How God Wrestles with the Shortcomings of His People on the Ontological Level

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Introduction

The question of how God wrestles with His people's failures can be addressed along many different disciplines and methods. The approach in this paper adopts the onto-relational position of theologians such as T. F. Torrance, Colin Gunton, John Zizioulas, and others. [2] The position is: within the Community of God, God primarily wrestles with His people's failures. The Community is a relational community which constitutes the personhood and therefore the *being* of the individual. This constitution of the individual by the Community of faith allows for a personal relationship by the personal God to deal with His people's failures. This is not by any means the only approach, or even the best approach, but it is an approach that can help us understand the relation between God and His creation, especially in light of salvation history as revealed in the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A. Personhood as Onto-relations

Before we begin our examination of the Community of God as determining the *being* of the individual, it is necessary to establish the framework for understanding personhood as otherness-in-relation and between God and those individuals within His community. The term "person" in modern thinking has become cemented with the notion of the individual, which has given rise to other problems to the detriment of theological thought overall.

1. Relations and Personhood

The British theologian Colin Gunton states that the doctrine of the Trinity "takes us wider and deeper into the mystery of what it is to be a human being in the world."[3] Gunton is reacting against those who have placed the center of value for being human within the human creature and apart from God. For example, Don Cupitt insists that in order for human beings to be authentic, they must have complete autonomy of their own self-definition.[4] For Gunton, Cupitt

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[2] "Onto" refers to ontology or the study of "being" itself.

[3] Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 29.

[4] Cupitt says, "The principles of spirituality cannot be imposed upon us from without and cannot depend at all upon any external circumstance. On the contrary, the principles of spirituality must be fully internalized *a priori* principles, freely

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has completely misunderstood reality, the scripture, the Triune God, and above all the fallenness of man. So instead of defining humankind properly, humankind is defined without consideration of the state of sin and evil in which it exists, and which ultimately imposes on the finite the burden of infinite divinity. There is such an inward turn that fundamental relations for personhood are lost, as well as relations with the Creator and the rest of the created order. So instead of creating an autonomous individual, philosophies like Cupitt's have created an enslavement of the individual who is no longer defined by relations with the other; *enslavement* because there is no accounting to the affects that sin has on the individual.

W. J. Hill states that "the full understanding of creaturehood itself is disclosed in the light of the Trinity, for only thus is it clear that world or universe … bears a trinitarian imprint."[5] In this way when Gunton discusses personhood, it is in relation to the Creator and the created order as opposed to an individually isolated autonomous self. When personhood is viewed in relational terms, beginning with the Triune God, salvation is no longer a matter of personal redemption from a perishing world, but restoration to true humanity by the Triune God who comes into the world to redeem it.

The economic activity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit determines what it means to be human and human in the world. The question of personhood should not be viewed as an opposition of human autonomy against heteronomous oppression. Things must be viewed differently in the light of a God who is Lord, but who also acts personally within our fallen human condition. Because redemption involves "the notion of God's faithfulness to his entire creation," the

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adopted and self-imposed. A modern person not any more surrender the apex of his self-consciousness to a god. It must remain his own." Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: Xpress Reprints, 1980), 9. Notice how Cupitt transposes spirituality: "That is, on our account the religious imperative that commands us to become free spirit is perceived as an autonomously authoritative principle which has to be freely and autonomously adopted and self-imposed" (Cupitt, 98.).

[5] William J. Hill, *The Three-Personed God—The Trinity as a Mystery of Salvation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 273. When Hill uses the word "imprint" he is referring to the idea that creation and salvation/redemption are Trinitarian events experienced within the history of the world.

economic action of the Trinity is at the core of what it is to be human and what it is to be human in the world.[6]

2. Personhood and the Human Creature

a. T.F. Torrance and Colin Gunton on Personhood

T. F. Torrance says,

> This onto-relational concept of 'person', generated through the doctrines of Christ and the Holy Trinity, is one that is also applicable to inter-human relations, but in a created way reflecting the uncreated way in which it applies to the Trinitarian relations in God.[7]

In other words, personhood is perceived univocally in relation to the immanent relations in the Godhead and the human creature; albeit asymmetrically, because the relations in God are absolute, perfect, and uncreated. By viewing "person" as onto-relational, the transition between the respective realities of the Creator and the creature gives the created person the freedom to be individual and particular while simultaneously relying on *relationality* to constitute personhood. This pattern of relational *being* and living is grounded in the very act of creation, in that God created humans relationally, first in relation to Himself as humanity's creator and then in relationship with others (the male and female creation event).

Colin Gunton arrives at his relational view of creation from the doctrine of creation and from Christology, for Christ is the basis of renewal and the goal for creation (cf. Col. 1:15; Rom. 8:29). Gunton uses the "image of God" to ground the human relation in the inner life of the Triune God; he expands his view of personhood and relations back into Trinitarian doctrine. Gunton says that "to be God, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, is to be persons in relation: to be God only as a communion of being."[8] Gunton then moves from the definition of persons as defined by the Father, Son, and Spirit, to the definition of the human person because:

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6 Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement—A Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 103.

7 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 103.

8 Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation, The Didsbury Lectures* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1992), 100.

it is that which is replicated, at the finite level, by the polarity of male and female: to be in the image of God is to be called to a relatedness-in-otherness that echoes the eternal relatedness-in-otherness of Father, Son and Spirit.[9]

Gunton does not want to press the analogy too far and assume that human society should be based on a social trinitarian model. He simply defines what it is to be a human person in a relational way, and the doctrine of creation requires a relational view of the human person. It is not simply a relation with other human beings which Gunton is advocating, but a relatedness-in-otherness with the otherness being on one level vertical and on a second level horizontal. The otherness on the vertical level is the human creature's relation with the Creator which is redeemed through Christ in the Spirit. The human creature is created in time and space which is given to it by the Creator, and the human creature is related to the Creator because its very existence is contingent on the free will action of the Creator. The horizontal level for Gunton is the relation between human persons and the created order. Being created in the "image of God" includes the idea that human persons are *persons constituted* by relationships with other human beings and a relatedness to the created order. It is through the various relations between families, friends, acquaintances, and the created order where the "image of God" is recognized: "we are placed on earth to join in mutually loving relations with those whom God gives us to be loved by and to love through the finite time he grants." [10] In this scheme, the human person is constituted by relation because the incarnated Son's personhood is constituted by His eternal relation with the Father. Therefore, the human person is grounded and constituted by mutual relations, albeit in a created and finite manner.

In order to complete the notion of personhood as otherness-in-relation, John MacMurray and John D. Zizioulas can enlighten the discourse.

b. John Macmurray on Personhood

John Macmurray presented two lectures at the Gifford Lectures during the Spring of 1953 and 1954. In the two lectures, Macmurray

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[9] Ibid., 101.

[10] Colin E. Gunton, *The Christian Faith—An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 46.

expounded on what it is to be a "person." Though difficult to do justice to Macmurray's thought, a brief examination will assist with our definition of personhood as otherness-in-relation. The foundation of Macmurray's proposal is a rejection of the Enlightenment's dualism mainly because the "person" is lost to the self, or in Macmurray's usage, lost to the subject. It is the self as subject, as an "I think" which separates the person from the world in which the person lives. Basically, Macmurray's position is that in order for a philosophy to be coherent and relevant, it must have some correspondence to experience, but dualism prefers "thought" or reason over and against experience. Experience does not mean simply the five senses, but the activity of the person within the world in which he/she lives; the world where "person" takes shape.

Simply stated, Macmurray finds that Kant is the radical departure for philosophy, and that all succeeding philosophies are basically grounded in Kantian philosophy. Even though this is an extravagant or even an overstated claim, Macmurray is only using Kant as the pivotal point in philosophy because he also finds that Descartes' famous *Cogito ergo sum*—"I think, therefore I am"—provides the foundation for Kant. Macmurray believes that Descartes' "*cogito*" is a mistake because it places the theoretical above and over experience, or over the practical. Because of the "*cogito*" takes precedence as the starting point of philosophy in Kant, by way of Descartes, a philosophy of individualism developed. Macmurray explains that,

> For thought is inherently private; and any philosophy which takes its stand on the primacy of thought, which defines the Self as the Thinker, is committed formally to an extreme logical individualism. It is necessarily egocentric.[11]

He then shifts the trajectory of the metaphysical dualism of immaterial/material to a dualism of the theoretical against the practical:

> It is that any philosophy which takes the 'Cogito' as its starting point and centre of reference institutes a formal dualism of theory and practice; and that this dualism makes it formally impossible to give any account, and indeed to

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[11] John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1991), 71.

conceive the possibility of persons in relation, whether the relation be theoretical—as knowledge, or practical—as co-operation. [12]

In this assessment of Descartes' "*cogito*" as a dualism of practical/theoretical, the theoretical is given priority over against the practical so that Macmurray is able to conclude that Descartes' "*cogito*" results in a challenge to authority and results in a declaration of autonomy. In sum, Macmurray's argument is that Descartes' autonomous philosophy is based on doubt; and for Macmurray, "The method of doubt is the rejection of authority in operation."[13] In other words, "doubt" rejects the authority which is outside of the self and denies the activity of the other.

By invoking concepts such as authority, the other, and autonomy, Macmurray lays the groundwork for the development of his view of personhood in relational terms. He continues to explain that Descartes' "*cogito*" simply leads to a tension between existence and non-existence. That is, Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* means that "I am an agent, and my act is thinking." [14] If Descartes is correct, then our being is grounded in thinking, which is non-existence. The reason is that

> to exist is to be part of the world. Thinking, however, in non-causal; it 'moves nothing' as Aristotle said. If it is an activity, it is an activity which is without effect in the realm of existence. [15]

There must be a causal relation to the material world for the person to exist; it cannot be grounded in mere theoretical thought processes. What Descartes' "*cogito*" proved is that the "I" exists; instead he should have proved that "I exist" as a mind and body. Macmurray does not want the person to exist within itself, as an "I"; he wants a personhood that is grounded in relation to the other, a relation which begins with the Uncreated Other, and also encompasses the created other. He is concerned that the person does not become grounded in the realm of the non-existent thought of "*I think*."

Once it is determined by Macmurray that the self cannot be defined by simple mental processes—a denial of both Descartes and

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[12] Ibid., 73.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 80.
[15] Ibid.

Kant—he defines the "self" as an agent. As noted above, without a causal relation in the world, the self does not exist: as only a mental process it has no effect on the other. The "other" for Macmurray, at least at this point, is simply a term meaning something "other" which exists. Therefore, the only way for the self to know its own existence, and the existence of others, is by participating in existence with others. Macmurray states that the self as agent is an active self, which basically means and necessitates a dynamic relation with others. The basic thesis regarding the self is that "the Self is constituted by its relation to the Other; that it has its being in its relationship; and that this relationship is necessarily personal." [16] Since the self is constituted as an agent in relation to the other—because that is where activity happens—Macmurray says that "persons, therefore, are constituted by their mutual relation to one another." [17] In this way, a person is not an isolated self. To be a person is to be in relation with another person; there must be a participation in existence. That is, construing the person as a "thinker" results in an isolated self-as-subject; and the "thinker" is non-existence. The "self-as-agent" is necessarily in relation to the "other," and it must be personal because the self-as-agent is a human person.

Macmurray is not a Christian theologian, but his position is that "to be a person is to be in communication with the Other." [18] His relational view of the person results in the idea that "the intention to maintain community universally has to be expressed symbolically in the idea of a personal Other to which we are all related." [19] For our

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[16] John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1970), 17.

[17] Ibid., 24.

[18] Ibid.

[19] John Aves, "Persons in Relation: John Macmurray," in *Persons, Divine and Human: King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 128. Aves explains that Macmurray does not like the traditional proofs for God's existence because they fall under the category of the "I think," which cannot prove existence. "But for Macmurray, God the Other is known in the act of existence; we discover our freedom in relationship with others.": in Aves, 129. Aves further explains that this activity, or act of existence, is Macmurray's way to eliminate the spirit/matter, immaterial/material dualism because it is the act of God in the world in which we participate that our conception of reality should take place.

purposes, it is both the relational and the community language which moves Macmurray from a philosophical trajectory to a theological one.

c. John D. Zizioulas on Personhood

John D. Zizioulas defines "personhood" in relational and communal terms. Zizioulas begins by asking "what does it mean that someone *is* rather than *has* a person?"[20] Zizioulas does not want the concept of "person" to be grounded in an individual identity which connotes absolute "being" apart from other "beings." Zizioulas' goal is to demonstrate that "person" is grounded in patristic theology and ecclesiology:

> The person both as a concept and as a living reality is purely the product of patristic thought. Without this, the deepest meaning of personhood can neither be grasped nor justified.[21]

Zizioulas believes that the question of "person" is ontological, and therefore it should be based on what he considers the basic question of humankind: "Who am I?" This simple question has a rather large burden in Zizioulas' program, because it is with this question that he lays the foundation for "person" to be defined in relational terms. In the question, "who am I?" the interrogative "who" locates the questioner in the world where he/she is in the face of other beings. The "I" is a need for particularity over and against the other—a need for otherness. The "am" is just as important in that it seeks an answer to the question of existence. So, an ontology of personhood must adequately address all three aspects of "who, am, I," especially the particularity of the "I" in relation to the interrogative (i.e., "who") and the "to be" verb.

Zizioulas states that "personal ontology is an assertion of the metaphysics of particularity."[22] The problem is that the "I" seeks an

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[20] John D. Zizioulas, "On Being a Person. Towards an Ontology of Personhood," in *Persons, Divine, and Human: King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 33.

[21] John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion—Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2004), 27.

[22] Zizioulas, "On Being a Person. Towards an Ontology of Personhood," in *Being as Communion*, 35.

eternal state of being; it wants to transcend to the universal level. Based on Platonic metaphysics, there is not any mechanism which allows for continuation of the particular, and in turn, no grounds for personhood. If personhood exists in the universal "being," then the particular is loss. In other words, for ancient Greeks "particularity is not ontologically absolute; the many are always ontologically derivative, not causative."[23] The particular will pass away, but the universal which is shared by the many continues.[24]

Zizioulas is searching for a mechanism that will allow the particular to be the ground of the person instead of it being grounded in a shared universal concept of being. To this end, he theorizes that for particularity to have ontological priority, it is necessary to assume that "being" is caused. If in Platonic and Aristotelian thought the world is eternal and the cause of being, then the particular cannot be the ontologically primary cause of being. In other words, the particular is causative and not derivative. Instead of the particular existing as a participant in the universal being, the particular is caused: or in the theological sense, created by particularity.

In the creation account in Genesis, the ground of human existence is in the *causation* by God, but also grounded in the *particularity* of Adam. Not as a participant in God's or Adam's being, but in a causal relationship between the creator and created. At this point, this does not lead to full "personhood"—if "person" includes the constitutive component of continuity of "human existence." Adam does not complete the picture of personal ontology—human existence—because in his death, Adam proved that he does not contain or maintain the totality of human nature in himself. That is, when Adam died, human nature and existence continued.[25]

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23 Ibid., 36.

24 Zizioulas explains that the particular person does not survive in Greek ontology; both in Plato and Aristotle. Even Aristotle's particularity answered the 'who' question with universal categories; categories which are shared with other things, or beings. Again, Zizioulas: "participation in being is a condition for the particular's being as much for Aristotle as it is for his master Plato." See "On Being a Person," 36–37.

25 From Platonic to Aristotelian philosophy, the basic problem for Zizioulas is that there is not a continuation for the person; this renders true ontology of the person impossible. For Zizioulas, this is seen in Plato's idea of reincarnation in

[*Footnote continued on next page …*]

Once Zizioulas has secured the grounds for "being" in the particular and then demonstrates the insufficiency of grounding "person" in Adam, he turns to God. By turning to God, he always has in mind the triune God as the eternal relations between the Father, Son, and Spirit. Zizioulas states that "in God it is possible for the particular to be ontologically ultimate because relationship is permanent and unbreakable."[26] Since in the persons of the Father, Son, and Spirit, the totality of the divine nature is always present; and always being present, the particularity that is located within each of the trinitarian persons are the bearers of the totality of the divine nature, thereby eliminating the paradox between the "one" and the "many." Since the relations between the three persons are permanent and unbreakable, and always present, Zizioulas argues that relationship should be introduced into the substance itself, so that "being" can be relational.[27]

Since "being" is grounded in the particularity of the triune persons, Zizioulas gives ontological priority to the "person" over substance. For Zizioulas, God "exists" on account of a person, the person of the Father; and not on account of an ontologically prior substance. The reason is simple, if the substance is the ground of existence, then freedom is lost because existence becomes "necessary"; freedom is based on ontological existence and not personal. So instead of giving priority to the substance by viewing God's personhood as derived from an "uncreated" substance, God's ontological freedom lies "in His personal existence, that is, in the 'mode of existence' by which He subsists as divine nature."[28] This is what gives man his hope of becoming an authentic person. This means that the Father freely communes, or is in communion with the

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which the person is not eternally connected with the material body, that is, the 'substance' (*ousia*) of man. The difference for Aristotle is that there is no permanence or eternality at all, because the individual which is form and matter simply ceases to exist at death.

[26] Zizioulas, "On Being a Person. Towards an Ontology of Personhood," 41.

[27] Shults explains that philosophers were already viewing 'relation' as a metaphysical category. Shults says, "notice that Kant explicitly makes "substance and accident" a subcategory of Category III, "Of Relation." See F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology—After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 21.

[28] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 44.

Son and the Spirit; it is this free communion, which is an ecstatic existence and is the ground of the Father's freedom, and thereby, His personhood.

This ontological expression is played out in love: "God is love" for Zizioulas and "signifies that God 'subsists' as Trinity, that is, as person and not as substance."[29] There is no ontological necessity in God, but freedom: "love is identified with ontological freedom."[30] Since, God's existence is not based on ontological necessity, God has seen fit to reveal Himself as the origin of all ontological reality. In summary, since the relationship is between particulars (and the ontology of personhood is based on the particular and relationship), the particular is raised to the level of ontological primacy,

> it emerges as being itself without depending for its identity on qualities borrowed from nature and thus applicable also to other beings, but solely on a relationship in which it constitutes an indispensable ontological ingredient, since it is inconceivable for the rest of beings to be outside a relationship with it.[31]

Since "person" is grounded in the reality of the Trinitarian persons, Zizioulas contends that Christology fulfills the human drive to personhood.

Because Christology is from above, human personhood finds its subsistence in the Father-Son relationship. The hypostatic union becomes crucial, instead of the *communication idiomatum*; the natures *are* because they are particularized in one person. What Zizioulas means is that in Christ the two natures (divine and human) give their qualities to the identity without having the identity rely on the natures in an ontological primary manner; the cause of being is located in the particular and not the general.

The human person realizes their full potential as a "person" in the new-birth because a new identity is received based on the relationship of the eternal Father and Son through and in the Spirit. This new way of identification is seen as salvation; which is the means for humanity being to become a "person" through the love of God; a person who is in a communication of love with God as a free loving *hypostasis*.

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[29] Ibid., 46.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Zizioulas, "On Being a Person. Towards an Ontology of Personhood," 41.

According to Zizioulas, the Greek Patristic Fathers understood this as *theosis*, which should be interpreted as participating in God's personal existence, not his essence. For the human person, the Greek Patristic Fathers understood basically two "modes of existence": a hypostasis of biological existence and one of ecclesial existence. The biological existence is a reliance on the body to determine the person; and simply put, this leads to an individualism which is a mask that hides the true person. This existence ultimately leads to the death of the person as this existence is not out of freedom but out of a natural and ontological necessity.[32] But the *hypostasis* of ecclesial existence is "constituted by the new birth of man, by baptism."[33] In order to avoid the "createdness," that is, the ontological necessity, the person must be born "anew" or "from above."

Christ's *hypostasis* is identified in His relationship with the Father; he is the eternal Son of God. It is not a biological existence, because it would be grounded in an ontological necessity and not freedom. So, it is the *hypostasis* of Christ as grounded in the free and loving relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit which is the ground for "personhood."

d. Concluding Personhood and the Human Creature

Based on our survey of Macmurray and Zizoulas, several key elements come to light which have an impact on our understanding of God's relation with His creation. Based on the model of personhood that I have chosen to adopt, God is a relational being. His divine substance is constituted by the eternal relations between the Father, Son, and Spirit. There is not an ontological priority given to the substance: in the stupendous words of Gregory of Nazianzus,

> no sooner do I conceive of the One
> than I am illumined by the Splendour of the Three;

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[32] The necessity is that the "passion" which preceded the conception of the individual created an ontological necessity which also dictates laws; the ontological freedom is lost – there is a sense of createdness which is another way to say "necessity of existence." In other words, the natural substance has ontological priority over the "person."

[33] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion—Studies in Personhood and the Church*, 53.

no sooner do I distinguish Them
than I am carried back to the One.[34]

God *relates* to His creatures, especially His human creatures, in a relational and personal way. The relation has concrete existence from within our creaturely existence in the living Christ as mediated by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the divine Person who is the agent of communion, in the divine life of the Godhead, and also in the new Community. This community is the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Spirit.

Now we will turn to the relational model to see how God relates to His people within the new community known as the Church. It is within God's activity through Christ in the Church where God begins to wrestle with His people's failures.

B. Ontological Origins: Trinitarian Foundations of the Church

1. Origin of the Church in the Grace of the Triune God

The people of God, as the church of Jesus Christ, discover its very being in the grace of God; the church's "being" does not unfold apart from the act of God. The community of Christ has its origin and existence as a divine fiat which is grounded in the existence and act of the triune God. The church is not merely an assembly of believers who have decided to meet because of a like-minded belief in Jesus Christ; it is called out by the Father through His Word and empowered by the Holy Spirit to respond to the Father's call. The "church" is the community of hearers of God's call to salvation that can become the doers or responders of the Word. Michael Horton explains it as follows:

> Therefore, the visible church is not composed only of the regenerate; it is the covenant community where the Spirit brings to repentance and faith "those who are near" (i.e., "you and your children") and "all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39).[35]

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[34] Gregory Nazianzen, "Select Orations of Saint Gregory Nazianzen: Oration 40.41," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York,: The Christian Literature Company, 1894), 375.

[35] Michael Scott Horton, *The Christian Faith—A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 845.

This means that the Church is not simply an historical organization, or an assembly based on notions of hierarchy. The activity of redemption is developed through the covenant that was initiated by God Himself as witnessed in scripture. The covenant between the Father and the Son to redeem creation eternally exists and is the same covenant which establishes the "community" from the foundation of the world. The community of the saints is an eschatological covenantal community that the Holy Spirit is constituting in the "now" and is also is moving towards the future; that is, the "not yet" has a certain promise in anticipation of the *parousia* at the *eschaton*.

Stanley Grenz says, "Because the coming together of believers in mutual covenant constitutes the church, it is the covenant community of individuals."[36] Instead of a collection of individuals who exist in an autonomous fashion, the church is a community of persons-in-relation; they are in relation to the triune God and then in relation to fellow believers. The church is a community that exists as an institution, but an institution that has its origin and continual existence in the historical reality of Christ and His continual presence as mediated by the Holy Spirit. As Otto Weber states: "the Community lives by the will of its Lord which essentially establishes it and determines its structure."[37]

The church is not a plurality, but it is a unity. The scripture uses three metaphors to reveal the nature of the church, which also reveals the intimate relation between the triune life of God and the church:

1. **The People of God,**
2. **The Body of Christ, and**
3. **The Temple of the Spirit.**

According to Berkouwer, "Each image points in the same direction, toward the one mystery of the Church, the origin of which is the love and mercy of God." [38] As believers are called by God into the

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[36] Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

[37] Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans., Darrell L. Guder, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 513.

[38] G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1976), 77.

communion of the saints, they are constituted as true persons because their personhood is grounded in the grace of God. The Holy Spirit liberates the individual from the death of unrealized personhood into a realized personhood which brings life through the redemption won by Christ. It is through proper relations with the Creator that constitutes the church without eliminating the individual. The individual is liberated to be the other in relation; but one that is constituted by the proper relation that is won by Christ and actualized when He pours out His Holy Spirit upon us.

There may be a logical priority given to the church, but the ontological priority is given to the act of the triune God. The Father wills the church into existence, and His Son and Spirit complete His will, in absolutely free obedience and cooperation. The Son completes the Father's will in the incarnation by being the person in whom the union between the Creator and creation is realized. The Holy Spirit opens up creation to accept the union of the Son: "He makes the incorporation of creation in the Son possible by enabling creation to open to its incorporation in the Son."[39] The church is constituted by the believers, but the believer(s) is (are) constituted by the church; this paradox is only resolved in that both are actually constituted by the agency of the Holy Spirit. It is the pneumatological aspect of God's divine activity which ensures that the unity does not overshadow the individual. The church is only a community due to what it receives from the Father through His Word, that is, it receives the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit creates, perfects, and ultimately constitutes the community towards empowerment, witness, worship, and fellowship, all in anticipation of the final reconciliation with God. In order to complete the relational aspect of the community within the divine life of God, it is necessary to briefly examine the three metaphors for the church in relation to the Father, Son, and Spirit.

2. Community as the People of God: The Elected Church

As stated above, the Triune life of God is the communion in which the church participates, and it is a participation which is initiated by God Himself. It is God who called creation into existence; called forth Adam; called out Abraham; and elected Jesus Christ by

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[39] John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Douglas H. Knight (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 132.

whom He finally elected us *in* Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:3–5). Calvin states, "But if we are elected in him, we cannot find the certainty of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we look at him apart from the Son."[40] Since it is the agency of the Holy Spirit to mediate the presence of the Son to the community, elected believers are always in fellowship with the community. The elected person is constituted by their new relation; a new person results from our earlier concept of persons-in-relation. The Holy Spirit constitutes the elected person to a new relationship in Jesus Christ, and they develop further through the variegated networks of relationships in the community of faith. It is through the electing grace of God that the church's ontological *being* is to be found as its source and origin.

Otto Weber says, "To be elect means to be elect in and with the Community."[41] The relational model of personhood indicates that the born again Christian is only a new person as he/she participates in the divine election which radiates from the economic life of God. In other words, to be part of the elect means a proper response to the electing call of the Father, an election mediated by and through the Son, and finally actualized by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit as the eschatological agent of perfection and communion is also the bond of love between the Father and the Son; He is the person who completes the eternal and absolute love between the members of the Trinity.

This same Holy Spirit also brings believers into communion, so that instead of an individual autonomous existence, the individual is now liberated into a new existence as a person constituted by otherness-in-relation. The Father's will to elect takes place *in* Christ; that is, God has chosen us to be "one *in* Christ," instead of merely believing or worshipping *one* Christ. Being *in* Christ is liberation from a non-existent life that will eventually lead to death into a liberated existence of eternal life *in* Christ. The liberation is in the election of God towards an existence of communion, that is, a proper otherness-in-relation existence with God, with others, *in* Christ.

Instead of predestination being viewed in a deterministic fashion, or as a coercive act that is planned in the past, election is construed as

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[40] Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans., Henry Beveridge, 4 vols., vol. III (1581), III.24.5.

[41] Weber, 511.

a calling by the Holy Spirit into a new relation with Christ and in Christ. Creation is liberated from personal non-existence to a proper personal existence of belonging to Christ's community. For Gunton, "The Spirit respects our liberty, because he is not an internal, immanent causality forcing us into the Church, but a personal "other" coming alongside us to set us free for others, just as the Spirit was alongside Jesus in his temptation in the wilderness."[42] The community is the elected community of individuals who are constituted by their relations-in-communion with the Triune God, with others.

3. Body of Christ: Institution or Instituted

The second metaphor for the church is the Body of Christ. This metaphor also denotes unity, but it is a unity which begins with Christ. The church as the body of Christ is not simply an institution, but it is instituted by its relationship to Jesus Christ as mediated by the Holy Spirit. The church is an institution—not by its own initiative—as it was instituted in and by Christ who is ever present. It is Christ's continual presence which prevents the church from becoming another earthly, humanly created organization, and it is a continual institution that was instituted by Christ. Berkouwer puts it this way,

> It can be assumed that the Church as the body of Christ stands in the full light of unity, concord, and fellowship; and all opposition, rivalry, and conflict are out of the question on account of the relatedness of the one body and all its members to Him, Who is the Head of the body, the Church.[43]

As an institution, the church is a unitary body of many members who are in relations with each other. The church as the body of Christ submits itself to the living Christ's rule; this rule of Christ eliminates opposition and conflicts because the Holy Spirit is producing unity-in-relation. Christ is the head of the body, so the body receives its life and personal existence from being *in* relation with Christ, a relation that began by the will of the Father and is actualized by the Holy Spirit.

The body of Christ is not the literal body of Christ, or the replacement for the body of the Christ while he is absent. The church is only the body of Christ when church members are in fellowship

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[42] Colin E. Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians—Selected Essays, 1972–1995* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), 201.

[43] Berkouwer, 80. Cf. Col. 1:18.

with Christ and each other. That fellowship is grounded in the agency and activity of the Holy Spirit by faith. Panneberg says that "the church is a fellowship of believers only on the basis of the participation of each individual in the one Lord."[44] Even though Pannenberg's Lutheran affiliation moves him to rely on the sacraments as a means to participate in the one Lord, his theology is derived systematically. The one God in Christ by the Holy Spirit inaugurates and sustains the church. The participation is one that includes the sacraments, but also includes worship and fellowship; a life that is lived on this earth in relation to and for the other.

Fellowship is not limited to a local or global term. Fellowship in Christ, as His body, transcends notions of visible and invisible, and transcends the local and global terminologies in reference to the community. Fellowship with Christ is just that: fellowship with Christ is such that the local church is not the entirety of the body of Christ, for that fellowship is global and even extends to heaven. Nor does the global community have an ontological priority over the local church. Where the Holy Spirit gathers people who meet, worship, and proclaim in the name of Jesus there is *the* church of God—for there the Father has gathered His people to be the body of Christ. The local church and other churches are united as they independently meet in Christ's name and declare that He is the head of the Church.

This paper is not concerned with church government—or the sacramental vs. the non-sacramental churches—but rather our focus is that the body of Christ is grounded in the unity of the triune life of God. The body of Christ is a unity because of its constitution by the Holy Spirit as a community-in-relations. Whether the sacramental or non-sacramental traditions be true, we leave that to God.

This metaphor of "body of Christ" for the church depicts the redemptive nature of Christ's work and not merely a symbol pertaining to a gathering of like-minded individuals. Soteriologically speaking, the metaphor "people of God" relates to God's calling and electing, the "body of Christ" relates to the redemptive work of Christ. It is the "body" that explains the redemptive work of Christ as forming a new community through redeemed relations. The metaphor

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44 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley, 3 vols., vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 102.

"body of Christ" serves as a metaphor of redemption through Christ, but it is not *the sole* metaphor for the church. Because God is a perfect union of persons, all three metaphors are necessary to complete the picture of God's people.[45]

4. Temple of the Spirit: Church Constituted

There is an order in the economic presentation of redemption, in that the origin is in the will of the Father; then moves to the willing obedience of the Son; and finally, is perfected by the free cooperation of the Holy Spirit. The church as the "people of God" and the "body of Christ" realizes her concreteness by the indwelling Holy Spirit who constitutes the church as the "temple of the Spirit." The individual believers are indwelled by the Holy Spirit. As believers come together under the urging of the Holy Spirit, the community becomes the "temple of the Spirit." The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of communion, and this is realized in the relations between the members as the presence of the living Christ given to the church. Pannenberg says,

> This immediacy that Christians experience as the work of the Spirit characterizes faith in Jesus, yet not just in the sense of knowledge of Jesus, but as the immediacy of a personal relationship. Believers have immediacy to Jesus because all have individual fellowship with Jesus in faith.[46]

When the immediacy is experienced as a gathering and empowering by the Holy Spirit, which gives believers the freedom to maintain their faith in Jesus Christ, there takes place a liberation from sin to a new and restored relationship with the Creator in Jesus Christ.

This liberation from sin is a liberation from non-existence personhood; in a manner of speaking, a liberation from a personhood grounded in an autonomous existence. The Holy Spirit liberates believers to have *fellowship* with Christ through His body or in the "body of Christ"—the church. It is not the clergy or any other office that is the unity of fellowship, but the Holy Spirit mediating the Son's presence to the church.

The church must guard against becoming an institution, which is defined as having independent existence which gives logical priority to the individuals; the church must maintain a proper pneumatology

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[45] I have decided to assume the metaphor "Bride of Christ" is contained in or derived from the metaphor "Body of Christ."

[46] Ibid., 124.

which allows for a relational aspect. The church as a community "is constituted by its members by virtue of their free relatedness to each other."[47] The local church, or institution, cannot lord itself over the members, because if "relation" is an ontological category, then the church is constituted by the relations brought about by the Holy Spirit. The individual persons are also constituted by the relations which take shape in the community—the "temple of the Spirit." So, both the community and the individual can be described as being a "temple of the Spirit" in such a manner that both have their ontological existence located in the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Based on the relational model of personhood, the church or the community is only what it is because of the will of the Father, the redemption of the Son, and the perfecting agency of the Holy Spirit. The new community may resemble social norms, current organizational methods, or practices of the non-Christian community. But the church should not be judged by these standards, nor will the church completely be at ease with the individualistic autonomous ontology of these systems, for "even when it is completely incorporated, it is nevertheless completely separate because of the Holy Spirit."[48] The relational model adopted here allows room for God to wrestle on a personal level with His people. The personal triune God deals with the struggles of His people in a personal and dynamic manner in the core of our existence.

C. Ontological Recovery: Restoration of Personhood through Relations

From the previous ontological and existential discussions, we now turn to the more practical side of how God is involved, relates, and helps His people in their failures.

1. Discipline through Relational Isolation: The Loss of the Person

At the end of the Fall in Genesis, God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden. This is the first indication of how God interacts with His people during their failures. Adam and Eve severed the free relation that God established, thereby ending their true personhood;

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[47] Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians—Selected Essays, 1972–1995*, 198.

[48] Weber, 523.

that is, their intimate and ontological status of being constituted as persons-in-relation with God. Athanasius describes the fall as follows:

> For if, out of a former normal state of non-existence, they were called into being by the Presence and loving-kindness of the Word, it followed naturally that when men were bereft of the knowledge of God and were turned back to what was not (for what is evil is not, but what is good is), they should, since they derive their being from God who IS, be everlastingly bereft even of being;[49]

Athanasius does not view the Fall as a moral or epistemological privation, for there is an ontological impact in the Fall. Since Adam and Eve did not instantly die, something else took place. Athanasius states they were deprived of knowledge of God; which is not an epistemological judgment but Athanasius' way of expressing a loss of their "relationship" with God. What died was the full "person," when personhood is defined according to the relational model that we have adopted in this paper. God elected and called forth creation to be in relation to Himself, and when the human creature responded with a "no" to God's "Yes," God allowed the relationship to be severed. But the severed relationship is an eschatological severing, for God's ultimate goal for creation is to be in relation with Him. But more on this later. For now the question is: how does the lesson from the Fall help us identify the strategy that God enacts to deal with His people's failure?

The Law of Moses is replete with commands for expelling from the Israelite community, one who is found ritually unclean as defined in the Law (Gen. 17:14; Exod. 12:15, 19; 30:33; Lev. 13:46; Num. 5:1–4; 12:14; 31:19, etc.). The purpose of the temporary excommunication is to maintain the covenantal status between God and His people by removing the thing (or in this case, the person) that is causing the disruption. Without going into a detailed exegesis of the Mosaic Law, or the historiographical issues of interpretation and use of the Pentateuch, very few would argue against the idea that God uses a form of excommunication within the Law. Throughout the history of Israel, the Old Testament indicates that God used other

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[49] Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans., Archibald T. Robertson, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. IV (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), par. 5.

nations—especially the Assyrians, Babylonians, and the Persians—to effectively scatter His people. Since Israel as a community is the people of God, this scattering of Israel serves as an ontological disruption of the relationship between God and His people. Israel no longer existed in a proper relationship with God, thereby losing their proper ontological personhood status; in essence, they were dying. God dealt with His community by allowing them to experience a lack of true humanity—a lack of full personhood—if being a true human is defined by our model of persons-in-relation with the triune God.

If God dealt with His people using excommunication, or severing of the relation, we would expect to see the same theological practice in the New Testament. It does appear that in the new community of faith—the church—that God does indeed deal with His people through types of excommunication and a breakdown of relations; we see these as changes in the ontological status of the believer or the community. A few examples from the scriptures demonstrate this. Later, we will review the purpose for severing the relation, thereby, changing the ontological status of the person or community.

a. Matthew 18:17 "treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

Jesus instructs his followers in the method of church discipline that will take place in the new community. One commentator says that, "to treat a person as a 'pagan or a tax collector' means to treat him or her as unredeemed and outside the Christian community."[50] Treating this person as unredeemed means that he/she has lost the true ontological status that comes with being-in-relation with God through the body of Jesus Christ, a status constituted by the Spirit. Not only has the person's status changed, but the relations are no longer intact; the person is no longer orientated to God through Jesus Christ.

b. 1 Corinthians 5:1–5 "hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed"

In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul engages in an issue of grave importance to the life of the community. Without going into detail regarding the theories behind the identity of the person, the

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[50] Craig Blomberg, *Matthew, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 2001), 279.

central idea for our purposes is the relaxed nature of the church itself. Paul says that instead of being horrified, the Corinthian church is actually "proud." Gordon Fee says, "Whatever the actual relationship of their pride to the incest, it has blinded them both to the fallen brother's true condition and to their own."[51] The true condition of the community is an impaired relationship with their Creator, and in turn with themselves. The prideful state of the community indicates their struggles with their new-found liberty in Christ and their old conduct as a member of the Corinthian community. The theology of Paul is consistent with the theology of the Old Testament scriptures in that the new community deals with struggles through expulsion. Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 5:2, 4–5, 7, and 13 that the church should expel the immoral person. The theological connection for Paul is found in verse 5:13: "Expel the wicked man from among you." Paul connects Deuteronomy to the current situation. Paul also tells his congregation that when they are assembled in the "name of the Lord" that the "power of the Lord is present," and this is the time when this person is to be handed over to Satan. By invoking the "name of the Lord," Paul is locating the authority of excommunication in Jesus Christ Himself. Based on our relational model, the community's personhood is affected by the impaired relationship which the sin of the individual has created. It is not only the sin itself, but the community's lack of concern which has changed its relational orientation towards the teaching of Christ. The Holy Spirit is no longer ruling the community. Rather, outside forces are ruling the community, which if allowed to continue will eventually damage the community as a whole. Collins says that "the purity of the community is Paul's primary concern. Paul urged the community to act as he did because it was the temple of God."[52] By expelling the individual, the ontological orientation has changed; the individual has lost his true self, because his personhood as otherness-in-relation has changed in relation to God, to Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, and also in relation to the local church.

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[51] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 202.

[52] Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, *Sacra Pagina Series* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 208.

c. Titus 3:10 "Do not associate with him…"

In this passage, instead of the usual banishments due to an egregious sin, the attitude of the person is the impetus for Paul's exhortation. Paul lists a series of offenses (foolish controversies, genealogies, arguments and quarrels about the law) prior to his command of excommunication as the reason for his pronouncement. These problems are not of a sexual nature or egregious sins obvious even to pagan communities. For Paul, these heretics or separatists are false teachers who are forming "dissident groups, thus dividing the body of Christ."[53] Paul included instructions that the church should give the individual repeated warnings as an indication that the community is involved in the problem. The problem is not simply an individualistic inner struggle. No, the entire community is involved due to the relational make-up of the body of Christ, even to the ontological level which is at the core of Christians' personhood. So, in keeping with the teachings from the Old Testament, and the teaching on discipline from Christ himself, Paul follows the same theological trajectory by injecting excommunication. Again, God deals with the struggles of His people through relational disconnects, which in turn, changes the ontological constitution of the person.

There are other passages, such as 2 John 10 and Romans 16:17, which indicate that those who are causing division or bringing non-Christian conduct within the community should be dealt with via excommunication. Again, the purpose of excommunication is not simply for punitive justice to force a change the person's behavior. Importantly, and part of the major message of this paper, if the person does *not* change or repent, then the excommunication *changes* the person: the person is no longer living *in* the Spirit.

This means that even on a larger scale God wrestles with His people's failure through relational means, and often with an expulsion from the community of faith. We have seen at various points in Church history, from the early church councils of Nicaea to Constantinople, from Luther at Worms to the Synod of Dort, that as the church struggles with doctrine, or other failures, separation takes

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[53] John Norman Davidson Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: I Timothy, II Timothy, Titus*, ed. Henry Chadwick, *Black's New Testament Commentaries* (London: A. & C. Black, 1986), 256.

place. In other words, God, through His divine providence and absolute knowledge, allows certain types of excommunications to take place so that the relational status of the church changes, and, indeed, so the relational status of individuals change. In many cases, the change results in the loss of the true person because the onto-relation status has changed. The same is true of the community; the community is no longer the "people of God" because they have severed themselves from the presence of the living Christ by denying the urging and mediation of the Holy Spirit. This takes place when those in the community give priority to other teachings instead of grounding their authority in the true Word. So instead of allowing the community to maintain this false existence, God allows the community to continue in their choice, but their choice comes with the consequence of no longer being in a relation with Him.

Again, as we will see, the purpose of God in severing the relationship with His people, thereby changing their ontological status, is not simply punitive, it is also eschatological. God wrestles with His people through expulsion so that they can be restored back to Him in a full and complete relationship, a relationship which returns them to their true ontological being.

2. Reconciliation through Relational Recovery: Restoration of the Person

One recurring theme found within the Old Testament prophets is restoration. One of the great restoration passages in the Bible is Ezekiel 37:5: "Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life'" (NASB). God does not sever the relationship for punitive purposes alone, but as part of His eschatological goal—God's *telos* for creation is communion with Him through restoration of life and for eternal life. From Adam, to the Law and through the exile of the Israelites, God promised restoration. As any reader of the Old Testament can attest, the Psalms, Lamentations, and the Books of the Prophets offer copious examples of Israel crying to God, yearning for restoration of the relationship with Him. The Holy Spirit allowed the Israelites to experience life without God through the broken relationship, that is, an excommunication from God. That experience caused a breach in their ontological nature and creates a yearning for their true selves, a yearning which could only be fulfilled by divine action. Since God

called forth humanity *ex nihilo*, only God can recreate true humanity by restoring the persons-in-relation—a proper relation with *the* Other—with God in Christ.

The same is true in the new community—the church as the body of Christ—where expulsion or excommunication takes place in order to restore the individual and the community. In the passages listed above, there is a sense that the purpose of the punishment is restoration. We see that in Matthew 18:17, Jesus' command to treat the individual as a tax collector "remains rehabilitative rather than retributive in design."[54] Also, notice the eschatological tone of Paul's reason for expelling the sinful individual: "so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5). Theologically speaking, Paul is instructing the church to excommunicate the person so that the "flesh" can give way to the "spirit." Ontologically, that person who is out of relationship with God and headed for destruction is being eliminated; but a new person is being re-created in the Spirit by returning to a proper relationship with God through His community.[55]

Based on the ontology of relation model of this paper, God excommunicates the person or the community, so that through the change in ontology, that is, change in the relations, the person or community will recognize their new, but deadly, nature. Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15 that the purpose of disassociation with the disobedient person is

> in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

The person whose nature has changed, or whose personhood has changed from life to death, will hopefully regain their connection with the urgings of the Holy Spirit and return back to the community of

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[54] Blomberg, 279.

[55] Raymond F. Collins says, "'Flesh' (*sarx*) and 'spirit' (*pneuma*) are among the more important of Paul's anthropological terms but these terms do not refer to parts of a human being as they would in a Hellenistic anthropology. Rather they refer to aspects or orientations of a person or community. Paul's anthropological dualism is not philosophical; it is soteriological…. Paul's perspective is that of the community." Collins, *First Corinthians*, *Sacra Pagina Series* (1999), 213.

faith. God will restore that person (or that community) by His Holy Spirit who is continually calling out to His lost people.

Conclusion

When the church struggles with failure, God wrestles with those failures by suffering the loss of the relationship, with the eschatological emphasis—and hope—of a complete and restored people. God continues to struggle with the failure of His human creatures by maintaining an ontological and epistemological distance—a hiddenness—so that His creatures can realize their lack of true life and respond to God's "Yes." God continues to pour out His Spirit through His Son on creation in order to redeem it from an existence which is really non-existence, a non-existence due to its improper relation with the Father, Son, and Spirit. In this way, God has expelled the entire creation, but with an eschatological view toward redemption and restoration of the true life which is creation's intended destiny. The church is the community of faith where we see the expression of the eschatological anticipation of Christ's Lordship. The Holy Spirit is the agent who is bringing about this communion, this perfection of creation as it returns to the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit to a state of a perfected relationship with God. God wrestles with His people by sending the Holy Spirit as a down payment in anticipation of future glory with Christ. Humaniy's "No," becomes God's "Yes" through the death of the old ontology and the renewal towards the new ontology of being-in-communion, a communion with the perfect communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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