

**Essay for Tomorrow:**

## **What's Next?**

### **A New Future or Repeating the Past**

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## Essay for Tomorrow:

# What's Next? A New Future or Repeating the Past

As the last days of 2020 are cycling, the end of this year is going to be far from over—not everlasting but long-lasting. 2020 will only pivot in apparent celebrations at 11:59pm, December 31<sup>st</sup>. Few of us have likely experienced a more historic year, and its effects will be simply uncertain to predict. We have seen the best in persons and the worst, which may be amplified in what is witnessed in the future.

Now that the United States' epic election is over, we can add that scene (though incomplete) to the current chapter of the human drama. I'm tempted to let out a great sigh of relief, but then reality gains control. How many other scenes (personal or public) can you also add to fill in our chapter of this drama? Are there harbingers pointing to what's next to come?

Those of us living in California (my wife and I in southern), in 2020 have experienced record-breaking wildfires, extensive heat waves and the worst air quality in our history annals—all compounding the COVID-19 pandemic, not to mention our economic woes. Besides the physical toll these conditions have had on our nation, we can't forget the emotional stress and pain they have had on us, which now includes experiencing *election stress disorder*. Yet, a common thread that ties together these scenes in our conversation is how politicized all these issues have become in public discourse.

Politics, of course, is a necessary part, and thus way, of life that maintains the human order. Whether that human order sustains the order created by God, however, has always been a critical issue in human history. We even have to ask to what extent existing politics even reflects the created human order.

The human order created by God involves politics, on the one hand, while on the other hand it is inherently not *politicized*. That is, this human order does not include a political spectrum, therefore it is neither amenable to nor subject to any political views that don't at the very least reflect God's order for human life. When the human order is politicized—as observed today both locally and globally—the human order is reduced to the fragmenting chapters (both present and past) of the human drama. And partisan politics unavoidably keeps reflecting, reinforcing and sustaining our human condition.

So, what's next now that the election is over and 2020 closes? Will we pivot into a new future or merely recycle by repeating the past? Stepping forward into the new or stepping back and falling into the old are crossroad issues that all Christians need both to account for in our way of life and be responsible for in everyday life. Therefore, we

personally and collectively as church must face the following: (1) give account of where are we going from here on, and (2) be responsible for what are we going to do in our daily way of life—questions needing real and not ideal answers.

## **The Certainty of Uncertainty vs. the Uncertainty of Certainty**

Most, if not all, Christians subscribe to some level of hope composed from their faith. The significance of this hope is measured less by its theological validity and more by how it influences our everyday life in reality, not in spiritual ideals. Some Christians use Jeremiah 29:11 as their reference for hope, which always challenges them during times of uncertainty. Others experience degrees of “hope deferred makes the heart sick, *weary, anxious, dissatisfied*” (Prov 15:22), and thus they redefine their hope in what “is seen” (Rom 8:24). This raises the critical issue for what’s next in life: the tension and conflict between ‘the certainty of uncertainty’ and ‘the uncertainty of certainty’, and their competing influence on our daily lives.

As we enter into the uncertainty of the days ahead, Christians need to honestly account for their hope in everyday life and openly address where they place their hope from day to day. Whether we are aware of it or not, admit to it or not, Christian hope can become politicized, and current partisan politics among Christians is a prime indicator that it indeed has. How all this plays out in what’s next for Christians, regardless of our theology, will determine the identity of our faith and its significance in daily life. As the writer of Hebrews made definitive, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Heb 11:1, NIV). On the basis of our personal faith, therefore, are we moving forward to a new future or are we set on duplicating the past?

Some Christians have faith in the process of science for the certainty of human progress. Others put their hope in single-issue politics (notably abortion) and have faith in the uncertainty (such as human fallibility) of those who promote such a policy. Still others try to balance the certainty-uncertainty of where they place their hope for everyday life and what they put their faith in daily. And some work on integrating their faith and hope on the basis of the primary of life by integrally subordinating and integrating what’s secondary in life to its primacy as defined only by God. What all these persons need to distinguish is certainty from uncertainty.

Right now what’s next is uncertain—that is, the immediate future is unpredictable, no matter what we believe and hope for. Yet, consider these examples: health science predicts with certainty the uncertainty of the pandemic, as cases rise to record heights and a vaccine is on the horizon; and climate scientists predict the certainty of climate change and its outcome on the uncertain state of the environment; pro-lifers act with certainty that abortion decimates human life, even at the expense of the uncertain quality of human life deteriorated by neglect of other life issues; some Christians and churches proclaim the certainty of individual freedom and religious liberty, while having

no certainty about their impact on each other and others to reinforce and sustain the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. So, what's certain and what's uncertain? And how certain would you be about your answer?

What's next for us will be largely determined by what we consider certain and uncertain; and, as Christians more than anyone else, we are responsible for sorting out the difference between them without bias, then accountable for their outcomes.

Many claim that their view on life matters/issues is true and thus has certainty. This certainty, however, does not insure that the source of their information and position is based on certainty. In the cyber world of today dominated by the internet, misinformation and disinformation have become a new normal, in which many put their faith blindly and base their hope without scrutiny. Therefore, without the credible certainty of the source, the views concluded are nothing more than *opinion*, the nature of which always bears the uncertainty of truth and making any truth-claims without valid basis. Accordingly, Christians have to examine their views in everyday life and their beliefs about daily life, in order to understand if they are in reality subscribing to **the certainty of uncertainty**.

Christians would not dispute that Jesus is the source of truth and thus has certainty, which he embodied in his way and life (Jn 14:6). Many, however, experience or fall into an uncertainty of his certainty in his way of life, emerging especially during adversity or hardship. Jesus' main disciples were no different. When he vulnerably revealed to them the whole truth of his person, they had uncertainty about the certainty of Jesus (Jn 14:6-10). Jesus didn't expect them to have blind faith in his source as truth, or to base their hope for what's next without scrutiny. He stated with objective clarity: "Believe me [i.e. relational trust]...or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves (Jn 14:11, cf. 10:25-26,38). The certainty of the Word—both embodied then and palpable now—has no greater and deeper counterpart, whatever the uncertainty of what's next. Therefore, the credible certainty of his source is irreplaceable for **this uncertainty of the certainty**, which Christians today are both confronted with to claim and challenged by to proclaim.

Distinguishing the uncommon peace Jesus brings with certainty from the uncertain peace the world gives (Jn 14:27) enables us in our uncertainty to claim his certainty in these tumultuous days. On the basis of our relational trust placed in the whole person of Jesus' certainty, we then are able to proclaim the certainty of our hope in times, conditions and experiences of uncertainty (as Peter challenges, 1 Pet 3:13-17).

Nevertheless, in everyday life Christians still turn, and even cling, to some semblance of certainty with a basis only in uncertainty—as stated earlier “hope deferred makes the heart...” This has narrowed down our faith and reduced our identity to what are essentially politicized alternatives of hope for what's next. This is not a modern phenomenon for God's people. Indeed, it emerged when Israel disputed God's governing process for their human order, whereby they demanded a king to rule over them just like

all the other nations of the world (1 Sam 8:4-20). It was Israel's politicized hope to become a nation-state, the certainty of which evolved only in irremediable uncertainty that continues to devolve today in the so-called Christian nation of the United States—which, like Israel before, is now proclaimed by contemporary Christians that God ordained.

The uncertainty of politicized hope, no matter the certainty ascribed to it, has had far-reaching repercussions on God's people before and the kingdom of God. What past consequences can be seen (and presently already exist) for what's next in Christians and churches? In the shift to the politicized hope of having a human king lead them, the source of influence on God's people becomes apparent. Politicized does not mean that they suddenly embraced politics to guide their life. Politics, as God ordained to govern the way of life of God's people, was already in force in the kingdom of God. But, this uniquely distinguished way of life was influenced by the politics of surrounding contexts (all having kings), whereby God's people shifted and favored that partisan political position. This shift may appear reasonable, if not justified—as partisan politics would claim today—based on the dominant norms of that time. What they favored, however, was uncertainty over certainty, which appeared certain by using a near-sighted lens of presumed certainty over uncertainty. The consequences are history, the lessons of which elude the awareness or understanding of Christian political engagement today.

The consequence foremost for God's people was distinct but subtle: Partisan politics became their *new religion*, in spite of their tradition or orthodox theology. Why and how? Because in their actual everyday faith practice influenced by the dominant political norm, they essentially “have rejected me, *the Lord God*, from being king over them” (1 Sam 8:7). In other words, though not readily apparent past or present, in this new religion partisan politics became their way of life, which Jesus ongoingly confronted during the incarnation and Paul contended with in the early church (e.g. 1 Cor 1:10-13; 3:1-4).

Further consequential for God's people is the uncertainty experienced in the past and relived further in the present. As narrated in the OT books of Samuel and Kings, the evolving of politics among God's people became controversial, contentious and even insidious, though perhaps not as much as today. Politics devolved as different kings didn't often follow the rule of law, that is, God's Law and not merely human law. Though the political climate certainly wasn't as partisan as today, the visible tension and distinct conflict over politics were set into motion both to define the identity and to determine the way of life for God's people—all in the presumption of certainty based on consequential uncertainty.

Christians and churches today are immediately confronted with our history and urgently challenged for what's next. Do we continue to circulate in uncertainty and repeat the misguided faith of the past, even with the certainty of good intentions? Or do we learn from this uncertainty in the past and move forward (not around) to the new future based

on the certainty constituted only by God, even in the midst of any uncertainty (personal or public) currently experienced?

## **Taking for Granted Our Theology**

Christians often take for granted that as God's people, God certainly supports them in their way of life. This certainty is further presumed notably when no disapproval is apparent from God about their views in everyday life—thus adding God's approval to their assumptions. What evolves in this process is the subtle condition that Christians take for granted their theology in their everyday way of life. What appears to have the sanction of God's Word is simply presumed to be in harmony with their theology, whereby the essential understanding from theological examination is taken for granted.

When Israel demanded a king according to the political norm of their time, they simply assumed God's sanction because God didn't deny them their request (1 Sam 8:22). Accordingly, they took for granted their theology and continued to shape their identity as God's people on the basis of this common political way of life (sound familiar?). Consequently, they didn't apply the essential theology of God's way of life to what they wrongly assumed was indicative in their now *common*-ized (no longer holy as uncommon) way of life. Without the integral clarification and correction provided by the theology that established them unequivocally as God's people, their identity could no longer be clearly distinguished as God's in (1) their way of life and (2) their faith, the everyday practice of which subtly shaped the faith of biblical theology into what amounted to a new religion.

In the early history of this reductionist process under the influence of surrounding politics, God afflicted his people or allowed them to be afflicted in this human condition. The purpose of their Father's discipline (cf. Prov 3:11-12; Heb 12:7-8) was in order that (1) they would learn and understand the depth of God's Rule of Law for the human order, and (2) thereby they would wholeheartedly embrace the full significance of the irreducible and nonnegotiable terms for God's way of life (as summarized in Ps 119:33-34, 67,71,75). Unfortunately but not surprisingly, the history of God's people reflects having to learn the hard way as they repeated theological errors and practice mistakes of the past. Sadly but not surprisingly, there were periods in church history when church leaders were just left to their own devices to bear the consequences of recycling the past in their theology and practice. There are two prominent examples that provide significant lessons from the past for us to learn in order not to repeat the past in what's next.

First, after God's people returned from exile in their political history, Second Temple Judaism emerged (notably in the intertestamental period) as Jews were faced politically with Greco-Roman rule and oppression. However, since God's people had yet to learn and understand from their past, the rule of God's Law still didn't prevail in their way of life. Underlying their tradition, which merely simulated the appearance of God's

Law (as God exposed, Isa 29:13; Mk 7:6-11), their politicized new religion prevailed in formulating their messianic views and expectations. The certainty of their messianic hope was composed in the uncertainty that the messiah would assume control over Greco-Roman domination. Without the clarification and correction from their theology constituted by God, they falsely presumed that Messiah would free them and usher in a kingdom to rule the world. Of course, the messiah of this new religion was incompatible with the Messiah embodied by Jesus. And Jesus encountered ongoing conflict with these people in their bias, who identified as belonging to God (e.g. Jn 8:33,39,41) because they took their theology for granted and didn't learn from their past. What can Christians today learn from this history to help us in what's next?

The second lesson unfolds from the 4<sup>th</sup> century of church history, in which the church was shaped into Christendom; and some dimensions of this are still witnessed today. The church was designated to determine the political way of life of the Roman Empire, as Constantine devised. Conversely, it was assumed that this political way of life would define the church's way of life. It was taken for granted that this was ordained by God, who would establish the kingdom of God in this political shape throughout the world. Constantinianism effectively ushered in a new Christian religion that constructed the ideal of Christendom. In the process, Constantine romanticized Christendom and thereby oversimplified the kingdom of God; this involved reducing the theology and practice of God's kingdom, which set in motion its reduction ever since. This is evident in the various narratives that have circulated through history by manifest destiny, colonialism, and evolving to the current exceptionalism and nationalism of the U.S., all presumed to be ordained by God.

The official U.S. political policy is the separation of church and state. This political norm, however, is skewed, if not inconsistently applied. Most on the side of state keep the church separate in public discourse, though they may use the church when it serves to their advantage—as observed in past politics. Many from the church depend on the state to enact their values, while an increasing number (notably among evangelicals) openly support the state to advance Christendom—as amplified in this past polarized election. On the one hand, Christianity has become a civil religion; on the other, many Christians and churches have taken their theology for granted and practice a politicized religion (i.e. no longer nonpartisan), which has left them susceptible to the theological errors and practice mistakes witnessed in the above history.

The political theology of Christendom takes a lot for granted and makes far-reaching assumptions about God's Word that have basis only in uncertainty. The perceptual-interpretive lens used to formulate these views is biased according to the surrounding socio-political culture. Thus, what Christendom signifies for the adherents of this new Christian religion is having 'the certainty of the uncertainty'. Therefore, while this may generate hope for a new future in what's next, the reality is that it in truth merely repeats the past.

Christians and churches must not presume the validity of their political theology, even in spite of its popularity; nor should they take for granted that their practice is according to God's Word and not shaped by the surrounding socio-political culture. Moreover, this theological conversation needs to be expanded, intensified and deepened. Why? Political theology should not be a specialized branch of Christian theology, but in truth it is at the heart of the way of life for God's people. Accordingly, we need to develop our political theology in the explicit primacy of God's integral Word (not partial or selective), and then integrate all the secondary in life to what is primary for God's way of life. Without this clarification and correction for theology, our explicit or implicit political theology is susceptible to using misinformation; and any misinformation for theology composes a gospel that becomes indistinguishable from fake news, which is validated by unexamined faith. Countering such theology and practice in his manifesto for discipleship (the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5-7), Jesus made imperative for his true followers: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [i.e. the important secondary matters of life] will be added to you"—but not at the expense of the primary (Mt 6:33). The priority of what's primary to God was neither optional nor negotiable for Jesus' followers because this primary is the certainty he constituted for our political theology; the primacy of this theology and practice thereby distinguishes our identity as God's family and determines our way of life for the new future of what's next. Jesus unequivocally summarized this relational outcome, as well as the relational consequence for those who take their theology for granted and make invalid assumptions for their practice (Mt 7:21-27).

## **The Future of the Past**

If this past new-normal election is a clear indicator of what's next, I am deeply concerned (not anxious or depressed) about the uncertainty of both the U.S. and the church. While neither reinforcing Christendom nor separating church and state, there is a vital relationship between church and state that Christians and churches need to take critical responsibility for. For our involvement in this distinct political process, however, to be of significance both for us and to God, our way of life is required to be distinguished unmistakably in, with, and thus as God's way of life. The problem with the future of what's next centers on the past, that is, beyond the past discussed above.

The future is never separate from the past, though we may disconnect the latter in discourse about the former. The future depends on the past distinctly in terms of what we do with what is the factual history of the past. Thus, we need to understand the past (immediate and distant) in order for the future of what's next to be significant for our way of life. *The future of the past* is essential for the Christian way of life to reflect, reinforce and sustain God's way of life rather than the human condition's way of life. And the

distinction from the human condition becomes blurred when Christians don't or are unable to account for the past; the history of the past is instrumental and formative for the identity and function Christians engage into the future. Not accounting for the past is symptomatic of a theological fog enveloping Christians in a new religion that evolved from the wrong roots of the past.

A new religion can appear to be the *old* religion, notably if its theology seems to be the same. The issue, however, is what defines the identity of a new religion and determines its function. This raises the distinction between the religion distinguished directly by God and any new religion shaped by human workings. In the psalmist's discourse on the primacy of God's Rule of Law (Ps 119), the defining past resonates to the forefront to determine the future: "Your decrees, *statutes, law*, are my **heritage** forever; they are the joy of my heart. I incline my heart to perform your statutes, *precepts, law* forever, to the end" (119:111-112). This heritage constitutes who and what we, as God's people, are descended from—the past which is definitive for the certainty of the future. Jesus finalized this heritage for political theology and made the certainty of the future contingent on the certainty of this defining past for the way of life of his true followers: the righteous whole of who, what and how they are that is clearly distinguished from the diluted righteousness reducing adherents to a new religion (Mt 5:17-20). The embodied Word from God made irrefutable the integral future of the certainty's past for what's next in the way of life for his true followers, not just any followers.

Certainly, Christian practice is found along a wide spectrum, and our ways of life are other than monolithic to validate any stereotype. Yet, all Christians today need to reexamine the heritage assumed for their faith—necessary if they are not to practice a new religion. The heritage of God's Rule of Law, of course, was the major issue of contention that Jesus ongoingly encountered with those publicly recognized as God's people but who, in historical fact, practiced a new religion (e.g. Mk 12:28-34). This issue continues to evolve today, noticeably as conservative Christians increasingly engage in partisan politics and even leading the way to intensify polarizing conditions. Moreover, this contrary witness is observed not only in the political arena but also widely observed in a politicized COVID-19 pandemic. During this uncertain health crisis, many Christians and churches have pushed and fought for personal freedom and religious liberty. Presuming their heritage demands it, their identity and function have given primacy to and revolve around the American heritage of civil law, all at the expense of their well-being as well as others' that integrally centers on God's Rule of Law.

Since God's Rule of Law is the primary heritage for the Christian faith, and since Jesus emphatically made imperative to "love your neighbor *as well as* your enemies..." (Mt 5:43-45; Lk 6:27-28), how well does this heritage currently define Christian identity and determine how Christians function? Is our political (or public) theology based on this heritage, or have we taken for granted that our practice reflects God's Rule of Law?

As referenced above, when Jesus encountered another member of the governing judiciary, an important example of reexamining one's heritage is provided for us (Mk 12:28-34). This adherent to a new religion set aside his bias revising God's Rule of Law and carefully listened to the Word for clarification, perhaps even for correction. Receiving that from the Word in the unequivocal relational terms of God's Law, this presumptuous expert of the law now understood what is primary in God's Law, realizing its contrast and conflict with the secondary aspects advocated by his new religion. This restored his heritage to the irreducible and nonnegotiable nature of God's Rule of Law, from which his identity and function in everyday life would now reflect "the kingdom of God" (as Jesus highlighted, v.34).

Setting aside one's bias and listening carefully to the Word—no matter how much theological expertise is in one's possession—are critical for the Word to clarify and correct anyone's theology and practice (as Jesus made axiomatic, Mk 4:24-25). Evangelicals (of whatever variation) are identified as "people of the Book," with the Bible considered to be inerrant by a majority of them. But, an essential difference needs to be made between (1) referencing information about God in the Bible for our theology and practice, and (2) relationally responding to the communication in relational language from God revealed in the Word, namely embodied by Jesus to constitute our theology and practice in the wholeness of God (as in Col 3:15-16), not in mere information about God. Which of these interpretive processes describes how you relate to Scripture and what composes your faith?

In spite of having identification with the Bible and having that information about God to refer to as needed to support their way of life, many evangelicals (unintentionally or unknowingly) have actually turned to a "new" Christian religion under the assumption that their practice follows the Word—taking for granted that their theology is biblically based. Yet, what's primary in God's Rule of Law has either been ignored or misrepresented by the secondary, consequently their true heritage has been displaced by misplaced heritages (both religious and civil). Unlike the legal expert listening carefully to the Word, what the Word tells these presumptuous followers of Jesus is this relational reality: In spite of all their practice in a biblical way of life, "I never knew you" (Mt 7:22-23; Lk 13:26-27). To expand Jesus' axiom (Mk 4:24): "The Word you listen to is the Word you get; and the Word you get is the Word you use; thus, the Word you use is the theology and practice you get—nothing more."

A critical condition emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic is the *social determinants of health*. Social determinants reveal how race-class factors into the extent of health care people have access to. Health, in other words, is not just based on physiology. In the same way, the faith practice of Christians is not determined foremost by their theology but more so by **social determinants of faith**—the surrounding contextual and systemic factors shaping our way of life. The early church in Thyatira was examined by the Word's post-ascension critique of churches, in which he exposed their

social determinants of faith. The church's practice was notable: "I know your works—your love, faith service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first" (Rev 2:19). Nevertheless, the church's "blue collar" context of trade unions and their sinful ways shaped how the church functioned in public life. Accordingly, the Word reprimanded the church for how its faith was determined, so that "all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve" (2:23).

Therefore, all Christians and churches need to reckon with the political and sociocultural determinants of our faith. Even the popular church in Sardis—perhaps a mega-church by early church standards—whose brand had a reputation "of being alive, but *in truth* you are dead" (Rev 3:1). How so? The Word found their practice to be incomplete, reduced and not whole according to how he constituted his church to be (3:2). Likewise, this serves as a contemporary wake-up call in order for us to return to the irreducible roots of our faith: the depth of Who and What we have descended from and ascended transformed, which constitutes our irreducible and nonnegotiable heritage as God's people, whom the Word embodied as God's new creation family in the wholeness of relationship together created in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity.

Nothing less and no substitutes of the certainty of what the Word constituted (in relational terms, not referential information) will have the relational outcome of the *new* future for what's next. Anything less and any substitutes will result in only the uncertainty of what's next and will be consequential for repeating the shortcomings of the past. Therefore, neither our theology nor our practice should ever be taken for granted or merely presumed.

## **Requiem for Hope, Referendum for Change**

Christians and churches observe another Advent season. For this atypical year in particular, we have to seriously ask ourselves the question, "The Advent of what?"

As we close out 2020, one thing is certain: What's ahead is uncertain; and it should be obvious to us by now that our hope for tomorrow can only be a dream, because 2020 will not end. That is, the events witnessed and experienced in 2020 will not end until pivotal changes are made—even with the election being over and a coronavirus vaccine soon to begin. Whether realized or not, all Christians and churches are at the forefront of these pivotal changes both within themselves and encompassing their surrounding contexts. Our hope for tomorrow is contingent on the pivotal changes first *within* ourselves, just as the Word corrected any misguided followers in the measure of faith practice they use: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', while the log is in your eye? You *misguided or misled Christian*,

first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Mt 7:3-5). Indeed, the measure of faith practice we use is the measure of change we get, and the measure of change we use is the measure of hope we get!

The witness of Christians and churches in 2020 has been revealing of the measure used for who we are and what we are doing as people of faith. Who and what we have demonstrated in these polarizing times rightfully raises questions by neutral observers about the integrity of our faith, if not also bringing us shame in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, in this post-Christian period—notably populated by the majority of unaffiliated millennials—the non-Christian opinion is validated that our faith has no significance to warrant their commitment. Thus, we are faced with the reality of our equivocal witness that rightfully needs to question if there is any valid basis for hope in continuing who we've been and what we've been doing. Or, ask if there is validity in the fact that we need to change—not just any change or some changes, but pivotal change—that is, turn-around change, which brings the **redemptive change** of the *old* dying so that the *new* is raised up. Without redemptive change the new normal churches of today are headed for repeating the old of the past in what's next, regardless of whatever expectations they may have for the new future.

Redemptive change wakes us up to more than the Word's clarification and correction. Going deeper, this irreplaceable change makes us vulnerable to the Word for the relational connection necessary to be transformed from inner out (in contrast to outer-in changes), in order for the Word to constitute us (integrally both individually and collectively) as his new creation family (2 Cor 5:17). This complete change and whole relational outcome, based on nothing less and no substitutes, then becomes the certainty for our hope in the *new* future of what's next—thereby putting the uncertainty of the *old* recycling into its whole context.

Redemptive change, therefore, is the **referendum for change** confronting all Christians and churches. However, so that we don't subtly reduce the substance of redemptive change to anything less or any substitutes that promote illusions of transformation and simulate its practice, we need to have a distinct **requiem for hope** that currently enhances or embellishes our faith practice in everyday life. We need to honestly account for the real elements of our hope and openly examine them with the Word. This essential vulnerable process takes us into having a formal requiem for the hopes that we need to relinquish in order to proclaim their death—an initial part of the *old* in us dying. When our dubious, unfounded and false hopes die, we are ready for the rigorously challenging and confronting process of redemptive change; ready because we have the certainty of hope for the relational outcome of transformation to the *new* future of what's next for the new creation. Accordingly without negotiation, having the requiem for hope cannot be minimized as a formality but must be integrated with our referendum for change, so that the transformation is a reality neither presumed nor virtual.

Transformation, however, is not an ideal that Christians can claim and cling to in their faith. Belonging to God’s new creation family comes with unavoidable responsibility, which every family member is accountable to fulfill. This responsibility may scare a family member or make them feel inadequate, understandably. But unlike the nuclear family of today characterized by individualism, each member in God’s family is never considered on the basis of individualism, though treated with respect and love as an individual person. Thus, each member is never alone, unimportant or insignificant in the family’s purpose and future, but rather an integral part of the whole family—just as Paul made definitive for the church family and imperative for each member (1 Cor 12:12-26).

The certainty of hope for the *new* future of what’s next in the new creation family centers on its ongoing responsibility. The ongoing responsibility of the new creation family is nothing less than “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:17-21), for which no substitutes are sufficient practice in our way of life.

## **Reconciling Reconciliation**

Sadly in the U.S., the church mirrors the polarized state of the union. The identity and views of churches have become politicized, such that they reflect the shade of blue or red rather than their identity and function reflecting the light of the Word; this is the Light who shines in the darkness as “the light of people” (Jn 1:4-5). Light is the essential function that clearly distinguishes the church’s identity—that is, the identity and function of the new creation church family of the Word’s true followers (Mt 5:14-16). Is it surprising, then, that because of what churches reflect, “the darkness has not understood the Light...the world did not recognize him” (Jn 1:10, NIV)?

The global community is dismayed at the dystopia they have been observing in the convoluted democracy of the U.S., the extent of which is circulating more intensely. Now in post-election, the intensely divided U.S. is greatly challenged to find common ground for the *us* in U.S. to emerge as the American people, in contrast to Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, the right and the left, and on and on between the favored one and the dismissed other. By mirroring the U.S., the church is not only challenged but confronted by the Word—who “entrusted the *ongoing responsibility* of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor 5:19)—(1) to not only find common ground for the *us* in the church to emerge, but (2) to take up our responsibility and be accountable to unite the diversity in the church and unify each part of the church into the union of the body of Christ, in order that (3) the church will function as *one* to fulfill its purpose (defined in Jn 17:21-23), so that (4) the world can also be reconciled to God through Christ. For this to unfold as the experiential truth (not merely propositional truth) and relational reality (not virtual), there is a critical process necessary in *us* that involves **reconciling reconciliation**.

Christians and churches need to reconcile aspects of their way of life to the political/public theology of the Word, and not assume that their practice is compatible with this specific theology. In addition, without taking their own theology for granted, there are elements in their particular political/public theology (explicit or implied) that need to be reconciled also. Currently, there are incongruities in our theology and practice, which must be reconciled for the truth of reconciliation to emerge and its reality to unfold. The contention of values among Christians, plus the conflict between Christians over right and wrong, indicate these incongruities that compromise our integrity, if not bring shame on our identity. In the Word's critique of church theology and practice, how does the acclaimed church in Sardis in actuality be incomplete and thus in truth be lifeless, rather than merit its reputation for being alive (Rev 3:1-2); and why does the growing love and faith of the activist church in Thyatira get strongly reprimanded for their loving tolerance and faithful diversification (Rev 2:18-23)? Two interrelated key issues in theology and practice are at the heart of what continues to be controversial for theology and practice today.

The 1<sup>st</sup> key issue revolves on our view of sin. The prominent view of sin focuses on moral-ethical failure and disobeying God. This disobedience was initiated by Adam and Eve as the essence of the origin of sin in this view. In truth, what evolved in the primordial garden goes beyond just disobedience and encompasses the depth of how they reduced their created persons and then reduced God's word to them down to negotiable terms, thereby renegotiating the nonnegotiable. This reduced their relationship with God and with each other according to their reduced terms over God's whole terms for relationship together. This view does not diminish the sin of disobedience, but merely disobedience does not take into account all these reductions enacted by these persons. In other words, sin seen only as disobedience and moral-ethical failure is an incomplete view of sin, which circulates in much theology and practice as a *weak view of sin*.

For God, all that evolved above was contrary to who and what he created and how his terms constituted the whole person and their relationship together in wholeness (as in Gen 2:18,25). Therefore, in God's view any reduction of God's whole is sin, and anything less than **sin as reductionism** is incomplete and weak. Our greatest sin today is not limited to disobedience but involves the reduction of God, that is, by shaping our God according to our human image and likeness, which mirrors the reduction of our created image and likeness—reductions all made to serve our interests. Accordingly, our view of sin impacts God's forgiveness and what we are forgiven *for*; directly interrelated, our view of sin then determines what we are saved *from*. If we are only saved from sin that doesn't include reductionism, then our forgiveness is limited and our salvation is incomplete, thus in truth of only little significance. If our view of sin encompasses sin as reductionism, then to be forgiven by its nature necessarily includes being restored to wholeness. This also is consequential for limiting salvation to only being saved *from*. The truth of being saved from sin as reductionism, however, by its nature must also include

the reality of being saved *to* the wholeness of our person and relationships together. The fact is that we cannot be saved from being reduced from wholeness without at the same time also being restored to wholeness. Therefore, the salvation of God in Christ integrally constitutes being saved *from* and saved *to*—from reduction and to wholeness.

Wholeness involves the 2<sup>nd</sup> key issue in theology and practice that is interrelated to our view of sin. What integrates sin as reductionism in theology and practice with wholeness is theological anthropology (TA)—that is, how the person is defined and relationships together are determined as created by God. Besides our view of sin presumed in our way of life, nothing is taken for granted more than our theological anthropology. Even theological scholars often make assumptions in their theological discourse that takes for granted their TA in how they define the person and determine relationships—apparent in their own person and relationships—which may or may not be compatible with the image and likeness of God that God created in us with nothing less and no substitutes. Anything less and any substitutes in our theological anthropology demonstrate how our view of sin interrelates with our TA to compose our theology and practice accordingly.

The person created in God’s image and likeness cannot be less than whole, or that would reflect God not being whole. Yet, the dominant way both the person and God are usually defined is by the reduced fragments of what they do and have, the quantitative measure of which either subordinates, ignores or doesn’t understand the qualitative dimension of being whole. Limiting the person and God to their quantified acts and resources fragments them to those parts and related quantitative distinctions (both from outer in); and regardless of how important or valuable those parts are, they become mere reductions from the whole of their wholeness. Their wholeness, by the nature of God’s image and likeness, includes the integration of the whole person into the wholeness of relationship together. The ontology and function of the Trinity constitutes the whole of God in the wholeness of the trinitarian persons’ relationship together. The image and likeness of the Trinity is inseparable from the ontology and function of the Trinity; and it is on this irreducible basis that the ontology and function of human persons are created whole in God’s qualitative image integrated in the wholeness of relationship together exactly in relational likeness of the Trinity.

Any theological anthropology not composed to functionally (1) define the ontology of persons in the whole of God’s qualitative image and (2) determine their function in the wholeness of relationship together by the Trinity’s relational likeness, becomes a TA reflecting, reinforcing and sustaining reductionism and thus a weak view of sin. Consider the quantified outer-in distinctions that emerge when persons are defined by fragments of what they do and have, and relationships are determined on this outer-in basis. Such quantified distinctions are always made in a comparative process, which uses outer-in measures to label persons as more or less, better or worse, good or bad, thereby creating a stratified system. How can we come together as created-equal persons united

as one, a union in which each person is as important as any other person? Based on such reduced distinctions, how can the church constitute the body of Christ that Paul irreducibly distinguished (1 Cor 12)?

When you suspend any bias you may have about the church, can you see how our view of sin and theological anthropology are the keys for getting to the heart of our existing condition? The scenes of Christians and churches today have amplified the level of our current drama. All the outer-in distinctions used among us (including the past) are contrary to and in conflict with the Rule of Law constituted by God for the church (see Acts 10:28,34; 15:9). Peter learned this experiential truth and relational reality the hard way (as Paul further corrected him, Gal 2:11-14); and since we are faced with similar issues, the open question is how well we will learn the same experiential truth of TA and relational reality of sin.

Therefore, these two key issues need to be reconciled in our theology and practice in order to fulfill the reconciliation of *us* as the new creation church family, so that we all will constitute “the **one** just as we are One”—the “just as” Jesus made constitutive of his family (Jn 17:11,20-23).

So, here we are facing the uncertainty of 2021. And the inescapable question for all Christians and churches looms over us: The advent of what, the *new* or the *old*? Until we reconcile these issues in our theology and practice so that the *old* in *us* will die, the *new* will not rise for reconciliation to be a certainty in our way of life.

## **Integrating Theology and Practice**

When Christians start to see the *us* between our divisions—as well as look deeper than outer-in distinctions—and begin to realize the *other* in the divided church, there is hope in the midst of our fragmentation to claim for tomorrow. For this hope to be experienced in the certainty of the *new* future, Christians and churches will need to integrate the fragments of theology and the parts of practice into the wholeness only constituted by and thus in the Word. This essential process, however, is composed primarily in qualitative terms, which is distinguished in the primacy of the relational process and its integral relational outcome of *whole theology and practice*.

Whenever our theology is not integrally integrated with our practice, we enter into a theological fog that limits our vision. In order to have light to guide us in this condition, we need to recognize that we are susceptible to turning to misinformed theological sources, which results in simply misguiding our practice. To apply the Word’s axiom (Mk 4:24) to this fog: “The source of theology we use is the theology we get; and the theology we use is the practice we get—nothing more, but it could be anything less.” We shouldn’t expect whole theology and practice in a theological fog.

Currently, our way of life as the church can be described as a collection of **unified divisions**. In this polarized country, churches have politicized increasingly to form a church composition of distinctly like-minded members bearing a partisan mindset. Even though such a homogeneous make-up has been advocated by various proponents of church growth—notably C. Peter Wagner, whom I encountered in a PhD class at USC—these like-minded churches have not grown the body of Christ but fragmented Christ’s wholeness (the “just as” of the Trinity). Like-minded is not what Paul meant for the church when he made imperative, “be of one mind, live in peace” (2 Cor 13:11, NIV). The peace Paul centered on was the uncommon peace Jesus distinguished from common peace (Jn 14:27), which is “the peace of Christ” (i.e. the wholeness of *shalom*) that Paul established as the only determinant to constitute the church “since as members of one body you were call to *wholeness*” (Col 3:15, NIV).

Therefore, contrary to unified divisions, churches that emerge in the uncommon peace of wholeness can be defined as **diversified unions**. Rather than the like-mindedness evolving from a weak view of sin and incomplete theological anthropology, diversified unions demonstrate the redemptive change of those who “wholeheartedly obey the *terms* of teaching to which you were entrusted” (Rom 6:17, NIV). To be clear, like-minded should not be confused with wholehearted. The peace that the Word gives in redemptive change makes whole our persons and relationships in a way of life uncommon to our surrounding contexts.

The integration of theology and practice for our wholeness converges in the Word’s political/public theology. Basically, political theology defines the way of life for practice every day. The Word’s political theology centers on God’s Rule of Law—namely as the Word centralized earlier (Mk 12:29-31)—and its way of life constitutes primary engagement in reconciliation. Accordingly, crucial for political theology in its integration process is the ongoing dynamic of nonnegotiable subordinating all the secondary (however important) in life, and then integrating that secondary into what is irreducibly primary to God and the Words’ “way, truth and life.” Why nonnegotiable? Because God’s primary always supersedes the secondary composing human life. Thus, the Word’s political theology requires its way of life to always integrate the secondary into the primary in order for any and all theology and practice to be whole.

Since all Christians and churches practice a way of life, their explicit or implied political theology becomes critical to examine with the Word for the clarification needed and correction necessary for any redemptive change required to be whole in our identity and function, whereby our way of life will be distinguished in wholeness. Commonly today, for example, too many Christians and churches have compromised their identity with identity politics and their function inseparably with partisan politics. The integrity of our way of life is at stake here.

At the forefront of the peace-wholeness of Christ constituting the identity and function of his church is nothing less and no substitutes for the ongoing function of

reconciliation in our way of life. Various Christians and churches use the term reconciliation in their discourse, but this doesn't mean it's the function distinguishing their way of life. As we enter 2021, I am not hopeful in the church; rather I place my hope in Christ's new creation family, who together as *one* will enact wholeheartedly who, what and how we are in wholeness for our everyday way of life. This alone will constitute the future *new* and distinguish our primary purpose, responsibility and function in nothing less and no substitutes for reconciliation.

What's ahead for you in 2021? You may be distracted by or preoccupied with all the uncertainty, but hopefully the Word (and his Spirit) will help you understand the certainty of what's primary to God amidst the uncertain secondary in everyday life. Surely you can be certain of this in what's next: Your way of life will either be growing in the *new* or recycling in the *old*. This makes political theology irreplaceable (1) for integrating our theology and practice, in order to (2) reconcile them with the Word and into his wholeness, so that (3) the identity and function of our way of life will be *highlighted*, unmistakably reflect and thereby irreducibly distinguish the nonnegotiable reconciliation entrusted to us for every aspect of our life.

Political theology and reconciliation are not optional for Christians and churches. So, we stand at this crossroads that makes 2021 one of the most pivotal junctures in church history. How this will play out in the road we choose will depend on the playbook used in our way of life. The playbook from the Word is not virtual but a hard reality, which many may choose to avoid or selectively observe. The hard reality of the crossroads before us is simply stated: "The gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, *reduction*, *fragmentation*, and there are many who take it; the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Mt 7:13-14). Life (in the Gk. *zoe*) is not merely life in general (as in *bios*) but the qualitative life in wholeness created by the Word (Jn 1:3-4; 10:10). The road to *zoe* is narrow and hard, with the latter qualifying the former. The hard reality of the narrow road to *zoe* is that it takes our everyday way of life outside of our comfort zones. For that reason, many Christians and churches may define the road they're on as narrow, but in truth that road is only composed by a limited fragment of the Bible (not the whole Word) that makes the reality of the road easier or easy; this for the most part allows them to stay in their comfort zones. Thus, such a so-called narrow road isn't compatible with the Word's narrow road and in its reality reveals a wider road chosen at the crossroads of life.

The playbook from the Word is indeed a hard reality. Which playbook have you and your church been using for the road you've been on? Whatever that might be, the crossroads facing us at this pivotal juncture will certainly determine if redemptive change takes place or not, if our choice is the hard road or an easier road, and therefore if the *new* unfolds or the *old* widely circulates. We cannot overstate the importance of our choice at this defining crossroads; nor can we underestimate the consequences of our choice in our everyday way of life.

We should not have any illusions of what we are building with our faith. Construction in faith and practice have simulated the hard reality of the Word, the forms of which are misleading to the unexamined life or deceiving to the divided heart. Once again, however, the Word makes unequivocal the results from the playbook we use (Mt 7:24-27). The certainty of our hope for what's next can rise on only one foundation, therefore make no assumptions about and use no reduced measure of the foundation you build your way of life on. The advent of what's ahead is inevitable for the road we choose at this pivotal juncture.

There is no doubt that what makes the hard road the hardest involves relationships. Relationships are primary in God's Rule of Law, the relational terms of which define the irreducible and nonnegotiable terms for relationship together, both with God and with each other. These terms for relationship, of course, were irrevocably centralized by the Word to their deepest function of love (Mt 22:37-40)—the hardest part of the Law. The primacy of relationships converges on the hard road in the primary function of love, which integrally unfolds with the ongoing primacy of reconciliation (Lk 6:27-28). If we choose the hard road at this current crossroads, we need to understand that it requires stepping out of our comfort zones and being wholeheartedly involved in this primacy of this primary.

## **The Primacy of the Primary**

In the political theology of the psalmists, their way of life proclaims: “Your Rule of Law is the theme of my song wherever I live” (Ps 119:54, NIV); “I will sing of your love and justice...and be *wise* to lead a life of wholeness” (Ps 101:1-2, NIV), and thereby “sing to the Lord a new song” (Ps 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1).

Singing the new song can only be composed in our way of life by the redemptive change of the *old* in us dying, so that the *new* rises in us as the new creation. Singing of God's love constitutes our love by being reconciled in the primacy of relationship together in wholeness (as in whole TA). Singing of God's whole justice cannot be composed only by partial justice (i.e. by a weak view of sin) in our way of life; therefore, God's Rule of Law becomes the theme of our song in whatever context of our way of life only when this Rule for our wholeness subordinates any other rules of law in human life. At this point, it should start to become apparent how easily singing the song of our way of life can get out of tune. As the Word states resoundingly: “The measure of the tune we use is the song we get; and the song we use is the singing we get” (Mk 4:24).

The singing by Christians and churches is often out of tune. Many worship songs may resound on the surface, notably in contemporary Christian music; but when their themes are examined deeper, they don't resonate because they are out of tune. A prime example is the songs about God's love and singing them for our love. If you listen to the words, the songs are tuned primarily according to the quantified fragments of what God

did, does and will do. On the basis of a reduced TA, of course, this defines who God *is* by what he does, and notably determines what God *is* by his deeds rather than how God *is* in the primary function of relationship as constituted in the Trinity. All God's deeds are certainly important but also secondary to God's vulnerable and intimate involvement in direct relationship, both together in the Trinity and together with us.

Any reduction of love to what God does or what we do for others, as important as that is, does not constitute the whole depth of love. As constituted by the Word, the fullness of love is solely determined by the primary function of vulnerable and intimate relational involvement directly face to face with others. God's love in the Trinity is not about what the trinitarian persons do for each other but constituted in the depth of their relational involvement in relationship together as One. On this functional basis, the Trinity's love is extended to us, again not by what they do for us in all its importance (as Christ's sacrifice on the cross), but solely in their primary vulnerable and intimate relational involvement directly face to face with us for the primacy of relationship together. This essential distinction was demonstrated ultimately by the Word—during what Christians consider the ultimate act of love, his sacrificial love on the cross—in the depth of his relational involvement face to face with others, notably the other criminal (Lk 23:42-43), and Mary and John (Jn 19:25-27).

Just as the Word made definitive and prayed, our vulnerable and intimate relational involvement directly face to face with God and with each other in relationship, this is the love that unites us together as *one* just as the Trinity is One (Jn 17:23). Unlike the Trinity, however, our love only unites us together as one when the depth of our relational involvement vulnerably and intimately involve our persons in the ongoing function of reconciliation. Among diverse Christians today, many disassociate with each other, some associate at various levels, but few if any truly engage in reconciliation with the relational involvement of love. God's new creation family is the experiential truth and relational reality of persons reconciled with God by redemptive change (2 Cor 5:18). Thus, the church that has undergone redemptive change becomes this new creation by its primary relational involvement of love in the ongoing function of reconciliation (Eph 2:14-22; 2 Cor 5:19-20).

To repeat emphatically, this primacy of this primary is irreducible and nonnegotiable for all Christians and churches. With certainty, however, a reduced theological anthropology reduces this whole, and a weak view of sin renegotiates this wholeness; when they are not reconciled in our theology and practice by redemptive change, they will always compromise the integrity of the Word's whole theology and practice. Our comfort zones find ways to make the hard easier. Yet, our uncertainty in this certainty can overcome our uncertainty with the certainty of the Word, who integrally integrates our theology and practice by the primacy of the primary; this will unfold in our political theology and way of life practice made whole—the wholeness in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity, nothing less and no substitutes.

So, what do you think is next for us? Do we sing the *new* song for the future or do we stay out of tune preoccupied by the secondary and repeat the *old*?

## **A Closing Word**

In the Word's discipleship manifesto, he clarifies for all his followers: "Therefore, do not worry (be anxious) about tomorrow.... Today's trouble is enough for today" (Mt 6:34). In other words, tomorrow will be determined by how we live today. For the way of life of the Word's political theology, the primary practice daily is pursuing "the kingdom of God and his righteousness (i.e. the whole of who, what and how God is, whose wholeness can be counted on in relationship together)" (6:33). Only the primacy of the relational involvement of love both with God and with each other clearly distinguishes the realm of the Word's new creation family in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity—distinguished even in the midst of surrounding uncertainties.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, today indeed cannot wait until tomorrow. There is essential work to enact today that no one else can fulfill, because God entrusted only those reconciled to him in the Word with the essential work of reconciliation. Nothing less and no substitutes for the enactment of reconciliation can and will bring the **new** future in what's next for our way of life.

The hope of certainty!

**Note:** This essay serves as the introduction to an expanded study of political theology to be prepared for 2021. Until then, for further study I encourage you to read related studies on our website (4X12.org), particularly the fundamental one on theological anthropology and the foundational one on the global church.