

An Urgent Essay Vital for Our Well-Being:

**Diagnosing the Underlying Pandemic
in Our Human Condition**

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Diagnosing the Underlying Pandemic in Our Human Condition

Discovering Where We Really Are

Among the many tragedies of the COVID-19 pandemic, one recently stands out that draws attention to our deeper condition facing humanity today. This involved Dr. Lorna M. Breen, an ER physician in New York, who treated countless COVID-19 patients until she contracted the disease herself. After appearing to recover, she then committed suicide—killing herself with no explanation or history of mental illness. Her sister said that Dr. Breen was in an untenable situation, which broke her down in spite of all the medical care she provided.

Implicit in this tragedy is the depth of our human condition that is routinely overlooked, commonly ignored, and rarely diagnosed. A poll taken in late April this year by NORC at the University of Chicago found that roughly two-thirds of those in the U.S. say they felt anxious, depressed, lonely or hopeless during the past seven days in this pandemic. These feelings are understandable, given the prevailing uncertainty of our condition and the despair generated about our future—all evolving regardless of the means provided by modern science. And this existing condition consumes us even without taking into account the devastating effects on us economically from COVID-19.

Humanity in general and Christians in particular need to have our attention acutely focused to a depth beyond a coronavirus. The psychological workings indicated above are not mere situational symptoms that point to only a transient condition. Beyond the limits of science, they point to a deeper dynamic that infects our minds and hearts. A related poll finds that for the population in the U.S. having religious belief, nearly two-thirds believe COVID-19 is a sign from God for humanity to change its ways. Whether or not this belief is valid, analogous to the COVID-19 pandemic, overlapping with it and ongoingly interacting with it, this deeper dynamic is the permeating infection creating the pandemic of the human condition. Regardless of our current belief, we are urgently challenged to examine this more pervasive condition inescapably prevailing over all human life today, encompassing all human contexts at the exclusion of no one.

Just as current measures (such as masks and social distancing) taken to fight the coronavirus have amplified the human condition, its unmistakable symptoms pervade our lives (collectively) in relational disconnection and prevail in our life (individually) by breaking down any wholeness of persons. While beyond the limits of science but not incompatible with it, this inescapable infection is the pandemic of sin—a term certain to evoke strong reactionary response, yet, when tempered, invokes the prevailing human condition neither distorted by human bias nor misled by misinformation.

To get to the depth of our human condition and not merely treat symptoms, we need to be able to diagnose what constitutes the infection of sin. The pandemic of our human condition ironically goes beyond ethical deficiencies and penetrates deeper than moral failure, the common parameters of sin. These certainly are included in sin's infection; and the COVID-19 pandemic has brought out many examples of these disconcerting symptoms, even by Christians pursuing their rights to be free in these socially isolating days. Distinctly further and deeper, however, sin is the virus of **reductionism**: whose undeniable workings pervading human life at its core, infects both persons and their relationships by (1) overtly or covertly reducing their wholeness, and (2) explicitly or implicitly fragmenting them into secondary parts, and/or to function with less, little or no significance.

In other words, the all-pervasive infection of reductionism renders persons and relationships to what is *common* to humanity, and thus to what is *normal* in the human condition. And it is a sad irony yet revealing paradox that so, so many persons experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic are impatiently yearning to get back to this *normal* and simply resume what's *common*. I would include many of those believing in God's sign for us to change, because the change considered necessary does not encompass reductionism, and thus include all that is *common* if not *normal*.

Getting the Correct Diagnosis

Given the scope of these two analogous, overlapping and interacting pandemics, our diagnosis is essential in order to expose, fight and be cured of any infection. The medical community has become more and more aware that the accuracy of testing for the coronavirus has been very inconsistent, with frequent false negatives rendering diagnosis problematic at best. Moreover, the latest science on the coronavirus is revealing that the original virus infecting the world has mutated. This mutation likely has now become the dominant source of infection spreading in most sectors of the global community. That makes any vaccine based on the original virus insignificant to prevent any further infection. Of course, any further mutations only compound the problem.

Similarly, the virus of reductionism has mutated into multiple forms; and its evolution keeps adapting to human contexts such that its workings have become even more *common* and thus *normal* to our human condition. On the one hand, this makes the correct diagnosis critical for all of us, because no one is immune to the human condition pandemic and can escape from its prevailing consequences. Furthermore, we can make ourselves more vulnerable to infection by compromising any viable immune system available for our well-being. On the other hand, as with the coronavirus, we can also develop the growth of antibodies to fight the infection of reductionism. Here again, our

diagnosis is critical to having the right antibodies. The growth process of antibodies is viable only when distinguished integrally as both incompatible with what's *common* and incongruent with the *normal* of the human condition. And for human identity and function to be so distinguished from the *common* and the *normal* in human life has been the defining problem for God's people since the emergence of the human condition.

Having the correct diagnosis is essential to any pandemic, and thus irreplaceable for fighting it. That makes the source of our diagnosis critical in order to contain and eventually cure the infection. Science has emerged as the definitive source for the current pandemic, but this has not stopped dubious sources from espousing misinformed claims and misleading diagnoses, which not surprisingly are misguiding many persons in what to practice. When diagnosing the human condition pandemic is at stake, even science can be a misinformed source and thereby make misleading diagnosis of the depth of our total condition. We need to be aware of our biases and not allow them to skew our perspective. For example, evolutionary science and its related neuroscience has been informative in quantifying human function and adaptations; but this descriptive source has limited value because the scope of its epistemic field is constrained to the limits of the person narrowed down to outer in. Given its limitations, science cannot define the inner-out ontology and function of the human person. Therefore, science should not be our primary source for determining who, what and how we are, and thus for defining the depth of our human condition. Any misinformed diagnosis becomes the basis for misleading conclusions about the infection, which result in misguided efforts to stop it.

Contrary to our approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is common misinformation to think that we can self-isolate from reductionism's pandemic and avoid it. Historically, Christians consistently have professed half-truths about it and have been misleading by effectively reducing sin of its constituting reductionism—the genius of reductionism. Such misinformed diagnoses only have reinforced and sustained the human condition pandemic; and, in effect, Christians have even idealized forms of reductionism that have rendered their identity and function to the constraints of the *common* and *normal*. It is imperative, however, and thus nonnegotiable, that any infection of reductionism be diagnosed thoroughly and thereby quarantined rightly in order to treat it completely—imperative and nonnegotiable so that recovery to wholeness becomes a reality in this fragmentary life. Any compromise of this process will not result in restoration; even if changes are made in our *normal*, and new *normal* will not get to the depth required to change the *common* in our condition.

Causative and Amplifying Agents

The mutation of the coronavirus corresponds to evolving mutations of sin composed as reductionism. Changes in reductionism's infection have become increasingly subtle, making diagnosis more difficult and thus increasingly problematic to identify the human condition both in what's *common* for human life and in what's *normal* in our everyday function. From the beginning of the human condition pandemic, its history has devolved with misinformation—with even disinformation from ranking governments entrusted with the public welfare—fake news, and prominently including illusions and simulations of non-infected alternatives. The agency of these usually subtle alternatives has been either causal or amplifying for the human condition by directly or indirectly reflecting, reinforcing and sustaining the reduction of the human person and the fragmenting of human relationships. And the subtle workings of all this also has emerged from and/or unfolded in our theology and practice, notably our theological anthropology (formalized, assumed or implied) as the basis for how the person is defined and their function is determined.

How much social distance have you maintained in order to contain the COVID-19 pandemic? How many of you have worn masks in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus? These measures have been instrumental agents in minimizing the infection of public health. Yet, it is critical for us to understand that such measures are applicable only to our condition from outer in, thus limited to the quantitative dimension of human life—often at the expense of the qualitative.

When the human person and human relationships are assessed on the basis of inner out rather than outer in, the qualitative becomes the primary agent and the quantitative is relegated to the secondary (though still important). When our focus makes this qualitative shift to the inner out, we start to develop a qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness that takes us beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and into the depth of the human condition pandemic. As we venture into the human condition, two definitive agents emerge to help us truly recognize and fully address our condition infected by reductionism. One agent is causal and the other is amplifying, and both agents contradict the instrumental agents used in COVID-19:

1. Contrary to the use of masks for COVID-19, the use of a mask or its functional equivalent is a causal agent for the human condition. In the beginning, God created the human person to *be* whole from inner out in the qualitative image and relational likeness of God's wholeness, whereby human persons vulnerably embraced the whole of who, what and how they were from inner out (Gen 1:26-27; 2:7,18,25). Then, reductionism intervened on human persons and their relationship both with God and each other, the consequence of which reduced

their persons and relationships from wholeness as they used masks to hide themselves from inner out—thereby presenting themselves only from outer in (Gen 3:1-10). This infection of reductionism has mutated since the primal garden, such that the wearing of masks became the new *normal*, even for God’s people in the practice of faith. Jesus exposed the causal agent of masks with the word *hypokrites* (as in Mt 6:2-16; 23:13-29). All hypocrites didn’t necessarily try to deceive, but they did project an illusion or simulation about their true identity, which magnified a reduced identity functioning accordingly. As illustrated in ancient Greek theatre, *hypokrisis* defined wearing a mask to play a role, which shrouded their real identity. In other words, masks (literal or symbolic) have become the causal agent of reductionism that reduces our real identity as a person and fragments us from the wholeness created by God from inner out, distinguished only by the qualitative image and relational likeness of the whole of God, the Trinity. Paul exposed this subtle *hypokrisis* in Peter and other church leaders, the subtlety of which misinformed the gospel and was misleading in their witness and misguiding in their ministry (Gal 2:11-14).

Therefore while wearing a mask makes us less vulnerable to the coronavirus, the reality of our *common* and *normal* masks makes us inescapably susceptible to reductionism’s infection by conversely preventing our person from being vulnerable in our wholeness from inner out. This paradox of vulnerableness is an essential dynamic for our identity and function to be the who, what and how God first created and later transformed with the new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 4:24; Gal 6:15); any lack of vulnerableness by our person in our relationships infects us with reductionism. Accordingly, anything less and any substitutes for this wholeness from inner out unmistakably are infected by reductionism, and all their *common* and *normal* mutations arguably reflect and reinforce the human condition and sustain its pandemic.

2. The second definitive agent, which ironically helps us truly recognize and fully address our prevailing condition infected by sin as reductionism, is distinct as an amplifying agent over a causal agent like masks. Social distance has been unequivocally the instrumental agent that has contained the spread of the coronavirus and its mutations—in spite of misinformed and misguided protests. What has been the most significant agent to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, however, also delineates what is the key amplifying agent for the human condition pandemic. As the *prescription* for the coronavirus, social distance (intensified by social isolation) exposes what is the critical *proscription* against reductionism: the deeper workings of relational distance (intensified by relational isolation), in all its variations and mutations, that construct the *common* and the *normal* of human life. For advocates of evolutionary biology, relational distance

became a necessary (perhaps natural) adaptation in life for “the survival of the fittest”—analogous to surviving the coronavirus today. Yet, the prescription to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic ironically makes more and more distinct what in the reality of human life amplifies the human condition pandemic of reductionism systematically diminishing our identity and function. Human adaptations of relational distance in order to “survive” have only entrenched us further and deeper into the human condition, such that even in the condition for Christians and churches relational distance is our ‘new normal’. Any and all relational distance must—not out of obligation but by the nature of persons and relationships created by God—be proscribed, so that the *new* in Christ becomes clearly distinguished from the *normal*.

God created human persons to be in likeness of the who, what and how God is, that is, the *uncommon* triune God. Therefore, God created persons for relationships together in the intimate relational likeness of the Trinity. When the human condition emerged in the primordial garden, God inquired of those persons: “Where are you?”—that is to say, “Where are your persons from inner out and what are you doing in your relationships?” (Gen 3:9) Their persons had made the consequential shift from ‘inner out’ to ‘outer in’, which required masks in order to hide their true identity and function from inner out, so that they would not be vulnerable with their person in their created wholeness of relationship together in their Creator’s likeness. Consequently, to “survive” in their reduced identity and function they adapted in relational distance, which set into motion the key amplifying agent for the human condition pandemic.

What has also emerged from this defining reality of human life is the cryptic process of infection by reductionism. This process of reductionism is constituted by its workings designed specifically to counter both the whole of God and God’s created wholeness. Because God created human persons in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the trinitarian persons constituted in ontology and function together as One in the Trinity, reductionism’s solitary purpose and function revolve around its *counter-relational workings*.

The genius of reductionism in its counter-relational workings is to subtly influence human persons (1) to shift our persons from inner out to outer in (e.g. by defining ourselves by what we do and have, including its basis physically, culturally, socially, economically and politically), and (2) to shape our mindset with the need, the justification, or simply the innocence to adapt with relational distance for the sake of survival or the benefit of so-called success. Even Jesus’ person was subjected to the subtle counter-relational workings of reductionism, when he was pressured to make primary the outer in and thereby allow himself to be manipulated to create relational distance with the Father (Mt 4:1-11). He never compromised his identity and function and always presented his person in the integrity of wholeness intrinsic to his nature.

Contrary to any relational distance, our relational involvement in following the whole identity and function of Jesus' person is essential for us to fight against reductionism in our own identity and function, whereby our person and relationships will grow in the wholeness of his image and likeness (Col 1:15-20; 2 Cor 4:4; then 3:16-18).

Consequential of the genius of reductionism and the subtlety of its counter-relational workings is that our identity and function have become shaped by what's *common* in human life and what's *normal* in our human contexts. This has predisposed us with limits in our thinking and formed biases constraining our perceptions. For example, to define ourselves by what we do and/or have in possession, on the one hand, is limiting ourselves solely to the *common*, with no basis of hope beyond the *common* except false hopes; meanwhile, on the other hand, such self-definition also constrains us to the *normal's* comparative process of assessing what we both do and have on the relative basis of more-less, better-worse. This unavoidable comparison relegates us to a hierarchical structure that constrains (even enslaves) us in systems of inequality—that which is inherent in the human condition. When our everyday life becomes occupied primarily by what we do and have, and then preoccupied with their comparative valued, our innate human condition is operating.

As our qualitative sensitivity and relational awareness become elusive or lost in any shift to the outer in, we fall into tendencies, practices and patterns that effectively reflect, reinforce and/or sustain the human condition, which becomes inseparable from our condition in our everyday life. Even unknowingly or routinely, we can easily engage amplifying agents for reductionism (cf. the early disciples, Jn 14:9), whereby we take no recourse against reductionism's infection (cf. Peter and other church leaders). Under these prevalent conditions, it is no surprise that the human condition pandemic flourishes among Christians and churches—predisposing us to its limits in our theology and biasing us to its constraints in our practice.

“Where are *you*?”

The Depth of Its Shape and Configuration

Grasping the configuration of COVID-19 has been a challenge for science and continues to be elusive as the infection keeps evolving. Even though children were initially considered at the lowest risk of infection and the most able to fight its effects, now doctors are discovering how endangered they are to the coronavirus causing multi-system inflammatory syndrome similar (if not related) to Kawasaki's disease. No configuration in this pandemic has been definitive. It seems like the best shape we can give the COVID-19 pandemic is 'the curve' and trying to flatten the curve. Yet, with all

the unknowns the present is still dissettled in uncertainty, while the future remains shrouded in mystery.

The shape of the COVID-19 pandemic also has encompassed strains of the human condition pandemic. Various episodes have taken place throughout the global community (notably in the U.S.) that have exposed the infection of reductionism inherent to the human condition. Diagnosing this pervasive condition has been minimal at best and the symptoms likely ignored or discounted. In spite (or because) of the fact that the human condition pandemic prevails over the COVID-19 pandemic, its prevalence is even more shrouded in mystery because the reality of its shape and configuration is not grasped. This is true notably of Christians whose identity and function have not been distinguished from reductionism, since they have not been tested for and cleared of its infection—leaving us limited to our predisposition and constrained in our biases shaped by reductionism.

From the beginning of the human condition pandemic, human identity and function have been reduced based on shifting the person to outer in, thereby rendering the inner-out person secondary if not unimportant. This outer-in person is *who* and *what* is presented to others (including God) without making vulnerable the truth of the inner-out person. Consequently, this “masked” person is *how* relationships are engaged in the *normality* of relational distance; these counter-relational workings subtly though unmistakably shape what configures our human condition. “Where are you?” then also leads to God asking us “What are you doing here?” (as in 1 Kgs 19:9,13)

The shape and configuration of the human condition pandemic has evolved; and like the human transition from gatherers to hunters, the dynamic constructing human identity and function has searched for satisfying (temporarily if not virtually) a relative hunger for the validation ascribed to achievement or success, rather than gathering together what fulfills their wholeness in the breadth and depth of human life. Furthermore, in this transition much of our related theology and practice has become domesticated in the surrounding contexts of the world. What has evolved and continues to evolve is critical to grasp, namely in how we have become predisposed and biased. On the one hand, mutations have taken place, which have confused the presence of reductionism’s infection with misinformed symptoms and misguided diagnoses. On the other hand, however, any mutations have not evolved distinctly away from what is basic and thus always inherent to the human condition: reductionism and its counter-relational workings, which permeate, pervade and prevail at all levels of human life.

Any and all sin constituting the human condition are innately the working of reductionism, whose genius always generates illusions and simulations of what appear to be significant but lack what is essential to the integrity of wholeness. Therefore, the shape and configuration of the human condition emerge only when delineated as reductionism. Understanding the intricacies of reductionism’s workings in its nuances is irreplaceable

in order to recognize its presence and then be able to address its infection in our persons and relationships, our theology and practice.

Since the emergence of the human condition, human function has gotten increasingly enslaved by simulations of freedom. Moreover, human aspirations have become mesmerized by illusions of hope such as “the American dream”—illusions and simulations amplified from the beginning (cf. Gen 3:1-6). The human context (both macro and micro) evolves with seduction, and human life (both individual and collective) adapts in a seductive process, both of which are constructed by the ascribed and vested subtleties of reductionism that misinform, mislead and misguide how we defined ourselves and determine our function. A major consequence of this history is not only how human history keeps repeating the human condition pandemic, but that the critical reality of the human condition itself has become widely reduced to a *notion*—a notion of depleting significance for our attention, much less our concern. Of course, there are still moments of disappointment or displeasure, perhaps shame or anger, but such moments are fleeting without resulting in any change to the condition itself. And while the subject of sin remains a major topic for most Christians, sin has commonly been renegotiated by human terms whereby it is also rendered to a notion without its constitution of reductionism.

It is critical and thus essential for us to understand the adaptive process underlying what characterizes the human condition in general and our human condition in particular. What is specific in our adaptations revolves around human terms shaping the human condition, our particular terms (identified as Christian or not) shaping our specific condition, rather than God’s own terms defining the human condition. For Christians, the shift from God’s terms to our terms is very subtle in our theology and practice, normally misled by simulations of freedom and misguided by illusions of hope: for example, as duplicated from the primordial garden, persons shifted to their terms when the resource availed to them was perceived as “good for personal growth in a delightful way,” and further ascribed to be the primary pursuit “to make one wise much like God” (Gen 3:6).

This shift is ironic because it appears to be vested in a well-meaning purpose with good intentions—after all, what Christian shouldn’t know “good and evil?” But appearances are the critical issue. What underlies shifting to our terms is the seductive influence of reductionism that shifts our person from inner out to outer in, thereby countering God’s terms essential for our person and relationships to be whole and not reduced. The subtlety of reductionism’s workings keeps us from understanding the truth of how we have shaped the human condition by our terms. The fact of this reality continues to evolve as Christians conflate God’s terms with our terms, whereby God’s terms become secondary (even in our theology) and our terms assume primacy—again, all subtly evolving with the seductive adaptations we engage even in the name of God and serving Christ. Many churches and its leaders, notably esteemed in their common

reputation, need to be alerted by Jesus' wake-up call, because "on God's terms I have not found your theology and practice to be whole" (Rev 3:1-2).

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its measures of social distance and isolation, also provides a pivotal alert for us to discern our shaping of our human condition. How would you assess the social distance already existing in your relationships with others in general and at church specifically? Perhaps you never thought about the *common's* social distance in most relationships, nor examined the *normal* social distance existing in your church. While social isolation is not the norm in congregations, many occupy the pews with the experience of relational distance, in the reality of being relationally apart, as if to be in social isolation, participating in effect in simply a virtual gathering. When God asks "where are you in such a condition?" we have to be accountable for any masks making our person less than vulnerable in relationships together; and we need to wake up to the fact that we shape our relationships according to our reduced terms defining our identity and determining our function, terms contrary to God's terms of wholeness.

The shape and configuration of our human condition will not be unknown to us if and when we own up to the *common* and *normal* adaptations composing our terms—namely by the illusions and simulations incorporated into our identity and function—from their surrounding contexts. When we use God's Word as the definitive source to diagnose our condition, the significance ascribed to our terms emerge from and converge in what, who and where we put our trust. In a subtle if not seductive process, the object of our trust influenced by the workings of reductionism condenses distinctly into what become unmistakable *idols*, to which we defer even as God is worshipped. The consequence of putting our trust in these ambiguous idols by a commonly considered innocuous shift, which in truth shifts from trusting God and God's terms, is unequivocal and inescapable: "Those who make these idols and all who trust them shall become like them—that is, reduced from the wholeness in who, what and how God created those persons to be based only on the qualitative relational terms of God" (Ps 135:18).

When we acknowledge our idols garnering our trust, the illusions and simulations shaping our condition in reduced identity and function then no longer will shroud our condition in mystery. At that vulnerable point, we are faced with the pivotal juncture: either (a) to maintain our terms, which undeniably reflects the infection of reductionism in our condition whereby our adaptations conjointly shape the reinforcement and configure the sustainment of the human condition; or (b) to return to God's nonnegotiable terms in order to address our condition of reductionism, treat its infection in order to be turned around, so that our condition can be restored by God's irreducible terms for our transformation to wholeness. Even though God's terms are nonnegotiable and irreducible, God does not impose those qualitative relational terms upon us to control us as *objects* in unilateral relationship. Contrary to misconceptions of God's reign, God created persons as *subjects* to be whole in reciprocal relationship together, therefore, we are all given free

will to make this pivotal choice. And any lack of decisiveness indicates the choice we've made.

Transforming Our Endemic Condition

There has been much speculation about how life will change after the COVID-19 pandemic is over, and that our condition will adapt in a new normal and never be the same. Though this may become a reality, such thinking needs to be awakened to the underlying reality of the ongoing presence of the human condition. The prevailing human condition pandemic constantly dominates by generating the composition of adaptive changes (even by the fittest), such that any so-called change merely extends the configuration of the human condition with variable shaping by our human condition. What evolves is inevitable from how it evolves.

What is inseparably innate to the human condition is reductionism. So, its infection of our identity and function is inescapable and its pandemic is unequivocally immutable. What may appear to be changes in our condition in reality are variable mutations of the infection, which simply reflect our oft-subtle shaping that further configures our infection of reductionism. In other words, our particular shape and configuration to our condition are endemic to the human condition in general. Therefore, the pandemic of our condition also remains immutable—unchangeable, that is, unless all the reductionist shaping that configure our identity and function are made vulnerable according to God's terms, in order to be transformed from inner out. We will not change and really don't change until constituted by the *redemptive change*, in which the *old* in us distinctly dies so that the *new* can rise in our identity and function with wholeness.

This turn-around process is contingent on deep understanding of our endemic condition, so that the pandemic of our human condition can be truthfully and thus thoroughly addressed. This understanding has been elusive even for Christians, many of whom assume being born again has made them new together. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a statement has been repeatedly echoed in our surrounding contexts: "We are all in this together." Certainly we are all affected by the pandemic, so it is valid to say that we are all in this situation. However, there is no valid basis to state that we all *share* in this together. Such a claim can only be made when sharing in whatever together is a function only of relationship; and no mere statement (even identified with love) makes that relational involvement a reality. Anything less and any substitutes for this relational involvement may *associate* us in something together, but this associating should never be confused with sharing in that together. The reality for most churches is a condition operating in associating together rather than sharing in together—an endemic condition magnified by wearing functional masks and amplified by relational distancing.

Today, in fact, there are increasing rumblings evolving from agitated persons stirred up for their personal rights—notably including Christians protesting (even defiantly) for their right to physically assemble in churches during social isolation—often under the assumption of being oppressed by tyrannical policies. Clearly, these protests for rights have been precipitated in spite (perhaps because) of our situation together. Their emergence is not a function of relationship together, but rather the misguided priority given to the individual at the expense of not only public health but more deeply at the loss of the primacy of relationship together as God created with nonnegotiable and irreducible qualitative relational terms. What emerges from all this instead distinctly points to what is endemic in our condition.

Freedom certainly does not function with oppression, yet the exercise of individual rights can abuse freedom and result in one's tyranny for the sake of those rights. The apostle Paul chastened Christians in their freedom in Christ: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity to exercise your human condition, but through the relational involvement of love make primary sharing in relationship together over what would be limited to your individual rights and thus only benefit yourself" (Gal 5:13, cf. 1 Cor 10:23-24). The individual person is not lost in Christian freedom, but in the dynamic of this freedom's reality the person becomes vulnerable to be the whole of who, what and how the *person* (not the individual) is in Christ—the whole of whom renders the individual insignificant and without the value ascribed to it by reductionism, which operates to elevate the individual to an idol.

Paul goes deeper by making definitive the process constituting Christian freedom and its outcome for our identity and function. The counterpart to freedom in human life is having individual rights. Those rights, however, cannot give the individual the right to do whatever they want, because that would result in an anarchy crumbling freedom. Yet, the protests for rights during the COVID-19 pandemic make the false assumption that the individual has the right to do what they want. In this dynamic it is critical to understand: Whenever what we want to do is defined and determined in any way by the bias from our reduced identity and function, there are inevitable repercussions that reverberate relationally and systemically in our surrounding contexts.

What this bias exposes ironically validates the statement "We are all in this together." What is validated is the endemic condition *common* to the human context and *normal* in daily human life: our enslavement in the human condition that controls how we define our identity and determine our function. Indeed, like it or not, we are all in this endemic condition together. And nothing validates this more than reductionist ways we define our identity and determine our function. This is demonstrated widely in the COVID-19 pandemic; social distance and isolation have prevented most persons from engaging in the *normal* function of their identity. This majority has been constrained from operating in what they *do* in life, making uncertain what they *have* for life, thereby

relegating their identity and function to further reductions in their value. This constraining process mirrors the enslavement of persons constrained to their reduced identity and function—the endemic condition preventing their complete function in their full identity of wholeness.

Paul always discussed Christian freedom not in political, economic, or mere social terms—although it certainly has deep implications for them all—but rather directly in contrast to and conflict with the endemic condition of enslavement that we are all in together. Accordingly, the human condition in general and our human condition specifically cannot be addressed without going to this depth.

Historically, as evidenced in recent protests, enslavement has different connotations. Being enslaved by and thus to the human condition has decreasingly occupied those thoughts and perceptions, instead preoccupied by a distinct predisposition and bias of so-called freedom. Any such freedom, however, can only be composed by falsehood or be reported by fake news, as long as that freedom does not involve being freed from the reductionism that defines our identity and determines our function. Being freed, on the one hand, is not a complex process for Paul; on the other hand, it is compounded by endemic conditions. Endemic to all persons, peoples, tribes and nations throughout their history has been the recurring cycle of an *identity crisis*. Entrenched in the comparative process generated in human life based on an outer-in criteria, no recourse has been achieved to resolve the depth and breadth of consequences from its designed inequality inevitably constructed at all levels of human life—recurring through time in one form or another.

Our human condition remains immutable without the essential freedom distinguished in Christ, whose redemptive process by Christ was defined by Paul for the experiential truth in our theology and the relational reality in our practice. His integral fighting, both *against* the reductionism endemic to the human condition and *for* the uncommon gospel of wholeness embodied by the person of Jesus, demonstrated the *new normal* for Paul's theology and practice; they were changed ever since his own identity and function were transformed from reductionism to wholeness. Thus, the validity of Paul as the definitive diagnostic source for the underlying pandemic in our human condition is based on the experiential truth and relational reality of his wholeness in relationship together with the *uncommon* God.

Partially based on the personal experience of his previously reduced identity and function—which distorted his theology and practice in the *common* and *normal* of Jewish tradition (cf. Phil 3:4-7)—Paul diagnosed the functional mask (“veil”) worn by many of God's people, an endemic condition which prevented them from understanding the wholeness of God's qualitative relational terms (2 Cor 3:14-15). This enslaved their identity and function in reduced terms from outer in, from which God's terms were distorted by their own terms shaping their theology and practice; this is an endemic condition pervasive, if not prevailing, among Christians and churches today. On the basis

of this pandemic and for the purpose of treating it, Paul then counters this inescapable reality of enslavement with the only solution that gets to the heart of the pandemic in order to change our human condition—the transformation in antithesis to the fragmentary reforms shaped by our terms:

“But [the antithetical conjunction] when one entrust one’s person from inner out to the Lord Jesus, the functional mask of enslavement is released. Now as the triune God, the Lord is One together with the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. The significance of this freedom distinguishes the following change in our condition: all of us who are now released from our functional masks of enslavement to reductionism, and thus made vulnerable to reflect once again the image of God in our person, are being transformed from inner out back into the qualitative image and relational likeness of God, constituted to be whole in relationship together just as Jesus and the Spirit, along with the Father, are One” (2 Cor 3:16-18).

The transformation to wholeness in our identity and function is the only process that not only changes us from our endemic condition of enslavement, but that also distinguishes our identity and function from what is *common* and *normal* in its endemic shape and configuration. The *common* signifies the summary configuration of all the variable shapes representing the *normal*, that is, the *common* and *normal* encompassing the world of the human condition. The Bible simply uses ‘the world’ as shorthand for the human condition, and the *common* configuring the world is in direct contrast and conflict with the holy God and God’s holy way; ‘holy’ signifies what is not *common* and apart from the ordinary or *normal*, thus which unmistakably distinguishes **the uncommon**. Therefore, God is *uncommon* in ontology and function, that is, not of this world and thereby distinguished from its endemic condition.

Furthermore, the ongoing tension and conflict generated between the *uncommon* and the *common/normal* persists in the world, because God’s *uncommon* ontology and function are incompatible with the *common*’s reduced identity/ontology and function. Accordingly, any attempts to associate, integrate or conflate them are incongruent. If the *uncommon* seems paranormal, that’s because the *common-normal* bias persists in your identity and function; and this predisposition will continue to bias your theology and practice until it is confronted.

Consequently, Paul made it imperative for our identity and function “not to be conformed to this world”—“conformed” (*syschematizo*) to the same outer-in patterns—“but in contrast and conflict, be transformed [*metamorphoo*] by the turn-around changes of your person from inner out” (Rom 12:2). In his integral fight against reductionism and for the gospel of wholeness, such conformity was always incompatible, therefore the distinguishing dynamic of nonconformity was never optional but imperative. Not

surprisingly, this made Paul a source to be scorned among his Jewish detractors and a source of contention among Christians even to this present day (e.g. 2 Cor 10:8-10, cf. 2 Pet 3:15-16). With compatibility, however, those transformed from the human condition are now also not of this world, whereby they likewise need to be distinguished clearly *uncommon* in their identity and function, always in ongoing contrast and conflict with the *common* and *normal* endemic condition of the world.

At the same time, we need to understand that even as turn-around changes are being worked on, any lapses in our involvement in this transforming process will always render us to what is our *default mode* in our endemic condition: reduced identity and function in our person and relationships. Thus, we should never assume that transformation will unfold without an ongoing relational involvement with him who embodies our redemptive change to wholeness. “Follow my whole person in the primacy of relationship together, and where I am, there must you be also in ongoing relational involvement” (Jn 12:26).

The “Just as” *Antibody*

The infection of reductionism is tenacious in its pervasive workings and prevailing control in human life; and its effects are unforgiving on all affected. Thankfully, forgiveness is available for those affected by this condition. But this solution has been misinformed by half-truths composing a reduced salvation that centers merely on being saved *from* sin, whereby misguided and misled Christians have been disconnected from what we are saved integrally *for* and *to*. Those disconnected have been guided and led by a gospel shaped in effect by fake news. These often subtle distortions emerge from the pervading counter-relational workings of reductionism, which don’t outright deny Jesus but constrain Jesus’ person from his wholeness both constituted in his trinitarian relationship together and constituting our relationship together in likeness—what he saves us *for* and *to*.

The whole gospel was embodied by Jesus’ whole person as the *antibody* that counteracts the *common* in our identity and the *normal* in our function, and that fights off this infection in our theology and practice. In his formative family prayer (usually considered his high priestly prayer, Jn 17), Jesus made imperative for all his followers what is irreducible for their identity and nonnegotiable for their function. As persons transformed from inner out in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity, he makes definitive that “they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world” (17:14,16); therefore, “I pray and support them because they need to be made *uncommon* and truly distinguished from the *common* and *normal* as they live in the world” (17:17-19). As the *uncommon* in the world—no longer conforming to the *common*

and *normal*—the identity and function of his followers must continue to be irreducible and nonnegotiable, so that they will be distinguished “*uncommon* in their persons from inner out and whole in relationship together just as I am, just as we are One” (integrating 17:11,14,16,21-22). “Just as” constitutes the qualitative image and relational likeness of the Trinity that is essential to distinguish our *uncommon* identity and function, that is, for those no longer enslaved to the endemic condition of the world. Therefore, “just as” counteracts the underlying pandemic in the human condition today in order for it to be transformed.

The *antibody* constituted by Jesus’ person is not an antiseptic substance that is not vulnerable to the human condition pandemic, nor who does not experience the consequential effects of reductionism’s infection. On the contrary, God the Son was embodied to be exposed to the human condition, which he certainly experienced consequentially even in his vulnerable involvement with his closest disciples (Jn 14:9). God the Father didn’t spare the Son from the consequences of the human condition but in truthful fact “sent me into the world” (Jn 17:18) to bear the full impact of sin as reductionism, in order to redeem enslavement to all the workings of reductionism so that the redeemed would be transformed to wholeness. Exposure to this infecting process wasn’t minimized by the Father, even during the Son’s most vulnerable plea (Mt 26:36ff), consequently the Son wasn’t saved from it or comforted during it (Mt 27:46). The incomparable relational outcome of this paradoxical relational process is now the reality that the embodied Word became the essential antibody to resist, fight, and cure infection from reductionism. The Word, therefore, is the definitive source essential for our growth and development in wholeness throughout (not just initially) the human condition pandemic.

The path the Son experienced in the human condition is analogous to the path that Jesus calls us to undertake in following him. To “follow me where I am” (Jn 12:26) requires the integral relational involvement both with Jesus’ person on his intrusive relational path into the world (17:15-18), and also with the Father’s relational comfort and protection during the human condition pandemic (17:11). Perhaps you’ve wondered where God’s presence and action are during critical situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, including in fragmenting situations both personal and throughout the world in these divisive times. Our focus commonly centers on situations when our person is defined from outer in, especially revolving readily around situations of difficulty for us. For the *uncommon* God, our situations may not be unimportant, however, they are always secondary (as evidenced by the Son’s), and thus they remain in lower priority to the primary: the primacy of relationship together, in qualitative terms over quantitative terms—what we are saved *for* and *to*. This unfolds for us as a relational reality, however, only when the secondary is ongoingly integrated into the primary; when integrated the secondary never takes priority over the primary both for who, what and how God and we are.

In Jesus' prayer, the relational outcome of the Father's comfort and protection throughout the human condition pandemic is unmistakable: "so that they may be *whole* just as we are *whole*" (17:11). "Just as" is the essential antibody irreplaceable to "follow me" in the world without becoming "of the world" (17:14).

The lack of the *antibody* has left us susceptible to infection. Sadly, the relational outcome of "just as" has eluded many Christians and gatherings in churches during the human condition pandemic. When diagnosed by the Word, our own condition readily reveals that (1) our identity/ontology (*who* and *what* we are) has yet to be defined clearly in the qualitative image of the *uncommon* God, and that (2) our function (*how* we are) has yet to be determined distinctly in the relational likeness of the Trinity—that is, defined and determined by the qualitative relational dynamic of the "just as" *antibody*.

When (perhaps if) the COVID-19 pandemic is over, masks will come off and social distance/isolation will stop. These analogous measures, however, are endemic in the human condition. Reductionism shifts the person to outer in to define our identity primarily in quantitative terms incompatible with our primary qualitative image, and then determines our function accordingly in relational distance incongruent to our inherent relational likeness. This reduced identity and function of our endemic condition will not change and remain conformed to the *common* and *normal*, that is to say, as long as we do not change back to inner out "to let the world know that you have sent me in qualitative relational terms and have loved my followers just as you have loved me" (17:23).

As the Son prayed to the Father, the *uncommon* God's love is framed in the Trinity's relational context and process, which constitute this *uncommon* love in God's *whole* ontology and function. To maintain the integrity of God's wholeness, who, what and how God is is always irreducible; and the qualitative relational terms composing the relational context and process of the Trinity's love are always nonnegotiable. When Christians think of God's love, the most common focus is to look at what God does for us. That's why at times, perhaps often, it seems like God maintains distance from us, because we can't see him doing anything for us. But, simply stated, this view of God's love is misinformed, distorted by our biases, and essentially wrong; God's ontology and function are reduced to the quantitative of what God does based on *common*-izing who, what and how God should be, all of which emerges when God's qualitative relational terms for love are renegotiated by our reduced terms.

However, the depth of significance necessary to understand the *uncommon* God's *uncommon* love focuses first and foremost on the intimate depth of relational involvement God has enacted, by which God connects with us in the primacy of relationship together regardless of situations. Therefore, contrary to our *common* shaping of God, the whole of who, what and how God is does not unfold from 'a situational God' but only as '*the* relational God'. Accordingly, this *uncommon* relational connection may not be reflected in the things God does for us or gives to us, to which we commonly give

primacy based on our terms. In contrast and conflict, Jesus constitutes his family only on God's terms, however *uncommon* they may seem to us.

With certainty for the present and confidence for the future, Jesus' formative family prayer is the undeniable source definitive for his family of followers to be distinguished "in the world" without compromising to the *common*. And the Word's prayer unfolds as the irreplaceable source prescriptive for his *uncommon* family to prevent any infection by the *normal* "of the world." Therefore, the unavoidable pivotal decision keeps challenging us in our identity and function during this pandemic. We are all in this world together, and the decision is ours for *who* and *what* will emerge from the effects of the human condition pandemic and for *how* we will unfold from our human condition.

The uncommon God keeps pursuing us with "Where are you?"—wanting us to know where we really are during this pandemic, not in virtual terms but based on the experiential truth and relational reality of the Word's wholeness.