

Neighbors in Racial Reconciliation: The Contribution of a Trinitarian Theological Anthropology
Gary W. Deddo (*Cultural Encounters*, Summer, 2007, pp. 27-46)

Thankfully racial reconciliation has been a focus of concern to some degree among the Protestant Christian churches of North America since the abolition of slavery. Since the mid 1960's even among the more conservative evangelical church racial reconciliation has received attention. And more recently in the literature and at the conferences of the Promise Keepers of the 1990's racial reconciliation was given special emphasis. Unfortunately there remain to this day serious social problems amounting to blatant injustice that fall out along racial lines, most especially along the Black-White fault line. It seems, however, that the persistence of widespread injustice in terms of housing, employment, wages, education, wealth, and health care cannot be attributed primarily to attitudes of racial hatred and prejudice among Christians. For social science research seems to be conclusive that these attitudes are not tolerated among most churches, even within the conservative evangelical branch, and are not generally exhibited.¹ So the question arises for the Christian church in general, and the evangelical church in particular, what more can and needs to be done to bring about a more just society beyond attitudinal reformation?

Social scientists Emerson and Smith argue that the continuing injustice remains because over time the very structures, networks, organizations and institutions of American society have been racialized. A racialized society does not need individuals or groups to intentionally promote injustice. Without any explicit intent the structures, ways and institutions themselves generate injustice along racial lines.² Whites remain ignorant of this dynamic, they argue, because they do not experience structural injustice directly themselves and because Christians, especially evangelicals, use some root ideas of their evangelical faith to interpret the reports of the experiences of their black brothers and sisters in a way that obscures if not denies the reality of structural injustice.³ If Christians, especially evangelicals, want to seriously pursue racial reconciliation they must attend to the realities of racialization argue Emerson and Smith. Their primary recommendation is that the social networks within and beyond individual churches must change so that they are no longer racially segregated. Without changes in this practical social element, despite all good intentions, racial injustice will persist and in fact be reinforced since the reality of racialized society will not be recognized much less forcefully addressed.⁴

Without calling into question the findings of Emerson and Smith or their practical recommendation for remediation on the social, practical front, I want to submit that the effort on the theological front is not over. In fact, I strongly suspect that the misuse of those theological roots which blind Christians, perhaps especially evangelicals, to deeper issues of social injustice gives evidence to inadequate or perhaps even misguided theological foundations. While certainly some things must indeed be theologically right to nearly eradicate the moral attitudinal problems of racial hatred and prejudice within the white Protestant church, it seems to me that scrutiny of those theological foundations is incumbent upon us to see if some rebuilding is not called for. If the church is to vigorously continue to pursue racial reconciliation and pursue it in a way that addresses the serious matter of racialization it seems to me that concerted theological effort must be exerted toward that end.

¹ See Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith. *Divided by Faith*, Oxford University Press, 2000, for their brief survey of the history of the Christian church's involvement in matters of race in America and their research on the current attitudes and values of both blacks and whites regarding race relations, social injustice and potential solutions

² *Ibid.*, pp. 7 and 11-17

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-91.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-133.

I want to suggest that at least some of the problem within the church for addressing racial reconciliation lies within the sphere of Christian theological anthropology. For it is within this sphere of Christian theology that we grapple with the very nature of humanity, including what we might mean by race, and where the foundations for ethical obligation, whether personal or social, are laid. Within this subcategory of Christian theology we address the questions who we are as human beings, who is my neighbor, what has gone wrong in our relationships with God and others and what remedy God has made available to us to bring about just and right relationships with God and others. Lacking a clear and solid sense of who we are in relationship to God and then who we are in relationship to all others created according to God's very image will certainly have an inhibiting if not distorting affect on our grasp of right relationship with others, no matter who they are. Our theological anthropology provides the foundational understanding that will inevitably inform our views on issues surrounding racial reconciliation. Furthermore, the particular theological roots apparently used by evangelicals to assess potential solutions to racial injustice in a way that, according to Emerson and Smith, leads them to overlook or even deny racialization, point to confusion or even error in this particular sphere of theological discipline.⁵

Consequently, I want to present four aspects of a trinitarian theological anthropology I believe have great promise for securely grounding any approach to racial reconciliation in the deepest verities of a historically orthodox Christian faith and for providing the most hopeful impetus for addressing both the personal and social/structural dimensions of racial injustice.⁶ Correlating with these four aspects are a number of theses identifying implications for a more complete approach to racial reconciliation.

I. Humanity as Being in Personal Relationships

The basic insights of a trinitarian theological anthropology arise out of a consideration of the person and work of Jesus Christ. For Jesus Christ reveals to us both who God is and who humankind is.⁷ In Christ we discover that the answer to the question about humanity corresponds to and derives from the question about God. The most comprehensive and fundamental truth revealed in Christ is that God is the triune God: the only God who exists, exists from all eternity by virtue of the triune relations among Father, Son, and Spirit. Furthermore, corresponding to that central revelation, Christ reveals that humanity also exists by virtue of its relations in two dimensions: first, with God and then, second, with others and the rest of creation. Finally, in Christ we discover that there is a correspondence among all three of these relationships. Our love for one another is to reflect God's love for us in Christ, and God's love for us in Christ has its source and ground in the Father's eternal love for the Son in the Spirit.

⁵ Emerson and Smith identify three particular assumptions, "rooted in their theological understanding" and transposed to race relations, that conservative white Christians use to understand the problems of race. These "religio-cultural tools," as they call them, are: "accountable freewill individualism, relationalism (attaching central importance to interpersonal relationships), and anti-structuralism (inability to perceive or unwillingness to accept social structural influences), pp. 77-78

⁶ While the growing interest in trinitarian theology can be seen throughout all branches of the church, my synthesis is especially indebted to contemporary theologians such as T. F. Torrance, Colin E. Gunton, Eberhard Jüngel, J. B. Torrance, and Ray S. Anderson. These scholars have deliberately aimed to be faithful to the biblical, prophetic, and apostolic witness to Jesus Christ and have built on the trinitarian theological developments enshrined in the ecumenical councils of the first five centuries. They have also been working within the continuities of the Reformed tradition received from Calvin and through Karl Barth. These expressions of trinitarian theology have been christologically centered and so are also incarnational in character. See Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), for an accounting of this renewed interest.

⁷ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 3/2*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. Harold Knight et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), pp. 19-54 (§43.2), and T. F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 13-14.

Thus, Jesus simply and profoundly lays this threefold correlation out for us: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (Jn 15:9); and then, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (Jn 13:34).⁸

These relationships, however, have a quality of depth not often recognized. Revealed in Christ we find that these relationships are not accidental or external to the being of God, the person of the Son or the being of humanity. Rather, relationship is shown to be essential and internal to divine and human existence. God would not be God were God not triune. Jesus Christ is who he is by virtue of his union with the Father and Spirit and his union with us. And, if humanity did not exist in relationship originally and continually with God, there would be no humanity. Humanity has its existence in and through relationship with God for it does not give itself its own existence but has it in virtue of a continuously given and upheld gift.⁹ Relationship at a profound ontological depth is essential to human being reflecting something of the very nature of God’s own triune being. Relationship is not optional for divine or human being, but makes divine and human being what they are.

The biblical narrative shows just how essential relationship with God is for humanity. That relationship involves a history of deliberate action of God towards humanity, a history that unfolds in three “phases.” First, we are the creatures who belong to God by virtue of our being created and preserved by God through the eternal Word. Second, we are sinners reconciled to God through the atoning/reconciling work of God in Christ. Third, we were created, preserved and reconciled according to an eternal and determinative purpose: to become the glorified children of God, perfected by the Holy Spirit of God for all time, to live within the eternal communion of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹⁰

All of humanity lives and moves and has its being in the history of that relationship. Humanity exists from God, through God, with God and for God. The history of humanity, then, is essentially the history of its relationship to God. So, no description of humanity without such an essential acknowledgment of this purpose and history of relationship can be adequate. Alternative descriptions may correspond in some way to what humanity is. We may describe humanity physically, biologically, psychologically, sociologically, economically, politically, historically even ethically, but if these descriptions are regarded as anywhere near comprehensive, the result will be a distorted and even dehumanizing reductionism. For the essence of humanity will have been left out. In Christ we see that, as utterly different as human creatures are from God, all humanity is, nevertheless, God’s humanity and God has become the God of humanity. Moreover, we find revealed in Christ the destiny of humanity for we see in the Son of God that there is an eternal place in the heart of God for humanity. Humanity was created for union and communion with God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In a derivative way, on the “horizontal” plane, human being is revealed to exist in relationship as well.¹¹ Within the created sphere the most profound level of relationship involves interhuman relations,

⁸ This teaching is the root and source for Barth’s *analogia relationis* (*Church Dogmatics* 3/2, p. 220 [§45]). See also Gary W. Deddo, “The Grammar of Karl Barth’s Theology of Personal Relations,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47, no. 2 (1994).

⁹ See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), for the finest exposition of this point as well as a recounting of the centuries-long struggle in which the early Greek church fathers engaged to overcome the inadequacies of Greek forms of thought for expressing the true nature of personhood as being essentially constituted by relationship or communion.

¹⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/2, pp. 142-55 (§44.3).

¹¹ For a profound philosophical treatment of persons being in relation see John Macmurray’s Gifford Lectures, *The Self as Agent* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1991), and *Persons in Relation* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1991).

especially those of parent and child, men and women, as near and far neighbors.¹² These relations are intrinsic to our human being. Distortions in these relationships constitute distortions of our very humanity. They dehumanize us. When they are right, then human life flourishes as God intends. Human life within the creaturely sphere is constituted in and by the history of these relationship. All other levels of relationship and interaction are sub-forms of these relationships. While not essential they may either serve or do disservice to our essential relationships and so to our humanity.

For our purposes the last of these relationships, of neighbor, is of central importance. From the giving of the law through Jesus' teaching on the greatest of the commands the ethical significance of the neighbor is prominent (Matt. 22: 37-40). It is rivaled only by the ethical instructions given to men and women concerning their relationship and between parents and children. In Jesus' interaction with the lawyer, it becomes clear that the question is not To which ones ought I be neighborly? (Lk. 10:25-36). For that question constitutes evasion. In truth we are neighbors to all and should so act. The ethical obligation arises out of who I am to others. None are excluded.

Now Karl Barth took note that the matters of ethnicity, social/economic and even religious difference are closely related to the biblical ethic of neighbor.¹³ The parable of the Good Samaritan certainly brings this out. But the Old Testament concern for the sojourner, the foreigner, the refugee and the poor all point in the same direction. Some, following Barth, may be near neighbors--being more similar to me in socio-cultural, economic background. Others may be quite different, being very distant geographically, linguistically, culturally. But in the economy of God, I am neighbor to them all. The only question is whether or not I will act as the neighbor that I am in the history of my relationships with others who are relatively different. Ethical obligation is formed and framed by my very existence as a human being of God who essentially lives in relationship to others. Failure to recognize myself as being a neighbor is failure to acknowledge my own and my neighbor's humanity. The violation of this relationship is a violation of my own essential nature and that of my neighbor.

While the biblical narrative certainly recognizes "tribes, tongues (languages), people and nations (*ethnos*)" (Rev. 5: 9 and 14: 6) these designations can all be subsumed under the ethical category of neighbor. These differences never exclude from the purposes of God, but are rather included in the larger scheme of redemptive promises. No matter what the *ethnos*, we remain, first of all neighbor. For we are all under God, Creator, Redeemer and Perfecter, humankind. These differences are radically relativized and can never overrule the obligation to recognize and treat the other as human neighbor who first belongs to God and so is given as a gracious gift his or her status before God.

What then are some of the implications of the relational aspect of a Christian theological anthropology?

Thesis 1. Humanity cannot be regarded individualistically. Being a human person means being in relationship. We are not our own, says the Apostle Paul (I Cor. 6: 19-20). We have our being by being in relationship. We are formed and shaped and come under ethical obligation in relationship to others, whether parents or children, men or women or near and far neighbors. Our essential humanity will either be affirmed and honored or denied and dishonored in these relationships. Ethical behavior is a matter of acknowledging the humanity of my neighbor or denying it in and through the relationships in which we live.

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/4, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. A. T. Mackay et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), §54.

¹³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/4.3 pp. 285ff.

It should be obvious that a theology, evangelical or not, that views persons as autonomous individuals who exercise independent agency over against God or others is woefully inadequate, and, in fact, a distortion. While we can affirm that we are individuals with agency, we are still individuals in relationships. Christian theological anthropology both rules out the ideas of an autonomous individual as well as the dissolution of the individual and personal responsibility. Problems in human relationships then must be approached by taking into full account both dimensions of human existence making sure that we see relationship as essential to who we as individuals are.¹⁴ This first thesis, then, would constitute a serious correction to the theological root of “accountable freewill individualism” that according to Emerson and Smith some Christians utilize to understand the problem of injustice in a way that obscures and even its source in racialization.

Thesis 2. Human problems and human flourishing cannot be addressed individualistically. As human creatures of God we live in a network and a history of relationships. To deny, ignore or even minimize those networks and histories is to diminish the humanity of my neighbor. Being a person means I and my neighbor are who we are in the history and networks of relationship in which we live.

Thesis 3. Race, then, as *ethnos*, consisting of the socio-cultural, historical, linguistic features of human life at best can only have relative value ethically or spiritually speaking. As the creatures of God we are human persons first, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, the new Adam. That relationship is essential to who we are and who we are becoming. Race as *ethnos* has relative value as it is caught up in purposes of God and used to serve the purposes of God for each to be a neighbor to the other. The differences are to be used to serve the neighbor by bearing witness to his or her true humanity secured for them by God through Jesus Christ.

Race, especially when used to differentiate and dismiss certain ethical obligations so that I may justify treating those of a particular “race” as if they were not my neighbor, is a socially constructed perversion. Identifying persons according to race for such purposes may follow the “traditions of men” but it denies their actual relationship to God (and to me) to whom those of another “race” belong. The elevation of the designation of race to an ethically differentiating status is a creaturely attempt to relativize and so deny and obscure the human identity of the neighbor. Such relativizing of the status of my neighbor constitutes the simultaneous absolutizing of both my own and my neighbor’s race. As such it constitutes a rebellious idolatry of a humanly constructed designation.¹⁵

Thesis 4. The sin of racism, then is not so much preferring one race (my own) and being prejudiced against another. Rather, the sin of racism is absolutizing (often inconsistently and arbitrarily) certain relative differences among humans and relativising the absolute (our God-given and sustained status as neighbors) so as to legitimate or at least allow for injustice towards the other “race.” Racism is seeing others essentially according to their race rather than seeing them first as human neighbors who belong to God. Racism is a form of idolatry.

Racism regards the neighbor and ourselves as essentially different kinds according to race, and not as humankind. Such idolatry of social construction absolutizes some creaturely differences at the expense of our common humanity. Whereas, right relationship recognizes the inviolability of the unity of humanity under God and so gives room and play for the relative differences within that unity. Whenever race is absolutized and made the ultimate basis of human identity and value, whether my

¹⁴ For much more that needs to be said about this, see Gary Deddo, *Karl Barth's Theology of Relations*.

¹⁵ This insight is prominent in what has remained an important text on a Christian interpretation of racism, George D. Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man* (New York: Scribner's, 1965).

own or another's, we are guilty of idolatry. The idolatrous social construction of race is excluded by grasping the true identity of humanity whose being and destiny is established in relationship to our creator and redeemer, the living God, who has made us neighbors one to another.

Further implications. Furthermore, the assertion that (a socially constructed) racial identity is absolutely and incorrigibly determinative for our worship, theology, and relationships constitutes a self-justification of our idolatry. It entails that all religion and ethics are mere mythology and self-projection out of our (socially constructed) racial identities. It rules out the possibility of self repentance and receiving from God the gracious gift of our identity as the humanity that belongs to him in fellowship and communion. Ironically enough, while race has in the Christian community largely been eliminated as a basis for exclusion from Christian or human fellowship (following Paul's announcement that there is neither Jew nor Greek, Gal. 3:28) the affirmation of race as a matter of essential identity, even though relative (and most likely socially and so arbitrarily constructed) has nevertheless been made by many in the church concerned about racial reconciliation a condition for real inclusion! Running roughshod over both logic and theologic, this misguided attempt to eliminate racism actually reinforces racism since it 1) makes reconciliation conditional and 2) so reifies race that it becomes itself an ultimate reality that sovereignly governs relations between differing people--absolutizing the (humanly constructed!) differences--rather than their allowing their graciously and divinely accomplished unity to so govern. The unity of humanity is thereby relativized and conditioned by the socially constructed differences rather than the socially constructed differences being relativized by the unconditioned divine gift of a common and unified humanity found in the all inclusive humanity of Jesus Christ, as the Apostle Paul declares (Eph. 2: 15)

Thesis 5. Both exclusion on the basis of racial identity and inclusion on the basis of racial identity are equally idolatrous, equally rendering the benefits of the work of Christ conditional upon our efforts and so seriously inhibiting true participation in the racial reconciliation found in Christ.

The rejection of the idolatry of race does not mean the denial of racial, or better, socio-cultural difference and value, that is *ethnos*. It means that *ethnos* is given its rightful and relative value as a means of glorifying God, but it is never allowed to become an end in itself. Race as *ethnos* is given its proper meaning and enduring value only when it is subordinated to the truth and reality of the one new humanity recreated in Jesus Christ.

Making the significance of *ethnos* relative does not underestimate the powerful and devastating effects of racism but rather fully acknowledges it by highlighting its true nature as idolatry. For race is never more dehumanizing than when it makes itself absolute and usurps the place of the Holy. Racism can be healed only where there is repentance for idolatry under the worship of the true God—Father, Son and Spirit.

II. Being in Personal Covenantal Relations

It is not enough to merely say abstractly that human being is constituted by a history of being in relationship. In Christ such relationships have a particular quality that is manifested in action. In biblical theological terms this means that humanity exists by virtue of being in personal covenantal relationship of holy love. Our threefold belonging to God as creatures, reconciled sinners, and redeemed children manifest the fruit of God's unconditioned and freely bestowed love. Such covenant love is unilaterally promised and is not dependent upon a deserving recipient. Rather such committed and faithful love is extend to the undeserving. But such covenantal love is not indiscriminant or indulgent. It has an aim, a goal: the perfection of the beloved. The God of covenantal love takes

initiative to find us where we are, but in order to take us where he is going, removing every obstacle and transforming us so as to share in his very blessedness.

That covenantal love bestowed on us both demands and enables us to respond with a creaturely reflection of that freely given love in all our relationships. By God's covenant love we are made to be God's own covenant partners in the world.¹⁶ All Christian ethical obligation is founded upon that covenant.

Existing in such personal¹⁷ covenantal relations means then that human existence is not static, inert or mechanical. Such relations involve a willing, acting, discerning, deciding and communicating that, first of all, are directed toward loving God and then toward the merciful and beneficial love of others. It unfortunately needs to be said that such holy love necessarily includes commitment to all that the biblical authors mean by justice and righteousness. Public and private life, individual and corporate life cannot be separated, even if distinguished. Holy covenantal love means the recognition of the full humanity of my neighbor and my commitment and promise to affirm, acknowledge and give witness to my neighbor of his/her humanity in every dimension of life. Covenant love means right relationship with my neighbor in every sphere of life. It also calls for a recognition of the history of the life of my neighbor. As a creature of God who exists in time and space and in flesh and blood, acknowledging that history and responding with the repentance or assistance required due to that history is essential to recognizing the humanity of my neighbor. Love for my neighbor cannot avoid confronting the history of injustice experienced by my neighbor no matter how "right" my individual personal history with that person might be.

Personal covenantal relationships, then, cannot be reduced to a passive inter-personalism as apparently many Christians, especially evangelicals, do. A covenantal approach to relationships calls for a commitment to the well-being of others and taking action to secure it in every area of life. Such action and commitment reflects the very initiative and total help provided for us in Jesus Christ, especially when undeserved. This calls for individual and corporate responsibility. Both the impact of history and the dynamic of a deliberate relationship of gracious benefit that mirrors God's own covenant of love must be taken into any account of love for the neighbor. Anything less constitutes a denial and rejection of the personal, covenantal love of God.

Thesis 6. A covenantal grasp of being in relationship would counter a truncated view of Christian love that would leave out matters of social justice, the impact of history, or leave the all the initiative up to the individual. Covenantal loves calls for active relationship with enabling initiative extended to even the undeserving that they might actively receive and make use of the graciously given help offered.

Being and becoming in relation. Two further crucial aspects of our being in personal covenantal relationships need to be pointed out. First, in and through such dynamic relationships we do not remain the same. We are affected by these relationships. Human existence in relationship with God is a becoming.¹⁸ In such a relationship we become personalized. God is the personalizing Person.¹⁹ Human

¹⁶ See Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/2, p. 320 (§45), and J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1996; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

¹⁷ It should become clear that the word "personal" in this essay does not mean private, or individual, or inter-personal. It really stands for whole human being standing under God's purposes with all their uniquely human capacities that enable them to participate in the myriad relationships within the created structures of life.

¹⁸ For an extensive analysis of God's trinitarian becoming see Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being Is in Becoming* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976).

existence is a history of relationship, of interaction, of communion and communication whereby we become more than what we were. In right relationship with God humanity is becoming truly personal, truly human. In Christ we see that union and communion with God is no threat to humanity but its foundation and fulfillment. For true humanity is perfected in and through covenantal holy communion with its creator, reconciler, and redeemer. Relationship does not mean the end of personal being, but its transformation and fulfillment. So Christian love must hope in the transformation of God's beloved and will want to contribute to that transformation in hope.

Thesis 7. Consequently, the Christian stance cannot be one of settling for the status quo. True love desires and seeks to contribute to the perfection of the beloved. Whatever hinders that transformation will be of prayerful concern to those who recognize that God's covenantal love is a gracious, long-suffering and transforming one. The status quo of the relationship between ethnic neighbors must be addressed.

But such a transforming relationship with God does not take place in a social-historical vacuum. The reconciling work of God took place in the Incarnate life of the Son of God, in time and space, flesh and blood. That work was worked out within the matrix the whole of creaturely existence, under Pontius Pilate, in the shadow of the Temple and its rulers, and even in confrontation with the demonic. The saving work of God in Christ was not merely personal, understood as being private and individual. It was public, social and even cosmic. While indeed the individual is rescued, such deliverance was not accomplished without the radical transformation at the root of the entire social-cosmic matrix of creaturely existence. In biblical terms, we are not only individually forgiven but the very principalities and powers, whether earthly or heavenly, are conquered (Col 1:19). The demonic is overcome. The Prince of Darkness is overthrown and with him death itself. There is one authority established over the whole of the cosmos, one Lord of lords and King of Kings. Furthermore, those individuals rescued are made to be members of the one Body of Christ, the church. And within that congregation the people of God are taught to direct their hope to the coming of the completed reign of Christ in his Kingdom. The redemptive work of Christ did indeed address the roots of the structural aspects of the human condition. The scope of the transformative redemptive ministry of Christ completed and hoped for must certainly erode away any dismissal of the corrosive effects of social structures on human life and flourishing. For the injustice generated by impersonal social structures are just as dehumanizing as are individual personal sins against one another. A Christian grasp of the scope of the redemptive authority of Christ will not be able to settle for the status quo at the social structural level any more than at the personal individual level. For under Christ the two may not be separated.

Consequently all attempts to resist, disregard, deny, denigrate or obliterate our being the covenant partners we are can only contribute to our dehumanization.²⁰ The gracious, reconciling work of God in Christ is designed to overcome every such possibility. Humanity is preserved and then rescued from its own dissolution by the atoning work of God himself in the incarnate, crucified, and risen Son of God. Our actions must bear witness to God's action in Christ.

Thesis 8. A neighbor must be regarded in all his or her relationships whether personal or structural, not just within a few individual interpersonal relationships. Covenantal love will necessarily take into consideration the history of that person and their relationships to all the institutions and social

¹⁹ T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Helmers & Howard, 1992; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 67. See also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 2/1*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), p. 285.

²⁰ Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, p. 26.

structures in which they live. It will be cognizant both of the problem of sinning and also of being sinned against both individually and corporately. Covenantal love has to be concerned about social justice as well as friendship. Evangelical relationalism needs to be supplanted by a robust trinitarian and Christological covenantal love. An evangelical anti-structuralism must give way to a strong and full-orbed grasp of the social and even cosmic scope of the redemptive work of Christ and so bear witness, not to the status quo, but to the hope for the renewal of all things, whether personal or social, public or private.

Extending relations. There is a second aspect to our living in personal covenantal relationship. We live within the larger context of our human relationships for the express purpose of extending such covenant fellowship first to other persons and then, in ways proper to each, to all other dimensions of created existence. All relationships are to bear witness to and thereby reflect God's own personalizing covenant love extended to us in Christ and by the Spirit. The love of Father, Son, and Spirit did not remain internal to God, but through creation, reconciliation and redemption God has sent forth his love to include us within the life of the triune fellowship. Covenantal love contains within it a centripetal force. The love of God is extensive, crossing barriers to grasp others so as to enable them to participate in fellowship and communion including reconciliation and transformation, if necessary, to do so. Jesus himself is called the original Apostle, sent from God to "bring many sons to glory (Hebrews 3:1 and 2:10). Jesus' ministry among outcasts, women, Samaritans and briefly to Gentiles embodied this missional dimension of God's covenantal love. So as those incorporated into the covenant people of God, we are sent out on a mission to include others, even the enemy, within God's covenantal fellowship.²¹ Those who contain their love for themselves and their own kind do not bear witness to the extensive love of God in Christ. The extension of our love to those who are different, even to enemies, is the test of the genuineness of our love.

Thesis 9. This missional dimension of our relational existence places a particular value on reaching neighbors across the differences that might divide. Barrier crossing is essential to the particular relational character of Christian love.

The Son of God's own crossing the divide between Creator and creature is the foundation for the Christian obligation and privilege of overcoming racial segregation and the injustice that follows in its wake. The glory of the church is the quality of its Christ-like love that brings together a redeemed and transformed people of every, tribe, tongue, people and nation (Rev. 5: 9). The church of Acts 2 embodied the truth of nature of such covenantal love. A lack of concern for addressing segregation along racial lines or even socioeconomic lines indicates a profound failure to grasp the very nature of the covenantal love in which the church has its very being. The ministry of the church is missional and this includes not just crossing geographical boundaries but socio-cultural boundaries as well. The theological directive of covenantal extension calls into question any view of racial reconciliation that would settle for having right relationship only within the interpersonal and private dimensions of the neighbor's life. Such a restriction of concern resists the truth of the missional aspects of covenantal relationships which extend out to incorporate the neighbor in a fellowship of right relationship. The extensive nature of covenant love does indeed call for the extension and overlap of our networks of relationship to secure right relationship and so justice and fellowship between those who are near and far neighbors. If Emerson and Smith are correct, it would seem that evangelical theology has not fully taken account of the extensive nature of human and so personal relationships in settling for segregated society and churches. Covenantal love offers a corrective to such a relationalism and antistructural stance.

²¹

Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/4, §54.3.

The ultimate source for our being in personal covenantal relation. We have not yet in our discussion reached the ultimate mystery of our humanity. We must take a further step. In Christ we find revealed to us that the ultimate ground for our existing in personal covenantal relationship is not merely the example or the command of Christ. Covenant relationship between neighbors is founded upon the very being and act of Christ and our being created, reconciled, and redeemed in and through him. That is, the mystery of our humanity lies in the being and act of the Son of God in his eternal triune relations with the Father and the Spirit.

Jesus does not only emulate and command the kind of love we ought to have for one another. His own existence is constituted by his right relation of holy love with the Father in the Spirit. He is who he is by virtue of his union and communion with the Father in the Spirit from all eternity. In time and space and in flesh and blood Christ reveals that the eternal being of God is personal being—that God is a triune communion of love between Father and Son in the Spirit. Covenantal relationship is not merely a phenomenon external to God in God's relationship to creation. Personal relationship is internal and eternal in God. Were God not Father and Son and Spirit in eternal communion of holy love, God would not be. The only God that is, is not a static, inert, mechanical oneness of stuff but a dynamic union and communion of the triune persons. God is eternally loving in his own being.²²

Human being, then, is derived from and given its reality on the basis of the personal covenantal communion of the triune fellowship mediated to us through the Son of God in creation and in re-creation. We exist in personal covenantal relationship because we are created through and for the Word of the Father. We were created to participate in the same communion that the Son of God enjoyed from all eternity in the heart of his heavenly Father. We were created to be the children of God because we were created through and for the one who is the Son of God. In Christ we are loved with the same love the Son receives. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” (Jn 15: 9).

Thesis 10. Thus the ultimate grounding for the imperative that we love one another as God in Christ has loved us is the indicative of the love with which the Son has been loved and which has been given to us by the Son. Ultimately our communion with one another is to reflect and bear witness not only to God's communion with us in Christ but also to the eternal triune communion of Father, Son, and Spirit.

In this light we discover the full sense in which we were created according to the image of God. We were created to personally image in our human relationships the divine love active between Father and Son in the Spirit.²³

In this light it becomes clear why Jesus summed up all the law and the prophets in the two coordinated commands of love. The first command is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. And the second is like it, that is, it is comparable, an image, a reflection, a witness: to love your neighbor as yourself. God's own being is constituted by the personal union of holy love. Our own being is first to be constituted by our covenant partnership of love with God and then embodied outwardly in a corresponding way in all other creaturely relations. Failure to reflect God's own

²² See Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 2/1, p. 286 (§28.2).

²³ This is Barth's way of construing the *imago Dei*; see *Church Dogmatics* 3/2, pp. 323ff. See also Willie Jennings, “The *Imago Dei* as a Christological Vision,” in *Incarnational Ministry*, ed. Christian D. Kettler and Todd H. Spiedell (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Helmers & Howard, 1990); and Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982).

covenantal and personal love in our relationships misrepresents and thereby dishonors Christ. Worse, it defaces the glorious communion of love that God is from all eternity.

The crucial theological insight here is that ethical obligation is not grounded on a divine imagined ideal or expectation, much less a divine need, but rather in God's own graciously established covenant of blessing in Christ.

Evangelical theology is cognizant that ethical obligation is not grounded in the belief that ethical achievement to any degree conditions God to be gracious to us. However, not unlike its so-called "liberal" brethren, the call to ethical responsibility is often generated by presenting the graciously granted Christian life as having the task to subsequently close a credibility gap between the "real" fallen state of humanity and the vision of an ideal state that God has set before us. The Christian life in this frame is taken up as a gracious donation of a potential that we, with God's help, make real, make actual. We are imagined to be the ethical agents who turn the less than ideally real into the divinely mandated actual. This approach, however, inevitably entraps us in the Galatian error (Gal. 3:1ff). We begin with faith in grace but end with trying to muster hope in our own works. While this motivational strategy may generate in the short term moral earnestness it necessarily is accompanied by a guilt, fear and anxiety that inevitably collapse into a self-righteous triumphalism and intolerance or into cynicism and burnout. Meanwhile the character and truly gracious act of God is distorted, lost and forgotten. Rather, a faithful trinitarian anthropology announces that ethical obligation is founded upon the completed work of Christ who has created and restored humanity in actuality. Such evangelical obedience, as Calvin used to call it, we will see, applies just as much to racial reconciliation as any other ethical obligation found within a covenantal relationship with God in Christ.

III. The Fulfillment of Covenantal Being in Relation

Some reflection on the nature of Christ's atoning/reconciling work is now in order. If the heart of the being of God is personal, loving communion, then the atoning/reconciling work certainly bears witness to this. The atoning work in Christ can be construed as God's freely chosen act of love to reconcile and so restore right relationship between God and humankind all in order to preserve and fulfill the end for which humanity was created: to enter into eternal union and communion in the triune life. If personal covenantal relationship is essentially ontological, then relational brokenness affects our very being and reconciliation must also then have to do with our very being in relationship. Consequently God's restoration and healing must take place not externally to humanity but be accomplished within the ontological dimensions of who we are and who we are becoming.²⁴

Indeed, is this not exactly what we see in the Gospel? The incarnation of the Son of God for us and our salvation is not merely instrumental, not merely a temporary tool, or means to another end. The incarnation of the Son of God did not just mean a relocation and appearance of the Son of God in visible form. Rather it effected a hypostatic union with humanity. And that assumed humanity was the lost and broken humanity found within the fallen nexus of its social, political, institutional and historical setting. The Son of God (*homoousion* with the Father) became one substance/being (*homoousion*) with us in our total human condition. Our salvation was accomplished not merely by Christ over us but also in Christ as one of us.²⁵ Our healing took place in him and is shared with us

²⁴ This is a strong theme in T. F. Torrance. He calls relations of this sort "onto-relations." See T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), pp. 43-44, and *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1980), pp. 174-78.

²⁵ J. B. Torrance emphasizes this aspect of Calvin's understanding; see *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, p. 43. It also reflects the insights of Irenaeus and the Cappadocian fathers, who saw the connection of the incarnation and the atonement, summarized in the dictum "The unassumed is the unhealed."

through the restored communion accomplished for us and at God's own expense. "With his stripes we are healed" (Is 53:5 KJV). A wonderful exchange took place in Christ that transforms our being by the transformation of our relationship with God through Christ. We are given new natures, new identities, within the fallen structures of human existence. We are being renewed by sharing in the renewed humanity of Christ himself; a recreation accomplished for us in his complete, socially located, and continuing humanity.

Consequently, the reality of the healing that takes place within the ontological structures of our humanity not only effects a reconciliation with God but also renews and restores in a fundamental way our relationships with others and ultimately with all creation. Rightly grasping the implications of the assumption of our full humanity for reconciliation to God, the teaching of Ephesians 2:15 then becomes clear. The apostle Paul announces there that in Christ, and not just by Christ, the alienation between peoples has been healed. In place of the once divided humanity (explicitly seen in the enmity between Jew and Gentile in Jesus' day) was created one new humanity. The breach and brokenness between human persons was healed along with our reconciliation to God. And notice that in the mind of the Apostle such a healing between persons is not regarded as a potential or a possibility but as an accomplished act. As surely as God has been reconciled to humanity in Christ, so humanity has been healed within its own relationships, in Christ. The humanity of Jesus Christ is an all-inclusive humanity. It includes me and my neighbor set within the entire individual and corporate, personal and social, private and public dimensions of human existence.

Only when the being of humanity assumed in Christ is grasped as being in relationship within the fallen historical, personal institutional structures of human existence, first in its vertical relationship with God and then in its corresponding horizontal creaturely dimensions, can the essential connection between the atonement and racial reconciliation be seen in its proper light and given its proper weight. The connection between the indicative of Christ's incarnation and atonement and the imperative for human reconciliation is not merely a moral one or a functional one. It is ontological, grounded first in the triune life and then in the incarnation, crucifixion and ascension of our humanity in Jesus Christ.

Thesis 11. Consequently, there can be no disjunction between the reconciliation of God and humanity and the reconciliation among human persons. The indicative of God's reconciling grace establishes the ontological grounding for the imperative of racial reconciliation in every dimension of human existence. Resistance to the reconciliation of all persons within our social historical context is resistance to the grace of God.

An Evangelical theology fully committed to racial reconciliation requires a firmer and deeper basis and a stronger and more secure hope that merely the proclamation of a command or the avoidance of the neglect of the practical results of a continuing racial segregation. That basis and hope must give full weight to the meaning and significance of the incarnation, the assumption of our humanity within the structures of our fallen world by which all humanity, especially across racial lines, has been reconciled in Christ.

Hope in the reality of the one new humanity in Christ has a further implication for how we approach the painful matter of experienced injustice along the lines of race. If we were created and reconciled for participation in and witness to covenantal relationship, then in freedom forgiveness must be requested and given unconditionally by all parties.²⁶

²⁶ Harkening back to the discussion made by *Divided by Faith*, Emerson and Smith highlight the crucial offering Evangelicals have in this regard when they write: "Evangelicals have some important contributions to offer for the solution

Thesis 12. While there can be no real reconciliation without justice, making the offering of forgiveness conditional upon the establishment of justice is a betrayal of the gospel and can never lead to reconciliation.²⁷ While there can be no real reconciliation without forgiveness, making the pursuit of justice conditional upon the offer of forgiveness is a betrayal of the gospel and can never lead to reconciliation.

IV. The Shape of Our Covenantal Relationships

While the biblical teaching, summarized in the two great commands, makes it clear that right relationship with God and with others can be summarized as love, which as indicated above must include justice, are we given any more insight into the nature or form or shape of such loving relationships? If, as we have argued to this point, the trinitarian, Christological and human relationships are rightly regarded as being analogous, comparable, then the love of Father, Son and Spirit and God's love for us in Christ should illumine for us the shape of our human relationships—the shape of love.²⁸ And if the fulfillment of that shape is revealed in person and within our creaturely reality in the Incarnation, then that is where we must look to discern more deeply the analogous shape of covenantal love and see if there are implications for right relationship between neighbors.

Theological reflection on the reality of this relationship reached a certain mature expression in the Chalcedonian Creed of 451 in its discernment of the shape of relationship exhibited in the *hypostatic* union of the divine natures. There the relationship of the natures was delineated as being without confusion, without change, without division and without separation in the one Person of Jesus Christ. This description seems to capture a certain logic of right loving relationship between God and humanity that also could provide analogously insight into the right relationship among persons. We could encapsulate the shape of right relationship in the person of Christ as involving three simultaneous dynamics: a unity, a differentiation, and a correspondence of one (nature) with another (nature).²⁹

In Christ we see a perfected unity of God and humanity—a perfected personal communion of mutual love, glory, knowledge and sharing in one authority and mission (John 17). In Christ we see no confusion of God and human nor change of one into the other. In Christ God does not change into a man, nor does a man become God. Neither is there a fusion of both into a third kind of being. The unity does not collapse the distinction. The distinction of natures does not dissolve the unity. The communion is maintained between divinity and humanity in Christ. In fact, the communion confirms the distinction and the distinction magnifies the unity.³⁰

The unity and the distinction of the natures work themselves out in a personal correspondence and coordination of one with the other. Beginning in the incarnation of the Son of God and culminating in

to racial division in the United States—such as their stress on the importance of primary relationships, and the need for confession and forgiveness. These may be important because, given the long, tumultuous history of U.S. black-white relations, solutions that call only for structural change are probably as naïve as solutions that merely ask individuals to make some friends across race. The collective wounds over race run deep. They need to be healed. And for healing to take place, there will have to be forgiveness” (pp. 170-71.)

²⁷ I am indebted to the teaching of J. B. Torrance for this insight. See J. B. Torrance, “Covenant or Contract?” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23, no. 1 (February 1970).

²⁸ Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, p. 40.

²⁹ See Deddo, “Grammar of Karl Barth's Theology.”

³⁰ The discussion of the Cappadocian fathers, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, and others, which all contributed to the formulations found in the early church councils, are instructive here. See Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), chaps. 18-28; also Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*.

the faithful obedience of Jesus upon the cross, our humanity is assumed healed and restored as it is brought into conformity with the Word and will of God. In Christ our fallen human nature is brought to the place where it confirms God's judgment and confesses its sin, where with thanksgiving it receives forgiveness and its adoption as a child of God, and where it takes up God's mission in the world.³¹ In this way the divine and human become corresponding covenant partners in Christ.³² There is a perfect reciprocity of divine and human, of giving and receiving, effecting a wonderful exchange. Yet the unity in reciprocity does not collapse the divinity into humanity nor is the humanity swallowed up by divinity. Here we see covenantal love fulfilled, fulfilled so that the unity, difference and correspondence are all maintained throughout the loving exchange. . What was lost in Adam is restored in Christ (I Cor 15: 22).

Analogously, then, human covenantal love ought to be ordered by this pattern. Wherever the unity of persons in relationship is undone by the distinctions of persons or the distinctions are obscured by the unity there will be a distortion of love. Wherever there is a failure of harmony, correspondence, or cooperation in relationship at any level, there is a betrayal of covenant love. Love requires the maintenance, even the perfection of loving exchange within these dynamics.

Again, the ultimate grounding for this pattern of relationship is found within the eternal triune relationships in which the unity of the Spirit, the Father, and the Son are eternally distinct yet unified in holy love in one being.³³ There is a coordination and correspondence of Father and Son in the Spirit in that there is a mutual love, a mutual glorification and a mutual knowing, willing and purposing, such that there is a reflection of the Father in the Son and of the Son in the Father (Jn 17). Human being then can be said to be personal being in relationship essentially with God and correspondingly with others in which the covenantal love of God is manifested. This covenantal love is personal, transforming and extensive, and it exhibits a unity, difference, and correspondence of persons in relation.

If the norm for the shape of covenantal communion is the communion of Father, Son and Spirit and the communion of God with us in Christ, then both the achievement of unity by the absorption of one person or people by another, or the maintenance of diversity by the autonomy of one person or people must be rejected as a faithful reflection of covenant love of God. Now we can extend this trinitarian and incarnational logic of covenantal love to those persons and peoples who are neighbors, near and far to each other. Under the lordship of Christ, where race as socio-cultural difference is granted its proper relative value, the unity of diverse peoples ought to be enriched by reciprocal exchange of the differences, and the differences would be harmonized or coordinated or for the sake of a unity-in-diversity that glorifies the triune communion and the reconciling work of God in Christ.

Thesis 13. Consequently it should be no surprise, then, that neither extreme of total assimilation nor complete separateness has been completely adopted in our attempts to establish racial reconciliation, although there are continuing proponents of both “solutions.” Rather we have seen an oscillation from one extreme to the other over the past century and a half. In great hope the Christian church should pursue and prophetically encourage a third way in which a true communion of unity, difference and

³¹ Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, p. 79.

³² Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/2, p. 320.

³³ This is the thrust of Colin E. Gunton's *The One, the Three and the Many* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). The Trinity ultimately sheds light on the solution to the problem of the one and the many and provides the ultimate grounds for hope in human relations.

cooperation might come to light.³⁴ In this way the graciously given unity of humanity in Christ becomes visible while the relative differences among humanity take their proper place of enriching the body of Christ and facilitating a fruitful exchange of gifts, freely giving and freely receiving from one another.

Forming both our personal and community relationships along the lines of a unity-in-difference with cooperation is a demanding calling. Making progress toward the manifestation of such a quality of relationship involves a dynamic process that will require constant vigilance, creativity, communication, forgiveness and restoration, long-suffering and hope. It will necessitate humility in which each serves the other. The pathway to either autonomy (and segregation) or amalgamation of a homogeneous people is a far easier one to take. And yet those easier pathways are fraught with peril and do not honor the truth of the gift of a reconciled humanity in Christ. The church can attempt nothing less if it wants to see manifested the glorious gift of the unified yet diverse Body of Christ obediently bearing witness to the coming Kingdom of God in the power of the Spirit.

These are some of the contributions a trinitarian and incarnational anthropology can offer to those seeking a more complete obedient witness to the racial reconciliation fulfilled in Christ.

³⁴

This is the import of Gunton's *The One, the Three and the Many*.