

“LISTEN TO MY SON”
(Mt 17:5)

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INTRODUCTION

“Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time?
Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say ‘show us the
Father’?”
(John 14:9 NIV)

The upper room was filled with somber dismay and confusion, made all the more uneasy by the openness of Jesus’ whole person and his relational vulnerability with them. Jesus had expressed his intimate involvement by washing the disciples’ feet, predicting Peter’s denial, and sharing that he was going ahead to his Father’s house to prepare a place for them (see Jn 13:1-14:4). As their three-year intensive journey together was culminating, with pain and poignancy in his penetrating question to Philip, above, Jesus’ words revealed his deepest expectations of his closest disciples: that they could have and should have known him—known *him*, not merely information *about* him. Jesus asks us today the same question: “Don’t you know me, even after I have been among you such a long time?”

Like the disciples, many of us spend years “with” Jesus without knowing him, without intimately experiencing his person such that we know the Father as well (vv 7, 9b-10; cf. 17:3). In recent years we were surprised by well-known Christians who admitted that in spite of all their years of serving God, or of teaching about him, they didn’t really know God—persons such as Lewis B. Smedes and Mother Teresa¹ (see related comments later). Jesus expects us to know him, and, fortunately for us, his self-disclosures continue to be available to us in Scripture for this relationship.

This essay is written for persons who want to go deeper in relationship with God, notably through Scripture, for persons like myself who have earnestly tried different approaches but have felt something is still missing. It is written for the average Christian, and for those in academia. Different persons will relate better to some parts of this essay over others.

We are first challenged to make the distinction between knowing information about God and knowing God intimately in actual experience. In his interaction with Philip and the other disciples, Jesus says that to know him is to know the Father, and that *he* himself is the way, the truth and the life. Philip, Thomas and the other disciples probably thought that they “knew” Jesus, but they exposed the gap in their knowing Jesus by asking him to show them the Father. Jesus is pointing to his whole person, not information about him. Thus he reveals a qualitatively

¹ Lewis B. Smedes was professor of theology and ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Mother Teresa, it was revealed in the summer of 2007, experienced a long period of darkness, in which she experienced no connection with God. In Christian circles this is called “the dark night of the soul,” but for Mother Teresa, that period lasted 50 years, according to Father Brian Kolodiejchuk, editor of Mother Teresa’s collected thoughts in the volume *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light—The Private Writings of the ‘Saint of Calcutta’*. (Doubleday, 2007). www.beliefnet.com/story/223/story_22353.

deeper epistemology—Jesus’ deeper epistemology emerging from relationship together.² In his comments to his disciples, Jesus differentiates between knowing him relationally, and having spent time together, having observed him, or accumulating information about him. Knowing Jesus is a function and outcome of relationship together—a qualitative and deeper epistemology.

God is the holy, transcendent God, and because of this ontological difference between God and humans, knowing this God must begin with the triune God’s self-revelation in the incarnation of Jesus. Even with historical basis, this disclosure by God has often been problematic to grasp, eluding our interpretive lens. As people of the Book, evangelical Christians depend on Scripture to learn about God. But Jesus has always known human tendencies so that he questions our approaches to Scripture—i.e., the lens with which we read and “listen” to Scripture. “Then pay attention to how you listen,” Jesus admonished his disciples (Lk 8:18 NRSV³). And he rebuked his Jewish critics, charging “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (Jn 5:39-40). While we evangelical Christians readily acknowledge Christ as savior, how much deeper does our relational involvement with Jesus get? Very often, we too diligently study the Scriptures to *possess* information about God, using a quantitative epistemological focus that assumes more information or knowledge is better. Jesus counters our everyday epistemology to get to the heart of the issue: our whole person (signified by primary function of the heart) involved with the whole of Jesus’ person for ongoing intimate relationship together.

The aims of this essay are to (1) examine and address the experiential gap in our approaches to Scripture, and (2) to expand on the overall interpretive framework that Jesus alluded to in his words to Philip and the other disciples, the framework by which to examine and critique all approaches to Scripture. During this journey, we “listen” intently to Jesus’ words as a guide to what is important and necessary to know *him*, as we read the Bible. Keeping in mind Jesus’ question to Philip above and his deeper epistemology, we examine two main approaches to the Bible used by Christians. The first approach is the spiritual discipline called *lectio divina*. The second is a contemporary trend in biblical scholarship called speech act theory. Connections with Jesus’ epistemology are made to show what has relational significance to God in biblical scholarship, as well as in devotional reading of Scripture—and what doesn’t have relational significance to him—and why.

The first section of this essay summarizes the goals, assumptions, and susceptibilities involved in the practice of *lectio divina*, not its history nor its steps. Questions are raised about *lectio divina*. This is followed by a discussion on biblical ontology of the human person—that is, the whole person, which is signified by the primary function of the heart for relationship. It is crucial also to understand that wholeness is diminished greatly by the presence and function of reductionism, which is therefore also given some definition. That God created us for relationships with him and others in likeness of the Trinity has direct implications for the practice of *lectio divina*. Often we may gain knowledge about some Scriptures, but little more. It may be that despite our stated intentions to experience God (spirituality), we approach even *lectio* with an academic perceptual-interpretive lens.

Section 2 shifts the focus to academic biblical study. It gives a summary of speech act

² Epistemology is the field of study of how we know what we know, and what we can know. For clarification, Jesus’ deeper epistemology isn’t synonymous with what is generally called “allegorical interpretation,” though it possibly may at times involve such interpretation.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the NRSV.

theory, which is not a method of interpretation but an academic approach to understand the performative nature of utterances. Its goals and assumptions are outlined, and then taken further by applying some principles from communication theory to help clarify the relational nature and relational dynamics of all utterances. Communication theory helps us understand that *all* communication contains a relational component. Speech act theory, however, like all other academic readings of Scripture has serious limitations that does not recognize and account for the vital matters of the ontology of God, the ontology of human persons in *imago Dei*, the sin of reductionism of the human person, and grace as a function of relationship.

Section 3 is an attempt to articulate the larger picture for engaging with Scripture. If more knowledge about God is the aim of our study of Scripture, then that's what we can expect to gain. However, for the experiential truth of knowing God, God's self-revelation is the necessary starting point and constitutes the perceptual-interpretive lens for probing Scripture. Because God's self-revelation is fully embodied in the incarnation, we must listen to Jesus, think relationally and interact relationally with God in the relationship that begins with a discipleship of following Jesus. This is the first step in transforming our perceptual-interpretive framework as we read and study Scripture. It also deepens our grasp of human ontology that Jesus makes whole by engaging us with his own person (whole without fragmentation) for relationship together. The results, I hope, will give helpful perspective to Scripture, for devotional reading and academic biblical studies alike, and guide us further into wholeness in our theology and practice.

Finally, I comment on an issue that is often raised in, for example, seminary. The issue is the gap between devotional Scripture reading from spiritual disciplines, and academic biblical study.

As a related side note, I wish to raise a matter for serious reflection. Some may think it is presumptuous on my part, but at the risk of being perceived as such, in light of Jesus' relational epistemology, in light of Jesus' own words, it seems urgent to consider.

When it became known through the publication of Mother Teresa's personal letters that she suffered a long period of "darkness," people were shocked. Excerpts quoted on Beliefnet.com express Mother Teresa's struggles with Jesus' apparent absence to her and also with her lack of faith:

- "I have no Faith—I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart—& make me suffer untold agony."
- "Such deep longing for God and...repulsed empty no faith no love no zeal....Heaven means nothing pray for me please that I keep smiling at Him in spite of everything."
- "What do I labor for? If there be no God—there can be no soul—if there is no Soul then Jesus—You also are not true."

And about her "ever-present smile", she called it "a mask" or "a cloak that covers everything."⁴

- "The whole time smiling—sisters and people pass such remarks—they think my faith, trust and love are filling my very being....Could they but know—and how my cheerfulness is

⁴ Associated Press. "New Book Reveals Mother Theresa's Struggle with Faith," Beliefnet.com/story/223/story_22353.html. Accessed 8/27/2007. The Beliefnet article came out on the occasion of the release of the book in 2007, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light—The Private Writings of the 'Saint of Calcutta'* (Doubleday).

the cloak by which I cover the emptiness and misery.”⁵

The absence of personal connection with Jesus pained her deeply. According to the priest who edited the book of her letters, Father Brian Kolodiejchuk states that, in spite of this agony, Mother Teresa maintained her “unwavering belief that God was working through her.”⁶ Comments by others express that her struggles will help others who doubt, and that her suffering is consistent with that of Jesus’ cry while on the cross to the Father, “Why have you forsaken me?”⁷—though they take Jesus’ cry out of context and essentially use it as a proof text. Father Kolodiejchuk spoke of Mother Teresa’s period of darkness, which lasted “Till the end. Fifty years. This seems to me the most heroic thing of her spiritual life.”⁸ In essence, such comments appear in defense of Mother Teresa’s stature and reputation as a woman of faith, indeed as worthy of beatification, while overlooking a critical issue illustrated in her ongoing experience.

What I urge us to think about is: how do we interpret such experiences (hers, others’ and ours), and how compatible are our conclusions with Jesus’ disclosures in Scripture? Mother Teresa herself was deeply troubled by the apparent incongruity of her life. It is tragic that she was “going on an empty tank all day.”⁹ We ought to be disturbed that the above comments show no concern about her lack of relational connection with God for fifty years. Consider these attitudes:

“Some have completely misunderstood the nature of these writings....Far from undermining the stature of Mother Theresa’s holiness, these new documents will immensely magnify it, placing her at the side of the greatest mystics of Christianity.”¹⁰

“The joy and serenity that emanated from Mother Teresa’s face was not a mask, but the reflection of profound union with God in which her soul lived. It was she who ‘deceived’ herself about her spiritual status, not the people.”¹¹

“The Rev. Joseph Neuner, one of those to whom Mother Teresa turned in her own agony, enjoined her to believe that her ordeal gave her a share in the Passion of Christ, and that His absence was in a way a ‘sure sign’ of His ‘hidden presence’ in her life.”¹²

It seems that we’ve made Mother Teresa into something of our own shaping, seeming to disregard the person beneath the image of sacrificial work among India’s poorest. Jesus distinctly revealed to his closest disciples that he fully expected them to know him, that this was his primary priority for those who follow him. In what could be considered Jesus’ paradigm for serving him, he says “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also” (Jn 12:26). This is Jesus’ priority of relational involvement over works of service,

⁵ Quoted by Father Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM CAP, in “The ‘Atheism’ of Mother Teresa.” *National Catholic Register* September 9-15, 2007. <http://www.ncregister.com/site/article/3762>.

⁶ “New Book Reveals”. Father Kolodiejchuk belongs to the Missionaries of Charity and knew Mother Theresa for twenty years.

⁷ “New Book Reveals”. Comment by the Rev. James Martin, Jesuit writer about saints.

⁸ In an interview by Raymond J. Souza, “Mother Teresa’s Dark Night,” in the *National Catholic Register*, which first appeared on Beliefnet in 2003. www.beliefnet.com/story/120/story_12041.html. Accessed 8/27/2008.

⁹ James Martin, “New Book Reveals.”

¹⁰ Cantalamessa. “The ‘Atheism’.”

¹¹ Cantalamessa. “The ‘Atheism’.”

¹² Christopher Hitchens, “The Dogmatic Doubter,” in *Newsweek* September 10, 2007, 41-42.

though not to their exclusion. And, again, he says as much in his poignant words: “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?” (Jn 14:8-9). Moreover, Jesus told those disciples (and us today) that in place of his physical presence to be with us, the Father will send (and has sent) the Spirit to be Jesus’ relational replacement (14:16-17).¹³ In sending the Spirit, Jesus did not leave us “orphaned” (14:18). “You know [the Spirit] because he abides with you and he will be in you (14:17b).¹⁴

A similar plea can be made on behalf of Lewis Smedes. His spiritual memoir reveals a lack of closeness with God.

“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 call close friends. What is taking us so long?”¹⁵

And:

“Here is something else that makes it hard to be God’s friend: He never, well, almost never, talks to me.”¹⁶

Like Mother Teresa, Smedes is held out as an exemplar of humility and hope in the face of doubts and struggles. Smedes also revealed in his memoir his struggle with deep depression, which he eventually managed with a daily dose of Prozac from the 1980s on (he died in Dec 2002). Persons have elevated Mother Teresa’s and Lewis Smedes’ lives, memorializing them as encouragement for others who doubt. The importance of their honesty notwithstanding, I ask whether these are only misinterpretations and misguided conclusions, or even instances of constructing illusions of spirituality. Why? Because the evidence from Jesus’ mouth is that we can know him and if we don’t, there’s something amiss with our perceptual-interpretive framework, the lens with which we perceive and interpret *him*. This isn’t to do a blame game or to put anyone down, but to call us to question the common resignation with which we accept spiritual emptiness, or the ulterior drive to explain it away by spiritualizing it. Doing so must make Jesus either sad or angry, or both. These illustrations are directly related to how we approach Scripture.

Warning!! Reading this essay may be hazardous to one’s presuppositions and may cause a negative reaction, and may upset one’s comfort zone!

¹³ The Spirit as Jesus’ relational replacement is discussed more fully in T. Dave Matsuo, *The Person, the Trinity, the Church: The Call to Be Whole and the Lure of Reductionism* (Wholeness Study), Chap. 5, subsection “The Spirit: Overlooked and Misused.” Online: <http://www.4X12.org>.

¹⁴ For a full discussion of “relational orphans,” please see Matsuo, *The Person, the Trinity, the Church*, chap 5; also chap. 6, subsection “The Practice of Church: Family or Orphanage?”

¹⁵ Lewis B. Smedes, *My God and I: a spiritual memoir* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 160.

¹⁶ Smedes, 161.

SECTION 1 *LECTIO DIVINA*¹⁷

Lectio divina is the spiritual discipline of praying the Word—the goal of which is communion, or union, with God.¹⁸ It goes by other names: sacred reading, divine reading, spiritual reading, and contemplative Bible reading. There are four movements which a person goes through: (1) Reading/listening a passage (*lectio*): vocalization, listening for a particular word or phrase; (2) meditation (*meditatio*): focus on spiritual matters, making connections; (3) prayer (*oratio*): offering back to God, praying prayers we are given; (4) contemplation (*contemplatio*): entering into the presence, awareness. These movements are initially engaged stepwise, but become inseparably reflexive and intertwined.¹⁹ When we first start out learning *lectio*, we are guided as to posture, repeated readings of a passage, and how to listen for particular words, letting the Spirit thus speak. After listening intently, we are then to respond to God's invitations, calls, inspirations and other messages. We are to respond by entering into conversation with God, “as a friend speaks to a friend (Dt 34:10)”.²⁰ Yet, is this process the significance of what Jesus said that he constitutes with “my friends” (Jn 15:14-15)?

Lectio divina as practiced in the Patristic era and medieval church²¹ functioned with the presuppositions of a “hermeneutics of tradition.” *Lectio* was developed and practiced by ascetic monks in the middle ages, who engaged other spiritual disciplines as a way of life. *Lectio* was practiced within certain “theological boundaries of a stable tradition” of the church. This stable tradition was the body of the earliest church practices rooted in the “rule of faith,”²² a defined context having specific shared understandings and beliefs.²³ Key to this approach is what is called a “hermeneutics of trust,” the belief that God speaks through the texts, or the attitude called the first naiveté, in which texts are taken to be literally true.²⁴

The aim of *lectio divina* was to lead participants beyond the exercises themselves to communion with God. Those who engage in *lectio* today do so with the same hope and expectation of this experiential reality. Often, however, experiential reality seems like but a pipe dream. For those of us who've practiced *lectio divina* and didn't (or still don't) experience deeper connection with God ongoingly, the questions linger somewhere in our minds, if not hearts: Why not? What am I not doing right? What did I do right that one time? Does God still

¹⁷ For a full discussion about *lectio divina*, see Enzo Bianchi, *Praying the Word: An Introduction to Lectio divina*, trans. by James W. Zona (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1998); Mario Masini, *Lectio divina: An Ancient Prayer that is Ever New*, trans. by Edmund C. Lane, SSP (New York: Alba House, 1998); Richard Peace, *Contemplative Bible Reading: Experiencing God through Scripture*. (The Spiritual Disciplines series). (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1995).

¹⁸ Bianchi, 27. Cf. Masini, 34ff, and Peace, 7.

¹⁹ Two additional movements sometimes given are: (5) Journaling/conversation: recalling/remembering, processing, transformation; (6) Obeying (*incarnatio*): putting it into practice.

²⁰ Bianchi, 98.

²¹ The Patristic era refers to the few hundred years after the 1st century, and is so named for the early church fathers, such as Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine and others. The Medieval church dates approximately from the Patristic era to the mid-15th century.

²² The rule of faith is a “brief summary of the faith which had been handed down from the apostles” containing the core Christian confessions. For more on this, see Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology* (4th Revised Edition, trans. by Gene J. Lund. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 50-51.

²³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 22.

²⁴ Noted by Paul Ricoeur. See Kevin Vanhoozer, “Ricoeur” in *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 693.

speak to humans? Going back to Jesus' words cited at the opening of this article—"don't you know me, even after these three years I have been among you?" (my paraphrase of Jn 14:9)—remember, Jesus reveals a qualitatively deeper epistemology. Related to Jesus' deeper epistemology is Jesus' understanding of the human person, created in God's image for intimate relationship. To this we now turn.

Biblical human ontology

Scripture teaches us that the heart of a person is the most significant aspect for relationship with God and thus for spiritual growth. The Bible makes it clear that the heart is "the center of the human person, the deepest and most authentic part of us, and...the seat of our faculty of understanding."²⁵ In Scripture—from the words of Old Testament psalmists and prophets to Jesus and Paul in the New Testament—God has (1) consistently disclosed his own open and vulnerable heart in self-involvement with humans, and (2) consistently communicated that he seeks the whole person, which is signified by the function of the heart.²⁶ The heart is the qualitative dimension of the human person that God seeks for relationship, because only with our whole person is our response compatible with his presence and involvement with us. The function of this qualitative dimension is that which has relational significance to God. Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well reveals this to us:

"But the hour...is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:23-24).

Those who worship the Father in spirit (rendered in function as inner person, heart) and truth (rendered in function as honesty of heart) are the worshipers whom the Father seeks for intimate relational connection. Jesus' further words rebuke those whose involvement with him is devoid of heart (e.g., reductionist worship): "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain, their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Mk 7:6-7; Mt 15:8-9).

In light of the function of the heart for the whole person, we can then understand the words of Cistercian monk Enzo Bianchi:

"So when you are getting ready to spend time listening to God, take your heart in your hands and raise it up toward God....Only when your heart becomes like that of a little child can it receive God's gifts."²⁷

Further, Jesus reveals to us "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mk10:15). What does it mean for our heart to receive like that of a little child? In an ideal world, a child can openly and expectantly approach her mother or father, without fear or self-censoring, in relational trust. Relational trust functions as the open and vulnerable sharing of our heart with God, to count on God to be who he says he is.

²⁵ Bianchi, 89.

²⁶ For a thorough survey and summary of the heart (Hebrew *leb*) and inner and outer aspects of the human person in the Old Testament, see John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* (Vol.2): *Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 548-560.

²⁷ Bianchi, 90.

In his life and practice in the incarnation, Jesus himself embodied this qualitative openness and vulnerability only for relationship together.²⁸ He engaged his person with others, ongoingly, for intimate connection, thus making them whole. His self-disclosures were not for them/us to observe, but to respond to in compatible openness and vulnerability for relationship. This is the relational function of grace, its relational origin, initiation and reciprocal response. The significance of grace—its function for relationship with God—is absolutely the only way we can know God as “experiential truth” (explained further below).

By grace, Jesus called them/us to follow him in relational progression to the Father as daughters and sons (see Rom 8:29). In this relationship together Jesus constitutes us in the relational context of the Trinity (family of God) through his work of redemption and adoption—redemption from the old, adoption into the new creation of God’s family.²⁹ While this process signifies various doctrines for the rule of faith, the only significance this process of grace has to God is wholly relational for living together in intimate relationship.

Bianchi claims what has been stated by ancient practitioners all along, that “God calls you to silent solitude in which the two of you can converse in prayer. God wants to *speak to your heart*.”³⁰ Mario Masini echoes the intimacy involved, conflating heart and spirit:

“[I]t is true that ‘the word of God grows along with those who read it,’ with those who keep up the dialogue of love with it, with the heart that allows itself to be touched by it. Truly, ‘the Spirit touches the spirit of the reader,’ as St. Gregory the Great so wisely taught.”³¹

The relational dynamic necessary to function in the family of God is also embodied for us by Jesus as the trinitarian relational process of God’s family love.³² We must see Bianchi’s and Masini’s words of guidance in the context of Jesus’ call to follow him as disciples, to the imperative relational work with him on the journey to personal wholeness constituted with the whole of God. Bianchi’s words, to “take your heart... and raise it up toward God” can easily translate for us into a static view of the heart. Rather, Jesus’ calls us to the reciprocal relational process with the Spirit, who helps us grow in our new identity as the Father’s daughters and sons by grace. This relational work with the Spirit is reciprocal, not a unilateral empowering by the Spirit; nor is this relational work what we can make happen merely by our own effort. It is in the trinitarian intimate relational process of family love (cf. Rom 8:15-16).³³

Only in God’s relational context of the Trinity as family, and by the trinitarian intimate relational process of family love can we be whole in the relationships necessary to be whole, God’s whole.³⁴ These are God’s terms for relationship together with him as his daughters and

²⁸ For a full discussion of Jesus’ life and practice, please see *Sanctified Christology: A Theological & Functional Study of the Whole of Jesus* (Christology Study, 2008) by T. Dave Matsuo. Online: <http://www.4X12.org>.

²⁹ The terms “God’s relational context” and “relational process” of family love used throughout this essay are given full discussion by Matsuo, *The Person, the Trinity, the Church*. [Http://www.4X12.org](http://www.4X12.org).

³⁰ Bianchi, 89 (*italics in original*).

³¹ Masini, *Lectio divina*, 38. Masini is a professor of biblical exegesis at the Pontifical Theological Faculty of the “Marianum” in Rome.

³² The trinitarian relational context of God’s family, and the trinitarian relational process of family love constitute the whole of God. These perspectives are developed in Matsuo, *The Person, the Trinity, the Church*.

³³ A functional study for reciprocal relational work with the Spirit is *Following Jesus, Knowing Christ: Engaging the Intimate Relational Process* (Spirituality Study, 2003). Online: <http://www.4X12.org>.

³⁴ For a fuller discussion on wholeness of human ontology, and the relationships necessary to be whole in the whole of God, please see Matsuo’s study on wholeness, *The Person, the Trinity, the Church*.

sons. This is the Good News, the truth of the gospel embodied by Jesus' whole person. Thus we can affirm that Jesus is the "hermeneutical key that opens the ontological door to the whole of God, and the functional key that opens the relational door to the ontology of the whole of God's family constituted in the Trinity, the Trinity qua family."³⁵ Going deeper with God in relationship requires redemption from the constraints of sin as reductionism, discussed in the next section.

A valid concern that many Christians have about devotional readings of Scripture is that we are susceptible of "loose subjectivity," which becomes human shaping of the process of knowing (the epistemic process). The process of knowing Jesus as experiential truth is not necessarily mystical, certainly not esoteric nor unilateral, but it does have to be experiential. Consider the following for perspective:

"For *experiential truth* to have validity and be reliable, it has to be more than the subjective—that is, be embodied only in oneself or in one's community—as practiced in postmodernity. Thus *experiential truth* must also have an objective basis; yet this objective basis cannot be functionally static (like that from modernity) but must be dynamic functionally for this knowledge to be beyond reductionism. What takes us beyond both reductionism and oneself?

For *experiential truth* to have a dynamic objective basis means that *experiential truth* must involve a relational epistemic process, where truth is beyond oneself as "subject" and is found in the Other as "object," yet who is also known (experienced) as Subject in relationship. The only process that makes this a rational reality without reductionism, yet experiential beyond oneself, is a relational process in the specific relational context initiated by the Other; a context initiated by oneself for the Other remains subjective without objective basis. Truth becomes dynamic functionally when truth is for relationship. And the experience of this truth has objective basis when the object of truth, the Other, engaged in relationship is the historical person (of the biblical narratives), Jesus the Truth, who as Subject vulnerably disclosed himself to us."³⁶

Understanding reductionism as counter-relational work

In life, children characteristically function with relational trust until they learn to close off their hearts through experiences of disappointment, being put down, ignored and rejected, and suppressed through cultural constraints, thus exercising caution or keeping distance in relationships. Relational trust is choked off as we hide and protect our heart, distancing it even from ourselves. In place of openness and vulnerability of our whole person, we offer something less, or substitutes for our genuine self. Most notably, we offer "what we do" (explained further below) to try to make connection with God or with people. This precludes us from the trinitarian intimate relational context and its intimate relational process embodied in Jesus' self-disclosures in the incarnation. This is the process of reductionism of the whole person created in God's image for relationship, resulting in the loss of intimacy in relationship in likeness of the Trinity.

Reductionism of the whole person is the most formidable and tenacious barrier to experiencing and thus knowing God. God's design and purpose for humanity are only for relationship, and reductionism always works in conflict with the whole of God's desires. It is

³⁵ A full discussion on Jesus as hermeneutical and functional keys, please see Matsuo, *The Person, the Trinity, the Church*.

³⁶ Matsuo, *Sanctified Christology*, Introduction, subsection "The Basis of This Study."

therefore imperative to take seriously how reductionism works in order to counter its influence, and to recognize reductionism as sin. Reductionism of the whole person can be summed up in three intertwined issues: The first issue is defining ourselves on the basis of what we do or have—e.g. our roles, job, education, reputation. This is reductionist human ontology in that it focuses on secondary aspects of persons and defines the person by those aspects—that is, defines the person from the outer in. Second, on the basis of what we do or have, we thus engage in relationships with God and others. I try, for example, to do my relationship with other persons through activities—by either what I do with them or for them.

In the same way, I try to do my relationship with God by my service for God—by functioning in ministry roles and through various activities. No matter how sincere and well-intentioned I am, functioning with this reductionist ontology is to do relationship with God on my own terms. God rejects such attempts. He makes this clear, for example, in worship which doesn't engage the whole person, to which he says “these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote” (Isa 29:13). As noted earlier, Jesus reiterates this critique of reductionist worship in Matthew's Gospel (Mt 15:8-9). Reductionist human ontology results in shallow relational experience, which has no relational significance to God! If we continue to define ourselves by what we do or have, these remain the primary determiners of our identity and the bases on which we practice relationships, no matter how sincere and devoted to the Lord we think we are. Moreover, this is the identity by which we define God and others, thus engaging each other only on this level, on these terms.

The third issue, then, is that we carry these reductionist practices into our ecclesiology, such that church practice focuses on what we do—e.g., the success of ministries, the performance of roles. We practice church like this with all sincerity and well-meaning, but the practices remain shallow and lack relational significance to God and to the churches' members as well. Recall Jesus' critiques of the successful churches in Revelations 2-4. Some of those churches had active ministries, good reputations, suffered for his name, or strove for doctrinal purity. Because they had forsaken God's priority for relationship together—“your first love”—Jesus was ready to take away their status as his church, symbolized by the lamp stands.³⁷

Anything other than the whole person and the relationships necessary to be God's whole is reductionism; it is an alternative, common human ontology, namely from human shaping. This common alternative ontology is the outer-in definition of the person based on what one does or has.³⁸ When I define myself by these criteria, my relationships are engaged based on what I do or what I have. No matter how sincerely I *try* and how much I *do*, as long as my self-definition and self-understanding comes from what I do, I am subtly functioning by self-determination for self-justification, functionally precluding the need for God's grace as the basis and base for relationship with God and others. In other words, I'm trying to do my relationship with God on

³⁷ See further discussion of Jesus' post-ascension discourse to the churches in *The Person, the Trinity, the Church*, Chap 5 “The Church in Likeness of the Trinity.”

³⁸ This contrasts with “uncommon”, or holy. The Greek word for holy is *hagios*, meaning something set apart from ordinary or common usage, thus denotes having significance to God. All Greek words studies in this essay are from Spiros Zodhiates, *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible (NIV)* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1996). Extending this understanding of *hagios*, the holy God is Uncommon, and human ways are common. For a fuller discussion of the common and Uncommon, see Matsuo's *The Person, the Trinity the Church* (Wholeness Study), Chap 8 “Called to Be Whole,” subsection “Beyond the Common and Ordinary.”

my terms—by my human shaping—not God’s terms.³⁹

Jesus clarifies that the people who define themselves by what they do (through their practices of piety) have already received “their reward in full” in the form of others’ approval. (Mt 6:5-8, 16-18). Their seeking affirmation from others exposes their reductionism; their actions have no relational significance to the Father, because apart from the basis of grace those efforts at relationship with God are on human terms. Recognizing the need for redemption from others’ approval, Richard Peace says “You ask God for a new sense of his love for you that will free you from your need to gain affirmation from others.”⁴⁰ However, even beyond a “sense of his love”, we need the experiential truth from Jesus’ deeper epistemology (recall his words to Philip: “don’t you know me, even after all this time?”). T. Dave Matsuo sums this up thus:

*“Experiential truth is based in relationship with this person Jesus the Truth [both as Other to know and Subject to be involved with] vulnerably revealed, who as the Way also reveals the relational epistemic process for knowing the whole of God in intimate relationship, and who also as the Life (zoe, not bios) redeems us for this qualitative difference of life together as his very own family in communion with and in likeness of the Trinity. Thus, we need to grasp this deeper epistemology Jesus revealed in his sanctified life and practice because his disclosures are the basis to experience in our life and practice the deeper ontology of the new creation “in Christ” (individually as persons, corporately as church, and both together as God’s whole). As we will discuss, anything less becomes the epistemological illusions and ontological simulations of reductionism.”*⁴¹

As we specifically repent from defining ourselves by reductionist criteria (what we do and have), this means that all we have left to bring to God are our real, genuine and sinful hearts. The only way we can come to the Father is humbly, openly, and vulnerably—nothing less and no substitutes—to be in God’s intimate presence. The only way we are able be in God’s presence face to face is in our response of relational trust to his initiative of grace, by which Jesus came in the incarnation openly and vulnerably—nothing less and no substitutes for the whole of God. These are God’s terms for relationship with him and the only terms by which God does relationship. Anything else is inevitably something less or a substitute for our whole person, and is trying to have relationship with God on our own terms, which God won’t do.

Because of both the need for healing and because the major influence of reductionism is so tenacious that it functionally enslaves us, it isn’t realistic to expect to immediately be able to open our hearts to God.⁴² When we function in relationships by focusing on what we do or have, we find ourselves resisting being open and vulnerable with God, and our hearts remain distant to ourselves and therefore distant in relationships—with God and with others. Therefore our hearts

³⁹ The “demands” of grace challenge all of our self-autonomy, self-determination and self-justification. See Matsuo, *Sanctified Christology*, Chap 2, subsection “The Demands of Grace.” Cf. Matsuo, *The Person, the Trinity, the Church*, Chap 7, subsection “Grace as the Functional Basis” for a discussion of ecclesiology of the whole. Both studies are available online at <http://www.4X12.org>.

⁴⁰ Peace, 9.

⁴¹ Matsuo, *Sanctified Christology*, Introduction, subsection “The Basis of this Study.”

⁴² Many of us did not or do not experience intimate connection with our earthly parents. Yet, we are quick to add, we know that they love us because, for example, they sacrifice and provide for us. We say this because we don’t want to appear ungrateful. In doing so, however, we rationalize away our unmet need for deeper relational connection—the design of our human ontology—and hide or harden our hearts, creating yet another barrier to intimacy with God. Our hearts need redeeming, healing and transformation.

need redeeming and transformation, including letting go of any benefits we have gained for ourselves from defining ourselves by what we do or have.

Discussions of biblical human ontology and reductionism of it are mysteriously absent from conversations in both Christian spirituality and biblical studies. The heart signifies the whole person in relationship, and its function for relationship is absolutely crucial to know God on God's terms. Quantities of time and amounts of effort we spend studying God's Word are inadequate criteria. The activity of human reason alone isn't adequate to know Jesus either, though the dependence on reason to know God is characteristic both of academic Christians and the average evangelical Christian. By staying at the level of the mind, we are able to avoid the heart and the discomfort we have in and about intimacy since we become increasingly detached from our hearts. The result is that we inadvertently erect or maintain barriers to intimate connection.⁴³

Transforming our perceptual-interpretive framework

Seasoned practitioners of spiritual disciplines agree that the key to spirituality—which is about experiencing God in relationship together—is “Listen.”⁴⁴ Even more specifically, God told the three disciples at Jesus' transfiguration: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mk 9:7; par Mt 17:5). The Son further qualifies the Father's command, admonishing his disciples: “Then pay attention to how you listen” (Lk 8:18)—knowing well that hearing is not the same as listening, understanding that we listen selectively. These words from the Father and the Son to us constitute for us the top-down direction for how to think about our perceptual-interpretive framework. Listening to the Son and listening in a definitive way to the Son are necessary terms for the relationship of following Jesus. Jesus expected his disciples to carefully listen, interpret what they perceived, and respond accordingly. And much of Jesus' teaching indicated the need for redemptive change of their/our perceptual-interpretive framework: “Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes to see but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?” (Mk 8:17-18). “Do you still not understand?” (8:21).⁴⁵

Our perceptual-interpretive framework (our “eyes and ears”) influences what we pay attention to and what we ignore, and how we listen.⁴⁶ It is so crucial an issue that Jesus brought it up with his disciples repeatedly. Paul also knew how important an issue it is, writing to the Roman Christians: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...” (Rom 12:2). However, as attested by Benedictine nun Joan Chittester, “our entire generation has gone deaf.”⁴⁷ Without the needed transformation, not only do we *not* hear God's relational call, but, even with the expectation to be called, we won't respond on God's terms for this relationship. Ignoring God's terms, we shape our response to our liking; we even shape the call itself.

⁴³ In a recent lecture series on theology, Brazilian missiologist Valdir Steuernagel gave the example that when his grown son moved to New York, he stayed at the intellectual, managerial level in relationship with his son to avoid deeper experiences of, e.g., the pain of separation. By comparison, his wife said that the pain she felt was a physical pain—the outcome of her vulnerable intimacy. Missiology lectures at Fuller Seminary, Nov 2008.

⁴⁴ Bianchi, 45, 80-81. Cf. Joan D. Chittester, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), 14-26.

⁴⁵ The Greek word *syniemi* (“understand”) denotes putting together pieces to discern a whole, like a jigsaw puzzle; also, reflecting on something in the heart.

⁴⁶ For a challenging discussion of perceptual-interpretive framework, see Matsuo, *Sanctified Christology*, Introduction.

⁴⁷ Chittester, 23.

Spiritual disciplines such as *lectio divina* may or may not help us listen. At the very least, in *lectio*, God is clearly the focus, the object of our attention and our pursuit. In this sense there is in the practice of spiritual disciplines what signifies “relational clarity.” Yet, if we aren’t helped in the transformation of our perceptual-interpretive framework, the “relational significance” of our whole person won’t be engaged with God while we read Scripture, even with relational clarity.⁴⁸

I suggest that spiritual disciplines as a whole, and *lectio divina* as representative of them, can inadvertently create, or reinforce, more difficulties for us in our pursuit of experiential truth of knowing God. If spiritual disciplines aren’t defined as functions of relationship with God on God’s terms of grace, we seekers are susceptible to approaching them as what we need to do, in spite of the warnings not to get into “doing.” While the intended focus of such practice may be on God, the prevailing effort focuses on “me”—be it silent retreats, fasting, *lectio*, and in praying. Moreover, we evangelical Christians often are blind to our own functioning with a reductionist human ontology of defining ourselves by what we do and have. We also project our reductionism onto God, for example, resulting in reducing Jesus’ person to what he did (e.g., miracles, teachings, his work on the cross) apart from how he was involved in relationship with the Father and human persons. This effectively disembodies Jesus and renders the incarnation to mere event, not the relational communication from God to listen to. Thus we have an incomplete Christology, not grasping the depth of his self-disclosure for relationship together. The relational consequence is the absence of experiencing intimate connection with God.

Bianchi warns that traditional *lectio divina* has been “somewhat distorted by ignatian ways of seeing things” by relying on “a lot of intellectualizing and psychologizing.... This, with its strong emphasis on the believers’ will power....”⁴⁹ Bianchi echoes the admonitions of the early church fathers against such an approach, “profaning the Scriptures by making them an object of speculation or of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, something even an atheist can do.”⁵⁰ Here it seems that Bianchi is warning against reading Scripture outside of the relational context of God. Apart from God’s relational context, we engage a self-determined and self-centering activity that essentially disembodies God’s revelation and involvement, which are only for relationship together.

This is not a push for subjectivism, however, and seasoned practitioners all affirm the place of the intellect in *lectio*. Christian philosopher Diogenes Allen calls for the balance between hearts and minds in *lectio divina*, but in a clear word to evangelicals, “its main purpose is to shape the soul, the entire person.... [and] ultimately lead to a direct experience of God....”⁵¹ For Allen, however, he seeks a “sense of God’s habitual presence,” which could be interpreted as a static outcome lacking reciprocal relational involvement. There is a subtle but significant distinction here to keep in mind.

If we interpret Bianchi’s guidance (noted on p.9) through our quantitative perceptual-interpretive lens of “what to do” in order to experience God, Jesus has a word for us. John’s

⁴⁸ “Relational clarity” in worship means that God is the direct focus of our singing and praise. “Relational significance” in worship is worship in which our whole persons are involved with God. Whether it’s in the gathering for worship, or other aspects of our Christian practice, relational clarity and relational significance are God’s terms for relationship together. For a fuller discussion, see *The Relational Progression: A Relational Theology of Discipleship* (Discipleship Study, 2004). Chap 9, subsection “Practicing the Ultimate Priority: Worship.” Online: <http://www.4X12.org>.

⁴⁹ Bianchi, 16.

⁵⁰ Bianchi, 39.

⁵¹ Allen, 125.

Gospel records just such an approach from the crowd that asked Jesus, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” (Jn 6:28). Like they, we wonder “what must I do to lift my heart to God?” Jesus’ reply to the crowd was “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (6:29). Beyond merely professing faith and having Jesus as the object of our beliefs, Jesus defines the necessary relational work of opening oneself in response to his self-disclosure with our whole person, which also necessarily applies to us in reading Scripture.

Further, when we hear “Only when your heart becomes like that of a little child can it receive God’s gifts,” we are also susceptible to defining God by what he does for us, focusing on the *gifts* from God. Bianchi’s guidance is valuable in giving primacy to the heart in *lectio divina*, yet, we must reject the tendency to think of the heart as some static organism apart from a relational dynamic. The heart’s significance and function is always for making relational connection with God. Being open and vulnerable makes it possible to receive God, giving God the opportunity to connect with us. As in all relationships, we need to take responsibility for our own openness and vulnerability. God doesn’t force himself on us, nor, again, does God do relationship on our terms.

To grow in this relational wholeness isn’t a passive waiting—hoping for God to do all the work, as if he were a divine taser to zap us. To raise our heart up to God is better understood as taking reciprocal responsibility in this dynamic relationship. Starting out listening to his Word and receiving him (and his relational messages, discussed below), we respond, question, prod, argue, and cry out to God. We sometimes wait and listen for long periods, with open and vulnerable hearts, not passively or listlessly. Analogous to relationships with people, there is back and forth interaction. Wholeness isn’t a static condition to attain. Wholeness is experienced in the dynamic engagement of our whole person—signified by the heart’s open and vulnerable involvement—in this intimate relational process with God, and with others together. Do we need the spiritual disciplines to be whole? Well, what did people do before the spiritual disciplines were practiced by ascetics? Wholeness is experienced only in relationship together in God’s family constituted by the Trinity.

The possible difficulties created by *lectio* and other spiritual disciplines, then, are that we make *lectio* another activity which we do or perform, or that we function in effect as passive objects, not living as subjects made for relationship. Doing so, we miss God’s relational communication and involvement with us, his call to us, so that studying Scripture inadvertently often becomes about what we generate. Functionally, it is essentially to try to make our relationship with God happen on our terms. Rather, we must first listen to Jesus’ whole person, listen to what is primary to him for relationship together. Grace is the only basis for this relationship initiated by God, and the only base for ongoing relational experience. We need to reject the lie that God defines us and our relationship by what we *do*, reject the thinking that more quantity is better, for such a mindset comes from reductionism of the whole person and reducing relationship with God to our own human shaping. Jesus had only harsh rebukes for those who tried to reduce the whole of God.

Where spiritual disciplines and *lectio* are helpful to us in our pursuit of God is that they help us create the space to be with God and to listen to him; this then becomes not so much the pursuit of God but our response to the God who is already vulnerably present and intimately involved. Such practices aid us in identifying and diminishing distractions, in quieting us down, orienting us in the relational clarity of focusing on God, even helping us “enter” God’s relational context in which to listen to God. Bianchi’s words help us know the primacy of the heart, if not its function. It is my view, however, that the practices of spiritual disciplines tend to get us away

from the dynamic relationship of intimacy that Jesus seeks with his followers.

SECTION 2 BASICS OF SPEECH ACT THEORY & PRAGMATICS OF COMMUNICATION

Note: the following section is specifically addressed to persons in Christian academia. It deals with speech act theory as representative of contemporary trends in biblical hermeneutics. If you're not interested in the current state of biblical hermeneutics, skim this section, but be sure to read the section on pragmatics of communication, as this gives insight into relationship dynamics.

Speech act theory

Speech act theory has evolved since the 1940s through the work of linguistics scholars J. L. Austin, John Searle, Donald D. Evans, and others. The philosophy behind speech act theory is to help us grasp meaning given in verbal and written communication. They were addressing the questions of how language performs actions beyond the mere conveyance of information. Uttered words are performative acts that do something in a relationship. For example, when I say to you "I forgive you" I am doing something beyond merely giving information. Originally speech act theory was developed for spoken language, but is currently being applied to written texts by biblical scholars.⁵² A very simplified, brief summary of the key aspects will suffice for the purpose of this paper.⁵³

Countering much of contemporary hermeneutics, speech act theory recovers the speaker of utterances, or in the case of texts, recovers the author—i.e., beyond merely acknowledging the fact of having a speaker or author. Significantly, speech act theory presumes that we have access to meanings and intentions of the author/speaker. Basic to speech act theory are three types of utterances: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. The locutionary act denotes the normal sense of saying something. The illocutionary act is the kind of utterance which performs *in* saying something; the effectiveness of the utterance is its "illocutionary force." An illocutionary act would be "I promise to come to you," or the "I do" in a marriage vow.

The third type of utterance, a perlocutionary act, is an utterance that produces effects, thoughts, feelings, or actions on the audience, listener, or other persons. Perlocutions *do* something to the hearer. Commands and emotive utterances are examples. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" expects a response, and when the hearer obeys, the utterance is said to have perlocutionary force. While speech act theory is concerned primarily with illocutionary utterances, biblical interpretation often entails perlocutionary utterances in which a response in obedience to the utterance is the perlocutionary intention. Because it focuses on the

⁵² This essay presumes the commonalities between spoken and written words. For further study, see Richard Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech act Theory and Biblical Interpretation – Toward a Hermeneutic of Self-Involvement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001). Cf. Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). Brown gives a concise description of speech act theory that's easy to understand.

⁵³ The following discussion is drawn from John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) and Briggs, 40-41.

speaker/author and hearer/reader, “speech act theory reaffirms the interpersonal nature of textual communication.”⁵⁴ This reaffirmation is a notable contribution for academic biblical studies and interpretation in light of some philosophical hermeneutical questions.

Speech act theory also defines a context: there are rules of language, and if shared by speaker and hearer within a shared context, then communication can take place, and meaning occurs. However, if speaker and hearer don’t function under the same language rules, meaning doesn’t take place, as when an American tourist traveling abroad misspeaks and asks “how are you?” instead of “how much does that cost?” Also necessary for successful communication is the function of “institutional” facts or rules that constitute an institution. An institution is a system of rules that constitute it. For example, a homerun in the game of baseball has significance only within the rules of the game of baseball, the institution of baseball. To speak of homeruns in a football game mixes institutional facts (though I’ve heard sports commentators intentionally mix it up—e.g., calling a touchdown a homerun). Context is a key part of communication.

In addition to restoring the speaker/author back into the relational context, speech act theory provides the needed aspect of self-involvement of the hearer/reader. What does “self-involvement” mean in actual practice? Self-involvement is the response of the hearer/reader to the communicative act from speaker/author. It is when, Jim W. Adams suggests, that we as readers are given the opportunity to confess, promise, pray, lament, and praise. In the case of Adams’ paper on speech act theory and some passages in (Third) Isaiah, the self-involvement of hearers of prophecy would have been to turn back to God.⁵⁵

The contributions from speech act theory for biblical interpretation and hermeneutics are that (1) God as the speaker/author and his purpose or intention are restored to the text and made accessible to us, and (2) clarifying the need for a specific context within which both speaker/author and hearer/reader must stand, and in which shared language rules and institutional facts are understood by both parties—that is, the institution constituted by a shared language system and rules.⁵⁶ These may not seem like contributions at all to some persons, but given the history of hermeneutical studies, they indicate progress!

Limitations of speech act theory

It becomes apparent very quickly that as applied to reading Scripture, even when we stand within the context of a shared language (e.g., our English translation), we *still* have difficulty understanding. For example, though we share the language, the meaning befuddles or escapes us, as if Jesus were still speaking in a different language. Speech act’s system doesn’t explain the difficulties that persons in the Gospel narratives had with Jesus. Jesus’ disciples and critics alike failed to perceive that which Jesus presented them with, resulting in relational gaps. Jesus admonished his closest disciples, holding them responsible for failing to understand his communications. After the second miraculous feeding of the four thousand, his disciples thought Jesus’ later comments about bread were to be taken literally, to which Jesus answered:

“Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?”

⁵⁴ Jeannine Brown, 35.

⁵⁵ Jim W. Adams, “Speech Act Theory, Self-Involvement, and Isaiah 40-55” (a paper presented in OT Hermeneutics Seminar, Fuller Theological Seminary, April 24, 2008), 23.

⁵⁶ Every fact of an institution is underwritten by a rule or system of rules of the form “X counts as Y in context C” (Searle, 51-52).

And do you not remember?” (Mk 8:17-18).

As noted previously, Jesus is confronting the disciples’ perceptual-interpretive framework—the biases and preconceptions with which they filter and process their experiences with Jesus. Where the disciples pay attention to situations and outcomes of Jesus’ actions, Jesus tries to point them beyond these to himself. Nowhere is the qualitative disparity between the disciples’ and Jesus’ perceptual-interpretive frameworks more clearly evident than in his interaction with them at the final Passover meal together before Jesus’ passion. Jesus’ question which opened this essay—“you still do not know me”—must have shocked and dismayed them, for they’d been with Jesus day and night for three years. He confronts their perceptual-interpretive framework—hearts, eyes, ears, and thinking process. They were not putting the pieces together and capturing Jesus’ communicative actions beyond the actions themselves.

Related to perceptual-interpretive frameworks and institutional rules (from speech act theory), communication on the disciples’ end of the relationship had been blocked, connections were not being made. Jesus’ close male disciples demonstrated that their perceptual-interpretive framework was unable to perceive what Jesus was communicating, and therefore needed redemptive change. In contrast to the Twelve and to Jesus’ critics, there were, in fact, persons who showed that they “got it.” Luke’s Gospel indicates to us that Mary of Bethany got it, that to Jesus “there is need of only one thing” and he affirmed that Mary “has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (Lk 10:42). What is that one thing that Jesus affirmed in Mary? What was different about Mary’s perceptual-interpretive framework, and therefore about how she related to Jesus? It was more than the activity of sitting as a disciple at Jesus’ feet, for the Twelve did this for three years and still hadn’t gotten it. Mary presented her whole person in response to Jesus’ person for relational connection. Speech act theory isn’t able help to us understand relational dynamics of these sorts of interactions other than the overt classifications of typology.

About the usefulness of speech act theory for biblical interpretation, Adams says:

“the notions of speech act theory and its overarching concept of self-involvement should be explored wherever the biblical text expresses communicative action. By viewing the language of the Bible as performative and not solely as descriptive, readers of every generation have the opportunity to be exhorted, promised, confronted, and commissioned by God as well as to confess, promise, pray, lament, and offer praise to him.”⁵⁷

Much of the work being done by persons like Adams with speech act theory for biblical interpretation focuses on typology of utterances and responses of self-involvement. The rules and terminology of its system can easily become ends in themselves, subtly shifting our attention away from engaging the relational dynamics, if not the relational context itself. In doing so, we unintentionally reinforce the disembodiment of Scripture, essentially ignoring the relational messages underlying God’s communicative acts of self-disclosures.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Adams, 23.

⁵⁸ An example of speech act typology used in interpreting Scripture, Adams refers to Isa 49:3 – “And he said to me, “You are my servant, you are Israel, through whom I will glorify myself.” Adams says: “In speech act terms, the utterance here is a multidimensional declarative-directive-expressive-commissive expressed through a personal confession” (21). Only the academic who is conversant in speech act terminology can understand or speak

While, thankfully for biblical hermeneutics, speech act theory provides God's Word(s) with a "voice" and a relational context, it is insufficient to define the relational process of God's qualitative communicative action. Speech act theory is able to describe interpersonal dynamics by recovering the place of the speaker/author, but functions apart from the qualitative, relational significance of God's communicative acts to us and the relational significance of our responses back to God. Speech act theory helps with "relational clarity", but remains at the level of systems and rules, and addresses the effects of utterances on hearers at a behavioral level without necessarily accounting for the significance of the whole person. Thus, speech act theory doesn't account for human ontology or the relational ontology of the Trinity, both of which are necessary to be compatible with the nature of the Speaker's/Author's context and relational language. Principles from communication theory, however, move us toward closing the qualitative gap in speech act theory at this juncture.

Relational messages from pragmatics of communication

Principles of communication theory are drawn upon from the field of marriage and family counseling in the 1960s, arising from studies of language functions.⁵⁹ According to communication theory, there are certain norms in any given interactional situation: (1) one cannot *not* communicate; (2) "Any communication implies a commitment and thereby defines the relationship;"⁶⁰ and (3) "Every communication has a content aspect and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former...."⁶¹ The interactional situation is the context within which communication takes place. It parallels the notion of "institution" from speech act theory, which is the context defined by its system of facts and rules. We can imagine this context as a circle within which two people are talking to each other.

Relational content of any communication are conveyed as "relational messages." Matsuo defines those principles further, noting that one or more of the following relational messages is conveyed in all communicative acts: (1) what one is saying about him- or herself; (2) how the speaker feels about the other person being addressed; (3) how the speaker feels about the shared relationship.⁶² These are relational messages from the speaker to the hearer. Thus, in God's communicative acts to us throughout Scripture, God conveys what he says about himself, how he feels about us, and how he feels about our relationship together. For both biblical studies and *lectio divina*, receiving and not receiving God's relational messages has deep implications for us.

How does it work, then, to qualify speech act theory with relational content? The following illustrates how speech act theory and communication theory orient us to have relational clarity, but not necessarily relational significance. Speech act theory can be taken a little beyond merely a system of rules and behaviors. This corresponds with the second principle

this language! It is not accessible to most seminarians, even less so for the average Christian for devotional Scripture reading and serious study.

⁵⁹ Paul Watzlawick, Janet Helmick Beavin, and Don D. Jackson. *Pragmatics Of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (NY: W.W.Norton & Company, Inc, 1967).

⁶⁰ Watzlawick et al, 51.

⁶¹ Watzlawick et al, 54.

⁶² This rendering of principles from communication theory of Watzlawick et al ("This is how I see myself...this is how I see you...this is how I see you seeing me"; p. 52) is developed by Matsuo in *The Relational Progression*, Chap 1, subsection: "Understanding the Word."

Relational messages are conveyed also nonverbally. One's actions, posture, and proximity in relation to others conveys relational messages, such as I don't want to get too close to you, I'm better than you, I want to be with you, and so forth.

from communication theory noted above: “Every communication has a content aspect and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former.”

In the Old Testament, it is written in Genesis that God called Abram, called Moses, and called the Hebrew people. At the same time that God called persons, he also made promises to them. Succinctly summarized, God’s utterances performed relational acts *in* their utterance. God called the Hebrew people into a relational context with himself, and in doing so he *performed* a relational message, the positive relational message that God desired this people. It was only God’s love for the people that motivated his calling them into this relational context (Dt 7:7-8). God also promised his own presence, promised their identity as his “treasured possession”, promised inheritance, and his blessings or curses (e.g., Gen 17:2-8; Ex 19:5, Dt 7:6, 12ff). Using speech act terminology, God’s promises have illocutionary force, which means that God is able to back up his words, and does so—what is conventionally attributed to God’s righteousness and faithfulness. He can’t and won’t do otherwise.⁶³ What is being described in the Pentateuch is essentially God’s calling the Israelites into the covenant relationship (God’s relational context), a covenant of love (Dt 7:6) thoroughly constituted in God’s relational messages. How he feels about the people, how he feels about their relationship, and how he sees himself are all expressed through his own communicative acts throughout the OT. While speech act theory treats self-involvement as the readers’ involvement with the text’s speaker (God), we need to recognize the self-involvement of the speaker first as Subject making the first move toward us. Whether the promises were fulfilled as blessings or curses depended on either the obedient relational response of the Israelites’ whole persons to God’s terms for the covenant relationship, or an alternative response shaped by their own terms.

In the performance of illocutionary acts, Searle says that the speaker intends to produce a certain effect (perlocutionary act) by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect. In this way, speech act theory restores authorial intention to academic biblical interpretation, countering the perspective that we cannot know an author’s intention (a view called “intentional fallacy”). Through the act of calling, God’s intention is to convey his relational initiative toward Abram, Moses, and Israel. In speaking to them, God presents himself to them, creating with them the context constituted by his presence and relational utterances. Through God’s illocutionary acts of promising, he commits himself to the people. The law was given as the terms for the covenant because the only way that humans can have relationship with the holy God is on God’s terms. It should be noted also that while the covenant required Israel’s obedience to its terms, God also bound himself to its terms, through his promises. The relational messages inherent in the performative of promise convey how God feels about the relationship together, and what he says about himself. Despite the assumption of what Searle and others call illocutionary force of promise, speech act theory doesn’t account in this transaction for God fulfilling his promises according to the nature of his righteousness. In relational terms, God’s righteousness is a relational dynamic that means that we can count on God to be who he says he is and do what he says he’ll do. This is what God discloses about himself in the first relational message that qualifies the content of his promises, which certainly then is a vital message to embrace from God and to hold God accountable for.

The relational context (called institution in speech act theory, and interactional situation in communication theory) is the covenant relationship. God’s illocutionary promises are

⁶³ Much debate involves the fact of God’s anger and violent punishment. I urge us to think about these issues in relational terms: the covenant relationship and its keeping according to God’s terms, and the righteousness of God whereby he acts according to who he is and what he says.

accompanied by perlocutionary intentions, which are the commands (both the apodictic “Thou shalt” and the casuistic, or case laws). Israel’s part in this covenant relationship was to submit to and embrace God’s terms (the Decalogue and Book of Covenant) for the relationship. In relational terms, the illocutions and perlocutions constitute the covenant of love in relationship together. Again, the motivation behind God’s initiative to Israel is God’s love for them (Dt 7:7). The relational message is that God desired relationship together in the whole of God (the family of God constituted in the Trinity), and acted—and continues to act—to bring us together. As Christians, we also are aware that this covenant of love is extended in the New Testament to all of humanity in God’s overarching purposes.

Without a transformed perceptual-interpretive framework to implement speech act theory, we’ll continue to have difficulty in perceiving and grasping the qualitative relational nature of God’s intentions and communicative acts, because we are unable to recognize that all communication has relational content. To reiterate relational messages, they are:

- (1) what the speaker says about her- or himself
- (2) how the speaker feels about the other person
- (3) how the speaker feels about the shared relationship.

Engaging in *lectio divina* or academic biblical study apart from God’s relational context inevitably is to treat Scripture with an approach of human shaping from reductionism. Moreover, without God’s relational content, the shape of relationship with God is left to human speculation. Like some ancient practices of piety that were given human shaping by some Pharisees (see Mt 6:1-18), our study of Scripture then becomes guided by our own goals. We will have our own rewards in full in terms of more information about God, but without relational significance from God to us and us to God in the experience of relationship on God’s terms. Even if our interpretive framework shifts to thinking relationally, we may be able to identify a class of utterances as “relational” but not as relational functions necessary to experience deeper relationship together with God.

SECTION 3 IMPLICATIONS FOR HOW WE APPROACH SCRIPTURE

There are two significant shortcomings of speech act theory and pragmatics of communication that I see. First, these theories do not account for a deeper ontology of the whole person, which ignores the qualitative depth of intimacy in relationships necessary to be whole (discussed earlier in the section on biblical human ontology). The second is related to the first: how to account for the ontological difference between God as holy and transcendent, and humans as finite and sinful. The second requires human persons to submit to God’s terms for relationship—namely, constituted by God’s grace, thus irreducible and nonnegotiable. *Lectio divina* similarly doesn’t necessarily take these issues into account. Bianchi clearly acknowledges the heart’s function and interacting with God at the heart level, but isn’t definitive about God’s relational context and process that must (by its nature) take place on God’s terms of grace.

1. Grace and the Dynamics of God's Relational Process

God is ontologically distinct from humanity, making it impossible to be in relationship together without grace's function. By grace God makes himself available and accessible to us for interpersonal and intimate relationship together, from OT times to the present. It is the function of the three relational messages from God (communicative acts) toward human persons (see p.23 above). Grace makes it possible for us to be in God's presence, and for God to be in our presence. Inherent in the function of grace is God's desire for us. Yet, God's grace does not merely open the relational door of engagement without making definitive what grace also necessitates for a compatible response from us in order to walk through this door for relationship together with the holy God.

Speech act theory and communication theory cannot account for the necessary function of grace for relationship with God. Notably regarding self-involvement, grace demands the openness and vulnerability of the human heart to God. These have always been God's terms for covenant relationship with him, nothing less and no substitutes for our whole person. This is the only compatible response to the openness and vulnerability of God in the incarnation. It is a qualitatively distinct response specific to and required by the nature of God's embodied relational action toward us.

We may be shocked to realize that grace makes a certain demand on us. This "demand of grace" opens Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in the first Beatitude. Matsuo articulates this important and helpful insight:

"The truth, which we don't always grasp theologically, is: grace *demand*s honesty of my heart and doesn't allow me to be anything other than my real, true *self* (weak, fallible, sinful) with God—and eventually with others."⁶⁴

When our heart is thus open and vulnerable, it can connect with the open and vulnerable heart of God, in the relational dynamic of intimacy—intimacy defined as the relational process of hearts opening to each other and coming together. It isn't about what we "do", but is the only relational posture in which we can experience God's grace and thus intimate relational connection with God. Furthermore, this function of grace by its very nature results in human relationships that are equalized because grace counters defining ourselves by what we do or have at every level of life; as our functional basis, grace negates false human distinctions and dissolves human inequalities based on those distinctions.⁶⁵ This function of grace also makes intimate relationships both necessary and normative because the heart involved with God can only be open and genuine, as it is redeemed, healed and transformed.

It is instructive to have in mind three issues for all practice that presume the above relational messages. These issues are embodied for us in Jesus' life and practice, and should ongoingly challenge our own life and practice. They are as follows:

1. the significance of the self presented, along with
2. the quality of one's communication and

⁶⁴ Matsuo, *Following Jesus, Knowing Christ*, Chap 2, subsection "The Demand of Grace".

⁶⁵ The issue here is about human constructions of distinction-making based on reductionist human ontology that leads to the comparative process, competition, and eventually systems of inequality. This process is given further understanding in Matsuo, *The Relational Progression*, Chap 12 "The Church as Equalizer: Equalizer Within Itself"; subsection "Its Functional Basis."

3. the depth level of relationship one engages.⁶⁶

Jesus is God's relational communicative act embodied. In the incarnation, Jesus personally embodied the relational context of God and relational messages to us. As such, in his earthly life, Jesus openly and vulnerably presented nothing less than God's relational nature, and no substitute for God's very person presented for relational connection.⁶⁷ Jesus' presence for relationship caused humans to react in different ways. Some overtly rejected him. Some had difficulty connecting with Jesus, as was the case with the twelve male disciples (e.g., Peter in Jn 13:6-10; 21:15-22). Others could connect deeply with Jesus, such as some of the women disciples (Lk 7:36-50; 10:38-42). Jesus pointed out that the openness and vulnerability demonstrated by little children is sought by God, because they signify the soft (as opposed to hardened) hearts that God is able to connect with by grace. Thus, we see Jesus' heart revealed:

Jesus rejoiced (leaping) in the Holy Spirit, said, 'I thank you Father ...because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned (intelligent and educated), and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure' (Lk 10:21 NIV).

These are deep relational messages of the Father to his beloved daughters and sons.

How Jesus functioned in the incarnation embodied and reveals to us today biblical human ontology—how and for what God created us in the *imago Dei*. This also points to the necessary process for relationship in God's relational context—intimate relational connection, where intimacy only means heart-to-heart connection. God's grace makes this connection possible, and grace makes the quality of intimacy imperative. This relational flow emerges because the depth that we experience is directly connected to the relational openness and vulnerability of our hearts. The only other alternative is giving God and others some reduced presentation of ourselves—something less or some substitute—thus diminishing the quality of our communication and minimizing the level of relationship we engage. All of this applies to our involvement with God in Scripture.

2. God's larger picture, or metacritique

Jesus reveals his deeper epistemology by disclosing in his life and practice the trinitarian relational context of the whole of God (God's family) and the trinitarian relational process of intimacy, all to make us whole and for relationships necessary to be whole. The nature and quality of this involvement on God's part, and humanity's response, are embodied by Jesus himself—revealed in Scripture for us to be involved in and with. For the purpose of knowing God, our perceptual-interpretive framework needs to be transformed according to Jesus' self-disclosures. In the ongoing process of relationship as Jesus' followers in the relational progression to the family of God, this will be our experience.

Jesus' embodied words (not reduced to his mere teachings) indicate God's own framework for approaching Scripture: the trinitarian relational context of family (the whole of God), with the trinitarian relational process of family love. Our involvement necessarily must be nothing less and no substitutes for our whole person (the demands of grace). This is the larger framework within which to view our approaches to Scripture. In hermeneutical terms, this is a

⁶⁶ Matsuo, *Sanctified Christology*, Chap 1 "The Person Presented."

⁶⁷ The understanding of the "nothing less and no substitutes" nature of the incarnation is expanded on in Matsuo, *The Person, the Trinity, the Church*, Chap 2, Subsection "The Experience of Knowing."

“metacriticism,” with which to critique all other approaches. Whatever we can know about our transcendent God has to start with God’s self-revelation, though certainly some human influence has shaped the texts. Admittedly this perspective functions with a hermeneutics of trust, and with a “top-down” view. Like the hermeneutics of NT writers such as Paul, for example, this view affirms and trusts in God’s self-disclosures in Christ to form our perceptual-interpretive framework.

It goes against the grain of postmodernism to suggest a meta-narrative, metacritique, or meta-anything. Evangelical Christians are therefore at odds with postmodernism in this crucial way. This essay offers a “metacritique” for evangelicals, to embrace Scripture as a trustworthy source for knowing God if we heed Jesus’ words “then pay attention to how you listen.” What we can look forward to is conjointly functional and experiential, so that our desire to know God deeply and our need for transformation are met experientially.⁶⁸

3. The gap between *lectio divina* and biblical studies: a secondary issue

There are, in both church and academia, serious Christians who lament the gap between devotional Scripture reading and academic biblical studies. I address it only briefly here, to acknowledge it, and to put it into the larger perspective of God’s qualitative epistemology as revealed in the incarnation.

Paul Ricoeur, writing in the field of philosophy of hermeneutics, says intriguingly: “Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again.”⁶⁹ Here Ricoeur alludes to a gap issue. Biblical scholarship has historically gone through painstaking, rigorous work, primarily to gain information—be it reconstructing the historical settings of biblical texts, information about the “real” (read historical) Jesus, the “authentic” worship of the earliest church, and more. Criticism means “the scientific or scholarly investigation of texts or documents to discover their origin, history, or original form,”⁷⁰ and different kinds of criticism use different lenses to study the Bible. For example, historical criticism explores the social, political, and cultural contexts of the Bible’s human writers. Or, literary criticism examines literary features of texts, such as genre, syntax, parallelism. All this scholarship gives us mountains of information. In his statement quoted above, however, Ricoeur expresses the sentiment that we have wandered long enough in the dryness of biblical criticism, and seeks to recover something that will speak to us—suggesting that our human ontology needs more than information. We need more than information about God and God’s Word.

In the Christian academy, some persons recognize that we need a way to deal with the dichotomy between dry academic pursuits on one hand, and the subjective proof-texting that characterizes personal Scripture reading on the other hand.⁷¹ Christian philosopher Diogenes Allen identifies this persistent gap between the two seemingly mutually exclusive approaches

⁶⁸ In his volume, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*, Anthony Thiselton proposes a metacritique of the cross for all hermeneutical approaches to Scripture, 614-19. The perspective articulated in this essay agrees with this concept, and is offered in order to take us further and deeper.

⁶⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *La Symbolique du mal* (Paris: Aubier, 1960). *The Symbolism of Evil*, Emerson Buchanan, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 349. Quoted by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Paul Ricoeur” in *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. by K. J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 693.

⁷⁰ *Webster’s New World Dictionary & Thesaurus*, Accent Software International Macmillan Publishers Version 2.0 1998.

⁷¹ Richard Peace, Fuller Seminary professor of Spiritual Disciplines, bemoans the extremes of “arid scholasticism and loose subjectivity,” lecture April 22, 2008.

thus:⁷²

“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.”⁷³

This gap is confirmed in conversation among seminarians and others, underscoring the lack of wholeness in our studies. At the same time, there is a growing felt need for wholeness that will lead to spiritual growth without compromising intellectual integrity in academic study of the Bible. One reason for the persistence of the gap is, according to Allen, the academic focus on

“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....”⁷⁴

Questions asked by science, theories of culture, and literary theory are such influences that capture the attention of academics. These are questions concerning contextualization that aren’t specifically dealt with here, but exacerbate barriers to experiencing God. Allen also points out that intellectual inquiry for doctrinal discussion doesn’t include our response, which is an action of relational involvement. Allen is correct, and his personal testimony below amplifies the need among Christians (notably academics) to close this gap.

Allen, professor of philosophy at Princeton Theological Seminary, opens his book on spiritual theology (*Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today*) with the admission that though he was a clergyman and “successful teacher of philosophy and theology” to seminarians, he was “very much at a loss concerning spiritual matters.”⁷⁵

“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?”⁷⁶

Allen extends his sense of bewilderment to give perspective to academic contexts.

⁷² Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today* (Cambridge, MT: Cowley Publications, 1997), 152.

⁷³ Allen, 154.

⁷⁴ Allen, 154-55.

⁷⁵ Allen, 1.

⁷⁶ Allen, 2.

“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.”⁷⁷

Unfortunately, what Allen ultimately shares in his book amounts to more information—information *about* spiritual theology, which is an entire body of knowledge he defines as our Christian inheritance. Allen believes it is to this inheritance that we must return in order to be able to experience a “sense of God’s habitual presence.” He gives a survey of writings about the spiritual life, about spiritual disciplines, and specific Christians who exemplify having experienced God’s presence. Despite the wealth of this tradition, I think it’s fair to say that his case for spiritual theology doesn’t take into account the relational self-disclosures of Jesus; thus it misses the relational dynamics embodied for us only for relationship together with God.

Closing the gap between approaches to Scripture won’t necessarily resolve the primary issue between merely knowing information about God and truly knowing God. While Allen’s personal effort to recover spiritual theology is a step in the right direction, his approach doesn’t engage the relational process to go further and deeper to know God beyond mere knowledge. This primary issue remains unresolved, which is directly related to the lack of wholeness in theology and practice evident in church and seminary. Even more urgent than closing the philosophical gap between devotional and academic readings of Scripture, we need to address the functional and experiential gap; this is imperative for us because Jesus’ words to his disciples rebuke all of us in our approaches to following and thus knowing him. Our various approaches and the gaps between them must be placed into a larger, deeper context of God’s whole, based on God’s self-disclosures to us, and thus must by its nature engage the primacy of the relational process of the triune God.

4. Implications for academic biblical study, *lectio divina*, and other spiritual disciplines

It is imperative for church and academy to address this prevailing reality: increasing in knowledge about God gained from biblical scholarship does not lead to the experience of knowing God because we can’t experience God merely with a quantitative epistemology. In its current condition, how we go about biblical studies diminishes the relational nature and function of Scripture, disembodiment Scripture as God’s communicative acts. By approaching Scripture without the qualitative perceptual-interpretive framework requiring our whole person’s involvement, Scripture remains words on pages. We become deaf and blind to the relational significance of God’s communicative acts, especially in the incarnation and the function of Scripture that avails to us the hermeneutical and functional keys of Jesus only for relationship. Thus, the embodied Word is fragmented into words disconnected and the embodied Truth is reduced to propositions disengaged—words and propositions without relational significance to God and God’s family.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Allen, 4.

⁷⁸ About “embodied Truth”, Matsuo writes, “Deep involvement with Jesus’ whole person engages the embodied Truth, which results in the intimate experience of knowing him. Truth is only for this relationship, the outcome of which makes evident the contextual contingency. When the embodied Truth is known by the reciprocal relational process of intimate involvement together, the embodied Truth functions in the relational involvement of family love to ‘set you free’ (*eleutheroo*, liberate, Jn 8:32). The redemption Jesus pointed to, however, has a contextual contingency. The embodied Truth is the fulfillment of God’s thematic action, the strategic shift of God’s relational work of grace.” *Sanctified Christology*, Chap 3, subsection “Functional Shift.”

When Jesus rejoices with the Father saying “You have hidden these things from the wise and learned” (Lk 10:21a), this suggests his reference includes various Christians in academia. Jesus doesn’t say that we should give up reason, but indicates that the efforts and output of the wise and learned won’t penetrate the barriers to knowing God as experiential truth. Biblical studies in its current forms yields more information about God and the Bible. Even those who call themselves postmodern (usually in academic circles) and emphasize “relationality” will still feel relationally constrained if functioning with a reductionist human ontology. Without redemption and transformation, distance in relationship with God (and others) will continue to be our normative experience; and deeper connection will consistently elude us, even in our practice of spiritual disciplines.

With the Spirit given as Jesus’ relational replacement for us, God isn’t inaccessible, nor is communion with God a mysterious experience that takes place by chance, arbitrarily, or when God feels like it. God is vulnerably with us, available and accessible by his terms of grace. The crucial issue for *lectio divina* is that the context for *lectio* (praying the Word) is God’s relational context—not the reverse; *lectio divina* isn’t the context for experiencing God, but rather primarily functions to orient us toward God by helping us focus on him. *Lectio divina* isn’t a guarantee to experience God relationally, and can actually sabotage our desire if we are approaching it with a reductionist human ontology, which essentially is to make it about us and what we need to do. Rather, in the trinitarian relational process of intimacy—i.e., heart to heart involvement with God, requiring of us nothing less and no substitutes for our open and vulnerable hearts—we can experience God. This is the only compatible response to God’s self-revelation in the incarnation. We don’t need *lectio divina* for this relational experience. Our praying Scripture must take place within this relational context and in this intimate relational process—in reciprocal relational work with the Spirit. We will then surely find our posture engaging the relational dynamic to be called by and able to experience God, and thus know God as experiential truth. God will engage our vulnerability in the longing of our hearts and transform us, the dynamic, relational goal of all spiritual disciplines.

By implication then, I suggest that the same conclusions apply to all the spiritual disciplines. Until we understand them within the further and deeper context of God’s whole, they functionally become reduced to what we make happen. I certainly don’t presume to know what persons have experienced throughout the ages in their practice of spiritual disciplines, but one thing is clear to me. Apart from the triune God’s relational context and process based on grace, we inevitably function with a reduced ontology of the whole person in any practice of spiritual disciplines. This is a serious issue, and one so subtle that we often don’t recognize it in ourselves. Admittedly I still deal with it in my life.

Richard Foster, well known for advancing the spiritual disciplines for spiritual formation among evangelicals, ironically provides a case in point. He has certainly been among the first to warn us against making the spiritual disciplines mere activity. One is surprised, then, by the recent comments he made regarding prayer after finishing writing a book on the subject.

“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.”⁷⁹

⁷⁹ In an interview by Mark Galli, “A Life Formed in the Spirit.” *Christianity Today*, (September 2008), 45.

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.

Spiritual disciplines often appear more to be what humans have shaped by their own desires, albeit with good intentions, for communion with God. Jesus, however, calls us into God’s relational context, not the other way around. Though their rightful practice may be helpful, we don’t need a special training or special regimen to know him experientially and intimately.

5. A word about language

I’d like to comment on language that is typically used by people who write about spiritual disciplines in general. In my own pursuit of God, I’ve rarely been able to make *functional sense* of language such as “interior castle”, “perfection”, “pure love” or even “love”. Such phrases have construed for me an ethereal mental image, a vaporous spirituality. In contrast, the language that has made a lot of functional sense to me—by which I could understand what specifically is involved for my part, and what takes place between God and me—is to think in terms of relational language and relational dynamics. Taking this further, it is helpful to think of the Bible itself as relational language, as God’s communicative acts. Relational language is discussed in the section on pragmatics of communication.

The word “interpersonal” is such a word needing clarification. Interpersonal generally is understood as something taking place between persons, as having relational implications. Yet, if our perceptual-interpretive framework focuses on the outer-in aspects of behavior, then “interpersonal” remains only at that level, staying focused primarily on what we do, or activity. Speech act theory reinforces this understanding of interpersonal.

Notably, however, both Old and New Testaments stress the significance of the whole person, which is defined by the function of the heart, and thus by an inner-out human ontology. Both Testaments admonish against incongruity between the inner person (signified by the heart) and outer person (secondary aspects of persons and behaviors). To speak of reading Scripture “interpersonally” must go deeper than only outward behaviors to penetrate the deeper, qualitative, dimensions of human persons, as well as those of God.

“Love” is another word that we assume we understand—not to mention “faith.” “God is love,” “Love the Lord your God...and your neighbor as yourself,” and innumerable other occurrences in Scripture tend to become vague and spiritualized (read ethereal). Allen notes that “the entire task of spiritual theology is to guide us in our attempt to obey the two great commandments that summarize the entire Jewish Law: love of God and love of neighbor.”⁸⁰ The problem is that love is often reduced to “something we possess, to a feeling, or to what we’re doing, then we take away its substance and minimize its relational experience—both receiving and giving.”⁸¹ Rather, as Matsuo explains it:

⁸⁰ Allen, 9.

⁸¹ *Following Jesus, Knowing Christ*, Chap 7, subsection “The Substance of Love.”

“Love is about *how to be involved in relationships*. Love (*agape*) is relationship-specific, not deed-specific; and involvement in that relationship is deeper and fuller. There are two parts to this involvement: (1) from my side, I need to be involved with my total person, which includes the most important part – my heart; (2) in relation to the other person, I need to be involved with the *person* and resolved (even devoted) to act for the sake of, the welfare or well-being of the other (*agape*). Such involvement (*agape*) doesn't require having an affection (*phileo*) for the other nor that we even by necessity like the person. *Agape* is not selective to our preferences nor reactive to those negative to us (Mt.5:43-47). It is the willingness and openness of the heart to be involved with that person, regardless.”⁸²

This indeed is how the whole of God is involved with us. No special language is required to define or to describe how God functions with us. Only one language is necessary: relational language embodied by Jesus. For this relational purpose the Father makes it imperative for all his children to “Listen to my Son.”

CONCLUSION

As we reflect on Jesus' incarnation in full self-disclosure of God to us, not only during Advent but throughout the year, he continues to call us to follow him in relationship together along with the Spirit. This call was the first and last words Jesus shared with Peter to make definitive the primary priority of intimate relationship together (Mk1:16; Jn 21:19,22). Embodied deep and heavy in Jesus' very person is the whole of God, vulnerably present and intimately involved for relationship. We might feel tension, and even threatened, about the fact that this can authentically happen only on God's terms; but if we respond, we will know him in experiential truth. He clearly calls us because he wants *us*. Scripture communicates all these relational messages as God's desires, the entire purpose for relationship together with the whole of God, the Trinity, as God's family. For this Jesus tells us to “pay attention to how you listen,” beyond the babble of our own shaping of his Word. May God's heart fully be heard and received by grace, and responded to.

Indeed, Jesus' question “Don't you know me yet?” makes us all accountable to ongoingly go further and deeper into intimate relationship together—no matter at what level of experience we may find ourselves.

⁸² *Following Jesus, Knowing Christ*, Chap 7, subsection “The Substance of Love.”

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