicultural nature of the church as well as the practice of the local apostolic church of the NT Both the integrity of the universal and the local church must be maintained.

When biblical culture does not provide the context for our faith and the church, they become contextualized by another source, a reductionist source. Then the integrity of our practice needs to be critiqued by the truth of the gospel, just as Paul did with Peter. Yet, this issue is less about doctrine and mostly about relational practice – how we present our self, the meaning and substance of our communication and the level of relationships we engage. Peter was guilty of hypocrisy (role-playing, playacting) in these areas of practice because sources other than biblical culture contextually influenced his behavior. The relational consequence, of course, was relational barriers, discrimination and inequality within the church.

Authentic discipleship integrates personal spirituality into the corporate relational context and process of the transformed church, the integrity of which is defined by biblical culture alone. This is the purpose of followers of Christ. This is the nature and the

process of his commission for his disciples. In a new shared life together this purpose is fulfilled in the multicultural church.

It is important for churches to be multicultural not just because of the surrounding situation but because of the truth of biblical culture. Additionally, this framework from biblical culture not only provides deeper understanding to issues of contextualization, but it also relationally ties together the micro-level (individual and relationships) and the macro-level (creation, humankind, course of history, kingdom of God) issues in the same framework and process of God's eschatological plan. The transformed church operationalizes this by connecting the micro and macro variables into the *whole* of the Father's purpose – a process fulfilled primarily through the practice of family love. This is the relational meaning of the gospel and the purpose of the church as equalizer.

Addressing Change

The growing contexts and intrusive realities of human migration (voluntary and involuntary) in recent decades have magnified the need in human relations, both local and global, for redemption and reconciliation. Compounded by globalization, this need exists today more so than probably any other period in human history. This makes the multicultural nature of the church that much more urgently necessary in order to witness to the world without ambiguity or shallowness of its hope and means for redemption and reconciliation.

The human condition, the multicultural church and the mission which connects them are all relationship functions. Into this *relational context* of biblical culture we need to bury “our little world,” our “box,” our perceptions, our “established ways of doing things.” This may include any popular perceptions of Jesus which have been contextualized by the influence of a prevailing context. When the person we follow is not the Jesus of the full incarnation also between manger and cross and the Jesus of the relational progression, we cannot adequately understand God's intimate relational nature and his grace to love downward to us and to destroy the relational barriers of inequality.

In order for disciples to follow God's lead, be relationally involved just as Jesus was and obey his commission by becoming the multicultural church, there are various tensions and conflicts which we must address individually and corporately. To face honestly the issues of mission in this *relational context* is to deal with the need for *change* – changes individually within oneself and corporately within the church. Before the church deals with changes in the world, it needs to change within itself in vital areas.

This is apparent as we discuss more specifically what it means for the church and Christ's followers to be multicultural. There are four major aspects involved in becoming the multicultural church: **structural and contextual dimensions, plus individual and relational processes**. In each aspect redemptive changes are necessary – changes which overlap and interact with other aspects.

The multicultural church doesn't automatically mean the church has to be made up of different races, colors and ethnicities, like a quota system. The **first key characteristic** of the multicultural church is the **structural dimension of access**. Access can be seen as a static condition as in an “open-door policy.” From a relational perspective, access is dynamic and includes relational involvement.

In his description of the multicultural church, Paul said: “For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Eph.2:18). The term for “access” (Gk. *prosagoge*) was used for the audience granted to someone by high officials and monarchs; it comes from *prosago*, to bring near. This is not merely an open door but the opportunity to interact with someone greater. Paul goes on to define the nature of this relational involvement: “we may approach [*prosago*] God with freedom and confidence” (Eph.3:12). “Freedom” (Gk. *parresia*) involves boldness, especially to speak all that one thinks, feels, that is, with “confidence” (Gk. *pepoithesis*, trust, from *peitho*, to persuade). This trust to share one’s self openly suggests a very intimate relationship, not merely having access. Access to the Father involves this intimate relationship.

This is the kind of access Peter first thought was impossible for Gentiles, until Jesus spoke to him in that vision. As he struggled to practice this equalization, he still maintained the relational barrier preventing the Gentiles this access in actual practice. The remnants of the old order still exerted influence to constrain the gospel and the church in an alternative context. Certainly, this changed (with Paul’s help) but change did not come easily, even for Peter. Change is always difficult if it involves losing something, or at least the perception of losing something.

Power, privilege and prestige are the basic issues around which systems of inequality revolve. We see these in Acts 10: the privilege of having access to grace and life’s resources and opportunities (10:34ff); the power of the anointing of the Holy Spirit (10:44-46); the prestige (status) of being God’s children with all the rights and privileges (10:47,48). Any power, privilege and prestige are advantages many persons are reluctant to even share if the perception means less for them. Access, however, is not a quantitative resource based on merit. It is a qualitative relational process based on grace. Embracing this change extends the relational involvement and deepens it for more persons to receive, experience and enjoy.

This structural change led quite naturally to a contextual change. This contextual dimension is the **second key characteristic** of the multicultural church. As just noted, the multicultural church doesn’t necessarily always involve a multi-race/ethnic make-up, although it is improbable without it since we live in a multicultural world. But the early Jewish Christian community was a homogeneous group which denied or limited access to others who were different. They had to learn that “*all nations*” includes Gentiles, Samaritans, whomever. To include *all people* means an active involvement with all persons who are different. This necessitates a major contextual change, especially for a homogeneous group.

Yet, becoming the multicultural church cannot stop here. The transformed church context operates with a culture of reconciliation by which the vital process of its reconciliation ministry practice initiates active relational involvement with all in family love. This family love does not make distinctions of persons, nor does it give any comparative value to their differences. The process of family love simply extends relational involvement, takes in and embraces as a full part of one’s own family. This is what operationalizes the relational involvement of the multicultural nature of the transformed church. For authentic church practice there has to be significant contextual change, which defines the next characteristic. This **second key characteristic** of the church is the *process of absorbing differences into the church and, therefore, the*

willingness to change and adapt to differences, all within the framework of the biblical culture.

With this principle, the biological family among Christians also needs to be “multicultural” in the sense that it needs to absorb (i.e., increasingly accept) family differences (especially generational) and change and adapt to those differences within the biblical culture. When they do, both the family of God and the biological family become more loving.

The importance of these structural and contextual aspects to the multicultural significance of the body of Christ was first demonstrated by Jesus back at the temple cleansing. He began the process of becoming multicultural by confronting the system of inequality established by power relations. The Jewish leaders had set up this system of inequality to control the temple to the advantage of their terms; and they set it up not only on the basis of religious and cultural factors but on an economic one also (as the context well indicates). This effectively denied access and use of the temple to all peoples in need. This would be especially true for those with less power, privilege and prestige – those in the lower strata of society.

So it is just and fitting to see Jesus, immediately after cleaning out the temple, receiving those needy persons with less resources and bringing healing to their lives (Mt.21:14). His household is for all people, not built on stratification, not using unjust criteria to create inequality; it not only gave access to all but absorbed all who are different into *one*. This is to be the nature of his church – the multicultural nature of the transformed church.

Jesus’ actions were always in the *relational context*. Here, Jesus purified the temple but not only for the presence of God. His whole purpose was to relationally open access to the Father so that all his creation could be reconciled to him in intimate relationship. This is the beginning of the multicultural church. And the church today has its roots here – not just by tradition, not merely ecclesiological roots but, more importantly, because of the *relational context* in which and the *relational process* by which Christ established his body.

What churches today pattern themselves after defines the context of influence that basically determines how they will function within itself and in the world. When that influence is other than biblical culture, alternative practices such as goal orientation, success models, dominant group value system, status quo perspectives on change, individualism, among others all serve to bring similar results in our churches as in society. The underlying relational consequence is that churches emulate many of the inequalities of society. Explicitly or implicitly, directly or indirectly, intentionally or inadvertently, regardless of its form, we’ve developed some parallel systems of inequality. This suggests that churches are often more a function of society than anything else. *There is only one true basis for the church but many alternative reasons why a church exists today.* These need fundamental, redemptive changes.

The other two major aspects involved in becoming the multicultural church are processes for the individual and for our relationships. **The individual process (third key characteristic)** involves our reaction or response to differences. When the individual is faced with differences in others, there is inevitably some degree of tension for that individual, whether conscious or not. This has to do with “our little world” or the “box”

we live in. What do we do with that tension in those situations? More importantly, what do we do with those differences in that relational context? This is important to understand for how we do relationships and what level of relationship we engage, especially within the church.

Let's look at two contrasting responses in the Bible. One is from Paul. While affirming the existence of Christian freedom, Paul highlighted his own liberty by responding to others' differences simply with: "I have become all things to all. . . ." (1 Cor.9:22). This is not the chameleon action of a wishy-washy person who has no clear sense of his real identity. This is not about assimilating or masquerading. Furthermore, Paul was not demonstrating what to do with tension in those situations created by differences in others. On the contrary, he demonstrated the relational need for having cultural sensitivity of others' differences (without losing his true identity) in order to be involved with them in the *relational context* of the ministry of reconciliation (as he goes on to describe, vv.22-23). Implied in Christian liberty is being redeemed from those matters causing barriers in relationships. This also shows us that as long as we maintain the basic integrity of *what we are* in Christ defined by biblical culture, then what multicultural mode we use in secondary areas to exercise our lives or ministry is not an issue. Mode is not that important to *what we are* as long as it does not substitute, distort or diminish our identity as his.

In contrast to Paul, the second response is seen at Jesus' dinner visit with Mary and Martha (see Luke 10:38-42 and our previous discussion of this passage). Martha had tension about differences in that situation. When Jesus responded to her being worried and upset by saying ". . . only one thing is necessary," it was an important statement about the meaning of differences and our reaction to them based on our perceptual framework.

What was Martha worried or upset about? Others' differences – in this situation both Jesus' and Mary's. Martha had an established way of doing things based on the prevailing cultural norm: her role as a woman, the importance of dinner in hospitality, the conformity of others in all this. In the established ways of "her little world," Martha felt comfortable. But in her tension with differences she also demanded that Mary be like her; and she tried to make Jesus feel guilty for not practicing the prevailing norm. Since Mary was different in that situation, Martha tried to **control** the situation by changing Mary to her established ways of doing things, to be like her.

Martha's response is understandable because she was threatened by differences. In her mind-set, differences to "her little world" had to be *controlled*. This brings out the underlying issue for all of us when it comes to others' differences: such differences pressure us to change. This becomes another burden or blessing – try to maintain the status quo or change for growth. Others' differences either become a threat to our established ways of doing things, or it's an opportunity for reconciliation. Either the fear and control of Martha, or the freedom and love of Paul. (In fairness to Martha and to her credit, she did appear to change from this particular situation, cf. Jn.12:1-3).

Just as Jesus told Martha what was important, we need to discover those ways which are truly necessary and important – based on biblical culture, not prevailing cultures. Then, we need to relinquish control of our unnecessary established ways of doing things and stop expecting others to fit into "our little world." In order to follow

Jesus in the relational progression to the Father as his, this means to step out of our “comfort zones” in trust of him by adjusting and adapting, even changing, to engage others’ differences in order to be relationally involved with *all*. In the ministry of reconciliation this is becoming truly multicultural, not about pluralism; in the culture of reconciliation this is absorbing differences, not about blanket tolerance.

These changes within the individual don’t often come easily, as Peter experienced. Despite this struggle, change is guaranteed by following Jesus in the **redemptive relational process**. This is the process of change from old to new. Yet, for the new to come this process of being freed from old or existing conditions (i.e., redemption) must by necessity take place first. This is the nature of **redemptive change**: *the cross of the old* always precedes *the resurrection of the new*. The hope for change is not in me but in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the transforming work of his Spirit. In this joint relational process, however, we can only have a personal resurrection in direct proportion to our cross. That is, to the extent we bring the *old* in us to the cross to die, to that extent the *new* will rise. *Redemptive change antecedes and prevails in the relational process leading to reconciliation.*

When Jesus told Martha “only one thing is necessary,” he defined what was happening in the qualitative framework of *the relational context*. Mary exercised the relational process of this context to *be with* Jesus, even at the cost of going against her sister, of being contrary to religious and social custom, even of exposing herself to possible rebuke from Jesus.

The individual process involved in becoming the multicultural church always takes place within this *relational context* and, thus, most certainly leads directly to **the relational process of our interpersonal relationships (fourth key characteristic)**, as seen in Mary. But this is the most clearly visible in Jesus’ life. In the incarnation of God’s glory (his heart, intimately relational, vulnerably present) Jesus made himself vulnerable to our rejection. That is, relational conflict is the natural consequence between the common and the Uncommon, between temporal and eternal. This is not merely information to formulate a theological framework, but more importantly his witness is the basis for the relational process in all our relationships. Jesus opened his heart to be affected by all those relational consequences; and he asks those who receive the Uncommon and Eternal to be vulnerable to the same.

Despite all the inherent differences he encountered, Jesus didn’t insulate himself from them but opened himself to them to reconcile relationships. The opposite of *control* in the relational context of others’ differences is **vulnerability**. Instead of being in control on our terms and trying to ensure something for ourselves, Christ calls us to be *vulnerable* to others (different or not) for the purpose of reconciliation. He makes this call prevailing in his commands to love; to love is how to be relationally involved by opening ourselves to others (God included) and being vulnerable. To love others, especially those who are different, is not to expect them to be like me or to come into my little world.

The relational process of love always involves being vulnerable, especially to those who are different – vulnerable to rejection, challenges to our person or criticism by others. Jesus loved in this way in his relationships and suffered consequences from it. Yet, the active trust and intimacy he experienced with his Father attended to the needs of

his heart. This is how Jesus lived and loved – and how he loves us in the redemptive relational process.

This shows us that *the vulnerability of love also necessitates engaging faith with trust and intimacy in our relationship with God*. As this ongoing relational experience attends to our needs, it yields the discovery of faith by freeing us to determine what is necessary in life and what we need to relinquish control over. When practiced in the relational context of the transformed church, love is equalizing (reconciling) – not condescending or paternalistic. Consequently, love requires change in us.

This process of faith, love and change in the relational context is further demonstrated by Paul in his personal letter to Philemon about taking back his runaway slave, Onesimus. While thanking Philemon for his faith and love, Paul tenderly challenges his faith and love to expand beyond “his world” to become part of the multicultural church. This required the redemptive relational process because equalizing was necessary. Paul asked Philemon for redemptive change to receive Onesimus back not as a slave but as a full member of God’s family, as his brother, as he would Paul himself (Phm.15-17). Paul engaged Philemon in family love for the redemptive change necessary to be vulnerable to Onesimus for transformed relationship.

Changes, while necessary, certainly do not always occur smoothly. To be vulnerable is one of those particular changes which doesn’t come readily. Often God uses or allows negative situations to bring the change in our lives necessary to be vulnerable. In the development of the apostolic church God used persecution to force the church out of its provincial context and made it vulnerable. We see this happen from Acts 8. Even further in God’s remarkable ways, Christ chose Paul, a Hebrew of Hebrews dogmatically monocultural, to lead the church in its new direction to the multicultural church. Why? Because Paul would be changed deeply. Indeed, change is necessary and often unpredictable.

An elementary **paradigm for the process of being multicultural** is suggested from our discussion of Scripture so far and could be identified as:

1. **biblical culture** (ideology) forms the
2. **basic identity of God’s people** who are equalized in
3. **the relational context and process** of the transformed church, thus becoming
4. **vulnerable** (as they fulfill his commission) in extending
5. **the relational act of family love** to others, especially those with differences, by
6. **becoming “all things to all”** in relational involvement for reconciliation to
7. **being multicultural** both within the church and in the world.

More specific aspects of this paradigm are discussed a little later.

Rationale for Change

It would be beneficial for our discussion to consider the question: is being multicultural an option for the church or a necessity for its “survival”? Christ’s

commission to make disciples of *all* is not merely a one-way relational involvement for the sake of conversion. Discipleship involves far more than our usual notions of evangelism. In terms of building the church there is a reciprocal relational dynamic which is inherent in the nature of the body of Christ, just as we discussed before about the church as an interdependent (covarying) system of differences connected by intimate relationships – the model in 1 Corinthians 12.

In the transformed church are found the multiplicity of human differences and the diversity of humankind created by God. As the equalizer, the church is inclusive of all God's creation, without distinctions or discrimination. In the process of equalization, all of humankind and all of our personal humanity are brought together (reconciled) in one family. Though the church is monocultural in its basic ideology, it is otherwise relationally accepting and absorbing of each human difference in secondary matter. In other words, the church is in effect pluralistic ("all things") in its relationships with others while also multicultural ("all into one") in the holistic operation of the church as family – yet, this is always defined by biblical monoculture, not by any other prevailing influences.

Still, why does the church need to be heterogeneous, including even ethnic churches? Since the ministry of reconciliation works out of the "*culture of reconciliation*", this process necessitates the **coming together** of all God's creation. The kingdom of God should reflect in the church; and God's kingdom is not homogeneous. Family love reaches out to *all*, takes in *all* and, then, makes *all* a part of God's own family. This does not mean a quota of "all nations;" multicultural defines the relational involvement with others (particularly who are different) who otherwise might be overlooked, ignored or discriminated against.

For a church to operate otherwise is to deny the nature and identity of Christ's body and its purpose in the world. Because of the relational and ontological realities of *who* and *what we are* as a result of being with Christ in the relational progression, any local people of God cannot reduce their identity, for example, to a narrow, provincial segment of humankind. Thus, for a church to authentically practice its function as the household, family of God, as the precursor of the kingdom of God (if not already the kingdom), it needs to be multicultural for its integrity to survive. Furthermore, this issue and principle of being multicultural is basically the same involved in all human relations and the matter of differences – whether between Martha and Mary, between parents and children, between generations or genders. When defined by biblical culture, however, this does not mean the prevailing notions of multiculturalism, pluralism and blanket tolerance.

For followers of Christ and their relationships, whether as the church or in other relations, **change** is a crucial factor in the process of being multicultural. This is not the quantitative outer-in change characteristic of *metaschematizo* but the qualitative inner-out change of *metamorphoo*. Theologically, this is really what sanctification is all about: the process of redemptive change (transformation) from the old nature to the new nature, the old order to the new order. God wants this change in us more than we do; he gave us his Spirit to complete the process. And the basic paradigm for this transformation is simply: **the old dying and the new rising.**

Yet, we often create systems (as Martha did) to minimize having to change and to limit having to take more relational responsibility (as the Judaizers did). Then, we fall into various ways to *control*; the use of the mind as a substitute for the heart is the most prominent way. The consequence is distance from our heart and distance in our relationships.

Contrary to popular perception, God has more room for variation than we would allow in “our little world.” In this sense God is not restrictive and narrow-minded, we are. God doesn’t want us to be constrained, he wants to liberate us to be all he created us to be. Fundamentally, that purpose finds its fulfillment in the *relational context and process of intimate relationships*. To be fully restored, God requires of us certain necessary ways and relinquishing control of our other established ways of doing things.

Most contexts in life to which we submit, such as a prevailing culture, seek to limit change in order to maintain control over us and keep us within its established ways. For example, as kids most of us learn certain ways to do things (like painting “inside the lines” or thinking “inside the box”) which reflected a certain mind-set and framework. These contexts essentially seek to maintain the status quo and, thus, usually have a negative view of change. The relational context of biblical culture, however, requires change: changes within the heart, change to live by the heart, more heart to heart connections and, therefore, more trust and intimacy in relationships, relationships where differences *come together* in reconciliation as *one* in the shared life together of his new kinship family (that is, the multicultural church). This is the transformed church of transformed persons living together in transformed relationships which are both intimate and equalizing.

Opposite Directions for the Church

By now in our discussion it should be apparent that *control* and *faith* (as trust and intimacy) don’t go together. Essentially, forms of control (exercised individually or corporately) by Christians are antithetical to this relational faith. They become substitutes specifically for trusting God and thus alternatives for his grace and promises. This is clearly observed in Paul’s letter to the Galatians about the transformed life and the truth of the gospel; his epistle suggests two opposite models for church practice.

In Galatians there are implied **paradigms both for and against the multicultural church**. These expand our understanding of the initial paradigm for being multicultural.

FOR:

1. **faith/trust** specifically in Christ’s work of justification by grace makes
2. **our redemption** a reality and his love enables us to
3. **receive the gift of his Spirit and live by the Spirit**; this change enables us
4. **to be open** (in contrast to controlling) **and vulnerable** to others’ differences; the bottom line for making this operational is
5. **faith expressing itself in love**, particularly **family love** which is able to
6. **absorb others with their differences** and relationally
7. **come together as one** in the transformed family of the multicultural church.

Note: This is the foundational process of building the “*children of promise*” which God covenanted with his people.

AGAINST: As a functional substitute for faith as trust and a reductionist alternative for God’s promises, some subtle type of

1. **system for self-justification** (i.e., for validation or affirmation) operates, often not apparent to members, due to
2. **the absence of living by grace and by his Spirit and of relationally experiencing his love**, which creates
3. **a lack of openness and vulnerability** to others’ differences because of dependence on that system, which must be followed closely (variation threatens one’s status); this reflects
4. **some enslavement because of a lack of redemption**; consequently, in the “little world” of that
5. **inflexible system** in which all must be similar and follow because of
6. **the inability to absorb others with differences**, resulting in a more
7. **selective or exclusionary group**, not an inclusive church family.

Note: This is the foundational process of building “*children of slaves*” and not the covenant family God promises.

The above paradigms help us to understand what we are building. Given Jesus’ metaphor that the appearance of what we are building can be deceiving (Mt.7:24-27), we cannot rely on our perceptual framework to distinguish the difference. Nor can the mere presence of doctrinal elements such as grace, redemption, love and reconciliation be sufficient to ensure how we do church. We need to turn to the relational context and examine our engagement in the relational process in order to understand what direction we are taking and what we are building.

In the relational context, faith is always the necessary relational response to God, ongoingly enacted by trust and intimacy. God’s grace, of course, is always the initial relational act to which faith responds to complete the relational connection. But, sometimes, as a subtle substitute for faith, we try to do things to justify (measure up to) that grace, thus nullifying the significance of grace and all that Christ did to reconcile us to his Father. Such a process or system is a way we try to control things on our terms, especially in our relationship with God. Certainly, this is counterproductive to our transformation from “*old to new*” and to reconciliation in our relationships. What this further indicates is a gap in redemption and experiencing the redemptive relational process. This means that there is in effect some enslavement taking place, unknowingly or inadvertently.

To equalize in relationships necessitates being free as persons. Not to be involved in equalizing with love for reconciliation strongly suggests that we are enslaved by something which prevents us not only from equalizing in relationships but also from being equalized in our own life. Defining ourselves, for example, by what we do or have may be the most prominent way we are not truly free just to *be* (our person), and thus are enslaved to a process that is not just about *me* but involves the comparative process of judging and treating others accordingly. As long as we don’t recognize and address this

enslavement, we can't be redeemed and change. Without this freedom we can't function as a full member (son or daughter) of God's household who is equalized in his family; we don't experience the family love of *belonging* and taking our permanent place in his family (as Jesus defined for the redeemed and reconciled, Jn.8:35). Without this transformation his followers are unable to share family love with all others in the church as equalizer.

The direction of any church is dependent on its level of relational faith and obedience. The church today needs to learn from both the failures and the successes of the early church. Despite its auspicious beginnings, the direction of the early church needed to be revised. The Lord used persecution to help redirect his people out of their provincialism, as well as some remarkable events to clearly define the nature of their life and purpose to "all people," without distinctions.

Any attitudes of provincialism work against the relational function of faith. Any approach controlled by "our little world" redefines obedience as it closes doors and narrows the options. It doesn't venture beyond a limited space or way to "see" things. Provincialism pulls inward to protect or preserve. Consequently, there is little room to consider *differences*, as well as be aware of or sensitive to matters of equality.

With all the changes taking place in the world and all the *differences* with which the church is faced, the church is called to be the equalizer. Yet, will all this be a threat to its established ways of doing things or an opportunity for redemption and reconciliation? The direction a church moves will largely reflect in principle either the fear and control of Martha, or the freedom and love of Paul.

Multicultural Qualifier

We have been hearing the call from more progressive and liberal segments of our society for multiculturalism. Essentially, it is a call for pluralism and the tolerance of others' differences – positions which have become politically correct by conventional wisdom. Though this is certainly important and necessary for our times, *coming together and becoming one* is not on their agenda, reconciliation and restoring wholeness are not a part of their process. This is not the multicultural perspective we have been discussing in this chapter. Even though voices in the world may push merely for a multicultural structure or context, the followers of Christ are called beyond that to a *multicultural life* in a transformed relational context and process defined only by biblical culture.

Just as Paul defined in Ephesians, the equalizing work of the church in the total relational context is based on reconciliation, which is predicated on redemption. The practice of the *culture of reconciliation* for all its members and their relationships involves changes of the heart in each individual and living as transformed persons in all their relationships as transformed relationships. Anything less than this would be without the qualitative substance of the God of heart and his intimate relational nature. Only biblical culture defines for the church its purpose to make known "*the manifold wisdom of God*" by functioning as the multicultural church, which is his eschatological purpose for his people (Eph.3:10,11).

Equalizing Disqualifier

Our lack of awareness or insensitivity to matters of equality and equalized interpersonal relationships reflect our lack of freedom. This is an issue of redemptive change, the need for which the church must seriously address. The integrity of church identity and the validity of its practice are constituted by the process of equalization inherent in the redemptive relational process enacted by Christ and summarized by Paul (Eph.2).

There is one human distinction that I want to highlight in particular. Even though I am a person of color and racism is a hot issue for me, there is another distinction which is even a more sensitive issue for equalization – gender. This issue engages race, ethnicity, class and age because the distinction of gender prevails in all these other distinctions. For example, even at the height of the civil rights movement in the U.S. during the 1960s, gender inequality or discrimination was practiced among the then Black civil rights activists. The operation of a system of gender inequality within a discriminated group, or its operation along with other systems of inequality, certainly compounds the process of equalization. This is uniquely true for women who are already discriminated against on the basis of some other distinction in what has been known as “double jeopardy” (as in law, prosecuted twice for being a woman; cf. the Samaritan woman at the well in Jn.4).

Gender position in the church certainly is a sensitive issue. Yet, we need to examine the ramifications of this issue for the integrity of church identity and the validity of its practice. Just as the integrity of the civil rights movement was opened to question and credibility became an issue as its practice bordered on hypocrisy by the presence of gender discrimination, the church is challenged today. We need to understand if the church also compounds the process of equalization with any insensitivity to gender inequality or with any lack of awareness of gender discrimination.

I want to discuss briefly the gender issue by placing “women in the forest” of God’s big picture. This involves examining the issue in the relational context and process of the truth of the gospel (as Jesus incarnated and Paul applied) as constituted in the transformed church, the new kinship family of God. Whatever side of the gender issue you lean toward, we all can undergo more redemptive change on the matter for the sake of the wholeness of the church’s integrity and the deeper validity of its practice.

Without going into the specific biblical texts relevant to the place of women in the church, various narratives in Scripture suggest the significant function of women in the development of the early church. The critical question, of course, is how significant can a woman’s function be in the church regarding specific positions of leadership?

The significant function of women in the early church’s development is so noteworthy to Paul that he prominently acknowledges and affirms their work – work which arguably included the highest positions of leadership. However, Paul also instructed various churches to preclude women from certain positions of leadership. The tension between these readings of Paul becomes problematic if we merely embrace his instructions about women apart from the relational context and process established by Jesus.

I suggest the need to put the “tree” of these specific instructions into the “forest”

of the broader context defined in Scripture. At the same time I think it is important to keep in mind that Scripture is not complete in its revelations of God's plan or will; and there is a tendency on our part with our biases either to "fill in the blanks" or to misinterpret a tree in the forest. In spite of God's silence about parts of his will, Scripture (notably the narratives of Jesus) gives us a good understanding of God's heart and his intimate relational nature, if not always his mind on a specific matter. It is on this heart of God and his intimate relational nature that much of my discussion about the forest will depend.

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

Ultimately, the only rightful power in the forest of life is God's. As the Lord and Creator, he exercises that authority over all life whether we like it or not. Furthermore, since all human authority is established by God, the issue of authority becomes an ongoing relational issue between God and us (Romans 13:1,2). Having said this, aside from our relationship with God, where in human relationships does the rightful exercise of power fulfill the desires of God – not merely in relation to a tree in the forest but more importantly in relation to the whole forest? How can we exercise or be subject to human authority within and consistent with God's redemptive plan for all creation and not find ourselves inadvertently in conflict with his desires?

What characterizes the existing condition of human relationships more than anything? I suggest it is distant, depersonalized or broken relationships. Our established ways of doing things further reduce or constrain the *whole* person while cultivating distance in our relationships, intentionally or unintentionally, with bad intentions or with good intentions.

In the broad context of human interaction the greatest indicator of distant, depersonalized, broken relationships is the operation of power relations. Whatever its form, the unrighteous use of power (rightful or otherwise) is responsible for determining the nature or extent of relationships more than any other single factor. As already noted, the greatest consequence of power relations is systems of inequality. Unlike our relationship with God which, on the one hand, requires inequality while, on the other, functions with intimate connections upon reconciliation, systems of inequality create barriers in human relationships. Whether the criteria used to determine inequality are based on race, class, culture, religion or gender, the results are to eliminate certain people from equitable participation in a system. This certainly can be accomplished even without prejudices or biases – even unintentionally. The subtlety of this relational issue may not involve power or discrimination but may only be indicated by distance in relationships reflected in a lack of intimacy.

It is in relation to prevailing contexts of human interaction that the issues of

church order and the relationships among its members must be addressed. We have to understand what aspects of how we do relationships and thus practice church are determined by biblical culture or by prevailing cultures. Failure to do so makes it difficult for us to distinguish the *old* (from which we are supposed to be redeemed) and the *new* (to which we are supposed to be transformed). Failing to assess honestly our established ways of doing things makes us susceptible to being in conflict with or in opposition to, however unintentional, the desires of God for his people.

As previously discussed, Peter was confronted with these failures to deal with the distinction of race/ethnicity (Gal.2:11ff). As clearly defined by the truth of the gospel and the mystery of Christ (Eph.3:4-6), this practice of false distinctions was in opposition to God's plan for all his creation. Furthermore, these distinctions are in conflict with the new order of the transformed life of God's people, because distinction-making creates, cultivates, reinforces or perpetuates the very barriers in relationship destroyed by Christ (Gal.3:28; Eph.2:14).

We know that it required the death and resurrection of Jesus to destroy these barriers in relationships and to establish the new order of transformed relationships for his people. Yet, this relational work started prior to his death; as we have examined the narratives between the manger and the cross, Jesus was destroying barriers in relationships and eliminating distance for intimate connections. These interactions were consequential both for their opposition to the *old* as well as for their establishing the *new*.

Throughout his incarnation, Jesus was engaged in relational work to restore equitable human relationships and reconciliation. Notably, in all his interactions, the most significant and intimate relational connections were made with women. Given Jesus' position of authority along with the social and religious cultural position of women, his intimate connections with women were remarkable in themselves. More significant, however, is the issue of equalizing relationships in the prevailing context of systems of inequality. When Jesus vulnerably engaged a Samaritan woman at a well, he broke down "double jeopardy" for her and gave her the access for intimate relationship with God by equalizing her (Jn.4:4-26). In his relational connections, Jesus defines the relational process needed for quality relationships, in general, and for Christian relationships, in particular.

No relationship brings these issues to the forefront of Christian practice more than Jesus' interactions with Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. Let's review again the highlights of this relationship: (1) Luke 10:38-42; at this first dinner there is a conflict of cultural perceptual framework; Jesus doesn't deny Martha her framework but prioritizes it in the biblical cultural framework; Mary goes against the religious culture by sitting at Jesus' feet in order to be taught by the Rabbi – a place forbidden for women and reserved only for men, particularly disciples (note also, that serious disciples usually were training for leadership); Jesus not only warmly receives her in front of all the other men but affirms her place and gently explains to Martha what's more important than the prevailing established way of doing things – namely, relationships and discipleship; (2) John 11:17-44; here again we contrast the two sisters; Martha shared her concern for Lazarus but within the limits (maybe barriers) of relationships between men/rabbi and women; consequently, she sincerely expresses her belief but does not fully open her heart; in contrast, Mary, though she repeated the exact opening words (see Greek text) to

Jesus as Martha, expressed herself completely from her heart, thus deeply moving Jesus to engage in that intimate connection; (3) John 12:1-11; Mary again breaks various established customs in order to respond even more intimately to Jesus (see similar interaction in Luke 7:36-50); Jesus, once again, not only receives her intimate connection in their relationship but makes this relational process more important than even ministry to the poor.

What we see Jesus practicing and, therefore, clearly defining for us is: (1) the primacy of relationships; (2) the intimate character of those relationships; (3) the equalizing of persons in the process of the relationship. As surprising (shocking to some) as his interactions with women were, this is not really extraordinary. That is, it isn't extraordinary because that's what Jesus came to do: to establish the relational context and process to his Father and for his family. And in order to restore these relationships, he had to redeem relationships – notably from how we make distinctions and relate to others based on those distinctions.

While vulnerably sharing his *self* in the incarnation, that meant dealing with the *old* and countering the *old* with the *new*. He didn't come just to save us from the old but to save us to the new. All his authority expressed while on this earth went to accomplish this end. Every exercise of his power (even for healing) worked for this purpose. It is to this end and for this purpose that all human authority must be examined and critiqued.

Into this forest I place the tree of Paul's instructions on women. This tree should not be given priority over the forest, nor should it ever take away from the forest. It cannot function as an end in itself nor serve a purpose separated from the Father's total purpose for his family in his eschatological plan. This means needing to deal with the *old*. By necessity, this involves countering power relations and systems of inequality with the *new*, as well as displacing any other relational processes which reinforce distance or impede intimacy. Regardless of what side of the gender issue you support, we need to address how we define our self and do relationships and thus practice church.

We know clearly that God seeks to reconcile his creation to himself by making peace through Christ's blood (Col.1:20). We also know from previous discussion that peace in the Bible is not the absence of something (like war or conflict) but, much more, peace is the presence of something (namely wholeness and well-being). Reconciliation denotes the change from the old order to the new order by taking away the root cause of relational brokenness, leaving no barriers to restoring communion. So, the process of reconciliation involves restoring relationships to this wholeness and well-being; that is, it involved returning creation to God's original design and purpose, especially for intimate relationships.

Yet, this is no simple process, as we've discussed. When Jesus wept over Jerusalem, he said: "If you had only known . . . what would bring you peace" (Lk.19:41,42). On his way to the cross, Jesus knew the price for wholeness and well-being was great because it required redemption. Restoration to wholeness necessitates setting one free from its existing condition in order that it could be returned to the original design and creation of God. This release, brought about by the paying of a price, is the redemption necessary which Jesus fulfilled for his followers in the relational progression to the Father.

This certainly means that to restore to wholeness involves a change from what

exists. Once again this issue of **change**, here is the issue which raised so much conflict over Jesus' earthly life, and keeps coming up for our life. Even opposition to Jesus' healing ministry must be understood with respect to change, because by healing, Jesus was engaged in the process of restoring – restoring God's creation to some aspect of wholeness, well-being. His healing involved much more than to mend, to fix or to reform, that is to say, to return something merely to its commonly existing old condition. The opponents of Jesus didn't want change. They resisted change because they wanted to keep things the way they were. Whether their position was due to vested interests in the existing order or due to blindness in their beliefs, the results were the same: their approach to improving the quality of life was to oppose change. Yet, in the relational context there is no way to avoid the need for redemptive change for the relational process.

It is changing from the existing condition of human relationships (invested also with culture and tradition) to the original created order of relationships as trust and intimacy (corporately also as a relational community) which creates tension, conflict or even opposition. Why? As Jesus countered the established ways of doing things with his teachings on the new life order, as summarized in the Sermon on the Mount, we can understand why. While he clearly brought out the substantive meaning of the law and the prophets (the primary purpose behind all of God's directives and the heart of God's desires for his people), Jesus helps us understand two of the overriding and far-reaching effects of our established ways of defining our self and doing relationships. To review them again, they are: (1) it gives more emphasis to secondary aspects of life than to primary aspects, and (2) as a result, it does not give top priority to intimate relationships. As we've been discussing, these effects exist even more today than in the 1st century, yet certain distinctions such as race, class and gender have consistently remained resistant to change through history.

The repercussions of power relations and systems of inequality can range from oppression, on the macro level, to living as a victim or an *object* (as opposed to a *subject*) for the individual person. The effects on the individual can involve thinking of oneself as less, feeling bad about oneself, or anything else which constrains the person from their full dignity and integrity as God's creation. But a more subtle implication to address also is the extent of intimacy (defined as hearts opening to each other and coming together) women can experience with men in *agape* family love. Jesus experienced the kind of intimacy with women that would make many men very uncomfortable – not for sexual reasons but for the threat it creates.

Back in Jesus' context or in today's, men have always had more to lose than to gain from such relations, at least in their perceptions. Aspects of prestige, privilege or power are diminished when intimacy defines the relationship. Furthermore, insecurities and self-worth are exposed when the heart is opened, leaving only the authentic *person* unembellished and without distinction to enter into relationships. Who would be more vulnerable in such relationships?

We hear from various sources that women are more relationship-oriented and that men are not really "wired" well for intimate relationships. Even though such perceptions conflict with the biblical cultural framework, churches have bought into these conventional perceptions (as if God created us with a different heart or designed us for a

different purpose) to establish a mind-set, even a bias, that deeply affects the relational context and process of the church, thus compromising the integrity of its identity as constituted by the truth of the gospel and compounding the equalizing process in its practice, even in relationship with God.

Equalization doesn't reduce living to the notions of the individual, but it brings his people to the depths of the true heart of the *person* and thus opens the way for our hearts to come together, first with God then with each other. This process establishes the new redemptive order in Christ where equality prevails and divisive distinctions (which separate, distance, fragment) are redeemed. Equality is the qualitative function of transformed relationships engaged by those persons truly being redeemed and transformed in Christ; it is fundamental to how God is involved with us and how he wants his very own to be involved in their relationships.

Women have long lived with the repercussions from inequality. Even as a person of color I can only understand part of their experiences. Yet, as we see Jesus interacting with women and understand the purpose his Father gave him and all that was necessary to fulfill the Father's desires, it becomes apparent that his commands to love in this relational context and process can be operational only in relationships which would not create, cultivate, nurture or reinforce, however unintentional, any forms of power relations and systems of inequality whatsoever, as well as any other practices impeding intimacy. Any other relationships diminish the integrity of his family, and any other practice than equalizing in family love invalidates that practice.

Excluding women from positions of leadership will result to some degree in similar repercussions. There will always be, at best, some barrier preventing the intimate and equalizing transformed relationships engaged vulnerably by Jesus and clearly established as the relational context and process for his followers. It would be as if Jesus had told Mary she could not sit there. At worst, the constraints (real and imagined) will minimize women's experiences to be transformed from old to new; this, in turn, will reduce all that the church could be, both in its resourcefulness and its witness as the Father's very own daughters and sons, and as sisters and brothers in his family. It would be as if Jesus had told Mary to use the money for the poor. Yet, in pursuing equalization women also need to decide if they merely want to be defined and have the same distinctions on which men's persons are commonly based, or if they want the *more* of the qualitative substance only experienced from being equalized in the relational context. The former (reductionist alternatives) will not bring wholeness and reconciliation for and between women and men.

At the same time, men need to examine the impact preventing equalization has on the wholeness and reconciliation not only on the lives of their sisters but on theirs also. Certainly, there is a related relational consequence for men in this prevailing context. The repercussions will be at best and at worst somewhat the reverse than for women, nevertheless further diminish the peace and reconciliation vital to the shared transformed life of the church as equalizer, both within itself and in the world.

In the forest of the Father's big picture, his desire is not for a specific structure or order for the church but for the distinct qualitative function of relationship which reflects being his and his family. This is not about the church *doing something* a certain way but about his people *being someone* as family. It is this *whole* of the Father and his family from which the Spirit distributes spiritual gifts for the sake of building up the Father's

family, as discussed in Chapter 7. If those spiritual gifts, roles and relational functions are determined by tradition, culture or aptitude, then we deny the Spirit's relational presence and purpose to build his family and bring it to completion as the Father desires and on his terms.

Following Jesus in the relational progression to the Father as his and his family becomes a functional reality only as it is operationalized by family love, not by doctrine or church polity. Just as Paul appealed to Philemon to equalize Onesimus on the basis of family love rather than merely as his rightful duty in God's family (Phm.8-9), we are called on (with the same appeal) to equalize without distinctions – not compelled to it by order but willfully out of family love. The integrity of our identity as his and his family as well as the validity of our practice as his daughters and sons, together as sisters and brothers, depend on it.

Functional Discipleship

Discipleship becomes functional when we engage: To follow Jesus in the redemptive relational process of transformation in the relational progression from our functional enslavements in order to be equalized intimately to the Father as his, thus experientially belonging in his family as his authentic daughters and sons, who functionally live in transformed relationships together by equalizing each other as sisters and brothers, without distinctions, in the practice of family love within the intimate relational context and process of his new kinship family.

This is the process of discipleship incarnated by Jesus in the relational progression for us to follow him in together. This relational progression is **God's paradigm** – his paradigm for the church in the eschatological big picture.

Consider

The practice of church and the gospel are functionally interrelated and should not be separated, even if you don't articulate an ecclesiology. When you examine the significance of the gospel you claim for yourself and proclaim to others, what *substance* distinguishes that gospel from other life alternatives?

Certainly, the substance you claim to have in practice must change in a transformational (*metamorphoo*) way how you function as a person as well as what you experience in relationships with others in your church in order for the gospel to distinguish itself as good news over any other. If it doesn't substantively change our person and our relationships together as church, what is the significance of being "in Christ" – of being "**new** in Christ"?

Doctrine alone is insufficient to constitute the authentic church and thus to witness (as experiential participants) to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

13 The Church as Equalizer Within the World

“ . . . so that the world may believe . . .
to let the world know. . . .”

John 17:21-23

For the church to be established as equalizer by becoming the multicultural transformed church through rigorous relational work is only one part of its total purpose. The other part is its work in the world. While the practice of Christian relational faith is uniquely intimate, authentic Christian faith (both for the individual and the church) cannot remain private. The transformed life of God’s people is also lived in public – “into the world” as Jesus prayed. For the early church in the Greco-Roman world this was known as their practice in *politeia* (“public life”). The Greek term has a much broader focus than our limited notions of politics do. As Bruce Winter informs us, the term *politeia* involved different spheres of activity and should not be equated to “politics.”¹

Historically, the church has strained to define exactly what its involvement in public life should be. Church mission in the world has been conducted narrowly, ambiguously, or without spiritual substance and eschatological significance. This chapter will suggest a more definitive public life for the church without the ambiguity and shallowness which reduce the church’s identity and function as light and salt. In the process we need to address aspects of eschatology, evangelism and social ethics within the framework of discipleship and its practice of following Jesus in the relational progression.

God’s Paradigm

The relational progression is God’s paradigm for the church in the big picture. This paradigm is introduced to us by Jesus in his farewell prayer. As we have discussed different aspects of his prayer throughout this study, the closing aspect of his petition to his Father on our behalf converges with the other aspects to address the public life of his disciples. Here we can understand why he specifically asked his Father not to take us out of the world and why he sent us into it.

“So that the world may believe” (Gk. *pistis*, trust) and “to let the world know” (Gk. *ginosko*, to come to know, experience) – trust *what*, experience *what*? How this has been answered in church practice must be reexamined. This is the current issue about

1. Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

politeia and the tendency to define Christian mission in reductionist terms.

Trust “that you have sent me” and *experience* “that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” This is what the world can trust and experience: Christ’s purpose (1) in coming to reveal his Father, (2) to extend his family love and reconcile us to the Father, and (3) to make us one with the Father as his and his family. Yet, the *what* for the world to trust and experience is not predicated on the propositional truth of this relational progression but on the witness from the experiential reality of these intimate relationships between the Father, the Son and his family.

When the world can observe in God’s people “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you . . . that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me,” it is exposed to more than a belief system that it can believe or know. This intimate relational oneness is the relational outcome made possible only by Jesus in the relational progression.

If Jesus had not come to reveal his Father, we could not know about the Father. If Jesus had not redeemed us from our enslavements, we could not trust the Father. If Christ had not reconciled us to his Father, we could not intimately know the Father as his and experience him as his family. This relational progression is the relational work of family love which the Father initiated, Jesus fulfilled and his Spirit brings to completion. This is God’s desire for his whole creation, his direction for redemptive history and his eschatological plan for his people. As the Father sent his son into the world for this purpose, Jesus sends his followers into the world for the same purpose. This constitutes God’s paradigm for the church’s function in the world as the major part of the big picture.

To fulfill its purpose to represent the Father as his new kinship family and to reveal the Father in his vulnerable heart of intimate relational involvement, the church needs to engage others directly with family love just as Jesus made it functional in the relational progression. As Jesus relationally involved himself with others in public as the equalizer, with the practice of this family love the church equalizes in the world. When the world becomes the object of this family love, it has the true basis to trust the reality of God’s covenant promise and to experience the qualitative substance of love and hope unique to God. When so engaged by the public life of the church, the world has the opportunity to trust in the truth of the gospel as witnessed by the church (in practice not proclamation), and thus be able to experience the reality of God’s family love by also becoming his and his family.

As a function of relationships and the corporate relational involvement of family, this purpose in the world operationalized by family love cannot be fulfilled by the individual(s). The individual alone cannot witness to the relational progression of God’s desires and purpose. This can only be fulfilled by the church functioning as family. In God’s paradigm the nature and scope of the church’s purpose are defined in the relational progression. We need to understand this further.

In the previous chapter we discussed the significance of “all nations” in the church’s purpose and commission. Now we need to examine more specifically the critical aspects in the commission of “*proclaiming repentance*” in public in the process of “*making disciples*” of Jesus Christ. Because of the tendency to utilize reductionist

alternatives for these aspects of Christ's commission, we need to reexamine his commission within the relational progression, that is, according to God's paradigm.

The World of Today

As the world shrinks because of human migration (as well as by the Internet), the cities around the world expand. As peoples of the world become aware of each other and are confronted with one another in this global community, they are less able to remain isolated and separate; and people of likeness (or like-mindedness) have less opportunity to live in a homogeneous or provincial context. And the place where this social revolution has been exploding the most is in the city.

The global nature and structure of the economy have accelerated this process and compounded its effects. Consequently, more than at any other time in the history of the human species we are thrust upon each other, voluntarily or involuntarily. Since we can neither avoid these encounters nor ignore each other, we have to deal with each other. These are not the mere encounters within the comforts of the Internet. These are the direct relational encounters in our "neighborhood" – usually defined in geographical terms or physical proximity, but not necessarily. For example, telecommunications is expanding globally everyday so that areas of telemarketing, public relations, and support services (especially technical support) are being outsourced to other countries (e.g., India) to reduce costs for U.S. operations. These become part of the direct encounters we experience in our "neighborhood."

The potential for conflicts or adversarial relations has always existed in human history. War, race and religious conflicts obviously are not new to history. Yet, all the contextual and structural changes and resulting interaction have intensified human relation conflicts exponentially. This modern period is realizing this potential on a wider and wider scale never before seen in human history. From a biblical perspective on human nature and from a historical perspective on human behavior, these conflicts are not unexpected. Wisdom would have us anticipate them. And this does not even account for the influence such a climate has on stimulating adversarial encounters within common relationships at work, school, sports, even at home.

The common denominator underlying this increasing multitude of conflicts is the issue of *human differences*. Whatever the level of differences – racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, economic, political, social, interpersonal, personal – the inability or the unwillingness to deal with and live with others who are different (look, act, think, feel) has always had a damaging impact on human relations. In the past we could minimize these consequences as long as we could avoid encountering others' differences.

These current conditions of human ecology have increasingly altered the modern human posture and psyche *from passive indifference to active intolerance of human differences*. The results are human conflicts being realized to an alarming extent. Consequently, we live today not only in a period of increased violence but, contextually, also in a **culture of violence**, directly or indirectly, real or simulated, perceived or not.

Even the process of force is being "legitimated" (merely by its frequency) on a

wider scale as the primary means of resolution – resolution of external conflicts as well as internal struggles. Increasingly, the use of force has become a way of everyday life (an “established way to do things”) – the attitudinal spirit or behavioral letter of our practices. In other words, force (or violence) has become a part of culture, or a culture in itself.

There is a reasonable basis to expect that even much more conflict will be realized in our period of history. Although the specter of total annihilation of earthly life in nuclear war is now less of a scenario with the end of the Cold War, there does not exist on the global horizon even a negative “solution” to reduce the magnitude of human conflicts with which we are and will be faced. And the current war on terrorism appears to be fueling the conflict – both globally and locally. Furthermore, economic growth continues to compound the issue of human differences with no apparent end in sight. Inevitably, the interrelation between the global economy and human ecology has its “trickledown effects” on everyday relations in our neighborhood and in interpersonal relationships, even within our own family. The primary impact here is negative, lower prices for consumer goods notwithstanding. For example, market fluctuations causing stress to compete for work and to perform on the job, fear of losing a job because of downsizing or exporting labor, anger in being mistreated, or impotence in being unable to do anything about it all. We bring these feelings home every day and impact those around us.

The increase of violence (physical or emotional) in families and neighborhoods is one outcome we can associate to this global process. And *scapegoating* (particularly of another racial/ethnic group) is another outcome. These two are connected by the issue of **intolerance**. Whether intolerance is linked to the anger of depersonalization or the despair of hopelessness, or linked to the inability or unwillingness to deal with human differences, the end result is conflict, adversarial encounters. Though we are oversimplifying the process, the underlying principle of human relations remains the same: *the biological, cultural, economic or ideological differences of others become more threatening as the physical, social, emotional or spiritual aspects of personal needs are less satisfied.*

Though all the areas of personal needs are important, unmet spiritual needs have the broadest association to others’ differences and the threat they pose. Yet, whatever need triggers the process, any threat becomes realized in conflict as encounters move persons from passive indifference to active intolerance.

This is just part of the world today into which Jesus sends us to fulfill the Father’s purpose.

Limited Prescriptions

History has not consistently linked intolerance and human differences in its accounts of human conflict. The link, however, between intolerance and differences is germane to human nature since Adam and Eve; it’s always been there. Today, the interconnection of mass mobility (again, voluntary and involuntary) of people, the global economy and the Information Age creates an increasing condition for human conflict

without an end in sight because the intolerance of human differences has no viable solution in the world arena of human relations.

The initial recourse mainly seeks to prevent the encounter of human differences. But with the expansion of urban centers and regions worldwide, the attempt of balkanization is not only impractical but unrealistic. Such effort will invariably lead to ghettoization and systems of inequality. Tribalism and nationalism only exacerbate the problem because the global economy no longer allows for such isolationism and protectionism. The reality is that *we are stuck with each other*.

Ignorance of others' differences is no longer civilized. Separatism is no longer reasonable nor efficacious. Intolerance per se is a sin. The conventional prescription of tolerance, on the other hand, though important and widely advocated, is not sufficient. Essentially, tolerance deals with relations on a horizontal plane, laterally to the left and right. As such it must have agreeable limits to how far from the center will be tolerated. Otherwise, the extremes become anarchy. Being a horizontal process, tolerance also is not able to deal with the truly crucial issue in human relations – the vertical plane of stratified relationships created between people, not the horizontal. This involves the perceptions and feelings of “more or less,” “better or worse,” “good or bad” and the comparative judgments made, for example, about one's identity or self-worth.

So, what are we going to do with all these differences in our changing world? Resist, adapt, capitulate? Capitulating lacks hope for improvement, and resisting only worsens the problem. Of the three, *adapting* is the most promising. What we are dealing with, however, is not some biological process that will eventually adapt itself due to necessity. Certainly, the process of human relations is much more complex, compounded by the damaging effects of human nature. Diplomacy, negotiation and compromise only go so far.

Furthermore, as we witness the growing use and legitimation of force (political, economic, civic, social) as a means to deal with conflict in the home, the neighborhood, a nation or in global situations, we also see the failure to look beyond the situation, to go deeper than presenting circumstances. Much of the use of force responds only to symptoms, failing to understand causes. Such uninformed response only compounds the problem in the long run. What is missing in this whole process for all these prescriptions, what's never achieved in its outcome is the basic and simple relational matter of people **coming together**.

We don't experience the relational process of *coming together* because reconciliation is not an integral part of this resolution process. We don't build reconciliation into the process. If we are stuck with each other, then nothing short of reconciliation of persons in their differences will prevent or eliminate conflict.

This is the purpose of *the church as equalizer*. Whether within itself (as we discussed in the last chapter) or in the world, for the church to absorb differences and be multicultural necessitates that reconciliation be built into it as an integral part of its work (as the ministry of reconciliation) as well as its way of living (as the culture of reconciliation). The redemptive relational process is the natural outworking of the transformed church.

Since the transformed church requires transformed persons living out transformed relationships, it is not sufficient for Christ's followers to just work for reconciliation. We also have to live reconciliation as *what we are* in Christ and as *how we define our self and do relationships* in being his followers. In other words, this means the culture of reconciliation. We have to develop this culture, substitute it for a culture of violence and show the world *what we are* as transformed persons made whole, *who we are* in intimate and equalized relationships, and *whose we are* as his and his family. This puts everything into *the relational context and process* of the relational progression, which is made operational by family love. Clearly, this is more than a work or ministry. It is the *culture* of God's people living as family. This is the biblical culture which is distinguished from and supersedes all other cultures – especially a culture of violence. When the world observes this and is the recipient of this, it has a basis to believe the same Christ who was sent by the same Father for the same purpose to be able to experience being his and his family.

Yet, living this out from the biblical cultural framework also goes beyond the limited notions of evangelism, ethics and discipleship we tend to prescribe for church practice in public.

The Jesus Alternative

When we look beyond the current situations in the world and symptomatic conditions associated with them, we are compelled to address human relations in general. The general condition of interpersonal relationships was set in motion from the beginning of human history. When Adam blamed Eve, he not only was avoiding his own sin but he was also stratifying their relationship. That is, the implication of using Eve as a scapegoat was that he put her down as being *less* than he. Sin does that to others and works like this in relationships.

Adam's action in effect established the operation of power relations and set in motion a process in relationships causing distance, depersonalization and brokenness. In the context of human relations, these conditions are the most prevalent in the operation of some form of power relations. This is the basic dynamic process which results in conflicts and inequality. And the broadest consequence of power relations is **systems of inequality**: the systematic and unjust stratification of persons, usually based on some criteria which guarantee power, privilege or prestige for those in the upper strata while denying the same to those in the lower strata, effectively making it improbable for the disadvantaged to move up to a better position in the system. Indeed, any system of inequality creates barriers in human relationships. Whether the criteria are based on race, class, culture, gender or religion, the results eliminate certain people from equal or equitable participation in a system. This can be accomplished with or without the presence of prejudice, intentionally or even unintentionally.

As we discussed in preceding chapters, the matter of systems of inequality arose as the pivotal issue in the mission of the early disciples. In fact it was an issue of

revolutionary proportions for the new order established by Jesus Christ. Not even the issue of his second coming took on greater importance; yet, the *parousia* (his coming) was the eschatological hope encouraging the church's practice in *politeia*, particularly in difficult times and circumstances.

Their involvement with this relational condition was understandable because of God's paradigm for the church's purpose. Since the basic issues behind systems of inequality deal with power, privilege and prestige, any involvement in the human context made this condition unavoidable in the making of disciples. Even further, any call to repentance of the human condition made it imperative for the church to contend with this sinful process. At the same time, any kind of reinforcement by the church of this unrighteous process – either directly through perpetration (e.g., by selectively ignoring or avoiding persons who are different from a church's constituency) or indirectly through complicity (e.g., by remaining silent and not holding discriminators accountable) – not only compromises the church's integrity and witness to the world but strongly indicts it for its legitimization of these sinful practices. What can the world believe and experience if this is how the church functions?

When Christian mission, however, is put into the relational context and process of the new life order established by Christ, a response to the human condition is the natural outcome. The scope of mission in the new order must deal with systems of inequality. We can neither accept (or adapt) nor be resigned (or capitulate) to barriers which eliminate certain peoples from equitable participation in a system, especially within the church. To do so would contradict our intimate experience with God made possible only by his grace to be equalized in the relational progression; and it would violate the nature of his purpose which extends from that whole process of redemption and reconciliation in the relational progression – God's paradigm for the church in the big picture. The big picture is not just about eschatology but more importantly about relationship as the Father's and his family.

Systems of inequality must be dealt with both within the church and the world. Since the fundamental issue here is the importance of relationships, for the church not to address the issue leaves it susceptible in its practice merely to mirror how the surrounding context does relationships. This would directly affect the practice of Christ's commission in the kind of disciples and the call to repentance the church makes. Obviously, selective discrimination by distinction-making is one repercussion. But a more far-reaching effect involves reductionism.

For example, some Christians perceive of discipleship as a methodology for discipling others mainly through using the Bible. The operative words "methodology" and "using" tend to involve the reductionist activity of gathering information and learning about something. This also reflects the outer-in approach to Christian identity and living. As discussed previously, Jesus revolutionized what it meant to be a disciple in the Mediterranean world and the rabbinic tradition. His process of discipleship involved a deep relational involvement with the Teacher and becoming progressively more intimate with his Father, not about learning as in rabbinic schools. When Jesus commissioned us to "make disciples" (Gk. *matheteuo*), this relational process must be distinguished from

the Greek verb *matheo* which simply means to learn without any attachment to the teacher (*didaskolos*). The aspect of “teaching” (Gk. *didasko*) in his commission was focused on transforming a disciple for this relationship, not for the purpose of learning something to later teach others about as conventional rabbinic disciples did. Furthermore, these reductions of discipleship tend to make it merely individualistic because it does not integrate it into the interdependent corporate relationships as his family. This is what happens when we stop short in the relational progression.

In a reductionist framework, his commission to “make disciples” is not only misinterpreted but oversimplified. Besides being subordinated in emphasis by giving primary attention to “go ye” (often incorrectly expressed as the imperative command in his commission, when “make disciples” is the only imperative here), the matter of making disciples tends to get reduced to mere conversion, primarily on simplistic spiritual and moral grounds. This is a truncated focus only on what Christ saved us from which is often perceived with a reductionist view of sin. It is a serious error to limit the application of this commission merely to the operation of traditional evangelism.

Jesus calls us both to be disciples as well as to make disciples. They go together and should not be separated. Yet, the disciples we are and the disciples we make must be in the discipleship process of the relational progression Jesus made functional with his family love. This ongoing process in family love is the basis for our experience with him and his purpose for us; thus, this must constitute our practice of evangelism. This deepens what evangelism involves. It also radicalizes the process of evangelism from quantitative measures like technique to the qualitative process of relationships made operational by family love – nothing less and no substitutes, just as Jesus extended family love from his Father.

In our quantitative emphasis we reduce evangelism more to a method of sharing propositional truths. But the function of his disciples in the Mediterranean world wasn’t to spread “teachings”; it was to *witness* to the person of Jesus, and thus their relationship with him in their entire life. This is not a methodology for dispensing truth but a life of sharing this relationship and demonstrating “the truth of the gospel” and “the mystery of Christ” with family love. Jesus said we are witnesses (Gk. *martyreo*, Lk.24:48; Jn.15:27) of *him*, that is, participants with him in relationship, not observers processing information to dispense later. This is what evangelism involves.

The tendency in such a limited approach to evangelism also involves having a weak or inadequate view of sin and dealing with individuals apart from the contexts of human life in which they live. The latter is not about the absence of contextualization as a method but about failing to address the broader relationship issues present. Sin is not merely an individual matter within a spiritual context. Sin has to do with our relationship to God and the whole order of life he established for all of creation. Sin is a violation of that relationship with God but it also has consequences in his design and purpose for creation. Christian ethics is not a private practice nor can it be limited to issues involving only the individual. Thus, we need also to address the collective nature of sin and evil and deal with all sin in this broader relational context. For example, more and more Christians have realized these consequences in relation to the abuses of physical creation and the

environment. As a result more effort has rightfully been undertaken to counteract these abuses with the rationale of the divine order of creation. Still more effort is needed but with a deeper understanding of the relational context.

Sin has social consequences also, as well as social influences. Our perspective of sin must include these macro-level human factors and human contexts. Evil does not restrict itself to the individual nor does it stay within the limited context of the individual(s).

Historically, churches in the past have recognized this fact. Great revivals have occurred as Christians addressed social problems. Significant social changes resulted from such movements. Urged by such tradition, the church today must review its position on sin, yet on the basis of biblical culture. Where it has undergone reduction, it must be restored or made complete.

The establishment of the new life order in Christ is always preceded by a clear understanding of and, thus, response to the conditions of the old order and its impact on relationships. This signifies the context of the relational progression and the redemptive relational process necessary to experience what Christ saved us to. This also means responding to the social consequences of sin and its social influences in our surrounding context. The OT prophets exemplified this in their response to confront their society in conflict with its evil and call it to repentance over all its sin – all as a precedence of the *new*. This whole process involves the prophetic aspect of the church's function in God's paradigm. As the church becomes this relationally involved, *the transformed church becomes transforming*.

Just as the church is transformed and constituted in the redemptive relational process and context of the relational progression, its purpose in the world is an expression and extension of that intimate relational experience. Following Jesus in this progressive relational experience is the only alternative he gave us, individually and corporately. His alternative is the distinct contrast to reductionist alternatives because it is not about what to do – nor based on a reductionist mind-set defining us by what we do and thus doing relationships in quantitative terms with distinction-making.

Jesus consistently demonstrated and taught that *agape* love does not define what to do but is about how to be involved relationally. This involvement of love extends beyond a circle of relationships with family, friends and church members (in *phileo*). When a lawyer tested Jesus about specifics in the Law, he wanted “neighbor” to be defined for him because “he wanted to justify himself” (Gk. *dikaioo*, to show to be just or prove to be right, Lk.10:25-37). Jesus clarified the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev.19:18) with the Good Samaritan parable. The term “neighbor” (Gk. *plesion*) comes from the root *pelas* (near) and means close by. As illustrated by the parable, anyone within proximity to us should be the object of our concerned involvement, regardless of whether they are close in relationships (like family and friends) or are different in race, class, religion, or even enemies (cf. Mt.5:43ff) – in other words, involvement without distinctions. This is how far the function of love goes. It signifies not what to do but how to be involved. This is not about validating ourselves in

missions but about how to love persons in their sin and how to care for persons in need because of sin.

This is the family love with which Jesus loves us. As he told the lawyer, this is the compassionate relational involvement we need to share “likewise.” Yet, the “neighbors” in our neighborhood are not only becoming more diverse, our “neighborhood” itself is expanding in this information age and the global economy. This tests what will determine how we perceive who our neighbor is.

The Jesus Example

When we look at Jesus’ behavior throughout his incarnation, we can see his teachings (like those above) demonstrated and the scope of his mission enacted. His behavior, however, also reveals paradoxes we need to understand. For example, his cleansing of the temple by forcefully throwing out the people and overturning their tables (Mk.11:15-17; cf. Jn.2:15) in order to restore God’s intended purpose as a house of prayer for all peoples (especially the disadvantaged) stood in contrast to the incident in the garden of Gethsemane as Jesus was taken to be crucified. The disciple who cut off the slave’s ear was rebuked, as Jesus healed the slave (Mt.26:50-52).

Realizing that Jesus preached the gospel of peace (Eph.2:17; Acts 10:36), we also know that he said: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword” (Mt.10:34). How do we understand such apparent paradoxes in the life and teachings of Jesus, especially regarding reconciliation and peace?

Many church practices in the 20th century tended to place more emphasis on either the work of redemption (e.g., liberation from social conditions) or the work of reconciliation (e.g., traditional evangelism) – usually to the exclusion of the other. Theologically, however, we know that redemption and reconciliation are not mutually exclusive. So, a singular emphasis does not help us to understand the apparent paradoxes of Jesus.

Yet, depending on our worldview and particular approach to the prevailing order of life, Christians often find themselves identified with either redemptive work or reconciling work. These approaches lend themselves to simplified classification on a continuum which will be helpful for us to review.

At one extreme we have left-wing, radical revolutionaries and at the other end of the spectrum we can find hard-core, right-wing “nationalists” (or fundamentalists). One tries to tear down the prevailing order while the other tries to maintain it at all costs. In between these extremes we have a host of variations. But each approach bases its action or perspective on certain assumptions. These assumptions have to do with views on humanity and on society – not to mention more specific views about sin and about God.

Whether we articulate it or not, we all hold to some kind of belief or model of the nature of humanity. This is also true of our conceptions of society – assumptions usually even more implicit. In very practical ways we make assumptions about both areas. Both our model of humanity and our model of society predisposes each of us to certain choices

and how we will approach, for example, improving the quality of life. Understanding this influence is important to our immediate discussion about Jesus' paradoxes as well as to the practice of discipleship and the church's function in the world.

Basically, we hold to either the inherent sinfulness or the inherent goodness of humankind. Without getting into all of the ramifications of these views, let's just call the former a "**pessimistic model**" and the latter an "**optimistic model**."

We can also place most perspectives of contemporary society into either one of two general models. The first model does not assume the basic goodness of the existing social order. Nor does it automatically accept the standards of the society but invariably questions the legitimacy of existing practices and values. Thus, this model does not oppose basic changes in the existing institutions, systems or structures – especially if it is in the best interest of the people as a whole. In fact, it often finds itself in conflict with some aspect of society because it does not seek to maintain the status quo. We can call this the "**conflict model**."

The second model of society stands in contrast to the first. It is somewhat optimistic in that it basically affirms (explicitly or implicitly) the existing institutions, systems and structures of the society in effect as good. The prevailing social order is assumed to be *good* and, thus, to be maintained or upheld – though some reforms may be sought. The core practices and values of the society are accepted as the prevailing standards by which all else is measured. We can call this the "**consensus model**" because it represents a dominant (if not majority) perspective.

These models do not delineate all the variations which exist but merely provide us with very general categories. Most persons subscribe to one of them for humanity and one for society in their practice, if not also by ideology.

The two sets of models for humanity and society also closely align to one another. The optimistic model (goodness) of humanity aligns with the consensus model of society. They do not see significant reasons for humanity or society to undergo basic changes – a very optimistic or romanticized outlook. The pessimistic model (sinfulness) of humanity matches up with the conflict model of society in their more realistic assessment of the conditions of humanity and society respectively. These two both understand that basic changes are necessary if the quality of life is to be improved.

With respect to sin and evil, we would expect Christians to hold a pessimistic-conflict model combination. This is a reasonable assumption to make; ironically, that is often not the case. Other factors intervene which influence Christians to assume other models. For example, more conservative Christians would generally believe in the inherent sinfulness of humanity (a pessimistic model) while tending also to affirm (if only by silence) the basic goodness of society, especially in the U.S. (a consensus model). On the other hand, more liberal Christians may not believe in humanity's inherent sinfulness (optimistic model) but do not necessarily assume that basic goodness for society (conflict model).

Since holding to one model of humanity or society does not mean that one automatically embraces the other model aligning to it, four different combinations of models are possible here. Each combination of models of humanity and society exert a

particular influence on choices we make and the approach to mission we take. For example, we may seek basic change in only the individual but not society due to a pessimistic-consensus combination of models; or an optimistic-conflict combination seeks change only in society.

Given these assumptions we make about humanity and society as well as the influence they exert on us, let's return to the life of Jesus.

When we review Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, we are struck by the humility of this grand event. As noble as that moment was, there was a very ordinary feel to it all. Here was the King of kings. But, grandiose style and protocol were missing because Jesus was a "people's king," not a "leaders' king." He represented the simple people, not the leadership.

I call his entry a "triumph of humility." The triumph, however, was not merely because of his humility. In spite of his popular reception, Jesus was willfully entering a hostile context, knowing fully the consequences he would bear. His purpose for going into Jerusalem was not to generate support for himself but in order to open the way to reconciliation. Under these negative conditions it was a triumph because of his relational act of reconciliation. This was the redemptive relational process of equalization for which Christ came to this earth.

As a people's king, Jesus brought forth a whole new approach to life to transform the quality of it. Essentially, the Jews in his day were looking for a political messiah, one who would assume control, reign and champion the nation forth. In Jesus this political messiah is replaced with the humble son of man, the suffering servant who was despised; yet, don't focus on these images but on their relational function. Throughout the Gospels we see the conflict of the presumptions of messianic hope with the equalizing relational nature of Jesus' life and teachings.

Jesus did not come to assume political control in an exercise of power relations. He came for reconciliation between God and his creation, and for his creation to be reconciled to each other – the outworking of the relational progression. Reconciliation, however, did not mean merely good relations in general, as previously discussed, but to do away with the barriers of hostility in bad relations to restore communion. Specifically, that is the barrier of hostility from sin.

Since Jesus was a people's king, his approach to relationships did not misuse his authority or power. To the contrary, his approach humbly assumed responsibility for broken relations. He took the initiative to enter the hostile context in order to open the way to reconciliation. This is the essence of God's grace. Power relations is clearly replaced by the ministry of reconciliation.

Consequently, the power we see exerted by Jesus was not for political ends, or any other self-interest agenda. That is not to say that it didn't engage a political process. There was no way to avoid that. But *the use of power by Jesus was for the purpose to heal*. This purpose is important to keep in focus.

Returning to his triumphant entry, we read that "the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen" (Lk. 19:37). This miraculous power was not political power per se but healing power; so they rallied around Jesus for this healing work of power.

Yet, how do we understand this approach of reconciliation in light of his physically forceful cleansing of the temple as well as his statement about not coming to bring peace but a sword? How do we look at human relations, healing and peace given other aspects in the life and teachings of Jesus?

The Outcome of Reconciliation

In Jesus' triumph of humility we see the full glory of God in his heart, his intimate relational nature and his vulnerable presence demonstrated. As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept openly over it (Lk.19:41; cf. Is.22:4). His deep feelings could not be contained and compassion for God's creation overflowed. In that poignant moment he said: "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace" (19:42).

It would be helpful at this point to consider: with what models of humanity and society do you think Jesus approached Jerusalem? What would he have done if he held different models?

"What would bring you peace?" The focus here is on *what belongs to peace*. This is a crucial area for discussion that is often overlooked, even by Christians who are a part of any peace movement. There is plenty of discussion on how to bring about peace. Yet, little is said about the details of what peace truly is, what belongs to peace. We make assumptions about the definition of peace as well as assumptions that those who use the term all have the same understanding of peace. Yet, in his farewell address to his disciples just prior to his crucifixion, Jesus clearly distinguished the peace he brought and gave from what the world gives (Jn.14:27).

In the classical Greek sense peace is looked upon as the opposite of war. However, the NT does not take its meaning of peace from this source. The NT concept of peace is an extension from the OT and of the Hebrew *shalom*. The opposite of *shalom* is any disturbance to the well-being of the community. In other words, peace is not the *absence* of something (like conflict) but the *presence* of something.

Throughout the Bible *the primary concept of peace is wholeness and well-being*. Peace is a general well-being which has both an individual dimension and a corporate/collective dimension. This wholeness extends to all aspects of our living and by necessity includes salvation and the end times but certainly is not limited to the latter. All of this is what must be present for peace. This is what belongs to peace.

Such peace, then, can only belong to the new order of life as God ordained and as Jesus Christ fulfilled by his life, death and resurrection. In reconciling his creation to God, Christ brought forth a new creation of which we, individually and corporately, are a part. And the authentic "peacemakers" (re: the seventh beatitude, Gk. *eirenopoios*, a reconciler, Mt.5:9) are those for whom this new life is a reality, thus are called the sons and daughters of God.

This new relational reality has already begun for those in Christ, resulting in our wholeness, well-being, though it still awaits final fulfillment. But, in order to be a part of this new creation and order of life, we must go through a process of redemption. God has

been working out this plan of redemption for his creation (humankind and the world) through the course of history. Thus, we understand that what God is deeply and so intimately concerned about is restoring his creation to wholeness, well-being. Corporately that fundamentally involves being his family. He sent his Son to pay the price for this redemption and to take away the barrier of hostility between us for this reconciliation.

For authentic peace, God is not concerned about the mere absence of conflict. This alone does not bring people together, nor is it sufficient to bring about a new order, a new creation. That is, this alone will not result in wholeness, well-being. For these we must turn to the work of redemption; the new does not emerge without liberation from the old. Thus, generally and soteriologically, peace is grounded in God's work of redemption.

Likewise, for authentic reconciliation, God is not concerned about mere harmony in relationships. Good relations in God's plan for his creation are not reflected in the absence of negative activity. They are directly tied into wholeness. This wholeness involves a distinct newness in relationships that involves an open heart and the intimate relational involvement of family love in the process of equalization. Transformed relationships are intimate and equalized relationships. As a qualifier, however, only in a corollary sense does peace describe interpersonal relationships. Foremost, peace involves the condition of wholeness – the wholeness and well-being of the total new order, the new creation as the whole of God's family. This is the relational outcome of reconciliation, the ministry of reconciliation. Each act of reconciliation (and peacemaking) must work toward this end, if, in reality, it is going to be reconciling. So, reconciliation is predicated on redemption. In understanding this, not only our theology but our practice as well must reflect it.

The Process of Reconciliation

It is from this perspective that we need to look at human relations, peace and healing. From this position we are also better able to understand some of the apparent paradoxes in Jesus' life and teaching.

Jesus, with the limitless power of God at his disposal, contained and directed his power for the purpose *to heal*. In doing so, there were times he gave the appearance of being weak and of human imperfection. Certainly, he could have asserted his power to greater personal advantage (e.g., at his arrest, Mt.26:53). Instead, Jesus spent a lot of his time healing; more than situational, this became his occupation. As we know, his healing was a source of much debate and conflict. So extensive was this the case that he was told on numerous occasions to stop healing. As Jesus continued his healing, the strength of opposition grew.

Why? Of course, there were other issues involved in the opposition to Jesus, yet, healing really represented the sum and substance of all the conflict. *By healing, Jesus was engaged in the process of restoring* – restoring God's creation to some aspect of wholeness, well-being. To restore meant much more than to mend, to fix or to reform, essentially to return something to its commonly existing condition. *To restore to*

wholeness involves a change from the existing condition. Therefore, to heal means essentially to change – from old to new.

This is not about just any type of change. To restore to wholeness involves **redemptive change**. Certainly, not all so-called positive change is redemptive change; and sometimes what appears to be negative change (especially to those with an optimistic model of humanity or a consensus model of society) is, in fact, redemptive change. *The determining factor for redemptive change is the wholeness to which something is being restored.* Wholeness, well-being is a creation of God only. By necessity, God is the one to define the nature of that wholeness. From our finite position, our understanding of the wholeness of something is often incomplete. Nevertheless, even without the total picture, the truths of biblical culture provide sufficient understanding of wholeness, especially in the relational context and process of the relational progression.

In the new life order and the new creation instituted by Christ we have the beginnings of understanding what wholeness involves (what belongs to peace), though it is far from complete. The primary aspects of it involve the importance of the whole person and the highest priority given to the relationships necessary to be whole. In these we have a more than adequate basis to engage in the redemptive relational process of restoring. Therefore, the work for reconciliation necessitates dealing with our attitude and approach to *change* – the change basic and necessary for this purpose.

The world sees reconciliation as bringing together parties engaged in some type of conflict. It brings parties together, however, not to form the wholeness designed and created by God. Rather, it often brings parties together based on the prevailing values, mind-set or worldview of their context or time. In this way it seeks in effect to maintain, uphold or restore the status quo. Basic change is not seen as necessary; optimistic and consensus models have this perception of change. And, like the medical model, it sees variation from the status quo as deviations which need to be fixed. Wholeness is not the starting point, nor even the goal prescribed.

Authentic reconciliation, on the other hand, by necessity must involve change. Since change is often a pre-existing issue and source of tension, the process of redemptive change may require first being freed from old or existing conditions, states or order which then would allow for the relational changes necessary for reconciliation. This is the ongoing work of redemption. For example, resistance to or intolerance of others' differences always involves an underlying fear of or unwillingness to change that need redemption, initial healing. Christ redeemed us not only to be free from the old but also to change to the new. These are aspects of the same total process – both necessary and inseparable.

Ministers of reconciliation are *not* agents of the status quo. They are ambassadors of Christ (representative of the Father as his) and, therefore, agents of redemptive change – the change necessary to bring complete reconciliation that results in the wholeness and well-being that God designed and created and that Christ brings to the world. For the integrity of this process, it is necessary to make this distinction with the status quo because many times Christ's disciples need to be in conflict with it, just as he was. That's why it is also imperative to address our worldview and approach to the existing order.

Redemptive Reconciliation

Redemptive change involves restoring God's creation to wholeness. If we were to focus only on reconciliation in this process, we would find ourselves approaching situations differently. This is particularly true if we limit reconciliation to harmony of relations.

For example, reexamine the temple situation which Jesus faced. On the surface, his actions certainly don't seem like an act of reconciliation. If anything, it was divisive to the religious community – action more in line with his statement about bringing a sword, not peace. Yet, Jesus was not contentious in what he was doing, he was redeeming. This is a crucial distinction to understand. To look at this situation only from a limited standpoint of reconciliation would invariably lead us on a course of action different from Jesus' action.

For this reason we cannot separate reconciliation from redemption. *Reconciliation is predicated on redemption* and, consequently, its ministry must include the work of redemption.

Restoration to wholeness necessitates first setting something free from its existing old condition so that it can be restored to the new order and creation of God. This release through the payment of a price is what is called redemption. To redeem is a rigorous process for us since it required the death of Jesus. Redemptive work is firm and uncompromising when the basic rights and inherent integrity of God's creation are violated; and at times it can appear contentious.

With this in mind let's go back to the temple situation. What did Jesus see there? Essentially, he saw the temple prostituted. This was not merely an institution created by God; it was the functional dwelling of God for the purpose of all peoples to have communion with him. The rights of the people and the integrity of God's house were being violated, denying access for the disadvantaged to be involved with God.

What would you do about this situation? You could pray, or negotiate with the leaders, or have a protest demonstration, or be silent – or attempt to liberate the temple. In this apparent paradox, Jesus was not concerned about reconciliation in terms of harmonious relations with the abusers of the temple. At the same time he didn't set aside reconciliation. He sought the restoration of God's house. For this to be possible, however, it had to be freed from its existing condition or order. His actions reflect the redemptive change necessary for wholeness, well-being. In this dynamic process redemption is inseparable from reconciliation.

I don't completely understand the violent mode of his actions. But I do understand the necessity of his action to engage his purpose in the redemptive relational process. Redemptive work has to be firm and uncompromising when the basic rights and inherent integrity of God's creation are violated.

It's obvious how Jesus' approach to the existing order would differ from those who embrace a consensus model of society. Since a consensus model assumes a basic goodness about the existing conditions or order, it does not seek basic change. For Jesus, redemptive change was basic to all he did. On the other hand, his goal was not to tear down an existing, sinful order. So, how does Jesus' approach differ from those who hold only a conflict model of society as do so-called liberationists or revolutionaries?

For Jesus, peace is an order established by the God of true peace. While peace is

opposed to disorder, it is opposed even more importantly to existing sinful orders which need to be redeemed. Yet, Jesus never forsook reconciliation whenever he worked for redemption because he always acted in the redemptive relational process. We must also keep in mind that juxtaposed with the temple incident is his pacification at his arrest and his intercession at his crucifixion (“*Father, forgive them*”). Both of these actions are directed on behalf of his enemies.

Redemption of the temple by Jesus, then, was only part of the process. Entering a context that was hostile toward him, he was bringing about reconciliation through redemption. His actions were redemptive *and* reconciling; and reconciliation does not promote *adversary relations*, though aspects of the total process can appear contentious and cause conflict.

These are important distinctions from a historic conflict model approach. Reconciliation has enemies but seeks to minimize them. Reconciliation speaks the truth that offends but relationally seeks to heal and restore. Power relations are replaced by the healing process while the barriers of hostility between parties are being removed. These actions change the character of a conflict model approach and even an approach which limits its work to redemption. All of this reflects the reconciling nature of God’s love: initiating family love by vulnerable involvement with us to restore us to him as his and his family.

By incorporating redemption with reconciliation, we are better able to avoid the excesses or lacks which could happen in emphasizing only one of them – practices, by the way, which could also find us in sin, anywhere from its direct instigation to indirect complicity. To move toward the wholeness, well-being of the new order of life created by God and relationally constituted by Jesus requires that the work of redemption and the ministry of reconciliation be interacting in the singular process of God’s eschatological plan for his creation and his mission to the world. This is the relational process of **redemptive reconciliation**. This total process helps us also to better understand what belongs to peace and what Jesus fulfilled in the relational progression.

Peace is an issue of reconciliation, which is predicated on redemption – all of which operate within the relational context and process of following Jesus in the relational progression. Therefore, what belongs to peace is the kind of mission not influenced by discrimination (e.g., power relations, systems of inequality), limited by provincialism (e.g., ethnocentrism, nationalism), nor diminished by reductionism (e.g., defining the person from outer-in and relationships without intimacy). Peace sustains the sanctity of all life in what God defines as wholeness and well-being – the intimate relationship of being his and his family.

The Church’s Challenge

Christ’s commission to the church to “make disciples” and “call to repentance” clearly takes us well beyond traditional evangelism. The church’s posture and function in the world involve the redemptive relational process which engages the church more deeply in the lives of persons than may be desired – by both persons in the world as well as even in the church. This tension is essentially guaranteed because the church’s involvement in public life breaches both secular “comfort zones” and Christian “comfort

zones.” That is, it does when defined by biblical culture and not made ambiguous or shallow by reductionist influences from surrounding cultures.

Yet, it should be understood that the primary discomfort about the church’s practice in public is really not about *what it does* but about *how it is involved*. Jesus’ relational progression, for example, redefines evangelism within the relational context and process of family love. As rigorous as this can be at times, *agape* love is not focused on what to do, only on how to be relationally involved. Such involvement affirms both the integrity and dignity of every person and the primacy of interpersonal relationships within the relational context of God’s design and purpose. His desires, fulfilled first by Christ, for such involvement by his people **make love the single most important quality practiced in the church’s purpose as equalizer – within itself and within the world.** No other action, no activity, proclamation, institution or propositional truth can substitute for the relational involvement of love. Yet, in actual practice this intimate involvement makes many persons uncomfortable, too vulnerable. Thus, in function the *involvement* of love (not the *deeds* of love) is often avoided, redefined, distorted, compromised or denied by reductionist alternatives and substitutes.

This tension is compounded when the world reacts to the church’s functional presence – reactions ranging from rejection to persecution. Under such conditions it is always simpler to let the *light* become ambiguous and the *salt* become shallow. It is more difficult to pursue justice than, for example, to maintain the separation between church and state, more costly to apply biblical social ethics, for example, to the global “marketplace,” harder to extend mercy and compassion, for example, to urban needs, problems, issues. Yet, this is not about what to do regardless of the consequences. It is still about how to be relationally involved with family love in the relational progression.

Faced with hardships and suffering, the early church was challenged to continue the redemptive relational process. Since their involvement was based in the relational progression, situations and circumstances did not signify the status of this progression. Its relational significance was constituted by the covenant of God and his eschatological plan. Eschatology (for relationship, not doctrine) provided the framework for a functional, secure hope necessary to encourage early church practice in difficult conditions (cf. Peter’s line of thought, 1 Pet. 1: 3-4,13; 4:12-13; 5:10). In the *parousia*, the relational progression is brought to ultimate conclusion, the relational outcome of family love is secured, and this assures his family that they are his and have a permanent place of belonging in his family.

Not only in the future, but also in the present process, this relational progression is ongoingly constituted by the Father’s covenant love and covenant faithfulness; and it is being brought to complete fulfillment by the current relational work of his Spirit.

The Father’s ongoing relational involvement with his people comes with the reciprocal relational responsibility to be involved with him and for him. This is what family love is. As those redeemed and adopted for reconciliation as the Father’s very own daughters and sons permanently belonging to his family, all his adopted children now have the family responsibility (and “legal obligation”) to represent their Father before others and to extend his family. Just as his Son fulfilled his purpose “to reveal the Father to the world” (Jn. 17:6,26), the church as his family is given this privileged purpose to continue to reveal the Father to the world. This is made functional only in the intimate relational context of being one with him as family (just as in the Trinity) and is made

operational only in the relational process of family love (even as the Father loves the Son). This is Jesus' prayer for the purpose and practice of his followers in the world (Jn.17:21-23).

This family love is the only qualitative substance, the only distinguishing characteristic in the church which reveals the Father. The relational involvement of family love – with which he first vulnerably involved himself with us and continues to be involved with us – establishes the church's purpose (within itself and within the world) deeply into the relational progression, and relationally works with his Spirit to bring his eschatological plan to completion.

This means in practice the church is not just a refuge *from* the world. It must be the agent *in* the world which brings the Jesus alternative and means of life *for* the world. It cannot do this *in absentia* or by proxy, nor can it function this way while being *of* the world or defined *by* the world. These nuances with the world are important to differentiate the reductionist alternatives and substitutes. This is not a matter of a goal or a program; it is only a function of relationships – the relational work of family love vulnerably extended to others by his family. With its own flesh the church must be *into* the world to relationally connect with the people who need the alternative for life or are hurting for the means to live quality of life. This is the new life of the transformed church living in transformed persons involved in transformed relationships. Even the individual disciple (however gifted and resourceful) cannot alone adequately express this relational reality. By its intimate life together as family the church provides the world with the model and the means for the new life restored to its ultimate design and purpose.

The approach a church takes to fulfill its purpose *to* the world is directly influenced by its models of humanity and society respectively. Likewise, how a church perceives the world, what it pays attention to and what it ignores, is determined by its cultural perceptual framework. The Scriptures, particularly the narratives Jesus, cannot be reduced to merely a belief system. It provides us with the biblical cultural perceptual framework for how we need to see the world, humanity, society and what approach the church needs to fulfill its purpose.

When the church as equalizer embodies this nature of mission and the extent of its scope, the church practices a particular approach to society and the world. Fundamentally, this approach is tension or conflict with sin and evil at all levels of human life – micro and macro. Functionally, this involves active prophetic engagement of prevailing contexts and ongoing relational involvement with our “neighbors.”

The early followers in Acts did not defer to its socio-religious context. If a community of believers had been under such influence, it would have lost its purpose and function. Thus, as it served in *politeia*, it often was in conflict with other sectors of society. For example, when Paul redeemed an abused slave girl who was generating a great deal of money for her owners, they accused Paul and Silas of radically disrupting the prevailing customs of Roman citizens (Acts 16:16-39). As a result, Paul and Silas were severely beaten without a trial and thrown into prison – unlawful treatment of Roman citizens. Since their civil rights had been violated, Paul was not silent or passive about it but demanded accountability from the town's magistrates before he would leave the prison.

Two other examples in Acts 17 and 19 highlight the church's conflict with prevailing contexts. In the first situation, the conflict was with the Jews in Thessalonica.

Yet, it was not over religious truth but with the Jews' vested interest: influential power (17:4-5). The second situation is even more interesting (19:23-41). The issue raised ostensibly could be taken as religious truth and freedom. Here again, the driving motivation was to protect a vested interest: in this case, money. The local craftsmen would incur a great economic loss if Christianity kept gaining influence. In these examples, both groups strongly felt threatened by the church's intrusive *politeia*; and they engaged in conflict with the church in order not to lose their power, privilege or prestige. So, they had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo because they benefitted from the existing system or structure without competition. Despite the conflict, the early church was not deterred in its purpose.

The tension or conflict associated with the transformed church's purpose is either initiated by its confrontation of sin or is created by others because of the threat of its mission. In either case, it has relational significance to inequalities and people threatened by any changes in the way things are. Because of the vested interests that advantaged people have, for example, in any vertical order of relationships, they are very resistant to change.

Vested interests by a church in *the ways things are* can be destructive to its purpose. They make us susceptible to a selective approach to Scripture – the tendency to take what we want and ignore or de-emphasize what we don't. This is particularly true for our perceptions of discipleship, where consistent obedience is the exception and not the rule. To embrace, however, the biblical culture and the purpose in the new life order is to divest ourselves of these old ways and any vested interests in the old order usually involving aspects of power, privilege or prestige. Authentic discipleship needs to relinquish a "status quo theology" and to function in the world as agents of redemption and reconciliation, agents of healing and change.

The Acts of the Apostles witnesses to this ongoing conflict with the world but also to the relational means, the experiential joy and the heart-level hope of the intimately shared life together of God's family. This new kinship family is important for us to grasp in the total relational process of mission in the new order. The early church made the nature of mission as a **redeemed system of equality** functional in its own midst whereby every person was vitally interrelated to each other as full family, without distinctions. This gave witness to the world of the authentic living alternative to systems of inequality. It is a model, however imperfect, of the kingdom of God and how the new creation in Christ lives. In its very life operationalized by family love, it is both confronting to the old and the hope for the new.

Furthermore, the intimate shared life together as family is also an essential support base for all who would undertake this mission. Since the Father's purpose is not an individualized one, until our mission practice is an expression and extension of his kinship family, we are denied the second of only two major means of support which the Father provides for his people to fulfill his purpose (the first being his Spirit). Without this support base, serving in the apostolic, prophetic, even pastoral functions can easily result in burned out, dried up, frustrated, angry or wounded disciples. We observe this, for example, in the many who entered various Christian causes with concern and enthusiasm, only to come away too needy or discouraged to continue. This group includes a growing number of pastors. Yet, this "occupational hazard" is a deficiency of relational involvement in which needs and feelings are not being attended to in the whole

person as well as life not adequately being shared together in intimate relationships. This is the consequence of a context where *what we do* is more important than *how we are involved relationally*.

As demonstrated vulnerably by Jesus in the relational progression, the Father's purpose is engaged only with the relational involvement of family love. This is the transformed church's ongoing relational experience within itself and the relational reality it extends to the world. Yet, though the "all nations" aspect of Christ's commission is nondiscriminating, there is an apparent sense in which the church as equalizer is partial. This happens when the church extends family love to the poor or the alien or the disadvantaged. These are the discounted, the dispossessed, the oppressed for whom God has a special affection. These are the lowest strata of systems of inequality which God seeks especially to equalize. God is always involved in loving downward.

For those who have been equalized as his very own family, the reciprocal relational responsibility is on the church to heal broken and depersonalized relationships, to work in restoring God's wholeness and well-being. Throughout the world churches are confronted with this challenge in their own "neighborhood," face to face with their "neighbors," especially in the city. Regardless of where this purpose is engaged, the world urgently awaits the **church as equalizer**.

Discipleship for the World

The discipleship practiced and experienced within the transformed church as equalizer is the discipleship expressed and extended to the world. Following Jesus in the relational progression as the Father's and his family involves us with the world in the redemptive relational process operationalized by family love. This relational process of discipleship ongoingly needs to work directly for change (within itself as well as in the world) and, thus, to function in the world as agents of redemptive reconciliation, not maintaining the status quo. By confrontation of sin and relational involvement with those affected by it, this redemptive work seeks to restore wholeness and well-being to persons and relationships by reconciliation to the Father's desires and purpose.

In this practice of discipleship, the Father is genuinely represented and vulnerably revealed to the world, and his desires to build his family are lovingly shared – "*so that the world may believe . . . to let the world know.*"

Consider

Unlike the early disciples, most Christians' introduction to discipleship does not precede their involvement with church. This is problematic if the practice of that church does not emerge from following Jesus in the relational progression. The expectations many churches place on their members are rather insignificant compared to what Jesus expected of his followers. Thus, we need to examine where our discipleship comes from and what exactly determines what in our practice.

For Jesus, discipleship precedes church. While the apostolic church didn't exist before Christ's ascension, Jesus already constituted the embryonic church with followers

intimately involved with him in the relational progression. Authentic church formation cannot happen prior to the progression of intimate relational involvement with the Father as his very own and together with one another as his family. This is God's paradigm based on his design and purpose for his creation, his covenant with his people, his revelation of himself in his Son to fulfill the new covenant with family love and his ongoing vulnerable relational work by his Spirit to complete it. Theology and practice which do not account for God's paradigm result in fragmenting the *whole* of God's desires, purpose and eschatological plan. The relational consequence is a reductionist substitute.

As the relational progression, discipleship is the integration of this relational spirituality with community (fellowship of believers, communion of God's people, the new kinship family of God) in the relational process of family love. How the church lives within itself and out in the world is the relational work of this transformed family process. By necessity then, the life of the church in public involves the three major issues of all practice we've discussed in the course of this study. And we should clearly understand in examining these three issues that how a church presents itself in public, what it communicates to the world and the level of relationship it engages with others cannot be in substance a witness beyond what it practices within itself.

14

“Do You Love Me?”

John 21:16

When Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection, he told her to go back to his family and tell them “*I am returning to my Father and your Father*” (Jn.20:17). His earthly stay was coming to a close, but not before he fully established the relational progression from his Father and for his Father. His relational work in the incarnation also established his followers in the relational progression to the Father to be equalized from enslavement-to-friend-to *become his and his family*. Discipleship is this redemptive relational process of following Jesus in the relational progression. Yet, has Jesus revealed enough of his person (and thus his Father) in the incarnation to follow, so that we can truly be called his family, and his Father called our Father?

Yes and no. No, in that the relational progression is not completed in its functional fulfillment; its functional completion is the cooperative relational work of his Spirit. Yes, in the fact that Jesus vulnerably operationalized the relational context and process of the progression to his Father for us to be directly and intimately involved; in other words, God’s paradigm for his people was fully revealed as was the means to live it.

The transition from his physical departure to the arrival of his Spirit was a crucial time for his first disciples – particularly for Peter. “Yes and no” needed to be grasped if their discipleship was to continue in this relational progression. Jesus instructed them further about the “no” just prior to his ascension (Acts 1:4,8). The “yes” was more deeply examined in the sensitive interaction Jesus had with Peter.

“*Do you love me?*” From our initial discussion (in Chapter 1) of this interaction, it was identified that Jesus pursued Peter because he was not grasping something. Jesus wasn’t asking him for information about his love but only about the relationship and his level of intimate relational involvement. As we revisit their exchange, we further need to connect Jesus’ question with his statement (“*feed my sheep*” or “*take care of my sheep*”), and both to his imperative (“*Follow me*”).

Since *agape* love is about “how to be involved relationally” and not about “what to do,” this suggests that Jesus’ statement (“*feed*” or “*take care of my sheep*”) was not about what Peter should do as a leader of the church. Rather, it was about how to be involved with the Father as his and with his family. It was characteristic of Peter to initiate independent action as if he were in the lead. Though Peter acted with good intentions, this was not sufficient to follow Jesus. He didn’t want Peter’s service nor what Peter could do for him, even with *phileo*. He wanted Peter’s whole person and the relational involvement of his person. This required of Peter: (1) to follow Jesus in the relational progression and not to stop at individual relationship with him, and thus (2) to be relationally involved with the Father as his and with his family in intimate interdependent relationships and (3) further function in his reciprocal relational responsibility without distinctions.

Jesus connected love for him (by intimate relational involvement) with taking

care of his family (“sheep”) by the relational involvement of family love. Yet, Peter needed to grasp that this family love can only be operationalized in the relational context and process of following Jesus in the relational progression. Otherwise, the practice of discipleship is merely individualized and stops short in the relational progression.

Peter’s tendency was to define himself by what he did, thus he paid more attention to secondary matter from the outer-in. This made it difficult at various times for Peter even to focus on what was important about Jesus – his person and intimate relationship with him. This happened again in this interaction when Peter was distracted by seeing John and comparing his circumstances. This reflected a mind-set which made distinctions not yet equalized as family. Thus, Jesus emphatically had to refocus Peter on the relational involvement of following him. This is the relational imperative.

Yet, Peter effectively functioned on a more individual basis. Even in his rigorous experience of following Jesus, this suggests his tendency to stop short in the relational progression. Before his departure Jesus wanted Peter to grasp the “yes” of his incarnation, he wanted Peter to be established in God’s paradigm for the new life. With the question of “love,” the statement of “feed,” the imperative of “follow,” Jesus integrates spirituality (intimate relational involvement with God) with the corporate process of interdependent intimate relationships as his family in the practice of family love.

The relational message vital for all his followers to understand in “*Do you love me?*” is: my whole person is very important to him and he wants my deep relational involvement. The relational message in “*feed my sheep*” is: I am a full member of his family and he wants me to experience new life together as his family. The relational message in “*follow me*” is: his person is the most important and nothing is more important than ongoing intimate relationship with him. These are the messages he incarnated from the Father, and the “yes” he wants us to grasp, to embrace, to be involved with him.

Authentic discipleship is following Jesus in the relational progression together with his Spirit who brings it to completion. If our practice (individually and corporately) is to be relationship-specific (person to person) and to have relational significance (heart to heart) to God, then our practice needs to function in this redemptive relational process of discipleship as his new kinship family.

Revelation or Reduction: Our Accountability

In the incarnation Jesus revealed more than his character for us to conform to; more importantly, he vulnerably exposed his person for us to be relationally involved *with*. His life didn’t give us a model to follow, but he intimately opened access to the relational context and process for us to be relationally involved *in*. When discipleship becomes following the model of Christ or conforming to his character, it becomes a reductionist alternative.

Jesus said to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount that what we are and practice (“righteousness”) must qualitatively exceed the reductionists (Mt.5:20). Likewise, he said our identity as “the light” and our function as “the salt” cannot be

reduced, or they will become ambiguous and shallow (5:13-16). Reductionist influence and alternatives are always in constant conflict with God's desires for his people – whether they are forms of individualism, legalism, institutionalism, rationalism or postmodernism. Jesus continuously leads his followers to the next level of new life in the relational progression, while Satan is constantly promoting reductionist Christian practice.

The writer of Hebrews approached this tension from another angle. Addressing persons who at this stage of their Christian life should have been much more developed, mature, even teaching others, the writer appears frustrated that they continued to live on “milk,” not “solid food” (Heb.5:11-14). The writer wanted to address so much more of Christ's purpose and function, so the following challenge was issued: “let us stop going over the basics about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding. Surely we don't need to start all over again with the importance of turning away from evil deeds and placing our faith in God” (Heb.6:1, NLT). This becomes the issue of what is more palatable for popular Christian practice. Reductionism prevents us from the meat of discipleship and keeps us focused on the less substantive practice of milk.

Yet, as John clearly defined at the beginning of his Gospel, the full revelation of God's glory became incarnate with Jesus in the relational progression (Jn.1:14,18). We are accountable for all of his revelation (without reduction) and to be intimately involved in all of the relational progression without stopping and without distinctions (1:10-13) – the popular use of verse 12 notwithstanding.

This study attempts to formulate discipleship based on a whole Christology (including between the manger and the cross) and a full soteriology (what Christ saved us *to* as well as saved us *from*). This puts the focus on Jesus in the proper relational context and process of the relational progression, just as Jesus did with Peter. Yet, as Peter demonstrated, how free we are to respond to him depends on our perceptual framework (e.g., quantitative reductionist or qualitative relational), and whether our perceptions of Christ predispose us to place him in a context different from his revelation – namely, the prevailing context of a popular Christ, more palatable and less threatening.

The influence of a quantitative perceptual framework of reductionism predisposes us, creates biases and forms a mind-set which essentially determine what we pay attention to and what we will ignore. Certainly, the relational perspective formulated by the qualitative perceptual framework also predisposes, biases and develops a mind-set. The crucial difference, however, in these two frameworks is whether the lens (or filter) to view life that each perceptual framework provides either distorts or sharpens reality, clouds or clarifies the truth. Reductionist alternatives distort and cloud, while the relational context and process of the relational progression sharpens and clarifies.

Since Jesus incarnated God's glory and vulnerably revealed his Father to us, we are accountable: like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk.24:25,31), to *see* his person; like Thomas and Philip (Jn.14:7,9), to *know* him intimately; like Peter, to be intimately involved with his person in the relational progression.

Discipleship must (*dei*, by its nature) be perceived and practiced on his terms revealed in the incarnation, for which we are completely accountable – without reduction and without substitution.

Summary

When the process of discipleship is contextualized by biblical culture, particularly the narratives of Jesus, it must function in the following contexts:

1. Following Jesus in his revealed context of the relational progression.
2. Involvement in the intimate relational context with him and thus with his Father as his.
3. Sharing life together without distinctions in the corporate relational context of his family.
4. Extending family love in the context of the world.

Identity formation develops for his followers *together* in this redemptive relational process. It is the only identity that has relational significance to the Father. Thus, Jesus faces each of us – “*Do you love me?*”

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