




CLARIFYING OUR THEOLOGICAL VISION



An essay by Dr. Gary Deddo
(Introduction by Dr. Joseph Tkach)
Grace Communion International
Educational Strategy Task Force

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CLARIFYING OUR THEOLOGICAL VISION: INTRODUCTION

GCI'S JOURNEY OF THEOLOGICAL RENEWAL

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In GCI USA, our theme for 2017 is *theological renewal*—a continuation of the amazing journey God has led us on for several years. Those of us who have been members since the early 90s (or longer) have lived the journey, which began with the transformation of our doctrines. That transformation began with a new understanding of the nature of the covenant of grace that God, in Christ, has with all humanity, and how that covenant relates to the provisional Law of Moses and to what Scripture refers to as an “old covenant” and a “new covenant.” Recognizing that Jesus fulfilled the covenant on our behalf (as grace and truth personified), gave us a clearer focus both doctrinally and theologically, with the result being the transformation of our *Christology* (doctrine of Jesus Christ). By God’s grace we came to understand that Jesus is the center and heartbeat of God’s plan for humankind. In our minds and hearts, we became Christ-centered.

This renewal of our Christology led to asking and answering the vital question: *Who is the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ?* The answer led us to embrace a theological vision that we now refer to as *incarnational Trinitarian theology*. That theology (with “theology” meaning “knowledge of God”) is *incarnational* in that it is Christ-centered, and *Trinitarian* in that the God who Jesus reveals to us is a *Trinity* (one God in three Persons): Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We came to understand that in the fullness of time, God the Father sent his eternal Son into time and space to become human, thus assuming our human nature as the man Jesus Christ. And when Jesus ascended, he raised human nature with him in glory and, with the Father, sent the Holy Spirit to be with us in a new and deeper way. The self-revealing, sending God thus sent us both his Living Word and his Breath.

Our incarnational Trinitarian theology is rooted in Scripture (the New Testament writings in particular) and has been worked out in the writings of lead teachers in the early (patristic) church including the *Didache* (a 1st century church manual with instructions about baptizing into the one name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), and the great Creeds of the church: the Apostles Creed (2nd century), the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (4th century), the Chalcedon Definition/Creed (5th century) and the Athanasian Creed (5th century). Our theology is thus biblical and historically orthodox.

Our understanding of this theology has been greatly aided by the writings of several of the patristic fathers, including Irenaeus, Athanasius and the Cappadocians. We have also found helpful the writings of several 20th-century theologians who, in the providence of God, contributed to a resurgence of interest in this ancient Trinitarian theological vision in many parts of the body of Christ over the past six or seven decades. These theologians include Karl Barth, Thomas F. (TF) Torrance, James B. (JB) Torrance and Ray S. Anderson—men whose faith and understanding traces back to the Bible and to the early Creeds of the church. Their understanding also aligns with the central concerns of the Protestant Reformation framed largely by Martin Luther and John Calvin, especially on the matter of grace. Within GCI, we have been (and continue to be) greatly aided in our journey of theological reformation by Dr. John McKenna and Dr. Gary Deddo, who both stand in this ancient and orthodox stream of theological renewal. We are blessed to have these two theologians on our Grace Communion Seminary faculty and, as you probably know, Gary serves as President of GCS and as my special assistant.

Over the last decade or so, as we've worked out the many details of our incarnational Trinitarian theology, we've used terms in varying ways to communicate its core concepts and precepts. At times, our use of a few of these terms was imprecise, leading to minor points of confusion, particularly in matters related to the nature of the church and the Christian life. For that confusion, we apologize, and now we seek to refine our terms and concepts so that there will be consistency and clarity in our communication. Please be assured that these refinements in no way amount to changes in our core theological convictions, nor do they amount to changes in the practices that flow from them. We are simply continuing to build on the solid biblical foundation that has been laid, with Christ being its living cornerstone.

To help in the important task of clarifying and refining our theological vision, a couple of years ago I asked Dr. Deddo, on behalf of GCI and with the cooperation of Grace Communion Seminary, to assemble an *Educational Strategy Task Force*. ESTF members are Gary Deddo (chair), Russell Duke, Charles Fleming, Ted Johnston, John McLean, Mike Morrison and Greg Williams. All have advanced degrees in theology or ministry, teach at Grace Communion Seminary (GCS) and/or Ambassador College of Christian Ministry (ACCM) and hold administrative leadership roles in GCI.

As part of its ongoing work, the ESTF has identified problems with the way we currently articulate certain aspects of our theology, and so I've asked Dr. Deddo, on behalf of the ESTF, to author an essay titled *Clarifying Our Theological Vision* to help clarify our theological terms, and thus refine certain key concepts in our theological vision. The goal is greater consistency and clarity in our publications and in what we teach in our courses at GCS and ACCM. I also pray that the essay will help sharpen what we teach in our sermons and studies in our congregations.

I'm grateful for the journey God has us on and for where we now are. Have we arrived? No, our journey continues, with its ultimate destination being a new heaven and new earth in which there will be found a new Jerusalem ([Rev. 21:1-4](#), [22-23](#)). Thanks for being part of the journey, for your loyalty, patience and willingness to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Thanks also for being a faithful teacher of the glorious gospel of Jesus.

Clarifying our Theological Vision: Part 1

CLARIFYING TWO KEY TERMS: “ALL ARE INCLUDED” & “UNION WITH CHRIST”

As Dr. Tkach notes in the introduction, the goal of this essay is to clarify some of the key terms we use in communicating the wonderful truths of our incarnational Trinitarian faith. As he also notes, though we’re not making significant changes, we are providing some clarifications to help us in our ongoing journey of theological renewal.

All are included

A key understanding of our theology has to do with what God has accomplished for all humanity in and through his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. For many years, we’ve summarized that understanding with the phrase, *all are included* (and the related declaration, *You’re included*). By *all* we mean believers and non-believers, and by *included* we mean being counted among those who God, in and through Jesus, has reconciled to himself. We thus mean to say that *God has reconciled all people to himself*.

This theological declaration is based on the biblical revelation that Christ died for all and that God has loved and reconciled the world to himself ([Rom. 5:18](#); [2 Cor. 5:14](#); [John 3:16](#); [2 Cor. 5:19](#), [Heb. 2:9](#)). Jesus is “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” ([John 1:29](#)), and he is the “ransom” for all ([1 Tim 2:4, 6](#); [4:10](#); [Matt. 20:28](#)). Because this reconciliation is accomplished, and thus a present reality, God’s desire, which is fulfilled by the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit, is for all people everywhere to come to repentance and faith so they may personally experience (receive and live into) this reconciliation and so not perish ([2 Pet. 3:9](#); [Ezek. 18:23, 32](#)). Thus when we declare that *all are included* we are affirming several important truths:

- Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of all humanity
- He died to redeem all
- He has atoned for the sin of all
- Through what he did, God reconciled all people to himself
- Jesus is the mediator between God and all humanity
- He has made all his own by virtue of his redeeming work
- He is for all and against none
- He is judge of all, so that none might experience condemnation
- His saving work is done on behalf of all, and that work includes his holy and righteous responses to the Father, in the Spirit—responses characterized by repentance, faith, hope, love, praise, prayer, worship and obedience
- Jesus, in himself, is everyone’s justification and sanctification
- He is everyone’s substitute and representative
- He is everyone’s hope
- He is everyone’s life, including life eternal

- He is everyone’s Prophet, Priest and King

In all these ways, all people in all places and times have been included in God’s love and life in and through Jesus and by his Spirit. In that we rejoice, and on that basis we make our gospel declarations. But in doing so we have to be aware of some potential for confusion. We must neither say too little or too much about inclusion (reconciliation). Perhaps, at times, we’ve said too much, making inferences concerning the reconciliation of all humanity that the Bible does not support—ones that are neither logically or theologically necessarily true.

It’s about relationship, which means participation

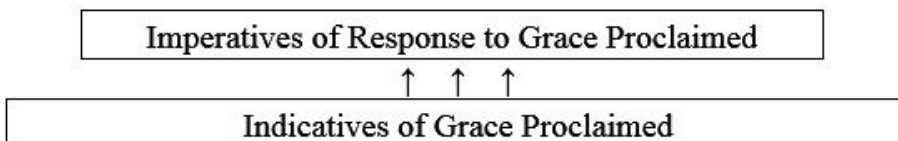
To avoid making unfounded inferences, it is important to note that when the Bible speaks about *reconciliation* (inclusion), what it is referring to is a *relationship* that God, by grace, has established in the God-man Jesus Christ between himself and all people. That relationship is *personal* in that it is established by the person of the eternal Son of God, and it involves human persons who have agency, minds, wills and bodies. This reconciliation involves all that human beings are—their whole persons. Thus this *personal relationship* calls for, invites, and even demands from those who have been included the response of participation. Personal relationship is ultimately about interaction between two persons (subjects, agents), in this case between God and his creatures.

By definition, personal relationships are *interactive*—they involve response, communication, giving and receiving. In and through Jesus, God has included all people everywhere in a particular relationship with himself for just these purposes so that what has been fulfilled for us *objectively* in Jesus by the Spirit, will then be fulfilled in us personally (*subjectively*) by the Spirit via our deliberate, purposeful participation (response) as subjects who are moral, spiritual agents. What Christ did for us, he did so that the Holy Spirit could work a response out in us.

When we understand that the person and work of Christ establishes or reestablishes a living, vital, personal relationship with all humanity, then the biblical teachings concerning inviting, admonishing, encouraging, directing, commanding and warning in regard to setting forth the fitting or appropriate response make sense. But if the gift of reconciliation (inclusion) is understood as merely a fixed principle, an abstract universal truth (like the sky is blue, or 2 + 2= 4), or as an automatic and impersonal effect brought about through a causal chain of events imposed on all, then the myriad directives in the New Testament concerning our response (participation) make no sense.

The indicatives of grace set us free to respond to the imperatives of grace

Many proclamations in the New Testament declare the truth of who God is and what he has done for us, including that he, in Christ, has reconciled all humanity to himself. These proclamations are *the indicatives of grace*, which, by their very nature, call forth and set us free for a joyful response to *the imperatives of grace* that are also defined in the New Testament. Here is a diagram showing how these indicatives and imperatives are related:



Our responses to the imperatives of grace, grounded in and thus flowing from the indicatives of grace, are made possible only because of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who continues his work in the core of our persons (our *subjectivities*) in order that we might respond freely to God and his grace with repentance, faith, hope and love.

The Holy Spirit grants us this freedom to respond (even as we hear the imperatives) by releasing us from the bonds of slavery so that our responses are a real sharing in Christ's own responses made on our behalf as our substitute and representative—our great and eternal High Priest. This indicative-imperative pattern of grace is found throughout the New Testament. For example, note Jesus' first proclamation concerning himself and his kingdom (the indicative) followed by the imperative, which defines our response:

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." ([Mark 1:14-15](#))

Note that the *imperative*, "repent and believe," is based on and made possible because of the *indicative* that "the time is fulfilled...the kingdom of God has come near." Because of who Jesus is and what he has done, people are given entrance into personal relationship with Jesus as their King and thus can respond by participating in his rule and reign.

At work here is a vitally important truth: because God loves us, he is interested in our response to him. He looks for it, notices it, even tells us the kind of response that is fitting to the relationship he has already given us by grace (through reconciliation). Moreover, by the Holy Spirit ministering to us on the basis of Christ's completed work, our Triune God has even provided all we need to make that response. We never respond autonomously, simply on our own. Instead, by the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to begin sharing in Jesus perfect responses that he makes for us as our eternal mediator or High Priest.

Avoid two errors

There are two common errors in thinking about the indicatives and imperatives of grace. The first is to regard the *indicatives* proclaimed in the New Testament as fixed, impersonal principles or abstract laws—general and universal truths operating like the mechanical, so-called *laws* of nature, or perhaps of mathematics.

The second error (which often accompanies the first) is to regard the *imperatives* mentioned in the New Testament as sheer, externally imposed legal obligations that indicate the potential ways we can condition God to act or react to us in some way. Embracing that false notion, we are tempted to think of the imperatives as setting forth terms of a *contract* with God: if we do certain things (fulfill certain contractual obligations) we will bring to pass the responses from God that we desire and to which he has contractually agreed.

Both of these errors presume legal, mechanical, cause-and-effect, force-vector-like actions and reactions instead of what is found in a real *personal relationship*. These errors reflect thinking that is not grounded in the covenant of grace by which God has freely established a *relational reality* with humankind for the sake of dynamic, personal and interactive participation, communication, communion, fellowship—what the Greek New Testament calls *koinonia*.

We err when we imagine we are somehow coerced slaves to God and to his imperious ways, or when we imagine we can manage a contract with God where we attempt to negotiate terms of mutual obligation agreeable to both parties. Such imaginings are *not* how God operates. He created us for

real, *personal relationship* in which we participate, by grace, through Christ and by the Holy Spirit. All our responses are *real participation* in an actual relationship—the relationship God has established for us for the sake of *koinonia* (fellowship, communion) with him in dynamic, personal ways—the ways of *freedom in love*.

We did not establish this relational reality by our responses. Only God can create the relationship, and so he has, on our behalf in and through Christ. Note, however, that though our personal responses *create* nothing, they do constitute real participation in the relationship God has given us in Christ. These responses are made possible by the freeing and enabling ministry of the Holy Spirit, based on the vicarious ministry of Jesus. We have been included, through Christ and by the ministry of the Spirit, in a saving, transforming and renewing relationship with God—a relationship that calls for our response.

With this clarification in mind, we can see that we must not use the phrase *all are included* to say too little or too much—and perhaps, at times, we have said too much. Yes, all humanity has been included in a saving, transforming and renewing relationship with God (referred to in Scripture as *reconciliation* with God). But this particular kind of inclusion in Christ is not a fixed, impersonal, causal and abstract universal “truth” that is divorced from real relationship. In fact, reconciliation is specifically for the sake of our response, and so it is for real, personal relationship.

What we can say is that *all have been reconciled (included) but not all are participating*. The God-given purpose of this relationship, established through reconciliation, cannot be fulfilled in us as long as there is little or no participation in the relationship—if there is resistance to and rejection of the relationship that has been freely given to us. The full benefits of the relationship cannot be known or experienced by us if we do not enter into it—if we are not receptive to it and its benefits.

Thus we must account for the difference between *participating* in the relationship, according to its nature, and *not participating*, thus violating its nature and purpose. Non-participation does not negate or undo the fact that God has reconciled us to himself (that he has included us in the relationship he has established, in Christ, with all humanity). To deny this reality does not create another reality. Going against the grain of reality does not change the direction of the grain, though it might gain us some splinters! We have no power to change the grain.

A good example of the difference between participation and non-participation is the elder brother mentioned in the parable of the prodigal son. He refused to participate—to enter the celebration the father established and invited him into. Note also this example in the book of Hebrews:

For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed.
[\(Hebrews 4:2\)](#)

This personal and relational understanding of receiving the gift of grace freely given us by the whole God (Father, Son and Spirit) helps clarify many things in the New Testament that otherwise would seem inconsistent or even incoherent. To think otherwise (in mechanical or causal ways) would be to ignore, or (worse) to dismiss, whole swaths of biblical revelation. A personal and relational understanding of God’s grace helps make sense of the proclamation of the indicatives of grace and the proclamation of the imperatives of grace, the latter being the call to receive and participate in the gift of the relationship established in Christ that is being fulfilled by the Holy Spirit.

Union with Christ

Having looked at the term *all are included* (which pertains to the reconciliation all humankind has with God in Christ), we now can look at a related biblical teaching that also needs clarification—the term here is *union with Christ*. As with reconciliation, we err if we view union with Christ as a fixed, generic and abstract principle, rather than the dynamic, covenantal and relational reality that it is. In making that error it's easy to erroneously equate the concept of the *reconciliation* (inclusion) that all humanity has with God in and through Christ with the concept of *union with Christ*.

Though some assume that all who God has reconciled to himself in Christ are automatically in union with Christ, there are significant problems with this assumption—problems that have become more apparent to us over the last four or five years as pastors have sought to teach about union with Christ and/or GCI members have tried to understand the concept. Because of these problems, we've spent time in further investigation of the biblical teaching and we're now addressing those problems by providing this additional teaching (via this series of articles) on this important topic.

First, it's important to note that the New Testament never equates reconciliation (universal inclusion) and union with Christ. The truth that Christ, who died for all, is everyone's Lord and Savior, does not mean that everyone is united (by the Holy Spirit) to Jesus. Union with Christ, as that term is used in the New Testament, is limited to describing those who are receptive, responsive and thus participating by the Holy Spirit in the gift of relationship with God established by Jesus Christ. This delimited description of union with Christ also applies to other closely related New Testament expressions including being "in Christ" or "in the Lord."

While God intends union with Christ for everyone on the basis of the atoning, reconciling work of Christ, not all have received that union or have entered into it. In that sense not all are united to Christ, not all are one with Christ, not all are "in Christ," not all "have the Son" ([1 John 5:12](#)), and not all "have the Spirit of Christ" ([Rom. 8:9](#)).

None of this means that God is separate from, or has rejected non-believers. It does not mean that God is against them, has not forgiven them, has not accepted them, or does not love them unconditionally. It simply means that such persons are *not yet* participating in (or possibly are resisting) the work of the Holy Spirit, whose ministry it is to open the minds of non-believers to the truth of the gospel, unite them to Christ, and call forth a response of repentance and faith befitting that union. In the end, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" ([Joel 2:32](#); [Acts 2:21](#); [Rom. 10:13](#); [Psalm 86:5](#)), though not all (yet) are calling on the Lord.

In the New Testament, union with Christ cannot be separated from participation in Christ or from communion or fellowship (*koinonia*) with Christ. Union with Christ, understood properly, is about *personal relationship*, and is thus limited to those who are participating in the relationship God has given us by grace. As James B. Torrance used to summarize it: *union* with Christ cannot be separated from *communion* with Christ. These twin doctrines cannot be separated even though they can be distinguished.

We must not think of union with Christ in fixed, mechanical, objective and impersonal ways, assuming that non-believers are automatically united with God, in Christ, in the same way as believers (who by definition, are participating by their believing, their faith). To do so would be to separate union with Christ from participation with Christ. If we are to follow the mind of Christ as found in the New Testament, we should reserve "union with Christ" and being "in Christ" as ways of describing those who, by the Spirit, are participating, receiving and responsive to Christ and his word. Participation does make

a difference, though it does not make *all* the difference. It doesn't, for example, change God's mind or his intention or desire. However, our way of speaking and our theological understanding ought to be able to communicate the difference participation does make, and do so in ways that match the biblical ways of speaking.

Faithfully and accurately proclaiming the gospel

Carefully and closely following the biblical patterns of speech and thought will help us communicate the truth and reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ with consistency, clarity and biblical accuracy. It will also help us avoid contributing, even inadvertently, to confusion or hesitation about the truth of union and communion with Christ by the Spirit.

We should avoid, therefore, using the term *all are included* as an umbrella phrase that tries to say everything there is to say about salvation. What Scripture consistently means when speaking of *union with Christ* is not the same as what we mean to say in using the phrase *all are included*, which as we've seen, pertains to the gift of *universal reconciliation*.

Though in [Acts 17:28](#) the apostle Paul (quoting a pagan philosopher known to his audience) says that "in him [God] we [all humans] live and move and have our being," he is referring to the created state of all humans and not to *union with Christ*—a concept he develops elsewhere to refer to the *reciprocal, personal relationship* that exists, through the Holy Spirit, between God and believers (Christians).

Not properly distinguishing between all humanity having been *reconciled* already to God in Christ (and thus *included*) and the believer's *union* with Christ, confuses or conflates biblical terms and thus risks the following:

- The loss of most or all of the full understanding of the personal, dynamic and relational nature of the gift of salvation in relationship with the living, triune personal God.
- The loss of the fact that the gift of salvation involves the ongoing ministry of the *whole* God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Turning what is dynamic and relational into something non-relational, generic, impersonal, causal and a fixed fact or data point that does not necessitate (in a vital way) *the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit* in the life of the members of the church, the body of Christ.

GCI's incarnational Trinitarian faith is grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ, not a gospel of universal inclusion (where "inclusion" is used as an umbrella term to speak of all aspects of salvation). We proclaim the good news about the relational nature of the gift of grace that God, in Christ, and by his Spirit, freely gives us. Inclusion is one aspect of that gospel, but not the whole of it.

Two related, but distinct unions

This brings us to another point that needs clarification, as it too has contributed to some confusion or hesitation. In accord with the gospel of Jesus Christ, we rightly distinguish between *two types of relationship*, which, theologically, have both been referred to as *unions*, but when carefully treated by theologians are distinguished by qualifying each with a different accompanying term. The problem here is not so much one of biblical usage as discussed above, but one of how union is used in theological formulations. In the latter case, many overlook the important theological qualifications made and assume all unions involving God are identical, when they are not. The problem is made greater when an improper notion of inclusion is conflated with either or both of these notions of union.

The hypostatic union

The first union pertains to what theologians refer to as the [hypostatic union](#). This is the union of divinity (divine nature) and humanity (human nature) in the one person (*hypostasis*) of the God-man Jesus Christ at his incarnation. It should be noted that this union does not amount to a fusion or confusion of these two natures, but a joining together that maintains their distinction while bringing about a true relationship and interaction between them under the direction of the subject of the eternal Son of God. (This theological understanding goes all the way back to the [Chalcedonian Definition/Creed](#) of the 5th century.)

This hypostatic union pertains to *all* people since the human nature Christ assumed is common to all humankind—both believers and non-believers. Human nature, with all its attributes (mind, will, affections, etc.) has, in Christ through his life, death, resurrection and ascension, been regenerated, justified, sanctified and glorified. On that basis, God, in and through Christ has brought about the *reconciliation* of all humankind with himself. As a result, God holds nothing against humanity or human nature. In that way, Christ is the first-fruit or first-born from the dead and is the new head of humanity (the new Adam, to use Paul's terms). Jesus has become the beginning of a new humanity. Thus we can say that there is a right way to say "all are included" meaning "all humans have been reconciled" on the basis of the renewal of human nature itself in Christ.

This understanding is why T.F. Torrance can assert that all are "implicated" (included) in what Christ has done, or that all humanity has been placed on a whole "new basis" in what Christ has done. Likewise, Karl Barth can assert that on the basis of the hypostatic union of the two natures in Jesus, all people are "potentially" Christians—"potentially" members of the church or body of Christ; or all can be considered "virtual" Christians (even if not actual Christians); or that all have been saved in principle by Christ (*de jure*) but not all are saved in actuality (*de facto*). These theological understandings parallel the New Testament understanding of Christ being *all in all*, but also recognizing that not all are participating in that relational reality—not all are believing, not all are responding to or are receptive of this reality. Not all are worshipping God in Spirit and in truth. Not all are active witnesses to Jesus Christ. And in that sense, not all are actual Christians.

The spiritual union

The second kind of union of which theologians speak pertains to the *spiritual union* that, by the Holy Spirit, unites believers with God in a particular type of relationship. The New Testament refers to this kind of union as "union with Christ"—a *union and communion* with God, in Christ, by the Holy Spirit. In this kind of union there is an essential recognition of a distinct, though not separate, ministry of the Holy Spirit to bring it about. After the incarnation and the earthly work of Christ, the Spirit is sent on a special mission, or for a special ministry, that is only now possible on the basis of the completed work of Christ accomplished with or in our human nature.

By this follow-up ministry of the Holy Spirit, individuals and groups of persons are freed and enabled to repent and believe, and have faith, love and hope. They are able to enter into a worship relationship with God "in Spirit and in truth." By the Spirit, persons are incorporated into the body of Christ as they respond (participate), typically by baptism, confession of faith, participation in communion (the Lord's Supper) and in Christian worship where they receive instruction and put themselves under the authority of the apostolic/biblical revelation. The *spiritual union* thus designates participation by the Spirit in the renewed human nature Christ provides for us so that we might participate in right relationship with God through him, by the Holy Spirit.

It is also important to note that in this union and communion with Christ, by the Holy Spirit, *we do not become one in being with Jesus Christ*—we do not become Jesus, and he does not become us. Union and communion with Christ is not a fusion or confusion of persons—it is a personal and relational union or unity, which necessarily includes a participation that maintains the difference of persons, the distinction of subjects (or personal agencies). While the work of Christ reaches the very depths of who we are (our being or *ontology*), the ontological difference of persons is not erased in our union with Christ. We are not absorbed into Jesus, nor into the being of God. Thus the relationship between the two persons at the deepest (ontological) level of who we are remains a real relationship, with real participation and fellowship maintained.

Summary

With these thoughts in mind, we now can summarize our key points:

- God has reconciled all people (believers and non-believers) to himself in Christ. All people have been implicated in the *hypostatic union* of divinity and humanity brought about through the Incarnation of the Son of God.
- Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, believers are brought into the *spiritual union* of God and humanity, and thus are “in Christ” by virtue of their positive, Spirit-enabled response to (participation in) the relationship created by the hypostatic union.
- Not all are included in the *spiritual union* since not all are participating in the saving relationship. Not all are included in that sense, even though the *hypostatic union* in Christ was accomplished for the sake of the *spiritual union* that would be brought to fullness through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
- The goal of the *hypostatic union* is thus fulfilled in the *spiritual union*, brought about by the Holy Spirit as persons participate in the relationship begun in the reconciliation of all humanity to God in and through the hypostatic union of God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.
- In our gospel declarations, we need to account for both types (or perhaps we could say both *phases*) of union, noting that both are aspects of the outworking of our salvation involving the work of the whole Triune God (Father, Son and Spirit).
- We can rightly use the phrase *all are included* when referring to the hypostatic union (the first phase). In doing so we should note that human nature was joined (but not fused) to Christ, and thus included in his whole mediatorial ministry of learning obedience, overcoming temptation, ministering under the direction and power of the Holy Spirit, submitting to the righteous judgment of God on the cross, and in the resurrection of our human nature with him in his resurrection and raised up to glory in his ascension.
- As we use the term *inclusion* to refer to the hypostatic union, it’s vital to remember that the purpose of this inclusion is *personal relationship*. Via the hypostatic union, God, in the person of the God-man Jesus Christ, has graciously reconciled all humanity to himself. All people (believers and non-believers) are, through the hypostatic union, included in a relationship with God for the purpose of personal participation—a personal response of repentance, faith, hope and love.
- We should be careful to not talk about *inclusion* (which pertains to the hypostatic union) in ways that obscure or make seem minor the matter of the Holy Spirit’s ministry and the related matter of our participation and response to God, both of which pertain to the spiritual union.

- The difference participation makes holds out hope of renewal and transformation for those who have not yet turned to Christ. It also provides insight and motivation for those who have begun to participate but who have grown weary or might be tempted to return to their old ways of non-participation. That's the point of the many admonitions in the New Testament to continue living in relationship with and thus to turn back to Christ. That's the point of its warnings to not resist the Spirit.
- If we fail to uphold the differences that participation does make, we will be unable to talk accurately about the differences it does not make, namely that though we be faithless, God remains faithful ([2 Tim. 2:13](#)).
- In our preaching and teaching we must account for both types of union, carefully explaining the importance of participation which relates to entering into deliberate, personal relationship with God, since that's what God has provided so richly for us. We need to preach and teach together both the *indicatives* of grace and the *imperatives* of grace that call for and enable our fellowship and communion (*koinonia*) with God, through Christ, by the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Because our Triune God, who is love, is interested in us, he wants to have with us a real, actual, living, loving, vital *relationship*. Through the hypostatic union of God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ, God reconciled all humanity to himself precisely so that humans may have a worship relationship with the Trinity. Now, God, in Christ and through the Spirit's ongoing ministry, is drawing believers into a spiritual union (*union with Christ*) that involves participation (response, sharing in, living into, communion). In this *koinonia* there is a difference between those participating in God's free gift of relationship (established in the hypostatic union) and those refusing to participate, or who have not yet begun to participate. That's why, in the New Testament, the term "union with Christ" applies to persons in a posture of responding in the Holy Spirit, and not to persons in a posture of resisting or ignoring the Holy Spirit. That is why receiving what is freely given is often emphasized in Scripture, as seen in these verses:

[Jesus is sending Paul] to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. ([Acts 26:18](#))

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. ([Acts 10:43](#))

If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. ([Rom. 5:17](#))

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ([Acts 2:38](#))

Given this biblical emphasis and language, it would be unwise to equate the term *inclusion* (which speaks to the hypostatic union and thus to reconciliation) with the term *union* (as in "union with Christ" or being "in Christ" or "in the Lord"). Besides departing from the ways the Bible uses these terms, equating the two collapses the biblical distinctions between the hypostatic union and the spiritual union, thus leading to confusion, including obscuring or avoiding the personal and relational nature of salvation which calls for our participation by the Holy Spirit.

The hypostatic union in Christ is not the same as our spiritual union with Christ by the Spirit. Even though they cannot be separated from one another, they must be properly distinguished. Hopefully, it is now clear why, when speaking theologically of these two *unions*, we must carefully qualify each (as do careful theologians) so as to avoid confusion.

To reiterate this important point, in the New Testament, *union with Christ* (spiritual union) necessarily involves participation (*koinonia*, also translated communion or fellowship) with Christ. Why? Because the New Testament uses the word *union* to speak not of the hypostatic union (related to the vicarious humanity of Jesus), but of the spiritual union (union with Christ).

This spiritual union is not automatic—it is not impersonal or mechanically caused by the hypostatic union. If it were, that would make the full ministry of the Holy Spirit unnecessary, contrary both to how the New Testament depicts the Spirit’s ministry and how it describes the explicit purpose for which the Son sends the Holy Spirit in the name of the Father.

That being said, it’s important to note that the spiritual union is absolutely dependent upon the hypostatic union, wherein the eternal Son of God, via the Incarnation, assumed to himself our human nature (the nature common to all humanity). However, the phrases “union with Christ,” being “in Christ” or “in the Lord,” being members incorporated into “the body of Christ” (the church), being “indwelt” by the Holy Spirit, and being “born again” as a “child of God” are all phrases or terms the New Testament uses in a way that includes (and thus presupposes) the idea of participation—that is, communion with Christ through the Spirit, which is about living in active personal relationship with Christ as a member of his body, the church. Said another way, these particular phrases are reserved in the New Testament for Christians (believers). In GCI, we believe it is important that we use these phrases in the way the New Testament uses them, not assigning to them different meanings (as do some Trinitarian authors).

We’ve raised several issues in this lengthy article, and we’ll add further detail as this series unfolds. Some of the issues that we will be addressing more fully are the vicarious humanity of Jesus, and what union with Christ entails. In the meantime, you might want to review a GCI.org article I wrote that addresses union with Christ and our participation in Christ’s ministry. You’ll find it at <http://www.gci.org/christian-life>.

Clarifying our Theological Vision: Part 2

UNION WITH CHRIST, CHRIST'S VICARIOUS HUMANITY AND THE HOLY SPIRIT'S MINISTRY

In Part 2 of this essay, we'll fill out what we covered in Part 1 concerning union with Christ and the vicarious humanity of Christ. It then looks at the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the related topic of the biblical distinction between believers and non-believers. These topics are of great importance to GCI's understanding of incarnational Trinitarian theology.

Union with Christ

As we noted last time, the New Testament uses *union with Christ* to refer exclusively to the relationship the Triune God has with *believers*. In GCI, we want to stick with that biblical usage, avoiding statements that imply that union with Christ pertains to non-believers. At times, we made that mistake, referring, for example, to the journey from non-believer, to new believer, to mature believer as progressing *from union to communion with God*. We also mistakenly said that *all are in union but not all are in communion*. Both statements are problematic for several reasons:

1. The New Testament correlates union and communion so closely that they can be used interchangeably to refer to the same relationship. Although they can, and ought to be distinguished, they can never be separated.
2. Though the New Testament declares that God loves all and is reconciled to all, it does not speak of all people as being *in union with God* in that particular way. The New Testament consistently uses *union with Christ* to speak exclusively of the relationship that believers have with God.
3. The New Testament declares that, through his post-ascension ministry, the Holy Spirit frees and enables people to receive God's gifts of repentance and faith (belief) and so to become believers. By the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit, those who are believing begin to share (participate) in all that Christ has accomplished for all humanity, including his ongoing intercession for us so that we might share in the perfect responses he makes for us, in our place and on our behalf. The Holy Spirit's ongoing ministry is personal and relational, not mechanical or impersonal. It is not a causal fact, nor a general universal principle that is abstractly effective upon all equally. The Holy Spirit unites believers to Christ, incorporating them into the body of Christ (the church) for personal, relational participation (sharing) in the life of Christ.

Not a *universal union*

The mistakes we made in using the term *union with Christ* largely resulted from not realizing the potential for confusion when following the writings of some Trinitarian theologian-authors who refer to the Incarnation as creating, through Jesus' vicarious humanity, a *universal union* of God with humanity in Christ (universal in the sense that it includes believers and non-believers). In their way of stating it, this universal union came about through what happened when the Son of God, via the Incarnation, assumed human nature. They thus equate union with Christ with the uniting of human nature with God via the hypostatic union.

Unfortunately, this confusion of terms leaves the false impression that the Incarnation itself resulted in all persons having an identical relationship with God—one more or less automatic and causal (and thus

objective, in that sense). But that is not what the New Testament teaches in using the term *union with Christ*, and it is not what GCI believes and seeks to teach.

Union with Christ (and related terms such as *in Christ* or *in the Lord*) as used in the New Testament, indicates a depth of relationship that, by the Holy Spirit, is reciprocal and interactive—a personal relationship possible for us individually only on the basis of the objective work of Christ who sanctified, personalized and brought into right, subjective, responsive relationship the recalcitrant human nature that he assumed, via the Incarnation, to himself.

The distinction between believers and non-believers

Misunderstanding union with Christ, some wrongly conclude that there is little, if any, difference between a believer and a non-believer, or at least that whatever we say of a believer should also be said of a non-believer (in the same way). For example, some conclude that all people automatically are united to Christ in the same way. But the New Testament consistently differentiates between those *participating* in (receiving, responding to, sharing in) the love and life of Christ (the New Testament calls them *believers*), and those who are *not-yet participating* (we call them *non-believers*, though we might appropriately refer to them as *not-yet believers*).

The erroneous conclusion that both believers and non-believers are in union with Christ results largely from not taking into account that the hypostatic union, which has to do with the union of divinity and humanity (two natures) in the one Person of Jesus, is *not* equivalent to or identical with, or does not automatically result in, the spiritual union brought about by the Person and work of the Holy Spirit (who ministers on the basis of the Person and work of God in Christ).

In all cases where the New Testament refers to union with Christ (and equivalent phrases) it is referring to this spiritual union, not to the hypostatic union. For our teaching and preaching to align with the Scriptural usage, it's best we limit our use of *union with Christ* to refer to the spiritual union—the relationship between God and believers by the post-ascension ministry of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we must lead with and thus emphasize that non-believers are not yet united to Christ in the same way believers are. It also doesn't mean we must try to figure out who is and who isn't united to Christ, or determine where, on some kind of continuum, each person stands with God. These are not the reasons to hold to the distinction the New Testament makes between believers and non-believers. These would, in fact, be misuses of that distinction. Any distinctions we make must be made for the same reasons the New Testament makes them. Otherwise we fall into another error—an arbitrary, impersonal legalism.

The New Testament distinguishes between believers and non-believers for the purpose of holding out *hope* to those who are not yet participating, to warn those who are persistently resisting participation, to encourage those who have been participating to keep on, and to highlight all the benefits of participating as fully as the grace of God enables—benefits to oneself and to others, both believers and non-believers. Even more so, making this distinction gives God the glory for enabling us, through the Son and by the Holy Spirit, to enter into a personal, dynamic, responsive and loving communion with him in a relationship of worship.

Our message and emphasis should always begin with and continue to emphasize who God in Christ is, and what he has done for *all*—what theologian JB Torrance calls the “unconditional indicatives of grace.” Building on that foundation, we can then spell out, as does the New Testament, the “unconditional obligations of grace.” Our message is thus Christ-centered and grace-based, not human experience-centered and law-based.

The vicarious humanity of Christ

Let's now shift a bit to consider again the topic of *the vicarious humanity of Christ*, which is related to the hypostatic union but focuses on the essential purpose of Christ's assumption of our human nature. Together, these truths tell us that Jesus, being fully God and fully human (the divine and human natures being united in the hypostatic union), is in his humanity (human nature joined to his Person) our representative and substitute—the one who, in his humanity, stands in for us. He acts in our place and on our behalf as one of us.

What Jesus did (and still does) in his humanity, he did (and does) for us, in our place and on our behalf as one of us. Jesus was baptized for us, overcame temptation, prayed, obeyed and suffered for us. He died for us, rose from death, and ascended to heaven for us—clothed, as it were, in our humanity. That is what Jesus' vicarious humanity is all about. It's a powerful, consequential truth—the gospel in a nutshell. However, it does not tell us everything about our salvation and our relationship with God through Christ and by the Holy Spirit. There is more to the story and so our preaching and teaching must tell the *whole* story, not just a part. And the parts should fit together, as they do in the biblical revelation.

Filling out the story in no way denies the reality of what can be called the *cosmic* (or universal, meaning everywhere throughout the universe) implications of the Incarnation, by which the eternal Son of God assumed human nature on behalf of all humanity, and through his vicarious humanity (representing and standing in for us all) reconciled all humanity in himself to God. Indeed, in and through the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ, who is Lord and Savior of all, *all have been reconciled to God*—all have been forgiven, no exceptions. It is on this basis that we rightly declare that *all are included!*

The spiritual union involves participation

Though God has reconciled all humanity to himself in Christ, it is those who are *participating* in (sharing in) that universal, cosmic reality who are said in the New Testament to be in *union with Christ*—living in relationship with God in what we refer to as the *spiritual union*. The New Testament calls these believers *children of God*, noting that they are *indwelt by the Holy Spirit* in a particular way, having been *born from above* (or *born again*, as some translations have it). This participation is the gracious gift of God, in Christ, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and not something of our own making or something we have earned. Participation is not a way of qualifying for union with Christ—it is the way of receiving and sharing in the reconciliation we have already with God, in Christ.

This is why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5 that God has reconciled the world to himself, then immediately adds that those who are members of Christ's body (the church) are ambassadors called to tell others to "be reconciled to God" ([2 Cor. 5:18-20](#)). Paul is not contradicting himself. Because God "has reconciled" all, then all are called by that fact to act, live and so "be reconciled." Paul is revealing the full story of salvation, of our real relationship with God that involves receiving and responding by the Holy Spirit to the gift freely accomplished and given by God through Christ and personally delivered to us by the Spirit.

Three unions

In part 1 of this series, we mentioned two unions addressed in the New Testament: *the hypostatic union* (that unites divinity and humanity in the one person of Jesus) and *the spiritual union* (the believer's union with Christ by the ministry of the Holy Spirit). We can now mention a third union that also is of great theological importance—theologians call it the *ontological union* (with "ontological"

meaning “pertaining to being”). This is the union between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit by which the three Persons of the Trinity are eternally *one in being* (*substance* or *essence*).

This ontological union of the divine Persons does not mean that there are no distinctions between them within the one being of God. The one God is not an undifferentiated ontological monad or lump. The ontological union is a unity of distinguishable divine Persons with distinct names and relationships with each other. As stated in the Athanasian Creed, God is *unity in trinity and trinity in unity*. C.S. Lewis put it this way: God is *tri-personal*. We could also say that *the unity of God is a triunity*.

This *ontological union* (explored in the excursus below) applies only to the Trinity. It is only in God’s being that there can be three distinct, divine Persons so related that they are one in being. This sort of unity of being is not found in the other two unions, which both involve human nature. In the *hypostatic union*, the human and divine natures are united in the one Person of Jesus, but those natures are not one in being, they remain distinct in their respective natures. In the *spiritual union*, human believers are united to Jesus, but the two are not one in being. We humans remain distinct persons. The ontological union is thus absolutely unique as noted in the excursus below.

Excursus on the ontological union

Starting with the eternal Trinity, which Jesus tells us about, we recognize a kind of dynamic permanence, stability and faithfulness in our Triune God for all time. There never was a time within the eternal triune life of God when the Father did not love the Son, the Son did not love the Father and the Spirit did not love or indwell the love of the Father and the Son. Jesus says the same in noting that the Father and the Son know and glorify each other, which we can assume (based on other things revealed) involves the Holy Spirit. These are permanent relationships occurring within the one, Triune God. We can also say that the divine Persons share in one Triune mind and will. There never was a time when they were separated in mind or will, or a time before they came to agree, cooperate and become united in will or mind.

These *dynamic relationships* constitute God’s eternal character, nature and being. God was Triune before there was anything existing other than God and would be Triune even if creation never existed. God alone is uncreated and has existence in himself. God is not dependent upon anything else to exist and to be fully and completely the God that he is---the "I Am" revealed to Moses.

The triune God is loving in his being as a fellowship and communion that is eternal and internal to God. How that is so is something to ponder---a mystery we cannot ever get to the bottom of because God is the incomparable one---one of a kind. This being the case, we can only know God by his self-revelation and not by comparison with other created things (which would lead to idolatry and mythology). That means that when God acts towards that which is not God, namely everything else that exists, we cannot think of that relationship in the same way we think of the triune being and relationships within God. When God acts towards creation to create it or to save it, that act occurs by the gracious will of God---it happens by his choice, his election, in the freedom of his love.

Nothing God does external to his being is necessary to God’s being. Creation and redemption are the free and gracious acts of God towards that which is not God, but which are the products of God’s free willing and acting or making. God acts towards creation not “by nature” but “by grace.” All such

relationships are external to God (*ad extra* as theologians say). They are not eternal, not automatic, fixed, necessary or permanent.

Some of the things God creates including impersonal things like rocks, are more fixed or static and law- or principle-like than are other things, such as human persons who are created in God's image. But none of these things are identical, and none exist on their own. Human persons are not emanations from (extensions of) or parts of God. Persons are works of God's grace, by creation and redemption, created as moral and spiritual persons for personal relations in fellowship and communion with God. As humans, we exist contingently and dynamically in personal relationship with God. We are entirely dependent upon God for our ongoing existence, though God is not dependent upon us (or any other part of his creation) for his ongoing existence.

As human beings in relationship with God, we have the capacity to live in personal, moral, spiritual relationships with others, God included. In those relationships we can reflect something of God's internal and eternal relationships---we can love. And so Jesus lays it out simply, maintaining the difference and similarity of relationships. His use of the word "as" indicates a certain comparison, but not an identity when he says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you." This indicates the Triune relationship (the ontological union) and the hypostatic union and saving work of Christ. He then goes on to say, "As I have loved you, you ought to love one another." This command speaks of our human relations being like or similar to Jesus' relationship with us.

The apostle John, speaking of our relationship to God, says this: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." He also says, "We love because he [God] first loved us" ([1 John 4:10, 19](#)). Note here that there is a difference of love, indicated by the order and priority of God's love over ours. John is referencing the great *asymmetry* between God's love and our love, but in this asymmetry there is not a separation, a disconnection. Our love is dependent upon God's love; our love has its source in God, who is love, and not in ourselves. We then say that our love is *contingent* upon God's love, but his love is not contingent upon ours.

If we make the error of thinking that we are somehow fused or one in being with God (even if that fusion were accomplished through some kind of fusion with Jesus), we would be wrongly concluding that our relationship to God is identical to Jesus' internal and eternal relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit, rather than distinct and comparable. We would be wrongly imagining that our human persons are so fused with God or with Jesus that we would be essentially indistinguishable as human persons from the Triune Divine Persons---we would thus be a sort of fourth member of the Trinity.

Though failing to distinguish between the three unions and mistaking fusion for union may seem like only small technical errors, the reality is that they make total nonsense of the entire story of God's salvation by grace, including the real relationship between God and human beings. And so we must carefully avoid making these errors.

Three moments of salvation

Understanding the three unions, and thus grasping that our relationship with God (the Source of our salvation) is in the Trinity, we can now fill out the story of God's saving grace noting that the Bible speaks of the activity of all three Persons of the Trinity united to work out our salvation. This is also indicated by the fact that the New Testament says we have "been saved," are "being saved," and will "be saved." These past, present-continuing, and future tenses speak of one work with three *moments* (see the note below)—three aspects of the one saving event.

Note: As in physics, a *moment* is not an interval of time, but is timeless. It is a *moment in time*, but has no duration itself. So by analogy, God works timelessly within our time. The one work of the Trinity seems to involve a time sequence for us who live in time, but the three moments of God's work are not strictly separate or divided, rather they are united in the one saving activity of God. One day, even our view of time will be transformed when we participate fully in time's perfection, when we have our being in the new heavens and earth and in a new and renewed time and space, in what we now call eternity.

These three distinct (though not separate) moments loosely correspond with the three distinct (though not separate) ministries of the Persons of the Trinity. In Scripture we find that one of the divine Persons is primarily, although not exclusively, associated with a particular moment. We might say that one Person takes the lead or makes a unique contribution to the one saving action towards his time- and space-bound creation and creatures. These distinct actions of the Persons then contribute to the three distinct moments in God's united, saving work. But we must remember that all the Triune persons act indivisibly, in unity, as they each share distinctively in one Triune divine mind and will.

Note also that these three moments are not exhaustive descriptions of all that the whole God or the Persons do towards creation. They indicate distinct moments of ministry involving the central work of God's saving activity. The first moment involves the ontological union of the Trinity in relation to salvation. The second, which pertains to the hypostatic union, involves the Incarnate Son's relationship to our salvation. The third moment, which pertains to the spiritual union, involves the Spirit's relationship to us in our salvation. These three moments can be summarized as follows:

1. **The moment of the Father's decision**—the decision to save, made “before the foundation of the world,” anticipating the involvement of the Son and the Holy Spirit by their being sent by the Father.
2. **The moment of the Son's work**—his saving work, accomplished through his incarnate life, including his earthly ministry, suffering, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit.
3. **The moment of the Holy Spirit's work**—a work involving bringing about, freeing, empowering and guiding the ever-growing participation of believers (via their personal response, receptivity, decision) to Christ's work. This work of the Holy Spirit began with the formation of the church after Christ's earthly work was finished, though it will be complete only with our glorification on the other side of our death.

It's important to avoid reducing salvation to one of these three moments. Modern western churches tend to do that, almost to the exclusion of the other two. However, some make the opposite mistake of fusing (confusing or conflating) the three moments. We must be careful to uphold the truth that the one, indivisible work of God involves three distinguishable moments in God's relationship to us in time and space, flesh and blood. We must be careful to uphold both their connection (unity) and their distinction (without any idea of separation).

Union of persons does not mean fusion of being

Now we need to note that it is a mistake to think of the *union of persons* as a *fusion of being*. In the ontological union of the Trinity, the three Persons are distinct without separation, but they are not fused. This distinction of Persons is essential to the oneness of being of the Trinity, because without distinction of Persons, there is no real eternal and internal relationships among the Persons. In the hypostatic union, the divine and human natures in Christ are distinct, but they are not fused. Likewise, in the spiritual union of believers to Christ, the believer's person remains distinct and is thus not fused (conflated) with the Person of Christ.

Properly upholding this unity-with-distinction with respect to all three unions, along with upholding the corresponding three moments in salvation, helps us to avoid several common errors that have to do with fusing (conflating or collapsing) together what are distinct aspects of the reality of the three distinct unions (or we might say, three unities):

- The error of collapsing our person(s) with Christ's person.
- The error of collapsing Christ's two natures (divine and human) into one.
- The error of collapsing Christ's Person into his nature(s).
- The error of collapsing our sanctification into our justification.
- The error of collapsing our subjective (personal) responses into Christ's objective responses (work) on our behalf.
- The error of separating or collapsing the ministry and person of the Holy Spirit into the ministry and Person of the Son.
- The error of confusing God's uncreated Triune being with created being.

Not only must we avoid these errors of collapsing/confusing different kinds of relationship, we must also avoid the opposite error of entirely separating them. All these relationships involve a certain kind of unity-with-distinction and also coordination (co-action) in relationship all brought about by God's grace.

Returning now to the three moments of the Triune God's saving work, we can see how this is so. If we collapse the second moment (Christ's incarnation and redemptive work) with the first moment (the Father's act of decision and intention within the eternal life of God to will or decide to save), then there would be no need for the Incarnation—no need for the actual, dynamic interaction and relationship of God with his creation or his creatures to bring about his saving purposes.

With salvation without Incarnation, God's mere thought or idea or intention would be all that was needed to bring about salvation. In that case, salvation would apply only to that which is internal and eternal to God, namely the Triune Persons who have no need for salvation. A creation external to God and distinct in being from God would then not experience God's salvation except perhaps as having an abstract idea in mind. In that case, there would be no such thing as grace, since no benefit would freely go forth to that which is external to God and dependent upon God. The grace of God would thus remain locked up in God and establish no real saving relationship with that which is not divine, with what is created and fallen. Such a salvation would fail to amount to a real restored relationship with God. It would be personally meaningless to created personal beings. Furthermore, the death and evil that take place in creation would remain untouched.

Both the revelation of creation and the revelation of salvation through the incarnation of the Person of the Son of God (assuming to himself a created human nature, involving his bodily crucifixion and resurrection in history), unequivocally and undeniably indicate an entirely different relationship of God with creation through Incarnation.

Salvation in Christ, as depicted in biblical revelation, involves unique personal and dynamic interaction between God and creation. In that story, there was a time when there was no hypostatic union (even if it was anticipated by God from all eternity). God's intention towards that which is not God (external to God) had to be actualized—realized by God, in and for God's fallen creation. It required the voluntary condescending of the Son of God, "from above," as Jesus says, taking on the "form of a servant" as Paul

puts it. It required the Father's willing, deciding and then actually sending of his Son. It required a real Incarnation, not just the appearance of Jesus looking as if he assumed a human nature when, in actuality, he did not!

God came in Christ, in our place and on our behalf, to *actually* undo what we had done ([Eph. 1:10](#)). In that undoing, a real relationship (via the hypostatic union) between God and mankind was forged in the Son of God's own person. How does this hypostatic union and the second moment of salvation fit into the overall story of our salvation? The union of the two natures in the one Person of Jesus *does not create a oneness of being* where the human and divine natures are fused into one nature—the divine ceasing to be divine, and the human ceasing to be human, thus turning into a third kind of thing, neither divine nor human. Nor do the two natures via this union turn into one another—one swallowing up the other.

The union of the two natures in Christ (via the hypostatic union) is *a dynamic communion in personal relationship*—a dynamic *unity* where the love of God for humanity and the love of humanity for God meet. The salvation worked out in Christ is the work of the Person of the Son of God bringing his human nature into right relationship with the divine nature, and so into reconciliation with the Father, thus making the human nature ready to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit in a new way—often referred to in the New Testament as being *baptized by the Spirit*.

Created humans are not God and they do not become God through Jesus. God is not a creature. But that does not mean there can be no real, dynamic and relational interaction between these two very different kinds of being (created and uncreated). However, in this relationship there is no fusion, confusion or conflation, instead there is gracious and saving relationship, which we see clearly in the earthly life of Jesus.

As one of us, Jesus was born, grew in wisdom and stature, learned obedience, overcame temptation, rejoiced in the Holy Spirit, suffered and submitted to the cleansing judgments of God on the cross. Jesus then died, was raised and ascended bodily. Especially in the Garden, we see the resistant human will of his assumed nature brought step-by-step into conformity with the will of God, finally exhibiting a perfect trust and love for God. We see this in Jesus words following a torturous internal battle: "Nevertheless, thy will be done" and, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit."

The human and divine natures are united in the one eternal Person of the Son of God Incarnate. But in that union there is no fusion, confusion or conflation of the natures. Had the natures been fused, there either would be no God to save humanity, or no humanity to be saved, since the one nature would have turned into the other, or both would have turned into a third that is neither divine nor human. Were the two natures fused, there would be no grace, no redemption of created human persons and thus no real ongoing saving relationship between God and humanity.

But the idea of a fusion of natures is not the gospel story of God's grace. Being faithful to the gospel requires that we distinguish between the ontological union (and the moment of the Father's decision with the Son to bring about our salvation), and the hypostatic union (and the moment of incarnation that united God with human nature in the Person of the eternal Son of God). It also requires that we distinguish between God and God's creation of human creatures, even in the hypostatic union. The gospel declares that we were created for real relationship—a relationship that, as Calvin said, was healed, not only *by* Christ, but *in* Christ—in his Person.

But how are we personally involved in all this? To answer, we must (on the basis of revelation) distinguish between the second and third moments and so between the hypostatic and spiritual unions

that correspond to these two moments. If we fail to do so, we get an erroneous result that similar to the fusion/confusion we examined above (except in this case, there is no need for the ministry of the Holy Spirit, rather than no need for the Incarnation). If fusion is the case here, once again the story of our salvation, as depicted in biblical revelation, makes no sense.

The essence of the Holy Spirit's special ministry following Christ's ascension, is to bring about personal participation (sharing) in Christ's perfect relationship (as one of us) with the Father and the Spirit. If we think of moments two and three as being fused, we miss the importance of the Spirit's gracious ministry, thus eliminating the third moment, which brings about the spiritual union. Envisioning the fusion of moments two and three means viewing the hypostatic union as accomplishing all that is involved in our salvation. But that can't be the case, for the biblical story places great emphasis on the ministry of the Holy Spirit as being essential to our salvation.

The Bible shows that the Holy Spirit works deeply within us to free and enable us to respond personally and grow up into Christ—a transformation that clearly is an essential part of God's plan of salvation for us. This is made clear in Jesus' directives (before and after his resurrection) that his disciples must wait for and receive the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' view, this third moment (the Holy Spirit's post-ascension ministry) is not optional—a view supported by the rest of the biblical story, beginning with the book of Acts.

By (wrongly) concluding that the hypostatic union fully accomplishes our salvation, one also concludes that there is no need for the participation brought about by the post-ascension ministry of the Spirit who indwells believers. There is not a real living, acting, responding, receiving relationship of saving grace. Instead, our relationship to God, through Christ, is fixed, automatic, impersonal and mechanical—an abstract fact that is generally and generically true—like a natural law, a forensic fact, or a universal principle that is accomplished by the mere fact of the hypostatic union.

When we regard the hypostatic union (rather than the spiritual union) as the final moment of our salvation, we are left with a salvation that is accomplished in Christ, but remains external to the individual human person, with no personal and transforming indwelling of the Holy Spirit that, according to the biblical revelation, is essential to our salvation.

Some might insist that the hypostatic union itself accomplishes everything needed at the ontological depths of our very being, and therefore is not merely external. However, without the personal, personalizing, and subsequent ministry of the Holy Spirit, such an ontological and objective union would amount to a mechanical, automatic and impersonal connection, not a relationship of personal participation, communion, fellowship and sharing that is brought about by the Holy Spirit. Without the spiritual union (which includes the ministry of the Holy Spirit), the dynamic, transforming personal relationship and responsive interaction of salvation is eliminated, replaced by an automatic, impersonal ontological effect that emanates to all from the hypostatic union.

Some might counter by arguing that the hypostatic union was personal because we are united to the Person of Christ. But without the ministry and moment of the Holy Spirit, who brings about personal participation and responsiveness in relationship, such a union with the Person of Jesus entirely effected by the hypostatic union takes us back to the problem of being ontologically fused in our persons to the Person of the Son. We would thus become Christ, and Christ would become us. As a result, real relationship would be eliminated and once again there would be a confusion of human persons with Christ's person, making us identical in being with Jesus Christ and potentially members ourselves of the

Holy Trinity. Union with Christ would thus be turned into fusion with Christ, and personal, dynamic relationship and communion would become optional to salvation.

Some may insist that the hypostatic union alone is sufficient to accomplish our objective salvation in a way that does not eliminate the ministry of the Holy Spirit who is needed to bring us to conceptually know or agree to the fact of the hypostatic union. However, this line of argumentation truncates the view of the Holy Spirit and his ministry that is presented in the biblical story of our salvation. This truncated view reduces the Spirit's ministry to bringing about a mere cognitive change, rather than the fully human-relational change (a whole transforming and personal change by uniting us to Christ and incorporating us into the body of Christ) presented in Scripture. Such a reduced ministry of the Spirit would not bring about the participation—the dynamic fellowship that is a true sharing in the life of Christ with all we are and all we have—a participation that involves the receptivity and responsiveness of our whole persons to the Spirit—one expressed in confession of sin and the birth of faith, hope and love along with a life of growing up in Christ, being transformed from one degree of glory to another.

Were it true that the objective fact of the hypostatic union accounts for the entire work of salvation, our subjective participation would be swallowed up and disappear in a radically objective hypostatic union with Christ. In that case, our subjectivity would all but be lost in the objective work of Jesus Christ, rather than (as the gospel declares) being fully enlivened by the Holy Spirit who brings about our growing and transforming participation through a fully personal and personalizing relationship with God through Christ and by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

A truncated view of salvation, does not align with what the Bible tells us about the ministry of the Holy Spirit and its fruits in the lives of those who belong to Jesus Christ and “have the Spirit of Christ.” It does not align with the personal, relational dynamic of relationship with God that the Holy Spirit brings about by enabling us who are distinct in person from Christ, to share in his sanctified and glorified human nature in right relationship with God.

When we fail to distinguish between the hypostatic union and the spiritual union, and the moment of the Son's work from the moment of the Holy Spirit's work, we lose the full understanding of the nature of our salvation, including the meaning of Christ's vicarious humanity, which becomes, at most, something fused with our persons—his subjectivity fused with our subjectivity—the result being that the distinction of persons as subjects and agents is all but erased.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit

When we fail to make these critical biblical distinctions, the gospel of Jesus Christ is reduced to believing in the sending work of the Father and the hypostatic work of the Son, leaving out any vital, saving and relational work of the Holy Spirit on the basis of the completed work of Christ. Unfortunately, this is what some formulations of Trinitarian theology have done—they overlook (or at least deemphasize) the Person and ministry of the Holy Spirit by locating the saving union almost exclusively in the vicarious humanity of Jesus (the hypostatic union). But as noted above, our salvation is the work of the *whole* Trinity, and that includes the work of the Holy Spirit.

What Christ in Person and work accomplished for us in our human form (nature) was worked out in him in perfect fellowship and communion with the Holy Spirit. And now, what Christ accomplished for us in the power of the Spirit is being worked out for us and in us by the same Spirit who by indwelling us, unites us to the Person and saving work of Christ.

Throughout the New Testament, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to unite us to Jesus in a dynamic, personal and personalizing way. By the Spirit we are set free to receive from and respond to Christ with all that we have and are able. It is the Holy Spirit who incorporates us into the body of Christ, with Christ as head, and those so incorporated are made to be members one of another in unity and distinction.

In the biblical revelation, union and communion with Christ (the spiritual union) is not located primarily in the Incarnation, but in the ministry of the Holy Spirit. However, this union is, indeed, dependent upon the completed work of Christ—his life, death and resurrection and ascension as the Incarnate one, on the basis of his vicarious humanity. That is why Jesus promises, then sends the Holy Spirit—a glorious event we celebrate each year on Pentecost Sunday.

The Holy Spirit comes to humankind in this new, unique way on the basis of the finished earthly ministry of Jesus. On that basis, the Spirit brings about the moment of our response, our receptivity—our first and ongoing repentance, faith, hope and love.

In over one hundred mentions of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, the Spirit's ministry is directly connected to our responses to God (to Christ, to God's word). The Holy Spirit reveals, teaches, enables us to hear, to speak and proclaim, to love, to obey, to pray, worship, love, minister, rejoice, to confess Jesus as Lord, and confess Jesus has come in the flesh. He also leads, sends, guides, sanctifies, unifies and harmonizes the body of Christ, gives gifts of ministry and fruits of Christ-like character to the members of the body of Christ. In sum, he gives us new life in Christ so that we live *in the Spirit* ([Rom. 7:6](#); [Rom. 8:2](#); [Rom. 8:5](#); [2 Cor. 3:6](#)).

What Christ has done for us, the Holy Spirit works out in us on the basis of what Christ has done for us. This "outworking" involves relationship between Christ and us, through a relationship between us and the Holy Spirit. This coordination of the ministry of the Holy Spirit with the finished work of Christ is so close that believing persons can be said to be both in Christ and in the Spirit, and sometimes in the same breath (see [Phil. 2:1](#); [3:3](#)). But our survey of the particular ministry of the Holy Spirit demonstrates that participation and our union with Christ depend upon the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who brings about our spiritual union with Jesus Christ.

The hypostatic union of the Incarnation does not establish this spiritual union, which pertains to our participation and fellowship with Christ. That is the distinct ministry of the Holy Spirit. The ontological basis of that spiritual union and participation by the Spirit in Christ is the saving and reconciling work of Christ in the flesh as one of us, in our place and on our behalf. Without the hypostatic union and the vicarious mediatorship of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit alone could not bring about our union and communion with Christ. Because the work of the Holy Spirit is distinct, it should not be conflated with the Incarnation, though it is not separable from it.

Thus we understand that the Holy Spirit, who is united to the Father and the Son in the ontological union of the Trinity, has a ministry distinct from the Son, yet inseparable from the Person and work of the Son. On this side of Christ's earthly ministry (post-ascension), the Spirit, who is sent by the Father and the Son, interacts with humans in new ways and at new depths. Why? Because of what Christ accomplished in his earthly ministry, which includes his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

This ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit is essential for our participation in relationship with God on the basis of Christ's ministry. The Spirit is the one who, in the proclamation and our hearing of the Word, gives us freedom to respond, who delivers to us the desire and willingness to repent, believe and trust Christ, and thus to receive the forgiveness God has, in Christ, already extended to us, and to receive the power to become and live as the adopted children of God that believers are.

The Spirit opens us up to receive all these benefits of Christ, which reach down to the roots of who we are and who we are becoming. Once again, all this saving work comes to fruition through relationship (participation, interaction, involvement). The work of the Person of the Holy Spirit results in our spiritual union with God, in Christ—a union that is manifested as we participate in the gift of reconciled relationship to God brought about by Jesus Christ through the hypostatic union and thus brings about an atoning union of God with all humanity.

Thus, as noted earlier, the saving union is distinct from, yet reliant upon the hypostatic union, and so upon the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ. The distinction and proper ordering of the spiritual union to the hypostatic union no more denigrates the hypostatic union than the hypostatic union ought to diminish or dismiss the spiritual union.

Summary

With these thoughts in mind, we can now make this summary statement:

Without the distinct and inseparable gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit, we could not and we would not participate—we would and could not share in Christ’s own (vicarious) responses of repentance, faith, hope and love for God and receive his grace given to us. Our salvation requires the ministry of all three Persons of the Trinity and all three moments of God’s saving action towards us, each contributing to the one whole will, purpose and accomplishment of our salvation.

Clarifying our Theological Vision: Part 3

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S MINISTRY, THE CHRISTIAN LIFE, BELIEVERS AND NON-BELIEVERS

Throughout our journey of theological renewal, GCI has, appropriately, emphasized the *objective* aspects of our Lord's Incarnation, vicarious humanity and ministry. Though always acknowledged, less emphasis has been placed on the *subjective* aspects of Christ's ministry and the related ministry of the Holy Spirit. As we've looked further at the relationship of our incarnational Trinitarian faith to the ministry of the church, we've seen the need for greater clarity and some adjustment concerning these less fully-developed topics. Toward that end, this part of the essay examines the Holy Spirit's ministry, the implications for the Christian life, and the distinction Scripture makes between believers and non-believers.

The Holy Spirit and our participation

One area where clarification and adjustment are needed pertains to what we teach concerning the relationship of the Holy Spirit and our participation (response) to all Jesus has accomplished for us. We now see that some of the terms we've been using to describe the completed (*objective*) work of Jesus and his ministry are more appropriately and directly applicable to the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit and our related personal (*subjective*) participation. In that regard, the terms (which we want to use as they are used in Scripture) "union with Christ," the "indwelling" of the Holy Spirit, and being "members of the Body of Christ" all make reference to the believer's response to the freely-given gift of God's grace by the working of the Holy Spirit. These terms refer to the *quality of relationship* that arises out of our participation as persons (*subjects*) being formed and transformed into conformity with Christ by the Holy Spirit.

In Part 2 of this essay, we noted that we must account for both the *hypostatic union* of divine and human natures in the one Person of Christ, as well as the *spiritual union* that we as believers have with Christ—a union brought about by the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit. Though not separated (as if disconnected), these two "unions" are properly and rightly distinguished as two *moments* (aspects) of God's one saving work—a work involving the ministry not just of the Son, but of the Holy Spirit (who is sent by the Father and the Son). Though related, these two moments are distinct aspects of the one (whole) saving work of God. Consequently, we want to avoid the potential error of thinking of the Christian life in ways that collapse the *spiritual union* (our "union with Christ" by the Holy Spirit) into the *hypostatic union*, particularly as it pertains to the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit, promise and fulfillment

The New Testament shows that the Christian life cannot be understood apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit, which takes place after the ascension on the basis of the completed earthly ministry of Jesus. Recall that the ultimate covenant promise of God being our God, and of we being his people, was prophesied to be fulfilled with the sending (pouring out) of the Holy Spirit. This pouring out, which is like water in the desert or breath to dead bones, raises persons up from their graves, gives them new hearts of flesh, and writes on those human hearts what formerly was written only on tablets of stone. Though Israel had the Word of the Lord in certain ways and the Law (the Torah), the Holy Spirit's coming was the high point of Old Testament prophecy. Looking back, we now see how the coming of God's Messiah fits into the plan—the Word of God comes in Person and sends the Spirit to work *intensively* (personally) within individuals, drawing God's people together. He then works *extensively* to bring the blessing to all peoples of the earth.

Jesus' own person and ministry is essentially tied in with that of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was conceived, baptized and anointed by the Spirit. He dealt decisively with evil by the power of the Spirit, he rejoiced in the Spirit, and he offered up his life through the Spirit to the Father on the cross. Likewise, Jesus' ministry towards his people is inseparably tied in with that of the Holy Spirit. As John the Baptist proclaimed, Jesus is the one who, uniquely, baptizes with the Holy Spirit, thus fulfilling the covenant promises and related Old Testament prophecies. Jesus' promise of the Spirit along with his breathing on the disciples while commanding them to wait for the Spirit after his ascension, demonstrate how essential the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit is in bringing about the fullness of God's saving work. Indeed, Jesus' own teaching consistently highlights the interweaving of the Spirit's ministry with his own. Note this declaration from Jesus:

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ([John 15:26 NRSV](#))

Paul affirms this interconnection of the ministries of Jesus and the Spirit:

Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. ([1 Cor. 12:3 NRSV](#))

The tandem ministry of Jesus and the Spirit

This interconnection of ministries is taught definitively in the New Testament's accounts of the Incarnation of the Word of God (Jesus Christ) and of his sending of the Holy Spirit. There we find the "tandem" ministry of the incarnate Son with the Holy Spirit first unfolding, then reaching a new phase following Jesus' ascension.

Then with the rebirth of the people of God at Pentecost, which brings about the formation of the church, the New Testament writers give intensive instruction, exhortation, encouragement, commands, correction and even warnings to those who are gathered as the body of Christ (the church). All these things specify aspects of our participation as members of the body. Throughout the New Testament, we find that the ministry of the Holy Spirit always is related to these responses and thus the sanctifying-transforming of the people of God.

The vast majority of the more than 100 New Testament references to the Holy Spirit indicate that his ministry is responsible for our participation in myriad ways: speaking the word of God, hearing the word of God, revealing, being guided, sent out, forbidden, justified, sanctified, sanctified to be obedient, declaring Jesus to be Lord, living and being led, putting to death sin, praying, sharing, worshiping, loving, being convicted, having new life, being renewed, expressing joy, proclaiming the good news, being witnesses, given gifts and fruit, being full or filled by the Spirit—all of these (and more) in, with and by the Holy Spirit. Thus we understand that the entirety of the Christian life is bound up with the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who engenders all these means of our participation in the life of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit's personal, particular, freeing and transforming ministry

The Holy Spirit frees and enables us to receive and live into the truth and reality of all that God has accomplished for us in Christ. Since salvation is essentially a relationship (a gift of reconciliation between God and humanity), Scripture does not depict the ministry of the Holy Spirit as being impersonal, causal, mechanical or automatic. Having been freed by the Spirit, our corresponding response in relationship to God is dynamic, personal, particular and life sanctifying. Accordingly, Jesus encouraged his disciples with these words:

When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say. ([Luke 12:11-12 NRSV](#))

The book of Acts also provides examples of the Holy Spirit working in individual, highly personal ways: with Cornelius, Philip and the Ethiopian in the chariot, with Stephen, then later with Paul under many different circumstances, and in the many incidents involving other apostles and other groups of people, some who were ready to receive the gospel and some who were not.

The Gospels give many examples of Jesus' personal encounters with people. He extends a personal call to James, John, Andrew and Peter. He speaks privately with Nicodemus. Though some encounters begin in indirect, impersonal ways, they typically turn highly personal—"face-to-face." An example is Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus. Jesus finds him in a tree and ends up sharing dinner with him. Another example is when Jesus calls back to himself the woman with the flow of blood who had only wanted to touch his robes. The point here is that there is nothing generic and thus impersonal about the ministry of Jesus (and the same can be said concerning the ministry of the Holy Spirit). What we find in the Gospels and throughout the New Testament is what TF Torrance referred to as the "personalizing" ministry of Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

As is true of Jesus, the Holy Spirit's work is not causal or mechanical. He is not an impersonal power or force-vector. Nor is he merely a universal principle. Given that salvation is the gift of a reconciled *relationship* for us to participate in, the Spirit's way of working is highly relational and therefore personal. Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit can be resisted. It warns us not to quench the Spirit but to be filled with the Spirit. So there is a real, dynamic interaction between persons and the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit faithfully ministers.

Though not everyone has this personal, relational understanding of the Holy Spirit's work, it is clear that his ministry does not result in a general effect that indiscriminately causes everyone to react the same way. This can be seen, for instance, at Pentecost, where some people observing what was taking place by the Spirit scoffed, claiming it was nothing more than persons being drunk ([Acts 2:13](#)). In other incidents in the book of Acts, Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Spirit and Simon the sorcerer attempted to buy the power of the Spirit for his own purposes. In the book of Hebrews, we are told of people "who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" but who have then fallen away and now "are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt" ([Heb. 6:4-6 ESV](#)). Then we have in the Gospel of Mark the sobering warning about those who are in danger of blaspheming the Holy Spirit with the result that they will never "have" forgiveness ([Mark 3:29 ESV](#)). They have repudiated the One who is delivering this forgiveness personally and thus directly to them (to their spirits). This does not mean that the Holy Spirit cannot or will not resist someone's resistance, or object to their objection, but it does indicate that the Spirit can be resisted—an act of human will for which there are consequences.

The Holy Spirit, maturity and sanctification

By observing that the Holy Spirit works in the church in ways that are not causal or deterministic (thus not "even"), we learn that there are *degrees of maturity* within the body of Christ, even though God's goal (aim or purpose) is for all to reach maturity in Christ. Paul puts it this way:

It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ([Col. 1:28 NRSV](#))

With the goal of maturity in mind, Paul distinguishes between those who are *spiritual* and those who are *unspiritual*, meaning not yet mature in response to the ministry of the Word and Spirit:

We speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. ([1 Cor. 2:12-15 NRSV](#))

Not all are *spiritual* (spiritually mature), even though that is the goal, not only of Paul, but of the Holy Spirit and his ministry. Such maturity is also referred to in the New Testament as being *sanctified*. But that too is regarded as a process of growth that involves the personal and personalizing ministry of the Holy Spirit. The outcome is that not all are sharing to the same degree in Christ's full sanctity, though all are to continue in faith, by the Holy Spirit's ministry, to grow (mature) in that direction since no one has fully arrived at the ultimate goal. Note, for example, what Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification.... May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. ([1 Thess. 4:3 NRSV](#); [1 Thess. 5:23-24 NRSV](#))

Because Paul did not expect the results of the ministry of the Holy Spirit to be instantaneous, he wrote this to the Christians in Corinth:

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. ([2 Cor. 3:18 NRSV](#))

The Christian life is not a self-help program—the *relationship* we have with Christ through the Holy Spirit, that like all *real* relationships is personal, particular, dynamic and interactive. Our relationship with Christ, by the Spirit, occurs over time, resulting in personal transformation that conforms us to Christ. However, those who continually resist or reject the Holy Spirit will not experience most of the benefits of Christ. So the author of Hebrews explains the difference between those who believe and enter God's rest and those who do not:

For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. ([Heb. 4:2 ESV](#))

The finished work of Christ's earthly ministry accomplishing all that is needed for salvation (wisdom, righteousness, sanctification) is never questioned but affirmed ([1 Cor. 1:30](#)). Likewise, the Holy Spirit's faithfulness is stressed and never questioned ([Phil. 1:6](#)). The author of Hebrews both assures us of Christ's finished work, but at the same time also indicates that this puts in motion a dynamic process: "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" ([Heb. 10:14 ESV](#)). We are sanctified in Christ, but we are also being sanctified by the Holy Spirit. As Paul says in [Philippians 2:12](#), we are to "work out our salvation" (live into it) *because* God is at work in us. Paul also says that we are to "press on" to make Christ our own, *because* he has made us his own ([Phil. 3:12, 14](#)). All obedience then is the obedience that belongs to, or is the product of faith in God's faithfulness ([Rom. 1:5](#); [16:26](#), [Heb. 11:1-40](#)).

The point here is that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is personal and personally transforming—it is dynamic and interactive, bringing about receptivity, responsiveness and participation. And the result is

that we are on a *journey* towards spiritual maturity and full sanctification, being changed into the likeness of Christ. But this journey is not automatic, causal, or impersonal. It is not mechanically imposed on all believers, much less on all human persons (including non-believers). Since personal (subjective) receptivity and participation do make a difference, much of the New Testament indicates the differences it makes and encourages, exhorts and even commands us to be receptive to the Word of God and the ministry of the Spirit out of trust in God's faithfulness through the Son and in the Spirit. As Paul exhorts in [Eph. 5:18](#), we are to "be filled with the Spirit."

These personal distinctions related to personal participation should not be taken to mean that God is faithful to some but not to all. The difference our personal responsiveness makes does not condition God into changing his purpose and aim for us and all humanity. It does not make God *for* some and *against* others, and it certainly does not lead him to want to see those who are unresponsive perish.

Our personal response (or lack thereof) to God cannot undo the fact that Jesus is and remains Lord and Savior of all. The character and purpose, mind and heart of God remain just as they have been revealed in Christ. The finished work of Christ is never undone—God remains, in Christ, reconciled to all people, no matter their response. He has and holds out forgiveness for them, is ready to receive them back into fellowship with him, and in that sense accepts them. However, while God accepts them, he does not accept their rejection, their sin, their rebellion, but accepts *them* in order to do away with what is against them and against their participation in the reconciliation accomplished for them in Christ. Nothing changes that reconciliation (with all it means), not even a person's complete or partial rejection of God's gift. However, our personal response (participation) does affect the quality of our lived relationship with God and thus our personal experiencing of the benefits of Christ.

God's omnipresence and the Holy Spirit

Another question often raised about the person and work of the Holy Spirit pertains to God's omnipresence: Is not God's Spirit at work everywhere all the time upon all people, since God is Spirit and thus is not absent from anywhere in his universe? While this is true, the biblical depiction of the working of God's Spirit and the nature of his presence is that God can be present and active in a wide variety of ways. God's presence is not impersonal, static, fixed or constant, as a law of physics might be.

This can be seen in the Old Testament wherever God particularly speaks a Word and where particular prophets receive God's Word. We note as well that certain persons were gifted to contribute to the construction of the Tabernacle. Some were (temporarily, it seems) filled with the Spirit of God for a certain task. We also note that the temple was filled in a particular way with the glorious presence of the Lord—a presence not found elsewhere.

In the New Testament we find a similar dynamic of presence. Jesus said this to his disciples:

This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ([John 14:17 NRSV](#))

Note how Jesus makes a distinction between the Spirit's being "with" them compared to being "in" them. Notice also that Jesus understands that the world in general, rejecting the truth, cannot on its own "receive" the Spirit, and therefore the Spirit will not be dwelling in them compared to those who are receptive. In like manner, Paul makes these statements in his letter to the believers in the churches in Rome:

You are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ([Rom. 8:9 NRSV](#) and see [Gal. 6:1](#))

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God... ([Rom. 8:15-16 ESV](#))

Though God is indeed present to everything that exists, the nature of his relationship with all that he is present to is not static, fixed, impersonal, non-relational. God, by his Spirit, is present and active in a whole range of ways, forging personal relationships with persons and even transforming them to become more truly the persons God intends for them to be in his image. Speaking more colloquially, God’s presence is not like a blanket spread out over everything. God’s presence is not like having an electrical switch being in the “on” or “off” position—either 100% present or completely absent.

It is only as we give full account of the ministry of the Holy Spirit as interconnected with the ministry of the Son, that it becomes clear why so much of the New Testament is dedicated to giving particular instruction, encouragement, explanation, exhortation, correction and even warnings. All these have to do with our *participation*—our involvement in real relationship with the present, living, acting and speaking Triune God. Only by seeing our participation in light of the Holy Spirit (whose ministry takes place entirely on the new basis of a reconciled relationship to God, brought about by Jesus’ finished earthly ministry) will we not end up either back in the place of an external and legal relationship with God or a life that ignores or makes largely irrelevant so much of the New Testament teaching concerning the nature and shape of our joyful participation. Even more than that, there is the danger of losing track of God’s great interest in having us *enjoy* a growing, maturing relationship with him that yields repentance, faith, hope and love—a relationship with him of children with a loving and gracious Father.

Life in the Spirit (personal response)

Given these considerations, it is imperative that we understand (and communicate as best we can) how the moments of our responsive participation in personal relationship to God are due to the ministry of the Holy Spirit on the basis of the finished earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. Our complete salvation (with its past, present and future moments or aspects) is the work of the *whole* Trinity (Father, Son and Spirit). We gain this fully Trinitarian approach by accounting for the scriptural testimony indicating that the Person and earthly work of Christ alone do not automatically, mechanically, impersonally, causally or necessarily result in our spiritual union with God, even though that is the aim (goal, purpose) for Christ’s life and ministry.

All Christ accomplished for us provides the absolutely necessary basis (ground, foundation) for the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the one who frees and enables our receiving of, participation in, and benefitting from the work of Christ. By the Holy Spirit, we are united to Christ as we enter into a personal relationship with him. And in and through that relationship, we share in all that he has done and is doing for us as our Lord who shares our human nature.

Our participation in the reconciled relationship forged by Jesus Christ in his assumption, redemption and sanctification of our human nature throughout his earthly ministry is brought about through the further ministry of the Holy Spirit. We rightly preach and proclaim the Person and work of Christ for all (and here we rightly proclaim that “all are included”), which by the ministry of the Holy Spirit calls forth a particular response to receive (and thus live into) that gift—to thus participate in the relationship. By the Holy Spirit, we are personally addressed and involved in a dynamic interaction with God through Christ and are transformed into Christ’s image or likeness. Who we are in Christ becomes more and more manifested in us as we participate by the Spirit who unites us with Christ. We could say that the finished earthly work of Christ is fulfilled in us, personally, by the freeing and transforming ministry of the Spirit.

What does life in the Holy Spirit look like? In the most comprehensive sense, it looks like conformity to Christ—mirroring in our lives the kind of relationships he had with the Father, the Spirit and with others. That life is often summarized in Scripture as receptivity of and positive response to the revelation and reconciliation achieved by Jesus Christ. Those responses are often summed up by the biblical words *repentance* and *belief (or faith)*. It can also be summarized as having faith, hope and love for God because of and through Jesus Christ.

Most particularly, life in the Spirit of Christ looks like a joyful, free “obedience of faith” in God through Christ that works itself out in following the many commands, imperatives and exhortations and correctives addressed to the church found throughout the New Testament. It involves a deliberate and purposeful participation in ministry as worship and witness that follows the patterns and priorities set out in the New Testament as enabled and gifted by the Holy Spirit. We can summarize all this under the heading of the Great Commandments of love for God (with all we are and have) and love for our neighbors (as God’s representatives).

Excursus on Jesus’ assumption of our human nature

How should we understand Christ’s assumption of our human nature via the hypostatic union in a way that fits with a full recognition of our spiritual union and participation by the Holy Spirit via the spiritual union? A clarification is needed at this point---one that though in line with the historic, orthodox and biblically founded faith, and contained in the writings of leading incarnational Trinitarian theologians, has perhaps not been highlighted sufficiently by GCI in addressing the kinds of questions we find ourselves needing to answer at this point in our ongoing renewal.

Down through the ages a longstanding and essential distinction has been made in Christian theology between *person* and *nature*. The importance of this distinction arose in the Ecumenical Council of AD 680 (the third meeting in Constantinople) in seeking to understand and communicate faithfully who Jesus Christ truly is. With that starting point, *nature* has come to be defined as that which consists of the characteristics, functions and abilities that a class of things (or persons) share---what they have in common. Members of the class that we refer to as "human" share "human nature." Humans have matching physiologies and senses; they can think, feel, know, remember, will, love, appreciate beauty, make moral judgments, seek justice, communicate in language, and respond to God’s revelation and interact with God, etc.

Giving consideration to the nature of a person only, one is not able to distinguish one human being from another. Rather, persons are distinguished not by their *natures* but by their unique *personal identity*: who they are. Persons *have* (possess) these characteristics, abilities and functions, but that is not *who* they are. As personal subjects or agents, they use these capacities and faculties to live out, express or communicate themselves and so live in meaningful relationship with the surrounding environment, including with other persons. A *person* constitutes what makes someone distinct from all others. It is what gives them unique individuality. A person has functions or abilities, such as mind and will, but cannot be reduced to them. No person could live and express themselves in the world without these functions, since all persons have natures. But their persons, their being subjects, or who they are, are not the same as their natures.

The words “soul” or “spirit” are often used in Scripture to refer to the essential personal, individual identity of someone. They indicate what is irreducible and therefore not to be confused with another, no matter how much they may have in common with another of the same kind. Also, speaking of human

beings as being created according to "the image of God" can be used to point to what all human beings have in common. Being created according to the image of God may also simultaneously point to the fact that human beings also are subjects---unique human persons who cannot be reduced to their abilities, faculties, functions, in a way that reflects the ultimate personhood of the Triune Persons and of God being personal, a subject, an absolutely one-of-a-kind God.

The Person of Jesus is what makes him distinct, unique, a one-of-a-kind personal subject or agent. He is eternally the divine Person of the Son, personally distinct from the Father and the Spirit. And, we can say, he shares with them a divine nature. He is one with the Persons Father and Spirit because he has a divine nature in the same way they do. The human nature Jesus assumed is what he has in common with all human beings; it is what makes him related to all human beings at the level of our being. Thus we say of Jesus that he is "fully human." There is no aspect of human nature that he did not assume: a human body, a human mind, will, emotional capacities, etc. Early on it became the consensus of the church that had Christ not assumed some part of human nature, that part would not have been redeemed, healed, reconciled to God. But God in Christ regenerated human nature itself so that we might share in that redeemed nature by his Spirit. That's what was involved in and accomplished by the "hypostatic union."

Via the Incarnation, God in Christ did not assume all human persons to himself. Had that been the case, the distinction between Jesus and all others would have been obliterated---Jesus would be all persons and all persons would be Jesus. As a result, all persons would be identical to the divine Son of God and thus members of the Trinity as Christ is. But that is not what happened at the Incarnation---that is not what the gospel declares. Jesus Christ assumed human nature---that, which *all* human beings have in common, not what makes them unique individuals or subjects---that which gives them personal identity.

By the hypostatic union, which took place at the ontological level of human nature, all human persons are not fused with the person of Jesus. But Jesus Christ did become Lord and Savior of all by his saving assumption of human nature, and he did so in order that all persons might live according to that reality as human persons who, as subjects, receive and participate by the Holy Spirit in that new and regenerated human nature Christ has for them.

Thus we understand that the word "humanity," when used in the context of the Incarnation or hypostatic union, is speaking specifically of human nature, which is common to all human persons. It is not speaking of their individual, unique persons, though we do understand that Jesus assumed human nature for the sake of *all* human persons (with their natures).

Since the hypostatic union does not bring about the fusion of human persons with the human-divine Person of Jesus, we do not worship human beings. Paul and Barnabas rejected completely the worship of those at Lystra who mistakenly thought they were gods in human form, declaring that they were of like (human) nature with those people ([Acts 14:8-18](#)). God's reconciliation and redemption does not mean God turned a created human being (Jesus) or all human beings into a divine being, fusing our persons. Rather, God in Christ reconciled, regenerated and renewed human nature at its very root ([Titus 3:5](#)). He reconciled and sanctified human nature in himself ([John 17:19](#)). He did that so that we, by the Spirit, might share in Jesus' sanctified and glorified human nature and so become fully (or perfectly) human.

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The Christian life: participation in Christ's humanity by the Spirit

Having been permanently joined to the Person of Christ via the Incarnation (with its hypostatic union), human nature was sanctified, transformed, renewed, regenerated and glorified in Christ. We could also say, as does T.F. Torrance, that the human nature Jesus assumed was *personalized* in who Christ is (as the God-man) and in what he has done.

As we, by the Holy Spirit, participate in the vicarious, perfected humanity of Jesus, we are able to have, in and through Christ, full fellowship with God. This participation in Christ's sanctified and glorified humanity is possible because Christ's humanity is now at the *root* of all humanity and because the Holy Spirit, through his ongoing ministry, sets us free to receive from and to participate with Christ. It is on this two-fold basis that we have *union and communion* with Christ (what the New Testament refers to as "union with Christ" or being "in Christ," or being "indwelt" by the Holy Spirit).

This *spiritual union* with Christ does not fuse or confuse our persons with the Person of Jesus (nor does it fuse our spirits with the Holy Spirit). On the contrary, the spiritual union establishes our true *individual personal identity*, which is able to enter into real dynamic personal *relationship* with God, who is the source and measure of all personhood. The hypostatic and spiritual unions thus do not eliminate human personhood. Instead, through the ministry of the Son and Spirit, both human nature and human personhood are confirmed and perfected.

A renewed (recreated) human nature (found in the vicarious humanity of Christ), is the basis for the new phase of the Holy Spirit's ministry to all humanity post-Pentecost. That basis, completed and thus established on behalf of all, is a work of grace that is absolutely necessary for anyone to receive the gift of participation in the new relationship established for humanity in Christ—a relationship realized in individuals by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament refers to this relationship as "union with Christ" (what we refer to generally as the "spiritual union"). This union is brought about by the Spirit, and so is concurrent with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

With these thoughts in mind, we can now draw some conclusions about the Christian life:

- The union (not fusion) of the eternal Son of God and our human nature is called the hypostatic union, which results from Jesus Christ bearing and personalizing human nature on our behalf (thus we speak of Jesus' vicarious humanity).
- To maintain the distinction of persons between Jesus and human individuals, and the importance of our participation (via the ministry of the Holy Spirit), we cannot think (or talk) as if the vicarious humanity of Christ is all there is to God's salvation.
- Though we are not fused with Christ (we remain distinct persons), yet we benefit from the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who personally unites us with Christ in a way that we are able to personally participate in the relationship that God has forged for us in Jesus Christ and thereby receive all his benefits.
- Through the hypostatic union in Christ, which unites (without confusion) God's divine nature with human nature in the Person of Jesus, and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (who unites us to Christ's vicarious humanity), we are set free as distinct human persons to participate in the gift of a personal and personalizing relationship in which we, by Christ, have been included.

We should emphasize at this point that the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit (including the call for our ongoing participation in union with Christ) does *not* nullify or set aside what Christ accomplished for all humanity (believers and non-believers) and what God intends for all. What God has done in Christ places everyone in a new situation—a new, reconciled relationship with God. The ministry of the Holy Spirit then builds upon that, bringing to fulfillment what God intends.

As was explained in Part 1 of this essay, God has reconciled all humanity to himself in Christ. In that sense, we declare the wonderful gospel truth that *all are included*. As also noted in part 1, this relationship of reconciliation calls for, invites, even demands the response of participation in the relationship that has been established for all in and through the God-man Jesus Christ.

Related but not equal in relationship

The relationship we are given with the triune God in Christ and by the Spirit does *not* require that there be exactly mutual, equal exchanges between God and us. In fact, these exchanges *cannot* be equal, for we all stand in need of God's free grace—we all must be freed from bondage to even begin to respond to God. Though the exchanges we have with God are not between equals they are, nevertheless, *reciprocal* (dynamic, interactive). What we are given by God the Father, in Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, involves a *real* relationship—one of personal interaction that is subject-to-Subject.

Speaking of our participation in this relationship (which is the essence of the Christian life), we declare rightly that this participation (like all aspects of salvation) is a gift of grace—one freely given so that it might be received. We are dependent upon God to free and enable our personal response, which is what his grace accomplishes. But we are not thereby eliminated or obliterated as persons (subjects) who personally respond. Indeed, this personal (subjective) response is what we were created and redeemed for. But how do we go about receiving this gift of personal response? Note these points:

- We do nothing to establish the basis or ground or foundation of our response/participation.
- We do nothing to earn or deserve or make the response possible.
- In responding, we are not exercising a freedom to respond to him that we somehow possess apart from God.
- All our responses to God are enabled by the Holy Spirit, who enables us to receive a share in Christ's own (vicarious) responses and thus for us to share more and more fully in his responses, made for us—that is, in our place and on our behalf.
- Our responses are thus gifts of sharing in the Son's responses on our behalf through the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. That is why repentance and faith are called gifts of God's grace.

Admittedly, these points fall short of exact explanations of how the Holy Spirit (mysteriously) works, by grace, in bringing about our response (participation), but that should be expected. The gracious working of the Triune God involves more than just a little mystery for creatures to comprehend. But we do our best to account for what has been revealed to inform our understanding, though we must leave open the "hows" of God's workings. In the end the best explanation as to how we participate in our spiritual union is to say, "by the Spirit." And if we take into consideration all that we come to know about the Holy Spirit in Scripture, that should be sufficient.

What about believers and non-believers?

In the New Testament, belief (faith) is the most often-used indicator of those who are receptive and positively responsive to the Word of God and to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament is clear that not all are believers—not all are responding in faith to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The New Testament assumes a strong distinction between those who are believing and those who are not, or at least not- yet, believing. It assumes that there may even be some who are persistently and actively resisting God (the Holy Spirit in particular).

Belief is the chief way of indicating a person's participation or fellowship with Christ by the Spirit. Unbelief and refusing to repent are indicators of resistance to participation, to receiving the gifts of God's grace. These two responses to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ lead to other correlating differences variously described in the New Testament. As developed above, theologically we can say that not all are in spiritual union with Christ, not all are then incorporated into the Body of Christ, not all are participating in the life of the Holy Spirit. And so not all are maturing in Christ, not all are sharing in the new life found in Christ, not all are sharing in his sanctified human nature by the Holy Spirit.

There are other ways the New Testament consistently makes a distinction between believers and non-believers (not-yet believers). Concerning *believers*, it says this:

- They are open to and are receiving Christ and his Word, responding with repentance and faith.
- They are united with Christ (via the "spiritual union").
- They are members of the body of Christ (incorporated into his body, the church).
- They are brethren (brothers and sisters).
- They are saints, being indwelt and sealed by the Holy Spirit.
- They are adopted children of God.
- They are "in Christ."
- They have been "born from above" (born again).
- They have the mind of Christ.
- They are children of the light.

These phrases and terms are used in the New Testament exclusively of those who are open, receptive and responsive to the Word of God (both Living and written) as the Holy Spirit ministers in their lives on the basis of who Christ is and what he has done for all humanity.

Concerning *non-believers*, the New Testament says this:

- They have not yet yielded to the Holy Spirit.
- They are resisting the Holy Spirit.
- They are not yet repentant—they do not admit they need a Savior, need forgiveness, require God's freely given and unearned grace.

- They continually defend and justify themselves in such a way as to attempt to insist they do not need grace or can somehow earn or deserve God's grace as if they, by their own efforts, can place God in a situation where God owes them favor, mercy, grace such that if God did not give them that favor, he would be in the wrong.
- They go on living in conformity to the particular practices of the surrounding culture that are God-dishonoring. They heedlessly disobey the ethical standards of the New Testament that contribute to life-enhancing, God-glorifying relationships.

Why make these distinctions?

Why distinguish between believers and non-believers (not-yet believers) when it is so unpopular in our day to distinguish between people on any basis? There are several important, biblical reasons:

- The Bible clearly distinguishes between believers and non-believers, and we must assume it does so for good reasons, even if those reasons are not readily apparent at first sight.
- We maintain the distinctions that Scripture does because we believe that they serve a very good (God-honoring) purpose.
- These distinctions are made by the Triune God who has distinction of Persons in his own Trinitarian being. Though the Creator is distinct from and other than his beloved creatures, he loved them and gave his Son for them and their salvation—at his own (very great) cost.
- Making distinctions is not inherently wrong or evil. We make them because the New Testament makes them, but never in abusive or condemning ways. For example, the New Testament never makes distinctions to justify hatred, alienation, injustice or even unkindness. It never uses them to feed self-righteousness, self-justification, pride, arrogance or any form of superiority. Following this example, we should never use such distinctions in God-dishonoring ways. Instead we must always uphold the New Testament usage.
- Positively speaking, the New Testament distinguishes between believers and non-believers in order to show the fullness of God's saving work and not truncate or diminish it. The whole God is involved, each Person of the Trinity making a distinct contribution. God's purpose is to bring people into the fullness of right relationship, which involves a reciprocal relationship wherein there is real participation (response, receptivity).
- The distinctions made in Scripture between believers and non-believers show the way forward for every person by showing the depth of our need. Our solidarity with all human beings, whether Christian or not, is in the need for grace, for forgiveness, for the work of Christ and for the gift of the Holy Spirit and God's written Word. We all stand under God's judgment of having fallen short. We all stand on common ground at the foot of the cross. We all, by the grace of God's Spirit, need to hear about, receive and then respond as fully as we can to the gospel of God's full provision and our deepest need.
- Pointing out the distinction shows the way forward, whether we have been dominated by our own patterns of sin (non-participation, non-communion) or have been sinned against. Christ, by the Holy Spirit working deep within us, can set us free from the bonds of sin, one way or another. That is truly good news!
- The distinction also is used to prevent us from presuming on the grace of God and not participating or actively receiving from God all his provision for us. The distinction is used to

encourage and give hope to those who are participating in the relationship leading to healing, growth and transformation in and through that relationship. God is not finished with any of us yet! Our relationship with him is living, dynamic and transforming. We are not stuck, we are not hopeless, we are not victims of ourselves or of our circumstances. He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion! Of that we can be sure.

- The distinction is used to show that God is faithful in transforming us in relationships (we are no longer where we were) and to encourage and even warn us of falling back into old patterns and old ways, which we used to practice and which others currently practice.

These, then, are some of the good and loving ways the New Testament distinguishes between believers and non-believers. There is no good reason for us to not follow this biblical pattern of terminology and application. By God's grace, making the distinction as Scripture does can serve as an impetus for those who are resisting repentance to begin participating by the Holy Spirit in the life God has forged for them in Jesus Christ by the Spirit. In this way, they may personally and individually live in fellowship with God through Jesus Christ, their Lord and Savior, and thus begin to experience all the benefits of Christ, now and into eternity.

Clarifying our Theological Vision: Part 4

ADDRESSING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE (PART 1)

How does what we have addressed so far in this essay inform our understanding of the Christian life? In this and the next (concluding) part of this essay, we'll seek to answer that question in a biblically faithful way that aligns with and clarifies GCI's incarnational Trinitarian vision. In doing so, we'll address a related question: Why do believers often struggle with temptation and sometimes fall into sin?

It's about relationship and becoming

We begin with the reminder that all humanity was created for a relationship of union and communion with God, through Christ, by the Spirit. Rather than fixed, determined beings, we humans are *becoming beings*, created to *become* primarily in and through relationship with the Triune God. We thus understand that the Christian life is a *becoming life*—becoming, in Christ and by the Spirit, who we truly are in Christ.

A journey of transformation

Our becoming through relationship is a life-long *journey* of growing up in Christ. We participate in this process of transformation, renewal and maturation through our relationship with the Triune God. Though the New Testament is decidedly optimistic about the ultimate destination of this journey, it indicates that different people begin at different points and move forward at different rates. Though it is not possible to pinpoint anyone's exact location on the journey, there are indicators along the way that God is faithful to his promise to "sanctify" us "through and through" with Christ's own sanctity ([1 Thess. 4:3](#); [5:23-24](#)). He has promised to complete the good work that he has begun in us ([Phil. 1:6](#)).

God's work, complete in Jesus Christ

From start to finish, our salvation is God's work of grace—one that is complete in Christ. Jesus is our whole salvation—the Source of our wisdom (especially about God), our righteousness (justification) and our sanctification (transformation) ([1 Cor. 1:30 NRSV](#)). We are not justified by grace then sanctified by our works. We do not "qualify" for any aspect of our salvation, which in all its "parts" (including sanctification) is a work of grace of the whole God: Father, Son and Spirit.

The Christian life is thus about living in dependence upon the Triune God of grace, and as we'll see, it has largely to do with the work the Holy Spirit does to unite us to and conform us to Christ through what we've addressed previously in this essay as the "spiritual union." It is through this union (our relationship with God) that we have access to and are able to possess all the blessings of grace. We trust Jesus to give us these blessings through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Moved by the Spirit, we receive these blessings through repentance and faith. Though never earned or deserved, we receive them *deliberately*, using whatever capacities we have at our disposal (capacities that differ from person to person). Because our transformation (sanctification, maturation, growth) is God's gracious work in us, it follows God's timetable, and God is not anxious or impatient about the pace.

Living by the Spirit "between the times"

To understand the Christian life, we must account for the New Testament teaching that, as believers, we do not yet have the fullness of the Holy Spirit. As we receive and respond to the Spirit, living in fellowship with the Spirit, we must regularly be "filled with the Spirit" ([Eph. 5:18](#)). In this life we are given the "first fruits" ([Rom. 8:23](#)) or "deposit" ([Eph. 1:14](#), also translated "down payment" or "earnest")

of the Spirit, having been “sealed” ([Eph. 4:30](#)) for a greater future with the Spirit yet to be unsealed. We thus understand that our relationship with the Spirit is not fixed, static, mechanical or impersonal. It is dynamic and personal.

Perhaps the most illuminating image in the New Testament that speaks to this is that we are told that an “inheritance” has been “stored up” for us ([Eph. 1:18](#); [Col. 1:5](#); [Col. 3:24](#)). Thus we understand that we cannot, in the here and now, participate, through the Spirit, in the fullness of all that Christ has accomplished for us. We can grow toward that fullness, we can be transformed, we can mature, we can go deeper, but we will not, until we are glorified, “arrive.” Though we should expect and be hopeful about our growth, we should not expect to experience (participate in) in this life, the fullness of Christ’s perfection (all his holiness). To say that is not to diminish our potential for growth—we will always have access to the source of fullness, the completeness of Christ, by the Spirit, even if we never reach that fullness before we are glorified.

There are obstacles of various kinds to our transformation. That is because Christ has not yet returned and so we live “between the times” in what the Bible calls “the present evil age” ([Gal. 1:4](#)). We await the fullness of the kingdom of God and the gift of our glorified bodies. We have yet to “put on immortality,” and so we still “groan” ([2 Cor. 5:4](#)). Nevertheless, we press on! Despite the obstacles in our path, we “strive to enter” God’s “rest” ([Heb. 4:11](#)). As we journey forward, we resist the devil and flee temptation ([James 4:7-9](#)). Rather than using our freedom to fall back into slavery, we put off ways inconsistent with God’s grace and purposes for human life. We die to our old ways, considering ourselves “dead to sin” ([Rom. 6:11](#)). We live in ways that indicate all the worthiness of Jesus Christ himself. We live as if joined (united) to Christ, for, indeed we are!

What we have said so far is generally accepted by Christians, yet there are some terminological issues that need to be addressed as we seek to clarify how we in GCI teach and preach on this important topic of living the Christian life “between the times.”

Our identity as believers

In clarifying the terminology related to the Christian life, we need to return to what we’ve already said in the earlier parts of this essay concerning our identity as believers. We belong to God, body and spirit. We were bought with a price ([1 Cor. 6:20](#); [7:23](#)). Jesus is our Lord and Savior and there is no other. He alone has eternal life for us. He is the fullness of life. We are adopted into his family to be his sons and daughters and live as members of his family ([Gal. 4:5](#); [Eph. 1:5](#)). We are his people, Christ’s body, the church ([1 Cor. 12:27](#)). As such, by the personal, particular ministry of the Holy Spirit, we are united to Christ and live in communion with him daily.

In that spiritual union and communion, Christ, by the Spirit, shares with us all that he has for us, and by the Spirit we are freed and enabled to begin receiving what he has completed for us. That is who we are! But how do we remind ourselves and encourage each other of that identity as we struggle with temptation, as we, despite our identity in Christ, succumb to sinful deeds, words and thoughts?

No dual identity

In a few places in the KJV, the New Testament speaks of an *old man* and a *new man* ([Rom. 6:6 KJV](#); [Eph. 4:22-24 KJV](#); [Col. 3:9-10 KJV](#)). Unfortunately, some Christians wrongly interpret these pairings as meaning that all people (or at least all Christians) have within themselves two opposing identities (persons or wills). Lacking a critical understanding of these verses, they mistakenly take this *anthropological dualism* to be the Bible’s explanation of why Christians struggle with temptation to sin.

In doing so, they embrace an idea that conflicts with the New Testament's insistent, overwhelming proclamation of a *singular* renewed self—a singular identity that believers have as a gift of the Holy Spirit who unites them to Christ. In embracing this dualism, they are adopting an idea that arose in Greek mythology, spread into existential philosophy, and from there into some schools of modern psychology. The idea is seen today in popular contemporary culture, as in cartoons showing a person with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, whispering dueling messages into the person's ears.

The false idea of humans having two competing wills/identities has been adopted by certain theologies, relying largely on ill-informed interpretations of the aforementioned New Testament old man-new man pairings. This mistake has been made because a dualistic view of human nature seems to explain the inner battle experienced by believers, particularly as it relates to the temptation to sin. This inner battle can feel like two opposing forces at work—two selves or persons (or perhaps two wills) at war. Certain Bible translators, embracing this dualism, have selected the word “man” (KJV) or “self” (NIV) in translating the aforementioned verses. Some Christian preachers and counselors have adopted this dualism, viewing it as a helpful way to explain why believers struggle with temptation. However, this dualistic explanation for a believer's struggle with sin is in error—it cannot be upheld biblically and must be rejected because we do not want to build a theology of the Christian life on a concept that undermines our trust and hope in our identity in Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit in us.

Scripture does not address the issue of temptation and sin in a believer's life by positing two internal aspects or parts of a person, or the idea of an internally divided person. Instead, Scripture refers to a struggle that persons have with that which is external (alien) to human being and nature, but one that does encroach and work within the person. In the New Testament, that external influence is called *sin* or *the power of sin*. The New Testament goes on to encourage (and expect) believers to resist sin as part of their journey of transformation. The biblical exhortations to resist temptation do not call into question our singular identity or Christ's completed work. In fact, our identity in Christ serves as the basis for continuing to resist temptation.

A singular identity (Romans 7)

While we must be realistic about our weaknesses and struggles as believers, we must do so without calling into question our identity—the truth of who we are in Christ. Unfortunately, some promote an understanding of the Christian life that seems to make that mistake. Examples are those theological formulations that speak of the Christian (a person who is in union and communion with Christ) as having two *selves* (or two *natures* or two *subjectivities*). These two selves are portrayed as being in unresolvable conflict with one another. While such a view may avoid stirring up false guilt or shame (since nothing can be done about this inner conflict in their experience), it offers what amounts to a counsel of despair. With this viewpoint, little or no change in the inner battle can be hoped for—it's part of the human condition. When union with Christ and his objective work are viewed in a way that pulls them apart from our personal involvement (thus setting up a dualism), any hope of experiencing that participation in the finished work of Christ here and now is ruled out. That mistaken view posits the idea that we have one identity in Christ, but not one that we are able to experience—we can only experience a dual, conflicted identity—two split *selves* or *subjectivities*.

According to some versions of this mistaken theology, Jesus Christ remains at a distance from our experience, but accomplishes things for us that we can't join in on. Our subjective experience is thereby split apart from Christ's objective work done on our behalf. We're caught between a single objective identity on the one side and a dual subjective identity that apparently cannot be resolved, on the other.

According to this mistaken view, this duality in us cannot be resolved in this life since it is built in, intrinsic to us.

This mistaken view of humanity contrasts starkly with formulations that, being faithful to Scripture, speak of one self, one nature, one subjectivity in tension with something that is alien to the self or our nature, namely, the power of sin or evil. That “something” we find ourselves in tension with is not essential to our humanity. It is not intrinsic to or built into human nature. No matter how seemingly influential or how strong a pull this sinful power has, it is alien to us as believers. This is what Scripture (particularly the New Testament) teaches and we should stick closely to the biblical language and patterns of thought in our interpretations and syntheses, not losing sight of the larger truth that we are in union with Christ, who has our whole salvation complete in him and in which we share (participate) by the Holy Spirit.

We should affirm a single identity of the Christian and not a dual identity, even if it might seem that way in an individual’s experience. We should avoid speaking as if our experience of opposition with the power of sin involves two equals of the same strength and determination. Whatever is resistant to our living in Christ is not an equal to Christ and the Spirit at work in us. Instead, the opposing forces are radically *unequal*.

The most faithful way to speak of this tension between us and what tempts us in the Christian life is to follow what Paul says in Romans 7, which is foundational to this topic. [Rom. 7:16-17](#) puts it this way: “If I do what I do not want to do...it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.” Note that Paul is free to differentiate between himself, “I...me...not myself” and the sin working within him. The internal tension or opposition that Paul experiences is not between two selves (persons, subjects), but opposition between the “I...me”—between the person of Paul and the sin (presented as a force) working within and against him. What opposes him, what influences him, what pulls him off base, what tempts him, is not himself (or an alternate false self) but something *other* than himself. In other words, Paul maintains his singular identity even while admitting that he sometimes does what he does not want to do. Paul takes responsibility for sinning—he does not divide his identity (who he is) into two persons or two subjectivities. Rather, *there is something in him that is not him*. This alien power tempts him, leading him to sin—to do what he (as a believer) does not want to do.

This way of thinking is not isolated to a few verses in Romans 7, though the repetition of certain key phrases there gives significant interpretive weight to this understanding that Christians have one person and one nature, not two. Paul is sorting through his experience for the sake of his listeners. All that he writes earlier in Romans 6 and 7 leads up to his conclusion just quoted. Paul has various names for what is tempting him, for the alien thing at work in him. In Romans 7, he identifies that power or influence as “sin,” showing how sin “seizing an opportunity... deceived me” and so “killed me.” He then speaks of being “sold into slavery under sin” and refers to sin as an “evil” that “lies close at hand.” According to Paul, sin is a “law” (principle or power) that is “at war with the law of my mind” ([Rom. 7:11-23 NRSV](#)).

Only one identity

Paul’s emphasis on the power of sin and his conclusion concerning his experience with it, lends strong weight to not understanding our life “between the times” in terms of a battle between two selves or even between two natures (which we’ll address below). The *unity of identity of the human person* is further backed up by how Paul ministers to those he is writing to—by how he addresses the dilemma of believers experiencing temptation and falling into sin. He appeals to the fact of who they now are (their identity in Christ) as the basis upon which they are to be hopeful and thus continue to resist temptation.

That *singular identity* is based on who Jesus is and what he has done for them. On that basis, he is confident that Christ will deliver them ([Rom. 7:25](#)), knowing that they have been set free from the “law of sin and death” ([Rom. 8:2](#)) through what God accomplished in Christ—that which the old covenant could not accomplish ([Rom. 8:3-4](#)). On the basis of who Jesus is and what he has done for us, Paul, in Romans 8, addresses his readers (Christians) as people who have *a singular identity*. In particular, he exhorts them to:

- “walk [live] according to the Spirit” not “according to the flesh [*sarx*]” ([Rom. 8:4-5](#))
- set their minds “on the Spirit” which brings life and peace and not “on the flesh [*sarx*]” as those who, in contrast, are “in the flesh [*sarx*]” ([Rom. 8:6](#))
- view themselves as “in the Spirit” and “indwelt by the Spirit” not “in the flesh [*sarx*]” ([Rom. 8:9](#))
- understand that Christ is “in” them and that they have “spirits” that “are alive because of [Christ’s] righteousness” ([Rom. 8:10](#))
- understand that they are indwelt by the Spirit of the Father, who raised the Son from the dead and whose Spirit dwells in them (said two times in [Rom. 8:11](#))
- understand that they are “not in the flesh” and are “not debtors to the flesh” ([Rom. 8:12](#)) but are “led by the Spirit” ([Rom. 8:14](#))
- understand that they have “received the Spirit of sonship,” not slavery—they are “children of God” and so “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” so that they will be, in the end, “glorified with [Christ]” ([Rom. 8:14-17](#))

As these and other verses attest, the basis on which to live the Christian life is *a singular coherent identity*, not a dual one. This understanding serves as the truth behind every exhortation given to believers in the New Testament. It is on the basis of who they are (as one person) in union with Christ that they resist temptation and participate in the life of Christ by the Holy Spirit.

A common human nature in transition

But why or how does sin and the power of sin have continuing influence in the life of a believer? If we have a singular identity (self), how is it that we are vulnerable to sin and the power of sin? The answer seems to lie in the fact that individual human persons are understood in the New Testament as having *a common (shared) human nature* that is not yet perfected, strong and complete. In theological terms, we can say that our human nature (although in communication with Christ by the Spirit) is in the process of being sanctified and is not yet glorified in us. Our human nature is thus in a dynamic transition as we live out our lives “between the times” in daily relationship with God through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

In Christ the transformation of our corporate human nature, at the head of humanity, is completed, fulfilled. But now, in our individual selves, we participate in what is completed in Christ by the Holy Spirit from “one degree of glory to another” ([2 Cor. 3: 18](#)). What is completed in Christ is ongoing in us while we are living between the times. So we are “being transformed”—sanctified by sharing in the Spirit in Christ’s completed work of sanctifying our human nature.

The New Testament speaks as if human persons have a *nature*. Persons have a common or corporate nature, but persons are not simply this nature. The New Testament distinguishes between the individual person (the “I”) and their common human nature. Our shared human nature renders Christians

vulnerable to temptation and sin. In our current state “between the times” (living in the present evil age before our death and before Christ’s return and our glorification), our common nature has remaining weakness—ones that sin and the power of sin take advantage of. As Paul says, sin “finds opportunity.” We share in human nature, and because of that, we are in transition—in a state of becoming, of being sanctified, transformed, maturing. In this transition time, we are tempted and we sin.

The explanation for our struggle is not that we have a divided self (man/person). Instead, the explanation is that we have a nature that is in transition, which the power of sin can take advantage of. The tension we experience is not between two “parts” within us, but between us (our persons) with our natures in transition and an alien and externally sourced power of sin. We experience this tension “within,” but that is not because the self is divided into two, but because the power of evil can address us at a deep and internal level even after the completed work of Christ. This explanation seems to best sum up our current already-but-not-yet situation and is the New Testament’s understanding of why persons who acknowledge their total allegiance and dependence upon Jesus Christ in repentance and faith can still be tempted and commit sin.

What then shall we do?

How then do we deal with a nature in transition, making us susceptible to temptation and sin? The biblical answer (and admonition) is that we “fight the fight of faith” ([1 Tim. 6:12](#)). We are not to be passive, regarding ourselves as helpless victims. Instead, when we sin, we are, with hope and determination, and by the power of the Spirit, to take these steps:

1. **Confess the truth to God and repent.** We offer our sin up to God for destruction, thanking God that one day we will see this temptation no more and no longer fall into its trap. By confessing and repenting, we are trusting God to be forgiving, and we receive (not earn) God’s forgiveness and so are restored. God is happy to receive this confession and renew our communion with him.
2. **Realign our thinking and resist sin.** As the New Testament states (especially Paul’s writings) based on who we are in Christ and our present and ongoing daily relationship to him by the Spirit, we are to take some initiative for what should have the greater influence upon us and our not-yet-fully-participating human natures. By the grace of God we can begin to align our thoughts, choices, actions and attitudes toward the future of our human natures already transformed in Christ. We can begin to resist the influences that play upon what is passing away or “former” of our human nature. There is one human nature but, we can say, it can face in two directions. The power of sin would have us living in the past, according to what is passing away. But Jesus Christ and the Spirit would have us, with them, align ourselves toward the future that is there for us in Christ—our inheritance laid up for us ([Eph. 1:14](#); [1 Pet. 1:4](#)). We participate with the Word and Spirit’s moving us in the direction they are taking us, and that involves trusting that Christ is at work in us by his Spirit. He who began a good work in us will, indeed, bring it to completion ([Phil. 1:6](#)).
3. **Surrender to the working of the Holy Spirit.** Rather than surrendering to the power of sin, we are to surrender to the working of the Holy Spirit within, in hope of the inheritance completed and laid up for us in Christ. We are to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is,” setting our minds “on things that are above, not things on earth” ([Col. 3:1-2](#)). This translates into action so that we “put to death what is earthly”—those practices in which we “once walked.” We are to “put on, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved” different actions and attitudes ([Col. 3:12-14](#)).

Notice how Paul is calling forth a new pattern of living. He points out several times that believers “have put off the old nature [*anthropos*] with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being

renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” ([Col. 3:9-10](#), RSV). Paul then offers hope: “For you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” ([Col. 3:3-4](#), RSV).

But this hope of the future is not a basis for passivity or hopelessness. It is the basis for Paul’s exhortations to “put to death” ([Col. 3:5](#)) “put away” ([Col. 3:8](#)) and “put on” thoughts and actions corresponding to who we are in Christ ([Col. 3:12, 14](#)). Paul regards this as a process being worked out on the basis of Christ’s completed work: “which is being renewed” (the present participle “being renewed” indicates continuing action, [Col. 3:10](#)).

This pattern, which sets forth both the basis and the outworking of it in our lives, is consistent throughout the New Testament. The completed work of Christ is the foundation for our acting on it as we trust in Christ and the foundation he has laid. That is why Calvin emphasized that our whole salvation is complete in Christ, not just part of it. Calvin did so not to encourage passivity and hopelessness, but rather to encourage hopeful, joyful and deliberate participation here and now. Paul put it this way: “He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness [justification] and sanctification and redemption” ([1 Cor. 1:30](#)). All this is done for us—not so that we do nothing, but so that we might live into it, grow up into it, participate or share in it starting here and now.

After pointing out in [Eph. 3:20](#) the “power at work within us,” Paul goes on in [Eph. 4:1-16](#) to exhort us to “live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (RSV). We show the value of all that Christ has done and who he is as we are “built up” as his body, “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood [humanity], to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine.” But “rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.” Paul continues by speaking of our human nature (*anthropos*), exhorting believers to...

...put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. ([Eph. 4:22, 24](#) RSV)

Because of the finished and completed work of Christ, we are to exert ourselves in hope of it. Paul recognizes that we are involved in a process—which we might liken to a journey—the result of our trust relationship with Christ who has finished his work for us.

Though these passages depict two incompatible patterns of life, there is no sense that these represent two principles internal to us. There is no sense here of a split self, person or nature. Paul is speaking of two paths our human nature can travel, and exhorting us to make the right choice. Jesus Christ is taking us in only one of these directions, and we are called to participate with him in journeying in that direction—the one he has trod and has set out for us to travel in fellowship with him, receiving from him daily by the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 6 Paul brings up for a third time in his writings the idea of an old nature (*anthropos*). He says it is being “crucified” with Christ so that the “sinful body” might be destroyed and we might “no longer be enslaved to sin” ([Rom. 6:6](#)). On that basis, Paul gives exhortations, not to passivity, but to active participation. He tells his readers to “consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” ([Rom. 6:11](#)). On the basis of who they are in Christ, Paul, hopeful of the outcome, exhorts them with these words:

Let not sin...reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as [those] who have been brought from the dead to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you. ([Rom. 6:12-14](#))

In Romans 7 and 8, Paul goes on to more explicitly show that the tension or opposition lies not between two (divided) selves, persons or natures. He makes his point by bringing to our attention the essential, ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit. In Romans 7 he is clear that it is “sin” or the “power of sin” at work in him that tempts and kills him ([Rom. 7:8-11](#)). He sums it up in [Rom. 7:17](#): “So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me, that is, in my flesh [still fallen and weak human nature]. In [Rom. 7:20](#) he reiterates that understanding: “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells in me.” In Romans 8, Paul spells out most comprehensively the implications for our daily lives:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. ([Rom. 8:1-17, NRSV](#))

The opposition revealed here is between us and sin (or the power of sin). It is not between multiple selves or parts of a divided self. As humans, we are not stuck in a hopeless unresolvable existential bind—our participation is not a matter of acquiescing to the power of sin as it plays upon the weakness of our human nature still in transition. Rather, it is a matter of deliberately and hopefully siding with Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit by exerting our lives in the direction that the Spirit wants to take us, to share more fully in the new human nature that Christ has for us. Paul addresses his readers as persons, exhorting them to direct their natures in the direction that Christ has opened up for them and in which they by the Spirit can share. As believers (those in union and communion with God, in Christ, by the Spirit) we can do this only because of our singular identity of being those who belong to Jesus Christ and who live in and by his word and Spirit.

So this is Paul’s description of the dynamics of the Christian life—our life here and now “between the times.” This is what our spiritual union with Christ looks like as it is lived out. We live out our spiritual union with Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit on the basis of Christ’s completed and finished work. By his Holy Spirit at work in us, we align ourselves (our own persons) with Christ and against the power of sin that is opposed to us and to God’s intention for us that has been worked out already in Christ’s human nature.

Sin attempts to take advantage of our human nature that is in transition on this side of glorification. Through the weakness of our human nature, sin attempts to lead us in a direction away from Christ instead of moving in the direction that Christ by the Spirit has opened up to us. But through the revelation of Christ and what he has accomplished for us in our human nature, the deceit of sin is exposed. We have a single identity in fellowship with Christ. Though not yet completed in us, the future of our fully sanctified and glorified human nature is complete in him.

Because the full transformation of our natures has been completed in Christ in every dimension (justification, sanctification, glorification), we can deliberately and purposefully begin receiving some of those benefits of Christ’s completed work here and now. Because the Holy Spirit is now at work in us in a way and at a level far deeper than the power of sin can reach, we can participate in our sanctification by faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the whole God.

Christ’s completed work does not result in leading us to passivity or a hopeless bind. Instead, it leads us to repentance and faith and so to an increased capacity to actively receive from God by the Spirit all that Christ has accomplished for us. The fact that we find ourselves living in a time of transition, of *becoming*, in no way calls into question the singular identity given us by God’s gift of grace, namely that we are his, and all that he has for us is ours in him.

Notes:

Here is additional detail related to the issues addressed in Part 4, above.

1. The old and new nature

Paul speaks of the “old” *nature (anthropos)* three times and of “new” *nature (anthropos)* two times, pairing them twice ([Col. 3:9-10](#) and [Eph. 4:22, 24](#)). In the third incidence of “old nature” (*anthropos*) the contrasting idea of newness is brought up, but what is “new” is not “nature” ([Rom. 6:6](#)). Doesn’t this way of speaking mean there are two simultaneously existing natures? In short, the answer is no. To explain, we need to understand what exactly is meant by the biblical contrast of old and new in reference to our human nature. There is a contrast here, but not one that affirms the idea of the existence of two natures existing simultaneously in one person, nor one that affirms the idea of the existence of a divided self (two selves, persons, or wills). Old and new describe something about a *single* human nature that we share here and now between the times. The qualifications of old and new indicate two opposite directions our human nature, in this time of transition, can be directed or guided.

Anthropos, is qualified by Paul in these three passages as being *old*, which means it is from the ancient past, original or even worn out. *New* indicates a different quality of that nature—renewed, but not brand new or never before existing. To think of the new nature as being brand new would necessitate thinking that humanity has been given a separate, entirely different kind of human nature created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), and then inserted into human existence alongside the old. But that is not the case.

That Jesus is said to be “born of a woman,” “under the law” ([Gal. 4:4](#)) is to say that he is of human lineage like us, thus indicating that in assuming our human nature, Jesus has fulfilled the promise of coming from the seed of Eve. The New Testament gives no justification for thinking that a second human entity (nature) has been created by God through Christ or by the Spirit—one that is ontologically separated from the first kind of human nature that we possess by birth. *Old* and *new* do not indicate two natures. Rather, they characterize one nature in two contrasting ways.

If an absolutely new nature had been created, then there would be no need and no sense for the Son of God to become incarnate or to transform anything. In that case, God would simply create an absolutely new human nature and substitute it for the one we possess. Taking *new* in such an absolute sense eliminates the need and thus the rationale for the Incarnation, which involves the hypostatic union by which the eternal Son of God assumed our human nature. Without the Incarnation and the hypostatic union, there would have been no redemption of human nature. Instead, the *old* would simply have been cast off and a new, completely different version of human nature substituted. These theological objections to the idea of a dual nature are significant, conclusive and vitally important. The idea that there are two selves or two natures in the believer at war with one another undermines the nature and significance of the Incarnation and atonement—this is a very serious matter.

The word *new* is not the only way the New Testament talks about the outcome of the work of Christ on our human nature. It also speaks about our one (human) nature being regenerated (*palingenesis*), renewed (*anakainao*—as in [Titus 3:4-7](#)), or “reheaded up” (*anakephalaiosis* as in [Eph. 1:10](#)). These words indicate continuity between the old and the new nature. The old nature is not cast aside to be substituted by another brand new version. Instead, the old nature is renewed. Speaking of *old* and *new* natures is a metaphor, while speaking of a *renewed* or *regenerated* nature is a more literal description. Human nature is not literally *old* or literally *brand new*. Rather, certain characteristics of the original nature are fading into the past and will one day be entirely gone because that nature is being renewed, restored, newly conformed to Christ’s perfect humanity, thus possessing different (new) characteristics, namely those of the resurrected (sanctified) life. The idea is that there is *one human nature that is being transformed*—not one newly created nature being substituted entirely for an old one (thus positing the existence of two natures).

There are many passages that speak of the nature of the Christian life being like this: *growing* ([Eph. 4:15-16](#); [Col. 1:10](#); [1 Pet. 2:2](#)), *transforming* ([Rom. 12:2](#); [2 Cor. 3:18](#)), *becoming conformed* ([Rom. 8:29](#)), *maturing* ([Eph. 4:13](#); [Col. 1:28](#); [James 1:4](#)), *becoming blameless* ([Phil. 2:15](#)), *being sanctified* ([1 Thess. 4:3](#); [5:23](#)), *pressing/running forward* ([Phil. 3:12-14](#); [Heb. 12:1](#); [1 Cor. 9:26](#)), *leaving behind* ([Heb. 12:1](#)). These all assume a continuity, not a duality of natures (selves, persons, subjectivities, wills).

In accordance with what Paul says in Romans 7, we should think of the transformation of the old nature in such a way that those characteristics that make it subject to temptation and thus prone to being taken advantage of by sin and the power of sin, are being done away. This old nature is being renewed—a renewal that can be experienced in an anticipatory way in this “between the times” as we participate by the Spirit in Christ’s perfected human nature, looking forward to the day of our glorification when our nature will be perfect and we no longer will be subject to temptation and sin.

The concept of two co-existing natures residing in a single individual is shown even more clearly to be wrong in the Colossians 3 passage, which contrasts *old* and *dead* not with *new* but with *resurrected life*. Death and resurrected (eternal) life cannot be literally grasped as being simultaneously true of one individual or of two separate realities in tension. Thus, there is no reason to conclude that Paul is thinking about humans as having two literal, co-existing natures.

Unfortunately, several New Testament verses (in some English translations) have given the impression to some that there are two different natures at work in us. But that impression is erroneous, based on false inferences behind loose English translations of the Greek word *sarx*, which in some versions of the Bible is translated *sinful nature* ([Rom. 7:18, 25](#); [8:3, 4-13](#); [Gal. 5:17](#); [6:8](#); [Col. 2:11](#); [1 Cor. 3:3](#); [Eph. 2:3](#)). Though *sarx* can legitimately be translated as *nature*, adding the qualifier *sinful*, which is not in the text, gives to some the impression that there is also a righteous or holy nature existing side-by-side this sinful nature (though such coexistence is never stated in these passages).

Most English translations do not make the mistake of translating *sarx* as *sinful nature*. Instead, they translate it *flesh*. This closer, and in context preferred, translation does not as readily suggest that there is another kind of flesh (nature) coexisting with this one. When placed in immediate context, there is simply one kind of nature, which is called *sarx* (*flesh*).

This is not to deny that the *flesh* is prone to sin, and so is sinful in that sense. Romans 8 indicates that the flesh we bear is the “flesh of sin”—this is the flesh (nature) that Christ assumed in order to overcome it on our behalf. However, the translation *sinful nature* seems to leave for some an erroneous impression that the word *flesh* does not. When we stick with the translation *flesh* and then see what it is contrasted with, in every passage where a contrast is made, there is no impression left of two natures co-existing in one person. In every instance, flesh is not contrasted with some other kind of flesh (like old flesh with new). Instead, the contrast is with the Holy Spirit. What is being shown to be in opposition in these verses is flesh and Spirit, not one kind of flesh with another kind of flesh.

2. The nature of the opposition

If the idea of two *persons* (*selves/subjects/subjectivities*) is ruled out, does the New Testament account for why believers fall into temptation and sin by teaching that we have two *natures* that exist in opposition—one warring against the other? The answer is again *no*, as we’ll see by noting [Rom. 7:5](#), [Rom. 7:18](#) and [Rom. 8:13](#), where humans are said to be “in the flesh” or living “according to the flesh” without using the terms *nature* or *sinful nature*. In these verses, *flesh* is contrasted not with a different or new flesh, but with the Holy Spirit. We find the same thing in 13 other New Testament passages that speak of this contrast or tension.

The understanding throughout is that the single person (agent, self) is either under the influence of the (sinful) human nature that is old in the sense of passing away, or is under the influence, guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit (who is renewing our nature into the likeness of Jesus’ glorified human nature). While the word *sinful* is not present in any of these passages except when speaking of the flesh that Christ assumed, the fact that he is said to have taken on the “flesh of sin” ([Rom. 8:3](#)) means that being sinful can be attributed to our flesh. But even in connection with Christ assuming sinful flesh, the contrast is not made with another opposing co-existing flesh. Rather, Christ assumed our human nature, our sinful flesh, “so that we might have the mind of the Spirit that is life and peace” ([Rom. 8:6](#)). The contrast is still between the sinful flesh and the Spirit, not between two kinds of flesh co-existing in opposition.

In Romans 7 Paul also speaks about our flesh both before ([Rom. 7:5](#)) and in the middle ([Rom. 7:18](#)) of sorting out how to think about his experience of wrestling with temptation and failing. After announcing his conclusion that it is sin that dwells in him, he says (for the first time): “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh” ([Rom. 7:18](#)). Here he distinguishes between himself and his flesh, his nature. But this sin that dwells in him, that is not him, dwells in his flesh, that is, in his human nature. The power of sin takes advantage of or finds opportunity in his flesh ([Rom. 7:5, 18](#)). Paul distinguishes

between himself, his nature and the power of sin, or simply sin, and that is consistent with all the passages we have surveyed. The opposition he experiences is not between a divided person or two selves or even between an old and new nature. It is sin and the power of sin that is in opposition to him and takes advantage of his fallen human nature, his flesh, his mortal body.

Looking back then, the metaphorical sequence of time in those other three verses (*old vs new*) is meant to allow for a difference that has to do with the change in the character of the single nature of flesh, not with the distinction of two co-existing natures. There is no ontological duality in humanity of either two selves/subjects/persons or of two opposing human natures.

3. Only one human nature

Though some Christians (including some theologians) embrace a divided person (man) or nature theory, it should now be clear that that this theory has little, if any, biblical support. *New* and *old* do not describe two separate entities in opposition— instead they describe the one human nature that can now in each person be prompted to move in two opposing directions. One direction is “passing away” or is a “former” pattern of living. It is *old* in that sense—made obsolete, worn out, even though there is still a way in which it is operative. But Christ has opened the door to a *new* future of human nature completed in him for us.

As T.F. Torrance often stated, Christ, on our behalf, has put human nature on a whole new basis. Human nature has a whole new future that moves in the opposite direction from where it formerly was headed under the power of sin. By the Spirit, we can begin here and now to benefit from that new direction— that new future held out for us in Christ. By the Holy Spirit we can resist the old direction that leads to final death. By the ministry of the Spirit, we can turn and use our natures in a new way, headed in a new direction towards the new future Christ has for us.

This participation by the Spirit in the redirection of our nature according to its renewal in Christ involves a process, a journey. We cannot and will not reach the end or goal (*telos*) in this life, which already is complete in Christ. However, the Bible teaches that we are to expect some manifestation of that renewal in our lives “between the times.” While we cannot predict the rate and cannot locate the exact extent of our progress, we are meant to be hopeful and optimistic about some transformation in our becoming conformed to Christ. But because the working of the Holy Spirit is personal, individual and dynamic and spans a lifetime, the exact pattern and pace will be individualized—it is a “custom” ministry that does not allow for straight-line predictability. However, the overall pattern of the journey will be one that Calvin described as *mortification that leads to vivification*, dying with Christ and being raised up with Christ. It will involve repentance and renewal in faith, hope and love, and it never leads in the direction of self-righteousness or self-justification.

Because, as believers, the power of sin is still somewhat operative in our lives, our spiritual union will involve facing opposition to the progress and manifestations of the Spirit’s renewal. This situation, which is related to the weakness of our human nature, calls for engaging in the “fight of faith” ([1 Tim. 6:12](#)). There will be setbacks. We will need to confess our sin and failings. But that should not undermine our hope or our efforts to follow Christ and trust in his working in our lives by his word and Spirit. It is a fight worth fighting!

The journey of transformation involves the fight of maintaining faith in the completed working of Christ and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit so that by our spiritual union we, as God enables, can share in the fullness of what Christ has accomplished for us in his hypostatic union in our place and on our behalf.

4. The meaning of *anthropos*

There are two words in the New Testament that mean the common nature shared by all human beings: *phusis* and *anthropos*. These both can and should in some contexts be translated *human nature*. The word *anthropos* usually indicates characteristics shared among a class or group of persons. *Anthropos* describes what makes human beings the same, human. It includes men and women. As such, *anthropos* could often be translated *humanity* or *humankind*, or as we have said, *human nature*. What Paul describes as *old* or *new* is human nature, not an individual self, person or man.

In contrast, the New Testament refers to individual persons, or personal entities primarily by using the word *aner*, translated most often *a man*. *Aner* indicates an individual human being, usually male, but the plural may sometimes include females—some particular individual who is human, that is, a person who shares in the common human nature (*anthropos*). The use of *I (ego)*, as we saw Paul doing in Romans 7, also indicates an individual person. And finally, the New Testament indicates a unique individual by the words *soul* or *spirit (psuche or pneuma)*. An individual *person (ego, aner, psuche)* is a created being and is mortal, yet unique. These three Greek words indicate the central core of who an individual person is. They are used to indicate a particular *human being*, not what human beings have in common, not their *human nature (anthropos)*.

No human person can be separated from their nature, even though an individual, a *subject* or *self*, is not reducible to their nature. Human nature is what we have in common, one with another. Our persons are joined to our natures, but our personhood (I, soul, spirit, subjectivity) is what makes us different from one another—not interchangeable with one another—it is what makes us unique and irreplaceable, one of a kind. The two are distinct but inseparable. Consequently, in some cases the best translation of *anthropos* would be *human nature*, which in context means human nature in transition and so prone to sin, or still able to sin. In no case is there good reason to translate *anthropos* as *self*.

In [Col. 3:9-10](#) and [Eph. 4:22-24](#), *old* and *new* are contrasted by translating *anthropos* as *self* (NIV) or *man* (KJV). This mistranslation leads to the false understanding that two selves or persons somehow co-exist alongside each other, either as a divided person or as a person who is internally divided into two separate and opposing parts—the old self (man) and the new self (man). But as we have seen, *anthropos* does not mean an individual self or an individual human (human being, person, subject). *Anthropos* is a reference to what human persons have in common, whereas *ego* (I), *aner* (a man), and *psuche* (soul) are used in the New Testament to convey the meaning of distinct individuals or personal entities and thus are rightly translated *self* or *man*. There can be multiples of these distinct, separate selves (but not multiple natures) that can co-exist in opposition, since individual selves are external to one another, but human nature is not, since it is what all human have in common.

It does seem that when Paul couples *anthropos* with *old* and *new*, he is, in a way, personifying human nature (*anthropos*). However, by mistranslating *anthropos* as *man* or *self*, what is meant to be taken metaphorically (as a personification of the generic, shared human nature) is turned into a description of an individual person or self. Such mistranslation or misinterpretation of a personification reverses what is meant. What is particular and individual (self, person/man) becomes substituted for what is generic and common among all human beings. But that's the rub. There is no literal man or self there, alongside another subject, person, self.

What is characterized as *old* and *new* is what all human beings have in common, not what makes them individual persons, selves, subjects, agents. *Anthropos* does not mean a literal self, a literal human subject (an "I"). So we are not being told in these verses that there are two selves, or two persons.

Translations that indicate otherwise are in error and are misleading. A more accurate translation would be that all human persons share a human nature that can be headed in two directions, towards what is passing away or is obsolete, or what is new and is being renewed.

[Col. 3:9-10](#) and [Eph. 4:22-24](#) do not say that the human nature being described as *old* and *new* are in tension with one another, or struggling against one another. There is a tension and opposition going on that is being addressed in the larger contexts, but it nowhere indicates that there is a tension between old and new natures. The struggle is actually between the person (with their human nature they have in common with all other humans) and an alien party, namely, sin or the power of sin. Every place Paul speaks of our nature being old and new, there is no mention of a tension between them. Everywhere he does mention a tension, it is between a person with their fallen nature (most often *sarx* or *flesh*) and *sin* and *the power of sin*.

The theological idea of a divided self or of a self that is experiencing an internal division, seems to depend on a conflation of passages that speak of opposition and tension in a person's life (e.g., Romans 7) with passages that talk about human nature that has a past that was heading in one direction and now has a future in Christ, heading in the opposite direction ([Col. 3:9-10](#); [Eph. 4:22-24](#)). This conflation, which is unwarranted, violates the meaning of the words used in each context and confuses two different points being made in those two different contexts.

The words for self, person or individual are not used in any explanation of why Christians are tempted and sin. Rather, human nature (*anthropos*) is used in such discussions to explain it, and in those contexts the reason given is that sin is able to take advantage of the lingering weakness of our human nature on this side of our death and resurrection. That is why Paul, in those explanations, addresses our subjects, our I's, our deepest self, our subjecthood, with their single identity, and exhorts us to side with Christ and the Spirit and thereby direct our human nature to act in a way that points towards its new future created in the image of Christ and held for us as our inheritance. Paul is thinking of a single subject with a single identity that can direct and express its life by means of a single common human nature which, at this point in time, can be made to head in two different directions, only one of which aligns with our new identity in Christ and thus with the movement of the Holy Spirit.

5. The meaning of *flesh* and *body*

Other words besides *anthropos* are used in the New Testament to explain why we can still sin (and thus need to repent and confess and receive forgiveness) although we have a new identity in union with Christ. Those words are *flesh* (*sarx*) and *body* (*soma*). They are used synonymously with *human nature* (*anthropos*) and are sometimes translated *nature*. Individual human persons with their singular identities are said to have *flesh* (*sarx*) and *bodies* (*soma*) and to have or share a *common humanity* (*anthropos*). All three of these words can be translated *common human nature*.

The New Testament declares that the power of sin takes advantage of the weakness of human nature, of human flesh (corrupted human nature) and of our mortal (subject to death) "bodily" natures. In that regard, it should be noted that flesh and body do not mean in the New Testament simply being physical, having flesh and bones. They represent human creatures who have "corrupted" natures that are subject to death and prone to sinning.

Having bodies or flesh is not evil in and of itself. They were created good. But our creaturely natures have been corrupted and therefore need to be renewed from the bottom up by God's grace and intervention through Christ and his assumption of our human nature, flesh or bodies, for sanctification and glorification in him and ultimately in us. This is how Jesus' incarnation is described in the New

Testament. He is said to assume our human nature, our flesh and our mortal body. These are synonymous descriptions. And what he assumed, he sanctified. What was crucified was raised up for us, in our place and on our behalf.

When speaking of *flesh (sarx)* or *body (soma)*, mistranslation does not occur since it makes no sense to think of them being multiple, divided or set in opposition to one another, flesh against flesh or body against body. Given that *anthropos* means a common human nature, and that *sarx* and *soma* are synonymous with it, *anthropos* should be translated in a way consistent with *sarx* and *soma*. Such consistency rules out the idea that what is being spoken of (fallen human nature) is a divided self (two selves) or an individual person who has some kind of internal division involving two simultaneously existing natures in opposition to one another.

The New Testament authors address those who are believing and who have been incorporated into Christ (are in union with Christ) as having a *single identity*. They are who they are and who they are becoming in relationship to Jesus Christ. The identity of believers comes from their relationship with Christ and not from their human nature. The believer who (by definition) is united to Christ has a human nature that is in transition from when it was alienated from God to what it is in Christ, sanctified and redeemed. On the basis of that identity given by grace, the believer is to side with the Spirit so that their weak human nature is not controlled by sin, which attempts to take advantage of its lingering weakness and turn it away from the direction Christ is taking it.

For people who have their identity in Christ, though sin is not *necessary*, is *possible* due to the weakness of their human nature. This means that believers, to receive forgiveness and so be rid of guilt and shame, need to confess and repent when they sin. But they do so as those who belong to Jesus Christ, who has promised never to leave or forsake them. They do so on the basis of the sure hope of their eventual total participation by the Spirit in who they truly are in Christ—fully sanctified and glorified children of God.

Note: The concluding part of this essay (Part 5) will be published following GCI's Denominational Conference, which will be held in August, 2017 in Orlando, FL.