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Individualism and Biblical Personhood

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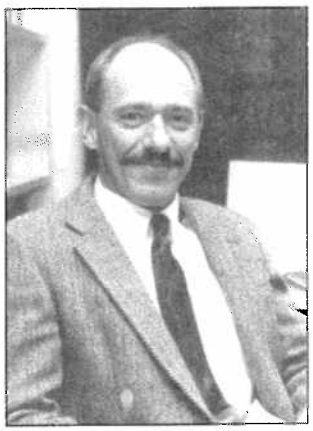

by Michael D. Williams

As Bible-believing Christians, Reformed believers consider themselves to be evangelicals. That's good, for we are indeed committed to the *evangel*, the good news of God's redemptive grace in Jesus Christ. Yet in a real sense, the Reformed tradition and the evangelical tradition are different. *Evangelicalism* is largely the product of the revivalist and holiness movements that swept across the North American continent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And those movements have given evangelicalism a tenor and perspective that is different from the Reformed tradition in some very important ways. Reformed Christianity believes that first of all, the Bible proclaims the *kingdom of God*, God's right to rule over all aspects of reality; and that that kingdom is expressed primarily through the *covenant*. This *kingdom-covenant* perspective is foreign to certain historical developments within American evangelical thought.

When first introduced to a *kingdom-covenant* perspective, students are sometimes shocked or confused, and often feel threatened. You see, the Reformed understanding of the kingdom is predicated upon *divine sovereignty*—God is the Creator and Lord of all things. And as his rule extends to all, so Christ's death and resurrection redeemed nothing less than the entire creation. God's intent is the redemption of the world, and he applies that redemption covenantally through the people of God. The question that often comes from students is this: "If God works on the cosmic scale, that is, with creation and history, and he works covenantally, that is, through the church, then what about me? Am I not personally important? Doesn't God know me by name?" In this paper I intend to address this very concern.

First, an affirmation: God is indeed personally concerned with each one of us. That is a biblical given, but we must understand it within its appropriate biblical context. Then we will find that our personal salvation is not threatened, but enriched and deepened. To place the context of personal redemption in graphic terms, we

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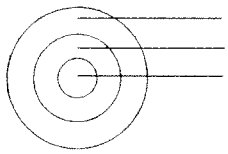
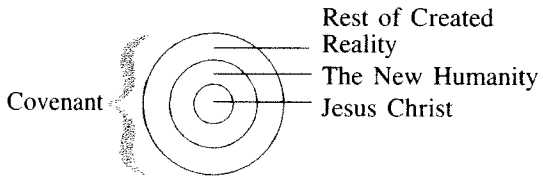
might think of redemption in terms of three concentric circles:



God's redemptive concern extends to the entire creation, of which we are a part. It is our ultimate context as creatures of God. Next we see that God works his redemption through a covenant community, the people of God. That is our immediate human context. Finally we reach the personal context of individual salvation. We are personally redeemed, but we are always redeemed within the larger contexts of the church (the covenant community) and the creation in which we have been placed (the kingdom of God). Of course, our concentric circles merely illustrate that our redemption is contextual. It ought not to be read as a statement that the individual self stands at the center of God's redemptive intent. Jesus Christ is the center of God's redemption. To graph that intent we would end up with a series of circles that would look more like this:



As I will suggest, evangelicalism has a highly individualistic understanding of persons, whereas the biblical tradition represents a relational, corporate, and covenantal understanding of persons. This distinction has far-reaching consequences for how we understand the Christian faith, the church, and ourselves in the world.

Breakdown of Community: The Evangelical Reduction

Individualistic Christianity thinks of the faith solely in terms of one's personal and private relationship to Jesus. The stress is upon knowing Jesus as personal Savior. Under this view, Jesus died to save persons. He saves people individually, one-by-one, and thus enjoys a private, singular relationship with each one. Evangelicalism has nurtured the attitude that the individual person stands at the center of the redemptive activity of Jesus Christ. Everything else—the church, family, society, the world, and history—either stand at the periphery of divine concern or fall altogether outside of it. Thus, the Evangelical accepts his Christianity as something that is fundamentally unrelated to others, society, history, and creation. In short, evangelicals assume that the individual is the primary unit of meaning and value. The individual person, separable from and in distinction to all other magnitudes, is the only firm reality within the world.

Much of what evangelicalism says is good and right. It properly stresses the individual's need for salvation. And yes, we each have a personal relationship to the Lord. But a reduction of the full biblical reality takes place when this is *all* we say. At best it is only a partial truth. It sees the whole through the part, or the part as the whole, and as such it is exceedingly dangerous for how we understand ourselves, our relationship to God, and our relationship to the world about us. Evangelical individualism reflects a right insight gone wrong. The right insight is that individual people do matter within creation and within redemption. Personal faith is crucial. Yet we must contend that the individual is not *all*-important.

Evangelical individualism reflects a right insight gone wrong.

According to Scripture people are always in relationship to one another, come to full expression, fulfill their God-given tasks, and even experience self-fulfillment and redemption, only in the context of the social relationship known in Scripture as Israel, the body of Christ, the people of God, or the church. The relationship represented by that body is intrinsic to the redeemed life and the very being of creatures made after the image of God. Relatedness is intrinsic to humanness. A human being is by definition a contextual being, a social being. Individualism, however, atomizes people, disrupts community, and fragments society. Evangelicalism is right in that it takes human beings seriously. But it is reductionistic right there, for it takes human beings in their individuality too seriously. It ignores the fundamental relatedness of

human beings and the fact that human beings are creaturely, and therefore dependent upon the structures of creation. In the end, evangelical individualism loses the very thing that it is concerned to establish and protect: the fulfillment of the redeemed person.

The Church Within Evangelical Individualism

The emphasis within evangelicalism is upon the individual's direct and personal relationship to God through Jesus Christ. It is that *and that alone* that makes one a Christian. And it is the presence of such believers, regenerate persons, that properly constitutes a group as the church. Membership in a visible group, a body of believers, is not directly connected with redemption, so the visible organization and/or association of believers is relatively unimportant.

Such a view minimizes the church by making it incidental to the Christian life. The church is no more than an aggregate, a collection, a meeting point of individuals. The body of Christ is understood as a voluntary association of persons united around some religious ideal. The reality is not to be found in the group, under this view, but in the atomized individual members, and no special importance is to be given to their association. Within an individualistic understanding of social arrangements, social institutions enjoy only a derived and therefore tentative contractual existence. Their authority and power over the individual is no more than that which the individual voluntarily relinquishes in order to participate. For the Christian individualist, the body of Christ has no ontological status. Only individuals exist. Institutions, whether they be the instituted church, an educational institution, one's place of employment, or the state, are but ideas in our minds, names and concepts given to associations of self-determining individuals who join together because they share a common interest or purpose.

The church is valuable only as it assists individuals in their search for self-fulfillment. When the individual has priority, the church functions merely to satisfy individual needs. Whether or not one participates in the church is largely an optional and personal matter. In fact, according to evangelical understandings of the church nothing crucial goes on there. The preaching of the Word is merely informational, and the sacraments are no more than remembrances. They are merely our activity, our memorial of the sacrifice of Christ. As such, they have only a psychological reality. God does not commune with his people, either in the preached word or the administered sacrament. There is no inherent reality, power, or authority in the church.

Under the notion of the ontological priority of the individual, evangelicals have reduced the institutional church to a mere convenience. The church may be an aid to spiritual growth, but it is not a necessary one. The church is rendered impotent, for it has no more reality or authority than the Elks Club or my Wednesday night bowling league. Put most simply, evangelicalism has lost all recognition of the church, the people of God, as an essential of the Christian life. One's redemption, and sanctification, is understood in totally individualist terms—a private exchange between God and the believer.

Insofar as evangelicals speak of the church as having any importance they tend to limit their attention to the *invisible* church. Here we enter the traditional distinction between what has been called the *invisible* and the *visible* church. The visible church refers to both the body of believers you and I meet with for worship in word and sacrament and the people of God irrespective of geographical proximity or cultic activity. Thus the visible church is both the cultic-institutional articulation of the people of God and the broader, non-instituted expression of the body of Christ. The New Testament uses the word *church* in conformity with both of these denotations. It speaks of the church as a group of people who meet to worship, hear the preached word, and receive the sacraments. But there is also a much more inclusive and non-institutional use of *church*. As such, the church is the people of God. Nowhere does the New Testament ever use the word *church* to refer to a building, to a structure in which God resides. Tabernacle and temple are done away with when God comes in the flesh, in Jesus Christ. By his Spirit, God now resides in his people, in a mobile tabernacle. But it is nevertheless true that we are the people of God, the church, outside of the parameters of meeting together in worship. The church does not pass out of existence Sunday morning at noon and then reappear for an hour later that evening.

The Reformed tradition also speaks of the church

in an invisible sense, a sense that is not immediately perceptible to the casual observer. As the invisible body of believers, the church constitutes all those who have gone before us and those who are yet to come. When we stand to recite the creed, we do so not only as a single congregation or denomination, and not as a single voice rising up to God at a particular point in history. When we recount the mighty deeds of God in Jesus Christ in the creed we also speak with one voice with the church historic. We are one with our brother Athanasius, our brother Philip Melanchton, and our brother Guido de Bres. This is the word "*invisible*" as it is used in Hebrews 11:1-2. It does not speak of that which does not exist in our world, but of that which is either past or yet to come. It is in the confession of the church invisible that the Reformed tradition articulates its understanding of the visible church as being situated within an historically organic whole.

Evangelicals have often taken the legitimate distinction between instituted and non-instituted church and the visible and invisible church, and have associated the two distinctions. Furthermore, they tend to literalize the visible-invisible terminology. The sense of organic relatedness is lost in a heavenly-earthly distinction. Thus a now-then organic connection is turned into a here-there dichotomy. *Visible* still refers to the instituted church, but *invisible* is taken to mean a mystical and heavenly association with Christ. Minimizing the historical church, evangelicalism often emphasizes the invisible as a heavenly reality, a perfect collection of all the saints from every time and place. This spiritualizes or dehistoricizes the church, emphasizing only the believer's association with Christ.

But earthly people do not relate to other human beings "in the heavenly places." Emphasizing a heavenly, invisible, perfect church loosens ties to the church as an historical, this-worldly reality. As far as I can tell, it is not biblically possible to speak of the church as heavenly in any way. Whether institutional or not, the church is always typified in Scripture as a this-worldly, concrete gathering of people. John Murray agrees:

> The church may not be defined as an entity wholly invisible to human perception and observation. What needs to be observed is that, whether the church is viewed as the broader communion of the saints or as the unit or assembly of believers in a home or town or city, it is always a visible observable entity. (*Collected Works*, 2:326)

Once one restricts the object of meaning, redemption, and divine concern to the individual, a number of other reductions become all but inescapable.

The Privatistic Reduction: The Problem of Egocentrism

Limiting God's redemptive concern to the individual, evangelicalism also tends to think of the Christian religion as a private affair. A sharp dichotomy is made between the public and the private, the private being the appropriate object of

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religion. One works to earn a living or gets involved in government to preserve personal freedoms, not to advance God's kingdom.

Evangelicalism merely mimics the secularist culture here. The dualism between the private-*religious* or *sacred* and the public-*secular* or *profane* is deeply woven into the American consciousness as an unquestioned article of faith. Hence the evangelical restricts the Bible to inner religious experience. Scripture is regarded largely as irrelevant to public life. In no significant way is it normative for public life, for society, the state, the arts, business, leisure, or education.

The biblical idea of the *covenant* has been individualized and personalized by evangelicalism. Rather than God entering into a covenant with his people, in which the individual participates insofar as he relates to the people of God, evangelicalism thinks in terms of the individual entering into a personal, one-on-one relationship with God. Covenantal biblical images are absurdly individualized. What makes sense as a corporate, covenantal image, often becomes ludicrous when cast in individualistic terms. The New Testament often referred to the covenant people as the "bride of Christ" (e.g., John 3:29; Eph 5:21-32; Rev 21:2). In evangelical hands, however, the image is atomized so that each individual believer becomes a bride of Christ. This transformation changes "the family of Christ into

a vast harem of brides, all of whom on separate occasions have come to the altar with the same groom" (Philip Lee: *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 140). Rather than entering into the covenant as a member of the redeemed community, evangelicals think in terms of each individual cutting his own private covenant with God.

When God speaks only to the individual, it is extremely difficult to speak of the Christian faith as having any social implications. The faith is privatized in such a way that the individual is effectively separated from society and societal concern, and both sin and salvation are understood in reductionistically private terms. For most evangelicals, being born again means having peace with God, strength to cope with uncertainty, and a hope for heaven.

The faith does seem to break into the public sector at two points in evangelicalism. First is the phenomenon of the gospel as a promise of material prosperity. The *Newsweek* cover story of October 25, 1976, spoke of the evangelical message as "not a call to Christian servanthood, but an upbeat stress on what God's power can do for you. . . a salvation-brings-success ethos." Second, sociologists of religion have noted that the church in American society functions primarily to confirm and sanctify the values of the individual. We live in a culture dominated by the quest for immediate self-fulfillment, the pursuit of the good life, and the avoidance of pain at all costs. In the midst of such a culture, evangelicals have all too often used the church to stroke rather than to challenge these aims. The message of the evangelical church has all too often comforted sinners, not called them to repent or seek justice. Modern evangelical Christianity appears at times to be motivated by the same pleasure principle that fuels hedonistic secularism.

A "What's in it for me?" attitude seems to result from an individualistic gospel. A certain self-centeredness seems to accompany the reduction of the gospel to the individual person. You cannot help but notice it in popular Christian music. The refrain invariably goes like this: "Jesus died for me, me, me." An individualist gospel is often more about the believer than it is about the Lord. Evangelicals traditionally forget to ask *why* they have been redeemed. The assumption tends to be that Jesus died for me so that I can live a happy life, have Jesus as my friend, and be comfortable and free from anxiety and worry. As the object of redemption is restricted to the individual believer, so is the goal of redemption. Under such a view Jesus and his cross become little more than devices for the fulfillment of the individual. In short, evangelical individualism often looks like outright egocentrism and narcissism.

Most of what we see and hear today in popular Christian music and publications is nothing more than a glorification of the individual believer. Popular Christian piety has more to do with the notion that Jesus is there for my ends, my needs, and the fulfillment of my desires, rather than my being wonderfully included in the purposes of God, for his ends, for the realization of his kingdom. God is no longer the Holy One of Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Redeemer whose goal is nothing less than the reclamation of all reality. By way of an individualistic understanding of the faith, he has been reduced to our personal financial counselor, or the great psychiatrist who can cure every ill, or—most blasphemously of all—a lover who sees to our every emotional need. We treat Jesus as though he is our own personal property, and his sacrifice as though its sole purpose is to secure us a happy life and an assured destiny.

The Pietistic Reduction: The Problem of Spiritualism

Many of us in the Reformed tradition criticize *pietism*. Unfortunately, what people often hear, is that we are somehow against piety. That is not the case. Piety is not pietism. *There is* an appropriate devotional, even emotional, response to the gospel within the people of God. We are called to respond faithfully to God in the totality of our beings. Our piety must be demonstrable in our bodies and intellects, as well as in our emotions and psychological states. Pietism, however, is a reduction of Christianity to the interior life—the emotions, the feelings of the believer. The faith lays claim to the heart more than to the head, to the spirit more than to the body for the pietist.

The pietist assumes the sole purpose of redemption is that the believer will enjoy a personal, internal communion with God. From the revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, evangelicalism inherited the idea that true religion consists of a subjective personal experience of God. Pietism says that Christianity functions primarily at the level of the

so-called spiritual, by which is meant the internal (an exceedingly dubious understanding of the word "spiritual"). The truly pious or spiritual Christian is the person who cultivates a certain emotional stance toward Jesus, for Christianity is primarily about having the right feelings about Jesus, having peace of mind, and emotional security. We might say that the world with which Christianity has to do, according to this view, is the world within.

Evangelicalism emphasizes the appeal of religion to the emotional and affective nature of individuals. Curiously, the founding fathers of liberalism could speak in exactly the same terms. Such notables as Immanuel Kant, Friederich Schleiermacher, and Soren Kierkegaard were all reared in pietism. None of these would be uncomfortable with the sort of faith we typically speak of as evangelical, for each was interested in the inner life of Christian experience. The architects of liberal theology were not secular humanists but pietists. Disdaining the creational and the historical, they sought exactly the kind of unmediated "heart knowledge" that appeals to the evangelical pietist. Schleiermacher, the "father of liberal theology," defined Christianity as the "feeling of absolute dependence." Schleiermacher's theological agenda was to undercut or even deny the historical and objective ground of the faith, and in its place locate the ground of faith in the interior life of the believer. Since Schleiermacher's time, liberalism has redefined the object of Christianity as the same thing as the religious subject. Thus religion does not extend beyond the religious impulse. The great irony of recent history here is that evangelical individualism recapitulates the subjectivism and pietism of liberal theology. Both liberal and evangelical Christianity enshrine the secularity and insularity of American individualism.

The four gospels challenge the notion that salvation can be reduced to, or even thought of primarily in terms of spiritual self-fulfillment. It is an interesting and altogether startling fact that the Bible never speaks of regeneration as "asking Jesus into your heart." The biblical question appears not to be "Have you invited Jesus into your heart" but rather, "Are you following Jesus and are *you in Jesus*?" and that is a reality that is thoroughly intertwined with relational, communal, and historical connections.

In the first gospel we read: "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10:39). Matthew also says that "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16:24-25). If we see Matthew disregarding the life outside of the soul, we have missed the point. It is the preoccupation with self, the very thing that pietism is so concerned with, that Jesus is warning against here. The rich young ruler asks Jesus the traditional question of spiritual self-concern, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' ultimate reply in directing the young man to sell his belongings and distribute them to the poor indict the rich young ruler's self-absorption. One of the extremely few places where the New Testament speaks of Christ dying for *me* rather than for the church, for the sins of man, or for the world, is Galatians 2:19-20. Christ died for me, and I am crucified with him, so that I can live "by faith in the Son of God." The *I* that dies is the self-indulgent, individualistic self. Finding our true selves, our redeemed selves, means losing the *I* of individualistic concern. The old man, the man who inherits the bitter fruit of the primordial garden, is put to death with Christ so that we might be taken beyond ourselves in loving service to one another and thus find our true selves. Thus William Dyrness comments: "The self that we find given back to us is now in the new relationship Paul describes: we are 'in Christ.' And being in Christ we are also in his body, the church" (*How Does America Hear the Gospel?*, 104). Being in Christ is not a matter of losing all semblance of personal identity. On the contrary, it is a matter of a different starting point, a different orientation, a different primary allegiance. Believers are freed from the self-idolatry of Adam's disobedience so that they can relate as complete persons in loving service. Again Dyrness

> *We treat Jesus as though he is our own personal property, and his sacrifice as though its sole purpose is to secure us a happy life and an assured destiny.*

writes: "So in dying with Christ the believer thinks first of the 'we' rather than the 'I.' Rather than beginning with the individual and seeking to work toward relationship, we begin with community, the body of Christ, and there discover our true identity."

Evangelical pietistism can be spoken of not as a surrender to Jesus, but as a gospel of the self. Instead of calling men and women to reorient their lives to the kingdom of God, evangelicals have too easily made the gospel the answer to a set of faulty questions, as if Christ were nothing more than the key to personal self-fulfillment. The idea that the Christian life is merely about warm feelings, and the church merely an emotional service station is so problematic as to border on the heretical. If we accept the radical individualism of evangelicalism, how are we to make sense of Jesus' statement that a greater love does not exist than to offer up one's own life for another? How can Paul's instruction that we are to consider others as more important than ourselves mean anything to us, especially when he illustrates his point by recounting the emptying and death of Jesus Christ? Surely, the notion of sacrifice for another is absurd under individualism.

The privatist and pietist reductions of individualism have in effect said that the gospel is not related to fundamental areas of human responsibility. The gospel is not appropriate to or for life in the real world. As the individual is thought of as *unrelated* to anyone but God, he is not *responsible* to or for anyone or anything outside of his own soul and spiritual (i.e. inner) life. I would contend that the privileges of the Christian life cannot be separated from or sought apart from its responsibilities. The Christ who said, "Come unto me and I will give you rest," also said to those same disciples, "As the Father sent me, so I send you," and then showed them the scars of his battles with the rulers of the world (John 20:20-21).

The Secularist Irony of Evangelical Individualism: The Loss of the Kingdom of God

Insofar as evangelicalism restricts its view to the individual, his private and spiritual life, it represents a Christianity that can be lived "on the side" (Lee, 194). It does not touch the work-a-day world—life at the office or in the factory; it is not relevant to political life, educational experience, or spending habits. Christianity is fully compartmentalized. Religion is merely one category of life, similar to categories such as economics, sex, music, and sports. Noting this phenomenon, Thomas Luckman spoke of evangelicalism as "the Invisible Religion." The privatization of Christianity leads to secularization. The vast majority of life is surrendered to forces that lay outside of the Christian religion.

Evangelicalism is so popular today because it makes so few demands. As we have become more religious, more pious, more internal, more spiritual, we have also become more secular. We have told God that his kingdom is restricted to us, our private concerns, our hearts. We have rejected the idea that the gospel that saves is also expected to transform every fact, every area of life. And this is why evangelicalism is displacing the Reformed tradition. Evangelical individualism is easy religion. It does not call for real commitment. It merely legitimates one's own agenda and selfishness. A private religion of personal salvation that did not challenge the public ideology was perfectly safe under Roman law, but Christianity was anathema. The Reformed idea of divine sovereignty, that the rule of God lays claim to all reality requires an understanding of and manifestation of justice that is primarily embodied in covenant relationships of mutual responsibility. To make disciples is to call and equip men and women to be agents of God's justice in all human affairs. An evangelicalism that invites men and women to accept the name of Christ but fails to call them to redeeming engagement with the world must be rejected as false.

I subtitled this section "the loss of the kingdom of God." That's exactly what the word "secular" means: no kingdom. Areas of human existence and concern are secularized to the extent that they are understood as lying outside of the sovereignty, rule, and concern of God. The New Testament says much about the kingdom of God—God's sovereign claim upon every aspect of creation and creaturely existence. The pietistic reduction requires that the kingdom be either spiritualized into a strictly heavenly claim upon the inner life of the believer or pushed off into the distant future, in some far off realm remote from the believer's responsibility.

Even though Jesus himself said that now that the king has come the kingdom is in the midst of creaturely life, entering into combat with the forces of the Evil One, a large number of Bible believing Christians choose to ignore it and prefer to think

of God's kingdom as strictly a future state of affairs. Conservative Christians sit around and debate the timing of the rapture and the nature of the millennium. It is assumed that the kingdom of God is a future event or arrangement totally unrelated to this world and this-worldly affairs. It is something beyond our responsibility. Such a view totally misunderstands the nature of the eschatological statements in the Bible. The biblical writers were not concerned to give us a Cook's Tour of the future. They were never concerned with the future merely for the sake of satisfying human curiosity. Rather, the biblical materials relevant to the future are given for the purpose of warning, judging, challenging, modifying, and shaping God's people right now, right here, in the world of their responsibilities. We cannot use a futurist ideal of the kingdom of God to excuse us from this-worldly action on behalf of God's kingdom. Matthew 6:33: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well," is not spoken in the future tense, but in the present.

A spiritualistic or heavenly idea of the kingdom offers no more hope for a pietistic rejection of this-worldly responsibility than a strictly future understanding of the kingdom. The Bible offers no warrants for thinking of the goal of the Christian faith as being an afterlife in another world. The Bible is amazingly reticent to reflect upon, and it most certainly does not dwell upon, the question of what happens to us upon death. Unrelentingly, the eschatology of the Bible is this-worldly. It speaks of the future in terms of the restoration of creation under the images of a new heavens and new earth, and the resurrection of the dead upon the return of the Lord. The Bible does not address human beings as primarily spiritual creatures who are trapped within a material world for a time, as heavenly beings who are just passing through. Human beings are earthlings. They have been intentionally placed by a divine hand within the context of earthly realities. Everything that happens to them, their sin, their redemption, and their service in gratitude, take place within the earthly realm. This is not to say that the Bible does not speak of an "intermediate state." It does address the question of the afterlife before the resurrection, but it does so only in murmurs and whispers. We know only enough about that state of affairs to say that the redeemed dead are safe with the Lord. The Bible's reticence in this area also tells us that heaven and the afterlife is not the appropriate object of human devotional concern.

> "The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to man. It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to silence; it is we who extol the Lord, both now and forevermore" (Psalm 115:16-18).

We must conclude that there is no pietistic escape from responsibility in either a transcendent world or a distant future world.

The Presentist Reduction: The Problem of History

One fundamental way in which the Bible expresses our intrinsic relatedness to the world and to God's people is through its understanding of history. The biblical understanding of things holds that all of life and history is connected, is of one piece, is an organic whole. The word "*history*" does not merely refer to the past, but to the entire temporal unfolding—present, past, future—of God's relationship with his world. God always comes to us within the midst of history. Our relationship to Jesus Christ is never taken out of our historical contextualization, a contextualization that is divinely ordained and ordered. Thus the Christian religion, my own faith-life, and the story of the people of God depend upon the mighty acts of God in history.

Finding our true selves, our redeemed selves, means losing the I *of individualistic concern.*

In *The Open Secret*, Lesslie Newbigin wrote: "The object to which God's purpose is directed is the whole creation and the whole human family, not human souls conceived as billions of separate monads each detached from its place in the whole fabric of the human and natural world" (201). What we are arguing for is an understanding of human personhood in terms of our fundamental relatedness to the structures of reality. Consistently, biblical religion binds people to one another, to the earth, and to history, and in so doing to God as well. Within God's community, it is unthinkable for the individual to turn away from God's people or from God's world.

Evangelical individualism gives rise to at least one

more reduction: reducng history to the immediate moment of personal experience. The individual self is abstracted from history and all temporal connection with the world about him. The reduction of history to just the present moment is necessitated by the elevation of immediate, subjective experience within the pietistic heart. When the individual's personal relationship with Jesus is made the all-determining focus of the faith, history and its web of temporal connections are effectively annulled.

Michael Horton recounts an episode in a television movie in which an American college coed vacations in England and is romanced by a young Englishman. In a scene set in a five-hundred-year-old chapel, the Englishman tells her: "In all the history and tradition this chapel represents, all my problems seem trivial. Here I find my place in the world." The American coed replies: "When I have problems, I go shopping" (*Made in America*, 177). Americans generally have lost all sense of connectedness to the past, all sense of standing within an historical process. Ironically, we have no sense of the loss, and how that loss has estranged us from God, creational structures, and each other.

History no longer speaks to the modern evangelical. He does not identify with it. Thus the student typically speaks of the study of history as *boring* and *irrelevant*. Unable to escape history, the presentist reduction collapses it into the present moment. The loss of a sense of community and a narrative sense of the community's history, and thus loss of appreciation of our own historicity, is exemplified in the moralistic reading of Scripture so endemic to evangelicalism. Once the believer is cut loose from all mediating structures, the Bible can be made relevant only through a dialogue between the present individual believer and the ancient text. The reader reads a redemptive-historical narrative, but since it is historical it is necessarily problematic for his individualistic self-definition. Thus he must ask: "How do I make this relevant to my life?" The prevailing answer is to transport the biblical character into the contemporary context to become a moral exemplar of right or wrong action. The perceived lack of relevance speaks to the loss of historical connection, but the evangelical deals with the loss in a typically ahistorical fashion, by decontextualizing and dehistoricizing the biblical text. The intervening historical distance between the biblical characters and the reader evaporate in a primitivistic repudiation of history, and the reader forges an existential and moral contemporaneity with the biblical characters.

Cut loose from any organic relation to the past, the evangelical is also set adrift from a realistic appreciation of the future. Reggae singer Ziggy Marley confronts the American loss of a sense of history: "Tomorrow people, where is your past? Tomorrow people, how long will you last? How can you have a future if you don't have a past." The faith spoken of in Hebrews 11:1 and following is not a vague trust in the transcendent. It is the "being sure of what we hope for" in the future, anchored in the drama of redemption in the past. That is the point of the chronicle of redeemed sinners one finds in the passage. We have a firm hold on God's future because he is faithful in his historical ways. As he preserved, redeemed, judged, and guided them, so he will us. In fact, if he did not act then, we have no reason to believe, no right to believe, that he will act now or in the future.

It must be said that if history is truly irrelevant, and is truly boring, God is unaware that that is so. Everything about Christianity is historical. The Bible is an event-centered revelation. It communicates its message in terms of, in the midst of, and through the mediation of, historical events. The biblical confessions (e.g., Deut 26; 1 Cor 15; 1 Tim 3:16) are recountings of the mighty deeds of God in creation and redemption, in time, in history. The early church used confessions in exactly the same way. Witness the historical grounding of the Apostles' Creed in the mighty deeds of God in Jesus Christ.

Rather than address an individual and make its appeal in terms of God's immediate relevance to a private religious sojourn, Scripture proclaims its message in terms of its pattern of frequent recountings of the history of redemption. When Stephen denounces the Jews for their faithlessness, his argument is thoroughly historical. In fact, Acts 7 provides us with something of a mini salvation history. The genealogies of Jesus place him within the ongoing story of redemption. Even the so-called "rogues gallery" of Hebrews 11 provides us with an historical insight into God's gracious ways in the world.

Far from seeking release from temporality or historicity, far from presenting a universalized story, or one easily transportable into some other time, the Bible appears to wallow in its historicity

and temporal particularity. The language of Scripture does not theologize, idealize, allegorize, or universalize. Quite the contrary, it is the language of depiction, of events, of history. One relates to such language, to such events, not by dehistorical moralization, but by participation in the redemptive-historical community that carries on the story.

God gives his covenant people a history lesson whenever he comes to them. He reminds them of how he relates to them: through the mediation of history. History makes our relationship with God possible. History sustains the life of faith. When God introduces himself to his covenant people at Sinai, he does not say that he is the God who lives within their subjectivity. He says that he is the God of mighty deeds, historical deeds. He is the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And when he speaks to individuals, it is not in terms of a private experience that was shared only by the person and God, but to them as representatives of the community. In the case of Jacob, for instance, his very name *Israel* is synonymous with the community itself (Gen 35:10-11). It is in the sense of communal and historical relatedness, of the promise of Yahweh's historical faithfulness to his people, that men and women are able to enjoy life and length of days. As we approach God only as members of the people of God, we also do so as having our place within the history of that people. It is through the history of God's dealings with his people that we know Jesus Christ as a man of flesh and blood, a man who walked the roads of Palestine, a man who suffered upon a real cross, a man who redeemed God's world. To know Christ is not to be personally related to a mythical heavenly being who liberates humanity from historical concerns, but rather to be engrafted into the family of God—a family with a history, a place, and a hope. The promise is made in history. If we are not part of that historical story, we are not heirs to the promise.

Contrary to the individualist reduction of history to the present, we must conclude that meaning is *in* history, not in some realm apart from it. Indeed, if God's ways in Scripture are any indication, we must say that we have no connection with God or his ways and works apart from history. There is no supra-historical path to God. Our relationship to God and the redemption wrought by Jesus Christ is thoroughly historical.

While evangelical individualism seems to have little concern for history, the genius of the Reformed tradition is its consciousness of standing with and being the spiritual children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That sense of rootedness comes to fullest expression in the Reformed tradition's reliance upon a creedal articulation of the faith. Creedal statements are by their very nature corporate achievements (if not in their production, then in their survival and use). The corporate confession of the faith inculcated in the creed and our cultic expression of it binds us not only to one another but also to our ancient past. The creed helps us not only to be aware of false religion that denies God as the good Creator, Jesus Christ as the crucified and resurrected One, the catholicity and communality of the faith, and everlasting life in Christ as the essentials of the faith, but also helps us to understand that the narrative story of Scripture is our story, that we have no past, no future, and no real present apart from our participation in that story.

> *Human beings are earthlings. They have been intentionally placed by a divine hand within the context of earthly realities.*

In 1933 Alfred Ackley wrote a revivalist hymn that perfectly captured the pietistic and ahistorical tenor of American evangelicalism. The Chorus of "I Serve a Risen Savior" ("He Lives") goes like this:

> He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today!
> He walks with me and talks with me along
> life's narrow way.
> He lives, he lives, salvation to impart!
> You ask me how I know he lives?
> He lives within my heart.

Nineteen centuries before, the Apostle Paul asked the same question, but found a decidedly different answer. Cut loose from history, locked up in the prison of private experience, the evangelical is concerned only that Jesus lives within his heart. You ask me how I know he lives? Paul's response: because we saw him rise from the dead! Within evangelicalism the subjective response to the gospel ceases being response, and instead becomes the very center, the thing itself. The evangelical insistence upon the heart as the appropriate object of religion

fundamentally denies the offense of the gospel. The personalistic reduction of Christianity to a matter of the heart, one's personal and private relationship with the Lord, renders the faith completely inoffensive to someone who might have different beliefs. The scandal of the gospel in the New Testament, however, is that God became man, that God acts decisively in the history of human affairs, and that that historical action and engagement is the one great reality by which we must now live our lives.

Building Up Community

The first thing we must say here is that individualism is not nearly the obvious, intuitive, and universal fact that many would allege. The sociologist Richard Geertz writes:

> the Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. (Quoted in Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 96).

While Americans have been socialized to be self-realizing individuals in such a way that sociologists can rightly speak of individualism as defining and determining American culture (Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 6), we must come to grips with the fact that individualism is a rather recent arrival on the stage of history, being born in the Enlightenment, weaned in the Revolutionary ideas of individual values, rights, and duties, and coming to adulthood in the American revivalist awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Secondly, we must contend that individualism's roots are more secular than Christian. Individualism must be read into the Bible. It does not come from it. Paul did not write his letters to individuals (outside of Titus and Philemon). The Word of God was not written to the individual for use in his private devotional, but to the people of God, Israel in the Old Testament, and the church in the New Testament, and it addresses us primarily as the people of God.

God always addresses us in community. We may be redeemed separately, and we are, but we are redeemed for community. Once redeemed we are no longer separate "monads," but part of the people of God. This does not mean the person disappears into the masses. It is not a question of individualism versus some solely corporate entity. The opposite reduction is just as dangerous in some ways as individualism. The person matters within the body of Christ not because he stands alone, isolated from all others, but rather because he stands alongside of the other members of the people of God.

The Covenant

There simply are no biblical warrants for the evangelical idea that the individual believer stands alone before God. That is not the sense in which the Christian person matters or in which the Christian is personally addressed. The person is given confidence and has meaning not apart from others, but in terms of others. Fundamental to the biblical idea of true personhood is the idea of *relationship.*

The covenant community is at the center of biblical religion. The covenant formula: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" is a pervasive theme in both testaments. It is a particularly constant refrain in the Old Testament when the special relationship of Israel to God was being established and had to be impressed on the minds of the people (Lev 26:12; Deut 14:2). Yet the Bible ends with the covenant formula: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev 21:3).

The covenant relationship is far more than a matter of relationship with God. It is also a relationship with others. God makes his covenant with a people. As such is it not only a relationship of trust, commitment, and loyalty to God, but also a relationship of trust, commitment, and loyalty to one another. We cannot say this strongly enough: the covenant formula is corporate. God does not say: You will be my private, beloved person. He does not cut individual deals with each and every believer. Rather, he seeks a people. Scripture portrays God working with a chosen nation, a communion of saints, a covenant people. When an individual is ascendant in the text, he or she functions as a representative of and for the people of the covenant.

Part of the problem here is one of language. Many people see the covenantal relationship in the Old Testament but miss it altogether in the New. The idea is sometimes articulated that God dealt with a people, Israel, in the Old Testament, but in the New he shifts his redemptive emphasis to individuals. What allows such a misunderstanding is the little word "you." The English language lacks a second person plural pronoun, a "you" plural. Unfortunately, "youse guys," or "ya'll" are not considered good grammar. If they were we might have translations that read: "Don't you know that the body (singular) of ya'll is the temple of the Holy Spirit" (I Cor 6:19), and "this mind (singular) be in youse guys which was also in Jesus Christ" (Phil 2:5). In fact, there is not one single you singular in the entire book of Phillipians.

Created as Social Beings

The primary biblical insight that we must come to terms with if we are to understand personhood is this: to be human is to be social. God designed us to be relational. Humankind was created to relate to other beings. It is not an accident. It is not the result of sin. It was an intentional, creational given, a design feature. We were never meant to be *individuals* (which from the Latin means that which cannot be divided). We were created in and for relationship—creational, historical, social relationship.

As God's own character is relational, he has created us for companionship and covenantal relationship with him. When God created humankind he created it capable of and needing to respond to him. Evangelicalism has no problem with that. But this is where evangelical individualism stops. It misses the rest of the story.

God is concerned about companionship, not only between himself and humankind, but also between people. Genesis 2 records God as saying: "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make a helper for him." We must first notice that Adam lived the individualist ideal. He has walked in the garden with God. He has known the so-called beatific vision: the soul's repose in God alone. And God himself has called everything in the garden "good." Yet God himself says that that is not enough. Man and God alone is called "not good" by God. Immediately, all of God's creatures are brought before Adam, but no suitable companion can be found. Thus, the Genesis account teaches that neither relationship with God nor relationships with nonhuman creatures are enough to satisfy the relational need he put into humanity. The human being needs other human beings.

And so, Eve was created. She came, in a sense, to complete God's creation, to eradicate the possibility of loneliness, and to finish the creation of humanity. I am not suggesting that a male is somehow incomplete without a female, or vice versa. The Bible does not make marriage or a sexual relationship (as good as those things are) prerequisites for human fulfillment. It does mean, however, that human beings were created to relate to one another in a social context, and this is what God intended for humanity. Aloneness is not good for human beings; togetherness is good for human beings.

> *We have no connection with God or his ways and works apart from history.*

Whatever *image of God* means, and there are many theories about that, a few things are clear from Genesis 1:26-28. First, it speaks of a correspondence between God and man. There is something about man that makes him the representative (a decidedly relational idea) of God to creation. Second, it speaks of a relationship between man and the world. To speak of human beings without reference to the world is to speak about something other than that which God created. In fact, it is to speak nonsense. Human beings are set in creation as God's imagers, reflectors, stewards, representatives. The world without human beings is impossible. Human being without the world is inconceivable. We were created in such a way that we can be fully human only in the context of our God-given relationships. Relationships are not an option. They result from an inbuilt creational design and need. Insofar as individualism represents a denial of our need for others, it is a lie that Genesis utterly rejects.

The Covenant Community: Paradigm for Humans in Relationship

The fall was the loss of relationship, the fracture of man's relationship to God and God's creation. When Adam sinned, he sang Sinatra's song: I'll do it my way. Thus, in the Reformed tradition we speak

of sin as *autonomy*, self-law, the making of one's own desire, one's own well-being, the primary or sole good. In his sin Adam no longer related to God as a faithful respondent to the divine law. He no longer responded to others as friend and help-meet, and he no longer related to creation as steward and divine representative. By trying to make himself master of all, he cut himself off from all relationships, and thus lost himself. The simple fact is, man by himself is not man. I, by myself, am not a person. Outside of my proper relationships I am not a human being, but only a misdirected shadow of one. Self-subsisting, non-relational, ontologically discreet and unconnected magnitudes do not exist within creation. Creation, and all within it, is contingent and dependent, relationally and ontically.

If the fall disrupts relationship, redemption retrieves relationships. Within the reality of our fallen world, the covenant community is a paradigm of what human society should be. American Christians have had a difficult time understanding that God's primary goal in history involves more than the individual Christian and that God has chosen to work in history primarily through a corporate agent, the people of God. In the thinking of the Reformation, the church was not a pragmatic device or means to individual ends, but the divinely ordained means to establish the kingdom of God. According to both Luther and Calvin, God resided in the church, conferred his grace there, and from there initiated his meaningful activity in the world.

It is difficult to put too much stress upon the church. The one great tangible, observable reality of the Christian religion is the church. The church is not some nebulous idea in Scripture. Quite the contrary, when Paul used the word, he referred to historical, concrete gatherings of Christians. Wherever you have regenerate persons in communion with one another you have the people of God, church, the body of Christ. And that is as true of a gathering of Christian educators in a faculty meeting or Christian farmers in a field as it is of the institutionalized expression of the people of God in which we participate on the Lord's Day for the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. Paul did not write his letters to fuzzy, spiritual beings, but to concrete gatherings of people; specific gatherings; particular historical gatherings of people (e.g., "to the church of God which is at Corinth" 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1, "to the churches of Galatia" Gal 1:2, "to the church of the Thessalonians" 1 Thes 1:1; 2 Thes 1:1). Likewise, Luke in Acts makes frequent reference to the church as a concrete community (5:11; 8:1; 11:22; 12:1,5). This body is more than the sum of its parts. The kingdom and its gospel is not entrusted to individuals, but to the church. The church is the divinely appointed context of redemption and holiness. It is the temple of the Holy Spirit. From Ephesians, Paul's church epistle, we read of the importance of the church:

1. The church is not a human organization. It is God's workmanship (Eph 2:10)
2. The church is the people of God (Eph 2:12)
3. The church is the household or family of God (Eph 2:19; 3:15; 4:6)
4. The church is a temple of God built by himself in Christ to be his dwelling (Eph 2:19ff; 1 Pet 2:4f; 1 Cor 3:9)
5. The church is the bride of Christ (Eph 5:25)
6. The church is the body of Christ (Eph 4:15)
7. Christ died for the church (Eph 5:25-27)

Many passages of the New Testament echo the Old Testament corporate view of God's people. Titus 2:14 tells us that Christ came to "purify for himself a people of his own." And 1 Peter 2:9-10 says:

> But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Stephen T. Davis ("Mercy Creates a People," *The Reformed Journal*, April, 1989) has noted that this text presents something of a before and after picture. Once you were individualists, looking out for No.1, autonomous beings, each seeking your own way. Now, however, you are a people. We also see a description of the Christian community in four ways, each of which mirrors Old Testament descriptions of the people of Israel: (1) a chosen race; (2) a royal priesthood; (3) a holy nation; (4) God's own people. Within this context of God's people, how is it possible to concern oneself with an isolated search for self-redemption, self-holiness, self-fulfillment?

I want to emphasize again that it is not a matter of corporate versus individual. We come to full

humanity, full personhood, in the midst of community. Within modern society we have a firm understanding of the distinction between the individual and the group. The Bible simply does not know this distinction. We can cite several biblical examples here. The book of Deuteronomy shifts from first person to second person pronouns almost in a willy-nilly fashion. The distinction between "me" and "you," "me" and "us," "you" (sg) and "you" (pl) simply were not important. That same phenomenon is also frequent in the prophets. Within a single context, Israel can be spoken of as "him" and "them."

The Psalms are written largely in the first person. David's Psalms are intensely personal, as they recount his relationship with God and his law and his relationship with the world about him. Yet those very same personal songs of praise and lament become the Psalter of Israel. The "me" of the Psalter becomes Israel. In fact, Israel is more often than not spoken of as a person, a corporate identity, an entity having all the properties that we associate with personality. The Israelite knew that his own personhood was intensely related to his participation within the covenant community, for while the "me" of the Psalter was all Israel, it was at one and the same time the person. We see this same idea, it is often called corporate personality, in the book of Isaiah. All Israel, Israel as the people of God, is "my servant," is "the suffering servant." Yet when Jesus comes, this one, acting as the representative of the whole, is "my servant," and the "suffering servant."

What the biblical understanding of the relationship between the person and the people comes down to is this: my personhood is dependent upon the people of God, and the people of God is dependent upon me. The New Testament gets at this through the idea of fellowship (*koinonia*). Paul never shows the slightest interest in a purely private notion of faith and the Christian life. The plain fact is that when we come to faith, we are called into a relationship with the people of God. Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 1:9: "God is faithful, by whom you [pl] were called into the fellowship [*koinonia*] of his Son." *Koinonia* ia a Pauline word used to describe the particular form of participation with one another by which Christians are bound together. The relationship of *koinonia* is explicitly likened unto the marital relationship by Paul in Ephesians 5:25-27. The communion of the saints is *koinonia pantos tou biou*; it is a marriage covenant. In fact, the point of the comparison there is not that the fellowship of the saints is to follow the paradigm of marriage, but just the opposite: the marital relationship is to mimic the intrinsic, inherent, inescapable, structurally given participation (a good translation of *koinonia*) that we find in the people of God. It is in this intimate and interconnected sense that Paul wishes to state the covenantal and participatory bonds that hold Christians together.

Many people find it difficult to come to terms with the historical reality of the church. If something is so important in Scripture, how can it be so messed up in reality? Isn't the church supposed to be the saints of God? But what we actually see is a group of people acting nothing like saints. What we see, many allege, is not the church, a spotless bride of Christ, but merely a group of confessors. But we must not allow the church's reality, which is often less than laudatory, to move us toward a denial of its importance for our lives. Both Luther and Calvin utterly rejected the Anabaptist drive for a pure and perfect church. The old saying goes: the perfect church ceases to be so the moment you join it. Luther voiced that same recognition when he wrote: "Farewell to those who want an entirely pure and purified church. This is plainly wanting no church at all." Calvin followed suit, seeing in the parable of the wheat and the tares the idea that when God's people enter institutional relationships (such as the instituted church) the result will always be an imperfect organization—an admixture of saints and sinners. The saint/sinner distinction is more than merely a recognition that the church attracts camp followers, those who play the piety game or the churchman game for their own ends. It is also a recognition that both God's kingdom and Satan's lay claim to our lives. So long as the flesh wars against the spirit, the people of God will be sinners. Yet we are also saints. When Paul addressed the church at Corinth he spoke to them as "those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy" (1 Cor 1:2). As

God always addresses us in community. We may be redeemed separately, but we are redeemed for community.

the letter shows, Paul did not view the church at Corinth through any idealistic haze or romantic mist. On the contrary, he saw them realistically, with all their warts, and he addressed their problems head-on; yet he still called them *saints*.

Holiness as a Corporate Concern

Being a Christian and growing into Christian maturity, into the likeness of Christ, is not something a person does in isolation from others. We need the church to be holy. Just like Adam in the garden, we need one another to be complete human beings. Sanctification, like justification, takes place in and through the church by the working of the Holy Spirit. We are "being *built together* to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:22). Christ gave himself *for the church* "to make her holy" (Eph 5:25).

Calvin rightly commented that "He errs who desires to grow by himself... Just so, if we wish to belong to Christ, let no man be anything for himself; but let all be whatever we are for each other" (*Commentary on Ephesians*, 66). Developing one's personal relationship with Christ outside of and without thought to the life of the body of Christ—as in the popular idea of *personal piety* and *personal spiritual growth*—was seen as not only anti-social but downright anti-Christian by the architects of the Protestant Reformation. The New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of the believer is not merely about having direct access to God without the intermediary of a human priest but also the right to act as a priest on behalf of the other members of the body of Christ (Heb 13:15-16). That is life in *koinonia*. Our own personal holiness is never separate from the corporate holiness of the church. In order to be personally holy we must move beyond private devotion, and include knowing one another, rejoicing with one another, suffering with one another, helping those who need our help, praying for, studying with, worshipping with, serving, and loving one another. Without those we are neither a people, nor are we holy.

The church, which is the temple of God, grows as a structure, composed of living stones. Individual members minister for the growth of the whole body (Eph 4:11-16). It is not too much to say that our personal relationship to Christ cannot be separated from our relationship to the church. When God sees me, he knows me by name, but he also knows me in the context in which he has placed and called me, the body of Christ. Once we are redeemed, brought into the family of God, the covenant community, we no longer belong to ourselves, but to Christ and his people. "I am the vine, you are the branches . . . apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). This is not only a statement of the believer's relationship to the Lord, but also an affirmation that we are engrafted into another as well. The same image of a rooted plant appears in Colossians 2:6-7 where we read: "as therefore you received Jesus Christ, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith." If that statement is not understood in the corporate sense of life within Christ's community, it cannot be understood at all, since the following context is one of discipline within the community. Each and every person in the body of Christ is essential to the body. Each person's contribution to that body is worthwhile, and each person's personhood is protected, not annulled. But the person's purpose and fulfillment now extends beyond the self. While the individual person is never denied or absorbed, the fundamental New Testament metaphor for restored relationship is decidedly anti-individualistic: *the body of Christ*. This is the place in which the Spirit of God dwells and lives. This is the place in which we image our God before the world.

The notion of the people of God as a nurturing and nurtured community is fundamental to the Reformed understanding of the church. Calvin's understanding of the body of Christ was that it is a mother who nurses, comforts, scolds, punishes, in short, loves her children into a healthy maturity that we might "grow in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph 4:15). Evangelicals tend to look upon conversion, and the Christian life, in terms of specific individuals and specific moments in time, while the Reformed tradition has resisted the revivalist-psychological model, and has not neglected the good offices of church, family, and schools in thinking about Christian nurture.

When we begin to recognize the body of Christ as a dynamic, growing community, one that is being built, one that is underway and on-the-way, we begin to appreciate the fact that it is an imperfect yet uniting community. All too often, the evangelical tends to view the church as a perfect collection of quasi-heavenly beings, a hang-out for saints, separated from the world. There is an element of

truth here. The church is called to be holy and has been called out from the world. But that does not imply that the people of God are cut off from the world. The separation spoken of in the biblical notion of holiness is not ontological but moral. The church is not meant to call men and women out of the world into a safe religious enclave but to call them out in order to send them back as agents of God's kingship. When Paul calls the Corinthians saints he does not refer to perfect people who cannot come in contact with a hurting world for fear of blemishing their holiness. He is speaking to a people who have been called to be holy so that they might fulfill a divine purpose. "Be holy" (Lev 19) is an imperative, not a state of repose.

God has redeemed us and baptized us into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so that we might bring the light of God's kingdom into our world. Being a Christian is a matter of being a member of a community, a community that has been elected for service, a community with a mission. As 1 Peter 2:9-10 puts it, the church was created for a purpose: ". . . that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Our aim as the people of God is to declare the acts of God and to live lives of gratitude in response to those acts. The central redemptive act of God is that of calling us out of darkness into the light, of making us a people by having mercy on us, and challenging us to be a people of mercy and redemption. So everything we Christians do—preaching the good news, worshipping God, educating children, feeding the hungry, freeing the oppressed, seeking justice, farming, manufacturing—is to be judged by that criterion. The church does not exist primarily for our own benefit but for the purpose of declaring and doing the work of God in the world.

Holiness as a Public Concern

The American evangelical has been taught that holiness, godliness, and piety is a matter of the closet, a matter of spending time with the Lord, of prayer and Bible reading. Now those are good things, essential things, but biblical religion nowhere restricts true holiness to such things. The Bible repeatedly affirms that true holiness is a holiness that is lived in the world, a holiness that manifests itself in terms of righteous activity within the public realm. It is a bodily godliness. Leviticus 19 instructs the people of God to be holy, even as God himself is holy. That chapter provides something of a list of things that it considers holy activities. Surprisingly, what we find there is that holiness is concerned with showing generosity to the poor and bringing justice to laborers; it is a matter of showing integrity in judicial matters, and demonstrating considerate behavior toward other people, and developing honest business practices.

As the representatives of God's kingdom, the people of God live their lives before the world. We vindicate, or slander, the name of our God in the public realm. Paul tells the Ephesians to put away immorality because it has no place in a community that

I, by myself,
am not a person.

represents the Lord of heaven. In 1 Timothy Paul gives Timothy instructions to pass on to the Ephesian church, instructions that are to shape their lives in such a way that they do not prejudice people against the gospel. Not one of the qualifications for elder and deacon that we find in I Timothy 3 has to do with private stuff. In fact, we know that Paul sort of stole the entire list. The whole list of qualifications for elder and deacon come, almost verbatim, from a Roman army promotion manual. These are the qualities that make a good soldier. These are the qualities that make a good citizen.

Such an understanding of holiness is completely in keeping with the church's mission of the proclamation of the kingdom of God. We have been blessed that we might be a blessing to others (Gen 12:1-3). True holiness, true piety, is obeying the law of God in the common ways of life. It is bringing all of our values, all of our goals, all of our means under the values of the kingdom. Holiness is as much concerned with presenting our bodies as living sacrifices—which is a spiritual act of worship—as it is with private devotions. If we cannot, or refuse to, embody our piety with righteous action within God's world, our so-called piety is a sham and a lie (James 1:22-27).

A Question of Turf

The Bible regards the drive for self-concern as a manifestation of sin, as an articulation of the drive for autonomy. Adam and Eve were created in a covenant relationship with God, each other, and God's

world. Rather than develop God's creation by faithfully responding to their mandate to image their Creator in creaturely ways, they chose to go it alone, to be their own gods. In rebelling in the garden they absolutized creaturely interests over against the divine law. That absolutization may be manifested historically in terms of individualism, or its polar and dialectical opposite, collectivism. Both reduce the creational to a single aspect. Yet I would suggest that the individualist reduction is the more radical—no less damnable, but simply the more radical—of the two. Is it not possible to see the rebellion of the garden as the sin of individualism? By stating the question this way I do not mean to suggest that the sin of Adam and Eve equals individualism. Rather we must say that individualism comes from the fall. The fall is the story of brokenness and fracture that man introduces into God's creation. That brokenness can be articulated—and is—in manifold ways within our world. Yet the fall story itself can legitimately be understood as a story of individualism. As Barbara Hampton has said: "It was insistence on individual rights that precipitated the fall in the first place" (An American Sin: Individualism," *The Banner*, Sept., 1972, 94).

Notice the responses the man and the woman give to God's queries in Genesis 3. The Lord asks the man: "Who told you that you were naked?" "The woman you put here with me . . .," the man shoots back. It's not *my* fault. The woman did it, and Lord you made her, so you're culpable too." God turns to the woman: "what is this you have done?" The first two words out of the woman's mouth, "the serpent," declare that she too claims personal innocence while blaming another. Each seeks to defend themselves. Neither comes to the aid of the other. The man betrays the one who comes from his very side. And each blasphemes the Lord of creation. By their own hands, each is individuated, divided, separated, alienated from one another, from the good ground from which they come, and from the hand that took them from the ground. Each has begun to define reality in terms of themselves, but God will hear nothing of it. He understands the relational and covenantal aspects of their actions. He alone understands that he has created his world as an organic whole. The curses upon the man and the woman are articulated singularly for he addresses them as they now see themselves: as individuals. But its historic effects are thoroughly corporate and covenantal. The ground is cursed because man, the one who was to steward the created order, the one who was to image and reflect the Creator within the creation, has sinned. As man goes, so goes creation. It's all relational and covenantal to the core. The progeny of the man and the woman receive their curse in whole, not individuated as they themselves received it. The man and the woman were individually cursed, dealt with on their own individuated terms. But we experience their curse not as the man or the woman, but as human beings. Again, utterly relational and covenantal.

That same radical form of autonomy underlies the temptation that was offered again in a Judean wilderness. The devil tempted Jesus to indulge himself. "You're the only one who is important," was the constant refrain of both temptations. The evangelical, Bible believing Christian who argues for the rights and priorities of his private, personal life, is simply defending the wrong turf. But there is nothing really new about that after all. As persons created to image God within creation we ought to be defending God's world, but more often than not we surrender that world in order to defend the gates of heaven. We cry out our individual rights and interests. Yet our real allegiance, our necessary prior allegiance, ought to be to the community of faith in which God has placed us, gifted us, and charged us to seek his kingdom.

Scripture does not put up a blind collectivism in which persons do not exist as the answer to individualism. This is not to advocate collectivism. The declaration of the *imago dei* in Genesis 1:26-28 is at once a relational notion and a proclamation of the worth of persons. What I am suggesting is that the sin of Adam and Eve went right to the most radical extension of autonomy, atomization, and alienation. Nor do I mean to suggest that collectivism is a somewhat less damnable evil than individualism, that it is somehow, in some little way, slightly more virtuous than individualism. The first sin merely points out the lengths to which autonomous atomization can take us. Both collectivists and individualists need to hear the Lord's question to Cain and Cain's self-damning reply, for the answer and the question indict both individualism and collectivism:

God: "Where is your brother?"

Cain: "Am I my brother's keeper?"