

Deconstructing Our Faith

Accountably Confronting the Inflection Points

Constructing Christian Faith

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Introduction

“Where is your faith?” Luke 8:25¹

With Jesus confronting his disciples to be accountable with the above question, his purpose to deconstruct their faith should alert us. What do you think about in terms of deconstructing our faith?

As we discuss deconstructing our faith throughout this study, the focus of deconstruction will be neither as a mere idea nor some conceptual activity, though deconstruction has been discussed in such ways. Rather, deconstruction with a significant purpose involves telling stories. Such stories are not some fiction but the reality of human life embedded in the human condition. Composed in these stories is the main narrative that revolves around the status quo and how in our humanity we submit to or are complicit with it. This is the prevailing tendency, rather than resisting it, in spite of having any grief, pain or anger experiencing the status quo for our human condition.

For example, many Christians in the U.S, have been influenced by their surrounding context, and thereby have constructed their faith shaped by various political, economic, social, cultural, or even religious sources. These stories continue to evolve, but they often don't get told, are not reported factually, or simply have not been shared with accountability.

Thus, the reality of this faith narrative can only unfold truthfully when

1. the facts are gathered and reported without bias and predetermined interpretation,
2. it gives a clear voice to those muted (by others or self) as this also constructs their faith in a descending arc of an unavoidable inflection point,
3. and/or it confronts those willfully living in its shadows, whether intentionally or inadvertently.

¹ All Scripture quotes are from the NRSV, unless identified differently; any italics in the Scripture quoted in this study signify emphasis or further rendering of terms.

This faith narrative unfolding truthfully is never a given but is always subjected to misinformation, denial or some biased interpretation. Nevertheless, the significance of the deconstruction narrative can persist to bring this reality into the light. As it does, an ongoing question unavoidably comes to the forefront of these stories: How much of the faith constructed necessitates deconstruction?

Notably, the deconstruction narrative is not new, but it unfolds throughout Scripture. The deconstruction story in the biblical narrative unmistakably brings to light the illusions and simulations of faith constructed first by God's people in the Old Testament, and then by Jesus' early disciples and by the early church in the New Testament. The faith of God's people evolved in a recurring cycle vacillating in their faithfulness (as truthfully reported in Hos 4:1 and Mk 4:40). In the narrative of these truthful stories, they are confronted by God's grief and anger in order to have their faith accountably redeemed and transformed. To emphasize, these grievous accounts do not convey a mere idea or conceptual activity by God but the history of God's relational redemptive involvement to personally transform the faith of these persons, people and churches. As each story unfolds, it integrally both charts the steps necessary to be involved with God on a distinctly narrow path distinguished only by God's terms, and lays the groundwork required for the deconstruction of faith to be completed by that faith's transformation.

Getting to an Integral Depth

As we listen to muted voices and affirm their presence without distinctions fragmenting their identity, we can form a kinship together that usually strains to be developed, embodied and ongoingly involved on the relational level for reciprocal relationship together. This involves the integral process necessitating incorporating individuals with churches and further joining together with the Christian academy, so that God's people will be constituted as family together. This outcome requires getting to the depth integral for all of them/us to be redeemed from the variable construction of

their/our faith, a faith that keeps them/us relationally apart from each other as well as from intimate involvement with God.

Moreover, as we observe the construction of faith by others around us, it may also bring to light other subtle constructions of faith needing to be deconstructed—perhaps even our own. Once again, the question always at the forefront of these stories confronts any constructed faith needing to be deconstructed. Getting down to this depth is integral for such faith first to be redeemed and then transformed.

Therefore, in this process of deconstruction, our addressing faith's inflection points cannot and must not be merely performative. This means that activism alone is insufficient, and that merely voicing the problem and its issues is inadequate. Even working for change in and of itself is incomplete for the required redemptive change directly antecedent to transformation. In other words, deconstruction is not an end in itself but only the necessary means to the new *end* for faith, which must by its constituting nature be constructed in wholeness.

It is unmistakable that Jesus' most visible followers were confronted with his penetrating question "Where is your faith?" (Lk 8:25) Many Christians have made and continue to make a common assumption about their faith that their faith practice is on the path of following Jesus. They assume to be on the same path as Jesus, because they believe in his teachings and observe its traditions, if not always his example. However, what they fail to understand is that they are on a **parallel path** with Jesus, which doesn't get to the depth integral to "where I am" (Jn 12:26). This path only appears to be following him directly when in reality their parallel path has no direct relational connection with him. That's why Jesus also asked his disciples, "Do you still have no faith?" (Mk 4:40, NIV)

The relational consequences of faith on a parallel path are:

1. not following his *person* and thus not being directly involved "where I am" in spite of serving him (Jn 12:26), hence
2. unable to truly "know me, *my person*" in spite of all the time spent with him (Jn 14:9) in the absence of relational involvement together heart to heart, no matter how much information is known about him.

As an unavoidable result, to continue on this parallel path is to have an illusion of faith in Jesus that merely simulates the practice of discipleship. Certainly, if not obviously, many Christians have been satisfied with a parallel path for their faith; and they remain unaware, in disregard or denial of a redeeming inflection point glowing before them in their shadow, thereby not going and getting to an integral depth in their faith.

A Broader Witness

Today, all the variations of Christian practice, and its improvisations, witnessed throughout the world are further assumed to make up the diversity constructing the church. This diverse construction, however, is not the body of Christ definitively both delineated by Paul and constructed by the Spirit (1 Cor 12). The diversity of persons composing the body of Christ only describes their unique function in the body; but that diversity does not and must not define the identity of who, what and how these persons *are* constituted “in Christ”. Both the individual and corporate identity are constituted only by the inner-out wholeness “I give” (Jn 14:27). In contrast and conflict with the diverse fragments composing the global church today, this irreducible and nonnegotiable wholeness constructs the body of Christ in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity (just as Jesus prayed, Jn 17:20-26).

On the other hand, there are Christians whose faith is constructed with uncertainty, distrust, fear, or a longing for a concrete faith not shaped by surrounding conditions. Whatever identity evolves from such a searching-dissatisfied condition or state becomes an **identity construct** from outer in that veils, masks, embellishes or otherwise buries the whole of one’s person from vulnerably emerging from inner out. This outer-in cover up prevails overtly or subtly to define human identity and to determine human function individually and collectively. With the pervasive stories of this dominating process, such an identity construct is also taken on by those on a parallel path, whereby the inner out of these persons is embedded in secondary position to their outer in.

Whether in a searching-dissatisfied state or on a parallel path, as well as any variations of them, the appearance of this outer-in identity construct and its outward construction of faith need to be exposed at the depth of their roots for their deconstruction to truly free them to be changed from inner out. Yet, this challenging process is ongoingly met with resistance and necessitates the redemptive work of the Spirit to free us from the grips of any identity construct. As this *old* condition is freed, turned around and negated, a transformation can begin to emerge to construct our faith in the image and likeness of the Trinity. This is the **redemptive change** constituted by the Trinity as the relational outcome awaiting our accountably confronting the inflection points constructing Christian faith (2 Cor 3:16-18).

It is critical to understand and take heed that redemptive change is neither a partial process nor a negotiable outcome. Thus, on the one hand, just changing aspects or parts of the *old* renders change fragmentary, which is insufficient for the *new* replacement to emerge. The Trinity only constitutes redemptive change to encompass the full condition of the *old* in us, first in order for our whole person to be freed (or *old* dying) from inner out, so that then our whole person will be raised up *new* in Christ as the new creation defining our identity and determining our function (2 Cor 5:17). This irreducible complete outcome in wholeness makes imperative that the stories in the deconstruction narrative must not be abbreviated or merely introduced. Otherwise, the outcome is subject to illusions or simulations of the outer-in appearance of what's assumed to be *new*.

Furthermore, in contrast and in conflict with incomplete or outer-in outcomes, the Trinity irreplaceably constitutes redemptive change as the nonnegotiable **relational outcome**. What the Trinity enacts is only in an uncommon relational context and vulnerable relational process with us; and this doesn't unfold unilaterally but with our reciprocal involvement just on God's relational terms to its relational outcome from this relationship together. Accordingly, anything less and any substitutes from us are unable to bring about the Trinity's integral outcome, which both irreducibly and relationally constitute redemptive change.

Therefore, the deconstruction of our faith cannot be a singular or partial action for the relational outcome to be complete, that is to say, constituted in wholeness. This relational process necessitates the vulnerable relational involvement of our whole person from inner out in order to be compatible with God's relational involvement. Just having faith is inadequate to be involved with God and is insufficient to receive the outcome of God's promises. Furthermore, this essential relational involvement for this integral relational context embraces not only the individual person but also requires encompassing the church and the theological academy, thus not rendering them only as institutions. In the same relational terms, churches and academies also cannot be addressed merely from an impersonal level without personal constituencies. These are persons needing to be addressed from inner out, so that their involvement will be completely dealt with from inner out as persons, not institutions.

Deconstruction efforts in churches and the theological academy substituting an institution for personal constituents, as well as dealing with persons less than inner out, are efforts rendered insignificant for resulting in redemptive change. Even with good intentions for change down through the years, such measured efforts have resulted in changes that do not go deep enough for the *old* to be truly redeemed. Thus, the prevalent results have been churches and academies operating with illusions and simulations of faithfulness, or more and more church and academy closures as we are witnessing today. This history has been witnessed in both local and global stories about churches and academies.

The Inescapable Challenge before Us

The above issues initially discussed for the individual, the church and the academy will be discussed further in the following chapters. The scope of each issue will basically overlap and/or interact with the others to compound the problem of constructing faith, thereby urgently prioritizing the essential work of deconstruction.

The question before us now is: Who will engage in this work and how will they be involved?

All Christians need to examine deeply their faith—examining its composition, its practice and its outcomes, while setting aside our assumptions and biases. How well, for example, can you distinguish your faith from being on a parallel path with Jesus?

Many who followed Jesus were confronted with the reality that their faith had no significance to him (Mt 7:21-23; Lk 13:26-27). This included Peter, the most outspoken of his early disciples (Mt 14:28-31; 16:21-23). Why so? These biased individuals generally followed images and ideas about Jesus, but their bias kept their involvement at a relational distance from him. Thus, in spite of their serving him intensely, they had no relational connection directly with his person to be “where I am” (the relational imperative of discipleship, Jn 12:26). Consequently, individuals, church members and those in the academy are all faced with the issue of confronting a faith to which Jesus responds, “I don’t know you...in spite of all that your faith claims to do in my name” (paraphrasing Mt 7:22-23).

Church leaders and academicians are especially susceptible to living on a parallel path. They assume the significance of their faith based on their service and/or theological foundation. And their influence obviously is pervasive in shaping the construction of others’ faith. Who, beside Jesus and the Spirit, will confront these persons for their accountability? Where and how will churches and the academy experience redemptive change?

An essential issue that underlies the significance or insignificance of our faith is observed in the narrative of God’s people. As they evolved from faith’s inflection point, the words from God revealed the human condition of their faith: “These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether *just* like you” (Ps 50:21). While we may not overtly state that God is just like us, we are all susceptible to assuming this one way or another in our faith practice. Indeed, the human shaping of both God and faith in our image are an ongoing critical issue needing to be exposed and transformed at all levels of individuals, churches and academies.

Therefore, it is inescapable, though avoidable , that all Christians at whatever stage of their faith development:

1. Willfully set aside any assumptions of their faith, and
2. honestly subject their faith to be examined deeply.
3. Then, be accountable for the inner-out change necessary.

In whatever season of life and whatever stage of one's faith, anyone can be subjected to some deconstruction of their faith.

So, what's ahead for you, our churches and academies? The status quo was, is and will be always the target of Jesus' deconstruction, just as highlighted in his critique holding accountable the majority of churches identified as his followers (Rev 2-3). Most notably confronted was a church with a reputation for being alive: "Wake up...for I have not found your *faith practice* complete *according to the lens* of my God" (Rev 3:1-2).

Wake-up calls are coming!

Chapter 1 The Individual & Their Faith

**For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything;
the only thing that counts is faith *being viable* through love.**

Galatians 5:6

As we examine the individual, we must begin at the beginning. That is, we should not discuss the individual on the basis of assumptions predisposing our conception of the individual. This certainly deepens our focus not on *who* is the individual but distinctly on *what* is the individual. That requires us to define what is the identity of the individual.

My own story emerged with frequent wonderings about “What am I?” I was born in Chicago, Il. And grew up in a lower-class neighborhood populated mostly by a white majority. Few minorities went to my elementary school, and there was only one other minority besides me in my classes. My physical differences with my white classmates, friends, neighbors and surroundings became a comparison that usually made me feel different, thus often less in what I am, and sometimes that I didn’t belong here. This preoccupation of comparing appearances motivated me to establish what I am based on what I could do and not on what I looked like. As a result, academically and athletically I excelled at or near the top level throughout my school years. These results not only redefined what I am in comparison; but, increasingly they also gave me the confidence of having an identity that I was proud of for being *more*, not *less*. This new identity evolved even though I was different from whites and couldn’t change my basic appearance.

What is the story defining your identity as an individual?

Thankfully, my identity eventually changed as an adult but only as the outcome of returning to the beginning—the beginning of the first individual human’s journey underlying all of ours. Therefore, we now begin at the beginning in order to get to the integral depth of *what* is the individual, as well as *who* this individual is, and *how* the individual is to be that *who* and *what*.

Begin at the Beginning

“In the beginning” begins the narrative of God’s creation. After the rest of creation was completed, God climaxed the beginning by creating the human being. As this constituting narrative unfolds, ‘what is the individual human’ signifies humanity in general. It is at this stage of the individual’s story that an inflection point creates a theological fog about *what* is this individual, and the significance of *who* was created and distinctly *how*.

Christians need to not only review the creation narrative but deeply examine the story of the individual’s beginning. Too many assumptions have been made about it, which have evolved to render the individual to only some facsimile of *what*, *who* and *how* God created. This evolution has certainly shaped faith to be constructed accordingly and thereby expanded the theological fog.

The identity of the individual human becomes ambiguous when the beginning is composed by biological evolution. Perhaps there could be reason to explain the individual’s physical characteristics on the basis of evolutionary biology. However, while this may give a reasonable basis for the individual’s physique, it does not and cannot be the basis for the individual human’s identity constituted integrally by *what*, *who* and *how* humans are. This integral depth emerged, not evolved, only and fully from the beginning as God’s creation to define the identity of humans and determine their function.

At this beginning, God unequivocally created the first generation of humans on this irreducible basis: “create humans in our image, according to our likeness...in the *image and likeness* of God he created them male and female” (Gen 1:26-27). The story of this human generation seems simple enough in the beginning. But their story should not be simply introduced or oversimplified, because their story unfolds in a complex process that compounds and confounds defining the individual’s human identity and determining their function. To overlook or mute this segment of their story has

innumerable repercussions and consequences, all of which have evolved in future generations of humans since the beginning.

Christians believe that human are created in God's image. What, who and how that image is depicted becomes the issue from the beginning that has diversely both defined the identity of human being and determined the function of being human. The creation image and likeness of God can only be attributed to the triune God, whose qualitative image and qualitative-relational likeness are intrinsically distinguished completely by the Trinity.¹ The identity of the Trinity is revealed throughout the Bible as the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Yet, this threefold *who* of the Trinity is only constituted by each of them as *persons*, not by their titles or roles. This means that the *who* of the Trinity is inseparable from the *what* of their individual persons; that does not mean there are three Gods (Dt 6:4; Mk 12:29). The *who* and *what* of the Trinity's identity constituted by their whole persons is inseparable from the integral *how* of their relational function (both by each of their persons and united in relationship together as One), which completes the likeness of the Trinity integrated in wholeness with the image.

In the belief systems of Christian faith, to what extent is the identity of the individual human congruent with this qualitative image of the Trinity, as well as is the function of the individual human compatible with this relational likeness of the Trinity? In addition, how much of God's image and likeness in Christian belief systems have composed faith practice with the subtle reverse thinking that who, what and how God is exists altogether shaped "just like humans" (the underlying issue of faith from Ps 50:21)?

The first humans created in the image and likeness of God emerged in the primordial garden as male and female individuals. Before the inauguration their gender, however, it is essential to understand what distinguished the individual human from and above the rest of biologically alive creation. First, without discussing the technical aspects,² the individual human was constituted by God's qualitative being from inner out in order for the individual to be a qualitative human being from inner out (Gen 2:7).

¹ For a full discussion on the Trinity, see my study *The Face of the Trinity: The Trinitarian Essential for the Whole of God and Life* (Trinity Study, 2016), online at <https://www.4X12.org>.

² For a deeper discussion on human being and being human, see my study *The Person in Complete Context: The Whole of Theological Anthropology* (TA Study, 2014), online at <https://www.4X12.org>.

Inner out signifies that *inner* is distinguished by the primacy of the individual's heart, which encompasses the secondary of *out* to constitute the whole person. For this human being to live distinguished invariably from inner out, that individual could not make primary any distinction from outer in (such as gender); otherwise the individual's human identity and function would become quantified from outer in—signifying the person's reduction and/or fragmentation. **Outer in** signifies that *outer* is distinguished by the primacy of the quantitative features and aspects of the individual, which go *in* only to the depth quantified by the individual's mind.

Since God's qualitative being is constituted by the trinitarian persons distinguished only from inner out, the Trinity's wholeness cannot be distinguished whenever any trinitarian's person is transposed from inner out to outer in. The outer in composes the person quantitatively in the secondary distinctions of what the person does and/or possesses (including gender). No matter how important what the person does or possesses is, in the image and likeness of the Trinity these quantitative distinctions are never primary over the person from inner out. Only the inner out qualitatively distinguishes the whole person, while the outer in at best only quantifies parts of the person or, worse, fragments the person—both of which are consequential for the person's wholeness. Thus, the outer in results unavoidably in the reductionist sum of anything less and any substitutes for wholeness. This prevalent consequence has become the status quo for defining the individual human identity and determining their function incongruent with God's image.

Secondly, integral with the whole person from inner out in the qualitative image of God, the likeness of the Trinity is created for being human. The ontology of God creating human being in the Trinity's image further enacts the creation of being human in the function of the Trinity's likeness. What is this Trinity's likeness?

Jesus vulnerably embodied the ontology and function of the Trinity, which reveals to us the image and likeness of who, what and how we were created, need to be and must by nature function. In his person, Jesus declares the wholeness of God constituted by ontological Oneness (e.g. Jn 11:30,38; 16:15; 17:21). God's wholeness is also constituted by the trinitarian persons' intimate relational involvement and connection they have

together inner out. This intimacy signifies the love their whole persons act on vulnerably to be involved with each other heart to heart in the primacy of relational connection together. The wholeness of the Trinity's relationship together is the relational quality, not quantity, that integrates the Trinity's qualitative image with the Trinity's qualitative relational likeness. Therefore, on this integral basis the individual human is created in the Trinity's qualitative image and relational likeness.

Given this image and likeness of God, the first individual human occupied the primordial garden incompletely. Thus, God declared, "It is not good that the *individual* should be alone" (Gen 2:18), which enacts God's conscious relational involvement with human beings. "Good" (*tob*) can be situational, a moral condition, about happiness or even being righteous. When attached to "to be alone," "not good" can easily be interpreted with all of the above, perhaps with the exclusion of being righteous. And human stories prevail with this interpretation, thereby constructing faith accordingly.

In the creative narrative, the Hebrew term (*bad*) for "to be alone" can also be rendered "to be apart." This rendering needs to prevail for the human story because it composes the deeper sense of relationship and not being fully connected to someone else. This focus goes beyond an individual merely having someone to associate with in order not to be alone. The difference renders God's likeness significant or insignificant. Thus, we need to pay attention to human stories with the focus on the distinction of "to be apart" because it takes our stories beyond situations and deeper than, for example, the heterosexual relations of marriage (the prevalent interpretation of God creating the female human in response to "to be alone").

"To be apart" is not just a situational condition but most definitively a **relational condition** needing to be addressed in our human being and brought to light in our being human. In human stories, for example, a person may be alone in a situation but also feel lonely in the company of others, at church, even in a marriage or family because of relational distance creating the condition of "being apart." This relational condition is compounded today on social media despite all the transactions individuals have but increasingly feeling lonely. And God simply defines such human being and being human as "not good." Yet, how aware are Christians of their relational condition, and how accountable in their faith are they of this inescapable issue?

In God's created design, meaning, and purpose for the human order, which are integrally distinguished by God's image and likeness, the human narrative is composed conjointly:

1. For human being to be from inner out and thereby "to be part" (not "apart") of the human order's interrelated structural condition and contextual process with the Trinity.
2. For the inner-out function of being human "to be part" (never "apart") of the heart-to-heart relationship together necessary to **be whole** (not partially or symbolically) just as constituted by and thus interconnected with the qualitative ontology and relational function of the Trinity's **wholeness**.

Accordingly, "good" signifies the Trinity's whole ontology and function, which integrally constitutes the righteousness of God defining the whole of who, what and how God is.

This wholeness distinguishes God beyond just the Creator to identify God's ongoing presence and determine God's relational involvement, whose righteousness can be counted on to be faithful in relationship together (cf. Ps 85:13). In other words, God's righteousness is not a mere attribute, as many belief systems compose. Rather, God's righteousness always constitutes the qualitative-relational function of the whole of God, whose presence and involvement are assured to be whole with those connected relationally by the faith they live (not just have).

The relational outcome is that human beings are constituted in whole ontology and function in likeness of the righteous whole of who, what and how God is. Nothing less and no substitutes for the individual's identity and function can constitute their human being as "good" signifying God's irreducible creation, and any diminishment can only be "not good." Therefore, anything less and any substitutes for defining our faith and determining our faith practice are unequivocally "to be apart" from this uncommon wholeness distinguished irreducibly and nonnegotiable; and the qualitative-relational consequences from anything less and any substitutes unavoidably render human being reduced and being human fragmentary.

This consequence is inescapable no matter how much faith we may possess. How so?

The Reliability of Faith You Have or the Viability of Faith You Live

The first generation of individual humans transposed the image of God from the qualitative inner out to the quantitative outer in, whereby what they did and possessed in their life became primary instead of just secondary. Pay attention to their story: Initially, “this male and female were both naked and they felt no shame” (Gen 2:25, NIV). What is the significance of this part of their story?

As whole persons created in God’s image and likeness, they saw each other as these persons from inner out, which included their secondary attributes as male and female from outer in. Being naked was the norm for all creatures, yet for these humans to be naked symbolized other issues. For them to be naked and feel no shame involved establishing the human narrative in its integral depth of created wholeness, in contrast to any fragmentary terms of the physical body and marital sex between husband and wife.

The Hebrew term for shame (*bosh*) involves feeling confusion, disappointment, embarrassment or even dismay when things don’t turn out as expected. Initially, what did they expect, and then what did they become conscious of?

Consider this male and female meeting naked for the first time, having the choice to examine each other either from inner out or outer in. At first, their perceptual lens was not constrained to the outer in, and thus their consciousness was not limited to gender. When they came together, their connection with each other emerged from the deep consciousness of their persons from inner out. Good, because the whole of their persons could not be grasped in physical terms or even be sufficiently understood on the spiritual level. They would only feel no shame when their consciousness centered on their whole persons, since all human persons are defined by and determined in the same image and

likeness of God. In their *person consciousness* of themselves and each other, the inner-out function of their whole persons then joined together on the newly created foundation (“not to be apart”) of intimate relationship heart to heart to constitute their relationship together in wholeness, and thus no shame. Furthermore, in this integral relational outcome, they not only felt no shame, but more importantly they personally experienced the deep satisfaction of living viably in the qualitative image and relational likeness of God. Thus, this relational outcome points to the viability of the faith they lived, not merely had.

Unfortunately, this part of their story was not sustained but evolved in a sad process. After being subjected to the counter influence of their surrounding context, these persons willfully shifted from inner out to outer in as they became *self-conscious* about their self-worth. This motivated them to pursue becoming wise, under the illusion that their self-esteem would be enhanced (Gen 3:6). The immediate effect their choice to shift had on them opened their eyes with a biased focus on the physical aspect of their nakedness as male and female. Consequently, with their consciousness as persons reduced to a *self-consciousness* about their outer-in *distinctions*, this male and female now had to cover-up their distinctions to make their self more presentable from outer in to avoid any shame (Gen 3:7).

Their reduced outer-in identity and function also had relational consequences for the faith they had in God. Contrary to initially trusting God not “to be apart” in their nakedness, their faith now composed from outer in became uncertain, insecure or anxious. So, along with making themselves presentable in their identity and favorable in their function—an illusion of self-worth and a simulation of self-esteem—they evolved in a subtle yet distinct relational distance with God (Gen 3:8-10). Such relational distance is the operating nature of faith possessed by those whose identity and function are composed from outer in.

How reliable is this faith for those who have it? When God addressed them with the question “Where are you” (Gen 3:9), it must be clear that it wasn’t about knowing their physical location. God was confronting them in order to hold them accountable for the faith they possessed directly constructed from their outer-in identity and function.

The consequence of where these individuals were did not evolve just from their disobedience of God's terms. *What* and *who* evolving from *how* they enacted their faith can only be explained and understood in two inseparably interrelated ways:

1. They reduced the persons created originally by God and thereby also transposed God's image and likeness from the qualitative and relational down to the quantitative and secondary.
2. In their reduction, they then fragmented their whole persons into what they do and possess, and in the process they fragmented (intentionally or not) the wholeness of their intimate relationships together both with each other and with God, thus reducing its created primacy to, at best, the secondary, and worse to illusions and simulations.

Therefore, the sum of these ways is what completely defines and determines what sin truly is—**the sin of reductionism** introduced ingeniously by Satan in the primordial garden (Gen 3:1-5).

Given their complete story, how reliable then can their faith be that they possess? Based on the male's response to God, the reliability of the faith he had exposed the need for his constructed faith to be deconstructed (Gen 3:10-12). His story (including hers) from inner out to outer in enacted in the above two ways has been reproduced in the faith of many ever since. But, since the story of the first generation individuals tends to be abbreviated or merely introduced in most Christian belief systems—for example, sin as their disobedience—the consequences on subsequent generations of individuals and the faith they have persist consistently in a theological fog. Moreover, the stories of current generations are mysteries as their reduction and fragmentation become even more obscured by the internet.

The inescapable issue before us to determine the reliability of faith centers on how reliable is the individual's self-perception, which also includes their perception's reliability of life with others and with God. Reliability is not only elusive but misconceived. In this vague or darkened condition, how viable is the life of the individual, much less the viability of their faith? To have faith is one issue and to live

faith is a deeper issue. Therefore, we need to pay close attention to how this has evolved in the individual's identity and function. In addition, we need to willfully and accountably confront the construction of faith shaped by our own image and likeness rather than God's.

Let's look further at the faith Christians have and understand how their variations construct faith in the individual, as well as the church and the academy.

The Activity, Acting, or Action of Faith

Any claim by Christians to having a strong faith does not answer the questions before us. It only raises the distinction between having an overtly active identity marker (such as God's people in the OT) and living with viable function (as in Ps 37:3-7; Gal 5:6). For many of those who assume to have an active faith, their mindset readily perceives their faith as available to exercise as desired, needed, or for whatever. This points to a faith based primarily on their situations and circumstances, which God's people ongoingly had to account for as their identity markers fluctuated according to those situations and circumstances.

In general, these three terms define or describe the faith of any religion:

- The activity of one who is or assumes to be.
- The acting of who and what one is or claims to be.
- The action of who, what, and how one truly is.

In simple terms, these three describe or define Christian faith.

Most Christians have a faith that participates in faith-related activities describing who they are; and sometimes what is ascribed to them in the activity defines who they are or can assume to be. Some Christians extend their faith to acting out faith on the basis of who and what one is or claims to be; their acting of faith becomes performative and raises questions about the nature of who and what that individual is. The terms of both **activity** and **acting** subject faith essentially to the workings of the individual from outer in.

The third term for Christian faith penetrates to the heart of the person to enact faith on the basis of who, what and how the person can, must and truly lives to *be* in the qualitative image and relational likeness of God. The **action** of faith from this person is both irreducible and nonnegotiable to anything less and any substitutes, which the activity and acting of faith are ongoingly subject to. In other words, the action of faith cannot be variably enacted, notably shaped by human terms under the assumption that “God is altogether like we are” (Ps 50:21). Thus, the viability of faith emerges only from the action of faith, which is enacted just when constituted by the person living from inner out viably solely on the basis of God’s qualitative image and relational likeness, not human images and likenesses.

The stories in the faith narrative detail many faith activities and acting, while fewer faith actions are described. After I became a Christian at age twenty, I initially practiced my new faith with intimate connections with God (notably Jesus). My ongoing relational involvement with God visibly changed me, such that some of my colleagues inquired about the action of my faith. They wanted to experience more in their faith, so we met regularly for me to share the viability of my faith with them. Later in my life, unfortunately, as I finished college and began graduate studies in theology, my intimate faith action became increasingly the activity of faith preoccupied with my referential studies focused merely on information about God. Consequently, my satisfying faith action became increasingly first the activity of my faith in order to secure my self-worth; then secondly, became the acting of my faith so that my self-esteem was enhanced. I became outwardly very verbal about the Christian faith and related issues, as well as demonstrative in preaching about it. One comment, for example, from an impressed minister listening to me stated that he felt he was listening to Billy Graham.

Well, this portrait of my later so-called Christian development did not continue to be the identity I presented. Thankfully, the faith I constructed in those years increasingly was confronted by God to hold me accountable for its deconstruction. In a deliberate process of person consciousness, I dealt with my self-consciousness that kept relational distance from God and returned increasingly to the relational connection of my initial faith. That is, the relational outcome keeps restoring and growing the action of my faith living by my viably *new* person redeemed from the *old* me.

God has created the individual with the volitional integrity to make their own choices. This volition, however, came with limits. As witnessed in the creation narrative, human being does not have the freedom to choose any variation of being human without incurring consequences. The story of the inaugural individuals initially shared with us the **dynamics** distinguishing their whole persons from inner out. Then their story (not to mention my story) evolved from their decision to only present to us a **portrait** of their self from outer in. Consequently, ever since, the presentation of self-portrait has countered persons living their profile

The individual's volition was and is notably accountable for the choices in their faith, namely whether it becomes the activity or acting of the faith they have, or is the action of the faith they live. And the reliability or viability of individual choices continue to call for "Where are you?" and inescapably necessitate ongoing accountability.

Faith Living Distinguished in Relationship

The faith we have can only transform viably into the faith we live when it is vulnerably involved from inner out in the primacy of relationship. Faith living is distinguished in the essential nature of relationship constituted in the relational terms of the Trinity. How so?

When you have faith in someone, you are stating some belief in them about what they can do or they have, perhaps in their character or credibility. When your belief also counts on them to do that or have that, then you start relating to them with some level of involvement. For your faith in them to become significant, some form of relationship is established.

The faith in God many Christians have is a statement of their belief, namely about what God can do and/or has, likely including God's character. For them to go beyond merely a belief in God, there has to be the formation and involvement in a relationship with God. Who defines this relationship and on what terms determine how that

relationship functions, whereby the viability of faith living can unfold as a relational reality.

This raises a critical question for Christian faith: Is faith a **noun** or a **verb**? If faith involves a relationship with God, faith has to be a verb to describe action. It is the action of this verb that God made essential in two integral ways for faith in God to be viable.

The initial way the action of faith becomes viable is by the verb to **trust**. In biblical language, the faith verb is rendered to believe or to trust. For Jesus, he held his disciples accountable for not merely believing in him but to trust him from their heart. In the disciples' fear during the storm while on the water, he confronted them with the question "Have you still no faith?" (Mk 4:40); but the issue wasn't that the disciples stopped believing. The faith issue was deeply about them not trusting him. Later, when his crucifixion drew near, he challenged them in their troubled hearts to "trust in God, trust also in me" (Jn 14:1, NIV); it is misleading to render his challenge to "believe in..." as the NRSV does.

Only the relational action of trust constitutes the relational involvement necessary for faith to be viable and thereby live our faith in direct relational connection with God. From the basis of relational trust, the verb of faith goes deeper in the relational connection in order to further constitute the relational involvement in the viability of **intimacy** together—not only face to face but also heart to heart.

The viable faith of intimacy together was clearly distinguished by Paul in his declaration: "For in relationship with Christ Jesus, neither what we do or have has significance; the only significance to him is our faith being viable by **love**" (paraphrasing Gal 5:6). The relational depth of love (*agape*) illuminated by Paul directly countered the outer-in faith constructed by activity and acting. Most notably was Paul's confrontation of Peter's faith practice from outer in, which exposed the hypocrisy of his faith (Gal 2:14-16). Peter's hypocrisy (*hypokrites*) signifies in Greek culture the performative function of acting as in a theatrical role. In other words, Peter was acting out the faith he had, in contrast and conflict with the faith he needed to live with relational trust and love.

The relational action of love constituting the verb of faith is distinguished in its depth by the invariable relational terms declared by Jesus: “Just as I have loved you with my intimate relational involvement, on this irreducible and nonnegotiable relational basis you must in my relational likeness love God and each other with your whole person from inner out” (paraphrasing Jn 13:34 and Mk 12:30 together). It was on the basis of these relational terms for love that Jesus confronted Peter with “Do you *agape* me?” (Jn 21:15-17). Peter answered with the variable of *phileo*. The love of *phileo* can have merit, but it cannot substitute for the intimate relational involvement of *agape* given us by Jesus.

The relational terms of love declared by Jesus in the primacy of *agape* are irreducible and nonnegotiable. Yet, as witnessed in Peter, Christian love has become so variable such that the significance of love is elusive. Love is often merely some emotion or affection expressed by Christians, or it exercises some good for others by what one does or gives, notably with sacrifice. This is to be expected because the view many Christians have of Jesus’ love for them revolves on his sacrifice. The cross, then, often becomes a barrier for experiencing directly the relational involvement Jesus has in his love for us, thus precluding the relational experience of “just as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34).

Jesus did not go straight to the cross after his earthly birth. His incarnation embodied the Son to be vulnerably present with his whole trinitarian person and relationally involved with his whole heart extended to us for the intimate relational connection of love. The relational intimacy of *agape* is intrinsic to the ontology of the Trinity and the trinitarian persons’ relationship together; and thereby, this is the only relationship viably constituting the action of faith in the relational likeness of the Trinity. Thus, on the basis solely by Jesus’ relational terms, love is enacted in, by and for the intimacy of hearts vulnerably opened and extended to each other for relationship together in the invariable likeness of the Trinity. This relational dynamic is the love that Jesus holds us accountable for in order that our faith lives viably from inner out (as Paul made definitive above).

Therefore, inseparably integrated together, the relational involvement of trust deepened by the relational involvement of love integrally constitute the viability of faith to be live by the action of this verb. The relational outcome for this individual challenges and confronts the variable construction of faith by anything less and any substitutes evolving from the inflection point in the beginning. When this outcome is the action of faith living in the individual, this person will love others (“just as I...”) for the deconstruction of faith those individuals have.

This completes the first phase of examining the faith that the individual has or lives. The next phase overlaps into and interacts with the church in order to expose further inflections points constructing Christian faith.

Chapter 2

The Faith of Churches

“All the churches *need to* know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts.”

Revelations 2:23

**Know that the Lord is God, who made us *to belong to him*;
we are his people *in our identity, who function as his family*.**

Psalm 100:3

Who defines the faith of a church, individuals or the church? Both! Who, then, determines how the faith of a church functions? That will depend primarily on who and what that church is. In today’s world of technology, the data of these answers, always including the related theology, will now be subject to AI constructing the Christian faith to shape churches in its virtual image and simulated likeness. As we examine the faith of churches, the answers will be clarified, as well as unravel the broader construction of Christian faith and intensify its deconstruction.

On the one hand, the identity of a church is made up of who and what individuals are; and the function of a church’s faith is determined primarily by how those individuals are. On the other hand, a church has a corporate identity whose function primarily defines and determines the faith both of the church and its individual members. These processes are not either-or since they do not exist independent of each other but, in fact, often overlap in mutual interaction of each exerting its influence on the other. Examining in what direction this influence is exerted and understanding the results will further unravel the issues anticipated that need to be resolved in the faith of churches.

We proceed in this examination on the basis of what Jesus (together with the Spirit) made clear unequivocally that “all churches *need to* know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts” (Rev 2:23). Thus, churches and their individuals, prepare to go to this integral depth, which will either expose the mind quantifying the outer in or will highlight the primacy of the heart encompassing the wholeness of the inner out.

Churches and Their Individuals or Individuals and Their Churches

Churches are diverse as individuals are, and their faith is variable like individuals. The determining factor in this mutual diversity and variability is whether churches define their individuals or individuals define their churches. Will these stories unfold from the faith churches live or just evolve from the faith they have? The answer is clarified only on the basis of what Jesus made clear above.

Whether this process unfolds or evolves depends on similar issues of inner-out or outer-in identity and function, as well as their faith being a noun or a verb to determine the faith they just have or indeed live. Thus, what was examined in Chapter 1 about the individual and their faith directly overlaps and interacts with examining the faith of churches.

The identity formation of a church is usually initiated by an individual(s), although denominational churches rely on their corporate structure and organizational nature operated by individuals or in spite of them. Our examination of church identity formation needs to go deeper than the quantified distinctions of who and what churches are to get to the heart of *who* and *what* the church is created to be and thereby *how* the church functions. Of course, the who, what and how of many churches have been, are and continue to be subject to human shaping under the subtle assumption that God *is* just as humans *are* (as God confronted in Ps 50:21). Consequently, this underlies the existing shape of many churches and their individuals. The question remains, however, about which came first, ‘the chicken or the egg’.

When the focus in this metaphor for the church is on God’s creation, the chicken by its intrinsic nature comes first. When the focus digresses or is transposed, for example, to biological evolution, then the egg comes first. Accordingly, the identity formation of a church unfolds only when focused on God’s creation, while it evolves focused on anything less or any substitutes. So, when is the church definitively a chicken

and when it is merely an egg? We will address this question shortly after further discussing the direction of influential interaction between churches and individuals.

When a church takes on the primary priority as the chicken, it produces individual eggs according to its faith. How a church practices its faith either revolves around the activities and acting of faith as a noun that church has, or is by the action of faith as a verb that church lives. The faith of this church's individuals subsequently are hatched in likeness of this church, both to reflect it and to increase its eggs. Given the priority of a church as a chicken, the defining influence churches exert on individuals is critical to examine at an integral depth in order to determine the kind of chicken it is and the significance of its faith forming its eggs.

The activities of many churches and the acting witnessed (notably at worship services) of the faith they have generally become the identity markers for those churches. These identity markers have even evolved in the type of music and songs churches use in worship services.¹ If you examine the church you belong to or merely attend, what do the church's activities mean to you? And what does the acting by pastors, worship leaders, elders, and others do for you? Or how do their actions affect you?

As Jesus critiques the majority of early churches (see Rev 2-3), the faith they had was devoted, widely acclaimed, integrated with the surrounding world for good works, or highly resourceful. However, each church existed in their performative faith without getting down to the integral depth of living their faith in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity. On the limited and constrained basis of these churches, who and what would their individuals be and how would they function?

When the above dynamic is reversed for individuals to define their churches, what unfolds or evolves will have similar antecedents as discussed above about churches defining their individuals. For faith practice, the individual's identity and function—either from inner out or outer in—is an inescapable condition, and the individual's faith—either as noun or verb—is an unavoidable issue. Either the activating and acting of faith individuals have, or the action of faith they live is an inevitable determining condition of

¹ For a discussion of these issues, see the study by Kary A. Kambara, *A Theology of Worship: 'Singing' a New Song to the Lord* (2011), online at <https://4X12.org>.

faith practice. On this basis, individuals from outer in or inner out, with a noun or verb as their faith, and by the activity and acting of faith they have, or action of faith they live, all together will either (1) shape their churches according to their likeness or (2) synthesize their churches in the image and likeness of God. The results from the former can and will only construct churches and the church's faith with the variable reliability of faith in need of deconstruction. In contrast and conflict, the relational outcome from the latter can, must and will only grow churches and its faith with the consistent viability of faith directly involved in the primacy of relationship intimately joined together both with God and with each other as the church of nothing less and no substitutes.

The former is consequential whether individuals define their churches or churches define their individuals. And the latter enacts the relational outcome both for individuals defining their churches and churches defining their individuals. The former prevails for the majority of churches today, while the latter lives in only a minority and continues to be elusive to the majority—just as Jesus exposed in his critique of the majority of early churches and affirmed in a minority.

So, then, how do you think that you affect your church? Also, how do you reinforce and sustain your church, and how have you changed it?

A Chicken or an Egg

It is essential to understand how the identity of the church was formed. The who and what of the church will always determine how the church functions. Thus, the who and what of the church is imperative to understand in its origin in order to know if it emerged metaphorically as a chicken or an egg. For the definitive answer, we have to go back to the beginning, which overlaps and interacts with the beginning of the individual.

In its beginning, how did the formation of the church come into existence, and did it unfold definitively or evolve variably?

During the incarnation Jesus created the roots for his church. He initially distinguished his church family in a surprising declaration. When he was told that his earthly biological family was urgently trying to find him in order to put limits on him to constrain the action of his person, he responded with “Who is my **family**? Then, pointing to persons who followed his person from inner out, not those on a parallel path, he declared unequivocally: “Here is my family. Whoever lives their faith in God with the relational trust on the basis of God’s relational terms, thereby is intimately involved in relationship together for the relational outcome constituting my church family” (paraphrasing Mt 12:48-50). His created roots for the church are further distinguished definitively by God’s relational terms, which integrally creates the church family in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity.

These relational terms creating the church family are integrally constituted in Jesus’ encompassing intercessory prayer to the Father on behalf of his church family (Jn 17). He defines the integral relational context and process between the Father and the Son (implicitly with the Spirit) that unites the trinitarian persons as One in the intimate connection of their relationship together. Their integral relational context and process create the integral relational basis and outcome for Jesus’ church family to come alive and live just as the Trinity lives. This is the invariable relational outcome of Jesus’ prayer that creates the church as a chicken, not as an egg evolving to hatch in human terms.

The family members of the church live together in the organic structure of Christ’s body, which is the relational outcome constituted by the Spirit (1 Cor 12). Christ’s body identifies the various secondary distinctions of each member, not to be confused with the identity of each of their whole persons from inner out. Too many Christians define themselves and each other by what they do in the church body, or by the gifts they have, which are designated by the Spirit as secondary to the primacy of relationships together as family. It is imperative to understand that Paul’s definitive account of Christ’s body was also necessary to counter various individuals in the Corinthian church. Throughout his Corinthian letters, Paul confronted those who constructed their faith and shaped the church from outer in, subtly in human likeness rather than God’s. The relational consequences were the reduction and fragmentation of

the Corinthian church and its individuals from the wholeness created in God's image and likeness, not theirs.

Each of the secondary parts composing Christ's body serves for the integral purpose of the church's created function to be lived in wholeness as one family just as the Trinity is One, thus for the church not to have a performative function of its members roles in and gifts for the activities and acting as merely a church body in variable likeness of the church's (and its individuals') creation. For the relational outcome, however, to be the experiential relational reality of significant relational connections for the church necessitates, by the church's created nature, for the church's relationships together to function in relational likeness of the Trinity. What distinguishes and determines these relationships together?

In today's digital world, the hatching of relationships evolves predominately online to form digital connections. Many have become weary and dissatisfied with these virtual relationships. This has led to a current effort in various contexts to return to an "analog lifestyle," with the hope of renewing a deeper involvement by individuals. Churches as an egg have hatched with similar relational consequences, yet their turnround to a chicken is not evident for renewing relationships in the church as created by Jesus in likeness of the Trinity.

To recap Jesus' heart-level critique of early churches, each of the majority of these churches was confronted for its constructed faith to be accountable for deconstruction. The church in Laodicea had an identity built on the foundation of its strong resourcefulness as the basis for what it did and had. This illusion of its self-worth rendered who and what it was to a mediocre condition of just being "lukewarm, neither cold nor hot"; and this rendered how it functioned to a simulated relationship with God keeping a relational distance, at best, and likely disconnected. Jesus simply rejected its evolving as an egg ("spit you out of my mouth") and pursued them to turn around, so that the church would be restored to the wholeness of relationship together as family (Rev 3:14-20).

Then Jesus confronted the church at Sardis, who had a hot reputation (a contrast to Laodicea). The widely esteemed reputation of the faith it had was measured quantitatively by reduced and fragmentary standards evolving in its surrounding context

(compare to digital measures today). Consequently, it was reduced effectively to an egg evolving quantified from outer in by the measure it used—just as Jesus made axiomatic earlier (Mk 4:24)—thus lacking the qualitative nature of the church as chicken. So, Jesus confronted its resounding outer-in faith and practice constructed without being whole from inner out as a *chicken* created by God in his qualitative image. His “wake up” call alerted this church to be freed from the reduced limits and fragmentary constraints of its parallel path, and thereby be restored to the narrow path created by Jesus for the wholeness of his church family (Rev 3:1-3). Wake up, eggs, to the sound of a chicken—the measure used is the measure you become!

Jesus also confronted the church at Thyatira for the hybrid faith they subtly constructed. It was actively engaged in the surrounding community to serve its needs with a sense of love; and its latest works were greater than at first. As an activist church, however, it did not clearly distinguish its full identity of who and what it was, which would have been in contrast to, if not in conflict with, its surrounding community. This church effectively placed its egg in the surrounding nest with assumptions about being part of it. Consequently, it not only blended into this surrounding context but also associated with parts of the community as if it were its own. Thus, it evolved no longer distinguished from them in contrast or conflict. What evolved for this church as an egg constructed a hybrid of identity and function that was no longer defined and distinguished from inner out as Jesus created for the church signifying a chicken (Rev 2:18-23).

Most notable in Jesus’ critique, he confronted the church at Ephesus. Since a chicken is created and an egg evolves, the issue of which came first should be apparent but its significance ongoingly faces churches for their accountability. This church represents the strength of churches working hard at maintaining their beliefs and ensuring the sum of its integrity as orthodox while in a climate of variable theology. This church also persevered in this theological struggle, as well as endured hardships for the sake of Jesus’ name without growing weary. Wow, what is Jesus critiquing that called for this devoted and uncompromising church’s confrontation? Didn’t the chicken come first to define its constitution? But, the reality is that no one is immune to the sin of reductionism, and this theological model of a church became subject to reductionism’s counter-relational workings.

Jesus didn't hesitate to declare what he held against this church. "You have forsaken the love you first experienced 'as I have loved you'; and thus, since you veered off course from your beginning, you have abandoned our intimate relationship together in its primacy by substituting secondary issues and concerns, however important they may have been" (Rev 2:1-5). In other words, this church as a chicken at first became unintentionally or inadvertently reduced to an egg. How does this happen?

In Jesus' relational love, he confronts this church to be accountable first and foremost for the relational work of love, which initiated the relational response and involvement by the Trinity in order to:

1. constitute the covenant of love for God's people (as in Dt 7:7-9); and
2. created the church and its individuals to be family together in the intimate relationship of love joined heart to heart, which is witnessed innately in the Trinity and living intrinsically in the church family by the Trinity's relational likeness (Jn 15:9; 17:23,26).

Furthermore, Jesus also made definitive his relational work of love earlier for his church family by declaring "I will not forsake (*aphiemi*, same word as Rev 2:4) you or abandon you, and thereby leave you as orphans without my church family" (Jn 14:18).

The church at Ephesus, at some point after its beginning, no longer lived in the primacy of the intimate relationship of love as constituted and created by the Trinity. It would also incur the relational consequences not only in relationship with God but with each other in the church. The intimate relationships of love heart to heart are not a given just because love is identified in its faith. Relationships of mere association become the given in any church forsaking its first love. When relational distance or disconnection replace heart-to-heart intimacy, then another relational consequence in those churches is the reality that many individuals in the church are rendered alone in its gatherings by its relational distance. In such an association, individuals effectively will be **relational orphans** and likely feel lonely in those gatherings of that church.

Therefore, the essential relational work of love is not optional for the church as a created chicken, nor is it negotiable to whatever evolves from the church as an egg. And whether as a church or its individuals, who would not be found accountable if not living their faith by the relational action of love? Regardless of the strength of their faith and the extent of its practice, the quantity of their resources, the value of their reputation, the amount of their service and devotion, as well as their theological certainty, the inflection point from the relational love of Jesus will necessarily be accountably confronted.

Emphatically stated, the church as a chicken is only created, whereas the church as an egg just evolves; and God's creation always antecedes as well as supersedes any evolution to constitute the church as chicken ongoingly primary, not just at first. Nothing less and no substitutes distinguishes the church as a chicken, but anything less and any substitutes always forms the church as an egg. This is the critical inflection point for the faith of churches. But what also needs to be exposed in the consequential issue of anything less and any substitutes is the illusion that consistently evolves in many believing that a church as an egg hatches into a chicken.

Moreover, a chicken or an egg also alerts the church and its individuals to the integral depth of Jesus' work of salvation. Our attention on Jesus' relational work of love now must extend to what Jesus saves us for.

What We Are Saved *from* plus *to*

Just as Jesus' relational work of love gets reduced to his sacrifice centered on the cross, his work of salvation gets fragmented in the faith most churches and individuals have. The theology of salvation (soteriology) in most belief systems centers on and is limited to what Jesus saves us *from*: that is, saved from sin. Forgiveness is basic to being saved from sin, and it expresses an essential function of Jesus' relational work of love. Yet, forgiveness only releases us from the sin we present to God by our faith. This raises issues about our sin and its forgiveness composed by our faith.

As witnessed in the first generation of individual humans, their human being and being human were contrary to God not just by their disobedience. Disobedience has been and continues to be the prevailing composition of sin emerging from the primordial garden. Accordingly, this sin has been and continues to be the prevailing perception of sin's composition in the theology for Jesus' work of salvation. But, as introduced by Satan in the garden, sin composes the reduction of wholeness created by God; and this **sin as reductionism** is what counters the wholeness of God in relationships together with God and with each other. Consequently, sin must by its nature be always composed by nothing less than reductionism. Moreover, even though being saved from the sin of reductionism is essential for human being, it is insufficient for being human to live as God created in the image and likeness of the Trinity. That is to say, Jesus' relational work of love not only saves us from sin, but also by the nature of his relational love Jesus integrally saves us *to* integrated with *from*.

'What does Jesus save us *to*?' is obscure theologically and becomes the elusive dimension in soteriology that generally exists in a theological fog. Our examination needs to clarify, correct and convict churches and individuals in their faith, in order for their faith to be lived by the action of what Jesus saves us *to*, so that their faith will not be composed by limited activities and constrained acting evolving from merely what Jesus saves us from. To what extent churches and individuals today will be saved is an open question only they can answer.

What we are saved *from* plus *to* cannot be reduced to the likes of a mathematical calculation. In other words, the relation work of love by Jesus to save us cannot be quantified merely to behaviors of sin. Nor can it be open ended without the relational outcome of his love. It also means that the variable faith churches and individuals have and the diversity evolving in their faith practice cannot grasp, embrace and encompass his relational outcome when limited to what Jesus saves us from. This unavoidably and thankfully brings us to the relational reality of his relational love constituting the relational outcome of what Jesus saves us *to*.

The truth is that since Jesus saves us from the sin of reductionism countering God's wholeness, then we cannot only be saved from the reduction of wholeness without also being saved to being restored to that wholeness. In other words, Jesus' work of

salvation cannot just forgive us for reducing or fragmenting God's wholeness without making us whole again in both our human being and being human. Otherwise, our human being and being human are left in limbo still being defined and determined by anything less and any substitutes. Unequivocally and irreplaceably, however, Jesus' relational work of love constitutes his work of salvation for completing his saving us to the *new* creation of wholeness in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity.

This relational outcome for the church created by the Trinity unfolds only from the redemptive change of its *old* ways dying so that the church is raised *new* in the **redemptive reconciliation** of the church's intimate relationships together both with God and within the church family (as in 2 Cor 5:17-18). Jesus' relational work of love first frees us from our effectively enslaved condition in the sin of reductionism; and then he reconciles us back to his family by the relational involvement of our cleansed hearts vulnerably opening to God and each other in the intimate relationship of love only as he loved us (cf. Col 1:13-14). This relational outcome intensifies when the church family reconciles the relational orphans in its midst as well as in its surroundings by adopting them to belong now in the church as family.

Yet, the relational outcome of what Jesus saves us to for his church family not only reconciles the church and its individuals in the intimate relationships of love as he loved us (witnessed in 1 Cor 12:12). Integrated essentially with these intimate relationships of love is the following:

In order for the church family to be fully reconciled to its created wholeness, it necessarily also must be involved relationally in the integrally essential process of **equalization**. As the church reconciles together in intimate relationships, their love must also address the inherent and ascribed distinctions that the church's individuals have from outer in. These distinctions create an inequality between individuals that requires them to be equalized in order to be reconciled together as family in wholeness.

As long as any distinctions are used to define individuals in the church, their relationships cannot and do not reconcile together intimately but are relegated to the comparative system ranking them on a vertical scale of better or less (cf. 1 Cor 12:14-16, 21).

In Jesus' church family, all these distinctions that its members have are overtly equalized essentially as persons from inner out. Equalization is a deliberate and necessary process in order that any of their distinctions do not prevent them from being reconciled together in the heart-to-heart intimate relationships of love. Therefore, redemptive reconciliation is constituted in Jesus' work of salvation by his relational work of love, so that his church family lives together in wholeness by their integral relationships **both intimate and equalized** in the relational likeness of the Trinity.

Redemptive reconciliation is not optional but essential for the wholeness of who, what and how the church family and its persons and relationships are *to be*. The relational outcome for the church family as created by the Trinity is the unequivocal identity and function of **the church as intimate equalizer** (as initially defined the early church, Acts 15:8-11). Paul clarified Jesus' work of salvation to make definitive the relational outcome of the church as intimate equalizer (Eph 2:14-22). This makes whole the theology of salvation for the faith of churches to be lived for, in and with their individuals together in the action of love whole-ly (integrally whole & holy/uncommon) "just as I love you...and by this action all will know that you are my family" (Jn 13:35).

When the faith of churches is not only deconstructed but transformed to the church as intimate equalizer, it holds us accountable for choosing to make our distinctions primary and confronts us in our choice for self-determination by them. Accountably confronting is essential because the choices for both imply and are consequential of the following:

1. They are incompatible with the uncommon peace (signifying wholeness) and equality of Christ, who saves us from reduced identity and function and saves us to wholeness together in the integral depth of who, what and how we are created *to be*.
2. The choices are incongruent with the new, uncommon (signifying holy), whole relational order of the transformed church family of Christ.

3. They are contrary to the gospel for the ages of all persons, the diversity of all peoples, the differences of all tribes and nations, and all their relationships, which unfolds (not evolves) to experience wholeness in their primacy from inner out.
4. The choices are in conflict with the redemptive reconciliation needed for the transformed relationships together, integrally both intimate and equalized, that constitute the relational outcome of this gospel of wholeness and uncommon equality—the whole-ly gospel enacted by Jesus’ relational work of love for his work of salvation.

The above consequences frequently elude the awareness of churches because the soteriology in their belief systems tends to be in a theological fog. Equality distinguishes the innermost of the whole and uncommon (whole-ly) God and is at the heart of God’s relational response of love to our human condition. The church as intimate equalizer distinguishes the innermost of whole-ly God’s likeness and extends the heart of God’s relational response of love to the fragmentary condition of all the persons, peoples, tribes and nations in this pluralistic, globalizing world—just as Jesus prayed for his church family. So, given what Jesus integrally saves us *from* and *to*, what does the church as intimate equalizer mean for the global church in all its diversity?²

Facing Us Today, Face to Face

Accountability for the faith constructed by churches has also been elusive if not avoided. It should be apparent from Jesus’ axiom (Mk 4:24), however, that the measure churches have used in their faith practice, then unequivocally and unavoidably is the measure of who, what and how churches have become—nothing more yet even

² For a discussion on the diversity of the global church, see my studies *The Global Church Engaging the Nature of Sin & the Human Condition: Reflecting, Reinforcing, Sustaining or Transforming* (Global Church Study), and *The Diversity of the Integral Gospel: Repurposing Diversity to Re-image the Global Church* (Diversity Study), online at <https://www.4X12.org>.

something less. With the echoes from Jesus' critique of churches howling for our attention, will deconstructions of church faith unfold to turn them around to the relational outcome of Jesus' relational work of love?

The earliest church struggled to be equalized (Acts 6:1). The early church leaders struggled at the church council in Jerusalem for the church to be the intimate equalizer (Acts 15). The church at Corinth struggled to be equalized (1 Cor 1:10-13; 4:7). The church at Galatia had to turn around in order to be equalized (Gal 1:6; 3:26-28). Paul challenged Philemon to intimately equalize in his faith (Phm 8-16), and he confronted Peter and other church leaders with him to stop acting in their faith and start living their faith for the church to be the intimate equalizer (Gal 2:14). And on and on, the struggle persisted for the church to be equalized from inner out as well as for the church to be the intimate equalizer.

The church as intimate equalizer perhaps is more visibly needed in the surrounding world today than since the beginning. The current U.S. immigration policy is a glaring example of the human condition, notably among its Christian supporters. This need is apparent also in the fragmenting diversity of the global church, which can only have an illusion of functioning as a unified church, much less live as Jesus' church family. Whether heard or not, the question resonates from God "Where are you?" for the faith of churches to be deconstructed. As Jesus loves us, he awaits the reciprocal response of love from churches and their leaders

1. To go beyond being "lukewarm" or having a hybrid faith,
2. To answer his "wake up" call to stop being fragmented and become whole, as well as
3. To be reconciled with their "first love".

Why does Jesus urgently await our **reciprocal response**? Because his relational outcome from his relational love is not a unilateral process that he solely controls and determines. Even though he initiates the relational work of love, its relational outcome becomes a relational reality only when we reciprocate with our relational love "just as I love you." Therefore, only in and thereby from these reciprocal relational responses of

love does the relational outcome of what Jesus saves us to become the experiential truth and relational reality. By nothing less and no substitutes can and will redemptive change bring redemptive reconciliation to the church's relationships together integrally intimate and equalized as church family in the relational likeness of the Trinity.

In this reciprocal relational outcome, the struggle of faith that churches have will be resolved. The resolution, however, is irreducible and nonnegotiable, because churches are resolved only for them to be free to live whole in the relational action of love that reciprocates in likeness just as Jesus loves them, whereby they embody the church as intimate equalizer without anything less and any substitutes.

Take heed and pay close attention, however, because this relational outcome only becomes the unequivocal relational reality when the inflection points constructing Christian faith are accountably confronted. Only then will the faith of those churches, church leaders and their individuals be deconstructed. In the meantime, what are you going to do with the distinctions making up your self-portrait, and those distinctions portraying your church? Unequal relationships are irreconcilable unless intimately equalized.

Deconstruction Outcome: Re-*image*-ing the Church

The human and commonized images by which churches have been constructed are the status quo that keeps evolving in new normals for the global church. This existential reality has disaffected many in younger generations, who don't see the church as relevant for their faith practice or as sufficient context to address their needs.³ What currently pervades the church accelerates the urgent need for the church to be re-*image*-d, not reimagined as witnessed today but re-*image*-d according to the depth of its created roots.

³ See, for instance, the survey by the Barna Group, *The State of Discipleship* (The Navigators, 2015).

When Paul defines the church as being reconciled in one body (Eph 2:16) and as equalized persons relationally belonging to God’s family (2:19), this church family (not church building) is further defined as being “joined together” (2:21). Paul is providing further theological-functional clarity to his previous dialogue on the church (1 Cor 12:12-31; Rom 12:5). His earlier relational discourse appears to describe an organic or organizational structure of the church whose parts are interrelated and function in interdependence. Paul deepens the understanding of interrelated parts in interdependence by further defining the relational dynamic involved to make this integrally function in wholeness together (Eph 4:16).

Implied in church theology and practice biases is the worldview prevailing at the time.⁴ Worldviews shape the surrounding contexts that influence the identity and function of churches as well as of God, notably as the Trinity. Understanding how worldviews get magnified in church theology and practice is critical for re-*image*-ing the church in contrast to reimagining it.

In the church’s perceptual-interpretive lens of the Trinity, uncommon likeness also requires the uncommon Trinity, who is not distinguished in common Trinitarianism.⁵ God’s glory encompasses the heart of the Trinity’s qualitative being functioning integrally by the glory of the Trinity’s intimate relational nature. At the heart of the Trinity, the trinitarian persons’ distinctions of roles and functions (enacted to love us downward) are indistinguishable—“whoever has seen *my whole person* has seen the Father,” “The Father and I are one *at the heart of our being*” as the embodied Word disclosed (Jn 14:9; 10:30)—and thus they are not structured together by a system of distinctions, as is commonly perceived in trinitarian theology and practice. The substantive face of the Trinity vulnerably disclosed the heart of the Trinity to distinguish the ontological One of the *person*-al Trinity and the relational Whole of the inter-*person*-al Trinity.

⁴ David Naugle discusses worldview history and reification in *Worldviews: the History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁵ For a discussion on the Trinity, see my study *The Face of the Trinity: The Trinitarian Essential for the Whole of God* (Trinity Study, 2016), online at <https://4X12.org>.

Intimate and equalized relationships inseparably define and integrally determine the whole ontology and function of the Trinity. The uncommon intimate whole essential to the heart of the Trinity's ontology is constituted only by the function of whole trinitarian persons distinguished as subjects intimately involved in relationships together, which by their nature are equalized from the distinctions of their roles and functions and thus without the horizontal and vertical barriers to the uncommon wholeness essential for the Trinity *to be* together and *not to be* reduced or fragmented. Accordingly yet not simply, nothing less and no substitutes can integrally define our persons as subjects and determine our relationships *to be* in uncommon likeness to this Trinity.

Intimacy is not optional for the uncommon Trinity, nor can intimacy be optional for those in likeness. This means that equalized persons and relationships are also not optional, both for the whole Trinity and for those in likeness. Not having this option is problematic, for example, for churches seeking more intimacy in their contexts without addressing equalizing their persons and relationships. This is also problematic for Christians promoting social justice and working for social change by equalization without intimate connection. We can't have one relational condition without the other relational condition, because they are inseparably integrated to compose wholeness of persons and relationships in likeness of the whole and uncommon Trinity.

Yet, this whole likeness has undergone profound reductions in the framework of modernism, and the uncommon likeness has experienced ongoing fragmentation in the scope of postmodern approaches. These surrounding influences urgently amplify the Trinity's confronting critiques and multiply the need to challenge, critique and confront the underlying assumptions of our belief systems. In addition, the current condition of persons and relationships confronts our view of sin, the significance of our gospel, and what we are saved *to*. All of these compelling issues converge in the measure of the Trinity used in our faith and practice, since that measure defines the persons we become and determines the relationships we get.

The most prominent realities shaping the human context and the majority of its persons and relationships—including the church context and its individuals and relationships—have emerged from the narratives mostly of modernism and less so of postmodernism.

In selective summary of the modern narrative from the emergence of the Enlightenment to its unfolding in modern science, its related process of reasoning and the recent effort to quantify the heart of the human person in the brain have profoundly narrowed down the epistemic field and the perceptual-interpretive framework to the realm of physics. As a result, assumptions are made as to the validity of this epistemic process and its reliability for application to all of life, such that the theories composed generate a grand narrative for defining the universe in general and for determining persons and relationships in particular.

Based on its quantitative framework narrowing down its epistemic field and perceptual lens to the outer in, the modern narrative has irreversibly reduced human persons and relationships *not to be* in qualitative relational function having qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness (i.e. being apart, Gen 2:18). From the Industrial Revolution to the internet world, the development of modern technology has indelibly entrenched and literally enslaved persons and relationships on a course of human development that has reduced the primacy of their created wholeness with secondary substitutes. These more-valued substitutes can only simulate who, what and how they are in a virtual likeness—notably evident in the use of digital technology and development of AI—that is, in a reality without qualitative relational significance and thus in no substantive reality.

The existing condition of persons and relationships in developed countries is no mystery and its development—perceived as so-called progress—is evident in the modern narrative. In these contexts in particular, the prognosis for changing this condition is confounding, and the recourse to make it whole is denied or at least ignored—which is witnessed in U.S. Christians and churches today. As emerged from the beginning, the modern narrative’s sweeping assumption has been that “you will not be *reduced*” (Gen 3:4). And the Trinity grieves (as in Lk 19:41-42) because the modern narrative also doesn’t know what makes for wholeness, since this uncommon wholeness is beyond its epistemic field and perceptual lens to understand. Those persons and relationships who have subscribed to the modern narrative must live and function by the valid axiom that reliably can be counted on for its results: the measure they use will be the measure they get—and what their reason thinks they have will evaporate from their grasp (Mk 4:24-

25). Whether intentionally or inadvertently, those churches and its individuals and relationships who use the modern framework and lens are subject to this axiom, because this is the existing reality that they have gotten in common likeness.

Another more recent narrative has emerged from postmodern thinking counter to the modernist narrative. The grand narrative of modernism is not accepted in postmodernism, at least not ostensibly. The variable thinking of postmodernists opts to define persons and relationships in the grassroots experience of their local contexts. Who, what and how persons and relationships are have their primacy in their particular settings, which cannot be generalized to all persons and relationships as in a grand narrative. In this sense, the epistemic field for postmodernists is narrowed down even more than modernism; yet, on the other hand, the postmodernist lens is broadened to behold a wide range of individuals and relationships. Thus, the likeness of individuals and relationships that emerge from the postmodern narrative is not a reduced likeness as in modernism, but it becomes fragmented likenesses of individuals and relationships merely from the diversity of human contextualization. The postmodern likeness is considered reliable in itself yet not valid for general application. Given its basis and discounting of modernist assumptions, the postmodern epistemic field and hermeneutic lens are useful for diversifying (read fragmenting) global theologies and practices—particularly composed to counter Western dominance—but they are problematic for whole trinitarian theology and practice.⁶

While the postmodern narrative broadens, and perhaps deepens, its stories of individuals and relationships, any of its theories provide no basis for individuals and relationships to be considered whole. Rather, what is proposed is merely nothing more than distinctly fragmentary likeness—the balkanization of individuals and relationships in likeness. Since it affirms no general narrative beyond local human context, even though postmodern theories may make statements as if to generalize, the measure it uses can only yield the individuals and relationships it gets—beyond whom it must remain silent, without knowledge and understanding of the whole needed for the human

⁶ David S. Cunningham considers postmodernism an asset for developing a postmodern trinitarian theology, which would focus on a number of concerns neglected by theologians influenced by modernity. See his discussion in “The Trinity” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 186-202.

condition. And the balkanized likeness of individuals and relationships remains in a condition “to be apart,” as if the face of Jesus disclosed nothing relevant or significant for persons and relationships *to be* in likeness.

Unlike the modernist narrative limited to the realm of physics, the emergence of the Trinity integrates the realms of physics and metaphysics to disclose the essential integral reality beyond those realms. The essential reality of the whole and uncommon Trinity composes the metanarrative integral for all life—distinguished from the grand narrative of modernism—which encompasses all persons and relationships in uncommon likeness neither reduced nor fragmented. Apart from this integral metanarrative, there is no essential basis for wholeness either for the Trinity or for persons and relationships.

This is the epistemological and hermeneutical dilemma that a postmodern narrative faces, even apart from its counterpart modern narrative. The resolution of this dilemma will only take place—and not without difficulty—when its epistemic field and hermeneutic lens account for and therefore become accountable to the whole and uncommon Trinity relationally disclosed qualitatively in the human context, yet not defined and determined by human contextualization as postmodernists depend on.

The reduced likeness from a modernist narrative may assume to be applicable to all persons and relationships, but that application can only reduce who, what and how persons and relationships are. The fragmentary-balkanized likeness from a postmodernist narrative is inapplicable to all persons and relationships and makes no explicit assumptions that it does. Yet, there appears to be an underlying assumption that the sum of all those fragments from local settings could apply to the whole of the human context. Perhaps balkanized likeness is considered analogous to diverse nations converging to form the United Nations. That sum, however, would still not equal the whole—which is greater than the sum of any parts or fragments—needed for all persons and relationships *to be* in essential likeness to the whole-ly Trinity.

We need to challenge our own assumptions and face the surrounding reality of reduced and fragmented likenesses; and we need to stop ignoring them or denying their influential reality in our midst, both of which keep us “to be apart” from our essential

likeness. That essential likeness for human persons and relationships in life together is uncommon to all that is common, whether in a modern narrative or a postmodern narrative.

Though idolized (as in modernism) or idealized (as in postmodernism), the likeness from such narratives can only compose persons and relationships in a virtual reality of the whole who, what and how essential *to be*. Even the likeness from a premodern narrative involved basically the same issues for persons and relationships. Christendom evolved in the fourth century, for example, to impose its common framework for all theology and practice to conform to a reduced ontology and function in common likeness. Similar in likeness, other efforts to ensure orthodoxy and to avoid fragmentation in the church established the primacy of doctrine over the primacy of relationships together involving the whole person, which thereby composed common orthodoxy in *unlikeness* to the whole and uncommon Trinity (cf. the church at Ephesus). The common shaping of persons and relationships also emerged in the earliest church. Paul further fought against these “fine-sounding arguments, persuasive speech” (Col 2:4,8,16-19, notably from the early forms of gnosticism) in order that the interrelated likeness of persons, relationships and the church would be in uncommon wholeness—integrated together with the uncommon whole ontology and function of the Trinity disclosed by Christ (Col 2:9-10, as in Eph 4:13-16).

Thus, implicit in Paul’s uncommon ecclesiology—contrary to a worldview implied in church theology and practice—is the relational dynamic that Jesus constituted in his prayer for the definitive formation of his church family (Jn 17). Paul extends the whole-ly Word’s relational dynamic in order to fulfill his prayer in the existential reality of the church that is *re-image-d* solely by the Trinity (17:21-23). In Paul’s whole ecclesiology, the functional significance of church ontology and function emerges as the church lives “created according to the likeness of God” (Eph 4:24). The church, for Paul, is the Father’s new creation family embodied in Christ and raised up by the Spirit in the relational likeness of this whole of God, who dwells intimately present and *agape*-relationally involved. If not created and functioning in this likeness, church becomes a gathering of human shaping or construction in likeness of some aspect of human contextualization, which then often reifies its ontological illusions and functional

simulations as the body of Christ in contrast to and conflict with the relational intimacy of the Trinity.

Paul was no trinitarian in his theological development, yet his monotheism went beyond the knowledge and understanding of the Shema in Judaism (Dt 6:4). His experiential truth of Jesus and the Spirit in ongoing relationship together gave him whole knowledge and understanding of the whole of God. The relational and functional significance of Paul's whole God constituted him as a new creation in God's family and provided the unequivocal basis for the church as God's new creation family to be in the relational likeness of this whole-ly God whom he himself has experienced intimately in relationship together.

Thus, trinitarian likeness was not a theological construct or an ethereal practice for Paul. It signified the reality of his intimate face-to-face involvement with the trinitarian persons, which composed the trinitarian relational process "with unveiled faces...being transformed into *Jesus*' likeness...who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). This essential relational outcome was the whole and uncommon basis for the whole of Paul's person and the whole in his theology and practice, which most notably composed the uncommon wholeness of the church and its persons and relationships in trinitarian likeness. In other words, since the Damascus road this monotheistic Jew vulnerably experienced the relational response of the trinitarian persons and their ongoing intimate relational involvement in family love, so that his whole person was *to be* distinguished in trinitarian likeness (see also Col 3:10-11; Gal 5:6; 6:15).

Even though Paul was no traditional trinitarian in theology, he clearly made definitive for the church this trinitarian likeness: "There are different...but the same Spirit...but the same Lord *Jesus*...but it is the same God *the Father*"; in addition, "There is one body and one Spirit...one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph 4:4-5), and differences granted to the church are based on each person "given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift" (4:7) and "given the *presence and involvement* of the Spirit for the *uncommon wholeness of the church*...just as the body is one and has many members...are one *ontological whole in likeness of the trinitarian persons*...all *our persons* baptized into *equalized relationships together without distinctions*" (1 Cor 12:7-13). The whole of Paul and the whole in his theology for the

church can only be understood in this trinitarian likeness, which transforms persons from inner out in their relationships without the veil to constitute the uncommon wholeness of the church in uncommon likeness of the whole and uncommon Trinity (as Paul made definitive in 2 Cor 3:14-18).

Churches need to understand, however, that the bond of wholeness is not simply a bond of love but is relationship-specific to whole persons in two vital nonnegotiable ways:

1. Only whole persons can be involved at the heart level for the bond of intimate relationships that is necessary for wholeness in trinitarian likeness; yet, this is only uncommon wholeness and not common peace (passing for wholeness), so the bond of intimate relationships is not a virtual reality that could be simulated, but is irreplaceably the essential reality of the hearts of whole persons (without the veil of differences and distinctions) bonding together.
2. This intimate bond requires then unavoidably that these persons be equalized unmistakably in any and all differences and distinctions, such that the involvement of their whole persons is not compromised and the integrity of this intimate bond is not redefined outer in and thereby become a bond of merely common peace—a bond which would neither be whole nor be in trinitarian likeness.

When Paul earlier held the church accountable to “open wide your hearts” in reciprocal likeness (2 Cor 6:11-13), it was this bond of wholeness in intimate and equalized relationships together in which he challenged their whole persons *to be* uncommon in trinitarian likeness. Nothing less and no substitutes for the church and its persons and relationships can be whole, just as is essential for the Trinity.

Therefore, for the ontological identity of the church to be of functional significance, it cannot be shaped or constructed by human terms from human contextualization. In Paul’s ecclesiology, the church in wholeness is the new creation by the whole of God’s relational response of grace (“was given grace”) from above top-down, the dynamic of which (“descended...ascended”) Christ relationally embodied to

make each one of us together to be God's whole ("he might fill all things," make complete, Eph 4:7-10; cf. 1:23). This is the church in wholeness embodying the whole of Christ. In God's relational response of grace, Christ also gave the relational means to church leaders for the dynamic embodying of the church (4:11), which Paul previously defined also as part of the Spirit's relational involvement to share different *charisma* from the whole (not a fragmented source) for the functional significance of the church body (1 Cor 12:4-11). Paul illuminates this further to make definitive the functional significance of embodying of the church in relational likeness to the whole and holy God.

Church leaders are given the relational means for the purpose "to equip the saints" (*katartismos* from *katartizo*, to put into proper condition, to restore to former condition, make complete, 4:12). This directly points to the dynamic of transformed persons reconciled and relationally involved in transformed relationships together in relational likeness to God, and integrated in interdependence of the various church functions ("work of ministry") necessary for the dynamic embodying (4:12) of the church's whole ontology and function of "the whole of Christ" (4:13). This means unequivocally: For church leaders to be of functional significance, their persons must be defined by the wholeness of the new creation in the qualitative image of God from inner out, not defined by their gifts, resources or the roles and titles they have which reduce their persons to outer in; and for their leadership to be functionally significant as transformed persons, their function must be determined by *agape* relational involvement in transformed relationships together (both equalized and intimate) as God's new creation family in the relational likeness of the whole-ly God, not determined by the titles and roles they perform (even with sacrifice) that make distinctions, intentionally or unintentionally, creating distance and stratification in relationships together. The latter practices by church leaders renegotiate ecclesiology from bottom-up based on a theological anthropology from outer in.

In the created roots of Paul's ecclesiology, church leaders in reduced ontology and function are not created or living new in the image and likeness of God and, therefore, cannot equip and train others in the interdependence necessary to be of functional significance for embodying the church family in relational likeness of the whole and holy God. Nor can they proclaim the experiential truth of the gospel of wholeness (Eph 6:15).

Only transformed leaders—whose persons are ongoingly being restored to the image and likeness of God (Col 3:10-11; cf. Eph 4:23)—vulnerably involved in transformed relationships together with the Spirit can help make complete the saints. Only whole leaders relationally serve to make complete the saints in the interdependence that is functionally significant for the church's whole function: to dynamically embody the whole of Christ until all those relationally belonging to God's family are intimately equalized together as one (unity); that is, whole in their relational response of trust in reciprocal relationship together and whole in specifically knowing the Son of God in intimate relationship, the relational outcome of which is persons without distinctions who are whole-ly complete in the qualitative depth of the wholeness embodied by Christ, therefore who together with the Spirit can embody the wholeness of Christ in functional significance of the relational likeness of the whole of God (4:12-13).

Paul is not outlining an ecclesial function of church growth models, missional models or any other ministry techniques of serving for the quantitative expansion of gatherings shaped or constructed by human terms. Paul makes definitive **the theological paradigm** for the whole function embodying the church's ontology and function of who the church is and whose the church is as God's new creation family in his qualitative image and relational likeness. This paradigm is the theological dynamic of church ontology, whose function is entirely relational and whose whole ontology and function is the functional significance just of transformed persons *agape*-relationally involved in transformed relationships together equalized in interdependence, the definitive paradigm especially for its leaders.

It is unequivocal in the created roots of Paul's ecclesiology that the church in relational likeness of the whole-ly God is irreplaceable for the functional qualitative-relational significance of its ontology and function. For the church's ontology and function to be whole as God's new creation family, it must by its nature (not by obligation) embody the functional significance of both transformed relationships reconciled together and intimate interrelations integrated together in equalized interdependence; and both of these are functionally significant only in *agape* relational involvement. Church whole relationships together are reconciled together by Christ with

the Spirit, thus are by their nature irreducible; and the embodied integrated relational outcome of church interdependence in relational likeness to the whole-ly God is nonnegotiable. Interdependent is how God created his new creation family, as well as created the whole human family in relationship together (cf. Gen 2:18) and integrated all of creation (cf. Col 1:20; Rom 8:19-21).

Churches may not want, even though they need, the presence and involvement of the *person-al* inter-*person-al* Trinity. The primary issue is because *to be* in uncommon likeness, the church and its persons and relationships have to be more vulnerable than they may want or find convenient—even though that is essential to what they need, which makes the want-need issue unavoidable. As Paul illuminated, wide-open hearts are uncommon and churches have consistently existed on a common easier path (as in parallel), contrary to Jesus’ intrusive relational path. Yet, to follow Jesus “where I am” (Jn 12:26) is neither optional nor open to negotiation for the church, despite the reality that discipleship has been presented as such by churches. Such church practice reflects a church’s incomplete Christology and truncated soteriology, and evidences a reduced theological anthropology of its persons and relationships in an ontology and function struggling (knowingly or not) to establish its identity both in the global community and within the global church—perhaps with a reputation like that of the church in Sardis, or with a track-record like that of the church in Ephesus.

The identity a church wants to establish may not be compatible or congruent with the identity the church needs to compose in likeness of the Trinity. As long as the integrity of who, what and how the church is (the whole of its righteousness) is not composed in the ontology and function that distinguishes its likeness beyond a common likeness of its surrounding context (locally, regionally and globally), that church has a major problem needing to be deconstructed. That church’s presence and involvement are in a critical condition that compromises the validity of its witness to the whole-ly God and its resource to know more than a common God. Churches in this likeness need to be accountably confronted in order to be transformed to uncommon wholeness only Jesus gives (Jn 14:27) *to be* in uncommon likeness; and that’s the pivotal reason why the church may not want the presence and involvement of the *person-al* inter-*person-al* Trinity.

Can you imagine going into a church and unilaterally turning it upside down in order to restore the relational context and process of God's uncommon temple for all persons without distinctions? Can you also imagine tearing down a church's tradition and exposing the barriers of its practice in order to open wide relationships of intimacy and equality to compose God's uncommon temple? Paul more than imagined these because Jesus embodied and enacted this intrusive relational path to constitute his church family in uncommon wholeness ("not as the *common* gives," Jn 14:27) in uncommon likeness ("just as I do not belong to the *common*," Jn 17:14) of the Trinity, that is, whole and uncommon, *person-al* and *inter-person-al*.

What jumps out in front of our face from Jesus and Paul, face to face, about the church as God's temple is the incompatibility between the uncommon and common, and that they are incongruent for any attempt to integrate them in a hybrid, not to mention irreconcilable in function and antithetical in ontology. What is 'holy and sanctified' has been perceived by churches throughout history with a common lens. That is, the uncommon (signifying holy) constituting the church by Jesus and composed for the church by Paul has been shaped by terms lacking congruence with the qualitative relational significance integral to their definition and application of uncommon. The most prominent issue-conflict involves the underlying theological anthropology defining persons and determining relationships in the church on the basis of what amounts to a common ontology and function—as evolved from the beginning. This church theology and practice further exposes an incomplete Christology of Jesus' whole person disclosing the whole and uncommon Trinity, as well as exposes a truncated soteriology not encompassing being both saved *from* sin as reductionism and saved *to* wholeness of persons in relationship together as the Trinity's new creation family. This essential reality and relational outcome have been pervasively commonized, such that at best they are simulated with only illusions of the uncommon.

The issue-conflict of defining persons and determining relationships in the church by a common ontology and function may not be apparent in the church's theology,

doctrinal statements and decrees of faith. But its operating presence emerges in the church's practice of its individuals' lack of heart-level involvement in the depth of relationships together integrally intimate and equalized in their differences and from their distinctions. Wide-open hearts in intimate reciprocal relationships is simply too uncommon and thus threatening for churches to advance for their individuals—a threat also for keeping their numbers in the church—plus too difficult for churches to cultivate in its relationships without having to address all the relational issues that emerge as individuals become more deeply involved.

Palatable relationships are certainly much easier for individuals (especially leadership) to face; just ask Jesus and Paul about their experiences related to the temple-church. The reason palatable relationships are easier to face is the fact that they don't bring persons together in face-to-face relationships—which today is the seduction of social media and the use of technology in the church. At most, palatable relationships are an association between individuals in the church, gathering together essentially as relational orphans still 'to be apart' from the transformed relationships together both intimate and equalized in the new creation family composing the Trinity's uncommon temple (Eph 2:21), that is, with the curtain torn away and the veil removed (2 Cor 3:16-18).

The relational context and process of the church as the Trinity's uncommon temple have been reconstituted for the primacy of all its persons to have intimate relational connection and ongoing involvement with the Trinity and with each other face to face. For the church's persons to have intimate relationships with the Trinity necessitates, by the nature of trinitarian relationship, the heart of the whole person, who by necessity has *to be* equalized from distinctions *to be* whole from inner out for the person's involvement in intimate reciprocal relationship together—just ask the Samaritan woman (in Jn 4:7-26), on the one side of this relational equation, and Peter at his footwashing on the other side. The church of uncommon likeness has no available option for palatable relationships, because the intimate and equalized relationships of the Trinity's uncommon temple are not optional but essential for the church *to be* in uncommon ontology and function to distinguish it and its persons and relationships together in uncommon likeness of the *person-al* inter-*person-al* Trinity.

Until the church is *re-image-d*, its contextualized and commonized images will continue to mirror the sociocultural, -political, -economic, and related human orders of the surrounding context, and thereby also (1) reflect the inequality and inequity of these orders and (2) magnify how relationships are enacted at a distance or with disconnection.

In the diversity of the global community, of course, relationships are ordered and enacted differently, but these grassroots reflect a human image and thus are contrary to the trinitarian image of church identity and function. The global church must face the reality that grassroots don't grow in a vacuum but are cultivated in and by the human condition—namely, the counter-relational workings of the sin of reductionism fragmenting persons and relationships in reduced ontology and function. And the global church cannot presume that these grassroots can be laundered for compatibility as the church's relational order and enactment of relationships. Any variable condition of the human order existing in the diversity of the global church needs to be deconstructed to undergo redemptive transformation in order for it to be turned around to redemptive reconciliation.

Therefore, the diversity of local and regional churches, along with the collective global church, are accountable to the created roots of Jesus' church family, whereby they are challenged, confronted and accountable for the image of their identity and function. When churches fully embrace the whole-ly image of the Trinity, they will be *re-image-d* from divergent images composing the global church. For *re-image-ing to be* the growing relational reality of the church's created roots, the diversity of the global church also needs *to be* re-order-ed by the new creation church as intimate equalizer.

Churches and their individuals need to pay close attention, if not “wake up,” to the evolving reality facing them: The measure of anything less and any substitutes creates the church in a **sub-image** submerged in the precarious waters of a theological fog. “Where is your faith?”

Chapter 3 The Faith of the Theological Academy

Those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.

Ecclesiastes 1:18

**“Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom...but let those who boast boast in this,
that they understand and know me.”**

Jeremiah 9:23-24

Come to me, listen *with your heart* so that you may live.

Isaiah 55:3

The faith of the theological academy is not an independent variable, which can be examined in and of itself without taking into account the intervening influences of (1) the faith of individuals occupying the academy, as well as (2) the faith of the church(es) determining, operating or in some other way shaping it. The overlapping interaction between the faith of these three is ongoing, such that the faith of the academy never stands alone as an independent variable. Rather, the academy's faith becomes a dependent variable explicitly supported or implicitly upheld by the faith of the other two intervening variables. This is the faith equation that must be examined now in order to have a clarifying explanation, a correcting solution and a convicting outcome for the academy's faith.

On the other hand, theological academies appear to exist and operate as if there is no need for clarification, correction and conviction, notably from other sources including the Spirit. This independence by the academy has evolved from the beginning to define its identity and determine its function, thereby serving as if the academy is the main source for explaining Christian faith and describing faith practice. After all, they are the training ground for church leaders. These stories about the academy need to be told and confronted when necessary.

The Academy's Variable Beginning

To know God and then to believe in God were basic questions and issues that stirred up the need for theological education ever since Old Testament times. This need increasingly precipitated the formation of theological education and the formalization of the theological academy. The educational process unfolded initially as God directed specific persons to teach God's people what God communicated for their faith (e.g. Ex 19:5-6; Lev 10:11; 1 Kgs 8:36). But, theological education became diluted and revolved around outward identity markers (such as the Sabbath, the Torah as a code of ethics, and the Temple)—compare with Sunday, the Bible and the church building for today—to construct faith for God's people to have, not live. Thus, theological education shifted from God's relational terms to reduced information merely about God. For this reason, God confronted them about the shallowness of its educators (as stated above, Jer 9:23-24). And the consequences of theological education were also clarified (Eccl 1:18; 12:12).

As this educational process evolved, Jesus had ongoing tension and conflict with the existing theological education and educators of God's people throughout his earthly ministry. Most notable was the story of Nicodemus' query of Jesus; this top-level educator of God's people was confronted about his knowledge when Jesus exposed his shallow thinking with the rhetorical question, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things *I say*?" (Jn 3:10).

This variable beginning has become a recycling narrative for the academy and its educators. How so?

As I engaged in theological study, I was drawn to a philosophical mindset and became enamored with the philosophy I read and heard, along with the knowledge-filled presentations by educators, as well as the logical arguments of various theological positions. I ongoingly felt challenged to quantify my knowledge and enhance my logic on the limited basis of a reduced theological education. I didn't realize at that time how

my knowledge and understanding of God were being diluted, and how I became boastful both of the quantitative composition of the academy and its educators (only a few), not to mention highlighting the shallow results of my theological education. The outer in of my mind prevailed over the inner out of my heart, the heart which composed my initial faith. But, this won't be surprising to others. My wife knows of seminary students who felt that they lost their initial child-like faith and excitement about Jesus while at seminary. And she has heard "jokes" in sermons/talks that refer to seminary as "cemetery," where faith dies. Thankfully, the Spirit eventually clarified, corrected and convicted me of what I was constructing in my faith.

What's your story about theological education, and are you aware of any stories about the academy or its educators?

I mentioned earlier how my new Christian faith involved intimately experiencing my relationship with Jesus, and how this intimate relationship became increasingly elusive as I became involved with the church and theological studies. This shift should not be surprising, even though my eventual dissatisfaction was surprising for me. These results reflect the faith of churches and the academy that they merely have and act, while living the action of faith was obscured in a theological fog. Thus, the academy's narrative needs to be closely examined in order to get to the integral depth necessary for theological education to be distinguished significant and essential for Christian faith.

What can be expected from the variables the academy and its educators depend on to define and determine the composition of theological education?

Theological Education's Dependent Variables

The results from the following variable may be surprising to older Christians, but their sum is likely anticipated by younger generations. This would explain why fewer and fewer younger Christians have been attending the theological academy, which has led to the closure of a number of Christian academies, both graduate and undergraduate.

Perhaps most surprising (even for younger Christians) is the initial variable needing to be understood, because it underlies the other variables to widely affect the faith not only of the academy and its educators but also the church, its leaders and individuals, as well as all Christians. This initial variable centers on **language** and revolves on the language used.

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

In the Bible we can observe similar difficulty and challenges with language, as well as give testimony of our similar personal experiences with the Word. Perhaps, not surprisingly, you may feel that you and the Word don't share the same language, and there may be more truth to that than is apparent. To highlight this reality, consider that the Jewish Jesus said directly to Jewish believers these words, "Why is my language not clear to you?" (Jn 8:43) Certainly his words were not foreign to them, but the meaning of his language was uncommon to them. In other words, though they shared the same language expressions, they didn't share the same language signs. And what is underlying this difficulty is the factual reality that essentially they didn't have the same language as the Word to "know the Truth" (Jn 8:32). This paradoxical linguistic contrast led to their interpretation conflict in misunderstanding the Word (8:33-41). Critical to this process, what underlies interpretation conflicts with the Word are language barriers generated, erected and sustained by reductionism (8:42-47).

The text of the Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, yet this literary fact does not necessarily define the composition of Scripture and the language distinguished by the Word. An abundance of exegesis and word studies of the biblical languages, not to mention critical studies, have accumulated a wealth of data (cf. Eccl 12:12) that have not progressed biblical studies with the significance to answer Jesus' above question. This is the type of learning and education that Paul cautioned Timothy

not to be misled and shaped by (2 Tim 3:7). The problem yet to be adequately resolved by churches and the academy is twofold: (1) understanding the nature of the Word's language, and (2) addressing the reductionism that is the barrier to this understanding.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The use of relational terms and its composing relational language function for the primary purpose of communication in relationship. In contrast, and often in conflict, the use of referential terms and its composing referential language function for the purpose of transmitting information, which is only secondary at best to the primary function and purpose of relationship. Essentially, on the one hand, it can be said that referential language was not "designed" for the further development of qualitative communication in

relationship but, on the other hand, in reality it purposely went in the opposite direction that takes us away from qualitative relational connection. Historically, the referential language of prose evolved after poetry, and early poetry was sung, the qualitative significance of which was basic to communication in relationship and not the mere transmission of information.¹ For further consideration, Iain McGilchrist locates this qualitative process in the function of the right brain hemisphere. This qualitative function of the right hemisphere, and its related view of the world, is in contrast to the quantitative reduction of words to the referential language of prose by the left brain hemisphere for its function not of communication in relationship but to merely make discourse about something.²

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

If we understand the nature of language, then whatever way we read the Bible, engage Scripture, or listen to the Word should always evoke our concern for the purpose of the language before us. Is this language to inform me, or to communicate with me? Is

¹ See Oliver Sacks for a discussion on perfect pitch, tonal communication and protolanguage, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008); see also Edward Foley, *From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991), 9.

² Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 105.

God merely engaged in theological discourse, or deeply involved to make relational connection with me? How we define this purpose is contingent on the language God uses. Accordingly, our understanding of the language composing the Word will determine whether we have been merely informed by the words of God, or we have been relationally communicated with by the words from God. The referential or relational outcome we will take away from this vital concern is the extent of knowing and understanding God, or at least what we think we know and understand about God.

This language variable has had a notably widespread effect on the academy, its educators and theological education. The effect is also directly related to the **hermeneutic lens** and **epistemic field** used for the language and outcome. The issue for our hermeneutic lens is when our view of God becomes “nearsighted,” which disables us from seeing God’s whole big picture; the consequence of this limited lens reduces our view of God and also likely focuses us on fragments of God that interest or concern us. The issue for our epistemic field is when it gets narrowed down notably to the quantitative at the expense of the qualitative, thereby skewing any knowledge of God and biasing the understanding of the Word.

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

The shift to referential language opened the door to shape, redefine or reconstruct the information transmitted by God to narrowed-down interpretation (what God really meant by that, “your eyes will be opened”), that is, to reduced referential terms that implies speaking for God on our own terms (signified in “to make one wise”). When referential language is the prevailing interpretive framework for our perceptual-interpretive lens, then this shapes the way we see God’s revelation and the way we think about God’s words—as modern science is rediscovering about language. Conjointly and inseparably, referential language also puts a constraint on our lens, thereby restricting what we see of God’s revelation and limiting how we think about God’s words (“you will not...”). This dynamic from referential language obviously redefines the subject matter in the theological task, and certainly continues to constrain its theological engagement, most notably and consequentially for theological anthropology. Any explanations and conclusions that emerge from the theological task in referential terms merely are the theological reflections of referential language. Any such theological statements have no theological significance; they only attempt to speak for God—most prominently with the illusion or simulations from reductionism (“you will be like God”).

The other variables facing us are not new but simply, yet critically, also emerged from the beginning and evolve from there. The next of two inseparable variables emerges from God’s creation of the first individual humans, which composes the basic and essential **theological anthropology** for theological education.

As previously discussed, in the beginning the Creator constituted the persons (no matter the gender) in the primordial garden with an irreducible ontology, an irreplaceable epistemology and a nonnegotiable relationship, the function of which distinguished the image and likeness of the whole of God (integrally incorporating the Word and the Spirit). Those defining words from the Creator (Gen 1:28-30; 2:16-17), expressed in an historical or allegorical context, were either given to human persons to inform them of the parameters of their human function; or they were shared with those persons to communicate distinctly the terms for the relationship between them and the Creator. If the words communicated the terms for relationship together, then these relational terms could only be distinguished when composed in relational language. Anything less than

relational language would be ambiguous, elusive, and simply open to variable interpretation of those relational terms; the consequence would be to substitute the Word's relational terms with other (notably human) terms to define the relationship.

The terms for most relationships are open for negotiation, at least in theory. The Word's relational terms, however, are nonnegotiable, and this truth has been ignored, denied or simply not understood by God's people since this beginning—with Christians having assumed the most negotiating posture in their practice of faith, though not openly stated in terms quantifying a Rule of Faith (like Law)..

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

The relational terms composing these relational actions can only be distinguished in Creator-Subject's relational context, and not a referential context in which this relational significance becomes elusive, gets obscured or is lost. This critically points to the language used in theological education and the need for the academy to account for it..

In theological education, theological anthropology in God's relational language readily gets transposed to referential language to quantify information about God and humans; this has been widely documented for the resourcefulness of the academy and its educators. This pursuit of theological significance that was put into motion in the primordial garden critically needs to be accounted for in theological anthropology discourse. In referential language, theology's subject matter is narrowed down to terms that are disembodied (de-relationalized), fragmentary or elusive, without distinguishing the whole Subject, and therefore the whole human person. This is the designed purpose of

referential language, and its use in the theological task has unavoidable consequences epistemologically, hermeneutically, ontologically and relationally. Thus, the theological anthropology they depend on has clouded their identity and function having shifted from the inner-out primacy of the heart to the outer-in distinctions quantified by the mind.

It is important to understand in theological anthropology, and give account for theological anthropology discourse, that language and thought are interrelated in a reflexive dynamic, whereby one leads to the other and the converse of the other leading to the one. For example, the language of personhood leads to the thought of person-consciousness—assuming that it is relational language—and the thought of person-consciousness leads to the language of *personhood* made functional in *personness*, whereas referential language leads to self-consciousness. That is, the thought or thinking we have before language formation involves human consciousness; and that consciousness (person-consciousness or self-consciousness) emerges in function through language (relational or referential). This reflexive dynamic illuminates how crucial it is for theological anthropology to understand the non-interchangeable distinction of language and to account for the language it uses to distinguish God, define God's revelation, and determine the language that composes the human narrative.

This critical and pivotal issue is the interrelated reflexive dynamic unfolding in the primordial garden of the creation narrative. The composition which unfolds in this narrative is contingent on the language used, which will be in either relational terms or referential terms leading only to a relational or referential outcome respectively. While language and thought are inseparably interrelated, the distinction of language and its terms is non-interchangeable. For theological anthropology, therefore, the type of human consciousness that becomes functional for human beings depends on the language used to express it. Person-consciousness emerged clearly from inner out and unfolded in relational language (“naked and without shame”). Reductionism influenced the shift to outer in and to the referential language that focused on information and its transmission. Information, for example, about someone is a fragmentary account of someone who has been disembodied (or “dismembered” into parts, not de-physicalized) as a subject and de-relationalized down to those bits of information about them as some object. These referential terms of information about someone, no matter its quantity, render such human

beings without the significance to be whole as well as relationally connected, and thus unable to be known and understood in the wholeness of relationship together. Again in contrast and even conflict, relational language involves the communication of someone not as an object but distinguished only as subject in order that relational connection takes place for the relational outcome of knowing and understanding the subject; and this relational process further involves reciprocal relationship together for mutually knowing and understanding each other in primary relational terms, not secondary referential terms.

Accordingly from the beginning, we are challenged by and accountable for this simple yet vulnerable reality:

Theological anthropology is not a topic but a life;
theological anthropology is not about subject matter but involves embodied subjects
connected to each other;
therefore, theological anthropology must be lived and not just discoursed.

And any discussion on theological anthropology must be lived first in the faith of those presenting it; indeed, theological anthropology requires being lived experientially by its proponents, such that theological anthropology is not conceptual or theoretical but being the person God created in ontology and function, who is distinguished whole-ly by the image and likeness of Subject-Creator.

Consequently, it is inadequate for theological anthropology to inform our minds, particularly with referential information about human beings and on the nature of the person in referential terms. Nor is theological anthropology sufficient merely to reform our thinking on human being and being human, and thereby only signify who and what form the person in likely referential language. By its intrinsic nature, theological anthropology must transform our persons from inner out, without fragmenting the person into parts, for the sole outcome of whole ontology and function necessary ongoingly to constitute the person and persons connected in relationship together. Nothing less and no substitutes from theological anthropology can transform, though it may reform and likely inform.

Therefore, the theological education of the academy's or the church's and any individual's variable theological anthropology should not be surprising because of the next variable inseparable from this dependent variable. The academy's subtle shift from inner out to outer in points them directly back to the sin evolved from the beginning. The issue, however, is its theological view of sin constructing its faith and composing its belief system, which directly leads to its faith practice in theological education. In other words (in relational language, not referential), the measure of sin it uses is the measure of what it gets.

In referential language, the academy's view of sin is limited or diluted to measures insufficient to hold it accountable for its variable theological anthropology—a TA reduced or fragmented, not whole. In God's relational language, sin must by its nature encompass the breadth of **sin as reductionism** countering the whole of God and God's created wholeness. The former is a weak view of sin, and the latter is the strong view of sin that is invariable to anything less and any substitutes for God's relational terms composed in relational language for relationship together in the image and likeness of the Trinity—the whole theological anthropology created by God.

In the counter relational workings of sin as reductionism, the awareness of what kind of theological anthropology defines the identity and determines the function of those in the academy is not apparent in their mindset. Lacking this awareness is not surprising for minds preoccupied with referential information about God that in their faith they have an obligation to teach others. Nevertheless, a reduced theological anthropology is palpable to the heart whenever it is paid attention to over the mind; and this awareness or sensitivity is contingent on a strong view of sin addressing the presence, influence and effects of reductionism. A weak view of sin maintains a relational distance or disconnection with God, even while possessing a quantity of information about God signifying the secondary in a referential outcome, not a relational outcome. While the academy could boast of this possession, the essential issue is the relational outcome of “knowing and understanding God” (Jer 9:23-24). Is this relational consequence the norm or the exception for theological education, the academy and its educators?

The academy has not been unaware of the need to nurture knowing and understanding God on a deeper level than referential knowledge—or at least deeper than

the information it teaches. Its approaches to address the need revolve around spirituality and spiritual formation for its students, without addressing an underlying reduced theological anthropology and weak view of sin. Yet, even with its limited acknowledgements, the outcomes are revealing, as two prominent theological educators have realized.

In an honest memoir, Lewis Smedes revealed his plans after retiring from Fuller Seminary; his story is notable for any and all in the academy:

I told them that I was going to develop a closer friendship with God. They usually chuckled. But I was serious. Abraham was God's friend. Jesus made friends of his disciples. In all honesty, I had never known God as a friend, not the way I know my other friends. Now, after seven years into retirement, God and I are still not what you would call close friends. What is taking us so long?

For one thing, good friends like each other...it has to be reciprocal. If I like you but you don't like me, we are not likely to be friends. So if God is to be my friend, he must like me, which is just what is hard to believe. For years—most of my life in fact—I have not found it easy to think that God could like me.

...Here is something else that makes it hard to be God's friend: He never, well almost never, talks to me. From what they tell me, I gather that he talks to other people.

...I walk and talk [with God], but God hardly ever says a word to me...when I am with God, I do all the talking. Most of the time.

...Maybe the highest obstacle that, for far too long, kept me even from thinking about God—or Jesus—as my friend was this: good friends admire each other. ...But the admiration has to be reciprocated.

...There is ever so much about God to admire and there is nothing about him not to admire. But is there anything about me that he can admire? As a child and for years beyond, I believed that there was nothing in me that anyone, certainly not God, could admire. Today, in my old age, I have begun to believe that I am someone whom God does admire.

...I am still more comfortable kneeling before the Lord my Maker than I am looking him straight in the eye and calling him my friend.

...Growing old has not brought me much closer to God or much wiser in his ways. I once thought that when I retired from a regular job and had no pressure to go here and there and do this and that, I would spend much more time with him. Hasn't happened. And I thought that, with more time to think about him, I would come to understand him better. Here, I think, I have made some progress—not much maybe, but enough to nudge me to work at it some more.³

It appears that he experienced the reality of “Those who increase knowledge increase sorrow” (Eccl 1:18)—that is, the outcome of referential knowledge in referential language.

Smedes' story evolved sadly but not surprisingly. His thinking signifies the cerebral activity and acting of his faith evolving out from his mind; and his mind was buried under his referential knowledge in a theological fog, thereby not truly understanding and knowing God. While Smedes had the cerebral nexus to this referential outcome with his mind, he didn't have the relational connection necessary from his heart for the relational outcome missing in his faith.

Smedes wanted to experience the relational outcome composed in the primacy of relationship together after all his years serving faithfully in the secondary for a referential outcome. He labored in a comparative process under the ontological lie of a deficit model making him 'less' and not under the Word in relational language and reciprocal relationship with the Spirit; yet his practice signified his congruence with Fuller's purpose and curriculum “under the authority of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit.” Therefore, there was no apparent epistemological clarification and hermeneutical correction to challenge his assumptions most notably of both a fragmentary theological anthropology defining him and determining relationships from the outer in, and a weak view of sin not addressing his and his context's reductionism. Consequently, the gospel and the human condition were inevitably narrowed down, the former without its depth and the latter without its breadth.

³ Lewis B. Smedes, *My God and I: A Spiritual Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 160-65.

The second story is from the late Diogenes Allen (professor of philosophy at Princeton Theological Seminary) who, like Smedes, struggled with the realization that he wasn't experiencing God's presence and involvement, indeed to have a close relationship with God. Allen admits that although he was a pastor and "successful teacher of philosophy and theology...[he was] very much at a loss concerning spiritual matters."⁴

"I found myself wondering again and again what it would be like actually to live every moment of one's life with an awareness of God. I do not mean that I actually wanted to live that way, because it would be quite daunting—this constant awareness of being in God's presence. Still, I was troubled by my ignorance. In spite of my religious faith, the ability to preach sermons and to give lectures...most of the time God seemed remote. Although I had a doctorate in philosophy and theology, and had read a lot of books, I did not really know what it meant to have an awareness of God in daily life, or how one went about achieving it. How was it that in all my church attendance and advanced education I had not learned such an elementary matter?"⁵

"Both biblical study and theology were cluttered with so many options and so many issues that conversation in the seminary and other academic gatherings resembled the plight of people after the disaster of the tower of Babel rather than the deep communion brought by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost."⁶

"questions that are extrinsic rather than intrinsic to theology. Intrinsic questions arise from the nature of God and of ourselves in relation to God. Extrinsic questions arise from somewhere else: what we have learned, or think we have learned, from fields of inquiry other than religion..."⁷

⁴ Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: the Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today* (Cambridge, MT: Cowley Publications, 1997), 1.

⁵ Allen, 2.

⁶ Allen, 4.

⁷ Allen, 154-55.

This demonstrates the referential nature of the Word used to define theological education's primary purpose, which is so critical to understand and address. This limited Word is contrary to Paul's relational imperative for the Word embodied in relational terms to vulnerably engage us whole-ly in relationship as we teach and contend with reductionism in each other.

From both their hermeneutic lens focused on and epistemic field narrowed down to the referential, Smedes and Allen weren't able to boast in understanding and knowing God, though they were able to boast about his wisdom and resources (the primacy of Jer 9:23-24). What Smedes and Allen were unable to boast, thus, must be defining for the primary purpose of theological education and determining of its curriculum. That is to say, the *what* of theological education is distinguished only by knowing and understanding the whole of God in relational terms and, therefore, by its relational nature converges with the *what*, *who* and *how* of God vulnerably present and intimately involved in reciprocal relationship in order to be known and understood. This good news makes this boast a simple reality, yet its experiential reality is made difficult by competing boasts commonly expressed explicitly or implicitly, directly or indirectly, in the academy: boasts of knowledge, insights, theories, abilities and resources.

This boast also includes the spiritual disciplines and spiritual formation in theological education. Many Christians besides those in the academy have turned to spiritual formation in order to experience more in their faith. But, this focus has become a referential outcome instead of the relational outcome needed and desired. Consequently, spiritual formation has become an end in itself for the faith of many rather than the means to deeper connection with God.

Richard Foster, a leading advocate and teacher of the spiritual disciplines for spiritual formation, has certainly been among the first to warn against making the spiritual disciplines a mere activity of faith. But, listen to his story:

“When I wrote the book on prayer [Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home], of course, it was a really intensive time. And I remember I wrote the last sentence on New Year’s Eve. I got up the next morning, and I didn’t want to pray. I was sick of it.”⁸

Foster shared further that he had to admit this to his spiritual formation group: “I don’t want to pray.” Such statements need to be put into the deeper relational context, beyond the mere situation that reflected Foster’s need. For example, in relational terms, his statements would be equivalent to saying about communicating with his wife, “I’m sick of being involved with my wife.” Yet, surely he wouldn’t say that about his wife because communicating is not about an “it” but only about the other person in relationship. It appears, then, that what Foster is unknowingly and unintentionally expressing is that functionally prayer is more of an activity than involvement with God in God’s relational context and with the trinitarian relational process of intimacy in reciprocal relationship together. Thus, Foster must critically examine *what* he taught.

No matter what the purpose and curriculum of theological education are, if they are not congruent with what, who and how God is embodied by Jesus’ theological trajectory and relational path, then its *what* does not signify knowing and understanding the whole of God in relational terms. There are likely other referential outcomes about which to boast but not this relational outcome. This uncommon boast is composed entirely from the primacy of vulnerable involvement with the Word in relational language. Contrary to the relational outcome of knowing and understanding God as distinguished only in relational terms by the Word are the common boasts resulting from the referentialization of the Word. Understanding the nature of the Word has been problematic for defining the primary purpose of theological education, and knowing the identity of the Word has been elusive for determining its curriculum.

⁸ In an interview by Mark Galli, “A Life Formed in the Spirit,” *Christianity Today*, (September, 2008), 45.

Its Purpose and Curriculum

Examining next the variables of the academy's purpose and curriculum for theological education needs to be with a hermeneutic of suspicion on the basis of the invariable strong view of sin and whole theological anthropology. These invariable variables will unequivocally help clarify, correct and convict the academy of the referential outcome of its purpose and curriculum.

The stated **purpose** of the academy could be an image of its activities, a script for its act, or an action to be lived in its faith and practice. Examine the following statement of purpose from a major Western seminary:

Fuller Theological Seminary is dedicated to the **mission** of *equipping men and women for the manifold ministries of Christ and his Church*. Under the authority of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit, Fuller pursues this mission by providing

- discipline-leading research and publications,
- first-class graduate and professional development programs, and
- widely valued spiritual formation resources,
- all in the context of a vibrant learning community that is evangelical, multid denominational, and multiethnic in character.⁹

It goes on to define "its unique character and distinctive contribution" by listing academic excellence, thoughtful evangelicalism and its two schools, multiple centers, institutes, and initiatives for its creative engagement with church and culture and for its regional and global influence.

In all its boasts there is no mention of knowing and understanding God. This absence is a critical matter that cannot be assumed or implied in its above statement. Given this, we can only conclude that its purpose and subsequent curriculum have shifted from the primary of God's relational terms to the secondary in referential terms. Furthermore, since it claims to pursue its purpose "under the authority of Scripture and

⁹ Taken from a document describing Fuller's search for a new president in 2013, "The Fuller Presidency: Opportunity Profile," 2-3.

the power of the Holy Spirit,” their focus and emphasis would indicate the referentialization of the Word and an immature pneumatology assuming the Spirit’s unilateral work. Such engagement cannot have the relational outcome of knowing and understanding God in the primacy of reciprocal relationship together but only its substitutes signified by the secondary in a referential outcome.

A previous dean of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (moved this year to Canada for its survival), Tite Tienou, identifies knowing God as basic to their core values: “there is no possible doubt that we must have recourse to the Bible if we want to know God.” He adds, “At Trinity we believe that knowing God is essential for all aspects of life” (*Trinity Magazine*, Fall, 2012, 10). Yet there is no indication in their focus that this is distinguished from merely knowing information about God in referential terms, however personal, as a substitute for the primacy of knowing God in reciprocal relationship together. Unless clearly distinguished, a hermeneutic of suspicion would conclude that their focus is not distinguished by the relational outcome of God’s communication recorded in the Bible—composed only by relational language, not referential language.

The variable purpose stated in referential language by academies becomes reducible and negotiable on the basis of their weak view of sin and reduced theological anthropology. In the relational language composing the invariable strong view of sin and whole theological anthropology, however, the purpose of the academy is irreducible and nonnegotiable to anything less and any substitutes.

On this relational basis, Paul’s ecclesiology for the church’s wholeness becomes a needed hermeneutic of suspicion for any purpose statement like “the **mission** of *equipping men and women for the manifold ministries of Christ and his church.*” Church leaders are given the relational means for the purpose “to equip the saints” (*katartismos* from *katartizo*, to put into proper condition, to restore to former condition, make complete, Eph 4:12). This directly points to the dynamic of transformed persons reconciled and relationally involved in transformed relationships together in relational likeness to God, and integrated in interdependence of the various church functions (“work of ministry”) necessary for the dynamic embodying (4:12) of the church’s whole ontology and function of “the fullness of Christ” (4:13).

This means unequivocally: For church leaders to be of ontological significance, their persons must be defined by the wholeness of the new creation in the qualitative image of God from inner out, not defined by their gifts, resources or the roles and titles they have which reduce their persons to outer in; and for their leadership to be relationally significant as transformed persons, their function must be determined by *agape* relational involvement in transformed relationships together (both equalized and intimate) as God's new creation family in the relational likeness of the whole of God, not determined by the titles and roles they perform (even with sacrifice) that make distinctions, intentionally or unintentionally, creating distance and stratification in relationships together. The latter practices by church leaders renegotiate ecclesiology from bottom-up based on a theological anthropology from outer in, which also apply to the practices of the academy.

Paul's relational imperative of the Word in relational language is integrated with his relational imperative for 'the wholeness of Christ' to be our only determinant from inner out (Col 3:15). Only the nature of the Word in whole ontology and function can constitute both "the manifold ministries of Christ and his church," as well as the "recourse to the Bible," and thereby compose theological education's "mission of equipping" us "for all aspects of life" to be and live whole as God's new creation family and to extend the depth of the whole gospel to make whole the breadth of the human condition. Anything less and any substitutes are fragmentary, incapable of wholeness, and rendered to reduced ontology and function.

The variable purpose stated in referential language by academies becomes reducible and negotiable on the basis of their weak view of sin and reduced theological anthropology. In the relational language composing the invariable strong view of sin and whole theological anthropology, however, the purpose of the academy is irreducible and nonnegotiable to anything less and any substitutes.

This examination leads directly to the academy's **curriculum**. It would be reasonable to assume by the general Christian sector, or even the secular sector, that the academy's curriculum is for the sake of its theological education. Though this may be its secondary purpose, the Western theological academy (namely in the U.S.) has shifted its concern first and foremost to becoming accredited by authorized educational

councils/committees to have formal status as an approved source of education. But, this accredited status is achieved not on a theological basis but on the basis of its epistemological research and expertise in quantitative terms. Thus, to achieve this accredited status the theological academy has had to evolve into a secular education likeness, with its curriculum formed by the currents of its counterparts.

One of the consequences evolved from the Western academy's accredited status is the imposition of its so-called superior (or elite) theology onto the theological education of the rest of the world, notably the global South. Surprisingly or not, the Western colonialization of theological education keeps evolving from its historical roots. When the Christian church first emerged, its Jewish majority constituency imposed their religious culture on Gentile converts. Aside from fighting theological heresy among Christians, subsequent dominant groups in the church have imposed their particular Christian practice on the others in the church throughout its history. Christendom evolved, with colonial Christianity notably imposing its culture on the expansion of Christianity in different parts of the world. However, the recent expansion of Christianity has reconfigured the Christian majority from its Western roots in the global North (or Minority World) to now be occupied by those rooted in the global South (or Majority World). Increasingly, a diverse segment of global Christianity is evolving in post-colonial Christianity, which then is asserting its will to impose the diversity of cultures on their practice

When the details of these historical developments are examined, a common thread can be located that has been a recurring theme through church history. Besides the gospel and its mission, what consistently has characterized Christians and churches in their faith practice is directly contingent on two underlying theological issues:

1. Their defining view of sin.
2. Their working (not ideal) theological anthropology (TA) that is the basis for defining the identity and determining the function of persons and relationships in everyday life.

Accordingly, theological education by ongoing necessity has to account for its view of sin and working TA, in order for its curriculum to be validated by the integrity integral for each of them.

Beyond the initial burden of accreditation, the academy is faced with forming its curriculum to be congruent with its purpose. And both its curriculum and purpose need to be accredited by God in relational language composing the relational terms of its curriculum with a strong view of sin and whole TA.

Any curriculum established in the academy projects a theological trajectory for theological education. The ongoing critical question that its curriculum needs to account for is “How compatible is the curriculum with the theological trajectory of God’s revelation communicated Face to face and most vulnerably embodied by the theological trajectory of Jesus?” In addition, the academy must account for its curriculum variable even more deeply because Jesus’ theological trajectory was integrated with and in his invariable relational path involved heart to heart. Moreover, Jesus’ relational path constitutes for his followers serving him (including for the academy) the discipleship essential to “be where I am” (Jn 12:26).

Therefore, the academy’s curriculum cannot be varied on a parallel path and expect to be compatible with Jesus’ theological trajectory, much less congruent with his relational path. The issue for the academy directly questions how complete is the Christology used in its theological education.¹⁰ Any incomplete Christology is insufficient to be on the same trajectory and path as Jesus, and thereby teaches a renegotiated discipleship reduced to referential terms. This is basic to examining with hermeneutic suspicion.

Consider statements made by presidents (former and present) of seminaries—plus another from Diogenes Allen—whose role would be at the forefront of ensuring that their curriculum fulfilled its purpose for theological education.

¹⁰ For a full discussion on Christology, see my study *Sanctified Christology: A Theological and Functional Study of the Whole of Jesus* (Christology Study, 2008), online at <https://www.4X12.org>.

Timothy George makes this observation about seminaries:

“Genuine theological education should aim for transformation, not the mere transfer of cognitive data from one mind to another. We can be satisfied with neither rigid intellectualism on the one hand nor unreflective sentimentalism on the other. Our aim ought to be rather head and heart together, puritanism and pietism, both together at their best. As Thomas Aquinas, echoing Augustine, put it, ‘Theology is taught by God, teaches God, and takes us to God.’”

With this goal at the core for the academy, George forecasts its future:

“Theological education over the next decades of the twenty-first century will need to be increasingly personal, incarnational, global, and gospel centered.”¹¹

Diogenes Allen adds further:

“A divorce between intellectual inquiry and spiritual formation occurs when intellectual inquiry is not concerned with movement toward God, and it happens quite easily because spiritual growth is not a prerequisite for discussing doctrines. Doctrines themselves do not include our response, whereas our response is the focus of devotion.”¹²

Yet, this goal will not bring significant difference from the past unless (1) it counters the underpinning shift of human interpretation and its challenging shift to referential language, and (2) returns to the relational language taught by God (not others speaking for God), teaching the words communicated *from* God (not about the informative words *of* God), and takes us to God for the relational connection to know and understand the whole-ly God. Furthermore, the academy’s future will not experience the

¹¹ Quoted from the Forward in David S. Dockery, ed., *Theology, Church and Ministry: A Handbook for Theological Education* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2017), xii-xiii.

¹² Allen, 154.

redemptive change of the *old* dying so the *new* can rise until (1) it confronts sin as reductionism in its midst and thus in its theology and practice, and (2) transforms its theological anthropology from reduced ontology and function to whole ontology and function. Without confronting these critical underlying issues in all theology and practice, both past and present, the status quo keeps evolving. When theological education and learning have their determinant distinctly shifted from the common to the uncommon, then they will no longer simply keep recycling changes from the *old* but will indeed experience the *new*.

In his comments for a hopeful future in theological education, David Dockery seems to opt for a previous phase of the status quo:

“We need institutions of theological education to recommit themselves to academic excellence in teaching and scholarship, in research and service, as well as in personal discipleship and churchmanship. At the same time, we must lay hold of the best of the Christian theological tradition and carry it forward to engage the culture and the academy.”¹³

What is the best of Christian theological tradition? Nothing really changes from the past to the future when we are on a different trajectory and path than what are incarnated by the Word—the whole-ly Word incarnated further, deeper and more significantly than the prominent evangelical Word of today. Moreover, in his renewal of the academy’s curriculum, Dockery assumes that the academy has already attained a complete Christology in its scholarship and research to be on the same theological trajectory as the embodied Word; and, thus, he assumes its service and discipleship will be on the same relational path as Jesus in relational connection “where I am.”

The theology possessed in the faith of the academy’s activities and acting still seem to be in a theological fog in the above statements, which reinforces all of the dependent variables for theological education. Until the academy gives these variables

¹³ David S. Dockery, ed., *Theology, Church, and Ministry: A Handbook for Theological Education*, 20.

its undivided attention and turns around from the secondary to the primary distinguished by the Word, this pervasive and persistent fog will not be cleared away. And any and all of its referential outcomes will continue to confront the academy with “Where is your faith?”

In a fog or not, the academy is not only faced with waking up to *the who* and *the what* of its theological education, but it also unavoidably faces **the how** its theological education operates in general and functions in particular. *The how* of the academy’s theological education centers on, revolves around and unfolds from its **pedagogy**.

The Academy’s Sustaining Variable: Pedagogy

For the academy to face up to its sustaining variable will not only be challenging but confronting, because it can only be faced directly face to face and then heart to heart. The theological education embodied by Jesus’ theological trajectory and lived by his relational path unfolds from his vulnerable relational involvement face to face and heart to heart, all of which signified his pedagogy distinguished in his teaching. His theological education throughout the incarnation illuminated his pedagogy, ongoingly intensified it, and kept it **sustained** by just his relational terms. That’s why face to face initially is essential and imperative for the academy to face up to, if not wake up. Keep this in focus as the academy is urgently faced with its own pedagogy.

Perhaps the most subtle inflection point constructing the faith Christians have (most notably the academy) is the shift from following Jesus’ whole person to simply his teachings. Consequently, Jesus’ person is reduced from a Subject to an object, which referentializes him merely as the object of faith possessed. On this reduced basis, what Jesus taught is transposed from his relational language communicating from God to share the heart of God openly Face to face to referential language only transmitting information about God. Consequently, Jesus is not only referentialized but also derelationalized.

The former communicates the words of God—as revealed in the literary Word and shared by the embodied Word—not first and foremost as teachings but personal words sharing directly the heart of God’s vulnerable presence and relational involvement with us, thus not only face to face but integrally heart to heart. In contrast and in conflict with the Word’s personal communication, the latter constructs the faith Christians have from the primary teaching of the academy, whose theological education propagates a faith effectively in its likeness, if not in its image.

Recently in the academy there has been a paradigm shift in the perceptual-interpretive framework of some biblical scholars to a more relational dimension by the use of *prosopological exegesis*.¹⁴ In Greek *prosopon* means “face” or “person” (in Hebrew, *paneh*), which then forms an exegesis with more relational awareness. Biblical scholar Scot McKnight discusses the need for this framework also for theologians in order to understand the Bible as the context for communication by the Word to humans who can communicate with God.¹⁵ This is certainly a step in the right direction for theological education to be of deeper significance. However, it doesn’t go deep enough to develop the qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness to connect with God vulnerably for the intimate involvement heart to heart (not just face to face) to listen fully to God’s communication. Only at this depth will our person(s) receive the experiential truth and relational reality of the relational outcome of knowing and understanding the whole-ly God. And it is only in this relational outcome will we no longer hear “I have been with you all this time and you still do not know me.”

If it has not become apparent, *what* the academy teaches is inseparably integrated with *how* it teaches to sustain theological education. Another major assumption made in theological education is an implied approach that learning takes place however the pedagogical process is engaged. There is a benign neglect of how teachers teach and students learn, operating on the assumption that teachers teach and students learn. The apparent thinking is that teaching and learning are achieved by the transmission of and exposure to a high academic level of content—and the higher the level the better the

¹⁴ See Matthew Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ Scot McKnight, *Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021).

achievement (cf. Dockery's statement).¹⁶ This is a pedagogical model composed in referential terms by the wise and learned that Jesus exposed as incompatible to know and understand God (Lk 10:21-22), and that Paul identified as being embedded in an endless process of learning without knowing the truth (2 Tim 3:7), that is, the incarnated Truth as Subject-person who frees us from such referential constraints (Jn 8:31-32).

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

The outcomes in theological education can also be described as follows:

The cerebral pedagogy of the mind produces pictures (or snapshots of God to effectively portray a 2-Dimensional view of God, thereby teaching only portraits of God's still-life profile; these portraits have been collectively posted analogously to a photo album. The affective pedagogy of the heart embraces the life of God in 3-D to bring alive the teaching of God's life in living relational reality Face to face.

Of course, academies boast about the photo album composing their theological education, albums which they label "theology"; and these so-called theology photo albums also add to the competition between them. In addition, academies display their photo albums on social media platforms to promote their survival by virtual theological education on the internet.

¹⁶ Michael S. Lawson challenges this mindset in *The Professor's Puzzle: Teaching in Christian Academics* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015).

By contrast in 3-D, the Word incarnated all this for us to be incarnated. Besides the Sermon on the Mount, the Word's manifesto for all his disciples and their discipleship, the incarnated Word enacted his most significant education and learning for his disciples when he vulnerably washed their feet (Jn 13:1-17). In order for his action to be lived, he subordinated his identity as "Teacher and Lord," not letting that role and title determine his function and thus how he would be involved with them. He thereby made his whole person vulnerable to them face to face as never before, penetrating heart to heart in the relational outcome that Jesus' footwashing gave them the experiential truth and relational reality of knowing and understanding the whole-ly Trinity. This incarnates the knowing and understanding without any veil (or mask) that creates a relational barrier or relational distance. The presence of any veil (e.g. role and title) prevents this relational connection and thus precludes this relational outcome.

Knowing and understanding the whole-ly (whole and uncommon) Trinity in 3-D are primary to God's presence and involvement Face to face, and this primacy is the heart of theological education and learning. Therefore, what is essential for and thus in our education and learning is the relational connection, involvement and outcome signified in **footwashing**—not as an activity or acting, but action lived by love.

It was no mere event of transcendence when the Father communicated directly to Jesus' followers: "Listen to my Son" (Mt 17:5). The Father's relational imperative clearly illuminated the nature and identity of the Word entirely in relational language, and the Trinity's relational terms set in motion the final phase of the relational epistemic process that distinguishes theological education in the Trinity's whole-ly ontology and function. To be so distinguished, theological education must compatibly engage this relational epistemic process and be congruent with the Word's improbable-uncommon (not probable-common) theological trajectory and vulnerable relational path for its pedagogical model of teaching and learning. For this reason, Jesus extends the Father's relational imperative with two interrelated relational imperatives: "pay attention to *how* you listen" (Lk 8:18), and "pay attention to *what* you hear" (Mk 4:24) because "the pedagogical model you use will determine the teaching and learning you get." Of course,

as Peter would testify, our hermeneutic lens and epistemic field will determine what we pay attention to and ignore, what we make primary and only secondary, thereby both determining our pedagogical approach and composing our teaching and learning.

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

Given the pedagogical footprints visible on Jesus' theological trajectory and relational path, the academy is now inescapably faced to be accountable face to face for Jesus' pedagogy heart to heart.

ARE You Face to Face

On the basis of his footwashing pedagogical model, the whole and uncommon incarnated by Jesus were clearly distinguished first in *how* he taught and then in *what* he taught. Jesus' approach to teaching *the whole-ly* was not about revealing key knowledge and critical information in referential terms, because the relational content (qualifying word-content) distinguishing God's whole basis in wholeness involved only the whole person in relationship. What this involved for Jesus is vital for us to understand both to more deeply experience his incarnated whole and to further extend God's whole basis to others within the church and in the world, the antecedent of which emerges from the

quality of theological education and not its quantity. Jesus' pedagogical approach to teaching and learning was integrated into the relational progression of discipleship in his theological trajectory and relational path, not merely to inform and reform theological education in the academy and all levels of Christian education in the church, but to transform them. This is essential for the status quo not to be recycled or to evolve with further adaptations, no matter how innovative.

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

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

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

When Jesus responded to his mother and got further involved, he made the whole of his person **accessible** to his disciples. Jesus was not just approachable but vulnerably accessible. To be specific, this involved more than the quantitative notions of accessible language or words in teaching, or of making accessible one's resources. This deeply involved making directly accessible the whole of his person from inner out and thus the qualitative significance of who, what and how he was. What unfolded from his person was his vulnerable resolve in relational terms. In this social context Jesus did not merely reveal (*apokalypto*) his resources, but most important, he vulnerably disclosed (*phaneroo*) his functional glory to his disciples, not a mere theological glory lacking functional significance (Jn 2:11, cf. 2 Cor 4:6).

The first aspect of his glory that Jesus made accessible to them was God's being, the innermost of God signified by the primacy of the heart. It was Jesus' heart, composing his whole person, whom he made accessible to them. The whole person, composed by the function of the heart, distinguishes clearly the depth level of significance necessary to be *accessible* in Jesus' pedagogy. Anything less and any substitutes are inadequate for this accessible-level to teach the whole further and deeper than referential terms that distinctly common-izes what is uncommon. A turn from the heart or veiling the heart are consequential for the qualitative engagement needed to be accessible. It is incongruent to be helping others understand wholeness while one is not functioning to be whole in the process. Therefore, **Accessible (A)** is the first dynamic dimension in Jesus' pedagogy necessary by its nature to be whole-ly in order to teach the whole-ly.

Phaneroo illuminates the irreplaceable context and process for making his whole person accessible. The miracle, person-disclosure, and being accessible, all are not ends in themselves but in Jesus' purpose and function (even in this apparent secondary situation) are always and only for relationship. More specifically then, *phaneroo* distinguishes the integral **relational context and process** involved in his teaching. When Jesus disclosed his glory, he did not end with making accessible God's being, the heart of God.

The second aspect of his glory involved God's nature, God's intimate relational nature, witnessed initially between the Trinitarian persons during his baptism and later at the transfiguration. In this teaching moment, Jesus disclosed his whole person to his disciples for the primary purpose of relationship together, thereby disclosing the intimate relational nature of God. That is, his *functional* glory, in his heart and relational nature, communicated in the innermost to make relational connection with their human ontology as whole persons—the persons created in the image of the heart of God for relationships together in likeness of the relational nature of the Trinity (as in Jn 1:14). This also provides further understanding of the relational context and process of God's thematic relational response to the human condition and what is involved in that connection, which integrally composes the innermost core of theological education.

In this seemingly insignificant social context, Jesus qualitatively engaged and relationally involved his whole person with his disciples in the most significant human function: the primacy of reciprocal relationship together in wholeness in order not “to be apart.” As he made his whole person accessible in this relational context and process, his disciples responded back to his glory by relationally “putting their trust in him” (2:11), thereby living their faith even if only in this moment. Their response was not merely to a miracle, or placing their belief in his teaching, example or resources—in other words, a mere response to the Object observed. The context of his teaching was *relational* in the process of making accessible his person to their person, thus deeply connecting with the heart of their person and evoking a compatible relational response to be whole in reciprocal relationship together Subject to subject, Face to face, heart to heart.

This relational process also illuminates the intrusive relational path of Jesus' ‘relationship together involving the whole person’, which anticipates his improbable theological trajectory to remove the veil for intimate relationship with the whole-ly God. If his teaching content were only cognitive, this qualitative relational connection would not have been made. Anything less and any substitute from Jesus would not have composed the relational context and process necessary to qualitatively engage and relationally involve his whole person for relationship together to be whole, consequently

not fulfilling God's thematic action in relational response to the human relational condition—nor fulfilling God's definitive blessing of bringing new relationship (*siym*) together in wholeness (*shalom*, Num 6:24-26). Therefore, **Relational (R)** is the second dynamic dimension in Jesus' pedagogy necessary by its uncommon nature to live whole in relationships in order to teach the whole, only God's relational whole.

When Jesus turned water into wine in this secondary social situation, he did not diminish the significance of his miracle or his glory. His disclosure was made not merely to impart knowledge and information about him for the disciples to assimilate. *Who* he presented and *what* he communicated are major issues for his pedagogy. His disclosure was made in this experiential situation (albeit secondary) for his disciples to experience him living whole-ly in this and any life context, thus not in social isolation or a conceptual vacuum that a theology divided from function signifies.

For Jesus, for example, merely giving a lecture/sermon would not constitute teaching—nor would listening to such constitute learning. That is to say, his teaching was *experiential* for their whole person (signified by heart function) to experience in relationship. For this experience to be a reality in relationship, the whole person must be vulnerably involved. This involved the third unavoidable issue of the depth level he engaged in relationships; the first issue being the presentation of his person and the second centers on the integrity and quality of his communication. When Jesus made his heart accessible to be relational with his disciples, he also disclosed the third aspect of his glory involving God's presence, God's vulnerable presence. In the strategic shift of God's thematic relational action, the whole-ly Jesus incarnated God's vulnerable presence for intimate involvement in relationship together, therefore disclosing God's glory for his followers to experience and relationally respond back to "put their trust in him"—not merely a belief for the Rule of Faith but the relational involvement of the whole person. Accordingly to the Word, the incarnated Truth is experiential truth vulnerably present and involved for the experiential reality of the whole Life in the Way's relationship together. If this is not the qualitative relational significance of the gospel at the heart of theological education, its core is not in the innermost of "the Way, the Truth and the Life."

Human experience is variable and relative. For experience to be whole, however, it needs to involve whole persons accessible to each other in relationship by vulnerable involvement together heart to heart, which in the human context is uncommon (as social media today demonstrates). For this relational dynamic to be a functional reality, it must be the relational outcome of Jesus' theological trajectory that removed the veil in relationship together (as in Eph 2:14-18), and of the relational path of his footwashing. This was Jesus' purpose in his teaching and his pedagogical approach, which also was intrusive with 'relationship together involving the whole person intimately equalized'. This was *who*, what, and how Jesus was ongoingly in his glory: *who*, as his whole person signified by the qualitative function of his heart; *what*, only by his intimate relational nature; and thus *how*, with vulnerable involvement of love only for relationship together to be God's uncommon whole.

The reality of relationally knowing (not referential knowledge about) the whole-ly God and relationally participating in God's uncommon whole only emerges as experiential truth. Jesus' teaching remains incomplete, and our learning is also not complete, unless it is *experiential* beyond the virtual. Therefore, to complete the three-dimensional approach, **Experiential (E)** is the third dynamic dimension in Jesus' pedagogy necessary by its nature to integrate the other two dimensions of *Accessible* and *Relational* for the qualitative depth of the uncommon whole in order to teach the experiential Truth of the whole Life for its experiential reality in the Way's new relationship together in wholeness.

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

As the Master Teacher (13:13-14), Jesus took his pedagogical approach to a whole new level. His footwashing (as noted above) is commonly narrowed down to serving, thus fragmenting Jesus' whole person to a part (in this case a secondary act) that is perceived with the mindset of a theological anthropology in reduced ontology and function. This is the *nearsighted hermeneutic lens* and *narrowed-down epistemic field* Peter had in this key interaction, which contrasted and conflicted with the pedagogical approach Jesus relationally incarnated—that is, who vulnerably intruded on traditional and conventional pedagogy. Beyond the norm and what would be considered reasonable (notably in the academy), Jesus made his whole person vulnerably accessible to them without the veil of his title and role in order to reach the depths of *agape* involvement (“the full extent of his love”) for the relational connection necessary for them to experience the intimate reality of relationship together in wholeness.

Since Peter defined his person from outer in focused on secondary matter, he defined Jesus' person by imposing the veil of the title and function of Master Teacher. Consequently, reduced ontology and function prevented Peter from learning experientially the primacy of whole relationship together incarnated by his Master Teacher's vulnerable relational path in whole ontology and function. And Peter's fragmentation should not be ignored in theological education since the limits in his theology and practice were consequential for the fragmentary formation of the early church (Acts 10:14-15,34; Gal 2:11-14). Nor should it be ignored by the educators and students occupying theological education if they want to progress in what's primary.

Jesus' pedagogy conflicted with the prevailing teaching practices in the ancient Mediterranean world; it was by its nature counter-cultural. Accordingly, his pedagogy conflicts with any reductionist teaching approaches, notably in the modern Western world with its primary focus on referential knowledge and rationalized understanding through the narrowed-down quantitative lens from reductionism (predating the Enlightenment)—further exposing a theological anthropology of reduced ontology and function. The learning process of Jesus' pedagogy necessarily involves whole knowledge and understanding (the *synesis* of Col 2:12), which engages the primacy of the qualitative and the relational for the outcome of whole ontology and function, and thereby requires the critical cultural shift.

Therefore, Jesus' teaching of whole-ly God's uncommon whole involves redemptive change and transformation to the *new*—not only for the whole person to experience as an individual but most importantly to experience in relationship together to be the whole-ly Trinity's family. God's relational whole on only God's qualitative relational terms is this new creation family 'already'—the new wine communion with no veil, intimately equalized without relational distance or barriers—relationally progressing to its ultimate relational communion together 'not yet', which Jesus made imperative to be taught after he discussed a series of parables about the kingdom of God and the last things (Mt 13:52). Anything less and any substitutes of this new as whole-ly constrain the flow of the new wine and reduce the planting, cultivating, growth and taste of the new wine in its full qualitative relational significance, whereby the status quo is maintained (Lk 5:36-39).

John's Gospel gives us this whole picture from the beginning, in which the incarnated Word ongoingly functioned in his theological trajectory while remaining vulnerably involved in his relational path for intimate relationship together. The whole-ly Word's teaching only had significance in this definitive relational progression for this relational outcome 'already' and relational conclusion 'not yet'. And this is how any teaching of the whole-ly Trinity's family needs to be theologically and functionally contextualized (counter to common-ized)—and all the "trees" of life put into the "forest" of God's thematic relational action for the eschatological big picture and the ultimate relational communion together, just as Paul composed in his theological forest and systemic framework. For Jesus, and Jesus *into* Paul, the only incarnating of theology that has qualitative relational significance is nothing less and no substitutes for the uncommon whole. To incarnate God's whole basis in wholeness, therefore, any theological enterprise by necessity functions in the uncommon complete fullness of God's improbable theological trajectory and intrusive relational path (Col 1:19-20; Eph 1:22-23); and this trajectory and path involve irreplaceably the primacy of the qualitative and relational needed to be the Trinity's new family together intimately equalized in wholeness with no veil—the fulfillment of God's definitive blessing that incarnates the change of relationships for their wholeness together Face to face (Num 6:26).

Both Jesus and Paul intrude on theological education today to challenge integrally *what* composes its core and *how* it teaches this core.¹⁷ To teach God's relational whole integrally constituted by uncommon wholeness and composed in the relational language, this engagement must involve the vulnerable resolve of the three *AREs* of Jesus' pedagogy to be compatible with the Trinitarian relational context of family and to be congruent with the Trinitarian relational process of family love that incarnate the new creation family as the intimate equalizer. At the heart of this whole-ly relational context and process is 'reciprocal relationship together involving the whole of persons', and this clearly involves both teachers and students being accountable for our whole ontology and function with the veil removed. The new wine is composed by and is contained in only this whole ontology and function, whereby to counter the reduced ontology and function in our theology and practice as well as the status quo in our education and learning.

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

Therefore, only the relational outcome from the three *AREs* of Jesus' pedagogy brings the academy face to face in the face of heart to heart.

¹⁷ For an in-depth study of the integration of Jesus and Paul, see *Jesus into Paul: Embodying the Theology and Hermeneutic of the Whole Gospel* (Integration Study, 2012). Online at <https://www.4X12.org>.

Deconstruction Outcome: Heart Healthy *Living*

While the human context and secular education have entered a 5G revolution—the 5th generation of fiber optics in wireless telecommunication technology that is 100 times faster than previous 4G and allows for billions of simultaneous connections—the theological academy has not progressed very far (if at all) in connecting with the Word on his theological trajectory and relational path. Its theological education remains distant from the relational progression Jesus constituted for the heart of his followers face to face, thereby keeping his relational outcome in a theological fog. And based on its available data, even AI will never be able to make any connection to Jesus' relational outcome.

The referential outcomes and consequences examined will continue to evolve for the academy until its faith constructed cerebrally is deconstructed, in order for the academy to undergo redemptive change so that the heart of its faith will be transformed to healthy *living*.

Transformed to heart healthy *living* must not be confused with the reformed and innovative activity that has recycled in theological education's history. The ancient poets illuminated the primary for theological education. Psalm 67:1-2 is the summary text of the primary: The whole of God's thematic relational response to the human condition in the innermost of the global picture for the primacy of new relationship together in wholeness—the relational outcome of the Face's definitive blessing from the beginning. Psalm 46:10 is the functional key to theological education:

“Be still, and know that I am God,” which in the context of Psalm 46 is to stop and cease preoccupation with the secondary, relax the hands of human effort in self-determination and don't allow the influence of our human contexts to define and determine who we are in God's image and likeness and whose we are as God's whole family, thus being freed from referential constraints so that we know and understand God in relational terms.

This opens up the pedagogical process beyond innovations in a conventional epistemic process to the vulnerable reciprocal response in the relational epistemic process with the Spirit. Simply stated in relational language, this reciprocal response is the relational function of “Pay close attention, O my people, to my teaching *in relational language*; open wide your ears *from inner out* to the *relational* words of my mouth, *not merely a text*” (Ps 78:1).

This relational dynamic, however, has extensive competition in theological education (as witnessed in Judaism’s history) that fragments God’s integral thematic response, that diverts us to the secondary embedded in a self-determining process, and that limits the pedagogical process to variations of the ‘old’ or the status quo. In this competing dynamic, anything *more* that goes beyond our cognitive understanding and/or what we can control is suspect or threatening, and consequently met with resistance in one way or another. Peter demonstrated his resistance, reflecting a competing dynamic in his theological education that limited his pedagogical process to the templates of the old, all of which are confronted by the Word’s declaration “Come to me, listen *with your heart* so that you may live” (Isa 55:3).

Transformation gets to the heart of the who, what and how of the academy, as well as the church and the individual. From inner out, the *old* is redeemed and changed to the *new* to restore the heart of the who, what and how to healthy *living* in wholeness (as Paul made definitive, Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17) only in the Trinity’s likeness (2 Cor 3:18). This heart healthy living is the relational outcome intensely facing the academy face to face

It is unlikely that Jesus and Paul would survive in the prevailing framework of education today in churches and the academy. Though both of them taught in the temple-synagogue contexts, they were in ongoing conflict in those contexts. Their conflict was not with the faith they had in common, but with the prevailing hermeneutic lens and epistemic field, along with a reduced ontology and function. In the primacy of “qualitative life and wholeness” (Rom 8:5-6), therefore, Jesus and Paul intruded on those engaged in self-determination and shaping of relationships, and they would also intrude on and likely threaten theological education today. For Jesus and Paul, even well-meaning intentions in those contexts are insufficient to compose theological education,

and inadequate to clearly distinguish its qualitative-relational function and ongoingly sustain its practice—as evidenced in the churches Jesus critiqued in post-ascension (Rev 2-3).

The divide between theology and function and the increasing fragmentation of theological education into multiple theological disciplines are normative for the academy today, lacking a sense of the whole even when stated intentions seek coherence. Theology and function were inseparable for Paul, with function the priority from which his theology emerged. Function without theology does not determine whole function. Theology without function cannot constitute whole ontology. For Paul, wholeness in theology, ontology and function are determined only by the primacy of the relational Word both indwelling and inhabiting us at the heart level from inner out with his qualitative presence and relational involvement (Col 2:9-10; 3:16). Anything less than the innermost and any substitute for it in theological education would no longer have the wholeness of Christ as its primary determinant (Col 3:15); nor would it have the whole of God holding it, the academy, church and the universe together in the innermost (Col 1:17; Eph 1:23).

Therefore, any and all accountable deconstruction of the academy's faith by necessity transforms referential outcomes to the relational outcome from the Word's theological trajectory and relational path. Nothing less and no substitutes can constitute the academy and its theological education in the action of faith *lived* heart healthy.

Take heed, academy, and “wake up” to the “knocking on your door” by “your first love” (Rev 2-3) facing you Face to face for the beat of your heart!

Chapter 4

Deconstructing Conclusion

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.

**In all your ways *be relationally involved with him*
and he will make straight your path.**

Proverbs 3:5-6

Most, if not all, Christians would readily say that “Faith in Jesus is faith,” and thereby would not question the faith of others as so stated. Certainly, these Christians would not be tempted to ask “Do you still have no faith?” (Mk 4:40), just as Jesus asked his early disciples following him the most rigorously. Do you think those disciples had no faith?

As a Christian, who do you believe in? What do you believe in, and how have you believed during situations and circumstances of your life? During the storm, the early disciples had to face the faith they constructed as Jesus’ disciples, a faith which obscured the face of Jesus to follow face to face for living their faith. Past or present, the faith constructed is always either subjected to the examination of deconstruction, or subject to the necessity for deconstruction.

In the present, a major issue in the surrounding context is the dominant influence of “the medium is the message,” whereby the secondary has displaced the primary in the priorities of life. For example, when listening to songs, the music often becomes the message over the words of the song. Likewise, Christian faith is faced with what distinguishes their faith: the medium or the message, the secondary or the primary. The former may sound good in its practice but not be significant to function for the viability of the latter.

“The medium is the message” for Christian faith is a subtle condition that appears contradictory in its theology and practice: notably in a theology of “justified by faith apart from works” (Rom 3:28), and in a practice of “faith without works is dead” (Jas

2:26). Thus, in a statement of belief of the former, “works” is anathema, whereas in an act of faith of the latter “works” is the medium. For the former, having faith becomes an end in itself, that is, the medium is the message. In the latter, the act of works becomes the message. In other words, the distinction between faith and works is confusing, if not contrary, for many Christians—especially if they consider Paul and James to be in conflict.

Both Paul and James challenged a faith reduced to practice without relational and functional significance. Both countered a faith that was an end in itself or a means for self-determination, even for justification. Critically for Paul and James, faith is not static, passive, self-involved, and a mere statement of belief. Rather, by the nature of God’s righteous relational action (cf. Ps 85:13), compatible faith is the righteous relational dynamic, actively responding to God and others in relationship with one’s whole person from inner out as the *relational* outworking of one’s belief (Gal 5:6; Jas 2:17; cf. Amos 5:21-24). Anything less and any substitutes of this relational response are reductions evolved from the counter-relational workings of the sin of reductionism. The simulations and illusions of faith from reductionism are the underlying issue Paul and James challenged in faith’s function and outcome, both of which they countered with whole faith—the wholeness of one’s relational response of trust and its relational outcome of whole relationship together with God and God’s family.

Basically, Paul and James confronted for accountability two different inflection points constructing faith during the early period of Christianity. Paul confronted a weak view of sin, in which the thinking reduced becoming justified to requiring the work humans could do to be released from the charge of sin. James confronted for accountability a fragmented theological anthropology, in which the thinking was that only having faith as a noun was sufficient for Christian faith, thereby making any further work unnecessary, if not contrary, for Christian faith.

Therefore, Paul and James would not conclude the deconstruction of faith until the essential **relational work of trust** constituted the relational outcome of faith with nothing less and no substitutes. The integral convergence of faith and its relational work is illuminated by Paul and reinforced by James. And the integral theology and practice

that Paul and James make definitive for Christian faith likewise clarifies, corrects and convicts what is viable for all Christians in their faith. Thus, what is integral for Paul and James is irreducible and nonnegotiable.

All individuals, churches and academies are facing the existential reality made axiomatic by Jesus, not as a theoretical proposition: “The measure *of faith* you use will be the measure *of faith* you get for your life” (Mk 4:24). Initially, churches and academies are dependent of the measure of faith used by individuals for determining a church’s or academy’s formation. Thereafter, individuals become dependent on the measure of faith used by churches and academies for determining the faith individuals get for their life.

The examinations in this study hopefully cleared the theological fog obscuring outer-in referential measures and outcomes, which have evolved from anything less and any substitutes for relational measures. These have been clarified and corrected. Now we are all faced with living our faith in the inner-out measures of the experiential Truth (not propositional), the relational Way, and the whole Life embodied by Jesus (Jn 14:9) for the relational connection and outcome of our whole person joined intimately equalized in the wholeness of relationship together as Jesus’ new creation family in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity. And “the face of Christ” continues his presence and involvement with love to illuminate our hearts with the relational reality of his relational outcome (2 Cor 4:6).

At this stage in your faith, what have you learned about the Christian faith in general and your faith in particular? Given the above examinations, how would you assess the qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness of your faith?

The conclusion of deconstruction is not open to negotiation, thus it does not conclude by variations of Christian faith, the global church notwithstanding. For example, how would you assess those who construct their faith acting like Jesus? Certainly this would be better than acting like the church or the academy, wouldn’t you think?

The key measure for such a faith is understanding the difference between “like Jesus” and “the likeness of Jesus.” Most Christologies would include the examples of Jesus’ life, along with his teachings. These examples in particular become the measure of

discipleship, that is, following “like Jesus,” which is always subject to variable interpretations and practice. And even if faith “like Jesus” could claim to be compatible with Jesus, it cannot be congruent with Jesus *in likeness*. However, in a complete Christology, Jesus made imperative the measure distinguishing his disciples by their love “just as I love you” (Jn 13:34-35), which cannot be distinguished merely “like Jesus’ example” but only on the essential basis of Jesus’ love constituted in the relational likeness of the Trinity.

Thus, any faith acting like Jesus cannot, does not and will not conclude the deconstruction of faith. Nothing less than and no substitutes for following Jesus’ whole person (not just example and teachings) in the relational involvement of love constituted in his relational likeness will have the relational outcome of “being where I am” (Jn 12:26) in reciprocal relationship together in further likeness of the Trinity.

Deconstruction concludes only with the relational outcome integrally embodied by the Word in relational language and constituted in the image and likeness of the Trinity, the relational outcome of which is the faith lived inner out by the action of love in Jesus’ likeness. The terms for this invariable measure of faith are only relational terms, the irreducible and nonnegotiable relational terms enacted by Jesus for the wholeness of reciprocal relationship together in its primacy, not for the faith acting in the fragments of secondary examples *like Jesus*. Accordingly, the examples of Jesus in referential language will only yield referential outcomes lacking the relational connection necessary to live faith in the action of love relationally involved with God and others in the *likeness of Jesus*.

Faith Viably Turned Around

Whatever surrounding contexts and situations we are in with our faith, the viability of faith’s relational work (1) clarifies its primacy over the secondary function of all related works, and (2) corrects the misinformation, misrepresentation and mistaken practice of *the medium of works* composing *the message of faith*. Whenever such a

medium composes the relational message of faith, what others hear and see has no substantive quality to distinguish that faith as viable and thus to constitute it as living.

Whether challenged by the conditions of stormy waters or by the vulnerability of having your feet washed, Jesus always wants to know from us: “Where is your faith?” and “Have you no faith?”—just as he confronted his early disciples. Since they followed him the most rigorously, they obviously had faith. But, having faith was insufficient for the relational connection necessary to “be where I am,” in spite of how much they served him (Jn 12:26, the relational paradigm for following). They needed to turn around in their faith in order to make this relational connection. Take heed church leaders and educators, no matter how much you serve Christ.

Therefore, in Jesus’ relational language, he is not asking if we have faith, but rather about our relational response of **trust** directly in him. Only the relational work of trusting him in reciprocal relationship together makes the action of our faith alive—viably alive to the fullness of life Jesus shared with us. “I am vulnerably present and relationally involved with you that you may *live* and have our life together in its fullness qualitatively from inner out, not quantitatively from outer in” (paraphrasing Jn 10:10). So, “where is your relational work of trust in me?” “Don’t you trust me when your situations are stormy, or when you have to make yourself vulnerable for the intimate relational connection of love?”

The deconstruction of our faith cannot and will not conclude until our faith viably turns around from the activity and acting of faith to the action of faith, from faith as a noun to faith as a verb, the viability of which Jesus embodied and enacted for us to trust him in reciprocal relationship together “to be where I am.” Trusting him on his relational basis, the deconstruction of our faith can and will conclude by the relational Way, the experiential Truth, and the whole Life, as constituted integrally by the relational reality and outcome of “as I have loved you.”

Vially turned around, our faith will “Be relationally involved in trusting the Lord with all our heart from inner out, and will not rely on our own insight. In all the ways of our everyday life, we will be ongoingly relationally involved with him, and he will always straighten our path with direct relational connection with him rather than on a parallel path” (paraphrasing Prov 3:5-6).

So, where is your faith now? Is the deconstructing of your faith concluding or is more deconstruction needed? The same questions extend to the church and the academy, because all inflections points will be accountably confronted.

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