Christ the Mediator and the Idol of Whiteness:

Christological Anthropology in T. F. Torrance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Willie Jennings

by

Jacquelynn Price-Linnartz

Date: _______________________

Approved:

___________________________
Jeremy Begbie, Supervisor

___________________________
Willie Jennings

___________________________
Edgardo Colón-Emeric

___________________________
Douglas Campbell

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor Theology in the Divinity School of Duke University

2016
ABSTRACT

Christ the Mediator and the Idol of Whiteness:
Christological Anthropology in T. F. Torrance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Willie Jennings

by

Jacquelynn Price-Linnartz

Date:_______________________

Approved:

___________________________
Jeremy Begbie, Supervisor

___________________________
Willie Jennings

___________________________
Edgardo Colón-Emeric

___________________________
Douglas Campbell

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
Theology in the Divinity School of Duke University

2016
Abstract

This dissertation asks how the theological anthropologies of T. F. Torrance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Willie Jennings help Christians diagnose and subvert the idolatry of our current racial imagination. It concludes that an idol we can call “whiteness” competes with Christ to function as the mediator of social identity, our goal and ideal human, and the icon held between us. This idolatry interferes with our ability to become the people we are meant to be together in Christ by the power of the Spirit. This theological anthropology enables us to identify the idol of whiteness at work in popular media like blockbuster movies, and it equips us to undermine this idol through our engagement of the arts, popular or otherwise, so that we might together develop a new, healthier, and holier imagination.
## Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................ iv

Contents ......................................................................................................................... v

List of Figures ................................................................................................................ xiii

Abbreviations ................................................................................................................ xv

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... xvi

Introduction ................................................................................................................. 1

  0.1  Nasty Flesh ........................................................................................................ 1

  0.2  Thesis .................................................................................................................. 3

  0.3  Key Terms .......................................................................................................... 4

    0.3.1  Self and Social Identity ............................................................................. 5

    0.3.2  Social Imagination ..................................................................................... 12

    0.3.3  Race and Race-as-we-know-it ................................................................. 13

    0.3.4  Mediation .................................................................................................. 17

    0.3.5  Idolatry ....................................................................................................... 19

  0.4  Outline .............................................................................................................. 21

    0.4.1  Part 1: Theological Anthropology ............................................................ 22

      0.4.1.1  Chapter 1: T.F. Torrance ................................................................. 22

      0.4.1.2  Chapter 2: Dietrich Bonhoeffer ....................................................... 23

      0.4.1.3  Chapter 3: Willie Jennings ............................................................... 24
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.4.1.4 Chapter 4: Conclusions about Christological Anthropology</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.4.2 Part 2: Exposing and Subverting the Idol of Whiteness in Art</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.4.2.1 Chapter 5: Exposing the Idol in Popular Art</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.4.2.2 Chapter 6: Subverting the Idol through the Arts</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.4.3 Conclusion</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART 1: THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1: T. F. Torrance</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Broad Framework: Mediation between God and Humanity</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.1 Hypostatic Union</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.2 Covenant with Israel</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.3 The Trinity</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.4 Summary of Broad Framework</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Theological Anthropology and Social Identity</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1 Vicarious Humanity</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1.1 Unity with all humans</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1.2 Fulfillment of humanity</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1.3 Unity with Christians</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.2 Eschatological Participation</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.3 Vertical and Horizontal Mediation</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.4 Radical Re-centering</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.5 The Church</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.5.1 Substantive sidebar: The church and Israel</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.3 Part 2. Church and Race

2.3.1 Community, Church, and Jesus Christ

2.3.1.1 Christian community and church community?

2.3.1.2 A real ideal?

2.3.1.3 “Church” as institution?

2.3.1.4 Eschatological reality (or bifocal vision)

2.3.1.5 Non-Christians

2.3.2 Bonhoeffer on Israel and Race

2.3.2.1 Israel

2.3.2.2 Race

2.4 Summary and Evaluation

2.4.1 Summary

2.4.2 Evaluation

2.4.2.1 Theory and practice

2.5 Conclusion

Chapter 3: Willie Jennings

3.1 Part 1: Social(-theological) Analysis

3.1.1 Component 1: Gentile Forgetfulness

3.1.2 Component 2: Colonialism and Land

3.1.3 Component 3: Rise of Whiteness

3.1.4 Component 4: Pedagogical Imperialism

3.2 Part 2: Theological(-social) Analysis
3.2.1 Our Problem ................................................................................................... 204
  3.2.1.1 Sin and idolatry ................................................................. 205
  3.2.1.2 Supersessionism............................................................ 207
  3.2.1.3 The idol of whiteness.................................................... 211
3.2.2 Our Hope ........................................................................................................ 214
  3.2.2.1 Land and space in Jesus .............................................. 214
  3.2.2.2 Pneumatological family with cultural enfolding .......... 218
  3.2.2.3 Practices .................................................................. 227
3.2.3 Christ the Holy Icon ..................................................................................... 232
  3.2.3.1 Idols and disordered desire ...................................... 233
  3.2.3.2 The Holy Icon and redeemed desire ......................... 234
  3.2.3.3 Producing idols and icons (a preview of Chapter 5) ...... 235
3.3 Summary and Evaluation .................................................................................. 238
  3.3.1 Whiteness .................................................................. 241
  3.3.2 The Created World ...................................................... 243
  3.3.3 The Place of Israel ....................................................... 244
  3.3.4 Eschatological Siblinghood .......................................... 247
  3.3.5 Particularity, Diversity, and Unity ................................. 248
3.4 Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 253

Chapter 4. Conclusions about Christological Anthropology ................................. 255
4.1 Overview ......................................................................................................... 255
  4.1.1 Torrance ........................................................................ 255
4.1.2 Bonhoeffer ................................................................. 257
4.1.3 Jennings........................................................................ 259

4.2 Questions ............................................................................ 260
4.2.1 Spatial Metaphor(s) Redux .............................................. 260
4.2.2 Distinction and Intimacy ......................................................... 264
   4.2.2.1 Intimacy without immediacy ..................................... 264
   4.2.2.2 Community with particularity .................................. 266
   4.2.2.3 Practical concerns ..................................................... 267
4.2.3 The Holy Spirit .............................................................. 271
4.3 Conclusion ..................................................................... 275

PART 2: EXPOSING AND SUBVERTING THE IDOL OF WHITENESS IN ART.............................. 277

Chapter 5: Seeing the Idol in Popular Art................................................. 279

5.1 Method ........................................................................ 281
5.2 The Movies and their Posters ............................................... 285
   5.2.1 Avatar (2009) ............................................................ 287
   5.2.2 Titanic (1997, 2012) .................................................... 296
   5.2.3 Jurassic World (2015) .................................................. 300
   5.2.4 Typical Franchises with the Typical Pattern: Harry Potter and The Dark Knight
       Movies ............................................................................. 307
   5.2.5 Marvel Movies: The Avengers (2012) & Co. ................. 314
      5.2.5.1 Iron Man 3 (2013) .................................................... 315
      5.2.5.2 The Avengers (2012) and The Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015) .... 318
5.2.6 The Star Wars Saga ................................................................. 326
  5.2.6.1 *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977) ...................... 327
  5.2.6.2 *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) ......... 330
  5.2.6.3 *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015) ........... 333
5.2.7 Other Divergences? *Frozen* (2013) and *Furious 7* (2015) ........ 338
  5.2.7.1 *Frozen* (2013) ............................................................... 339
  5.2.7.2 *Furious 7* (2015) .......................................................... 342
5.3 Conclusion: Theological Analysis Redux ........................................ 344
  5.3.1 Center and Periphery: With Whom do we Identify? ................. 345
  5.3.2 Whiteness and Theology Revisited ........................................... 350
  5.3.3. Theologically Charged Movie Posters ..................................... 351

Chapter 6: Subverting the Idol through the Arts ................................. 354
6.1 The Place (and Race) of Jesus in Popular Art .................................. 354
6.2 Protagonists and Ensembles? ....................................................... 359
  6.2.1 Protagonists ............................................................................. 359
  6.2.2 Ensembles ............................................................................... 362
6.3 Sanctifying Perception with Media-critical Education ..................... 363
6.4 Summary ...................................................................................... 373
6.5 Positive Examples ......................................................................... 375
  6.5.1 Chagall’s *White Crucifixion* (1938) ..................................... 376
  6.5.2 Jackson Hlungwani’s Altar-spaces ......................................... 383
  6.5.3 Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) ............................... 387
6.5.4 Ihimaera and Caro’s *Whale Rider* (2002) ....................................................... 393

6.6 Conclusion to Part 2 of the Dissertation............................................................. 400

**Conclusion** ........................................................................................................... 405

7.1 Further Avenues.................................................................................................. 406

7.1.1 Intersectionalism............................................................................................ 406

7.1.2 Positive Examples........................................................................................... 408

7.2 A Final Image....................................................................................................... 409

**Bibliography** ...................................................................................................... 412

**Biography** .......................................................................................................... 432
List of Figures

Figure 1: Avatar Poster 1 ................................................................................................ 287
Figure 2: Avatar Poster 2 ................................................................................................ 288
Figure 3: Titanic Poster .................................................................................................. 296
Figure 4: Jurassic World Official Poster ........................................................................ 300
Figure 5: Jurassic World Fan-made Poster ................................................................. 301
Figure 6: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part II Poster .................................. 309
Figure 7: The Dark Knight Poster ............................................................................. 310
Figure 8: The Dark Knight Rises Poster ..................................................................... 311
Figure 9: Iron Man 3 Poster ...................................................................................... 315
Figure 10: The Avengers Poster .................................................................................. 318
Figure 11: The Avengers: Age of Ultron Poster .......................................................... 319
Figure 12: Star Wars Poster .......................................................................................... 327
Figure 13: Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace Poster .................................... 330
Figure 14: Frozen Poster ............................................................................................. 339
Figure 15: Furious 7 Poster .......................................................................................... 342
Figure 16: Harold Copping’s The Hope of the World (1915) .................................... 357
Figure 17: Marc Chagall’s White Crucifixion (1938), Art Institute of Chicago .......... 376
Figure 18: Jackson Hlungwani, Altar to God, New Jerusalem, ca. 1984; photo by Susan Cole ................................................................. 383
Figure 19: *The Bluest Eye* cover, 1972 Washington Square Press edition ...................... 387

Figure 20: *Whale Rider* Poster ........................................................................................ 393
Abbreviations

The following are used for the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English (DBWE) series (17 vol.), edited by Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., Victoria J. Barnett, and Barbara Wojhoski, translated from the German series, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke (DBW), edited by Eberhard Bethge, Ernst Feil, Christian Gremmels, Wolfgang Huber, Hans Pfeifer, Albrecht Schönherr, Heinz Eduard Tödt, and Ilse Tödt. For volume-specific bibliographic information, see the Bibliography.

- **DBWE 1** Vol. 1: *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*
- **DBWE 2** Vol. 2: *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*
- **DBWE 3** Vol. 3: *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*
- **DBWE 4** Vol. 4: *Discipleship*
- **DBWE 5** Vol. 5: *Life Together and The Prayerbook of the Bible*
- **DBWE 6** Vol. 6: *Ethics*
- **DBWE 8** Vol. 8: *Letters and Papers from Prison*
- **DBWE 10** Vol. 10: *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931*
- **DBWE 11** Vol. 11: *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931-1932*
- **DBWE 12** Vol. 12: *Berlin: 1932-1933*
- **DBWE 14** Vol. 14: *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*
- **DBWE 15** Vol. 15: *Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940*
Acknowledgements

Like raising children, completing a dissertation takes a village. I thank my friends and family, especially my husband, Isaac. Having a baby in the middle of writing a dissertation was no easy task but possible with his loving support. I also thank my parents and siblings, who always assumed I would complete a doctorate even though I will be the first in the family to do so. Countless teachers and mentors have likewise propelled me onward, including Joseph Ho, my InterVarsity campus minister who encouraged me to think theologically about race.

This dissertation reflects five years of coursework at Duke Divinity School, whose professors have left their mark. Edgardo Colón-Emeric, J. Kameron Carter, Willie Jennings, and Jeremy Begbie in particular inspired much of this dissertation’s central theses, together inviting me into deep consideration of trinitarian theology, theological anthropology, and the relationship between Israel, Christ, and racial identity, all while asking why these matter today.

I could not have crossed the finish line without Duke Divinity School, A Fund for Theological Education, and the United Methodist Church, who have warmed my heart with their generous funding. I am also grateful for assistance from the staff at Duke Divinity School Library, where I have requested enough books to open my own branch, and Princeton Theological Seminary Library’s Special Collections, which houses the Thomas F. Torrance Manuscript Collection.

Last but not least, I thank my committee—Jeremy Begbie, Willie Jennings, Edgardo Colón-Emeric, and Douglas Campbell—for helping me narrow down my topic from forty dissertations to this one, recommending I reverse the order of my proposed argument, and taking the time to join me on my dissertation journey. Jeremy Begbie has been my teacher in “theology and the arts,” my academic advisor, and my mentor since 2009; without his encouragement, I would not have entered the doctoral program or, most importantly, be doing something I love with such remarkable people.
Introduction

I believe in Christ, who brings us closer to God and to life, who directs our thoughts and our hearts against false gods, while, at the same time, directing our thoughts and hearts toward the victims of those false gods.

—Eberhard Bethge, “a christological credo after Auschwitz”¹

0.1 Nasty Flesh

A little girl wants lighter skin. She stares at the back of her hand and says, “I just don’t like the way brown looks, because the way brown looks looks really nasty for some reason.”² She is not alone. In the documentary “Dark Girls,” women of color testify to their experience of “colorism,” a worldwide species of racism that ranks


people based on relative skin tone. One woman recounts how she scrubbed her skin raw, to wash it “clean.” Others use bleach to lighten skin.\(^3\)

Over five hundred years ago, in 1444, the chronicler of Portugal recorded a seminal slave market, noting that “amongst them were some white enough, fair to look upon, and well proportioned; others were less white like mulattoes; others again were as black as Ethiops, and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear...the images of a lower hemisphere.”\(^4\) It would seem that the pigmentocracy that justified the enslavement of tens of millions of people as chattel, funded the decimation of entire peoples and ways of life, and still leads our little girls to call their skin “nasty” has been at least five hundred years in the making.

What has driven this widespread madness so deeply into us that we hate our own flesh? How might Christians diagnose our disease, and what might we do about it?

---


0.2 Thesis

A Christian understanding of what it means to be human exposes our popular racial imagination as idolatrous. This dissertation asks how the christological anthropologies of T. F. Torrance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Willie Jennings help Christians diagnose and subvert the contemporary idolatry that sustains racial identity as we know it.

From these theologians, this dissertation develops an anthropology that recognizes Christ as the one true and proper mediator between us, God, each other, and the rest of creation. It understands Christ’s mediation in terms of Christ serving as our goal, ideal, and Holy Icon who, when held between us, enables us to become more who we are meant to be together in Christ. Ever since the colonial-imperial era, however, a perversion of these theological truths has corrupted the dominant social imaginary so that Christ gets replaced with a false mediator and ideal: the “idol of whiteness.” With our christological anthropology in place, we can see the idol of whiteness at work in popular media and work to undermine it through those same channels.

In its first four chapters (Part 1), this dissertation uncovers the relevant components of these three theologians’ christological anthropologies, so that by the end we can capitalize on the ways in which they complement each other. Together, they point to Christ as the true and proper mediator of social identity, serving as our
goal for human being and our “Holy Icon,” suggesting that when Christ is seen between us and held up as our Holy Icon, we can together live into our true identities in God.

In its last two chapters (Part 2), the dissertation describes one practical ramification of this line of christological anthropology—namely, that it equips us to identify this particular form of idolatry at work in popular culture, and simultaneously to develop ways we might transform our idol-infested imagination into something more holy.

0.3 Key Terms

The thesis of this dissertation relies on several terms that could use some initial clarification, including “self” and “social identity,” “social imagination,” “race” or “race-as-we-know-it,” “mediation,” and “idolatry.” Some concepts, like “mediation,” will become much clearer in the context of the dissertation’s unfolding argument, while others, like “Holy Icon,” will receive direct, extended treatment in later chapters as soon as they become relevant and therefore escape a preliminary definition.
0.3.1 Self and Social Identity

This dissertation traffics in contested terms related to “self” and “identity.” Multiple academic disciplines tackle these topics and provide their own angles, and each of these disciplines harbors countless competing theories of these concepts.

First and foremost, this dissertation’s anthropology emerges from a discourse with three key theological interlocutors. One potential source of confusion will be that the three theologians who provide the building blocks of this dissertation’s christological anthropology have non-identical vocabularies and emphases when it comes to self, identity, personhood, and related concepts. Nevertheless, they share a concern to leave behind modern-era understandings of the “self” associated most prominently with Immanuel Kant (i.e. treating the self as an autonomous agent who assumes epistemic priority), favoring instead a more communal notion of selfhood or personal identity, one that takes seriously the ways in which our identities are fundamentally shaped by other people, whether by direct interpersonal relationships or social and cultural powers more broadly speaking.

In terms of these theologians’ nuances, T. F. Torrance will have the most to say about personhood or humanity as something rooted ultimately in Christ, the “personalizing person.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer will speak of a sinful “Self” that must be decentered and re-centered on Christ. Willie Jennings will rely heavily on Bonhoeffer’s concepts to point to our fundamental need for each other. This dissertation will, in
turn, tease out the way in which, taken together, these contribute to a coherent account of social identity. In this account, who each person is on a fundamental level—whether we call this one’s identity, selfhood, or particular personhood—is inherently bound to others and ultimately to Christ so that one becomes who one is meant to be in an eschatological fashion when pneumatologically united with other persons in Christ.

This dissertation’s understanding of identity tracks with the general contours of trends in contemporary theology and other disciplines. John Webster shows how theologians of recent decades have moved away not only from Kantian accounts of identity, but from postmodern ones, as well. As he summarizes, “to be human is...to have one’s being outside of oneself,” owed to the triune God, meaning that humans are fundamentally “a-centric.” Who we are on a fundamental level, including our individual or personal subjectivity, is ultimately rooted in the communal Trinity.5 Here the critique of modernity’s master-Self gestures directly at a communal, social understanding of identity.

Webster’s account suggests that he does not care much for postmodern attacks on “self,” which tend to dismiss it as a complete fiction. Kevin Vanhoozer engages in a similar project, concluding that “postmodern accounts are mainly ironic: the modern

---

subject has been exposed as a fiction, its self-congratulatory story undone."\textsuperscript{6} Much of contemporary theological anthropology builds on this critique of the fabricated autonomous “self” but does not entirely reject the notion of a self, a subject, or the individual human’s unique identity. Vanhoozer summarizes contemporary theological anthropology by tracing the key concepts espoused by Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and those who appeal to the “sociality” of the Trinity as a way of explaining, affirming, or recommending a deep, identity-constituting sociality among human beings.

This dissertation echoes these basic insights of contemporary theological anthropology. By following the lead of its primary interlocutors, this dissertation repeats the Barthian move of doing anthropology “from above,” in the sense that we best know ourselves from God, who breaks into our otherwise closed existence and opens us back out to God and other people (hear in this elements of both modern and postmodern thought\textsuperscript{7}). Bonhoeffer and Torrance likewise contribute an eschatological view of identity that echoes Pannenberg’s anthropology “from the end,” as seen and


\textsuperscript{7} This line of thinking admits the existence of something like a modern “Self,” but, with postmodernism, it challenges this notion as fundamentally flawed—that the “Self” is not in fact autonomous or coherent. Diverging from postmodernism, this Barthian argument posits that God can and does break into our limited, isolated, fragmented fields of view to open us back out of ourselves to make us whole.
inaugurated in the resurrected Christ, who reveals our destiny in him. With advocates of the “social Trinity,” this dissertation likewise follows general postmodern trends that recognize the inherently social nature of personal identity.

These trends in theological anthropology are not isolated from other disciplines even if the terminology varies. Psychologists and sociologists in particular are not generally interested in retaining (or rescuing) concepts of “human nature” in the way that theologians often are; nor do they typically care to speak of “personhood” in ways that connect to the “persons” of the Trinity. But these disciplines have likewise participated in the move toward more communal and social understandings of identity even if they cannot escape the postmodern skepticism of whether or not there can be a “self” beyond that which is humanly constructed. The “social self” and “social identity” are common terms in these disciplines to indicate that form or level of individual or personal identity that is inherently social.

The “social self” proves a useful concept, as explained by sociologist Suzie Scott. Her understanding “social identity”\(^8\) embraces a concept “of the ‘social self’ [that] centres on the idea that selfhood is relational” and arises “through social interaction at

the micro level” as well as the macro level.⁹ “This is a symbolic and communicative process by which actors understand themselves through their relations with others.” Her position charts a middle way through sociological debates about whether the “self” is purely stable or pure fiction, suggesting “something of a compromise between the extremes of [the self’s] fixity and fragmentation.” In doing so, scholars like Scott can “refer to such notions as self and identity, which may be experienced by individuals as relatively consistent, but do not claim that this constitutes a ‘pure’ essential core, immune to external social influences.” They also accept that identity is fluid, evolving, and reflects countless influences, including one’s own agency.¹⁰

Whereas scholars in these disciplines often prefer to distinguish between innumerable concepts like self, personhood, and social identity, this dissertation will take each of these terms to be relevant to “identity” in general and therefore will focus more on their common referent rather than how any one scholar prefers to distinguish them. This dissertation does not limit the term “social identity” to what social psychologist Henri Tajfel most famously meant by it (“affiliations with reference to groups and the processes to which this gives rise, such as social comparison, in-and out-

⁹ Although Scott’s particular approach to identity focuses on micro level interactions among “actors” who have “agency,” it does not thereby discount the reality of macro level influences that affect the micro level and delimit agency, sometimes severely (see ibid., 18).
¹⁰ Ibid., 11.
group relations and prejudice”¹¹), although this is close to what “social identity” means in this dissertation. Rom Harré, a social philosopher, takes “social identity” to refer to attributes and categories applied by external parties or forces,¹² which again is close to this dissertation’s use. In this dissertation, “social identity” refers to personal identity with an accent placed on the way in which personal identity is always socially constituted. Thus “social identity” does not simply refer to either (i) attributions of group memberships, or (ii) the ways we form and are formed by such group memberships. In this sense, it is much like Scott’s “social self”—influenced not only by group memberships and cultural attitudes toward these, but by all of our relationships, period. Further charting a middle course, it does not presume some stable center to any form of “self”—at least not beyond what God provides in Christ through the Spirit, which is another way of affirming the Christian belief that our very existence is a gift from God.

To summarize, following both contemporary theology and social sciences, this dissertation assumes there is something like a “self” (or personal identity, or individual

---


¹² Scott, Negotiating Identity, 3. See also Horace Romano Harré, The Singular Self: An Introduction to the Psychology of Personhood (Sage, 1997). Note that Harré distinguishes social and personal identity, using the latter to indicate a person’s concept of being a consistent (or at least persisting) entity over time. This dissertation’s idea of personal identity and social identity occupies the space that is shared by what Harré has dissected into two.
human identity). One’s self or personal identity is strongly shaped by other persons, which means we can also legitimately speak of one’s “social identity.” This shaping by others comes by way of interpersonal interactions as well as larger social, cultural ways of thinking and being in the world (which this dissertation refers to as “social imagination”). Much of this will be theologically developed by our three theological interlocutors.

To be clear about terminology, “personhood” and “humanity” indicate something very basic to human identity and are in some sense shared among us all. In Torrance’s hands, they further indicate the ways in which we are each meant to be particular creatures of God. This in turn reflects his concern for personal identity.

“Self” will not appear often but will usually indicate some core aspect of personal identity; and this dissertation will clarify its varying meanings in Bonhoeffer’s hands as he indicts the sinful, egotistical, self-made false god that he calls the “Self.”

“Social identity” will indicate personal identity with an emphasis on the ways in which it is inherently socially formed. It inhabits the intersection of the group and the individual, belonging to both. Thus this dissertation will often speak of “identity-constituting relationships,” ultimately arguing that these relationships are distorted by an idol in ways that harm us on every level—collectively, interpersonally, and personally.
0.3.2 Social Imagination

A related concept to “social identity” is “social imagination,” which this dissertation uses to indicate those wider social, cultural ways of perceiving our shared existence, including those strong social forces that operate on what Scott calls the “macro level,” which in turn influences micro-level interactions. I base this term directly on philosopher Charles Taylor’s influential term “social imaginary” in *A Secular Age*, where he defines it at length. “Social imaginary” refers to something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations.\(^\text{13}\)

Taylor wants to describe how “ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings,” which gets “carried in images, stories, legends, etc.” It is “shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society.” It entails “that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”\(^\text{14}\)

In this dissertation, “social imagination” means “social imaginary”: we make the slight change because the term is somewhat simpler and because it better corresponds


\(^{14}\) Ibid., 171-172.
to a related term, “racial imagination,” which we find in the work of theologian Willie Jennings. This dissertation maintains that our racial imagination is both a part (or cross-section) of the widely held social imaginary at work in contemporary Western societies.

At the same time, variants of the particular racial imagination currently operative in the dominant social imaginary can be found in slightly different social imaginaries, such as those that Charles Taylor would see as the predecessors to the contemporary social imaginary of Western societies (“predecessors” at least when it comes to assumptions having to do with religion, government, public space, the market economy, secularism, etc.). Moreover, when this dissertation describes the current “social imagination,” it is most concerned with those dimensions that have to do with racial identity. That said, how we tend to think and live in relation to “race” is itself a complex matter that implicates a host of other factors—something that will become clearer in Chapters 3 and 4.

0.3.3 Race and Race-as-we-know-it

Although “race” is a contested term, most today can identify well-worn racial categories like “white” (or Caucasian and) “black,” and most can likewise name a host of other shifting categories in between these ends of the racial spectrum. Moreover, despite the term’s instability, scholars often converge on an understanding of “race” as something imaginary or socially constructed. Hence it makes sense for Jennings to
speak of our racial imagination. What do they mean by “imaginary” or “socially constructed,” and how else might we define “race” today?

Critical culture theorists Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon, upon whose work this dissertation’s Chapter 5 relies, describe “race” as a term that, in practice, designates one or more biological traits (e.g., skin color) from which a sociopolitical hierarchy is derived and the assumption that some races are superior and therefore deserve to be more powerful than others. In spite of the concentrated efforts of scientists over the past one hundred years, the concept of “race” has become progressively more elusive, to the extent that today we can say that race is an illusion, a fiction that no longer leads to a meaningful classification of humans in the biological or social sciences. It is not an objective or fixed category.  

Similarly, other cultural theorists whose work also informs this dissertation “consider race always to be socially constructed and contested.” Despite attempts to make race a fixed biological reality, “race is not a set of biological categories but a social and political construction.” Racial categories “are the basis of individual identity and often of life experience and opportunity, as well as serving as persistent bases for social stratification.”

All of these theorists appeal to the work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who contend that race consists of “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social

---


meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.” Even if a fiction, race “continues to be central to everyone’s identity and understanding of the social world.”

As Vera and Gordon put it, race matters, even if imaginary, because “today the vast majority of humans across the globe still think, feel, and act as if ‘race’ were real, as if it pointed to true, useful differences among people. Furthermore, no one alive today has lived in a world in which race did not matter.”

Race is not stable, in that the categories have shifted over time and vary by geographic and cultural location. Many formerly distinct “races” have, over time, been incorporated under the white or Caucasian umbrella, and today “many Latinos are considered white in Latin American countries, for instance, but are racialized as nonwhite in European and Euro-American contexts.” Yet for the past five hundred years, some traits of the racial imagination that has taken root in the Western social

---


20 Beltrán and Fojas, “Introduction: Mixed Race in Hollywood Film and Media Culture,” 3. This is also the experience that Hernan Vera had when moving from Chile to the U.S.—he was white in Chile but Latino in the U.S. For his part, Andrew Gordon interprets his experience as matching what Jacobson describes, seeing Jews as being “admitted into the exclusive American club of whiteness” after World War II. See Vera and Gordon, Screen Saviors, 1.
imagination have proven relatively stable, and this dissertation will focus more on its relatively stable features.

“Race” can have very different meanings, too, especially if we look at cultures that predate the colonial-imperial era. For example, the “nations” of the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament are sometimes considered “races” by modern translators, yet the term must mean something very different in such instances. Even the term “ethnicity”—which better implicates the cultural practices, geographical origins, and familial heritage of self-proclaimed people groups—carries some of the problematic baggage of the dominant, contemporary understanding of race.\(^{21}\) Moreover, we can always find many other forms of intergroup conflict and prejudice that have little to do with the racial imagination that this dissertation examines. This dissertation will therefore sometimes speak of “race-as-we-know-it” to remind readers that by “race,” this dissertation refers to that contemporary notion of “race” or “racial identity” as described above. This particular understanding of “race” has largely to do with “black” and “white” as boundaries of a hierarchically structured scale, which first developed largely in Western Europe in the early modern era (as further discussed in Chapter 3).

Lastly, this dissertation will eventually position the contemporary racial imagination within a larger framework that it will call “whiteness,” which helpfully captures many of the specifics of just how the contemporary racial imagination works.

and how it coordinates with other weighty forms of distinction as expressed in sexism, nationalism, Westernism, and so on, which we might otherwise consider as independent of racial categorizations. “Whiteness” will be discussed at length in Chapters 3 and 4, where this dissertation will name the idol that perpetuates our racial imagination as the *idol of whiteness*.

### 0.3.4 Mediation

What does it mean for Christ to be the “Mediator”? This dissertation describes Christ’s mediation in multiple senses. With T. F. Torrance, it describes Christ as the mediator of revelation and reconciliation, and as the mediator between God and humanity (and all creation). With Torrance and most certainly with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we come to see Christ also as the one and only proper mediator of our horizontal relationships with one another and the rest of creation. This is another way of saying that Christ is the one and only true and proper mediator of social identity, because who we are should be based on our relationships with God, others, and the rest of creation. Christ’s vertical and horizontal mediations are intrinsically connected—we are meant to be in communion together in Christ by the power of the Spirit, who together bring us before the Father. We are made for loving communion with the communal, personal, triune God.
To be clear, to mediate in this sense is not quite the same thing as mediating like an arbiter in a dispute, or serving as an intermediary, or serving as the medium that unites otherwise disparate entities. Although Christ’s mediation bears some similarity to each of these senses, it diverges from each in important respects. Unlike an arbiter, in this view Jesus Christ does not go back and forth between two distant parties who are at odds, and he certainly does not intervene as an intermediary to effect some bland form of reconciliation in which the parties never make contact and, once “reconciled,” can go their separate ways. These models allow too much distance. They also us to misperceive Christ as a neutral third party, himself distant and detached rather than very intimately and personally involved to the point that reconciliation takes place in him. Yet taking Christ as merely a medium of joining, on the other hand, might mistake Christ for a solvent that dissolves differences or simply something inert in the background rather than someone whom we encounter.

Instead, “mediation” in this dissertation takes on significant qualifications when applied to Christ: Christ at once comes between as a protection against sinful forms of contact and as the space, medium, or body in whom we can have true, healthy, holy, life-giving intimacy with one another. Moreover, as this dissertation will argue, we cannot have the one without the other. It may seem counterintuitive, but sometimes paradoxes get us closest to the truth: only with Christ between us can we really have one another, and only when united in Christ do we find the particular selves we are meant to be.
The term “idolatry” carries a range of legitimate meanings. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, one readily associates the term with those writings in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament that denounce (i) Israel’s worship of the gods of other peoples, (ii) the worship of these gods’ “graven images”—visible, tangible representations of the god, or even (iii) the creation of such artifacts, which the Second Commandment prohibits when in reference to the one God of Israel, whom the prophets declare as the one and only God, period. We find these related concepts of idolatry in the New Testament, too, when Paul reiterates the view that, by worshipping “images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles,” one exchanges “the truth about God for a lie” and instead worships and serves “the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:23-25, NRSV).

Beyond scriptural stories and denouncements of idols and idolatry, Christians sometimes use “idolatry” to describe the act of giving some part of our lives a very large and undue amount of control, attention, affection, or centrality—as when someone repents of making an idol of her job, art, health, romantic relationships, or efficiency, just to name a few of many possible examples.

Although these uses of “idolatry” have important differences, they all refer to the worship of something that is not God and is therefore created. Some uses define “worship” more narrowly, and some more broadly, but in each case the “idol” gets in
our way of worshipping God or loving God and neighbor as we should. In the view of
this dissertation, “idolatry” in its simplest meaning refers to replacing God with not-God.

This dissertation uses “idolatry” more specifically to refer to replacing Jesus
Christ with not-Christ, in our hearts and in our collective social existence by way of an
idolatrous social imagination. This narrower sense of idolatry does not discount other
uses, but it puts a particular spin on it.

This understanding of idolatry appears first in Chapter 1, with T. F. Torrance’s
theology, but Torrance himself had little to say explicitly about idolatry. Dietrich
Bonhoeffer (Chapter 2) uses the term much as this dissertation does, suggesting that
the first “idol” is the human “self,” to the extent that we, in our sinfulness, consider
ourselves limitless non-creatures, self-creators, and gods.22 He also notes how the
“hopeless” attempt “to identify our own ideal of humanity with what God actually
created...fails to recognize that it is only from Christ that we can know about the original
nature of humankind.”23 The idolatry of the Self does not end with the Self, but seeks
an “ideal human” aside from Jesus Christ who can serve as our goal, as our telos, as a
center that generates our identities. Willie Jennings uses Bonhoeffer’s understanding of
idolatry to explain how idols distort our desires for God, others, creation, and ourselves,
thereby distorting our relationships, and how Christ comes between to serve as our

22 See also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-
(Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), [DBWE 3:] 107; 143.
23 Ibid., 62.
“Holy Icon” to heal our broken relationships and therefore heal our broken selves.\textsuperscript{24} This dissertation takes these insights and applies them to the racial imagination in which the false ideal of humanity that we might call “whiteness” functions as an idol that occupies the space meant for Christ alone.

\textbf{0.4 Outline}

This dissertation shows that a theological anthropology centered on Christ’s role as Mediator exposes our current racial imagination as idolatrous, which in turn empowers us to do something about it.

In order to make its argument, this dissertation dedicates each of the first three chapters to one of its three main theological interlocutors. T. F. Torrance paves the way by situating christological anthropology within an overall trinitarian, orthodox, and ecumenical theology. Chapter 2 moves back in time to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who better draws out what Christ’s role as Mediator means for relationships and therefore for social identity. Then Chapter 3 focuses on Willie Jennings, who extends Torrance’s and Bonhoeffer’s theologies into our contemporary context, introduces the language of Christ as our “Holy Icon,” and delves more deeply into the problematic nature of specifically racial identity. Chapter 4 concludes Part 1 by considering how these three

theologians together weave a tapestry of christological anthropology that exposes our current racial imagination as idolatrous.

From such a perspective, we can see ourselves and others in a truer light and become more like our true, eschatological selves, in opposition to the distorting effects of the idol that sustains race-as-we-know-it. In two chapters, Part 2 of the dissertation uses this christological anthropology to expose the idol of whiteness at work in popular media and proposes ways we might undermine this idol in how we approach the arts.

0.4.1 Part 1: Theological Anthropology

0.4.1.1 Chapter 1: T.F. Torrance

Chapter 1 looks to T. F. Torrance to provide a solid framework for a theological anthropology that hones in on Christ’s role as Mediator. Torrance suggests that Christ mediates the divine-human relationship, fulfilling God’s covenant with Israel from both sides so that human creatures can participate in the communion of the Trinity. Such communion is what God intends for all creation in eschatological fashion. We become who we are meant to be with other persons in the body of Christ. Identity is interpersonal, social, eschatological, and secured in Christ alone.

From Torrance, we can also conclude, first, that God desires to restore all creation into a familial relationship. Second, conceiving of Christ as our Mediator exposes the sin of self-centeredness. Torrance suggests that racism can be traced to the
loss of our true center and Israel’s place there. Third, having one’s identity “in” Jesus fosters \textit{particular} identity. Lastly, Torrance’s explication of several key doctrines provides resources for appreciating difference-in-unity based ultimately in the generative love of the triune God sup.

\subsection*{0.4.1.2 Chapter 2: Dietrich Bonhoeffer}

While Torrance provides a theological framework that is robust, orthodox, ecumenical, and trinitarian, Bonhoeffer’s distinctive contribution lies in his call to practical, ethical action and in his spatial metaphor of social identity that maps out the connections between Christ, identity, and idolatry. From his account, we can conclude that Christ is the one true \textit{center} and \textit{mediator} of social identity, in the \textit{middle} of our social reality. With Christ mediating, we each receive who we are from God and in turn from each other. Christ stands \textit{between} and yet precisely by standing between, Christ is also our common bond, our \textit{limit}-generating center and eschatological \textit{goal} who enables genuine life together. As the true center, Christ topples the idols that distort our relationships so that we can embrace others in life-giving ways, thereby becoming who we are meant to be.

Bonhoeffer also prompts us to see racism as a rejection of God-given limits and diversity in favor of a false ideal, such as the idolatrous Aryan ideal of humanity. Like Torrance, he also affirms true creaturely particularity and leads us to consider all people
as God’s children from the perspective of God’s desire. He does not, however, offer a fully developed social or theological analysis of that which sustains race-as-we-know-it.

0.4.1.3  Chapter 3: Willie Jennings

Chapter 3 turns to Willie Jennings to reveal the ongoing contest between what this dissertation calls the idol of whiteness and Christ the Mediator, even if he never speaks in those exact terms. From Jennings, this dissertation concludes that we inhabit a racialized social imaginary that places a false ideal of humanity between us—an ideal we can name as whiteness. While Bonhoeffer moves this dissertation’s argument toward Christ’s mediation of social identity with an eye to ethical action, Jennings now adds the appropriate nuances to show its relevance for specifically racial identity.

Jennings in particular exposes whiteness as constitutive of our current racial imagination, whiteness’s historical-theological underpinnings, and our hope in Christ for a better way of seeing and being in the world together in light of this specific problem. In the process, he furthers the trajectories begun by Torrance and Bonhoeffer to offer a yet wider vision of the created world, the place of Israel, and our eschatological siblinghood with diverse peoples. He also gives us yet more resources for appreciating particularity, diversity, and unity in ways that do not repeat the problems of whiteness.
0.4.1.4 Chapter 4: Conclusions about Christological Anthropology

This chapter serves as a capstone for the first three chapters, drawing the threads together and addressing lingering concerns about this dissertation’s spatial metaphor of Christ-mediated identity, about how best to understand distinction and intimacy, and the role of the Holy Spirit in unity, particularity, and eschatology.

0.4.2 Part 2: Exposing and Subverting the Idol of Whiteness in Art

0.4.2.1 Chapter 5: Exposing the Idol in Popular Art

Chapter 5 considers one practical ramification of the christological anthropology developed in the first three chapters. Namely, it helps us confront the contemporary idolatry of racial identity (a.k.a. the idol of whiteness) as we encounter it in popular media, such as the highest grossing films of recent decades. To this end, Chapter 5 offers a case study that analyzes the highest grossing films and their posters, concluding that we see the influence of whiteness especially in the dominance of white male heroes around and beneath whom lesser characters take their respective places, indicating that “the world revolves around the white messiah.”

---

0.4.2.2 Chapter 6: Subverting the Idol through the Arts

Chapter 6 proposes ways we can subvert the idol of whiteness particularly in the practices surrounding popular art and media, especially by way of reconfiguring how we relate Christ, protagonists, and Christ-figures and by way of education. Chapter 6 also offers a few examples of artworks that subvert the idol of whiteness using some of the recommended devices. It concludes that these options can contribute to new images, new stories, and a new imagination that helps us subvert the idol of whiteness in favor of lifting up the Holy Icon between us.

0.4.3 Conclusion

The dissertation concludes by proposing a few avenues worth further exploration as we seek out what it means to be in Christ together in a world that is, like us, at once under the sway of unholy idols and in desperate need of holy intimacy.
PART 1: THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Chapter 1: T. F. Torrance

Thomas Forsyth Torrance (1913 – 2007) ranks among the most highly regarded British theologians of the twentieth century. Torrance is perhaps best known for embracing the work of his Doktorvater, Karl Barth, in the world of British theology and extending central Barthian themes in new directions that merit attention in their own right.¹ One specific contribution has received extensive attention: Torrance both clarifies and qualifies Barth’s “natural theology” (or lack thereof), and in the process develops a highly nuanced understanding of how “theological science” and the natural sciences interact. In his understanding, our structures of knowing should correlate to the structures of reality, and both exist on levels, allowing for natural and theological science to coexist in a specific relationship.² As helpful as his insights on these points

² Paul D. Molnar, Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 2.
are, they are not as relevant to this dissertation’s project as his claims that more directly concern Christ’s role as Mediator.

In the twenty-first century, T. F. Torrance’s work has attracted a growing body of secondary literature that progresses beyond mere summary into more critical appropriations, whether concerning the natural sciences or otherwise. This dissertation’s engagement of Torrance modestly fits within this last category of recent secondary literature, bringing aspects of Torrance’s theology into critical and creative conversation with the theologies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Willie Jennings. Compared to Bonhoeffer and Jennings, Torrance provides the most thorough and developed systematic-theological framework in which to situate a christological anthropology that takes Christ’s role as Mediator as its lodestar. Moreover, Torrance’s overall framework

---

3 Much secondary literature on T. F. Torrance engages his approach to the natural sciences. E.g., in Daniel Hardy’s encyclopedia entry for Torrance, his section on debates exclusively discusses Torrance on natural science, scientific knowledge, and epistemology. The same is true of Hardy’s assessment of Torrance’s influence today (“T. F. Torrance,” 172-176). This trend, however, has been shifting. In 2005, Daniel Hardy could write, “ten years ago [in the mid-1990s], there was relatively little direct response to Torrance’s work. Now, thankfully, the situation is different. Although one does not find his work being taught as such, it has attracted a number of careful studies. Most come from those who are predisposed to systematic theology and primarily consider his contribution to the content of theology; of these, most are descriptive and analytical, and do not challenge his ways and conclusions; only a few go further to probe and challenge his work” (175-76). Several of the texts that play a supporting role for the following analysis have emerged since 2005 and continue the trajectory of increasingly appropriating, qualifying, and critiquing Torrance’s contribution.
is trinitarian, orthodox, and ecumenical, securing its appeal for a wide range of Christians.

To unfurl the relevant strands of Torrance’s christological anthropology, this chapter first sketches the broad contours of Torrance’s theological framework as they pertain to Christ’s role as Mediator between God and humanity. It then considers Torrance’s anthropological claims that emerge from or engage this broad understanding, with a view to what this means for social identity. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary and evaluation.

1.1 Broad Framework: Mediation between God and Humanity

T. F. Torrance’s theology helps advance the claim that Christ is the only true and proper mediator of our social identities.

More specifically, Torrance contends that through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ mediates between God and humanity from both sides, as fully divine and fully human, making revelation and reconciliation possible through his person and work. Second, just as the greatest commandment to love God also entails loving one’s neighbor, so too this “vertical” relationship between humanity and God mutually
implicates our “horizontal” relationships. Not only does Christ mediate between humanity and God, but among humans, as well.

Torrance devotes much of his work to articulating a theological understanding of how Christ mediates the “vertical” relationship between God and humanity. Several key concepts help Torrance illuminate the mystery of this mediation, especially the hypostatic union, God’s covenant with Israel, and the coordinated work of the Trinity. These three concepts all hang together in Torrance’s highly unified theology, and they likewise fold into themselves related concepts such as homoousion and Christ’s “vicarious humanity.”

1.1.1 Hypostatic Union

T. F. Torrance’s commentators hold up various theological constructs as the key to Torrance’s theological paradigm. Frequent recipients of this honor include the hypostatic union, homoousios, Christ’s vicarious humanity, and the Trinity, and different authors highlight different combinations of these Torrancian themes in their secondary literature. The reason for this diversity is not that Torrance is necessarily unclear on the

---

4 I will use the language of “vertical” and “horizontal” because of its popularity in Christian discourse, even if such a spatialization problematically implies that God is literally “above” us and invites us to think of God as an object among objects. Suffice it to say, any such spatial language on my part is metaphorical. This is not to say that God did not occupy space and time as we know it in the Incarnation; indeed, Christian faith professes that Jesus Christ somehow remains embodied even if we lack the conceptual tools to comprehend this.
matter, but because these concepts hang together in close association in his corpus. Together, they capture the distinctive flavor of Torrance’s theology.

As expressed in the Creeds, Christians profess that in the incarnation, God the Son became fully human while remaining fully divine. This joining of the divine and human without diminishment or confusion of either is known as the hypostatic union. In his person and work, Jesus reconciled humanity with God by enacting that reconciliation in his body and life. Torrance argues that the hypostatic union is both the heart of the gospel and a dynamic reality.\(^5\) Jesus Christ’s life as a whole effected and deepened divine-human reconciliation as he took on humanity’s alienation from God. As human, Christ could be our representative and our substitute, but as God, he could overcome our diseases, burdens, and demons—so that as both God and human, he could overcome our alienation from God on our behalf. Only through such a union is atonement—or reconciliation between God and humanity—possible.

Jesus Christ is not two beings forced into one, but is “one person,”\(^6\) “one Reality who confronts us as he who is both God and [hu]man.”\(^7\) As one person and one reality, Christ mediates between God and humanity. Torrance calls this “the mystery of true divine nature and true human nature in one person,” which is “the very heart of the

\(^5\) Torrance, _Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ_ (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 81.
\(^6\) Ibid., 83.
\(^7\) Torrance, _The Mediation of Christ_ (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 64-65.
Christian faith.”

According to one of Torrance’s leading commentators, Elmer Colyer, “the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in the incarnate Son...is the source for all of Christ’s mediatorial activity on our behalf.”

Two other key phrases come into play here for Torrance: *homoousion* and “vicarious humanity.” *Homoousion* is the Greek expression formulated by the ancient Church to explain that both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are of one substance or essence with God the Father—that all three persons (*hypostases*) of the Trinity are equally and fully God. (If breaking down the word, *homo-* means the same and *ousia* means substance or essence.) For Torrance, the fact that Jesus, as the incarnate Son of God, is *homoousios* with the Father is a lynchpin theological concept because otherwise humanity would not be truly reconciled to God through Christ.

---

8 Torrance, *Incarnation*, 83.

9 Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 86. He also notes that Torrance links this to Trinitarian activity, in that the “hypostatic union is rooted in and sustained by the communion and mutual indwelling of the trinitarian persons in the one being of God” (82n121).

10 See the glossary entries for “homoousion” and “hypostasis” in Torrance, *Incarnation*, 348. Paul Molnar describes Torrance’s commitment to the doctrine of *homoousion*, which is “the oneness in being and act of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Molnar, *Theologian of the Trinity*, 54.

11 Colyer explains that, for Torrance, the formulation of *homoousios* “by the Nicene theologians is a fundamental event in the mind and memory of the church,” and in fact it is the “ontological and epistemological linchpin of Christian theology,” helping us grasp how Christ mediates reconciliation and revelation (*How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 81).
In fact, by way of the hypostatic union, Jesus is simultaneously of the same *ousia* as *humanity*, which is equally essential for atonement, redemption, and salvation to take place through him.\(^{12}\) As Torrance argues, “the whole of reconciliation depends upon the fact that *one person acts both from the side of God, and from the side of [humanity]*...and that these acts are really and truly identical in the person of the mediator.”\(^{13}\) Torrance also calls Christ’s full humanity Christ’s “vicarious humanity,” which means that Christ is humanity’s representative and substitute, taking on our weaknesses and fallen condition so that humanity might be redeemed.

To be clear, when Torrance emphasizes Christ’s “vicarious humanity” as entailing our broken and sinful nature, he is not saying that Christ was or is sinful, but rather Torrance is reviving the patristic theological contention that Christ could only have truly saved our fallen nature if Christ had truly assumed it. If the Son “did not really come into our fallen existence...where we are, and join himself to us...,” how could it be said...
that Christ really took our place, took our cause upon himself in order to redeem us?” \(^{14}\)

Instead, as Colyer concludes, “To be mediator, Jesus Christ has to be as fully human as he is *homoousios* with God the Father.” \(^{15}\)

Torrance’s language of “vicarious humanity” merits one last clarification. He prefers to see it from two angles that he believes must always be held together, as if looking through blue and red 3-D glasses. One recognizes Christ as humanity’s “representative,” and the other recognizes him as a divinely-provided “substitute” for humanity before God. On the one hand, “Jesus represents, or stands for, our response...to God” as one of us and our “leader,” the perfect human. But on the other hand, Jesus is a “substitute” externally provided by God, doing what we were unable to do. \(^{16}\) Seeing one without the other distorts our vision of Christ, whereas together they better reveal Christ’s depth and reality. The Spirit enables Christ not only to be fully God, but fully human, and only as both can he provide the true human response to God.

Torrance summarizes the connections between the concepts of hypostatic union, *homoousios*, vicarious humanity, and Christ’s role as Mediator in the following words:

If representation and substitution are combined and allowed to interpenetrate each other within the incarnational union of the Son of

\(^{14}\) Torrance, *Incarnation*, 62.


\(^{16}\) Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 80.
God with us in which he has actually taken our sin and guilt upon his own being, then we may have a profounder and truer grasp of the vicarious humanity in the mediatorship of Christ, as one in which he acts in our place, in our stead, on our behalf but out of the ontological depths of our actual human being.\textsuperscript{17}

This means that the “mediatorship of Christ” between God and humanity takes shape in God the Son’s incarnation. In the incarnation, Christ is fully homoousios with God and with humanity so that as God he can act on our behalf (as substitute) but as one who is truly one of us (as representative).

\textbf{1.1.2 Covenant with Israel}

Torrance further explains the fundamental Christian profession of Christ’s mediation in terms of God’s covenant with Israel. In \textit{The Mediation of Christ}, Torrance argues that Christ’s vertical mediation “became grounded in humanity through God’s anguished struggle with Israel and as it was brought to its decisive fulfillment in the Incarnation.”\textsuperscript{18} In God’s covenant relationship with Israel as recorded in the Old Testament, God was creating the proper tools for humans to receive God’s self-revelation. This process culminated in the Christ of Israel, who embodies both God’s full self-disclosure \textit{and} the perfect human understanding and reception of God. In Torrance’s words, “divine revelation was progressively mediated to [human]kind in and

\textsuperscript{17} Torrance, \textit{Incarnation}, 81, emphasis mine.  
\textsuperscript{18} Torrance, \textit{The Mediation of Christ}, 5.
through Israel in such a way that it provided a true and faithful human response as part of its achievement for us, to us and in us.”\(^\text{19}\) This means that Israel is essential to Christ’s mediation between God and humanity, for “in [Christ] the revealing of God and the understanding of [humanity] fully coincided, [and] the whole Word of God and the perfect response of [humanity] were indivisibly united in one Person, the Mediator.”\(^\text{20}\)

God’s relationship with Israel, which culminates in Jesus Christ, cannot be understood apart from God’s *covenant* with Israel. Christ is the Mediator between God and humanity because Christ fulfills the covenant from both sides—from the side of God and the side of Israel (and, by extension, all of humanity). As Torrance puts it, God the Son fulfilled the covenant “in the body and blood of Christ, from the side of human beings toward God the Father as the divinely provided counterpart to God’s unconditional self-giving to [hu]mankind.”\(^\text{21}\) As a human who lived a particular form of life, Christ fulfills Israel’s side of the covenant, offering the perfect human response. And as the Son of God enfleshed to make reunion with God possible, Christ upholds God’s promises to Israel and, through Israel, all of creation. God’s covenant with Israel,

---

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 77.
then, is particular and specific yet also part of God’s chosen means of blessing all humankind,\textsuperscript{22} and, indeed, the entire cosmos.\textsuperscript{23}

One might think from this description that Israel’s significance could end with Christ’s coming. “Fulfillment” and “culmination” can be read in this way. Torrance, however, vehemently argues the contrary. He offers at least four interrelated counterarguments.

First, Israel’s unique relationship to Christ secures its ongoing significance. For Torrance, “Israel had and continues to have an inner organic bond with Jesus Christ which is not shared by any other people,” as “clearly reflected in the Virgin Mary.”\textsuperscript{24} Israel’s status as the People through whom God would enter the world in Christ is not merely historical, as if incidental, but fully ontological.\textsuperscript{25} In fact, Torrance often describes Israel and its role with terms he otherwise reserves for Christ.


\textsuperscript{24} Torrance, “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel,” 90.

\textsuperscript{25} Torrance, ibid., 87.
The organic, ontological, and inseverable connection of Christ to Israel is such that Israel, too, is a “mediator” of revelation and reconciliation and has a “vicarious” role on behalf of humanity, serving as its “representative.”

God’s mediating work in Israel culminates in Christ. And just as Christ’s significance as Mediator does not end with his death or resurrection, neither does Israel’s. As Torrance rhetorically asks, “Can we Christians really apprehend Jesus Christ if he is abstracted from Israel?”

No. Just as Jesus Christ and his significance live on after his incarnate walk in history, so too is Israel necessary for Christ not just as the historical ground of his earthly journey, but as God’s covenant people taken up into Christ and his resurrection.

Hence Torrance can say that the cross “takes up, fulfils and transcends [Israel’s] own vicarious mission for [hu]mankind.”

Second, God does not abandon God’s covenant people. This is perhaps one of the most obvious arguments against extreme supersessionism (the belief that Christians or the Christian Church superseded, supplanted, or replaced Israel as God’s chosen

---

26 Torrance uses such language in all of his writings on Israel here discussed.
28 As Torrance puts it, “the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...includes the resurrection of Israel in him.” Ibid., 15.
29 Torrance, “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel,” 95.
30 Ibid., 85, 91.
people\textsuperscript{31}). God’s fidelity will be proven eschatologically for both Israel and the Christian church. Speaking of how the eschaton presses on our present, Torrance claims that “far from abandoning his People as if his faithfulness had come to an end, God has put a decisive end to all that divides, so that the future that opens out from the resurrection is one in which all Israel is restore[d] and the Gentile branches broken off will be grafted in again: One Church and People of God.”\textsuperscript{32}

This points to the third reason for Israel’s permanent significance to Christians (and all creation): the thoroughly biblical argument stemming from Paul’s language in Romans 11, in which Gentiles are likened to branches grafted onto the vine of Israel. Gentiles are otherwise “without hope and…God” if they are not grafted into the “promises and covenants of God,” i.e., grafted into Israel, the true “people of God…with

\textsuperscript{31} The term “supersessionism” requires further clarification, given that it can be used to describe a wide range of positions, as described in Bruce W. Longenecker, “On Israel’s God and God’s Israel: Assessing Supersessionism in Paul,” \textit{The Journal of Theological Studies} 58, no. 1 (2007): 26-44. Torrance—and Jennings after him—avoid an extreme form of supersessionism understood in terms of a Christian or Gentile “replacement” of Jews as God’s people. Yet some might describe Torrance’s theology as supersessionist, in that it does not affirm a “two covenant” or “two ways” theory in which Christians and Jews independently receive God’s promises, and instead (like Bonhoeffer and Jennings) Torrance simultaneously affirms Jewish exceptionalism and Jesus’s salvific relevance for Jews as well as for Gentiles. The key biblical passage on the subject is Paul’s Romans 9-11. As Longenecker puts it, “Paul maintained a form of supersessionism whereby the Christian gospel was thought to be of key relevance to the Jewish people, offering the way of salvation not only for Gentiles but also for Jews,” all while avoiding “any suggestion that God’s covenant with Israel has been abrogated” (39). This could likewise be said of Torrance and Jennings. This issue will recur especially in Chapter 3, on the theology of Willie Jennings; for criticisms of Jennings on this front, and a partial reply, see Chapter 3’s footnote 100.

\textsuperscript{32} Torrance, “Israel: People of God,” 14-15.
messianic destiny.” Branches simply cannot replace their tree, their trunk, their vine—they are innately dependent.

The fourth Torrancian argument for Israel’s ongoing significance is likely the most controversial. This chapter will explore it in depth in the second half, when reviewing Torrance’s take on the church and its relationship to Israel, but for now suffice it to say that he interprets Israel’s vicarious role on behalf of humanity to include especially humanity’s fallen sinfulness at its most extreme, and humanity continues to need this. To summarize, the incarnation is embedded within God’s faithful covenant relationship with Israel, so that only through Israel is the sin of all humanity borne and overcome in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. This renders Israel the trunk onto which God grafts Gentiles who would join God’s people through Christ.

Israel’s ongoing significance means for Torrance that “there is no room for anti-Semitism,” leading him to maintain “that the deep schism between Christianity and Judaism that developed in the early centuries of the church, and perpetuated in history since, has impaired Christianity’s attempt to understand the gospel, especially the atonement.” Similarly, Torrance’s advocacy for ecumenism includes the Jews of

---

33 Ibid., 3.
34 Also discussed by Colyer, How to Read T. F. Torrance, 68n50.
35 Ibid., 68n50. To follow Torrance’s argument about the significance of Israel through time, it would help to have some familiarity with his understanding of space and time. One can get a taste of the intricacies here in Colyer’s following description: “The revelation and reconciliation mediated through Israel…span all of these levels [of human being…molecular, biological, personal, spiritual], fulfilling the divine purpose for humanity and all of creation, and
today, so much so that the “reconciliation and unification of the whole people of God”
cannot take place without “the Christian Church in East and West [being] in serious
dialogue with Israel.”

1.1.3 The Trinity

Torrance’s reflections on Christ’s mediation of the God-human relationship rely
not only on the concepts of the hypostatic union and God’s covenant with Israel, but
also on a creedal doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, T. F. Torrance’s trinitarian framework is
his most distinctive contribution to Part 1’s search for a christological anthropology
when compared to the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Willie Jennings.

Like the doctrines of the hypostatic union, *homoousios*, and Christ’s vicarious
humanity, the Trinity plays such a fundamental role in Torrance’s world of thought that
many have heralded the Trinity as the *sine qua non* of Torrance’s work. For example,

pressing toward the final consummation in the new creation. To grasp what Torrance intends
here requires the ability to think of the nation of Israel (and the church) as a spatial-temporal
reality spanning the various levels of the created order…and moving through a successive
pattern of change and development involving both divine and human agency together” (64n30).

36 Torrance, “Ecumenism: A Reappraisal of its Significance, Past, Present and Future,” in
*Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West*
(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), 75. Also discussed by Molnar, *Theologian of the Trinity*,
281.

37 This is not to say that either Bonhoeffer or Jennings is necessarily inadequately
trinitarian. Rather, Torrance devotes more of his writing to articulating a thorough doctrine of
the Trinity as one of his distinctive theological emphases.
Molnar claims that “Torrance’s thinking is deeply structured around his understanding of the triune God,” so much so that “for T. F. Torrance, the doctrine of the Trinity is the central doctrine around which all other Christian doctrines gravitate and become comprehensible.” Similarly, Kye Won Lee suggests that “the doctrine of the Trinity is the fundamental grammar of his theology.” Alister McGrath, however, prefers to explain that Torrance views the doctrine of the Trinity as founded upon scripture and Christology, and he further suggests that the *homoousion* “is the cornerstone on which much of his distinctive theological reflection rests,” including his trinitarian reflections.

As already indicated, the reason for what may seem like a debate about which theological theme is most foundational to Torrance’s work is that these foundational themes coinhere. More specifically in this case, christological claims that Christ is *homoousios* with the Father and Spirit in the incarnation are necessarily trinitarian claims as well. Moreover, because we receive revelation, reconciliation, and salvation in Christ, these various doctrines cohere together as the heart of the gospel and the heart of theological reflection on that reality. Torrance explains this christological and trinitarian framework at length:

---

39 Ibid., 31.
42 E.g. see Torrance, *Incarnation*, 85-86. See also Molnar, *Theologian of the Trinity*, 102.
The incarnation of the eternal Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ... 
prescribes for us in Christian theology both its proper matter and form, 
so that whether in its activity as a whole or in the formulation of a 
doctrine in any part, it is the christological pattern that will appear 
throughout the whole body of Christian dogmatics.... While the Lord 
Jesus Christ constitutes the pivotal center of our knowledge of God, 
God’s distinctive self-revelation as Holy Trinity, One Being, Three Persons, 
creates the overall framework within which all Christian theology is to be 
formulated.  

This relates directly to Christ’s role as Mediator as thus far described. Christ’s 
mediation is the key to God’s triune activity of reconciling creation to God’s self. 
Torrance repeatedly returns to the argument that God’s immanent and economic work 
cannot be understood apart from each other because God’s economic activity with 
God’s creation extends from and reflects who God is in God’s self. God’s activity reveals 
God’s heart. As already mentioned, Christ is not simply God in some vague or general 
sense, but the incarnation of God the Son, a person (or hypostasis) of the Trinity. As the 
incarnate Son of God, Christ reveals God. Christ mediates reconciliation with God the 
Father because the persons of the Trinity always act together.  
Our faithful response 
to God’s economic work is made possible by Christ’s Spirit-filled work and by the Spirit’s 
work in our own lives. Thus Father, Son, and Spirit are all working to unite creation with 
its Creator.

44 Torrance, *Incarnation*, xxxi.
In Torrance’s words, “it is through the incarnation and atonement effected by the conjoint activity of Christ and the Holy Spirit that God has opened the door for us to enter into his holy presence and know him as he really is...in his triune being.” Thus the triune God enables us “to participate, creaturely beings though we are, in the eternal communion...of knowing and loving...him there as one God in three Persons.”45 Here we see coming together trinitarian themes with the themes of Christ’s joint unity with God and humanity (as expressed in the hypostatic union, along with homoousios, vicarious humanity, and God’s covenant with Israel). Out of the combination of these doctrines emerges yet another claim: that our goal, destiny, or telos as humans—as made possible in Christ—is eternal communion with the innately communal triune God.46

1.1.4 Summary of Broad Framework

To summarize, Torrance believes that Christ mediates the divine-human relationship as God the Son who is simultaneously fully human, fulfilling God’s covenant with Israel from both sides and enabling creation to participate, by the Spirit, in the

46 Kye Won Lee describes Torrance’s theology on these points using the metaphor of a chariot on which the three wheels consist of the “union and communion of the Triune God,” the “union between God and humanity in the Incarnation,” and “our union with and in Christ,” revealing that these wheels revolve “around the axis of ‘union and communion.’” Lee, Union with Christ, 317.
communion of the trinitarian persons. What does this mean for how we think of ourselves and our social identities? The next half will consider this question and delve deeper into Torrance’s theological anthropology.

### 1.2 Theological Anthropology and Social Identity

Torrance does not provide a single, extended treatment of theological anthropology, but his writings include a range of anthropological claims that bear upon the central concerns of this dissertation. A christological anthropology emerges that is consistent with his overall framework and relies on Christ’s role as Mediator. We discover this christological anthropology in Torrance’s engagement of at least five main themes: (i) Christ’s vicarious humanity, (ii) eschatological participation, (iii) Christ’s mediation of both “vertical” and “horizontal” relationships, (iv) Christ’s freedom-giving centrality for human identity, and (v) relationships within the church.

Not surprisingly, these five themes interweave the broad framework laid out above. Together, they outline an anthropology that suggests all people depend upon Christ for their eschatological identities, and that we both need each other and are free “for” each other within the Body of Christ. Identity, then, is interpersonal, eschatological, and secured in Christ.
After laying out these themes of Torrance’s christological anthropology, this chapter considers relevant criticisms of Torrance’s work, followed by a summary and detailed evaluation.

1.2.1 Vicarious Humanity

Christ fulfilled the covenant from both sides, human-Godward and God-humanward, and Christ’s vicarious humanity has more to do with the former. Christ’s vicarious humanity refers to “the fact that Christ in his humanity stands in our place and represents us, so that what is true of his humanity is true of us, and that what he did in his (our) humanity is ours.”

Torrance’s understanding of Christ’s vicarious humanity informs his anthropology on at least three levels: the level of Christ’s ontological unity with all humans, Christ’s fulfillment of humanity, and Christ’s unity with Christians.

1.2.1.1 Unity with all humans

As already discussed, Torrance affirms that Christ is of the same ousia as all of humanity, in that through Israel he is both the representative and substitute for all sinful humanity (and, in turn, for all creation). He serves as humanity’s perfect representative before God, giving our perfect response to God as one of us, but he is also our divinely-

---

provided substitute in light of our inability otherwise to give such a response. This makes Christ archetypical for humans. In Torrance’s words, “every human being is ontologically bound to him. It is in Jesus Christ the incarnate Creator...that the being of all [humans], whether they believe it or not, is creatively grounded and is unceasingly sustained.” 48 This means “no one exists except by the Word of God, by all whom all things were made and in whom all things consist.” 49 In short, all humanity has its ontological ground in Christ.

1.2.1.2 Fulfillment of humanity

Related to Christ’s grounding of humanity, Christ is also the truest and most human person to have existed in all creation. Such a claim might necessitate a complete reversal of perspective: rather than judging Christ’s humanity based on our own independent ideas of what it means to be human, we are in fact to judge ourselves based on God’s revelation in Christ. Those familiar with the Barthian tradition will


49 Torrance, “Universalism or Election?”, Scottish Journal of Theology 2, no. 3 (1949): 315.
recognize the pattern of turning to God to know the truth of our existence, even if it means a complete reorientation or abandonment of our prior position.

What accounts for the gap between Christ’s perfect humanity and ours? Why do we need a Mediator in the first place? The Christian tradition often claims that sin has disrupted what God originally intended for humanity and all creation, but that the Son of God incarnate fulfills “the original intention of God”\(^50\) on our behalf as one of us. Let us consider here what this means to Torrance.

Torrance describes sin as the “mystery of iniquity” because to choose the “way of sin” is to deny God’s love, choosing “our own way,” choosing to “contradict God” in an attempt to “escape from the eternal love of God” even as God refuses to deny us such love.\(^51\) But, as discussed at length earlier in this chapter, through Christ’s vicarious humanity, God assumed our fallen existence. “Christ really took our place, took our cause upon himself in order to redeem us.”\(^52\)


\(^{51}\) Torrance, “Universalism or Election?”, 316-317. Molnar’s explication of Torrance on this part profoundly resounds with Bonhoeffer’s theology as presented in the next chapter: As Molnar explains, according to Torrance, our fallen state is such that “sin determines our entire existence” so that “sin is not something we are capable of changing. No matter how much a person tries to save himself or herself, that person sins all the more because all human actions are so deeply rooted in our attempts...at being autonomous in relation to God—which, of course, is in itself the impossible possibility.” Molnar, Theologian of the Trinity, 166-67.

\(^{52}\) Torrance, Incarnation, 62. See also Molnar, Theologian of the Trinity, 167.
Furthermore, Christ shared fallen existence in order to redeem it. Christ vicariously repents for us by bearing “the righteous judgments of God” and turns everything around for us in that God “resurrected our human nature in the integrity of his body, mind and soul from the grave.” Our new birth (a.k.a. regeneration or conversion) “has taken place in Jesus Christ himself, so that when we speak of our conversion or our regeneration we are referring to our sharing in the conversion or regeneration of our humanity brought about by Jesus in and through himself for our sake.” Torrance concludes that “in a profound and proper sense, therefore, we must speak of Jesus Christ as constituting in himself the very substance of our conversion...[which] in that truly evangelical sense is a turning away from ourselves to Christ.”

Here, Torrance leads us to consider idolatry (a key concept in this dissertation’s thesis). As discussed in the Introduction, idolatry typically refers to any displacement of God by something else: in our hearts, minds, souls, imaginations, or way of life, we have replaced God with not-God. For this dissertation, the idolatry in question has to do with the displacement of Christ as our true center, mediator, goal, and “Holy Icon.” In the above account, Torrance recognizes the sinfulness of the move from rightful God-centeredness to self-centeredness. Although he rarely uses the language of idolatry, he

---

comes close enough that one of his leading interpreters, Paul Molnar, naturally summarizes Torrance’s conception of “self-centeredness” as “idolatry.”

Torrance expresses the idea without the using word when he explains that “Jesus insists that we can only follow him by denying ourselves, by letting him displace us from a place of centrality, and by letting him take our place”—i.e., take his proper place as our center and Mediator. Or again, if Christ’s full mediation is “depreciated, then the need for some other human mediation creeps in,” which explains his critique of priestly mediation in Catholicism and preacher-personality-cults in Protestantism.

What Torrance leaves inexplicably implicit, this dissertation makes explicit: we are only our God-intended selves when we hold Christ as the one and only proper mediator between us, God, and others; if we do not, then we slip into idolatry.

To claim that Christ ontologically grounds humanity, is ontologically connected to all humanity, and fulfills God’s intentions for humanity naturally attracts the charge of universalism. If Christ fulfills the covenant perfectly from both sides, and gives the perfect human response, then what does this mean for non-Christians? Like Karl Barth before him, Torrance has been accused of universalism (the idea that all will necessarily be saved), although Torrance himself combats the charge. He instead believes that

---

54 Molnar, *Theologian of the Trinity*, 32.
55 Torrance, “Justification in Doctrine and Life,” 166.
56 Torrance’s lack of attention to “idolatry” is all the more striking in light of his frequent commendations of Israel’s “imageless” imagination of God. See *The Mediation of Christ*, 20-21. The ban on image-making is clearly tied to issues of idolatry as presented in the Old Testament.
salvation is for all through Christ’s vicarious humanity, but some inexplicably choose to exclude themselves.\textsuperscript{57} For Torrance, we simply cannot know what comes of those who are not found in Christ.\textsuperscript{58}

Torrance is far more concerned with describing Christian existence. That said, he addresses the question of universalism in no uncertain terms. He rejects the doctrine of universalism, preferring to call it instead a “hope” and “possibility” at best.\textsuperscript{59} Against the doctrine, he cites the biblical witness to hell as a live option, the gospel’s life-and-death urgency, and the depth of sin that is dealt with not by a logical argument from God’s love (universalism) but God’s love enacted on the cross (for if the cross judges all sin, then it judges all that choose sin in rejection of the love of God there offered).\textsuperscript{60}

Instead of universalism, Torrance would rather speak of election. This may at first seem strange, but Torrance’s account of election aligns directly with his belief that all humanity is grounded and fulfilled in Christ. He defines election not as some “dead predestination in the past...but a living act that enters time and confronts us face to face in Jesus Christ.” It is God’s eternal decision to love us, to enact that love into our “history in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” God’s decision is for all

\textsuperscript{57} E.g. see ibid., xiii. See also the discussion in Molnar, \textit{Theologian of the Trinity}, 336.
\textsuperscript{59} Torrance, “Universalism or Election?”, 313.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 311-213, 316, 318.
humanity, not just part. “The great fact of the Gospel...is this: that God has actually
chosen us in Jesus Christ in spite of our sin.” “In as much as no one exists except by the
Word of God..., and in as much as this is the Word that has once and for all enacted the
eternal election of grace to embrace all..., the existence of [all] whether [they] will or no is bound up inextricably with that election—with the Cross of Jesus Christ.” Election therefore refers not to a select group that attains salvation in the eschaton, but to how Christ ontologically grounds and fulfills all humanity, extending God’s atoning love to all in a way that upholds all and invites them to share in what Christ has accomplished—i.e., to become their true, God-intended selves in union with God. Universalism is ruled out not due to any lack of faith in God’s love for all, but precisely because that love posits the possibility of its rejection.

1.2.1.3 Unity with Christians

While Torrance professes humble ignorance of the fate of non-Christians, he makes stronger claims about believers. We have already established that Torrance believes Christ grounds and fulfills all humanity, and he would add that the Spirit has been poured on “all flesh.” Torrance goes on to argue that

While we cannot understand all that this being-constituting relation of the Spirit of God to [humanity] involves for one who is ‘without Christ’, it certainly means for [someone] ‘in Christ’ that [their] human nature as body of [their] mind and mind of [their] body is affirmed with a spiritual wholeness and a new ontological interrelation with others that

61 Ibid., 315.
transcends [their] original creation, for now [they exist] not just alongside of the Creator, but in such a way that [their] human being is anchored in the very Being of God.\textsuperscript{62}

Speaking of Christians in particular, Torrance frequently cites Galatians, when Paul declares that “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God,\textsuperscript{63} who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:19b-20a, NRSV). Paul’s claim here is paradoxical: Paul lives a new life, yet it is Christ’s life within him. For Torrance, this is not a diminishment of our humanity. Instead, in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, we witness “the sanctification of our human life in Jesus Christ, an elevating and fulfilling of it that far surpasses creation,” “raising up” people to “have their being in the very life of God”\textsuperscript{64} as they are “raised into union and communion with God.”\textsuperscript{65}

To summarize, we saw in the first half of the chapter how Christ’s vicarious humanity fits within Christ’s role as Mediator and Torrance’s grand theological framework. Here, we see that Christ’s vicarious humanity has the following anthropological significance: Christ’s humanity ontologically grounds all humanity and fulfills God’s intention for it, bringing salvation to all and enabling those who enter Christ’s Body (i.e., Christians) to share in all that Christ has accomplished. We receive

\begin{footnotes}
\item[63] The NRSV indicates that this can also be translated “the faith \textit{of} the Son of God.”
\item[64] Torrance, \textit{Incarnation}, 66.
\item[65] Ibid., 223. See also Molnar, \textit{Theologian of the Trinity}, 159.
\end{footnotes}
our true humanity only in Jesus Christ, and in such a way that affirms our humanity as something distinct from divinity.

This description sparks several questions, including the lingering concern of what this means for non-Christians more specifically, what this means for human action (for if Christ has accomplished everything, then what is left for us to do?), and why those who share in Christ’s accomplishments (Christians) do not yet seem to possess all of its benefits (such as perfect freedom from sin and death). These questions are relevant to this dissertation’s project, in that any attempt to describe social identity in a new light, with the hope of nurturing fruitful change, must be alert to distinctions between groups of people (e.g. Christians and non-Christians), motivations or lack thereof to take concrete action, and how we might live into better identities and relationships.

We have already reviewed what Torrance has to say on the distinction between Christians and non-Christians, so that question must linger on into future chapters. The next section will explore a partial Torrancian answer to the questions of what action we can take and sin’s ongoing presence in Christian life from the angle of eschatology. In short, those who participate in Christ share in Christ’s actions and live eschatologically into their true identities.
1.2.2 Eschatological Participation

Torrance suggests that Christians live in an “eschatological reserve” on both corporate and individual levels. Within this reserve, “the Church is sent to carry out its work in the world, in a sense, ‘on its own’...it is not yet what it shall be, and not yet wholly in itself what it already is in Christ.” As Ray Anderson puts it, “the incarnational community lives and functions...between the cross and the parousia, between the evangelical word of forgiveness and the final act of restoration and reconciliation.”

The age in which we live, between Christ’s ascension and second coming, is often described as the “already-not-yet.” For anthropology, this means that our true humanity, true identities, or true personhood are eschatological in nature, resulting in a tension. In one sense, Christians are already who we are meant to be in Christ because Christ has already inaugurated God’s reign, but in another sense, we will not be perfected until God’s reign comes in full. As Torrance would say, a Christian’s “true being is hid with Christ in God.”

---

68 Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 158.
In fact, Torrance’s anthropology is thoroughly eschatological and teleological.69 Regarding individual people, Torrance has a striking way of describing this in terms of becoming a “person” by knowing God. This claim can be both confusing and upsetting. How can someone not be a person?

For Torrance, person is a loaded word because the Christian tradition describes the three hypostases of the Trinity as persons—which means they are innately interpersonal and constituted by divine interpersonal relationships. Due to the alienation spawned by sin, human beings are in need of humanization and personalization by the one true Human and Person: Christ.70 “For us to be really human” and “really personal, therefore, is to be in Christ.”71 And being in Christ is an eschatological reality. That is why Habets can succinctly rephrase Torrance’s position by suggesting those in Christ move from “human being, a biological fact, to human person, a moral, theological fact,” i.e., “true personhood.”72 In short, “men and women are persons-in-becoming.”73

69 That is, Habets suggests that “Torrance’s anthropology is christological, soteriological, and eschatological. These three features inform his theological anthropology as every point” (Theosis, 33).
71 Torrance, “Goodness and Dignity of Man,” 318. Note that being human and personal are mutually implicated in Torrance’s thought: “To be truly human is to be truly personal, and to be truly personal is to be truly human—that is the kind of human nature that God has embodied in Jesus Christ” (318).
72 Habets, Theosis, 40.
73 Ibid., 31.
As the first half of the chapter suggested, as Mediator Christ enables creation to enter the kind of communion that eternally exists among the persons of the Trinity. It should be clear by now that this is the *telos* or goal of human being and personhood.\(^74\) This in turn enables us freely to respond as God’s children even here and now, before we taste that communion in full.\(^75\)

The idea of human participation in the divine raises questions about our continuing sin, on the one hand, and the relationship between our agency and Christ’s agency, on the other. Although Christians continue to struggle with sin,\(^76\) Christ as our high priest both “uncovers and bears our sin,” creates and calls for “an answering faith” and thereby enables us to take “his answer on our lips, and so in his name humbly dare to go before the throne of grace.”\(^77\) Christ’s vicarious humanity signals that our very humanity has been transformed in Christ Jesus, a transformation in which we may participate by the Spirit.\(^78\) Participation in this sense indicates that human and divine

---

\(^74\)E.g. see Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 189; and *Incarnation*, 223. See also Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 94.

\(^75\) Colyer explains this nicely at length: “Our *telos* in Torrance’s theology is *personal* sharing in union and communion with God the Father through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit in which we become ever more fully human and free, and respond in thanksgiving, faith and joyous freedom, as children of God, in the Spirit through the Son to the Father. It is a personal sharing of our humanity in union and communion with God, first in Jesus Christ through *his* vicarious humanity, and then in our humanity as we are incorporated by the Spirit into Christ and his union with our humanity in the incarnation” (*How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 122).

\(^76\) Torrance, *Incarnation*, 342.

\(^77\) Ibid., 146-147.

\(^78\) See Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 122-123.
agency are non-competitive. Rather, Christ enables humans to respond, to take his words on our lips, because “the fullness of grace creatively includes the fullness and completeness of our human response.” As Torrance often puts it, “All of grace really does mean all of [the human].” It would not make sense otherwise, because “how could the unconditional grace of the Lord Jesus Christ...ever mean a depreciating of the very humanity he came to save?!”

Torrance prefers to describe the role of human agency in the eschatological reserve in terms of the *mystery of participation*. Participation means we cannot confuse ourselves with God or with Christ’s divine-human existence. Rather, as Torrance argues, “the human nature of the participant is not deified but reaffirmed and recreated in its essence as human nature, yet one in which the participant is really united to the Incarnate Son of God partaking in him in his own appropriate mode of the oneness of the Son and the Father...through the Holy Spirit.” Torrance is anxious about over-describing such participation, treating it much like the hypostatic union, because both are forms of *koinonia* (a.k.a. communion or participation) to be treated with reserve and respect for the “mystery of Christ.” Additionally, our “participation in grace” in Christ can only be understood eschatologically. It means “the real participation here and now in the new creation through the Spirit, and within the time of waiting for the

---

80 Ibid., 186. See also Molnar, *Theologian of the Trinity*, 184n173.
81 Ibid., 186.
redemption of the body at the Parousia of the Lord. [It] involves a real having of grace within our creaturely being and existence, but a having that is yet to be fulfilled or completed when Christ comes to make all things new.”82 Habets justly dubs this an “eschatological mystery.”83

One might yearn to know more about how this participation works. Torrance resists giving in to this temptation, and the clearest answer one is likely to get is “by the Holy Spirit.” According to Torrance, the Son and Spirit mutually mediate each other and exist in such a close relation that Christ is never without the Spirit, as the Spirit empowers Christ to be Christ and fulfill his mission. Moreover, Christ sends the Spirit to the church (think Pentecost), mediating the Spirit’s “sanctifying and renewing agency to dwell with [humanity]” so that we may in turn participate in Christ through the Spirit.84 The Spirit “realizes in us the recreative power of the risen and glorified Humanity of Christ” and unites us to Jesus’s obedience and faith so that, in our worship, the Spirit also raises “us up in Jesus to participate in the worship of heaven and in the eternal communion of the Holy Trinity.”85

83 Habets, Theosis, 44.
84 Torrance, “Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship,” in Theology in Reconstruction, 247. See also Habets, Theosis, 145ff., and Molnar, Theologian of the Trinity, 199-201. Molnar further clarifies that “the Holy Spirit does not act in place of the risen and ascended Christ, because it is precisely in his coming that the presence of Christ himself is with us, acting both from the side of God and from the side of humanity” (201).
85 Torrance, “Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship,” 250. See also Molnar, Theologian of the Trinity, 201.
Note that although Torrance respects a measure of mystery on this subject, he vehemently argues that “participation” does not refer to any kind of methexis, or “Greek notion of participation in the eternal realities,” which would lead us into all manner of errors. Torrance identifies the problems of conflating our nature with Christ’s, of thinking the divine nature swallows human nature in Christ’s person and in those joined to Christ, and of subsequently assuming the church in particular shares in Christ’s divinity as if an extension of the incarnation—which we can certainly label a form of idolatry that displaces Christ as the one and only proper Mediator.

Torrance’s thoughts here readily inform this dissertation’s evolving description of human identity. Our true identity is eschatological and teleological, in that we are

86 Thus Torrance is not espousing the kind of “participation” lauded by Radical Orthodoxy’s John Milbank and colleagues, which has attracted incisive criticisms from Stanley Hauerwas, J. Kameron Carter, and others from diverse theological backgrounds. Torrance flat-out rejects what Milbank calls an “ontology of participation,” which attends his idea of analogia entis and by which he means “a somewhat Neoplatonic approach to causality, in which every higher level until that of Godhead not only caused but also ‘gave to be’ the lower levels.” Milbank, Foreword to James K. A. Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 14. Much of the controversy boils down to the clash between Neoplatonic approaches like Milbank’s and Barthian ones like Torrance’s. The latter instead prefer concepts like koinonia, communion, and an analogia relationis (based in relationship) as the ground for “participation.” For a detailed account of Barth’s historical engagement with the analogia entis, see Keith L. Johnson, Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2010). For a nicely succinct summary, see Jeremy Begbie, Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), 341n31. And for something in between, see Alan J. Torrance, Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), Ch. 3.

87 Torrance, “The Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 185-86.
made for union and communion with the triune God. In Christ, we can become more fully human, more fully personal, and more fully who we are meant to be by participating in him through the Spirit. Any action on our part to effect or respond to Christ’s union with us is secondary and inefficacious compared to the primacy of God’s grace.88 We can only know God and become who we are meant to be through God’s triune activity on our behalf, yet surely this gift demands the kind of response on our part that participates (however mysteriously) in what God has already accomplished.

1.2.3 Vertical and Horizontal Mediation

In Torrance’s holistic theology, Christ’s vicarious humanity as Mediator and the eschatological nature of our true identities in Christ make the greatest combined impact upon his theological anthropology, at least as it pertains to this dissertation’s focus. However, we can tease out a few more of his christological anthropology’s contours in the remaining sections.

The start of this chapter suggested that, according to Torrance, Jesus Christ mediates between God and humanity from both sides, as fully divine and fully human, and that this “vertical” relationship between humanity and God mutually implicates our “horizontal” relationships with other people. Christ mediates between humanity and God as well as among humans. Although Bonhoeffer and Jennings more fully describe

88 As discussed by Habets, Theosis, 33-34.
Christ’s horizontal mediation, at times Torrance comes close to echoing his predecessor Bonhoeffer when describing horizontal relationships, both in terms of diagnosing their ailments and prescribing their cure. Habets picks up on Christ’s cross-shaped mediation in Torrance’s theology when explaining what Torrance calls onto-relations (deep, ontological connections), which exist vertically when we are reconciled with God and horizontally when we are reconciled with each other.

To unpack these “onto-relations,” we must first return to the doctrine of the Trinity. Following Barth before him, Torrance sees the Trinity’s innate otherness-in-togetherness (and vice-versa) as characterized by generative love and therefore as the basis of God’s creation of the cosmos (something ‘other’ than God, created out of love). Creation reflects or “images” this pattern, which explains the “personal or inter-personal structure of humanity in which there is imaged the ineffable personal relations of the Holy Trinity.”

89 For Torrance, a person is (and certainly is meant to be) “in ontological relation with other persons.” What he calls “onto-relations” he also calls “being-constituting-relations.”

Torrance diagnoses the disease that has ravished these onto-relations in terms of sin’s disruptive nature. In the Fall, “the breach between [humanity] and God enters into the inner being of men and women, so that they are no longer the being they ought


90 For more, see Habets, Theosis, 40.
to be either in relation to God or in relation to one another.”91 Instead, we are estranged from the “personalising source of our being,” which imprisons us “in a self-centred individualism which cuts us off from genuine relations with others, so that the very personal relations in which persons subsist as persons are damaged and twisted,” resulting in an “ontological split in human being.”92 We refuse to listen to the Holy Spirit, seeking self-determinism rather than accepting definition by God. We no longer receive our identity from God, but ourselves. Despite humans’ best efforts, they are “so deeply split within themselves that they are trapped within that split and cannot escape from it. They have become so inverted in their nature, so inextricably curved in upon themselves..., that no matter how much they exercise their free-will they are quite unable to escape from their self-will.”93 Habets summarizes Torrance well: “Because of sin and the Fall the onto-relations that exist between all personal beings—God-humanity, humanity-God, and humanity-humanity—have been radically ‘disrupted’, resulting in the breakdown of personal relationships on both the horizontal and vertical levels.”94

Thankfully, through Christ the Mediator, God “sends forth his Spirit to dwell with human beings in order to bring their creaturely relations to their destined end in

91 Torrance, “Goodness and Dignity of Man,” 312.
93 Torrance, “Goodness and Dignity of Man,” 312.
94 Habets, Theosis, 41.
unrestricted access as children to their heavenly Father.”\textsuperscript{95} In short, that is how we live into our eschatological identities in Christ, becoming more like him (the truest human person).

Torrance holds that the person and work of the Mediator not only salvages these vertical and horizontal relationships, but renders them life-giving. Habets, summarizing Torrance, once again puts this in terms of vertical and horizontal relationships:

“Vertically, one is justified and sanctified through a relationship with the triune God; horizontally, one is formed into communion with other believers in the Body of Christ, the church.”\textsuperscript{96} Because Christ mediates justification, reconciliation, and sanctification to us, thereby restoring our relation to God, so too does Christ restore the “disrupted” onto-relations among us as we come together in the Body of Christ. As Torrance puts it, “Through union and communion with Christ,” we “may be transmuted into a Christian community in which inter-personal relations are healed and restored in the Person of the Mediator, and in which interrelations between human beings are constantly renewed and sustained through the humanising activity of Christ Jesus,” which all takes place within our reunion with our Creator.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{95} Torrance, “Goodness and Dignity of Man,” 315.

\textsuperscript{96} And “these two levels are one integrated whole, not two separate spheres.” Habets, \textit{Theosis}, 41.

\textsuperscript{97} Torrance, \textit{The Mediation of Christ}, 72; see also pp. 68-72.
1.2.4 Radical Re-centering

The relationship between the vertical and horizontal should become clearer in the next chapter, but even here one can surmise the primacy of the vertical. First of all, Torrance’s christocentricity and desire to receive all knowledge about God from God\(^{98}\) suggests that Christ’s vertical mediation predicates his horizontal mediation. Second, as implied above, our opportunity to unite together in the Body of Christ as horizontally mediated by Christ depends upon our vertical reconciliation with God. This remains true even when we factor in the eschatological nature of such unity or reconciliation, the fact that these levels are an “integrated whole,” and the ways in which our joining on either axis feeds dialogically off the other.

A closely related implication of Torrance’s theology of Christ’s mediation is that living into one’s eschatological identity in Christ means a radical re-centering of one’s very self around Christ. Rather than treating one’s self as one’s center, someone who lives into this existence accepts Christ as the true center. Furthermore, such a radical

\(^{98}\) Any reliable account of Torrance’s work, such as Daniel Hardy’s, will note Torrance’s “development of the insights of Karl Barth’s approach to theology,” which is itself known for placing such priority and stress on God’s self-revelation (Hardy, “T. F. Torrance,” 164). In his introduction to the same volume, David Ford categorizes Torrance’s approach to theology within a broader “type” that “gives priority to the self-description of the Christian community” and “insists that Christian identity is primary and that all other reality needs to be construed in relation to it” (The Modern Theologians, 2).
re-centering frees such a person for genuine, identity-informing relationships with God and other persons. Let us consider these two implications in turn.

First, being in Christ means that one’s identity is radically reoriented around the person and work of Christ. For T. F. Torrance, this radical re-centering on Christ is part and parcel with having “faith.” He argues that faith not only entails reason’s obedience and submission to God’s reality,\(^9^9\) but it calls us out of our “self-enclosed modes of existence into genuine personal relation with God and with all others in the new creation of Christ.”\(^1^0^0\) Returning to the theme of sin, without God’s revelation in Christ, we find it hard to know God. Molnar summarizes Torrance on this point and introduces the language of idolatry, arguing that “we human beings tend toward idolatry since, in light of the Fall, we are inclined toward self-centeredness rather than God-centeredness.”\(^1^0^1\) For Torrance, in Christ and only in Christ are we freed from such self-centeredness.\(^1^0^2\) And “whenever he is not seen and understood to be the one and only man who can mediate between us and God, and whenever his true humanity is depreciated or concealed by his divinity, then the need for some other human mediation slips in”—i.e., idolatry.\(^1^0^3\)

---

100 Ibid., xliv.
102 E.g. see Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 68-72.

66
But when Christ is embraced as the Mediator, the Spirit turns us out of self-centeredness and enables our God-intended God-centeredness. The reorganization that takes place in the center of one’s being is the only way to become who “we ought to be,”104 who we are meant to be. In *The Mediation of Christ*, Torrance argues that Christians are constantly de-centered by the Holy Spirit to be re-centered on Christ, and in such a way that we are not diminished, but freed to be our true selves, as we are meant to be. By the work of God in our lives, “we may live continually out of our true centre in [Christ] and not out of a centre in ourselves.”105

Second, this radical re-centering frees us for genuine relationships. The Spirit of Christ liberates us “out of ourselves into union with Christ, freeing us to live fully and freely out of him.”106 Through the Son’s vicarious humanity in Christ, God has done for us what we could not do, freeing us to share in God’s freedom. Such freedom is not “freedom from” but “freedom for” others. Having Christ as one’s center is the only genuine personal relation one can have with God, and only by genuine relationships with God and others can one live into one’s eschatological identity.

---

104 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 70.
105 (a) Ibid., 97; 68-72. On pp. 96-98, Torrance suggests that God effects this re-centering through faith, conversion, worship, sacraments, and proclamation/evangelism.
   (b) What Bonhoeffer makes even clearer than Torrance is that not only are we freed for God and others and freed to be our true selves, but that we also need God and others to be our true selves (see Chapter 2). This dissertation further develops the idea using the work of Willie Jennings (see Chapter 3).
Using this dissertation’s language of idolatry, we can say that when Christ restores a right vertical relationship, he turns us away from our false centers (idols) to our one true center (Christ), thereby enabling us to be our true selves-in-relation-to-each-other. This claim will be augmented by the theologians of the next two chapters.

1.2.5 The Church

Just as Torrance is far more concerned with describing Christian existence even though he makes universal anthropological claims, so too he spends more time describing interpersonal relations as they are or should be within the church. This means that his ecclesiology bears directly on what he would say about a theological anthropology concerned specifically with relationships and interpersonal, social identity. In fact, most of the themes discussed in the second half come together in his descriptions of the church, including Christ as the center, the connection of Christ’s vertical and horizontal mediation, and eschatological participation oriented toward the Trinity, as well as recognition of Israel’s importance. When approaching these from the angle of the church, Torrance adds the language of priesthood and unity (a.k.a. koinonia or intercommunion).

First, christocentricity carries over into the life of the church. Because Christ alone is the Prophet, Priest, and King, no one or nothing else should be the center of the church’s activity. Rather, our activity as the body of believers derives from Christ.
Torrance is especially concerned to make it clear that Christians do not replace Christ after Christ’s ascension. Jesus remains fully human and fully divine, interceding for us. “Jesus Christ must be given his rightful place by being set right in the centre, as Head and Lord or the Church, as its sole Prophet and Priest and King, and that means in...the whole life of the congregation as the Body of Christ alone.”\textsuperscript{107} Therefore the church must live and act “only as it is directed by its heavenly Lord, and only in such a way that his Ministry is reflected in the midst of its ministry and worship.”\textsuperscript{108}

As Molnar puts it, the church, which “is already present in Israel in a hidden way....has no independent existence” but “only has meaning as it finds that meaning again and again in its heavenly head.”\textsuperscript{109} Or in Torrance’s own words, “the Church really is the one Church of Christ when it looks away from itself to its objective source and ground in the Godhead, and dwells in the Holy Trinity, for it is in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that the Church and its faith are rooted and founded.”\textsuperscript{110} This does not render the Church entirely passive. Rather, Christ “summons the Church to engage in His ministry by witness..., by stewardship..., and by service,” thereby serving as Christ’s instrument.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{107} Torrance, “Justification in Doctrine and Life,” 168.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 167. See also Molnar, Theologian of the Trinity, 185-186; 331.
\textsuperscript{109} Molnar, Theologian of the Trinity, 266-67.
\textsuperscript{110} Torrance, The Trinitarian Faith, 268.
\textsuperscript{111} Torrance, Royal Priesthood, 38. Also see Molnar, Theologian of the Trinity, 291. Likewise drawing from Torrance, Royal Priesthood, esp. 37-38, Colyer makes much the same point in How to Read T. F. Torrance when he writes, “there is no relation of identity between the
Second, the church, like Christian life, is rooted in the Trinity in an eschatological fashion such that our horizontal reconciliation depends upon our vertical reconciliation. As Lee suggests, Torrance understands the Church as being “created by the intersection of the vertical (communion with God) and the horizontal (communion with each other) dimensions, that is, *koinonia*. However, the horizontal dimension is to be governed and informed by the vertical.”\(^{112}\) According to Torrance, through “personal interaction with us[,] God creates reciprocity between us. By encountering us as personal Being[,] God at once brings us into a personal relation” with God and also “upholds us before him as persons in relations of mutuality and freedom with God and with one another.”\(^{113}\) God creates the church as the site of what Torrance calls “a community of reciprocity in knowing and loving” that “participates in and reflects the *perichoresis* within the Holy Trinity.”\(^{114}\) In other words, the church reflects and externalizes the perichoretic love and communion of the Trinity, making it “the community in which men and women are


\(^{113}\) Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 179.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 182.
objectively related to God and to one another in love”\textsuperscript{115} so that it participates in God’s generative, triune love.\textsuperscript{116} The church can therefore “carry out her divine mission in the world” only as an “eschatological community.”\textsuperscript{117}

Not only must we continually accept our eschatological reality as those who look to our head, high priest, prophet, and king, but we must accept God’s plan to redeem the entire world through Israel by way of Jesus Christ. Torrance argues: “Israel retains in the purpose of God’s grace an essential role in the mediation of reconciliation, and that the Christian Church will not be able to fulfil its own mission in proclaiming that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, except in so far as it is incorporated within Israel in the one mission of God’s love for all his creatures.”\textsuperscript{118}

From the above discussion of the church, we gather that (i) our ability to be and become our true human selves \textit{together} in the church rests in Christ, (ii) we live \textit{together} in a space and time of eschatological tension in which we can still participate \textit{together} in Christ’s humanity and ministry, and (iii) Christ’s intention is to redeem the \textit{entire} world,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{116} Torrance, \textit{Reality and Scientific Theology}, 182-183. Also see Lee, \textit{Union with Christ}, 207; 254.
\textsuperscript{117} Torrance, \textit{Incarnation}, 330, emphasis partially original, partially mine. Also see Molnar, \textit{Theologian of the Trinity}, 269. Lee similarly notes that “Union with Christ is the ‘life-process’ or eschatological process of the Church here and now in the midst of eschatological reserve. It is the sign of \textit{eschaton} to which all history advances” (\textit{Union with Christ}, 303).
\textsuperscript{118} Torrance, \textit{The Mediation of Christ}, 46.
\end{flushright}
all of God’s creation,\textsuperscript{119} through Israel. (Torrance’s thoughts on how the Christian church and Israel relate will receive in depth treatment below.)

Before turning to how Torrance relates the Christian church to Israel, let us first consider two remaining ways in which Torrance’s ecclesiology informs this dissertation: it speaks to issues of social identity, and it makes some modest indications of just how we might participate in Christ’s ministry and re-act to him.

First, Torrance’s ecclesiology clearly connects Christ’s mediation to social identity. In his ecclesiology, he articulates a vision in which our relationships with others, who are equally called and sought by God, are an intrinsic part of knowing God and becoming who we are meant to be. As Torrance puts it, “the church constitutes the social coefficient of our knowledge of God, for in the nature of the case we are unable to know God in any onto-relational way without knowing him in the togetherness of our personal relations with one another.”\textsuperscript{120} Although Christ’s vertical mediation is primary, it is inseparable from the horizontal.

Torrance’s ecclesiology also expands on the pesky question of just how we might participate in Christ’s ministry and the eschatological kingdom in which we are united with God and each other, practically speaking. In particular, he commends Scripture and

\textsuperscript{119} Also see Torrance’s concern for the entire cosmos in “My Interaction with Karl Barth,” 61.

the sacraments as sites of empowerment. Lee explains that “the once-for-all perfected unity of the Church, hidden with Christ in God, is to be fully consummated and manifested at the final parousia; however, we are given to participate in it through Word and Sacrament.” Scripture and the sacraments provide an actual connection through the power of the Spirit. Again, Lee explains: “Analogous to hypostatic union yet at a different level, there arises a sacramental union or faith-union between our re-actio and Christ’s actio in the Sacraments.” We are not adding to Christ’s work, but receiving it as Christ extends himself to us in the Spirit. Our action is not ruled out, but considered a participation, a response sustained through the communal activity of the sacraments in the power of the Spirit.

Given its importance for partaking in what Christ has done for us for the sake of fulfilling our telos, it is little wonder that interpersonal “reconciliation” and “intercommunion” deeply concern Torrance. Torrance worries most about reconciliation in the church itself—hence his tome on Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in the East and West. However, his concern for ecumenism connects more broadly to all of humanity and all of creation in that the people of God are meant to be conduits of God’s redeeming love—as God said of Israel, through them all nations would be blessed (Gen 12:2, 18:18, 22:18; Gal 3:8). Torrance believes the church is to be the community where people live out “reconciled life.”

121 Lee, Union with Christ, 305.
122 Ibid., 306.
drawing others “into its own fellowship of peace with God and with all [people],”¹²³ also known as “intercommunion.”

In fact, seeking intercommunion or reconciliation (through, say, the ecumenical movement advocated by Torrance) is one of the re-actions the sacraments can and should inspire. In Torrance’s words, “to eat the Body and drink the Blood of Christ sincerely is to resolve to act out that Communion in the body; to engage in Intercommunion obliges Churches to work out their reconciliation, seeking how unity in faith and order may be achieved between them.”¹²⁴ In Chapter 3 we will see that Jennings might push this further to include explicitly all other people and all of creation, but the groundwork is already present here in Torrance’s holistic theology. Indeed, in a way similar to Jennings, Torrance insists that Israel must be a part of our efforts for ecumenism if we are to witness “the reconciliation and unification of the whole people of God.”¹²⁵

As helpful as Torrance’s commendations of Scripture, sacraments, and intercommunion may be, he seems to stop there when it comes to practical ways of participating in Christ’s ministry and re-acting to him. In short, it would appear that

¹²³ Torrance, “What is the Church?”, in Conflict and Agreement in the Church, vol. 1 (London: Lutterworth, 1959), 118.
Torrance provides a strong ecclesiology in many ways but spends little time on developing a missiology beyond the call to reconciliation within the People of God.

1.2.5.1 Substantive sidebar: The church and Israel

Before this chapter concludes its second half, it must again revisit Torrance’s distinctive approach to Israel, noting especially Israel’s relation to the Christian church. Such a discussion will prove all the more valuable as this dissertation proceeds, because not only does it raise issues of race due to Judaism’s ethnic character, but Jennings in particular will make bold claims about Israel’s utter centrality for how race as we know it developed in history and for reimagining race in ways that are healthier and holier.

Thus far, this chapter has used the word “church” to refer to the universal Christian church, but at times Torrance refers to the “Christian Church” and “Jewish Church” as together constituting “the One People of God.” Torrance relates Israel and the “Christian Church” in a peculiar way that requires significant unraveling.

First, as already indicated, Torrance conceives of the Christian church as dependent upon Israel, making the following contention:

For Christians, the Church is to be thought of, not as born with Jesus or at Pentecost, but reborn, for it reaches back through Jesus into the continuities of the People of God in the Old Testament times which is no

---

126 Torrance speaks of Israel, or the Jewish people, as having both an ethnic and a “laic” dimension. As ethnos, Israel is a human “nation” like other human nations, but as laos it is God’s People, with a calling that can be described as “spiritual.” “Israel: People of God,” 3, 12.

127 As he does throughout “Israel: People of God.”
less the People of God. That is to say, the Christian Church has no independent existence apart from Israel, and cannot be understood either in its origin or in its goal in disjunction from Israel.\textsuperscript{128}

This comes as no surprise in light of his insistence upon Israel’s ongoing significance and especially the biblical metaphor of Gentile branches grafted onto the trunk of Israel. Torrance extends that imagery to suggest that “the deepest split in the One People of God is that between Jews and Christians” in the first century, which devastated the Christian church, “for once the Christian Church was broken off like branches from its true centre in the trunk of Israel, it began to fragment...like branches separated from one another by being separated from their common source.”\textsuperscript{129}

Second, Torrance develops a nuanced (and confusing) account of how these two parts of the One People of God relate to each other through history, according to God’s plan of salvation. To understand this, we must return to Torrance’s potentially controversial claims regarding Israel’s vicarious sinfulness. In Torrance’s account, God confronted humanity’s sin—namely, humanity’s rejection of God and God’s love—in and through Israel. As Torrance puts it,

\begin{quote}
the closer God drew near[,] the more the human self-will of Israel asserted itself in resistance to its divine vocation. Thus the more fully God gave himself to this people, the more he forced it to be what it actually was, what we all are, in the self-willed isolation of fallen humanity from God...something which God deliberately took into the full design of reconciling activity...to effect reconciliation with [humanity] at [its] very worst, precisely in that state of rebellion against God.\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[128] Torrance, “Israel: People of God,” 2.
\item[129] Ibid., 13.
\item[130] Torrance, The Mediation of Christ, 28.
\end{footnotes}
On the one hand, God elected Israel to be “God’s covenant partner in mediating reconciliation to [hu]mankind”; on the other, “Israel was elected also to reject the Messiah.” To say that Israel vicariously represents humanity’s very worst when rejecting Christ may be offensive enough, but he goes further to suggest that this was the result of their covenant destiny and even may continue to be the case. That is, Torrance claims that we must “appreciate the continuing role of the Jew in this respect,” for “if Israel was blinded in fulfilling its destiny as the servant of the Lord, in the mediation of revelation and reconciliation, then it was blinded for our sake.” Or similarly, “Through the very fact that he remains an outcast from Israel, repudiated by his own, the despised and rejected [of humanity], Jesus...continues to bear the contempt and antagonism of the human heart to God and vanquishes it in the atoning love of God embodied in himself.”

The sting of these words abates only when one revisits the link between Christ and Israel. Christ not only suffers their rejection, but simultaneously embodies Israel’s best, being thoroughly Jewish. He ties the two extremes together, taking on the conflict of the covenant in his own flesh. That is, Christ culminates their obedience and all that was good in their covenant relationship, and likewise “made his own all the

131 Ibid., 34.
132 Ibid., 35.
133 Torrance, “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel,” 100. See also pp. 89, 94.
134 Ibid., 89; Torrance, The Mediation of Christ, 32.
disobedience and guilt of Israel, and above all the sin of rejecting him and handing him over to be crucified.”\textsuperscript{135} Indeed, “it was in the bearing of that very sin that reconciliation was driven into the depth of Israel’s being and nailed there in such a way that Israel has been bound to God for ever,”\textsuperscript{136} leading us to conclude that humanity enters God’s reconciliation through Christ, yes, but more precisely through Israel-in-Christ, or Christ-in-Israel.\textsuperscript{137}

What exactly does this have to do with the enduring relationship between what Torrance calls the Christian Church and the Jewish Church? It provides the necessary backdrop for Torrance’s metaphor in which he likens the two Churches to the two goats offered for atonement on Yom Kippur (Lev. 16). The Christian Church goes forth from “the resurrection side of the Cross,” following the Lamb that was slain—i.e., the goat that is killed, but, in this case, made alive again. Thus its “perspective is governed by the triumphant vindication of the Servant,” with an “emphasis...[on] atonement as a finished work.” The Jewish Church, however, goes forth “from the dark side of the Cross

\textsuperscript{135} Torrance, \textit{The Mediation of Christ}, 34. Emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{137} This is not to imply a perfect symmetry between Christ and Israel, just as the hypostatic union does not entail a symmetry between God and humanity. The situation here is directly related to that of the hypostatic union but is now simply more specific regarding Israel’s function, given that Christ’s embodiment of all humanity is by way of embodying Israel. Spelled out, Christ remains primary, in that Christ culminates and fulfills Israel and its mission; he takes up Israel’s \textit{vicarious representation} of humanity but also uniquely serves as the divinely provided \textit{substitute}, being also fully God. Such a qualification helps us maintain the complete primacy of God’s grace (Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:4-10). God remains the primary actor who makes a proper human reaction possible.
into history as the Church of the scapegoat, cast out and scattered over the earth under
the shadow of the crucified Jesus.” Thus its “perspective is governed by the baffling role
of the Servant in continuing to bear the disgrace of God’s people in which the emphasis
falls upon the concept of atonement as divinely prolonged into history.” Both
“participate in the mediation of God’s reconciling love” in Christ, in whom God and
Israel are one and therefore God and humanity are one. And both are “directed toward
the future advent of the Messiah.” But they do so in opposite ways that nevertheless
support one another.138

It would be nice if Torrance were clearer in his account of Israel’s destiny within
history. He does, however, augment this goat metaphor, suggesting that Israel’s destiny
in history remains incomplete. They have not yet been “fully reconciled” to their
destiny as God’s chosen people, and together with the Christian Church, the Jewish
Church has not yet fully realized its mission of bringing shalom to the entire world.139
Not only were they ‘meant’ to reject Christ, but, as the wandering scapegoat, they also
bear the sinful scorn of others just as Christ did, as seen most profoundly in the
Holocaust. As Torrance puts it,

the way to Israel’s resurrection must lie through the darkness of its
participation in the Cross, that is, in obedience to its divine vocation in
the Christian era when Israel still has a vicarious mission to fulfil deep in
the shadow of the Cross even if it is not fully aware of it. It is by sharing
with Jesus to the full his experience of abandonment—‘My God, my God,

139 Torrance, “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel,” 86, 93. See also The Mediation
of Christ, 27.
why has thou forsaken me’—that Israel will also share to the full in the power of his resurrection! Is that not exactly what has been taking place? Where more fearfully or profoundly than in the terrible concentration camps of Europe...?\textsuperscript{140}

As this quote hints, Torrance is optimistic that reflection on the Holocaust can renew both the trunk and branches of the divided Church, enabling Jews to take further steps toward their divine destiny. Again, he writes:

only as Israel penetrates into the mystery of its own most harrowing suffering through the crucifixion of Jesus,...and only as the Christian Church acknowledges as never before the depth and continuity of Israel’s divine calling [including its “rejection by the world...for the sake of the world’”] can Christians and Jews help each other to understand in a new way the atoning and living sacrifice which God himself has provided....[for everyone, so both can] advance together toward the fulfilment of God’s redemptive purpose for both and for the whole human race.\textsuperscript{141}

As intriguing and illuminating as this Christian account of Judaism may be, it might stir up nearly as many thorny questions as it answers. Was Israel’s rejection of Christ truly part of their God-given mission, or might there be a way to describe it that is less theologically and ethically disturbing? Torrance is wrestling with the challenging language of Romans 9-11, especially 11:25-32. This question also thrusts us into the minefields of the felix culpa tradition, why God “willed” Christ’s death, and, indeed, theodicy itself. However, these are not quite the minefields that this dissertation is destined to traverse. Suffice it to say that however one prefers to answer those grand questions can equally apply to this one. For example, we might say that God does not

\textsuperscript{140} Torrance, “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel,” 94.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 101.
desire sin and its wages but brings blessings from curses, life from death. More to the point, if Torrance is right, Israel’s worst moments of sin were a consequence of their intense relationship with God; but that does not mean that any such vicarious sin partially fulfilled their covenantal relationship, at least not apart from God’s redemptive manipulation of it. Could we not instead say that God drew out humanity’s best and worst in Israel through that covenantal relationship, and that the worst was in opposition to their true covenantal destiny while their best was in line with it?\(^{142}\)

Also, is Israel’s “resurrection” in Christ the exact same as the resurrection of all humanity in Christ, including unbelievers—i.e., something that still requires more to constitute full salvation?\(^{143}\) Or if it differs, how so? Many Christians will ask in particular what this means for individual Jews and how to share the gospel with them. Although Torrance might not answer this directly, one can anticipate his possible reply: that perhaps it is not for us to ask or know—that such matters might rest solely between Israel and God—and that sharing the gospel with Israel sounds like a call for them to embrace their divinely given covenantal mission and, eventually, Christ’s role within it.\(^{144}\)

\(^{142}\) I doubt Torrance would take much issue with adding such nuance, even if he would likely defend his original language, as we are all wont to do.

\(^{143}\) The question of our necessary human response will be more thoroughly discussed below, in the Summary and Evaluation section.

\(^{144}\) He does insist that Jews cannot accept Jesus as Messiah and Savior and cease to be Jewish; instead, they must maintain their covenant with God. See, for example, Torrance, “Israel: People of God,” 11.
Similarly, did God truly require or desire in some sense that (most) Jews reject Christ from the first to the twenty-first century? Perhaps Torrance is more concerned here with combating the historically deep roots of anti-Semitism based in the Jewish rejection of Christ as Messiah and God-with-us. That said, such a reading of history may not be necessary for his other claims regarding Israel’s enduring status as God’s chosen people.

1.2.5.2 Torrance on Race

As a coda to the substantive sidebar, note that Torrance understood the problems of race in terms of the Jew-Christian divide in particular and in terms of failed ecumenism in general. First, Torrance contends that

rebellion against the reconciling purpose of God being worked out through Israel cannot but bring fragmentation among the peoples and nations of [hu]mankind, for it detaches them from their creative centre in God’s providential activity in history, when they are thrown back upon their separated existences and cultures as national entities. Nationalism of this kind can only take the form of group-egoism or ethnic sin, which is the poisonous root of all racism.145

In short, the root of racism lies in the original fragmentation created by our rebellion against God’s reconciling work in Israel. Without God as our center, we are thrown back on ourselves, individually and as people-groups.

Second, after a visit to South Africa in 1976, Torrance sees that apartheid reflects a rejection of the reconciliation we have in Christ’s particular body. Torrance is “ashamed of many so-called ‘evangelicals’ in [South Africa] who live and act in such a way as to condone apartheid, keeping their Christian witness apart from any resolve to actualise in the flesh and blood of human existence reconciliation in Christ with one another.” Too many missionaries in South Africa, he judges, had detached Christianity from Christ, removed Christ from the center, rejected Christ’s “sole mediatorship,”\(^{146}\) and imposed “European Church divisions upon African people.” He issues a call to action, that the churches should “combat and eliminate obstructions to the Gospel of reconciliation through divisive policies enacted in the name of a Christian State and with the backing of a Christian Church.” If the churches did not unite ecumenically to overcome the divisions of apartheid, then they were living a lie.\(^{147}\)

Although Torrance seldom wrote explicitly about race, his instinct to root racism in how Christians relate to Jews gets developed in the work of Willie Jennings, and Torrance’s related diagnoses of nationalistic ethnic division as a form of egoism and of

\(^{146}\) Torrance, “Strategy for Mission,” in *The Thomas F. Torrance Manuscript Collection* (Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library, [1976]), 1. Although the manuscript lacks a date, the context makes it clear that he wrote this during or shortly after his 1976 visit to South Africa; it includes a reference to Transkei’s “independence today,” and the Transkei province gained independence from South Africa on October 26, 1976.

\(^{147}\) Ibid., 2. Torrance makes a similar argument about unity among apartheid-divided and culturally divided churches in a recording about Transkei’s independence (11-12).
apartheid as a rejection of Christ’s body, mediation, and particularity all echo Bonhoeffer’s diagnosis of Nazism.¹⁴⁸

1.2.6 Summary of Theological Anthropology

The second part of this chapter warrants a summary. First, Christ’s vicarious humanity means that Christ ontologically grounds all humanity and fulfills God’s intention for it, bringing salvation to all and enabling those who enter Christ’s Body (i.e., Christians) to share in all that Christ has accomplished. We receive our true humanity, personhood, or identity only in Jesus Christ, and in such a way that affirms our humanity as distinct from divinity.

Second, our true identities are eschatological and teleological, in that we are made for union and communion with the triune God that will come in full only with the *parousia*. Even now, however, we can become more fully human, more fully personal, and more fully who we are meant to be by participating in Christ through the Spirit.

Any action on our part to effect or respond to Christ’s union with us is secondary to the primacy of God’s gracious acts to reconcile creation to God’s self, restoring it to be as God intended.¹⁴⁹ The only way “to know God or to know ourselves as *persons*” is

¹⁴⁸ Indeed, those who knew Torrance personally say that he decried apartheid as resembling Nazism; e.g. see McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography*, 101.
¹⁴⁹ As noted by Habets, *Theosis*, 34.
to be “renewed and brought face to face with God in Christ,”\textsuperscript{150} which happens via God’s triune work yet demands that we respond in ways that participate (however mysteriously) in what God accomplishes for us.

Third, because of the Mediator, our vertical and horizontal relationships are both salvaged and rendered life-giving. Because Christ mediates our salvation to us, thereby restoring our relation to God, so too does Christ restore the “disrupted” onto-relations among us as we come together in the Body of Christ.

Fourth, living into one’s eschatological identity in Christ means a radical re-centering of one’s self around Christ, and in the process God frees such a person for genuine, identity-informing relationships with God and other persons.

Fifth, in Torrance’s ecclesiology he articulates a vision in which our relationships with others, who are equally called and sought by God, are an intrinsic part of knowing God. In short, we need others in order to be who we are meant to be.

Torrance’s ecclesiology also expands on just how we might participate in the eschatological kingdom in which we are united with God and others. Specifically, he commends Scripture and the sacraments as providing a real connection to God’s work in Christ through the power of the Spirit. We are not adding to Christ’s work, but participate in it as Christ extends himself to us in the Spirit. Moreover, seeking

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 33.
intercommunion or reconciliation is one of the participatory responses the Word and sacraments should inspire.

Lastly, by way of an extended sidebar, this dissertation explored Torrance’s take on the ongoing relationship between the Christian and Jewish Churches, noting that he conceives of them as conjointly the One People of God who must ultimately be reconciled in Christ to fulfill their missions for the sake of the world. But the world’s—especially Christendom’s—rejection of Israel has sustained human rebellion against God and led to endless de-centering fragmentations that just might constitute the very root of racism.

1.3 Summary and Evaluation

The first half of this chapter laid out Torrance’s broad theological framework. In this framework, Christ mediates the divine-human relationship as God the Son who is also fully human, fulfilling God’s covenant with Israel from both sides and enabling creation to participate in the communion that eternally exists among the persons of the Trinity. Any anthropology that attaches to this framework will have a robust, orthodox, and ecumenical foundation.

The second half considered Torrance’s theological anthropology more specifically, always from the angle of Christ’s role as Mediator as laid out in the first half, and ultimately for the sake of detecting its relevance for social identity. His
anthropology suggests that we all depend upon Christ for our eschatological identities in which we both need each other and are free “for” each other within the Body of Christ. Identity is interpersonal, social, eschatological, and secured in Christ alone.

Before fully accepting the components of Torrance’s christological anthropology as described thus far, we should first consider the relevant criticisms that have been leveled against Torrance’s arguments.

One common criticism concerns the sweeping scope of Torrance’s systematic theology and its sometimes dense presentation, making it frustrating for some to understand and to see its practical implications for daily life. A related criticism likewise concerns questions of practicality, but focuses more narrowly on the place of human agency within Torrance’s grand scheme, especially in light of his focus on salvation by grace alone. This second criticism bears directly on this dissertation’s project: to the extent to which it is fair, we are left with little material that offers specific directives on how we might improve our interpersonal relationships, live into our true identities, and generally approach any matter that might be considered to fall within the domain of “ethics.” Again, this points to a weak missiology.

In a qualified manner, Ray Anderson launches both of these critiques. First, he suggests that “Torrance’s literary style and scholarly erudition tend to baffle if not discourage all but the most tenacious reader.” More seriously, although Anderson sees how Torrance intrinsically connects theory and practice in his world of thought, even Anderson’s “attempt at reading Torrance as a practical theologian” still forces him to
admit that Torrance “seldom ventures onto the turf where practical theologians ply their trade.”  

When it comes to practical applicability and human activity, Torrance does suggest that we are *eschatologically* empowered to serve, obey, and glorify the Father like the Son, by way of that difficult concept of participation. Habets would add that Christians undergo a progressive transformation as they are “continually bound to Christ by the Spirit” through “fellowship with the saints, corporate worship, the ministry of the Word, and partaking of the sacraments.”

Torrance’s primary concern is that we recognize that salvation is by grace alone, and was effected by Christ through his life, death, and resurrection as one who was fully God and fully human. As Molnar explains, God has done all of the important work in Christ; Christ performed and embodied his priestly sacrifice for atonement *as* God and *as* a human “so that we do not need to do anything to complete this work or to enable it; we only have to receive it gratefully as the very gift of grace, that is, of God himself enabling our lives as part of the new creation inaugurated by Christ’s own life, death, resurrection and ascension and thus as the fully human beings God intended us to be.” Torrance himself explains that he emphasizes Christ’s vicarious humanity and

---

unconditional grace because it is the truth of the Gospel and necessary for freeing us from our “deep seated bondage to the self.”\textsuperscript{154}

For his part, Lee thinks Torrance provides theological resources for appreciating Christian ethical activity even if Torrance leaves such activity under-described. Because our “ontological union” with Christ is the means by which “we are intrinsically and creatively personalized and humanized” by the “personalizing Person and humanizing [Hum]an,” the two-way unions between us and Christ “are central to Christian life and ethics.”\textsuperscript{155} That said, the logic here could be clearer. How might we spell out the connection between what it means to be personalized and humanized, on the one hand, and Christian life and ethics, on the other?

Lee begins to formulate an answer by articulating the connection between Christ’s activity and Christian activity in Torrance’s thought. Lee asks the pertinent

\textsuperscript{154} In response to Ray Anderson’s article, Torrance writes, “I often find the Gospel of salvation by grace alone to be so difficult for people to understand and believe. In preaching and speaking about it to good people in their homes I have sometimes found the sharpest reaction, for it is unconditional grace that cuts so deeply into our life, and unconditional grace which strangely upsets so many evangelical Christians, as I have found in their reaction to my book, \textit{The Mediation of Christ}. It is sometimes the case that would-be evangelical Christians shy away from the sheer truth of salvation by grace alone, and yet it is there, as I have so often found in my pastoral ministry and theological writing, that people feel so ‘liberated,’ as they say….it cuts deeply into the very quick of the soul and frees it from deep seated bondage to the self. It is when people think of salvation through what [Jesus has done through his whole life, death, and resurrection] that they can really understand the deep truth of the vicarious humanity of Christ and his unconditional grace.” Torrance, “Thomas Torrance Responds,” in \textit{The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T.F. Torrance}, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 323.

\textsuperscript{155} Lee, \textit{Union with Christ}, 301.
question: “Does not Torrance’s immense stress upon the vicarious humanity of Christ threaten our own freedom, faith, and personal decision? Does God’s total and unconditional grace mean the exclusion of all of our humanity?” 156 The tone of the question belies his answer: no. The question itself, Torrance would claim, is too dualist between grace and freedom. The solution is to see how the relationship of union moves in two parts.

First, we have the ontological union of God to humanity in Christ (which is itself solidified in a twofold movement of God-in-Christ toward creation and creation-in-Christ toward God). Second, we have what Torrance calls our “subjective response,” or our experience of salvation, which is ontologically grounded and necessary to complete our salvation. 157 Lee explains thusly: the Fall made our true faith and conversion impossible,

156 Ibid., 302.
157 As Lee explains, this is why Torrance is not a universalist in most senses of the word. Christ may have died for all unconditionally, but “in spite of the fact that this ontological atonement and redemption are already fulfilled in Jesus Christ, salvation is given to us only through faith-union.” We must distinguish here between redemption/atonement (ontological) and salvation (which is eschatological and incorporates our subjective response) (ibid., 314). Torrance also implies this dynamic using the language of enhypostasis and anhypostasis, which I have avoided for the sake of clarity. For a thorough description of these doctrines, see Torrance, Incarnation, 228-33. In short, enhypostasis means Jesus Christ’s “human nature had no independent subsistence or hypostasis, no independent centre of personal being” (229) while anhypostasis means that “the humanity of Jesus has full reality in the person of the Son” (230). Torrance relates these to the ontological and subjective poles of salvation. That is, for Torrance, anhypostasis further indicates how Christ assumed human nature ontologically—pointing to how he upholds both existence and atonement for all, while enhypostasis suggests that he was a particular person, so that salvation requires “acutely personal modes of existence, and encounter, and communion” (231). In his introduction to Torrance’s Incarnation, Robert T. Walker interprets this to mean that “the salvation of all is not automatic but comes to us
but Christ’s vicarious humanity gives our “acts of response full place” by assuming, sanctifying, transforming them “ontologically.” This means our “subjective” response—our experience of accepting God’s grace in Christ—objectively shares in Christ’s response to God the Father on our behalf. Ours is “a personal and free act which is objectively grounded in and controlled by the vicarious humanity of Christ.” Lee adds that “our acts towards God become genuine and free acts only when we are united to the personalizing and humanizing Christ through the Spirit.” In Torrance’s words, “we are entirely dependent upon the divine decision, but that is a decision which overlaps and undergirds my decision and gives it ground and room and freedom for full personal activity.” This is what it means when Torrance stresses the theme of Galatians 2:20 as the “simplicity of the Gospel”: “I-yet-not-I-but-Christ.” Both are true at once.

personally in personal relations of encounter and response in faith...[and] remains no use to us until we are brought into union with him.” Robert T. Walker, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), xliii. Note, however, that in the above-mentioned pages, Torrance does not explicitly mention our faith response.

160 Lee, *Union with Christ*, 301, emphasis original.
On the whole, then, Torrance’s framework provides space for human activity that responds and re-acts to the triune God’s decisive acts in Christ. Although he rarely teases out in detail the practical ramifications for our practices beyond his call for ecumenism and reconciliation of the people of God,\(^{162}\) he clearly commends the practices of communal fellowship, worship, reading scripture, and the sacraments as ways of responding to God’s grace and inviting the Spirit to deepen our mutually implicated horizontal and vertical unions.

Even Lee concludes that Torrance’s strong, theory-based emphasis on Christ’s vicarious humanity seems to devalue our response, our “historical experience” of “faith, repentance, decision and worship,” which receives significant attention in the New Testament.\(^{163}\) Moreover, for Lee “the problem is how this kind of theology could be applied to our various life-situations, and what kind of answers it could give to the complex and various problems in this post-modern era.” Torrance’s “theological system...does not seem to correlate with its lower level, i.e. actual society and culture.”\(^{164}\) Anderson again agrees with Lee on this point, suggesting that “the relation

\(^{162}\) This is a generalization. For example, as Anderson points out, Torrance “affirmed the practice of ordaining women for pastoral ministry in the Church based on the ‘new humanity’ of Christ” (Anderson, “Torrance as a Practical Theologian,” 177-178). See Torrance, Royal Priesthood, xi-xiv, and The Ministry of Women (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1992).

\(^{163}\) Lee, Union with Christ, 313.

\(^{164}\) Ibid., 310-311. For example, his work on theology and the natural sciences tends to remain on a purely epistemological level without engaging “human sciences” (311).
of Christ to culture” in Torrance’s theology “lies hidden in the shadows, waiting to be brought forth into the light.”165

Note here how a expanded missiology would help. Torrance begins to unpack how our vertical relationship with God affects our horizontal relationships with others, but primarily in the context of the worshiping Body of Christ. His concerns for intercommunion and reconciliation extend beyond the church, but his focus remains upon the reconciliation of the One People of God, as seen in his extensive work for ecumenism and Christian-Jewish dialogue. However, just how our reconciling activity spirals beyond the church—a primary concern of missiology—remains under-articulated.

Questions of our horizontal relationships are necessarily and perhaps self-evidently “ethical” in nature. They have to do with how we see ourselves-in-relation-to-others and others-in-relation-to-ourselves. Torrance makes it clear that this horizontal dimension stands directly in relationship with the vertical: our relationships and interpersonal identities are shaped and eschatologically driven by Christ’s mediation between humanity and God. Regarding issues of race, Torrance does make a provocative suggestion that the roots of racism ultimately lie in the human rejection of Israel and God’s work in them.166 What is only a brief hint in Torrance becomes a fully

---

166 Torrance writes that “rebellion against the reconciling purpose of God being worked out through Israel cannot but bring fragmentation among the peoples and nations of [hu]mankind, for it detaches them from their creative centre in God’s providential activity in
developed thesis in Jennings. Indeed, we will need to look beyond Torrance in order to get more specific about the nature of these horizontal relationships and our ethical activity in response to (and empowered by) God’s grace, especially as it pertains to matters of race in our current context. This is where Bonhoeffer and Jennings come in.

Anderson would support this move. He reads “Torrance as tending more toward following Barth’s concern for a Trinitarian exposition of dogma than following Bonhoeffer’s concern for a practical application of theological ethics.” Both Torrance and Bonhoeffer engaged Barth’s theology, but Bonhoeffer takes a different line—a line that this dissertation finds complementary to Torrance’s precisely where Torrance could use such a complement. According to Anderson, “Bonhoeffer assumed Barth’s theology of Christ as the very revelation of God,” but Bonhoeffer “pressed for a more contemporary answer to the question “Where is Christ in the world today and what am I to do as an obedient disciple?”” Looking at Bonhoeffer’s answers will simultaneously help us explore how Torrance’s theology might extend into more concretely ethical matters.

One last criticism deserves mention. According to both Colin Gunton and Myk Habets, despite his highly trinitarian and orthodox system, Torrance inherits one of Barth’s lacuna in that he does not adequately explore the role of the Holy Spirit in the history, when they are thrown back upon their separated existences and cultures as national entities. Nationalism of this kind can only take the form of group-egoism or ethnic sin, which is the poisonous root of all racism” (Torrance, “The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel,” 87).

process of *theosis*—what has so far been described as personalization, humanization, or together living into our eschatological identities. Against this criticism, Torrance does claim that the Spirit “is at work as personalising Spirit” within the various structures of knowing God (rational, personal, and social). In so doing, God by the Spirit confronts us, addresses us in the Word, “opens us” up to God, and “calls forth from us the response of faith and love,” rehabilitating us into proper vertical and horizontal relations.168

Nevertheless, Torrance could say more. Habets concludes that “surely the solution is to speak more of Christ’s human experience than Torrance has done.”169 The question of the Spirit’s role and the benefits of contemplating Christ’s human experience will recur in subsequent chapters so much so that it merits extra attention in Part 1’s conclusion (Chapter 4).170

168 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 188.
169 Habets, *Theosis*, 196. Others have criticized Torrance’s pneumatology. The Smail-Kettler debate resurfaces here, in that Smail believes Torrance fails properly to differentiate between work of Son and Spirit (Smail, *The Giving Gift*, 109-112), whereas Kettler parries back that Smail over-divides them (Kettler, *Vicarious Humanity of Christ*, 139-42). Colin Gunton levels a host of criticisms, including that Torrance pays inadequate attention to the three “persons”—including the Spirit—as particular and unique. Colin E. Gunton, “Being and Person: T. F. Torrance’s Doctrine of God,” in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T.F. Torrance*, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 115-137. He likewise notes that “if our concern is to seek out the implications of the doctrine of the Spirit for the work and ministry of the Church as Torrance has laid it out for us, I think it is clear that much can be written on that foundation” (106). Molnar launches a largely convincing rebuttal to many of Gunton’s criticisms in *Theologian of the Trinity*, 341-49. But even Molnar does not unpack for Torrance what the Spirit’s personalizing work looks like and how it might enable us to participate in our eschatological identities in any specific context, practically speaking.

170 Interestingly, the sum of these criticisms resembles those Stanley Hauerwas levels against Karl Barth’s theology, for which he otherwise shows admiration. As he puts it, “Barth
1.4 Conclusion

Torrance’s highly integrated theology provides a robust, orthodox, and ecumenical framework that supports a theological anthropology based on Christ’s role as Mediator. Christ mediates the divine-human relationship, fulfilling God’s covenant with Israel from both sides so that human creatures can participate, by the Spirit, in the communion of the Trinity. Such communion is what God intends for all creation—it is our eschatological telos accomplished by Christ in which we may participate even now by the Spirit. Our humanity and personhood is secured in Christ, who has vicariously provided the way for us to receive our identities in God. To become who we are meant to be, we need God and all other persons within the Body of Christ.

Four implications of this partial sketch of Torrance’s christological anthropology bear additional attention, given their relevance for social identity. First, Torrance sees all humans as children of God, at least when seen from the perspective of God’s desire and intention. In the incarnation we witness “human nature set forth in its truth as creature made to be the child of the heavenly Father.”

---

ourselves and others from the lens of God’s will, then we will see others as siblings and family. Even those who do not claim to be Christians are in this sense our family.

Similarly, according to Colyer, “the universal range of Christ’s effective incarnational redemption, Torrance contends, includes not only all people, but the entire universe,”[^172] or “the whole created universe of space and time, including all things (*ta panta*) visible and invisible, earthly and heavenly alike” (Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20).[^173] Although Torrance is not a universalist in the sense of assuming as dogma the ultimate salvation of all people and things, he accepts that God *desires* to draw all of creation into perfect relationship with God’s self. If we wish to see the creation as God does, we must see it as unconditionally loved and redeemed by the triune God. God’s desire to restore all creation into an intimate, familial relationship likewise suggests that our eschatological identities in part depend upon that familial restoration.

Second, conceiving of Christ as our singular Mediator between us and God, between us and others, and even between us and our individual selves exposes the sin of self-centeredness. This dissertation takes Torrance one tiny step further by recognizing the move from rightful God-centeredness to self-centeredness as “idolatry.”[^174] God-centeredness requires that we understand Christ as the one and only thing who can mediate between us and God; if we do not, we slip into idolatry.

[^174]: Just as Paul Molnar does on p. 32 of *Theologian of the Trinity*. 
Concerning identity, such a reorientation around Christ exposes all aspects of who we are (or who we think we are or try to be) to criticism. The extent to which one exists in the fallen order of things is confronted by the Holy Spirit, who enables one to exist simultaneously in the ultimate redemption of creation. We experience identity as a mélange of ingredients, with some aspects more central than others, and these ingredients and their arrangements can be more and less compatible with one’s ultimate reality in Christ.

This is even more clearly relevant to social identity and ethics when we consider that sin and self-centeredness corrupt not only our vertical identity-forming relationship, but our horizontal identity-forming relationships, as well. The Fall and ongoing sin radically disrupt the “onto-relations” that exist between all personal beings—God-humanity, humanity-God, and humanity-humanity. In sin, we block the Holy Spirit and self-determine and self-define rather than receiving who we are from God. By the power of the Spirit, the Mediator salvages these vertical and horizontal relationships and renders them life-giving. With Christ as one’s center (i.e. mediating ourselves to us), we enter genuine personal relation with God and other persons, thereby living into our eschatological identities. The motif of speaking of Christ as the Mediator and center in contrast to the idolatry of self-centeredness will recur in greater depth in the next chapters.

Building on this basic insight, Torrance’s gentle suggestion that racism can be traced to our loss of our true center—and Israel’s place there—will reappear in a far
more developed form in later chapters. Yet we can already begin to see how the false centers that sustain racism might constitute idolatry.

Third, having one’s identity “in” Jesus, or becoming the human persons we are meant to be by sharing in his perfected humanity, does not damage our creatureliness but in fact fulfills it. In other words, by sharing in Christ so that we ultimately share in the communion of the Trinity, we do not melt into divinity in such a way that God’s divinity swallows our humanity or dissolves it. Rather, when we are humanized and personalized, we share in the “logic of grace” in which God sustains the “integrity of the creature and realize[s] the creature’s relation to God.”175 For one to “live in union with God is to become fully and perfectly human.”176 This implies rejection of any anthropology that would despair of creaturehood or use either claims of God-likeness or accusations of creatureliness to rank human creatures as relatively superior or inferior to one another.177

Fourth, Torrance’s doctrines of the hypostatic union, *homoousion*, and the Trinity all provide frameworks for maintaining a delicate balance of difference-in-unity. This in turn suggests a way to value individual and group differences on the horizontal plane, even as God seeks to bring us all into the triune communion through union with Christ. Just as we do not melt into God and lose ourselves in God, so too we do not

---

177 And this is certainly a risk of Milbank’s version of participation. See above, footnote 86.
merge and lose ourselves among one another. Torrance does not spend time reflecting on this, but he would likely extend his understanding of the Spirit as enabling union-with-distinction on the horizontal plane as well as the vertical.\(^\text{178}\) That said, we have much work to do in order to discern which “differences” are worthy of respect and which reflect the work of sin.

Alongside Torrance’s secure theological foundation, these last four points embody those elements of his christological anthropology that this dissertation will carry the furthest. As the dissertation considers Torrance in conversation with Bonhoeffer and Jennings, his appraisal of Israel will likewise prove vital.

As the dissertation progresses, we must also bear in mind the crucial criticisms discussed earlier. Although Torrance offers some account of Christian ethical activity and response and its theoretical integration with the primary activity of God, we are generally tasked with discovering just how the rubber meets the road. One reason for this is the lack of a developed missiology.

It also remains the case that this dissertation has not yet fully articulated the ways in which the Holy Spirit enables us to engage in such action and participate in our eschatological identities together. In light of Torrance’s affirmation of the intrinsic ties between the work of Christ and the Spirit,\(^\text{179}\) we should ask: is not the Holy Spirit also a


\(^{179}\) For more, see Torrance, “Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship,” 245-251.
“personalising Person”? Torrance moves in this direction, speaking of “the personalising work of the Word and the Spirit,”\textsuperscript{180} of how the triune God as the “infinite and universal Person” is “essentially and creatively personalising,…constituting…us through the Son and the Spirit,”\textsuperscript{181} and even of the Spirit as “personalising Spirit” without immediate qualification concerning its conjoint activity with Christ.\textsuperscript{182} In fact, we can press Torrance’s theology further: could the Spirit be even more worthy of the title “personalizing Person” than the Son? This question will recur again later on.

Related to this, we could likewise say that the Spirit enables appropriate distinction-in-unity. Again, we might need to look beyond what Torrance explicitly provides. When he conceives of Christ as the personalizing Person, he believes this “enables us to overcome individualism”; he also understands “good dogmatics as ethics.” That is, “he steadfastly refuses to base his understanding of…our personal relations anywhere else but in Christ himself as the ‘personalising person.’”\textsuperscript{183} However, at this point we may ask not only if we can say more about ethics, but if an understanding of “individuality” can be recovered (e.g. as “particularity”) as long as it

\textsuperscript{180} Torrance, \textit{The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church} (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 230.
\textsuperscript{181} Torrance, \textit{Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement} (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 97-98. In this passage he refers to the triune God as “Person” but not as one hypostasis.
\textsuperscript{182} Torrance, \textit{22God and Rationality}, 188-189
\textsuperscript{183} Molnar, \textit{Theologian of the Trinity}, 348-49.
does not signify the attempt to self-define, and if a stronger doctrine of the Spirit’s role in personalization could help.

In light of the strengths and shortcomings here identified in Torrance’s work, we might come to a conclusion similar to that of Kye Won Lee’s:

While retaining his holistic theology and its inner dynamics, we must positively and constructively seek to answer all of the questions persistently thrust at the Church by the post-modern world in the new millennium. However, I believe that this task will take place only in a way which observes the commandment of Christ: ‘Renounce yourself, take up your cross and follow me’ (Mt 16:24).¹⁸⁴

Significantly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer would full-heartedly agree. While Bonhoeffer does not provide such a stable, sweeping framework as Torrance, his description of Christ’s mediation in Christians’ daily life together offers stunning insights into social identity and holds in balance the truth of sola gratia and Christ’s call to take up one’s cross and follow him.

¹⁸⁴ Lee, Union with Christ, 322.
Chapter 2: Dietrich Bonhoeffer

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 Why Bonhoeffer?

Moving from a chapter on T. F. Torrance to a chapter on Dietrich Bonhoeffer demands justification. Not only did they belong to slightly different eras, but they thought in different languages and belonged to different Protestant traditions. Torrance ministered within the Reformed Church of Scotland with Calvin’s works lining his shelves, while Bonhoeffer labored as a priest burdened with the Lutheran legacy amidst burgeoning German nationalism; and Torrance would soon resume launching his theological career in the United Kingdom after serving as an army chaplain just as Bonhoeffer faced a noose at Flossenbürg.

That said, their theologies both challenge and complement each other so that, through their interaction, this dissertation can trace a relatively coherent line of christological anthropology that clarifies what it means for Christ to be the Mediator of our social identities and what this in turn means for race-as-we-know-it.

Both Torrance and Bonhoeffer engaged the theology of Karl Barth, but Bonhoeffer did so more ambiguously and with a different set of primary concerns that
complement Torrance precisely where Torrance could use such a complement and vice versa.\(^1\) Namely, Bonhoeffer desperately wanted to heed Christ’s call to be an obedient disciple, thereby steering the christological anthropology “begun” by Torrance toward more concretely ethical matters. With Bonhoeffer we get more specific about the nature of our horizontal relationships and our ethical activity in response to (and empowered by) the grace of God that Torrance so strongly affirms.\(^2\) Although Bonhoeffer does not provide a systematic framework, he describes Christ’s mediation in Christians’ daily life together in ways relevant to social identity, all while attempting to hold in balance the truth of *sola gratia* and Christ’s call to take up one’s cross and follow him. (Note that the Torrance-Bonhoeffer relationship will receive more attention at the close of this chapter.)

This should likewise clarify why this dissertation moves from Torrance to Bonhoeffer, and not the other way around. Rather than give in to an easy chronological ordering of the three theological interlocutors, Part I moves with the flow of an

---

\(^1\) Torrance proves aware of this connection even if he clearly favors Barth over Bonhoeffer in T. F. Torrance, “Cheap and Costly Grace,” *Baptist Quarterly* 22 (1968).

\(^2\) Many note that Bonhoeffer’s theology was driven by primarily ethical concerns. For example, Stephen Plant’s thesis in *Bonhoeffer* is that “a trajectory can be traced from Bonhoeffer’s earliest to his final writings which describe an ethics of responsibility” (9); Bonhoeffer’s “theology is a consistent, and by and large credible attempt to describe how people should live together and conduct themselves in the light of the Gospel of Jesus.” Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer* (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), xi. This distinction between the two theologians will be revisited below, in the Summary and Evaluation section at the end of the chapter.
emerging argument. It begins with Torrance, who provides a grand, trinitarian framework for this dissertation’s emerging christological anthropology—a framework in which the triune God bids us live into our eschatological identities by radically re-centering us around Christ, which in turn frees us for genuine, identity-informing relationships with God and others. As this chapter contends, Bonhoeffer more deeply describes Christ’s horizontal mediation in ways consonant with Torrance even if Bonhoeffer himself eschewed systematic theologizing. Indeed, Bonhoeffer would push Torrance to say that these genuine relationships entail perceiving Christ as the one and only Mediator who stands “between,” which alters how see ourselves and others. (Jennings, in turn, will press the logic yet further into the realm of the racial imagination.)

As this chapter will show, Bonhoeffer’s account of Christ’s mediation of social identity (i) deepens our understanding of what it means for Christ to stand “between” us as both our “center” and “limit,” and (ii) enables us to identify the nature of sin and idolatry in these terms. Christ the Mediator draws us out of self-centered idolatry into life-giving communion with God and others in God. Only by taking Christ—and not an

---

3 According to Wayne Whitson Floyd, “He is not just unsystematic in his approach to theology, but opposes all theological system on principle.... He is best understood as himself a perpetual pilgrim—for whom being a Christian was a task rather than an accomplishment.” Wayne W. Floyd, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” in The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, The Great Theologians (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 56. This chapter’s Summary and Evaluation section will explore this topic in greater depth.
idol like itler or his Aryanism—as our mutual, limit-constituting center can we truly live together without destroying each other. Only when we are in Christ together can we become who we are meant to be.

2.1.2 Which Bonhoeffer?

Unfortunately, any extended treatment of Bonhoeffer’s theology must declare its position upon a veritable battlefield. That said, many aspects of Bonhoeffer’s life remain uncontested. Few if any would deny that he was born in 1906 and executed by order of Himmler in 1945, only a few weeks before the end of World War II. He is also well-known as a German Lutheran priest who tried to subvert the Nazi regime, who helped shape the Confessing Church and its early declaration of freedom from Nazi control, who led clandestine seminaries, and who aided a covert anti-Hitler resistance movement until arrested in 1943. Many other facts of his life are widely accepted. However, debates about the legitimacy of recent biographies suggest that the very life (and death) of Bonhoeffer remains contested territory.4

Over time, interpreters have given different Bonhoeffer works pride of place, and they have disagreed about how Bonhoeffer developed (or did not) over time—and these differences often coincide with the era of Bonhoeffer scholarship in question. Charting these disagreements could be a chapter unto itself. For our purposes, we need only understand the basic shape of this landscape as it pertains specifically to Bonhoeffer’s christological anthropology and why this chapter can rely on works from the 1930s while still appealing to others for nuance and support.

Following most contemporary Bonhoeffer scholars, this dissertation accepts two fundamental insights: first, that scholars must bear in mind the whole of Bonhoeffer’s work, and, related, that Bonhoeffer’s development regarding christological anthropology and practical ethics was such that he never left behind his early insights but rather expanded upon them (or even lived into them).

Undoubtedly, early Bonhoeffer scholarship in the 1960s fixated on Bonhoeffer’s last writings. Put simply, this represents the most theologically “liberal” end of Bonhoeffer interpretation, in which Bonhoeffer’s snippets about religionless Christianity and humanity-come-of-age served the larger “death of God” movement. However, by

---

1972, Clifford Green lamented how this early research’s bias leads to neglect of Bonhoeffer’s earlier writings.⁶ This engenders a “teleological bias which obscures the intrinsic purpose and integrity of [Bonhoeffer’s] early theology.”⁷ Eventually more evangelical appropriations of Bonhoeffer appear on the scene, and some reflect an overly reactionary stance to these more liberal appropriations.⁸

Subsequent decades witnessed the proliferation of literature on Bonhoeffer, both academic and popular.⁹ Stephen Haynes devotes an entire book to tracing Bonhoeffer as just such a “phenomenon.” In his words, “one can find Bonhoeffer’s name attached to virtually every mainstream theological movement that has flourished during the past three decades.”¹⁰ However, like much of the recent scholarship on Bonhoeffer, this dissertation quite simply follows a more moderate path in an attempt to let Bonhoeffer speak for himself.¹¹

---


⁹ Stephen Plant suggests that “Bonhoeffer’s writings have been press-ganged into authorizing astonishingly varied theological and ethical positions.” Plant, *Bonhoeffer*, ix. See also Floyd, “Bonhoeffer,” 43.


¹¹ Floyd commends such moderation in Floyd, “Bonhoeffer,” 43.
Regarding Bonhoeffer’s development, this dissertation focuses on three works from the 1930s: *Creation and Fall* (1932-33), his Christology lectures (1933), and *Life Together* (1937), all while drawing on other sources that buttress or nuance the relevant themes of these works. Although Bonhoeffer may have shifted his perspectives at either end of this decade, these shifts did not shake his central focus on Christ and Christ’s singular relevance for faithful Christian existence.\(^\text{12}\)

Interpreters who are otherwise polarized agree that Bonhoeffer’s 1930-1931 stay in the U.S. sparked something like a spiritual liberation that clarified the trajectory of his life, and “without knowledge of this autobiographical dimension, understanding Bonhoeffer’s theological development would be darkened.”\(^\text{13}\) Although some might interpret Bonhoeffer’s works of the mid-1930s “either as outstanding devotional books not essentially related to Bonhoeffer’s ‘mature’ theology or as a reflection of a ‘sectarian’ period which he later rejected,”\(^\text{14}\) there’s an abundance of evidence for

\(^\text{12}\) Plant offers a helpful account: “Bonhoeffer’s life was marked by both continuity and change, and...Bethge’s influential proposal that there were two major breaks in his life (from theologian to Christian, and later from Church to world) helpfully emphasizes developments in Bonhoeffer’s approach, but can unhelpfully obscure continuities in his thought.” Plant, *Bonhoeffer*, 36n12. Here Plant refers to Bethge’s suggestion that in 1932 Bonhoeffer “found his calling, in 1939 his destiny,” moving from theologian to Christian to contemporary. See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, trans. Eric Mosbacher, et al. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 581-582.

\(^\text{13}\) Green, *Theology of Sociality*, 3. Despite being at odds with Green when it comes to interpreting Bonhoeffer, Metaxas would agree (pressing it further to say that Bonhoeffer was, at that time, “born again”). Metaxas, *Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, 123-124.

\(^\text{14}\) L. Gregory Jones, “The Cost of Forgiveness: Grace, Christian Community and the Politics of Worldly Discipleship,” in *Theology and the Practice of Responsibility: Essays on*
continuity in Bonhoeffer’s reflections on Christ’s mediation of social identity. As Green convincingly argues, Bonhoeffer’s “theology of discipleship” in the 1930s “necessarily presupposes the formative theology of sociality.” And a level of continuity also appears in the latter shift that may have taken place closer to Bonhoeffer’s time in prison. As Reggie Williams suggests, Bonhoeffer’s time in Harlem enabled him to live more fully into his ethically charged theological ideas of his earlier dissertations—making Bonhoeffer’s works of the 1930s enriched by both his deep theology and call to faithful action. Therefore, this chapter’s focus on works that took shape from 1931 to 1937 naturally incorporates Bonhoeffer’s concern for ethically relevant acts of discipleship that in turn presuppose his earlier insights about christologically shaped sociality—Bonhoeffer’s two most essential contributions to this dissertation’s project.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. Wayne W. Floyd and Charles Marsh (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994), 149. Jones goes on to discredit this claim by showing continuities of these works with those prior and later.

Plant suggests that although Bonhoeffer’s “writings come to us in frustratingly fragmentary forms,” we discover his theological coherence by tracking his ethical concerns. Plant, Bonhoeffer, xi. This contrasts with those who, like Barth, consider Bonhoeffer’s path to have been an “agitated intellectual pilgrimage” that never reached a worthy a destination prior to his martyrdom. Ibid., 9.

Green, Theology of Sociality, 16; 3. See also Plant, Bonhoeffer, 57.

Joel Lawrence, Bonhoeffer: A Guide for the Perplexed (New York: T & T Clark, 2010); Marsh, “Bonhoeffer,” 48; Green, Theology of Sociality, 4, 16. Note, however, that Green also argues that Bonhoeffer had an unresolved tension concerning power, authority, and weakness (whether purely human or Christ’s) that goes unresolved until his imprisonment (4).

Reggie L. Williams, Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2014).
Floyd, too, finds continuity in Bonhoeffer’s thought-world, at least when it comes to Bonhoeffer’s key themes that drive this chapter’s argument, even if we must also recognize a healthy dose of open-endedness to all of Bonhoeffer’s work. When we read Bonhoeffer’s prison letters “for our own work in theology and spirituality, we must hear...not only the polyphony of all the Bonhoefferian themes that came before, but the fragmentariness of the ‘not yet’ that is open to a future yet unrealized.” Bonhoeffer himself had such an approach to theology from the very beginning of his theological career, as seen in his conclusion to one of his two dissertations:

This is the new creation of the new human being of the future, which here is an event already occurring in faith, and there perfected for view. It is the new creation of those who no longer look back upon themselves, but only away from themselves to God’s revelation, to Christ. It is the new creation of those born out of the world’s confines into the wideness of heaven, becoming what they were or never were, a creature of God, a child.

If anything, the current state of Bonhoeffer scholarship serves as a warning against reckless appropriations of Bonhoeffer’s work. By focusing on select themes in Bonhoeffer’s work, one could worry that this chapter will fall into the trap of repeating the selective cherry-picking that has characterized so much of the secondary literature on such a striking historical figure. However, the themes that compose the core of this chapter...

---


21 See Green, Theology of Sociality, 8-9.
chapter’s argument arise naturally from the overall flow of Bonhoeffer’s lifelong contribution to theology and Christian life today. And with Bonhoeffer’s invitation to open-endedness, he propels us into the next chapter, where Jennings will bring Bonhoeffer into our present.

With this painful yet necessary throat-clearing out of the way, let us now turn to Bonhoeffer’s contribution to the line of christological anthropology that Part 1 is weaving. Bonhoeffer’s primary contribution to this line consists of a complex spatial metaphor that relays a christocentric understanding of social identity and its idolatrous perversion. In this respect, Bonhoeffer paves the way for a robust account of social identity based on Christ’s mediation. We need only take one small step beyond Bonhoeffer (in the next chapter) to discover the specific idolatry of the current racial imagination.

To make this argument, Chapter 2 will work through three Bonhoeffer works that, when taken together, reveal a spatial metaphor of Christ-mediated sociality: *Creation and Fall*, his Christology lectures, and *Life Together*. Then it will consider Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on two other relevant topics: the church and racial identity. Lastly, it will summarize Bonhoeffer’s contribution and evaluate it by way of clarifying the Bonhoeffer-Torrance interface.

---

22 For example, Green identifies “sociality, Christology, anthropology, and soteriology” as themes that emerge “from the texts themselves, and command attention because they are central to Bonhoeffer’s theological work and development.” Ibid., 10.
2.2 Part 1: Christ’s Mediation of Social Identity

Clifford Green observes that Bonhoeffer “regularly uses spatial metaphors for theological ideas.”\(^{23}\) One such metaphor is found in Creation and Fall, his Christology lectures, and Life Together, in which Bonhoeffer develops a spatial metaphor of social identity in Christ. It describes both holy and unholy life together using the concepts of limits, centers, and mediation. Although Bonhoeffer does not use the phrase “social identity,” his theology speaks directly to it. Recall that social identity indicates personal identity with an emphasis on the ways in which it is inherently socially formed by way of interpersonal interactions and social imaginaries. Relationships on every level are key to social identity, prompting us to consider “identity-constituting relationships.” Because Bonhoeffer always thinks of centers and limits in terms of relationships (e.g. who is our center, who is our limit, and in what way?), his reflections apply to social identity.

Even if he does not speak of “social identity,” he would have been aware of the growing academic interest in intersubjectivity.\(^{24}\) Bonhoeffer first formulated his basic


\(^{24}\) See Wayne Whitson Floyd, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” in *Act and Being*, DBWE 2: 10-11. See also Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of his Theology* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 128-129 and especially 142-143, where Marsh explains Bonhoeffer’s idea of selfhood in terms of a christological reconciling of dialogical and transcendental intersubjectivity models, resulting in something that jointly
concepts of intersubjectivity in his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*, arguing there that “God does not think of people as isolated individual beings, but in a natural state of communication with other human beings.” Only in my relatedness to others “do I discover my reality, i.e., my I-ness.” We see this in the Genesis account, in that “God created man and woman directed to one another.” Likewise, “God does not desire a history of individual human beings, but the history of the human *community,*” which is not a community “that absorbs the individual into itself, but a community of *human beings.* In God’s eyes, community and individual exist in the same moment and rest in one another.”

Bonhoeffer’s accounts of life together are not just about ethical actions toward others, but about how identity takes shape in Christ. Charles Marsh goes as far as to suggest that

The whole of Bonhoeffer’s theology can be understood as an account of the continuities of God’s identity, as well as human identities, interpreted through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ.... Bonhoeffer’s formulations, “Christ existing as community,” “Christ the center,” “Christ as reality,” and “Jesus as the one for others” are all ways of demonstrating how a christological description of human sociality affirms genuine relationship and offers a rich alternative to conceptions of self and other which are grounded in a world-constitutive subject.

---

preserves independence and interdependence by way of a christological relation (what this dissertation refers to as Christ’s mediation).


26Marsh, “Bonhoeffer,” 42.
For Bonhoeffer, Christ offers the key to genuine relationships, meaning the kind of sociality that not only fundamentally forms us but reforms us in accordance with God’s intentions. To understand Bonhoeffer’s argument, we must understand his basic description of proper identity-forming relationality, how sin affects this, and how Christ restores proper relationality through his mediation. Each of these appears to varying degrees in *Creation and Fall*.

### 2.2.1 Creation and Fall: Limits, Centers, and Sin

*Creation and Fall* reworks themes from Bonhoeffer’s earlier writings so that they anticipate later ones while also marking Bonhoeffer’s first foray into serious biblical exegesis.27 The book represents the outcome of Bonhoeffer’s lectures on Genesis 1-3 in 1933, which he delivered soon on the heels of his experience of Christian renewal in the United States.28 Following Barth’s lead, Bonhoeffer deploys a post-critical method that moves beyond the historical criticism that reigned among their peers by assuming the Bible is a text of the church with Christ as the best hermeneutical lens. Although some may legitimately challenge elements of his exegesis, we need not accept it as a

---


definitive and last word on Genesis to recognize the value of his biblically engaged theology. Bonhoeffer sought the “truth in this legend” of the beginning of creation, and, for us to benefit, he need only to show us part of this truth.

Most important for our purposes are his accounts of limits, centers, and sin. In *Creation and Fall* Bonhoeffer introduces a spatial metaphor of social identity and what happens to it during the Fall (a.k.a. the introduction of sin into creation). It also gestures toward Christ’s mediatorial role in redeemed social identity as both the limit and center of human existence. And as the next sections will show, his Christology lectures and *Life Together* take up the metaphorical language of *Creation and Fall* and carry it the rest of the way into a more complete model of Christ-mediated identity.

### 2.2.1.1 The center as limit

Bonhoeffer relies on what he calls the “picture language of the Bible,” in that he builds upon the spatial notions of centers and limits found in Genesis to devise a biblical account of human social identity. Bonhoeffer recounts the story of the Fall as a God-given story in which humanity (embodied by Adam and Eve) turns away from God and itself in an act that is fundamentally idolatrous.

---


30 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, DBWE 3: 86.
The spatial metaphor begins with God placing humanity in the garden with the two infamous trees in the middle—the center. For Bonhoeffer, the central placement of the tree of life indicates how “God, who gives life, is at the center.”\(^{31}\) By center, we should think of the source of life, around which life “revolves...constantly.” Unfallen humanity lived “from the center of life, and [was] oriented toward the center of life, without placing [its] own life at the center.”\(^{32}\)

There in the center we also find the tree of knowledge. The prohibition to eat of this tree is a gift of God in that it pronounces the creaturely limit of humanity. To be a creature of the Creator is to be contingent, dependent upon one’s source of life. This tree’s placement at the center, then, suggests to Bonhoeffer that “the human being’s limit is at the center of human existence, not on the margin.”\(^{33}\) Given that God gives life from the center, this means too that “God is at once the boundary and the center of our existence.”\(^{34}\) Adam and Eve have knowledge of this, but not the kind of knowledge that puts them at odds with God (as we see later in the story); rather, they know it as “an expression of center,” of their “creatureliness and freedom,” meaning their “freedom for God, in unbroken obedience to God.”\(^{35}\)

---

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 83.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 84.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 86, italics original.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 86, italics original.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 86-87.
The difficult image of a limit-as-center or center-as-limit will become clearer as we continue to review Bonhoeffer. For now, we can surmise that humanity’s center is not meant to be itself, but God. It is oriented not toward itself, but to God as its center and source. Because of this singular dependence and orientation of creature to Creator, that which is at humanity’s center is also its limit. By the time we have reviewed Life Together, we will also recognize this concept of center-as-limit—however challenging—as crucial for grasping Bonhoeffer’s contribution.

2.2.1.2 Freedom-for sociality

The notion of “the interrelatedness of freedom and creatureliness”\textsuperscript{36} is key to recognizing how Bonhoeffer’s spatial metaphor describes prelapsarian social identity. Humanity’s freedom is itself a limit. Humanity has freedom because God creates humanity in God’s image; and just as “God wills not to be free for God’s self but for humankind,” so too human freedom follows from this. “In the language of the Bible freedom is not something that people have for themselves but something they have for others.” That means “no one is free ‘in herself,’”\textsuperscript{37} but rather “freedom is a relation between two persons.” Being “free means ‘being-free-for-the-other’, because I am

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 86.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 62.
bound to the other. Only by being in relation with the other am I free.”38 Because freedom means boundedness, freedom constitutes boundaries.

To be a creature entails bodily limits39 and being made precisely to be relational. This means that humans are meant to be free for others, to have the gift of other persons who serve as limits that do not hold us back, but rather make it possible for us to be human at all. “The other person is the limit that God sets for me, the limit that I love and that I will not transgress because of my love. This means nothing other than that both people, while remaining two as creatures of God, become one body, that is, belong to one another in love.”40 We need each other in order to be ourselves.

We are here seeing Bonhoeffer make his first sketches of Christ-mediated social identity. The prototype offered here suggests that God serves as prelapsarian humanity’s relational center and limit, and that humans are likewise made to have other people as God-given limits in a similar fashion. In other words, one’s identity is innately social, because the most basic quality of human life is its center and limit in God, in whom and through whom others likewise constitute who we are.

38 Ibid., 62-63.
39 Ibid., 77.
40 Ibid., 99.
2.2.1.3 The false, limitless center: sicut deus, the isolated Self

If the social aspect of Bonhoeffer’s emerging metaphor remains unclear, it comes into greater focus when we consider his account of the Fall as a perversion of God-given social identity. The Fall indicates how sinful humans fail to receive identity from God and others-in-God as their limiting, identity-constituting centers, but rather seek to live out of their own selves. In the beginning, there was “Imago dei…being for God and the neighbor, in its original creatureliness and limitedness.” But there was also the sinful option: the “sicut deus—humankind like God in knowing out of its own self about good and evil, in having no limit and acting out of its own resources…being alone.”41 In Adam and Eve’s rejection of their limit, humanity’s constituents are broken “apart” so that Eve and Adam no longer see each other as their “limit given to [them] in bodily form” to be “acknowledged…in love,” but as the result of a begrudging God’s wrath. “This means that the human being no longer regards the other person with love. Instead one person sees the other in terms of their being over against each other...divided.”42 No longer do particular persons welcome others as gifts of God meant to share space with God in the center of who we are. Rather, we have rejected our true center, our true limit, in favor of a delusion—that we be like gods who live from our own selves on our own terms.

41 Ibid., 113.
42 Ibid., 123.
Here we encounter the first idol: the Self. Bonhoeffer’s description of idolatry revolves around this theme and never advances as far as this dissertation will take it. For now, however, we need Bonhoeffer’s foundational account. He suggests that we engage in idol-making because our fallen condition causes anxiety. We cry out to God in response to the fear caused by not knowing our true beginnings and ends, but we end up crying out “to a god who is but our own ego.”43 Being “sicut deus” means being a limitless non-creature, a self-creator, a false god—an idol.44 He also mentions the “hopeless” attempt “to identify our own ideal of humanity with what God actually created,” for this “fails to recognize that it is only from Christ that we can know about the original nature of humankind.”45 With this last observation, Bonhoeffer points the way forward: the idolatry of the Self does not end with the Self, but seeks an “ideal human” aside from Jesus Christ who can serve as our goal, as our telos, as a center that generates our identities.

2.2.1.4 Jesus Christ

The last quote above hints at the role of Bonhoeffer’s Christology in his account of social identity. *Creation and Fall* may not come across as a tome on Christology, but Christology is presupposed throughout. In fact, his theology and methodology are here

---

43 Ibid., 29-30.
44 See also ibid., 107; 143.
aligned. As Charles Marsh explains, “Bonhoeffer was convinced that the pre-eminence of the thinking self or subject in modernity has invidious consequences for the task of understanding Jesus Christ, community, and selfhood. Theologically, it tends to endanger revelation’s authority and priority.” Methodologically, Bonhoeffer approaches the Old Testament from the vantage of one committed to being in Christ, receiving revelation through Christ as the Word of God. This also accords with his argument that theological inquiry is sinful when it entails speculating about God from our own resources rather than primarily receiving any such knowledge from God as obedient listeners. This is why prayer is so important to him for performing the tasks of theology. (His methodology will receive in-depth review near the close of the chapter.)

Not surprisingly, Bonhoeffer believes Jesus Christ alone saves us from the false, unreal god of sicut deus. It is only through Christ that we know our sicut deus selves

46 Marsh, “Bonhoeffer,” 42.
have a problem, and only through Christ do we access what humankind is meant to be. Here Bonhoeffer anticipates Torrance when he implies that Christ is himself the ideal human who alone reveals what humans were in the very beginning and what they will or should be in the very end.49 “For us in the middle who exist through Christ and who know what it means to be human through Christ’s resurrection, the fact that God is free means nothing else than that we are free for God.”50 Being in Christ, then, opens us out of our sicut deus selves, restores true creaturely freedom to have God—or more specifically, God’s Son—as our center. Charles Marsh makes a similar point, explaining that

in Creation and Fall Bonhoeffer stresses that freedom is not a possession over which the person has control but ‘something he has for others.’ God’s being is a being-in-relation; God is one who is always on the way toward the other in communion… ‘Only in relationship with the other am I free.’ 51

God in freedom chooses to bind God’s self to us, sharing God’s freedom with us, mediated by Christ for those who live in the middle. In Christ and Christ alone we can belong fully to God and the world.

The close of Creation and Fall comes full circle by describing Christ’s work in terms of the “picture language” of the trees in Eden:

Now in the midst of the world, on the accursed ground itself, life is raised up anew. In the center of the world, from the wood of the cross, the

49 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, DBWE 3: 62. See also pp. 35-36.
50 Ibid., 63.
fountain of life springs up.... What a strange paradise is this hill of Golgotha, this cross, this blood, this broken body. What a strange tree of life, this trunk on which the very God had to suffer and die. Yet it is the very kingdom of life and of the resurrection, which by grace God grants us again. It is the gate of imperishable hope now opened, the gate of waiting and patience. The tree of life, the cross of Christ, the center of God’s world that is fallen but upheld and preserved—that is what the end of the story about paradise is for us.52

The tree of life is now the cross and body of Christ. It appears in the middle of fallen creation in order to usher in the new creation, the paradise of God’s resurrection kingdom. Following the logic of the metaphor, we can say that Christ enters into the middle to be the Mediator, to topple the idol of Self and enable holy identity-constituting relationships. Christ and not one’s self is the only real center, true limit, and good goal.

2.2.2 Christ the Center

Bonhoeffer’s 1933 Christology lectures were compiled from student notes and published as Christ the Center, Christology, and the “Lectures on Christology” in DBWE 12.53 Although one might expect these lectures to play a larger role in this chapter on Bonhoeffer’s christological anthropology, in truth they do not add much to the spatial metaphor we are here mapping out. That said, they make a few essential contributions.

52 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, DBWE 3: 146.
53 For a discussion of the different translation and compilation techniques of these publications, see DBWE 12: 299n1.
Specifically, in these lectures Bonhoeffer suggests that (1) Christ mediates us to ourselves and (2) anthropology in these terms truly is Christology. (At the end of this chapter, the lectures will also clarify Bonhoeffer’s methodological concerns and his navigation of Lutheran and Reformed Christologies.)

2.2.2.1 Christ mediates particular selves: revisiting “center” and “limit”

In the span of a few key paragraphs, when considering Christ’s “place,” Bonhoeffer revisits the tricky language of “center” and “limit.” This time, he applies them to individual, particular selves. In this example, Christ is simultaneously the limit (or boundary) of our old selves and the center of our new selves, where “old” and “new” allude to Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3. Due to our fallen existence as sicut deus selves, one is “separated, by a boundary [one] cannot cross, from the self that [one] ought to be.” Christ enters into our space, into the middle of where we are caught between the old and the new. There, Christ serves as a limit to the old self (judging its inability to fulfill itself) and the center for the new (for in him we share in his fulfillment). In this sense, Christ mediates us to our new selves even in the midst of the fallen world, which we receive by faith. “Christ is not the center that we can see is here but rather the center according to our faith. In the fallen world, however, the center is at the same
time a boundary.” Christ “is not only the end of our existence—its limit—but also the beginning of the new existence, and that means the center.”54

Bonhoeffer’s use of “limit” in this way seems to contrast with his use of “limit” in *Creation and Fall*. To speak plainly, does not *Creation and Fall* describe a *good* limit given to humans as part of *unfallen* existence? And do not these lectures suggest instead that Christ’s existence as our boundary equates a *judgment of fallen* humanity?

Thus we are tasked not only with reconciling the concepts of “center” and “limit,” but also reconciling what superficially seem to be limits of redeemed versus fallen humanity. The two tasks are the same, because the answer lies in accepting that in each case, God is meant to be our good, limit-granting center who alone makes fulfillment possible. If we take *Creation and Fall* and the Christology lectures together, we find that fulfillment requires de-centering the self and re-centering it around Christ so that our limits and centers are life-giving. On the one hand, Christ’s presence exposes and judges our sinful attempts to save ourselves as if we constitute our own centers. Despite our attempts, we cannot make ourselves God: we rail against that limit. What was meant as a gift—our creaturely limitations that make life-giving relationships with God and others possible—we now treat like a curse. Thus Christ’s presence exposes a limit to the old self and our sinful attempts to reject that same limit. Yet Christ also

---

54 Bonhoeffer, “Christology Lectures,” DBWE 12: 324. Similarly, Bonhoeffer writes, “Christ as the mediator is precisely the end of the old, fallen world and the beginning of the new world of God” (327).
restores our creatureliness into that which puts us in intimate relationship with God and others, when we re-center ourselves on Christ. Christ exposes, judges, and redeems our limits so that with Christ at our center, he sets our limits and makes it possible for others to join him as boundaries-from-the-center.

To be clear, Bonhoeffer does not condemn limits—only our attempt to be our own centers and to transcend our limits out of our own resources. With Christ entering our centers from the outside, we are opened back out of ourselves, now able to have unity in an outward-oriented fashion so that we unselfconsciously allow Christ to direct us, to set our limits and lead us into life-giving relationships. With *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer develops this concept using the language of Christ’s mediation in Christian community.

### 2.2.2.2 Christological anthropology

The second contribution that the Christology lectures make to this spatial metaphor lies in how the metaphor indicates the intrinsic relationship between Christology and theological anthropology. In terms of this dissertation, the selves-we-ought-to-be are attainable only with Christ mediating as our limiting center, and this is not just an anthropological statement, but a christological one. For it “is the nature of Christ’s person to be in the center. The One who is in the center is the same One who is

---

55 “Here a new existence breaks into our existence.” Ibid., 308.
present in the church as Word and sacrament.... Christ, as the one who is being-there *pro-me* [for me], is the mediator. That is Christ’s nature and way of existing.”\(^{56}\) This spatial metaphor suggests that an adequate anthropology must not only begin with Christology, but with the singular christological point that Christ is Christ *for me*, as the one who is always *for others*. In *Life Together*, we see how Christ’s mediation of selves also entails the mediation of all relationships, both vertical and horizontal.

### 2.2.3 *Life Together*: Mediation and Community

While *Creation and Fall* and the Christology lectures name Christ as the center and hint at what this means for social identity, *Life Together* takes up the language of the spatial metaphor and more explicitly applies it to horizontal relationships. Bonhoeffer wrote *Life Together* in 1938, and it reflects upon Christian community in light of his experiences with his ordinands at Finkenwalde, an “‘illegal’ clandestine seminary for the training of young pastors,”\(^{57}\) and especially his time with his yet more intensely communal Brothers’ House at the seminary.\(^{58}\) When placed alongside *Creation and Fall*, *Life Together* tells a story in which Christ heals the postlapsarian social arrangement by assuming the center to mediate life-giving relationships with God and

---

\(^{56}\) Ibid., DBWE 12: 324. See also Lawrence, *Perplexed*, 99-101.


others. Only in Christ do we have access to God and others—and therefore only in Christ do we have access to our true selves.

2.2.3.1 Mediation of reconciliation, particularity, and unity

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer argues that Jesus Christ alone mediates Christian communal relationships. “Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this, and none that is less than this.... We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.”59 This is because, for Bonhoeffer, Christ alone is the reconciler: he reconciles humans to God and to others, and outside of Christ reconciliation is impossible. Christ alone is the “Mediator,” making peace possible with both God and other Christians.60 Bonhoeffer believes that Christ’s mediation means that Christians find individual particularity in (and only in) Christ, and Christians find unity in (and only in) Christ.61

As an aside on language, Bonhoeffer variably uses four German words to indicate an individual or particular person: *Individuum, Person, Mensch*, and *Einzelne*, which respectively translate into individual, person, human being, and one. English editions often translate both *Individuum* and *Einzelne* as “individual,” and sometimes the other words translate thusly, as well. The term “individual,” however, has been tainted by

---

60 Ibid., 32-33.
61 Ibid., 44.
association with individualism. Bonhoeffer himself is wary of “unreal individualism” (as well as “unreal collectivism”), which he sees as the result of modern conceptions of the self as an autonomous, atomized subject and agent free from constraint and free for itself. As seen above, such a “self” is, for Bonhoeffer, nothing other than sicut deus. Torrance and Jennings share similar concerns. On the other hand, Bonhoeffer believes there exists a proper, good form of “individuality” or Individualität (as well as good collectivity), which this chapter hopes to uncover.

With the above caveat in mind, “individual particularity” names Bonhoeffer’s conviction that a Christian’s identity is not directly derived from others but from a relationship with Christ, in and through whom others help make a Christian unique. We


63 See Marsh, “Bonhoeffer,” 42. Also Ann L. Nickson, Bonhoeffer on Freedom: Courageously Grasping Reality (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 84. Nickson explains that even what is taken to be Bonhoeffer’s most “individualistic” section of his most “individualistic” text (Discipleship) actually speaks against individualism by emphasizing how the “individual” has responsibilities “in relationship and in community.” The same Mediator who “makes us individuals” also grounds “a wholly new community” in which Christ both “divides” and “unites” (97-98).

find the priority of Christ in shaping Christian identity most clearly in Bonhoeffer’s rejection of “immediacy.” Bonhoeffer writes:

I must release others from all my attempts to control, coerce, and dominate them with my love. In their freedom from me, other persons want to be loved for who they are,...as those for whom Christ won the forgiveness of sins and prepared eternal life. Because Christ has long since acted decisively for other Christians, before I could begin to act, I must allow them the freedom to be Christ’s. They should encounter me only as the persons that they already are for Christ. This is the meaning of the claim that we can encounter others only through the mediation of Christ.... Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person as seen from the perspective of Jesus Christ. It is the image Jesus Christ has formed and wants to form in all people.65

Here Bonhoeffer nuances his understanding of freedom. Although we are made for “freedom-for” sociality, we must also permit “freedom from”: specifically, freedom from sinful attempts at intimacy that would bypass Christ’s mediation between us.

Bonhoeffer privileges each Christian’s relationship with Christ, or Christ’s love of every person.

Attempts at immediacy corrode the freedom of everyone involved to be who they are meant to be in Christ. Bonhoeffer argues that seeking immediate relationships produces “enslavement, bondage, [and] rigidity,” whereas loving others according to Christ’s mediation “creates the freedom of Christians under the Word.” Each person “serves [Christ] alone” because only Christ can save, and only from this service to Christ can any legitimate service to others derive.66 This means that Christians serve others by

65 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, DBWE 5: 44.
66 Ibid., 43-44.
pointing away from themselves to their shared Mediator, Jesus Christ. By accepting that Christ is between us, as the ground that unites us, we allow each other to be Christ’s, to be for Christ, and to bear the image that Christ wants to form in us—meaning, we allow each other to be who we are meant to be in Christ.

Being a particular person does not mean total separation. Instead, particular Christians are united based on each person’s relationship with Christ. Bonhoeffer’s warning against immediacy is not a directive against unity or community, but in fact seeks to preserve it. Bonhoeffer writes:

The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more everything else between us will recede, and the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is alive between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we really do have one another.67

This is the key insight of Life Together’s model of social identity: we can only really have one another by way of Christ, who grants our full particularity and freedom from immediacy, and the necessary flip side is that we only have our true particularity when together with others in Christ. In sum, Christ creates the conditions of freedom for individual, particular persons to be (or become) who they are meant to be, which includes being held together in Christ. The benefit of community is to point one another to Christ and in so doing to promote the unique, Christ-centered identities that Christ “has formed and wants to form in all people.”68

67 Ibid., 34.
68 Ibid., 44.
2.2.3.2 Whose limit, which center?

The model so far described is no facile attempt to hold together the seemingly competing realities of independence and unity. It soars beyond a simple affirmation of these by giving a fairly specific theory of Christian social identity. One little clause in Life Together captures the whole of this model. When placed within Bonhoeffer’s spatial metaphor, we can appreciate the scope of his account of Christian existence.

Below is the clause in the original German, followed by the two main English translations of the clause’s full sentence:

*Sie wird die Grenze des Andern achten, die durch Christus zwischen uns gesetz ist.*

[Spiritual love] will respect the other as the boundary that Christ establishes between us, and it will find full community with the other in the Christ who alone binds us together.

[Spiritual love] will respect the line that has been drawn between him [the other person] and us by Christ, and it will find fellowship with him in the Christ who alone binds us together.

The main difference between the two translations appears in the first clause. In the first translation, Christ has established ‘the other Christian’ as our boundary. In the second translation, Christ has drawn a line between us and ‘the other Christian.’ Both agree

---

70 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, DBWE 5: 44.
that Christ is simultaneously the ground of unity. But the difference in the translations raises a question: who is our limit, Christ or others?

The truth is that Bonhoeffer does not use his spatial language in a rigid fashion and that both translations are true to ideas found repeatedly in Bonhoeffer’s literary corpus. In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer suggests that God serves as prelapsarian humanity’s center and limit, and that humans are likewise made to have others as God-given limits in a similar fashion. In the Christology lectures, Christ is both our personal limit and center. In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer offers ‘the other’ as our limit, and although he never uses the language of “center,” he offers Christ as our Mediator and the one who alone gives us our true image. In fact, the simplest, literal translation of the clause in question nicely captures its proper range of meaning: when a Christian approaches another in spiritual love, she “will respect the limit of the other, which is placed between us through Christ.” The limit both belongs to and consists of ‘the other,’ and Christ too is the limit and limit-giver in that the limit exists “through Christ.”

This does not mean that other Christians and Christ should be one and the same to us. Bonhoeffer’s invectives against immediacy and idolatry make that clear. Instead, Bonhoeffer is describing what happens when we live together from our common center in Christ. Christ protects us from the evils of immediacy and the attempts of others to

---

72 Special thanks to Stephanie Gehring Ladd for her translation advice.
define us in relation to their sicut deus selves, but Christ also makes it possible for us to safely inform each other’s identities at our very cores. So we are to respect that others are in one sense free from us, that their relationship with God is primary to their relationship with us, and that we all have boundaries. Yet we are also to respect that others are a part of our identity-constituting centers by virtue of our shared existence in Christ. Others are indeed meant to be central to who we are and vice versa, and we can see that when we look to Christ alone and thus see ourselves and others through the lens of what Christ has done and wants to do for us all.

2.2.4 The Spatial Metaphor Recap

As Bonhoeffer says, “it is only with reference to God that human beings know who they are,”73 but this ‘knowledge’ comes by way of Christ and others in Christ, our true limit and center. The editors of the latest German edition of *Life Together* capture much of Bonhoeffer’s spatial metaphor of Christ’s mediation in the following quote, which also nicely resonates with the driving themes of the prior chapter on Torrance. They write:

> Christ is the mediator between God and human beings, making possible the new being of the justified sinner in the Christ-humanity. Christ is thus the center and the mediator in this encounter with human beings, who live isolated from one another in their ‘being in Adam,’ caught in hopeless egocentricity. As members of the body of Christ, however, we find our loneliness overcome, even if, of course, our existence as

73 Bonhoeffer, “Christology Lectures,” DBWE 12: 305.
individuals is not. Therefore, Bonhoeffer is not driving into the opposite ditch of collectivism to escape individualism. The connecting bridge between God and humanity, as well as between one person and another, proves to be Christ as the basis of the new humanity. Yet this also means that I first encounter Christ in my brother and sister [rather than having direct access to them].

The new humanity enabled by Christ reflects the prelapsarian humanity recounted in Genesis but is best understood as our eschatological goal in which we can participate in the present (as discussed in Chapter 1). Jesus Christ—who is both fully God and the truest human—is our limit, our center, and the one who gives us our eschatological identities in relationship to one another and God. Christ simultaneously enables our true particularity and true togetherness, which in the end are one and the same thing in the ever-loving, ever-generative community created by a triune God. Christ between us, Christ within us, Christ around us, Christ before us: this is how we are meant to see ourselves and others.

The spatial model will receive in-depth attention at the end of the next chapter, in the section titled “4.2.1 Spatial Metaphor(s) Redux,” once Willie Jennings adds yet more concepts to the spatial mix: Christ as our “space” of joining and our “Holy Icon” between us. For now, however, we can summarize that Christ is both “limit” and “center” in multiple, overlapping senses. Christ is the “limit” to our old, sinful selves so that we can be re-centered around him in our new, eschatological selves. In this sense,
Christ’s presence judges our attempts to defy creaturely limitations, including our attempts at immediacy with others. We must be de-centered and re-centered, moved from sinful to redeemed existence. And Christ is a limit in that he is a boundary line between us, a protection against immediacy. In these related senses, Christ’s role as a limit reflects the presence of sin. Yet Christ also helps us embrace our limitations as God’s creatures created to commune with God. Similarly, Christ is the “center” of both individual lives and social existence as the one who resides between us as the Mediator. Lastly, others in Christ are, by way of Christ and only by way of Christ, likewise a part of our limit-forming center.

2.2.5 Anticipating the Spatial Model’s Significance for Racial Identity

As Bonhoeffer argues in Creation and Fall, Christ enters the middle to be the Mediator, to topple the idol of Self and enable healthy identity-constituting relationships. But we might suspect that a sicut deus Self is not the only idol we face and that isolated-selfhood is not the only description of how sin has corrupted our social identities. The danger of immediacy has a manifestation that Bonhoeffer himself may have never considered. What if we not only attempt to construct our identities from our individual, isolated Selves, but also receive our identities from others seeking immediacy or, worse, from an antichrist, a false mediator? Indeed, I will later name one such false mediator as the idol of whiteness. But this account will have to wait.
2.3 Part 2. Church and Race

The bulk of Bonhoeffer’s theological contribution to this dissertation lies in his spatial metaphor. That said, this chapter has yet to clarify Bonhoeffer’s accounts of (i) the church and (ii) racial identity. What role does the church play in the kind of Christ-mediated sociality that Bonhoeffer commends? Does he have anything to contribute to this dissertation’s emerging account of racial identity? Bonhoeffer’s theological account of the church places it as the eschatological and outward-oriented site of identity formation, and his account of Israel, although more limited than Torrance’s in important respects, paves the way for an account of the idolatry that sustains racial identity as we know it.

2.3.1 Community, Church, and Jesus Christ

With the discussion sparked by Life Together still fresh in mind, we can address the obvious question of how Bonhoeffer relates Christian community to the church. Is the community he describes in Life Together the church itself, a part of the church, a practice of the church, or something else? This is an essential issue for this dissertation and not only in light of Torrance’s singular focus on the church as the site of proper horizontal relationships, but more importantly in light of the persistent and practical
questions about what this all means for non-Christians and where can we find such Christ-centered communities.

Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology can be constructed by way of a progressive series of statements. First, the identity-giving community that Bonhoeffer has in mind is indeed specifically Christian, which he likes to call “Christ existing as community.” And this is what he often means by “church.” Second, Christian community is not primarily an ideal. It actually exists. Third, this does not mean that all Christian community and all forms of “church” are synonymous for Bonhoeffer. Lastly, although Bonhoeffer (like Torrance) does not clearly include non-Christians in his accounts of Christ-mediated sociality, when taken together the two theologians give some indication of a way forward that does not exclude such a large segment of the population when we imagine what it means to be human together in God’s creation.

2.3.1.1 Christian community and church community?

First, not just any community will do for Bonhoeffer. The community he envisions in *Life Together* is fundamentally Christian. “Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ.”75 Other forms of community may serve good purposes, but they are not the focus of Bonhoeffer’s singular description of Christ-mediated social identities. And the community he envisions is likewise “church”

---

in a fundamental sense. Bonhoeffer’s famous phrase, “Christ existing as community,” frequently refers more specifically to “church-community.” He characterizes his experiment with the Brothers’ House at Finkenwalde as a “new ecclesial form of community,” just one possible solution to a problem he leaves vaguely defined, perhaps because he was alluding to the disintegration of the German churches’ ability to prove faithful under Nazi pressures. However we define the exact problem, finding new forms of community was “a responsibility to be undertaken by the church as a whole.”

2.3.1.2 A real ideal?

Second, this community is not just an ideal but really exists. The community Bonhoeffer describes in *Life Together* may sound more like an ideal than a reality—one in which individuals see Christ as their Mediator and only source of unity, in which individuals point away from themselves to Christ, and in which individuals see in others the image that Christ “has formed and wants to form in all people,” recognizing “in each other the Christ who is present in the body.” Christian community is a *God-given reality*. And when someone inevitably falls short of the mark, her sin is nevertheless

---

77 Bonhoeffer’s Preface to *Life Together*, DBWE 5: 25. The German expression is “Christus als Geminde existierend.”
78 Ibid., 44.
79 Ibid., 29.
80 Ibid., 35-38. See also Plant, *Bonhoeffer*, 107.
“an occasion for me ever anew to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ.”

2.3.1.3 “Church” as institution?

Third, although a reality, Christian community or “church community” does not refer to everything someone might label “church.” Bonhoeffer very consciously rejected the Reich Church, which he disavowed as true church when an ecumenical assembly invited both the Confessing Church and Reich Church to conference. He explains to the conveners, “The issue here is not persons but churches, a matter of Christ and the Antichrist; there is no neutral ground here. The ecumenical movement would transgress against its own mission, as well as against the Confessing Church, if it sought to evade a clear decision here.” He saw the Reich Church as falling too far from Christ, absent of Christ’s love and therefore not functioning as part of the body but as part of an “Antichrist” and a “heretical” government.

Not only does Bonhoeffer challenge the Reich Church’s status as church, but he also questions the use of “church” to describe a voluntary association of members in a

---

“religious community.” Instead, “church” for Bonhoeffer is a God-given reality that is enjoined and perceived only by faith. The Christian community cannot take shape around a group that seeks piety, like a colegia pietas; rather, the church “is always already there” as constituted by the “word of God alone.” It is “the vicarious representative action of Christ and the Holy Spirit making this intelligible. We see only the works, not the persons who are in God,” and it “can only be believed…through faith in Christ” rather than by sight. The church for Bonhoeffer is not a collective of well-meaning individuals, but is “that particular bit of the world and humankind created anew out of God’s Spirit.” Thus we can posit that Bonhoeffer identifies the Reich Church’s departure from the true church only “in faith.” Or as he elsewhere puts it, “God established the reality of the church, of humanity pardoned in Jesus Christ—not religion, but revelation, not religious community, but church. This is what the reality of Jesus Christ means.” The church, then, is a spiritual or pneumatological reality, and not a human invention.

85 Ibid., 309-310.
86 Ibid., 309n288.
87 Ibid., 309.
89 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, DBWE 1: 153.
What then do we make of the Brothers’ House and all such communal experiments that look suspiciously like voluntary associations of well-meaning individuals united by a cause? Bonhoeffer is confusing on this point. For example, in his 1933 treatise, “What is the Church?”, he suggests that the church is also a human institution. There, he plainly says that “Church is an institution for preserving Christian piety and morals…. It is an institution that is not a good model of organization, not very influential, not very impressive, in need of improvement in the extreme.” And similarly, Church is a union of religiously inclined, interested people who curiously enjoy expressing their religiosity in this form of church. Today they generally belong to a social class that is neither particularly spiritually lively nor a particularly future-oriented creative force, but rather offers a certain contentment with their own achievements…. Not a lot seems to take place.90

Bonhoeffer’s critique of “church” here rings loud and clear. This is the “church” that most of his (and our) contemporaries could identify. Still, Bonhoeffer is not only critical of this use of “church,” but he tries to incorporate it into his larger understanding of church in this particular treatise.

### 2.3.1.4 Eschatological reality (or bifocal vision)

How can “church” be a concrete reality in which Christ has achieved reconciliation and also a disappointing human institution in which Christians continue to have faults? First of all, for Bonhoeffer, Christian communities such as the Brothers’

---

90 Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” DBWE 12: 263.
House are efforts of the universal church, engaging in practices such as the sacraments, preaching, and service that reflect God’s work in them rather than their own works. Here we see the union of human institutional activity with God’s activity. Second, Bonhoeffer wants to hold together two views of the one church—the human view and God’s. Or more precisely, he is thinking eschatologically.

In the opening lines of “What is Church?”, Bonhoeffer explains that “what church ‘is’ can only be said if we say both what it is from the viewpoint of human beings and what it is from the standpoint of God. Both belong inseparably together. It is in this dual nature that it exists.”91 This means it is eschatological, in that we witness the repeated emergence of the true church within Christian communities that are as of yet imperfect. Plant suggests that, for Bonhoeffer,

In the Church-community being-in-Adam is replaced by being-in-Christ. But this only means that the Church is free of sin in the eschatological sense, that is, as God’s promise and the Church’s hope. Christians sin. For this reason the ‘real’ Church should not be confused either with the visible religious community called church, or with the Kingdom of God. The ‘real’ Church is a reality of revelation visible only with the eyes of faith.92

---

92 Plant, Bonhoeffer, 66, looking at Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, DBWE 1: 141. Bonhoeffer is here drawing on 1 Cor 15:22 (“for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ,” NRSV). See also Bonhoeffer, Life Together, DBWE 5: 28-30.
And through the eyes of faith, the church is visible through its worship and work for others. Yet through the eyes of the world, it is, like Christ, a disappointing sight. “It is one and the same church, its visible form and its hidden divinity.”93

Following Bonhoeffer’s logic, the church community’s eschatological reality means that our life together and the social identities that are thereby constituted are likewise shaped by our future in Christ. For Bonhoeffer, “To-let-oneself-be-defined by means of the future is the eschatological possibility of the child,” so that we “can only live in the present.”94 (This notion of childlikeness will prove valuable later on.) This acceptance of “the future,” of God’s good will and purposes for us, means that we “participate” in the future from the present. For Bonhoeffer, “the Christian life” that lives from the future “neither destroys nor sanctions” the “penultimate” present; rather, “in Christ the reality of God encounters the reality of the world and allows us to take part in this real encounter.”95 Thus Bonhoeffer can argue that “Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”96 Or again, Christians are meant to “participate” in the “work” of God, for example, by listening to others, which in turn enables them to “speak the Word of

---

94 Bonhoeffer, Act and Being, DBWE 2: 159.
96 Bonhoeffer, Life Together, DBWE 5: 38.
As was the case with Torrance, this form of “participation” is difficult to define, but it does not mean any kind of *immediacy* in which one person or thing dominates another as its source of being or identity—a role reserved for God, or more specifically, for Christ the Mediator by the power of the Spirit.

The eschatological nature of the church means we cannot justifiably equate the church with Christ or with Christ’s relationship to the world. The church does not by itself give the rest of the world its identity but rather *is* the world—the world of the “end.” According to Charles Marsh, Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the eschatological character of church-community keeps his ideas of “Christ existing as community” and “Christ becoming present in community” from advancing an injurious principle of “identity” between Christ and his community. Or more simply, emphasizing this eschatological dimension keeps us from mistaking the body of Christ as the whole of Christ. Just as we earlier ruled out the possibility of seeing others as identical to Christ, so too we do not mistake Christian communities or even the true church for our God incarnate. In both cases, Christ’s presence in the other and in the community is fully

---

97 Ibid., 99.
99 In his Christology lectures, we hear Bonhoeffer make this move while explaining the twofold nature of the church: “Even the church, as the presence of Jesus Christ—God who became human, was humiliated, resurrected, and exalted—must receive the will of God every day anew from Christ. For the church, too, Christ becomes, every day anew, an offense to its own desires and hopes. The church must stumble every day anew over the sentence, ‘You will
real, but in such a way that the individuals of the community, and the community itself among other communities, point away from themselves to the one Mediator, Christ, the Son of God incarnate and the resurrected son of Mary.

The eschatological view required here resembles Torrance’s “eschatological reserve,” which, recall, refers to the church’s existence in the already-not-yet, in which the Spirit enables Christians to “participate” in God and God’s work. Eschatology plays a central role in this dissertation’s emerging concept of identity, making this a key site of interconnection among these two theologians. Drawing on Torrance, we concluded that our true identity is eschatological and teleological, in that we are made for union and communion with the triune God; in Christ, we can become more fully human, more fully personal, and more fully who we are meant to be by participating in him through the Spirit. Now Bonhoeffer reaffirms the eschatological aspect to identity, seeing it even on the communal level, and he likewise gives pneumatology a key (yet under-defined) role.

More so than Torrance, Bonhoeffer offers strong directives on how to navigate the already-not-yet. Like Torrance, Bonhoeffer affirms reading scripture, worshipping God, and partaking of the sacraments together in community as ways to participate in eschatological reality. Nevertheless, although only God creates the church (“that all become deserters because of me,” and it must hold on to the promise, ‘Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me’” (Bonhoeffer, “Christology Lectures,” DBWE 12: 360).

100 These emphases structure key parts of the Christology lectures and much of Life Together.
particular bit of the world and humankind created anew out of God’s Spirit”\(^{101}\)),

Bonhoeffer more fervently directs us toward concrete (re)action as those who accept broken Christian communities as gifts from God, gifts that in turn provide the site for concrete ethical action in response to the call of Christ. The need to answer that call is precisely what led him to his experiments with the Brothers’ House in the first place. We will see shortly how this connects with Bonhoeffer’s stronger missiology.

### 2.3.1.5 Non-Christians

Lastly, like Torrance, Bonhoeffer generally prefers to write about Christians in particular rather than humanity in general, and he seems to suggest that Christ only mediates relationships among Christians (and of Christians with God). For example, he argues that “Christian love is not a human possibility,” but rather “the reality of love is…present only in Christ and in his church-community.”\(^{102}\) Moreover, as Plant explains, “only in God can the barrier that exists between I and You be transcended; only in God is community truly possible.”\(^{103}\) However, Bonhoeffer has left room for non-Christians to play a role in Christian love and community. More so than Torrance, Bonhoeffer develops the foundations of a robust missiology, and one that fully respects non-Christians as potential partners and siblings. That said, both Torrance and Bonhoeffer


\(^{103}\) Plant, *Bonhoeffer*, 69.
provide ways to interpret how Christians should “see” non-Christians with an eschatological eye.

To repeat, for Bonhoeffer, when we see others, we see them according to what Christ has done and wants to do for us all. Like Christ, others are present as our limits and enter into our centers as partially constituting our social identities. In fact, Bonhoeffer goes as far as to suggest that “every human You is an image of the divine You.”104 And when Christians in community love one another, they are not simply loving God-in-others; rather, as Plant explains, “God’s spirit enables us to overcome the barrier, to love a You as You really are” as part of what Bonhoeffer calls “my intention to embrace God’s will and purposes for you...without limits,” which in turn sparks our “action-for” others.105 The ‘others’ here can be non-Christians just as much as fellow Christians, because God has a will and purpose for everyone.

Moreover, Bonhoeffer thought of collectives as “persons,” too, with implications for how Christian communities ought to ethically engage other communities.106 Clifford

104 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, DBWE 1: 54-55.
105 Plant, Bonhoeffer, 67.
106 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, DBWE 1: 77; Plant, Bonhoeffer, 65, 69. On these grounds, we can question Bonhoeffer’s consistency when he elsewhere argues that the “church” cannot criticize the morality of the “state” in its attempts to maintain order (unless it is utterly failing to maintain order), while such a task remains appropriate for “individual Christian[s].” (See Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” in Berlin, DBWE 12: 363). If individual Christians can address social entities on moral grounds, then by his logic here, so too can the church. Bonhoeffer’s justification for limiting the church on this front is his notion of “orders of preservation”—a notion that is not necessary for the thread of theological
Green surmises that, for Bonhoeffer, “Christ who is present in the church-community is the Mediator of the new humanity for all people, and the life of the church is thereby intrinsically related to all the life of the whole human race.”\(^{107}\) The intrinsic relation here could be called a *missiology*, for it indicates an ethical responsibility on the Christian-slash-church-community to act for others and to receive them as gifts of God. “The church must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community—not dominating but helping and serving.”\(^{108}\) Bonhoeffer’s concern that we turn out from our *curvatus*-bent, sicut deus selves into the freedom for identity-constituting relationships is an ethical one. Because Christ (the one-for-others) restores that prelapsarian mode of freedom-for-others-in-God in ways that shape us into who we are meant to be, we too follow that pattern and promote it in others by acting for others—regardless of who those others are. And this applies to the communal level, as well.

Here again we see the importance of an eschatological view of social identity that embraces Christ’s work on behalf of everyone. With Torrance’s help, the prior chapter concluded that our goal is Christ—or more specifically, communion with others

\(^{107}\) Green, *Theology of Sociality*, 212.

in the triune God by way of Christ’s mediation, all in the power of the Spirit. Christ died for all, Christ rose for all, and Christ calls upon all regardless of how they respond. The endgame is a community of everyone, all together in communion with the triune God as achieved through Christ’s mediation. Like Torrance, Bonhoeffer assumes an eschatological eye. When viewed from the perspective of God’s “will and purposes” for others, all ‘others’ are seen as siblings and co-heirs. For “God is the Father. Yes, God is the Father of Jesus Christ, who came to be brother to us all.”

Following the logic of this dissertation so far: we all depend on God first and foremost for our identities. And in God we each need each other in order to be who we are meant to be. As Bonhoeffer would put it, “God or the Holy Spirit joins the concrete You; only through God’s active working does the other become a You to me from whom my I arises.”

To summarize, for Bonhoeffer, Christian community does indeed refer to the church, but to a fairly narrow conception of the church as a God-given, pneumatological,

---

109 Bonhoeffer, Discipleship, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English 4 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2001), [DBWE 4:] 123. See Heb. 2:17 (“Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.” NRSV.) In Ethics, Bonhoeffer similarly implies that both the church and humanity in general have their “true form” in Jesus—it is simply that the world beyond the church “has not grasped and accepted” that form which nevertheless “belongs to it” and “which it has already received” (DBWE 6: 97-98).

110 Bonhoeffer, Sanctorum Communio, DBWE 1: 54-55.
eschatological reality in which we imperfectly but truly live into Christ. The church is not
principally any particular institution that may go by that name, but is more so “that
particular bit of the world and humankind created anew out of God’s Spirit.”
111 It is a
gift, not our creation. This church is eschatological. This church is likewise not
exclusively for Christians, in the sense that it will participate in the world as a body who
helps, serves, and proclaims Christ to all, 112 and in the sense that it is in fact the world—
the world of the end. When bolstered by Torrance, we could say that Christian
community shares in the generative pattern of the triune God—a.k.a. love. 113

Before turning to this chapter’s last substantive section, we need one last
observation on Bonhoeffer’s eschatological, missional ecclesiology. When the Christian
community views others and itself eschatologically, it is not content with what it sees.
The vision of what-ought-to-be, based on what we know of God’s good intentions for
God’s world, does not paper over what-currently-is. Bonhoeffer is not advocating
myopia to the ills of the present—which should be obvious given his frequent calls to

112 Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers, DBWE 8: 503.
113 Charles Marsh summarizes Bonhoeffer on this topic: “God’s overabounding love in
Christ is the source from which human overabounding in togetherness freely springs. To think
the world as the overflowing of God’s love, and thus, to begin with God alone, means to begin
with the ‘infinitely abundant God’ whose abundance can be understood not as possession but
only as overflowing.... God redefines or reenacts the meaning of God a se, so that aseity is in
reference to an other. In this manner, those who are in Christ are freed to live for and with the
bear our crosses in our present circumstances, and his brazen attempt to do so with his life.

Rather, Bonhoeffer demands a bifocal vision, that we walk with two eyes wide open seeing both near and far. Only then do we know how to act for others. When we do this, we privilege the “end” over the muddied “middle,” seeing that the entire world is God’s, that we are all siblings and creatures who share a destiny that deeply depends on the destiny of all. And so it is that Bonhoeffer can begin his book about “the Beginning” with an affirmation of a church that does not seem to exist when seen from our current fallen position, but is nevertheless real and visible when seen from the end because of God’s work among us. In fact, he can only legitimately begin such a book with such an explanation.

The Church of Christ witnesses to the end of all things. It lives from the end, thinks from the end, it acts from the end, it proclaims its message from the end…. The church speaks within the old world about the new world. And because it is surer of the new world than of anything else, it sees the old world only in the light of the new world.114

By embracing all others as our future siblings, we embrace God’s good will and purposes for them and our mutual “end” together. And only then do we foreshadow who we really are, at the end of the world as we know it.

114 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, DBWE 3: 21.
2.3.2 Bonhoeffer on Israel and Race

This last substantive section of Chapter 2 asks what Bonhoeffer offers this dissertation explicitly on the matters of Israel and racial identity. Of the three theologians, Willie Jennings provides the best resources for carrying the dissertation’s budding argument into racial territory, but both Torrance and Bonhoeffer provide supplies for the journey. For his part, Bonhoeffer’s engagement with Jews and African Americans leads us to conclude that racism is a symptom of the sicut deus Self and its penchant for some form of idolatry.

Bonhoeffer’s writing on Israel will not prove especially helpful, in that his theories are not as developed as those of Torrance or Jennings. Like Torrance, he maintained Jewish exceptionalism, but he did not always do so very clearly, and he lacks Torrance’s nuanced attempt to hold together the racial and more spiritual or religious dimensions of Jewish identity as seen in scripture and history. Bonhoeffer’s actions on behalf of Jews speak louder than his words, which were, to his credit, spoken at a dangerous volume in his Nazi-dominated context. Even if limited, his approach to Judaism as a whole exposes the idols of Nazism and therefore helps identify the idols of racism.
2.3.2.1 Israel

Surely Bonhoeffer had a compelling theological account of Judaism, given that his death was, in some measure, a result of solidarity with Jews in Germany. His writings raised Nazi eyebrows, his arrest followed from the trail left behind a successful operation to smuggle a dozen Jewish people into Switzerland, and his execution resulted from evidence of his share in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. But as Stephen R. Haynes has vociferously argued, Bonhoeffer’s legacy is far more complicated and far less coherent than many would like.\textsuperscript{115}

Bonhoeffer’s theological account of Israel resembles Torrance’s in many respects. According to Bonhoeffer, Israel is “chosen,” Israel “must endure the curse” in “long-drawn-out suffering” for having killed Jesus, and nevertheless “the history of suffering of this people that God loved and punished will end in the final homecoming of the people Israel to its God” by way of “Israel’s conversion to Christ.” (Note, however, that Torrance attributes Israel’s ongoing suffering to its role as a representative of all humanity and to the sin of the Gentiles who wrongly punish them for Jesus’ death.)

Bonhoeffer likewise tries to mitigate the sting of this claim about Israel’s suffering by placing the church alongside Israel in its crimes.

The church’s knowledge of the curse that weighs upon this people takes it far beyond any sort of cheap moralizing. Instead, it knows itself as the church that is unfaithful to its Lord over and over again, and that it shares

in the humiliation that it sees in this outcast people, and full of hope it views those Israelites who have already come home, who have come to faith in the one true God in Christ, and it knows it has a bond with them as brothers and sisters.116

Bonhoeffer sees suffering as a definitive aspect of the church. Just as God’s relationship with Israel includes love and punishment, so too God has “incomprehensible ways with the church,” which bears its own “guilt.”117 For this reason, Bonhoeffer’s “The Church and the Jewish Question” ends with the following quote from Luther:

There is no other rule or test for who is a member of the people of God or the church of Christ...than this: where there is a little band of those who accept the word of this Lord, teach it purely and confess it against those who persecute it, and for that reason suffer what is their due.118

In short, Bonhoeffer maintains a variant of Jewish exceptionalism (“viewing Jews as a people uniquely related to God and to Christians”119), one that still blames Jews for Jesus’ death but also partners the church with Israel’s guilt and suffering and upholds a bond of siblinghood.

Bonhoeffer’s affirmation of siblinghood extends especially to Christian Jews:

In reality, it is the duty of Christian proclamation to say: here, where Jew and German together stand under God’s Word, is church; here it will be proven whether or not the church is still church. If someone feels unable to continue in church fellowship with Christians of Jewish origin, nothing can prevent him from leaving this church fellowship. But it must be made

118 Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” DBWE 12: 370, quoting Luther on Psalm 110, v. 3.
119 Haynes, Post-Holocaust, 145.
clear to him, with ultimate seriousness, that he is turning his back on the place where the church of Christ stands.\textsuperscript{120}

Setting aside the odd contrast of “Jew” with “German,” Bonhoeffer here affirms that non-Jewish Christians must stand in solidarity with their Jewish siblings even if it means suffering.

Already Bonhoeffer has taken a slightly different line than Torrance. He outright diverges, however, when he argues that Judaism “is never a racial concept” for the church “but rather a religious one,” which is not biological but simply means “people Israel.” This clearly does not mesh with Torrance’s attempt to hold together what Torrance dubs the “ethnic” and “laic” dimensions of Israel (with which Torrance tries to hold together the concepts of Israel as an ethnic “nation” and Israel as the people of God, called by God into covenant).\textsuperscript{121} According to Bonhoeffer, one can join this people by “accepting the law” of God in legalistic fashion, like “Paul’s opponents in…Galatians.” Thus the label “Jewish Christian” does not refer to those of Jewish \textit{race} who converted to Christianity, but only to any Christian who behaves Jewishly, claiming we enter the chosen people by the \textit{law} rather than by the “call” of God “through God’s Word in Christ.”\textsuperscript{122}

If that is truly what Bonhoeffer thought, however, then it becomes harder to explain Jewish exceptionalism. If true Judaism is simply a matter of living by some form

\textsuperscript{120} Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” DBWE 12: 370.
\textsuperscript{121} Torrance, “Israel: People of God,” 3, 12.
\textsuperscript{122} Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” DBWE 12: 368.
of God's law, then why is it the Jewish race who suffers in history? His argument about Jewish Christians emerged from a very specific polemical situation, which may explain the seeming incoherence. The national German churches were strongly encouraged by the Nazi government to incorporate their Aryan clause, which would expel all racially Jewish members. Bonhoeffer's logic regarding "true" legalistic Judaism allowed him to claim that those churches who accepted such a non-Christ-based law were in fact being Jewish—a clear jab at the chin of anti-Semites.

This explanation seems even more likely in light of Bonhoeffer's argument in the 1933 draft of "The Bethel Confession." There, he contends that "God has preserved, according to the flesh, a sacred remnant of Israel, which neither becomes absorbed into any other nation...nor annihilated," and which bears the indelible mark "of the chosen people." Therefore Bonhoeffer does think there is a racial or ethnic dimension to Israel, or at least that Israel's chosenness is somehow tied to its "flesh" and indelible. Moreover, God's promises to Israel are the same promises in which Christians hope to share, and for that reason, Bonhoeffer and his fellows "object to the attempt to make the German Protestant church for Christians of the Aryan race, thus robbing it of its promise." Therefore, Bonhoeffer might not settle far from Torrance's position, even if he lacks Torrance's complex attempt to reconcile the various dimensions of "Israel."

123 Ibid.
125 Ibid., 420.
That said, Bonhoeffer typically reserves his positive appraisals for the “sacred remnant” and Christian Jews, whereas Torrance’s valuation of modern Israel is not thusly qualified.

For his context, Bonhoeffer was at times very clear about the church’s practical role in standing in solidarity with Jewish Christians especially, but also with Jews in general. Such sibling-solidarity is a requirement for all Christians, and essential to any who would be in Christ. As he puts it, “only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chant.”126 And “driving out the Jew(s) from the West must result in driving out Christ with them, for Jesus Christ was a Jew.”127

To conclude, Bonhoeffer’s theological account of Israel foreshadows Torrance’s in some respects. It also retains some problematic vestiges of classic Christian anti-Semitism (such as the belief Jews suffer a “curse” for killing Jesus),128 but in both his theology and practice he respected the special bond of Jews with Christ and the siblinghood of Jews and Christians.

---

128 “The Church and the Jewish Question,” DBWE 12: 367. Classic Christian anti-Semitism includes laying special blame for Christ’s death on Jews—and not just on certain Jewish people, but Jews as a whole—and it likewise entails the belief that Jewish suffering is therefore in some sense deserved, even a curse from God who has not only “chosen” but also “rejected” Israel. For more, see Haynes, *Post-Holocaust*, 80, 106, 145.
2.3.2.2 Race

Beyond his approach to Israel, what does Bonhoeffer offer our discussion of racial identity? Bonhoeffer’s contribution on this front will extend into the next chapter, as it informs the work of Willie Jennings. However, a foretaste is here in order. As found in Josiah Young’s reading of Bonhoeffer, Bonhoeffer helps us (1) affirm racial alterity, (2) connect racism to immediacy, and, related, (3) recognize racism as idolatrous.

2.3.2.2.1 Alterity

Young sees in Bonhoeffer an affirmation of what Young calls racial alterity or racial otherness. Drawing largely on Bonhoeffer’s dissertations, Young notes how Bonhoeffer repeatedly argues for the necessity of the “Thou” (or an “Other”) for an “I” (or “Self”) properly to exist—a theme well established by now in this chapter. For Young, Bonhoeffer’s insistence that we need others, and that Christ died for all so that all might be united in God, has clear racial overtones. 129 Hence, during his stay in the U.S. (where he spent much time with African Americans), Bonhoeffer could preach that we should “never more forget that one Christian people is the people of God, that if we

---

are in accord, no nationalism, no hate of races or classes can execute its designs.”\textsuperscript{130}

Not only does racism deny our God-intended unity in God, but it denies the very nature of the triune God. As Young declares, “Racism is born from a refusal to accept one God in a unity of persons,” precisely because it tries to destroy alterity in favor of making everyone the same.\textsuperscript{131}

\begin{bfseries}2.3.2.2.2\textsuperscript{ Immediacy\end{bfseries}

In Young’s reading of Bonhoeffer, the desire to make others into the “Same” is to seek\textsuperscript{ immediacy}. And racism, for Young, is characterized by racists seeking immediate contact with racial others in order to eradicate difference and enforce sameness. As Young explains, “Given my African-American reading of him...Bonhoeffer has much to offer those of us who are bothered incessantly by the sinful transgression of limits.”\textsuperscript{132}

Or, in more depth, he writes:

One who seeks such immediacy violates the Other in refusing to grant him or her agapic space—the Other is invaded through the coveting of the Same. Racism is just such a coveting: In the refusal to accept Jews at the communion table, \textit{al la} the Aryan clause, apostate Christians disregarded their Lord. In asking, “How is it possible for Jews to have free space at the Lord’s table?” such Christians succumbed to a religious whim; the desire to push God out of the world. This is why Bonhoeffer wrote that to know who Christ is is to know where he is.\textsuperscript{133}


\textsuperscript{131} Young, \textit{No Difference}, 18.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 136.
In Young’s reading, Christ is found in the Other, and specifically in the racial Other who, like Christ, suffers. By seeking sameness, racists refuse Christ-in-others, refuse the diversity of Christ’s body, refuse their own God-given need for others, and ultimately refuse God in favor of the Self. In short, they commit idolatry.

2.3.2.2.3 Idolatry

Young rightly surmises that Bonhoeffer gives us tools to identify the idolatry of racism, even if his diagnosis is not quite the same as this dissertation’s (which will require Jennings’s contribution). Recall that in *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer explains how being sicut deus means being a false god or idol.\(^{134}\) First, such a Self seeks immediacy rather than respecting the Other as a good, freedom-granting, identity-constituting limit. As Young would put it, racist Selves repeatedly commit “the sinful transgression of limits”\(^{135}\) all for the sake of seeking sameness.

Yet Young also picks up on the threads in Bonhoeffer that indicate we are wrestling not just with the idols of individual selves, but an idol “out there” in our shared social space. Bonhoeffer nudges us in this direction, suggesting that the attempt “to identify our own ideal of humanity with what God actually created” is “hopeless” because it “fails to recognize that it is only from Christ that we can know about the

\(^{134}\) See also Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, DBWE 3: 107; 143.

\(^{135}\) Young, *No Difference*, 12.
original nature of humankind.”\textsuperscript{136} And this in turn suggests that the idolatry of the Self does not end with the Self, but seeks an “ideal human” who can serve as our goal, as our \textit{telos}, as a center that generates our identities.

For his part, Young finds a similar clue in Bonhoeffer, when Bonhoeffer describes Hitler’s ascendancy. Bonhoeffer provocatively writes, “The leader then becomes…the leader of [one’s] own heretofore undiscovered, better self. In the election of the leader, the individual is liberated to himself. In the leader, the one who is led sees his own ideal human self.”\textsuperscript{137} This happens for individual people and collectives: “The spirit of the people—it is imagined—brings the leader out from its metaphysical depths and raises him to great heights.”\textsuperscript{138} We are seeing in this move something like the externalization of the Self’s self-centered idolatry on a grand social scale: the scale of a social imaginary. Young observes that Bonhoeffer here describes how “sameness concentrated in the person of the Leader, the \textit{Führer},”\textsuperscript{139} and how “the rise of the \textit{Führer} raised the Aryan-self to the status of a god.”\textsuperscript{140}

With the help of Jennings, this dissertation will argue that the Aryan self did not become a god with the rise of the \textit{Führer}; rather, the \textit{Führer} with his Aryanism was an

\textsuperscript{136} Bonhoeffer, \textit{Creation and Fall}, DBWE 3: 62.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 277-278.
\textsuperscript{139} Young, \textit{No Difference}, 133.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 134, emphasis mine.
instantiation of a much larger, stronger, and older antichrist: the idol of whiteness. And because this idol is rooted in a grand, evolving social imaginary, it is much harder to kill.

To summarize, Young charts out many of the first steps for this dissertation’s appropriation of Bonhoeffer’s christological anthropology as it pertains to racial identity. In Bonhoeffer’s life and work combined, Young hears an affirmation of diversity and an indictment of the idol of “sameness,” which Nazis pursued through limit-destroying immediacy. And Young anticipates this dissertation’s next move by way of his description of Bonhoeffer’s reaction to Hitler. Bonhoeffer thought Hitler rejected the “rich and manifold variety of God’s creation.” Young explains:

The distinctions within the human race are all too apparent...for one to force them into ‘the false uniformity or...pattern of an ideal or a type or a definite picture of the human character.’ ‘To be conformed with the Incarnate,’ wrote Bonhoeffer, moreover, ‘is to be a real [person].’ ‘The quest for the superman...the pursuit of the heroic, the cult of the demigod...is untrue.’ In that critique of Nazi paganism, Bonhoeffer makes it clear, once more, that sameness, uniformity, is chimera. Diversity, manifold otherness, is reality. For ‘to be conformed with the Incarnate is to have the right to be the [person] one really is.’ Within such diversity each is permitted to be him or herself, which quells pretense, hypocrisy, delusion, and, therefore, the deception whereby people cling to a metaphysical concept of humanity – ‘something other, better and more ideal than what one is.’ ‘God loves the real man. God became a real man.’

---

We hear in this quote several key themes: racism as a rejection of limits; God’s love of diversity; and the disavowal of immediacy and false demigod ideals that seek to destroy real, unique, particular humans who are to be found in Christ. These themes will prove vital components in this dissertation’s diagnosis of the current racial imagination.

Diverging from Young, this dissertation will (1) qualify the relationship between diversity and race, (2) correspondingly question whether “sameness” is the primary problem or if there’s a sinful “diversity” at play, and (3) explicitly identify the master-idol that generates historical incarnations of itself like Hitler’s Aryanism—the idol of whiteness.

In doing so, this dissertation will develop the spatial metaphor begun by Bonhoeffer. If Christ enters the middle to be the Mediator, to topple the idol of Self and enable healthy identity-constituting relationships, then Christ also competes with the social externalizations of ideal humanity. What if we wrongly receive our identities from Young’s “racists” who seek immediacy? Or worse, what if our center is not simply our sicut deus selves, but a much grander antichrist, a false mediator? An ideal for humanity not in the form of the crucified God-man who died to bring all into communion with God and each other, but an ideal human in the form of the White Man, the Imperialist, Colonist, Master, Superman, and cinematic Hero?
2.4 Summary and Evaluation

2.4.1 Summary

After a long introduction, this chapter laid out the contours of Bonhoeffer’s christological anthropology in which Christ mediates redeemed social identity. Building upon the basic insights of interpersonal identity theory, Bonhoeffer posits a christocentric, spatial model of identity. God is the true source of identity, our proper center and limit, and yet not to the exclusion of others who likewise appear as central limits. In fact, when together with us in God, others are necessarily essential to who we are and who we are meant to be. Only when we properly embrace others as our limits in God are we truly free to be ourselves.

Sin disrupts all of our life-giving, identity-constituting relationships so that rather than looking to God and others-in-God, we instead curve inward, rejecting our limit-forming center and setting ourselves up as our own ‘limitless gods.’ Christ alone makes it possible for us to escape our fallen gravity, turning us outward in order to receive our true, eschatological selves in community with others in God. Christ and not one’s self is the only real center, true limit, and good goal. Only in Christ do we have access to God and others—and therefore only in Christ do we have access to our true selves.

The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more everything else between us will recede, and the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is alive
between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through
Christ we really do have one another.142

Others truly are meant to be central to who we are and vice versa, and we can see that
when we look to Christ alone and thus see ourselves and others through the lens of
what Christ has done and wants to do for us all.

In this model, Christ stands between as a shield against attempts at immediacy
(seen most clearly in rape, slavery, or Young’s sameness). And yet precisely by standing
between, Christ is simultaneously our common center and eschatological goal, enabling
genuine life together, which in the end is the only path to genuine life, period.

After laying out Bonhoeffer’s spatial metaphor of Christ-mediated social identity,
this chapter considered two key issues: how Bonhoeffer construes the church’s role in
creating the conditions for such identity, and how Bonhoeffer addresses the question of
specifically racial identity, including his understanding of Israel. By “church,” Bonhoeffer
often meant a God-given, pneumatological, eschatological reality in which we
imperfectly but truly live into Christ. It is “that particular bit of the world and
humankind created anew out of God’s Spirit.”143 It lives from the end with a missional
orientation that tries rightly to perceive the present in light of the future. By embracing
others as siblings, we accept God’s good will and purposes for our mutual “end”
together, thereby becoming who we really are, at the end of the world as we know it.

142 Bonhoeffer, Life Together, DBWE 5: 34.
Bonhoeffer’s approach to Israel foreshadows Torrance’s, retains problematic vestiges of anti-Semitism, and yet exhibits a respect for the special bond of Jews with Christ and the siblinghood of Jews and Christians. Although Torrance’s theological account may better avoid anti-Semitism regarding Jewish sin and suffering, both theologians preserve Jewish exceptionalism and attempt some kind of genuine, God-centered solidarity between Jews and Christians. In the next chapter, Jennings will take up what has been a thin thread in these two theologians and weave something altogether new with it.

Regarding race more generally, Bonhoeffer sees in Nazism the exaltation of an Aryan idol. Young connects this to Bonhoeffer’s sense of “immediacy” as the false-god Self violating the limit (a.k.a. true alterity) of others. The racist idolization of the Aryan leader is the externalization-writ-large of selfish individuals who want to enforce sinful sameness. From Young’s analysis, we see that Bonhoeffer can help us identify racism as a rejection of God-given limits and God-given diversity in favor of a false ideal that ranks us relative to it and, in turn, to each other. These will prove vital components in this dissertation’s diagnosis of the current racial imagination. We still must get more specific, however, regarding the goodness of all versions of diversity, whether sameness is always the enemy, and the nature of the complex idol at work behind the way in which we socially construe race. If Christ enters the middle to be the Mediator, to topple the idol of Self and enable healthy identity-constituting relationships, then Christ also competes with false ideals of humanity. What if our center is now an antichrist, a
false mediator in the form of the White Man, the Imperialist, Colonist, Master, Superman, and cinematic Hero? What if such an abomination now occupies Christ’s throne?

2.4.2 Evaluation

Before we can move beyond Bonhoeffer, we must still consider those remaining issues that could complicate our appropriation of his work. These concerns are here addressed by way of reviewing Bonhoeffer’s interface with Torrance, which drums up the thorniest snags for taking Bonhoeffer down this dissertation’s path.

Having laid out Bonhoeffer’s contribution, we can now see its organic connections to Torrance’s grand trinitarian framework. The main theological conclusions we drew from Torrance bear a remarkable resemblance to what we have just heard from Bonhoeffer. First, although Bonhoeffer spent little time developing these ideas, he would agree with Torrance that Christ mediates the divine-human relationship as God the Son who is also fully human, fulfilling God’s covenant with Israel from both sides and enabling creation to enter the kind of communion that eternally exists among the persons of the Trinity. Second, even more so Bonhoeffer would full-heartedly agree with the broad strokes of Torrance’s anthropology—that we all depend upon Christ for our eschatological identities in which we both need each other and are
free “for” each other within the Body of Christ, meaning that identity is fundamentally interpersonal, social, eschatological, and secured in Christ alone.

Chapter 1 concluded with several “takeaway” points from Torrance, which we can now put in conversation with Bonhoeffer.

1. All humans are God’s children when seen from the perspective of God’s desire and intention. Bonhoeffer likewise sets up such an argument.

2. Conceiving of Christ as our singular Mediator exposes the sin of self-centeredness, a.k.a. idolatry. Bonhoeffer takes this much further than Torrance in his analysis of the sicut deus. He also identifies the idolatry of the Führer and Aryan ideal, and he gives us a spatial metaphor in which we can understand the contest between Christ and idols as mediators of identity. Torrance suggests that racism originates from the loss of our true center, and, according to Young, Bonhoeffer would agree.

3. Being “in” Christ and participating in our eschatological identities as rooted in communion with God and others does not harm our true humanity, but fulfills it. Bonhoeffer shares a concern for preserving true creaturely particularity—that our identities do not dissolve in the solvent of community but rather receive their true essence from them. (Hence his concern for preserving the integrity of the Other and affirming life-giving limits at our very cores.) In fact, Bonhoeffer provides a fantastic way of understanding this dynamic in terms of Christ’s mediation: in Christ and Christ alone can we receive who we are meant to be by way of a true union with God and therefore others-in-God, for Christ prevents the immediacy that destroys
individual particularity while concomitantly fostering the unity required for us to be our truest selves.

4. Torrance’s take on the hypostatic union, *homoousion*, and the Trinity provide resources for maintaining difference-in-unity. Bonhoeffer also attempts to preserve the delicate balance of unity and particularity, and he likewise affirms these doctrines even if he rarely focuses on them.144 Charles Marsh posits that Bonhoeffer’s “investigation of the secondary objectivity of revelation must be interpreted such that it always presupposes the primary objectivity of God’s trinitarian identity”—meaning that Bonhoeffer’s focus on God’s economic activity in the world presupposes a deeply trinitarian understanding of who God is in God’s self.145

5. Torrance’s stance towards Israel in some respects mirrors Bonhoeffer’s, and both of their positions will stand in creative tension with that of Jennings in the next chapter. Stephen Haynes implies our need for Jennings in this regard. In his final analysis of Bonhoeffer’s approach to Jews, Haynes agrees with Floyd and others that “while Christians must learn from Bonhoeffer, we cannot allow ourselves the luxury of merely emulating him.” We instead must “become more aware of the ways our theological impulses are implicated in a tradition that is fundamentally ambivalent about Jewish existence and virtually closed to Jewish self-understanding.” We “must

---

144 As in Bonhoeffer’s “Christology Lectures,” DBWE 12: 299-360.
surpass Bonhoeffer...to engage Jews and Judaism on their own terms,” even if this 
only strengthens notions of Israel as God’s chosen people. And that is exactly what 
we find in the work of Willie Jennings.

When it comes to Torrance’s weaknesses, Bonhoeffer offers a stronger 
missiology, but he likewise might not offer an adequately robust pneumatology for 
grasping identity (re)formation. L. Gregory Jones levels this critique in relation to 
Bonhoeffer’s approach to the theology and practices of forgiveness, observing that “he 
does not adequately develop a doctrine of the Holy Spirit which would show the ways in 
which those topics and practices [of forgiveness] are integrally related.” This likewise 
applies more broadly to all aspects of communal existence and the vital connections of 
its theory and practice, both of which are addressed christologically in Life Together. 
Jones believes that a stronger pneumatology would clarify the dynamics of judgment 
and grace in the church community, including the judgment of its ethical actions; it 
could foster greater coherence among Bonhoeffer’s Christology, ecclesiology, and 
ethics, and in such a way as to put these in tighter relation to a doctrine of the Trinity; 
and it could help preserve the ways in which God is over-against the church.146 Most 
importantly for this dissertation’s purposes, we must continue to wonder if the Spirit 
might be the “person” of the Trinity most intimately involved in the creation of our true

146 Jones, “Cost of Forgiveness,” 165-166.
identities as we come to participate together in Christ (and, through Christ, in the triune communion).

To be fair, both Torrance and Bonhoeffer do speak of the Spirit, often in conjunction with Christ and the church. For Bonhoeffer’s part, his focus on Christology is best understood in the light of his context, in which the person and work of Christ were under attack both within and beyond the church. Under the sway of Nazi influence and the Aryan ideal, German Christians were accepting the lie of the Aryan Jesus and his nigh-reincarnation in the figure of the Fürher. For this reason, Andreas Pangritz can legitimately posit that Bonhoeffer’s 1932 Christology lectures “can be read as a commentary on the socio-political context in Germany,” where Hitler had already ascended to Chancellor. That said, one could imagine that this context could have equally compelled Christians to recover pneumatology from the grasps of a German ideology that spoke more of zeitgeist and volksgeist, handmaids to the Aryan myth. Bonhoeffer does, however, take a step in this direction when he declares that the “Spirit is, to begin with, Word and not power, action, or feeling.... Only as Word is the Spirit power and action”—that is, there is no Spirit detached from Jesus Christ.

Although Bonhoeffer’s theology of what Marsh calls God’s “secondary objectivity of revelation” readily connects with a strong trinitarian theology, many have wondered

---

if Bonhoeffer is adequately trinitarian. For his part, Marsh reads Bonhoeffer charitably and simply suggests that his work naturally extends into more clearly trinitarian directions—something that this dissertation does retroactively by interfacing his work with Torrance’s. Related, Marsh argues,

The promise of a trinitarian articulation of selfhood lies in its capacity to illustrate a conception of life with others that originates in the identity of the subject (God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as integral persons) and yet requires the movement of and to the other in order to achieve its completed end (the perfect communion of the three). The movement of the subject from self-constitution to self-becoming in fellowship with others can then be modeled on the inner-relationality of the perichoretic mystery of the triune God—God the Father, the Son, and God the Holy Spirit being themselves persons in perfect communion with each other.¹⁴⁹

When we partner Bonhoeffer with Torrance, allowing each to supplement the other, this is precisely what we get. In fact, Bonhoeffer gives us the outline of a yet deeper model of “self-becoming in fellowship” by articulating the primacy of our union with God in Christ over our union with others (which would otherwise devolve into destructive immediacy), and yet all in a way that retains full Torrancian “intercommunion.” This also means that human relationships do not simply mirror God’s triune fellowship but rather stand in concrete relationship to it.

2.4.2.1 Theory and practice

One last major tension between Torrance and Bonhoeffer remains to be addressed: namely, their potentially divergent understandings of theory and practice. This tension takes two forms. First, Bonhoeffer levels serious criticisms against theology-proper as a discipline, criticisms which would seem to indict Torrance’s work. This would-be tension instead reveals how these two theologians form a bridge between Lutheran and Reformed Christologies. Second, as already suggested, Bonhoeffer’s own “theology” presses in more practical directions; yet this observation itself invites a critical appraisal of just how “practical” Bonhoeffer proves to be.

2.4.2.1.1 Torrance as too theological?

First, Bonhoeffer is known for criticizing the intellectual activities of theorizing in general and theology in particular. In *Creation and Fall*, he describes the story of the serpent and its questions as the story of the first theological conversation. When the serpent asks, “Did God really say...?” the most cunning creature of all has suggested to its human conversation partner that it is possible to go “behind the word of God” and provide a “human basis—a human understanding of the essential nature of God.” And if God’s word to humanity (God’s commands, revelation, etc.) contradicts “this understanding, then the human being has clearly misheard.”150 Does this process not

---

150 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, DBWE 3: 106.
fall within the common purview of theology? Bonhoeffer suggests that the serpent’s question is “a perfectly pious one,” but “with the first pious question in the world, evil appears on the scene.”151 Another translation describes it as the first “religious question.”152

More pointedly, in his Christology lectures, Bonhoeffer opposes two approaches to Christ and indicts the one that resembles much of theological inquiry. The one approach, driven by the human rationality of the exalted self, asks how questions of Christ (e.g. how can he be human and divine?). The other approach asks the question of “faith,” asking of Christ, “Who are you?”153 Asking how it is possible for Christ to exist “is the godless question, the serpent’s question,” whereas the “who question” expresses the strong distinction of the asker and Christ, accepting Christ’s otherness and the asker’s limitations.154 When we delve into the christological questions of homoousios and the hypostatic union, or ask how the immanent and economic activity of the Trinity relate, are we not simply talking about God’s nature as if God were far away, rather than simply listening to God, the supreme Subject who addresses us?

151 Ibid., 107.
152 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall; Temptation: Two Biblical Studies, trans. John C. Fletcher (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 70; 73. As the translator of this edition explains, the original German word, fromme (as in “die fromme Schalnge”), means both “pious” and “religious” (73n1).
154 Ibid., 303.
The tension here between the two theologians is real but can easily be overstated. Bonhoeffer clearly does not oppose all forms of theological inquiry, otherwise he would forfeit the vast majority of his own work. And Torrance shares Bonhoeffer’s main concerns when it comes to theological activity.

First, Bonhoeffer’s indictment of what sounds like some versions of theology is simply a critique of theology-done-in-the-wrong-spirit. Bonhoeffer admits that, by ourselves, we cannot even ask the cherished “who question,” but only the “how.” As he puts it, “one can legitimately ask who only after the self-revelation of the other to whom one puts the question has already taken place”—only within God’s revelation of God’s self. “And this in turn means that the christological question can only be asked, as a scholarly question, within the sphere of the church.”155 Bonhoeffer affirms the Chalcedonian formulations because he interprets them not as asking “how” but instead as articulating a “mystery….we can only enter in faith,”156 one that forces us to ask not “about the difference of the two natures and the unity of the person” but rather “who is this human being who is said to be God?”157

Place this within Bonhoeffer’s christological anthropology as described in this chapter, and the logic becomes clearer. When Christ is not our center, or when we are not fundamentally oriented toward Christ, then we remain curved in on our sicut deus

155 Ibid., 303.
156 Ibid., 342.
157 Ibid., 350.
selves, exalting Self over God and therefore only able to approach God as if our intellect were capable of controlling God, the object of our inquiry. But when we have the proper orientation with Christ as our center, we are opened out of ourselves into a real relationship in which God the Subject constitutes us as subjects capable of real communion.

Thus Bonhoeffer is critiquing the manner of much of our theology. Are we passing “judgment on the concrete word of God” simply “on the basis of an idea, a principle, or some prior knowledge about God”\(^\text{158}\) as if we are the true God, or are we within the true “church,” within Christ’s body and thereby in proper relationship with God and others-in-Christ? Theology in this sense is more interpersonal than intellectual.

Second, Torrance’s methodology bears the marks of similar concerns, including God’s primacy and the interpersonal, relational nature of true theology. Fundamental to all Torrance’s work is his conceptualization of the proper relationship between reality and our knowledge of reality. For Torrance, the structures of our knowing should take shape in correspondence (a.k.a. obedience) to the structures of that which we would know. As he puts it, we must “allow that objective reality to impose its own rationality upon our thinking and articulation of it.”\(^\text{159}\) This model takes on remarkable urgency when speaking of God, because God, the ultimate Subject, can alone tell us about God’s self. “Only by God is God known,” and again, “it is only in the Spirit and by his power

\(^{158}\) Ibid., 108.

that we may really know God and apprehend his Truth.”160 And just as Bonhoeffer believes theology only rightly takes place in the “church” among those turned right-side-out by Christ, so does Torrance. In fact, the following passage by Torrance sounds like it could have been written by Bonhoeffer:

True theological questioning is possible only through Jesus, because only in Jesus do we know the truth that makes us free from ourselves and reconciles us to the Father, because only in Jesus can human questions be directed to God from a ground where they are not distorted in their source from which they are not deflected past God into nothingness, and because only in Jesus...is a questioning possible which carries us beyond the limitations of our creaturely human being into God himself.161

Torrance likewise critiques theology-done-in-the-wrong-spirit, done from the wrong center. He even goes as far as to argue, “Even when we have done all our duty in thinking and speaking as accurately and exactly as we can, that is, orthodoxy, we confess that Christ alone is true and that we are in untruth.”162 Such a line could just as easily flow from Bonhoeffer’s pen.

The apparent conflict between Bonhoeffer and Torrance on the matter of theological knowledge is mostly superficial. They share similar concerns that all theological activity be done as a relational response to the self-revealing God who tells us who God is and who we are in relation to God and each other. Although Torrance is

---

161 Torrance, Theology in Reconstruction, 127.
162 Torrance, “Cheap and Costly Grace,” 298.
probably more comfortable using traditional theological terminology, their differences here do not prevent them from working in concert to weave a theological anthropology that is fully interpersonal, christological, eschatological, and capable of exposing contemporary idolatries.

This commonality between Bonhoeffer and Torrance also indicates the way in which they bridge the gap between Lutheran and Calvinist Christologies, and in turn why their divergent theological traditions do not in fact pose too great an obstacle for hitching their theologies together in this dissertation. By taking Chalcedon in the direction of the “who” question, both theologians in their own ways overcome classic debates in favor of stressing the relational, interpersonal aspects of Christ.

As already suggested, both theologians affirm Chalcedon, which is likewise affirmed by both theological traditions. However, our two theologians also interpret it in a particular direction, suggesting it serves as our signpost to ask “who” of Christ. Both theologians prioritize the interpersonal dimension. In the process of stressing the “who” question, Bonhoeffer criticizes both Lutheran and Reformed Christologies for asking “how” instead of “who,” especially in their protracted debates over the two natures of Christ and the nature of Communion.

Lutherans devised a doctrine of the genus majestaticum to explain how Christ’s humanity received divinity and therefore how Christ could do miracles and also be omnipresent—bodily—in Communion. The common Calvinist critique of the Lutheran genus majestaticum is that it insults Christ’s real humanity by implying that humanity-
as-humanity has a capacity for divinity. Bonhoeffer shares this critique even if he sees the entire theological exchange between Calvinists and Lutherans on this point as deriving principally from “how” questions. Bonhoeffer concludes that both Calvinists and Lutherans involved in this debate “fail to understand Christ’s presence as Christ’s way of being.” Christ is the one who confronts us as the “God-human person.”

Moreover, Bonhoeffer rejects the Lutheran German perversion of this doctrine that affirmed the Aryan ideal of humanity as the form of humanity closest to divinity.

Torrance likewise criticizes the Lutheran genus majestaticum with a better model of relationality in mind, all with a Torrancian twist. Torrance charges the Lutherans who devised this model with having a misguided sense of space-time, leading them to think of human nature as a receptacle that had to contain the Son’s divinity, making it difficult to imagine how God the Son could both remain the Son and also be fully human without jeopardizing that humanity. If human nature is a container, then God had to make Christ’s human container capable of housing divinity; and for the

---

163 Bonhoeffer continues: “Neither the doctrine of ubiquity nor the doctrine of ubivolipresence can express the presence of the God-human person as the exalted and humiliated Christ. They are theologically inadequate to do so. Both doctrines are necessary consequences of the ‘how’ question in Lutheran territory, that is, of the Reformed question within Lutheran theology” (Bonhoeffer, “Christology Lectures,” DBWE 12: 322).


165 Torrance, Space, Time and Incarnation (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 36-37.
Communion elements to be Christ’s body all around the world, then clearly Christ’s ascended body shares in the Son’s omnipresence. But if we think of space-time as relational and jettison the space-as-receptacles-in-time model, then we have no need for such Newtonian or Cartesian mental gymnastics. Instead, thinking relationally helps us appreciate Christ’s personal way of being, both in relation to the Father and to us here and now. Torrance is so close to Bonhoeffer on this point that he even cites Bonhoeffer’s Christology lectures to level this critique! Torrance recognizes a deep kinship between Bonhoeffer’s Christology and Barth’s, leading him to suspect that the editor of the Christology lectures had suppressed references to Barth.

In short, although both theologians attack the problem in their own ways—with Torrance stressing a relational model of space-time and Bonhoeffer stressing the “who” question—both end in a similar place well above the Calvinist-Lutheran debate with a similar stress on relationality and interpersonal encounter with Christ.

2.4.2.1.2 Bonhoeffer as more “practical”? The second manifestation of the theory-practice tension between Bonhoeffer and Torrance concerns Bonhoeffer’s more practical orientation. Following the lead of

\[\text{166 Ibid.}\]

\[\text{167 Torrance, The Scotsman, May 28, 1966, cited in Green, Bonhoeffer, 206n60. One might question whether Barth lives between Bonhoeffer’s lines or the reverse, given that they were contemporaries, but what matters for our purposes is that the two not only echo each other but that this echo reverberates into Torrance’s work.}\]
many scholars, this dissertation maintains that Bonhoeffer guides us in the direction of concrete ethical action. In theory, the two theologians hold similar positions. Torrance argues that “all of grace means all of [the human], for the fullness of grace creatively includes the fullness and completeness of our human response,” such that divine and human agency can be non-competitive. For his part, Bonhoeffer similarly contends that Christian ethical action is “action out of freedom,...the freedom of those who have nothing in themselves and everything in their God.” Both construe human ethical action as secondary to, derivative of, and taking place within God’s gracious activity for us while simultaneously affirming human agency. Yet Torrance typically ends his discussions at this point, whereas Bonhoeffer more often takes this as a starting point.

The truth of this difference between the two shines through an article written by Torrance that prominently features Bonhoeffer. Torrance’s main purpose for this article is to discredit the existentialist, death-of-God “new theologians” who misappropriate Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison. Torrance was familiar with much of Bonhoeffer’s work, here referencing *Discipleship, Christology, Ethics*, and *Letters and Papers*. With such a title as “Cheap and Costly Grace,” one might think Torrance would follow Bonhoeffer’s line of thought in *Discipleship*, in which the point is the call to follow

---


(Nachfolge), the imperative of Christ upon us to engage the world in our contexts as part and parcel of God’s free grace for us all. Yet Torrance only makes passing mention of this call twice in the article, without ever expounding upon it, and each time “ethics” crops up as a topic, Torrance immediately enters epistemological discussions.

In this article, Torrance echoes Bonhoeffer in such remarkable ways, expounding on how God’s grace frees us from “self-centredness” for a liberating Christ-centeredness, a “centre” in the one “who summons you to leave all and follow Him.” Yet most tellingly, Torrance sees justification by grace alone as so singularly important and so heinously overlooked by his contemporaries that he remains hesitant to explore what he calls the “dialectical aspect of Justification,” which Bonhoeffer “sharpened to a cutting edge” as befitting his context but which Torrance worries has gone too far among some Lutherans and others by displacing the primacy of God’s objective, utterly free gift. In short, for Torrance the objective end of justification—God’s act and decision on our behalf—always receives full pride of place over concerns for the “subjective pole,” or our response and experience of it, including our ethical (re)actions.

With Bonhoeffer, this dissertation focuses instead on that subjective pole and especially on our practical, ethically charged social arrangements; but with Torrance’s help it seeks to do so while retaining a strong anchor in God’s objective, decisive

---

171 Ibid., 300.
172 Ibid., 311.
173 Ibid., 293.
An answer comes by way of proponents of liberation theology who have found in Bonhoeffer a kindred spirit. As Geffrey Kelly puts it, “the ‘this-worldliness’ of Bonhoeffer is a forerunner of the concrete emphasis on praxis, or the promotion of a Christian life in the midst of the world, that is foundational for liberation theology’s statements about the church’s public mission.”174 Explaining how Bonhoeffer offers a theology “from below,” Kelly contends that Bonhoeffer’s theology liberates “because [it affirms] life in the face of death and demand[s] that reflection on God’s word carry over into everyday life.” Moreover, his theology interprets faith “out of the sufferings of people” and “conjoin[s] concrete action for justice with the cross of Jesus Christ.”175 Plant likewise picks up this thread in Bonhoeffer, suggesting that “Bonhoeffer’s existential solidarity with victims of Nazism furnishes his voice with a radical authenticity amongst those who struggle for liberation.”176 Even if Bonhoeffer originally came from a position of privilege, his diverse methods and “the authenticity of his existential witness...uniquely qualify Bonhoeffer as a bridge builder between his own privileged

---

175 Ibid., 103.
perspective, and that of those...who truly speak with the experience and zeal of the oppressed."  

So far it would seem that Bonhoeffer truly is a practical theologian, in the sense that his theology is innately bound to the call and need for concrete ethical action in solidarity with others and especially the oppressed. Given its emphasis on our need of others and the eschatological lens of the church, Bonhoeffer’s theology would be incomplete if severed from its practical dimension. And so in Bonhoeffer we have not only a theological model of interpersonal identity that allows us to begin to see the idolatry of race in our current social imagination, but also a necessarily intertwined imperative to act against such idolatry, all in pursuit of heeding Christ today.

Yet liberation theologians have also identified one weakness of Bonhoeffer on this front. Namely, as Gustavo Gutiérrez and others after him have noted, Bonhoeffer never engaged in the kind of social analysis that could have enabled him to see the problems of class and labor. As Clifford Green explains, “Bonhoeffer lacks an adequate methodology of social analysis” even in his late theology, which tries so hard to steer Christians into practical service of the world.

---

177 Ibid., 114.
Similarly, as Green further notes, “A second critical absence from Bonhoeffer’s theory is any discussion of colonialism.” This absence is indeed unfortunate, even if entirely forgivable. Today, however, we cannot ask about social identity and its idolatries without factoring in the deep, global, and ongoing effects of colonialism (which represents the larger historical machine of imperialism, transatlantic slavery, and the related massive changes that defined the modern era). Green continues:

Bonhoeffer completely ignores colonialism as a characteristic of the modern age. Nor does Gutiérrez’s critique of Bonhoeffer raise this issue, which is the external counterpart to the internal issue of class and labor. Just as the upper classes benefited from the labor of the working class in Britain, Europe and North America (here, from slaves also, as well as from the land of the indigenous population), so colonizing nations benefited from their exploitation of colonies. To what extent did the wealth and other resources derived from colonies contribute to the process...Bonhoeffer called coming-of-age? Bonhoeffer did not address this issue. It is not one that can be ignored in the post-colonial age.180

No, we cannot ignore these realities, and this dissertation aims to bring them into the purifying light of a gospel that bids us to bear our crosses in our current contexts, to die in order to live, to love in order to become ourselves. We have to consider those whom Gutiérrez labels “nonhuman,” or the “human being who is not recognized as such by the prevailing social order.” These nonhumans “call into question...our economic, social, political and cultural world,” making our task one of proclaiming God “Father in a world that is not human...telling nonhumans that they are...

180 Clifford J. Green, “Bonhoeffer, Modernity and Liberation Theology,” Ibid., 126.
Bonhoeffer might not have offered an adequate social analysis of the colonialism that spawned the master idol that now deforms us as our false mediator, but Jennings will take the torch from Bonhoeffer to guide us toward just such a revelation.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter laid out Bonhoeffer’s spatial metaphor for his christological anthropology that places Christ as the one true mediator of social identity so that we can each receive who we are from God, and in turn from within that space receive who we are from each other. Christ stands between us as a barrier against sinful trespassing and yet precisely by standing between, Christ is likewise our common bond, our limit-generating center and eschatological goal who enables genuine life together, which in the end is the only path to genuine life, period. As the true center, Christ topples the idols that would otherwise dictate who we are. In the space of Christ’s church, we live from this end, embracing others as siblings and accepting God’s good will and purposes for our mutual “end” together, thereby becoming who we are meant to be.

---

Bonhoeffer also helps us identify racism as a rejection of God-given limits and God-given diversity in favor of a false ideal that ranks us. He even gestures at the idolatrous nature of the Aryan ideal and the projection of sicut deus egoism into the social sphere. We still must get more specific, however, in our appraisals of diversity, sameness, and the nature of the socially constituted idol that sustains our racial imagination.

Although Bonhoeffer adequately intersects with Torrance, gaining from Torrance’s secure trinitarian framework and contributing a more practical account of relationality and ethical action, he also replicates some of Torrance’s weaknesses, such as the absence of a strong pneumatological presence in his anthropology. Perhaps even more so than Torrance, Bonhoeffer’s theological account of Judaism is wanting, even if the witness of his life speaks louder than words ever can. For his part, Willie Jennings improves upon Bonhoeffer regarding the place of the created world and Israel in theological anthropology, and he will likewise provide a historical account of the racial imagination that, in conjunction with the anthropology woven thus far, enables us to identify the idol of whiteness.

Although this dissertation’s chapter dedicated to Bonhoeffer here draws to a close, he will reappear in the next as a primary interlocutor with Jennings. For now, we can succinctly capture much of his contribution in a short “christological credo after Auschwitz,” written by Bonhoeffer’s close friend Eberhard Bethge:
I believe in Christ, who brings us closer to God and to life, who directs our thoughts and our hearts against false gods, while, at the same time, directing our thoughts and hearts toward the victims of those false gods.  

By the end of the next chapter, we will be able to give this quote a slight yet meaningful expansion. Christ, our mediator, draws us out of idolatry and into life-giving communion with God and others in God. Christ, our eschatological goal and *Holy Icon* for human being, turns us away from the idol of whiteness so that we may reject its violence perpetrated against all but especially against those of us in our family furthest from its false ideal. In short, Christ turns us away from whiteness so that we might kill it and truly live.

---

Chapter 3: Willie Jennings

Willie Jennings guides this dissertation beyond Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s world into our contemporary context in which we enjoy the fruits of postcolonial and decolonial studies. If Clifford Green and Gustavo Gutiérrez are right that Bonhoeffer lacked an adequate social analysis, especially of colonialism and its propagation of race-as-we-know-it, then Jennings comes to Bonhoeffer’s rescue. Jennings does so not only by accounting for the ascent of the racial imagination in colonialism but by using Bonhoefferan (and Torrancian) theological constructs to expose the theological underpinnings of race. Jennings thereby enables us to confront the idol of whiteness with Christ, who Jennings describes as our space of identity-forming community and our Holy Icon.

Although Jennings does not regularly use the language of Christ’s mediation, his reliance on Bonhoeffer and his descriptions of whiteness’ modus operandi both reveal that he addresses the contest between the false and the true mediators of social identity. His contribution to the dissertation brings us to the final conclusion that when Christ is seen between us as our Holy Icon, we are living together into our true identities in God (or, as Jennings might put it, in the space of Christ). In the process, Jennings also provides a wider vision of the created world, the place of Israel, and our eschatological
siblingship with diverse peoples, and he sketches a few contours for appraising
diversity and particularity.

This chapter will make two passes through Jennings’s contribution, providing
complementary angles that together yield a better view of the whole. Part 1 sketches
Jennings’s social (and historico-political) analysis of the rise of whiteness in the colonial
era. This analysis is, at the same time, necessarily theological, but its theological aspects
will come into sharper focus in Part 2. Although the theological analysis in Part 2 is
correspondingly social (and historico-political), it allows us to consider the argument in
depth and in concert with Torrance and Bonhoeffer. In other words, Part 1 introduces
the social analysis of colonialism that Bonhoeffer lacks, while Part 2 shows how this
analysis is theologically driven and in harmony with the voices of Torrance and
Bonhoeffer. If Part 1 is the initial sketch, then Part 2 finishes the painting. The chapter
will then summarize and evaluate Jennings’s contribution before we draw this
dissertation’s Part 1 to a close in Chapter 4.

3.1 Part 1: Social(-theological) Analysis

In “Overcoming Racial Faith,” Jennings summarizes his key arguments about the
racial imagination and how it grew within a distorted Christian imagination. This article
appears in an issue of DIVINITY Magazine that served as a reaction to the profound
racial animus in the United States, where outrage has continued to erupt over the
relationship between the police and black communities and especially the disturbing
deaths of young black men killed by white police officers. As Jennings puts it, “racial
animus is a constituting reality of our social body.”¹ What might be more surprising,
however, is his argument that “race has a Christian architecture, and Christianity in the
West has a racial architecture...built inside Christian life and practice in the West.”² Yet
this is precisely what Jennings depicts in depth in The Christian Imagination: Theology
and the Origins of Race. Jennings calls Western Christianity a “racial faith,” and it has
four interrelated components.

This section will outline these four components from an angle that is historical,
social, and political. Part 2 will revisit these themes but in a reconfigured order that
highlights their place within Jennings’s theology.

3.1.1 Component 1: Gentile Forgetfulness

Like T. F. Torrance before him, Jennings believes that Christianity made a
fundamental misstep soon out of the gates. This misstep sent Christians and Jews in
diverging directions, with horrific ramifications that have reverberated throughout
history. Or, to use a different metaphor, “Christian faith grew from spoiled soil” so that
Christian readings of scripture and Christian self-understandings were “distorted almost

¹ Willie James Jennings, “Overcoming Racial Faith,” DIVINITY 14, no. 2 (2015): 5,
emphasis original.
² Ibid., 5.
from the beginning.” ⁴ We have records of early church activity in Acts, in which we witness the inability of Peter and other disciples to “enter fully the trajectory...of faith in Jesus,” which left them with an impoverished understanding of the relationship between Jew and Gentile. These early disciples “could at best only imagine parallel theological universes in which the Gentiles imitated Israel’s contra mundi posture as the fundamental signature of their newfound faith in the God of Israel through Jesus Christ.” ⁴ Not only is the church as a Gentile people contra mundi, but its deep instinct to form disciples of all nations leads to the development of a Christian segregationalist mentality in which there can be multiple theoretically equal (yet functionally unequal) Christianities among distinct peoples. ⁵ Because Christians failed to relate to Jews rightly as Gentiles, we are left with countless divided branches. ⁶

Yet “Gentile forgetfulness” has done more damage than fostering division through the centuries. It has also fueled imperialism’s mindset that dismisses Jews as a mere ethnic group rather than the chosen people of God. According to Jennings, “the election of Israel never significantly entered into the social imagination of the church”

---

³ Ibid., 6.
⁵ Ibid., 271.
⁶ Recall from Chapter 1 that Torrance believes “the deepest split in the One People of God is that between Jews and Christians” in the first century, which devastated the Christian Church, “for once the Christian Church was broken off like branches from its true centre in the trunk of Israel, it began to fragment...like branches separated from one another by being separated from their common source.” Torrance, “Israel: People of God,” 13.
and “has not done any real theological work for Christian existence.”7 Early Christians were naturally aware of Israel’s election, but this idea “quickly destabilized inside Christian thought.” Knowing that election was based not on merit but on God’s gracious initiative, they came to the convenient conclusion that election was “detachable from Israel and thereby attachable to other peoples”8—namely, attachable to Gentile Christians. Then, “With the colonial moment, the idea of election entered the currencies of the new transatlantic economic order with its burgeoning nationalist operations energized within vernacular biblical translation.” In simpler words, “divine election bound to the church trickled down to its various nation-state subjects, so that their prosperity and unchallenged power yielded an irrefutable conclusion: we are chosen by God.”9 Not only did this Gentile theft of elect status empower Western Christendom to justify its colonial-imperial exploits, but it enabled them to think of Israel as “merely an ethnic group.”10

In short, we Christians of Gentile origins forgot “that we were Gentiles, the real heathens. A Christian world was turned upside down and remade in our image.”11 In colonialism, Christians could “look at the world as though we were at the center of it

---

8 Ibid., 254.
9 Ibid., 254.
10 Ibid., 254.
and not at the margins with a Jew named Jesus.” Election came to signify something very different—something that fed the engines of colonial-imperial conquest and the reduction of Jews to a race among races. And as the next two subsections indicate, the modern idea of “races” itself took shape in the cauldron of colonialism, the noxious result of the supersessionism of Gentile forgetfulness combined with the loss identities shaped by land.

3.1.2 Component 2: Colonialism and Land

The colonial era meant a new world. Not only did “new” lands come into the imaginations of Europeans for the first time, but those lands and their peoples were suddenly at the mercy of new, voracious visitors who were both able and willing to reshape existence. In part due to technological advances and increased mobility, Christians embraced the “notion of being simply bodies floating through space,” detachable from land that could now be conceived of as private property (and private property even on new continents). Thus, in colonialism, we see “the destruction of place and space in the minds and hearts of Christians.” As they spread across the globe, “Europeans taught the peoples of the new world that they carry their identities

---

12 Ibid., 6.
13 Note that the term “supersessionism” refers here to what Jennings describes as “Gentile forgetfulness”; this form of supersessionism entails the Gentile Christian rejection of Israel’s election and the simultaneous claiming of that same election for themselves. For more on supersessionism, see Chapter 1’s footnote 31 and this chapter’s footnote 100.
completely on their body, detached from any specific land or animals or agriculture or place,” leading ultimately to a “world-altering reconfiguration of the relationship between land and identity.” Instead of having identities informed by land and animals, identities were superficially determined.14

“The land no longer spoke of who we are and who we should or could be,” and ever since we have accepted the “horrible calculus” of “weighing human life against private property and commerce.”15 European Gentile Christians believed they could quickly surmise the identity (and worth) of someone based on appearance and presumed biology, and they realized this ‘knowledge’ around the world. In this way, we witness the invention of a value-laden “race” carried on the skin of every people and person.

3.1.3 Component 3: Rise of Whiteness

There is more to the invention of race-as-we-know-it than Gentile forgetfulness and the loss of land, even if these serve as its two most essential pillars. Race-as-we-know-it has a very specific form, texture, and pattern to it that can be summed up using the language of “whiteness.”16 In the colonial period, race took on an aesthetic

---

15 Ibid., 8.
16 The term “whiteness” has been used in variable ways, but this dissertation’s use of the term will follow the general contours of Jennings’s account, which here follows and reappears again in Part 2 of the chapter. Note, too, that the 1990s and early 2000s witnessed 197
dimension. The White Man’s Burden encapsulated an entire optic for valuing humans in relation to one another, with a scale that, although evolving, always placed an imagined perfect white at the top and always rested upon black at the bottom—like a shadow that marks the line between existence and nonexistence, reality and unreality, life and death.

Yet whiteness is not just what we imagine at the top, but it is rather the entire operation that sustains this imaginary scale—an imaginary so powerful that it has in many ways become real. In a peculiar perversion of theological truths, whiteness emerged as “the ground for the uni-versal,” meaning that “the one” is able to “represent the many as well as to present reality on behalf of the many.” In short, “White bodies were established as normative humanity.”17 Whiteness is not “a


Criticisms of whiteness studies from within the academy are sometimes legitimate—for example, some scholars are understandably frustrated that the term is so hard to define and that it so readily implies the hatred of white people. The most valuable criticisms from historians like Eric Arsenen and Peter Kolchn do not apply to Jennings’s or this dissertation’s use or articulation of the theory. For example, this dissertation eschews the psychoanalytic analysis that Arsenen finds so objectionable (which, by the way, is also popular in other sectors like critical film theory); it does not assume that all white people have the same experience; and it very clearly does not assume whiteness and racism are intrinsically American. See Kolchin,
particular people, not a particular gender, not a particular nation, but an invitation, a becoming, a transformation, an accomplishment. Whiteness was and is a way of being in the world and a way of seeing the world at the same time."\(^{18}\) It facilitates our belonging to humanity, to the “central...reality...that makes sense of, interprets, organizes, and narrates the world.” It “instructs” most people across the globe “to approximate fabricated white images of humanity and urges us to participate in the process of self-invention through consumption.”\(^{19}\) In other words, “whiteness became the facilitating reality, as that form of identity inside of which all other identities could be imagined.”\(^{20}\)

Not only did a kind of supersessionism help fund the imagination of whiteness, but whiteness in turn makes it harder for Jews and Christians to find true communion with each other. With the “advent of whiteness,” Jews and Christians have been caught up in whiteness’s “deeply embedded social performances in the pedagogical, economic, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America,” and Eric Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60, no. 3 (Fall 2001).


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{20}\) Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 275. If this concept is difficult for some readers, I invite them to consider their own experiences of popular media—whether film, television, or literature—and how often these stories and their visualizations invite them to imagine life through a white male protagonist. Although the overwhelming dominance of white males as protagonists is simply one instantiation of how whiteness operates, merely reflecting on how we are invited to relate to these protagonists (whether we accept them as blank templates on which all others can imagine themselves, or if we think we have to be one of his sidekicks) reveals much about whiteness among us. For more, see Chapters 5 and 6, especially section “5.3.1 Center and Periphery: With Whom do we Identify?”.
and cultural relations of the Western world.”

These performances and relations reflect how we have commodified ourselves and land, detached ourselves from land and each other, and made identity fundamentally racial and superficial.

Overcoming the divide between Jews and Christians requires that we reconsider “the formation of racialized bodies” and “tear open racial identity so as to reveal the original relation—exposing it afresh to our social imagination.” According to Jennings, Jewish and black bodies help us see the fault lines of race-as-we-know-it, ultimately pointing us back to the original relations between God, Jews, and Gentiles. However, such reflection has been stilted by an inadequate appreciation of the body of Jesus. Instead, “the body of another has remained at the center of our relational imagination, the body of a powerful, white, Western man, the image of self-sufficiency, social power, and self-determination.”

3.1.4 Component 4: Pedagogical Imperialism

The three components discussed so far give a good account of how the modern racial imagination emerged especially in the colonial moment as a consequence of a prior supersessionist mentality combined with the unique, interrelated characteristics of colonialism (such as mobility, consumerism, and the reduction of land to private

---

21 Ibid., 275.
22 Ibid., 275.
23 Ibid., 286.
property). Yet Jennings also draws out a fourth component to what he calls racial faith: pedagogical imperialism.

Jennings has reflected on the nature of pedagogy—especially theological pedagogy—in many capacities. In his theological writing, he suggests that the current racial-and-Christian imagination emerged from (and still retains) a hierarchical, top-down model of education and formation. In colonialism, “European Christians saw themselves as the bearers of the true faith and therefore as destined by God to be the teachers of the world.”24 Since then, Christians have “preferred to impose theological knowledge, denigrate indigenous knowledge, and present a God who knows everything and wants to learn nothing.” This “pedagogical imperialism made West always teacher, rest always learner.” It therefore introduced “a form of modern Christianity that is not open to learning, changing, adapting, and becoming new but that assimilates peoples and/or segregates peoples into their own separate versions of Christianity. This way of thinking is a hallmark of racial faith.”25

These four components of “racial faith” are likewise components of the current racial imagination that influences so many in our world today. If Jennings is right, then a dominant imaginary that has spread around the world from the West (from Christendom and its remnants) has a Christian background entailing Gentile

25 Ibid., 9.
forgetfulness and supersessionism, as seen above, and deep theological underpinnings, as discussed next. In the colonial-imperial era, Gentile forgetfulness gained steam in conjunction with the loss of land-based identities, together contributing to the rise of “whiteness” as a way of re-imagining the social, human world in particular and the entire world in general. Aesthetically ranked, skin-deep identity placed Western Christian men at the top and the dark heathen of the world at the bottom of this new world order. The White Man’s Burden reflects how these men and these peoples proclaimed themselves the teachers of the world. We have been inhabiting this racially charged social imaginary ever since.

3.2 Part 2: Theological(-social) Analysis

Although much of Part 1’s argument can stand without its theological basis, at its heart Jennings’s account of race-as-we-know-it is thoroughly theological. Following Bonhoeffer, Jennings contends that humans are meant for deeply interpersonal lives together with each other, God, and creation, but that sin fundamentally disrupts our ability for such healthy, holy relationships. In both the early supersessionism of the church and later in the colonial moment, Christianity distanced itself from its “deepest instincts”26 for intimacy. Intimacy should be a natural tendency for Christians, because

it is “the central trajectory of the incarnate life of the Son of God, who took on the life of the creature, a life of joining, belonging, connection, and intimacy.” And yet here we are, bearing the painful distance between Gentiles and Israelites, between superficial “races” of fictitious origins, between humans and the rest of creation, and between us and God. Our only hope is the same as it has always been: Jesus the Christ of Israel and Holy Icon of God.

An example of distorted Christian desire for intimacy appears in Jennings’s story of John Williams Colenso, an Anglican bishop sent to South Africa in 1854, where he translated the scriptures into the Zulu language. Although translation requires great familiarity with the receiving culture, Colenso lacked the “depth of intimacy” required for “grasping the inner logics of both worlds.” He had not been trained to desire intimacy with the Zulu people, and “Colenso’s theology in effect retreated from intimacy and advanced toward a kind of didactic use of the native.” Rather than engaging the Zulu people and their questions as if he had found long-lost siblings who had much to contribute to theology and faith, he used their questions to do theological reflection for English people in English ways. If it were not such a common story, we might

---

27 Ibid., 7.
28 Ibid., 119.
30 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 150.
recognize it as truly tragic. Jennings's theological account of our problem and our hope pave the way for us to feel both the tragedy and promise latent within Colenso’s story.

Because Jennings theologically frames not only the problem of the racial imagination but also our hope for a new imagination, this section will have a different structure from Part 1, which focused on the historical, sociopolitical rise of the problem. That said, the end of Part 2 will return to the question of sociopolitical action, but in the form of Jennings’s proposal for a better future rather than his analysis of the broken past. Part 2 first reviews how Jennings narrates the problem of the racial imagination in terms of sin and supersessionism, concluding that the whiteness described in Part 1 functions as an idol. Part 2 then turns to Jennings’s account of our hope in Christ, which includes returning to land and the space of Jesus, embracing a pneumatologically formed family among diverse cultures, and performing practices that reject the idol of whiteness in favor of the Icon of Jesus.

3.2.1 Our Problem

From a Christian perspective, our problem with the idol of whiteness is quite obviously the problem of sin and idolatry. Yet Jennings’s theological account of the racial imagination rests upon an account of sin and idolatry that is specifically Bonhoefferan in shape, in that it emphasizes how sin disrupts holy identity-constituting relationships and how idols facilitate this rupture. Jennings likewise takes us beyond a
simple account of our problem by showing how supersessionism funds distance between Gentiles and Jews and between “races” in general. Last but not least, Jennings advances beyond Bonhoeffer to expose the specific idolatry of whiteness, shedding light on Bonhoeffer’s own instincts against Nazi Aryanism.

### 3.2.1.1 Sin and idolatry

In “The Desire of the Church,” Jennings follows Bonhoeffer’s arguments in *Creation and Fall*, yet he also goes further into the arena of gender relations and deeper into the language of idolatry.

In Jennings’s Bonhoefferan account, God created women and men for deep, rewarding relationships with each other and God. Desire was intended for good but went awry in sin. In the story of the Fall, “Male and female no longer look at one another preparing for communion with God.... Their focus turns sight and desire against humanity,” revealing for Jennings (more so than for Bonhoeffer) that there is a gendered social structure to sin. Fallen men and women do not truly see each other but only see others as “bodies for use,” so that desire is distorted from desire “for” the other to a desire that looks past or through the other “to achieve self-gratification” (or Bonhoeffer’s “self-knowledge”), “and in so doing to constitute an isolated self.” In this way, our sin fragments us from each other, ourselves, and God.

---

31 Jennings, “The Desire of the Church,” 239.
32 Ibid., 41-42.
Although desire’s “goodness was intended for communal interpretation and expression,” desire gets distorted like light refracted through a medium. Our gaze that is meant to truly see and want others and God instead gets filtered through an idol that has come between us. In the Garden, this idol was the tree of good and evil, but Jennings identifies another idol: the image of the Beautiful Woman, a false ideal that comes between women and men and distorts how we see and desire each other. Drawing from Naomi Wolf, Jennings names this idol “the beauty myth,” which, in Wolf’s words, “keeps a gap of fantasy between men and women,” a gap “made with mirrors.” Although we actually need each other in Christ to know ourselves, our idolatry constantly undermines our capacity for holy intimacy. We continue to make images (and imaginaries) that facilitate our desire in harmful ways. Our idols turn our desire back toward us, directing desire inwards toward the creature. The key point here is

33 Ibid., 42.
34 Ibid., 242-245. Jennings bases this on Naomi Wolf’s “Beauty Myth.” In this article, Wolf argues that the massive onslaught of pornographic images that undermine women’s full sexual liberation arose in part as consumer culture’s backlash against the possibility of men and women entering satisfying, long term unions, which would kill our consumer desire that otherwise seeks to fill the void. She writes, “consumer culture depends on maintaining a broken line of communication between the sexes and promoting matching sexual insecurities.” These images “that flatten sex into ‘beauty,’ and flatten the beauty into something inhuman, or subject her to eroticized torment, are politically and socioeconomically welcome, subverting female sexual pride and ensuring that men and women are unlikely to form common cause against the social order that feeds on their mutual antagonism, their separate versions of loneliness.” Naomi Wolf, “The Beauty Myth,” in Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology, ed. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1992), 420.
that our idol-making takes place within and perpetuates our distorted nexus of relationships between women, men, and God.

### 3.2.1.2 Supersessionism

Supersessionism reflects how Gentiles failed to truly desire Jewish siblings from the very start. Yet Gentile forgetfulness is not just sinful because of this distorted or failed desire. It also entails a rejection of Israel and the one people-level distinction that Jennings affirms as an integral part of God’s plan.

First of all, the “Gentile” pattern of nations warring with other nations reflects our fallen tendency to seek self-sufficiency and to desire others not for their sakes but for our own. In Bonhoeffer’s terms, this amounts to seeking immediacy or giving in to the temptations that Jesus overcame. Jennings describes the Gentile mode of existence, including its rejection of full intimacy with Israel in the early church, as giving in to such temptation. “The temptation is fundamentally one of an isolating self-sufficiency that heeds no other voice and that needs no other voice than the internal voice that speaks only what would be good and right for the survival of a people.” Israel is meant to be the means by which Gentiles receive salvation in Christ, and yet every Gentile people continues to reject Israel out of a desire to “to be self-sufficient, to feed its own, to turn its stone into bread.”

---

Second, *Israel* is and will always remain fundamental to knowing Christ and entering into the redemptive space of his body. Who exactly is Israel? Much like T. F. Torrance, Jennings conceives of Jews and Israelites as being one and the same, defining “Jewish” as “all those inside the history of Israel, who would identify themselves, theologically or ethnically, inside that history.”\(^{38}\) Jennings also appeals to Torrance to explain Jesus’ essential relationship to Israel. As Jennings argues in *The Christian Imagination*,

> With breathtaking power, biblical Israel performs humanity. The stories of biblical Israel also set the stage for God, drawing our attention through nothing less than a rupture in our knowledge. Israel’s God ruptures the way peoples imagine their collective existence, reorganizing what they know about God and how they should understand themselves in their land and in the world.\(^{39}\)

As the representative performing humanity, Israel was tempted to act like a Gentile people. As recounted in the Old Testament, as *laos*, Israel struggled to fulfill “their destiny and calling as God’s people, rather than to enter the logic of being just another people trying to establish its eternal existence, an ethnic Gentile destiny.”\(^{40}\) Like Torrance, Jennings reads the *laos* aspect of Israel as primary to its *ethos*, although Jennings may be more skeptical of the necessity of its ethnic aspect. Rather, Jennings implies that its destiny as *laos*, as God’s people, leads to the struggle to leave behind the “Gentile” form of existence it has “internalized,” which is marked by a sinful us-versus-

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 258.
them mentality. Like Torrance, too, Jennings interprets Israel as representative of humanity, the means by which God prepared humanity to know God, and necessary for knowing Jesus in particular.

As Jennings puts it, “The story of Jesus never leaves Israel.” Although Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection have a universal relevance, the way in which God has chosen to redeem the universe is nevertheless irrevocably routed through Israel. We therefore should “follow Jesus’ own trajectory toward the many in Israel and through Israel to the many in the world.” Jesus came first for Israel.

This is a reality of his story that never truly did its work in the social imagination of Christians. Israel was constantly read as a permeable reality of the gospel story, allowing us to completely read through Israel to imagine divine direct address to us, the Gentiles. However, to weaken the connection of Jesus to Israel is also to miss the actual mode of connection he draws to us. The story itself gives us the clues to our presence. We are the ones who believe the word of God to Israel.

We are the Canaanite woman, the dog beneath the table who receives the scraps that prove to be the bread of life. But, as described in Part 1, Gentile Christians reversed this election logic early on and again with great power in colonialism.

The problem of failed intimacy repeats throughout the colonial era into the present in the guise of positive diversifications and contextualizations of Christianity. Diversity and contextuality should be praised, one might argue. Really, if Josiah Young

41 Ibid., 258.
42 Ibid., 265.
43 Ibid., 261.
44 Ibid., 262.
was right about the problem of sameness, of not loving diversity as much as God loves it—if Young was right that whiteness stifles diversity by enveloping the entire world in its smothering embrace—then how can contextuality, diversity, and particularity be a bad thing? “Simply put,” says Jennings, the new instances of Christian faith that grew from colonial missional activity “were not the people of God but peoples of God.” These divisions did not come about through a respect for “cultural practices, memory, and story,” which are more legitimate (even if potentially transitory) distinctions among peoples. Instead, these Christians old and new failed to embrace “the goal for the embodiment of Christian community.”45 That is, they did not seek the kind of togetherness and intimacy we see in the example of Christ, in whom God became creature for the sake of creation so that all might enter into God’s covenant promises. Contextualizations have value, but in practice they have repeated the problems of whiteness by defying genuine fellowship, retaining the hierarchical structures of whiteness, and prioritizing context over transformation.46

3.2.1.3 The idol of whiteness

To summarize, our problem’s theological diagnosis suggests that the whiteness described in Part 1 reflects and repeats fallen relationships typified by distorted desire, relationships in which we only want or need each other selfishly. Idols facilitate desire between us in ways that perpetuate these distortions. The Gentile-Jew division displays a lack of proper desire for communion. Moreover, the Gentile forgetfulness of supersessionism amounts to a rejection of the very means by which God unites us to God’s self: Israel. The Christ of Israel embodies Israel’s destiny as a light to the nations. As Gentiles before we are Christians, we repeatedly fail to accept God’s invitation to community lodged within an invitation to join Jesus within Israel and Israel within Jesus. In the language of this dissertation, we therefore repeatedly reject God’s invitation to communally formed identities—i.e., our eschatological identities.

The above argument also suggests that, at least in Jennings’s analysis, the various “races” of today are in fact Gentile if they are not Jewish, and the Christians among these races lack the humility to recognize that the doorway to life is a backdoor, a low door, a narrow passage thoroughly painted with the blood of the lamb.

Although Jennings refers to whiteness as a “power and principality,” it does not require any theological hand-waving to recognize it as an idol. His Bonhoefferan theology and description of whiteness as a facilitating social reality together point

\[47 \text{Jennings, “Overcoming Racial Faith,” 7.}\]
directly to such a revelation. In our current context, many idols stand between us, but one is particularly strong. The one we regularly approximate and judge others by is not the true human who is also the true God. The one who regularly tells us who we are, and who we are in relation to others, is not our Creator who desires unity with us all. Although our social identities are indeed fundamentally shaped by it, it orients us toward death rather than life. By now it is no surprise that “the body of another has remained at the center of our relational imagination, the body of a powerful, white, Western man, the image of self-sufficiency, social power, and self-determination.”48 And if Jennings’s critique of contextualizations is right, then the mere celebration of diversity is not enough to overcome the idol of whiteness.

Returning to the intersection between Bonhoeffer and Jennings, we can now consider how the Aryan ideal was an iteration of whiteness in which its particular form of monstrosity corresponded to its context in modern-era Germany.49 As a manifestation of a grand master-idol, it served as a facilitating reality in which Gentile Christians in Germany frequently did not desire loving communion with Jews and other undesirables but instead sought their destruction as part of the logic of exalting themselves as closer to the ideal at the expense of those deemed furthest from it.

---

49 The Aryan ideal had natural precedent in Germanic pride of Volk and in the broad concept of the Übermensch (Superman)—which, although associated most with Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), is clearly at work in Goethe’s Faust (1808).
Bonhoeffer himself came close to this conclusion, in that he understood Nazism to be playing with a false ideal of humanity in opposition to the true humanness and particularity we have in Christ, who himself was a particular human. As he put it, “To be conformed with the Incarnate is to be a real [person]” in opposition to “the false uniformity or...pattern of an ideal or a type or a definite picture of the human character.” This meant that the German-Nazi “quest for the superman,...the pursuit of the heroic, the cult of the demigod...is untrue.” Instead, “to be conformed with the Incarnate is to have the right to be the [person] one really is.”\footnote{Bonhoeffer, \textit{Ethics}, 81.} Rather than focusing on the real, particular Christ and the particularity he fosters, the Aryan gaze instead focused on a form of whiteness, a Superman, a Hero, a Demigod who could be seen represented in their Führer. Jennings would simply add that they did not seek true, intimate \textit{communion} with these particular others but sacrificed these others and communion itself for the sake of exalting the false ideal and themselves alongside it. Although most today would explicitly reject the ideal embodied in the Führer, we nevertheless find our desires distorted by similar Supermen, Heroes, and Demigods that fundamentally stem from the master-idol of whiteness.\footnote{If this is not obvious now, it will be visibly evident in Chapter 5.}
3.2.2 Our Hope

Jennings is not content to identify our problem and leave it at that. In most of his writings, he also identifies the way ahead. Planted deep within the diseased Christian imagination live the vital seeds of redemption. From Jennings’s writings, we learn that our hope in Christ includes returning to land and the space of Jesus, embracing a pneumatologically formed family among diverse cultures, and performing practices that reject the idol of whiteness in favor of the Icon of Jesus. Although Christians are caught up in a distorted social imaginary, the church can nevertheless foster communities of enfolded identities by way of concrete practices, which participate in trinitarian and incarnational patterns.

3.2.2.1 Land and space in Jesus

Jennings frequently speaks about land, place, and space as interconnected concepts that Christians in the West have repeatedly failed to appreciate. According to Jennings, Western thought has excelled at thinking temporally, so that we have little problem with the concept of ages and the “already-not-yet,” but we struggle to have the kind of spatial imagination that would correspond to how we should live here and now in light of God’s work among us. Whether or not this assessment of Western
Christianity is true, what matters most for our purposes are the ways in which Jennings’s recommendations about land and the space of Jesus provide avenues of hope.

3.2.2.1.1 Land and space

For Jennings, “land” indicates our physical, geographical locations as well as creation, which includes plants and animals. Overcoming the idol of whiteness requires “a group of people who take space and place seriously,” including the spaces and places of the land we inhabit. Ignoring these realities and how they should shape us is fundamental to the racial logic that we wear our identities on our skin. In contrast, our physical spaces and the animals with whom we share space are “ways to delve deeper into our identity and the truth of our creatureliness.” Practically speaking, such a renewed appreciation requires “deep thinking and serious intentionality” so that we might challenge and change “spatial configurations of the way we live in cities, suburbs,” and locales defined first and foremost by real estate value. Churches need “abiding connection” with “space, people, land, the earth, and animals” so that we can participate in the life of the triune God. Echoing Torrance, this “incarnational participation” connects the triune life to our earthly life and vice versa.52

“Space” for Jennings is a concept that includes but is not limited to land and place. “Space” is more specifically a space of joining. The space of joining is a “reality

---

unrealized” that “is always ready to appear when the people of God reach down to join the land and reach out to join those around them... This joining involves first a radical remembering of the place... We must learn the history of a place.”53 This means that land and place are a part of a larger movement of reconciliation within the space of joining.

As discussed in Part 1, Jennings argues that land should be fundamental to our identities. One could worry that land-based identity gets priority over an identity formed and reformed in the space of Christ, as if there is a contest. However, just as Christ mediates our social identities by placing himself between us and serving as the space of our communion, so too Christ mediates between us and the land. In this way, Jennings takes the gestures of cosmic reconciliation and redemption found in Torrance and Bonhoeffer and follows them to their logical conclusion. Jennings writes:

Centrally, YHWH repositioned the importance of land for Israel. Through the story of Israel, God stands between them and the land, constantly showing divine sovereignty over the land as its creator.... If there is a close connection between people and land out of which come material culture and the identity created therein, then YHWH challenged the identity of Israel formed in Egypt.... [Indeed,] the story [of the Old Testament] reveals a God who stands between the land and Israel. This God enfolds the holy people in the truth that YHWH, not the land, is the giver of life; YHWH, not the land, defines their identity; YHWH imparts into their collective life the divine...word.... Divine word certainly precedes land. But word and land are bound together as the realities that constitute the stage of life for Israel.... Torah and land flow out of the divine will for Israel.54

54 Ibid., 255-256.
We can expand on this using Torrance’s theology. As the one who fulfills the covenant from both sides, Christ as God stands between Israel and the land, and Christ as Israel receives the land into himself. In Christ, we can enter in to this logic of reconciliation and receive the land as fundamental to who we are.

3.2.2.1.2 Jesus as a space

Although Christians regularly use the language of being “in Christ,” “in the body of Christ,” or “in the Spirit,” we rarely appreciate how this also indicates the “space of joining” with others and the land. For Jennings, the space of joining is Christ himself. But such a potentially abstract concept needs explanation. What does Jennings really mean by the “space of Christ”? Aside from being describable as “Christ’s body,” this space is concrete in that it has to do with physical living arrangements; this space is pneumatological in that it is formed by the Spirit; and this space is a relational practice in that it emerges from a set of relationships among real people and peoples (and primarily, between Jew and Gentile). These characteristics hang tightly together in Jennings’s writing.

“In” Christ, we are invited to enter “into the lives of peoples to build actual life together, lives enfolded and kinship networks established through the worship of and service to the God of Israel in Jesus Christ.” Such life together “would, of necessity, come into contention with the permeation of class and economic stratification inherent in the transformation of land into private property.” If we are living together and trying
to take space seriously, we will reconsider the practices of real estate and where we live. “Our imaginations must be drawn to new possibilities of living arrangements that capture our freedom in Christ and turn them toward desiring a journey of joining enabled and guided by the Spirit of God.”

The “space of Christ” is not just an unrealized (or eschatological) reality formed by Spirit-led relationships with others and the land, but it is specifically a space formed for Jew and Gentile existence. Christ, after all, is the one who opens up Israel to the nations, the *goyim*. Christ “marked an alternative path away from violence and toward peace through his own body, in which he constituted a new space of reconciliation” among Jew, Gentile, and land. And “If Jesus constitutes a new space for Jew and Gentile existence, then in that new space a common life must ensue that allows the formation of a new identity.” This space “announces a kinship network that cannot be verified but only enacted through discipleship and living together in communion with God.”

3.2.2.2 Pneumatological family with cultural enfolding

The attempt to reach out in the pattern of the incarnation has always typified Christianity in that it reflects our deep instinct for intimacy and sharing the love that God has shown us. Yet Gentile egoism and its earth-shattering permutation in colonialism has led to a world that rejects full intimacy in favor of discrete, essentialized,

55 Ibid., 287.
56 Ibid., 271-272.
racialized, land-alienated groups who stand apart and stand above or below one another in tragic power relations. Nevertheless, Jennings refuses to give up on Christianity and instead proposes that we capitalize on those positive instincts embedded in Christianity’s heart, including the instinct of joining. In the space of Jesus, we already begin to see the new family that God wants to form for all people—a family that includes and welcomes, a family that respects difference without enforcing it, and a family that “enfolds” cultural and other forms of difference to create something altogether new. Christ forms such a family between Jews and Gentiles, including all the various Gentiles of the world.

3.2.2.2.1 Jews and Gentiles

Jesus first ministered to Israel, through whom the nations would be blessed. As the fulfillment or embodiment of Israel, Jesus saves Gentiles by drawing them into the Israeliite family. Yet Jesus challenged even the family structures of Israel in order to prepare the way for drawing in the nations. “Jesus entered fully into the kinship structure [of Israel] not to destroy it but to reorder it—around himself.”57 Both Torrance and Bonhoeffer affirm that Christ came to be our true center around which the rest of life takes shape, and according to Jennings, this first happened within Israel, and with the pain of new birth. “Jesus does not intend the destruction of Israel, only its

---

57 Ibid., 263.
rebirth in him.” Rebirth means that Israel is preserved and yet entirely new, all at once.

“The kinship network in Israel would now be profoundly qualified. Jesus came first.”

And given that “the strongest bonds of relationship were qualified through commitment
to Jesus, then the entire socioeconomic and political structuring processes deeply
woven inside these bonds came into qualified view and ultimately unrelenting
challenge.”58 This challenge, qualification, and rebirth is serious for Israel: it requires
the choice to die, to submit to “social death for the sake of new life” that comes from
“the reconfiguration of patterns of belonging around Jesus himself.”59 Only in Jesus
does life come from death, and his people must follow him and flow from him as its new
source.60

Israel’s contra mundi stance was also challenged by a profound gesture of
opening, inviting, and welcoming within the space of Jesus. The communion that began
to exist between Jew and Gentile “helps us envision a relationship between living Israel
and the church built on more intimate possibilities.” Jennings here appeals to
Torrance’s account of the organic siblinghood between Jew and Gentile in Christ. The
church stands between living Israel and its witness to the world. Living
Israel stands between the church and its witness to the world as the
reality that makes the church’s witness intelligible. The organic
connection between Israel and the church is simply Jesus, the space that
joins and the space that draws.61

58 Ibid., 263-64.
59 Ibid., 263.
60 Ibid., 264.
61 Ibid., 274.
Like Torrance, Jennings believes that the Christian church and Israel both witness to the one true God. Like Torrance, he believes that Christian community should resound with Israel as a familiar tune that has been embodied by the many Gentiles drawn to the house of David—a tune that should “provoke an invitation for relationship.” And like Torrance, Jennings laments that this tune is seldom sung and rarely heard.

Despite this failure of Gentile Christians, we still have hope because we have scriptural witnesses to the trajectories of God’s work in the early church, and we have the means by which God worked them: the Holy Spirit. From this witness, we can discover the trajectory that should orient our new family in Christ—a trajectory that opens us out of our sicut deus selves on both the personal and communal levels, opening up the possibility of mutual identity-(re)formation. According to Jennings, this is precisely the process of the Spirit of Christ as it opens up Israel to the Gentile nations, initiating a process of joining and belonging.

Jennings shows this as the driving logic of Pentecost. In Pentecost, “the presence of the Holy Spirit presents a profoundly counterhegemonic reality in which the sign of the Spirit’s coming is language imposition (Acts 2:2-12).” Speaking the language of others was not the disciples’ decision but an act of God. For “on the day of Pentecost the Spirit descended on the disciples and drove them into the languages of the world to enact the joining desired by the Father of Jesus for all people.” By doing so, God

---

62 Ibid., 274.
initiated a “new reality of kinship” that is “not only the continuation of Jesus’ work of forming the new Israel in Israel, but the full disclosure of the desire of Jesus for the entire world. This in effect is the Creator reclaiming the world through communion.”

This pneumatological family in the space of Christ reframes election, but not in the manner of Gentile egoism and supersessionism. Instead, “In Jesus, Israel’s election does a stunning work by opening the possibilities of boundary-shattering love between strangers and enemies. The election of Jesus turns Israel’s election outward.” It is an election that now defies the very concept, one that proclaims a people’s chosenness yet invites all others to enter in. According to Jennings, this “election enabled desire to be formed between Jew and Gentile, a desire that drew them together in longing for him and in turn invited them to desire one another.” As their God incarnate and Messiah, Jesus offers the deepest intimacy between Israel and God, but also between Israel and all others as the path to true fulfillment. In Jesus together, Jew and Gentile perform “the deepest transgression of cultural boundaries.”

As recounted in Part 1, the earliest disciples failed to carry out this logic all the way through, and now we can give this a deeper theological narration. These early disciples “did not imagine a form of life together in which Gentile life could be enfolded into their life of obedience to the Torah and their life of obedience could be enfolded

---

63 Ibid., 267.
64 Ibid., 267.
65 Ibid., 269.
into Gentile existence.” They did not succumb to a “Spirit-led process of bilingualization inherent in the speaking of other tongues” that would require that both parties be thoroughly changed by the encounter. “This meant they did not imagine the reformulation of ways of life (Jew and Gentile) established in the spatial reality created by Jesus himself.” After this, it is no wonder that the Christian church found it harder and harder to engage in cultural intimacy, leading over time to a Christian segregationalist mentality of infinite, discrete Christianities in infinite languages among infinite, untouching peoples.

What would it look like if Christians today took this trajectory seriously? Jennings argues that “Christian theologians are still unable to capture the spatial implications of life with the Jewish Jesus, that is, a Spirit-directed joining of peoples constituting a new space for Israel, but drawing out of Israel a new identity for both Jew and Gentile.” If we allowed the Spirit to continue its work, however, then “there would be a rebirth of peoples in the expression of a new cultural politic.”

3.2.2.2 All Gentiles culturally enfolded

Jennings’s description of the new kinship network in the space of Jesus offers a fresh way to think about race and cultural differences in Christ. This is one of his most

---

66 Ibid., 270.
67 Ibid., 271.
68 Ibid., 271.
important contributions to this dissertation’s project. When considering Jennings’s account of the “space” of Christ alongside the Bonhoefferan account on which he heavily relies, the spatial reality shifts to one that imagines Jesus as both the “space” and the “center” of union and in such a way that Israel is the only people necessary for entering this space. Gentile peoples may retain their “multiple histories,” but these are “now situated in the story of Israel.” Yet because Christ opens Israel’s election out onto the world, suddenly the call is sent to all nations to gather in the house of David (that is, in Christ), and there we together engage in a process of “enfolding.”

Integrating Bonhoeffer’s language with that of Jennings, we know that we are not the center, the Christ of Israel. By the logic of the fallen world, Christ is on its margins, marking its limit, so we should join him there. “In” Christ, we are de-centered and re-centered around Jesus, who, although marginalized in a fallen world, is the center of the new creation. And this means joining Israel in Christ and Christ in Israel. Imagining Gentile existence theologically in this way fundamentally alters how we imagine life together and how we exist in the “space” or “body” of Christ. Jennings calls Gentiles to humility, to inclusivity, to remember what it means to be an outsider. We need to know more than ever before that “becoming Christian mean[s] a permanent opening of our identities toward those whom God would send into our lives, because it was exactly that opening that made us Christian in the first place.”

69 Ibid., 271.
Note that the Gentile humility that Jennings longs for would spell the end of pedagogical imperialism and further deepen the new kinship networks that already exist in Christ. As Gentiles, we “joined the story of another people, of Israel, and in this way we learned of our God. This movement of joining another as learner is central to the life and practice of our faith.”71 This is an incarnational process, or what it means for us to participate in the trinitarian life of reaching out and joining in order to draw in and share life together so that we can finally receive who we are meant to be with others in God. God was flesh and like us, God grew and learned. If we take the life of Jesus seriously, then we see how he learned his people’s “way with the earth, with the land, with animals”—how “God has chosen to learn with us.”72 Even Jesus’ teaching is embedded in this learning. For us to enter Christ as Gentiles, we must be learners, sharing in the pattern of learning in order to enter in and learning in order to reach out.

Jennings’s vision of racial and cultural joining in the Christ of Israel has two important implications for this dissertation: he levels race-as-we-know-it and offers a model of difference-in-unity based on the concept of “enfolding.”

First, Jennings has completely reframed questions of “race” so that race-as-we-know-it has no legitimate footing. If race-as-we-know-it derives principally from our alienation from the land and Gentile supersessionism, then correcting these problems leads to race’s eventual downfall. The current racial imagination is further undercut by

71 Ibid., 9.
72 Ibid., 9.
the fact that all “races” who are not Jews are instead Gentiles, which conceptually flattens the hierarchies of whiteness and questions what other people-level distinctions might legitimately remain.

Second, Jennings here offers a paradigm for appreciating social difference in unity that at least begins to articulate which differences are the products of sin and which may deserve our respect. Rather than retain sinfully formed “races” in their current form, Jennings prefers to speak of “cultures” and what happens to them in the body, space, or kinship network of Christ. In Jennings’s model, “enfolding” leaves room for cultural differences but not at the expense of genuine communion. This means that identity is never stable. It is not anchored by anything other than Christ, in whom we encounter many others who inform our identities in ways that we cannot predict.

Jennings describes the phenomenon of enfolding in the following way:

Imagine a people defined by their cultural differences yet who turn their histories and cultural logics toward a new determination, a new social performance of identity. In so doing, they enfold the old cultural logics and practices inside the new ones of others, and they enfold the cultural logics and practices of others inside their own. This mutual enfolding promises cultural continuity measured only by the desire of belonging. Thus the words and ways of one people join those of another, each born anew in a community seeking to love and honor those in its midst.73

We simply cannot know ahead of time what will change and what will remain the same.

In this way, the space of Christ is risky. And yet we can rest assured that Christ-centered identity is just that. In this model, we belong to each other because we belong to Christ.

Bonhoeffer would add that we belong to each other *solely* because we belong to Christ. We have each other *only* in Christ, but in Christ we truly do have one another.

Enfolding entails a dance of “cultural logics and practices.” What else? Jennings expands on the concept, suggesting that enfolding creates a space that forms people to “imagine the world differently,” which should come as no surprise if we are integrating new cultural logics and practices with our own. Moreover, enfolding “is done not through isolated individual bricolage, but in the everyday realities of life together with others.” This echoes Bonhoeffer’s experiment at Finkenwalde but now with an intentionality of cultural joining in the full knowledge of the contest between such joining and the powers of whiteness that isolate and stratify. Against these powers, enfolding instead creates “a new network of kinship that transgresses life-threatening and life-diminishing boundaries. It also upsets the particular ideological arrangements of nations, peoples, and corporations, enabling resistance to the temptations of all peoples toward violence in pursuit of their own survival, safety, and world power.”

Returning to this dissertation’s driving metaphor, Christ as the center reorders all else.

### 3.2.2.3 Practices

This dissertation has repeatedly asked its three primary theologians to be practical so that we might know what we can do in light of their arguments. In the

---

74 Ibid., 274.
above discussions, Jennings has gestured toward such practical issues, and now we will turn the spotlight on these by considering his calls to action.

Like Bonhoeffer, Jennings recommends everyday life together, but beyond Bonhoeffer, he also suggests a process of cultural enfolding that privileges belonging over cultural continuity in direct opposition to the logics of whiteness. As with Bonhoeffer, this life together will mean a new family (or kinship network) formed through worship and service with a central, unifying focus on Christ. But more so than Bonhoeffer and more like Torrance, this community will take the close relationship between Christ and Israel extremely seriously. Bonhoeffer’s very life suggests he intuitively understood this. Torrance comes right up to the edge of this in both his account of the Israel-Jesus connection and his suggestion that Christian divisions all stem from this fundamental divide. Jennings takes it one step further to suggest that not only do Gentile Christians need to seek communion and reconciliation with Israel (including modern-day Jews), but that our supersessionist tendencies have created an environment and mentality—a social imaginary—that makes Gentile humility and enfolding with Israel nearly impossible. This imagination has enthroned the idol of whiteness.

Along these lines, Jennings surpasses Torrance’s longing for ecumenism even between Jew and Christian by making this vital connection between supersessionism and race-as-we-know-it. He argues:
If Christian social imagination is ever going to be turned back toward the possibilities of communion, then it must be brought back into the original relationship—of Israel and the Gentiles. Until we clearly reckon with the awesome power of the racial calculus deeply embedded in the theological vision of the Western world, no amount of [interreligious dialogue] will bring us to the deepest possibilities of communion.75

In light of this problem, Jennings repeatedly calls for a “group of people who reject imperialism”—the imperialism of nations, of Christianity, “of whiteness, of a way of life that imagines we are first and always teachers rather than being first and always learners.” In this community of enfolding, people “open themselves to being changed by joining their lives with others.” And, as already suggested, the Christians of this community must get “reintroduced to this identity as Gentiles” who are not the center of the world or the center of Christianity but who instead join “Jesus at the margins.” While Bonhoeffer spoke of Nachfolgenden—or discipleship, a.k.a. following-after—as taking up our crosses even if it costs us everything, Jennings speaks of following Christ as living into his pattern of incarnational learning, meaning we must “become radically adaptive learners always willing to expand our identities toward those to whom the Spirit is calling us to join.”76

More so than Bonhoeffer and Torrance, too, Jennings points to our fundamental need for changing how we relate to land in such a way that we reconfigure our geographical arrangements and habits of engaging land (and animals) in our new

75 Ibid., 274-5.
community. Such a new imagination must run independent of the well-established
grooves of real estate, private property, commerce, and the divides that are racial,
cultural, socioeconomic, political, and governmental in nature. We need nothing short
of Spirit-led creativity.

This *does not* mean colorblindness, which in effect simply means pretending not
to see our current context and the power of whiteness at work among us—which can
only add to its power. It likewise does not mean a hollow “commitment to a changed
perspective” that does not require any actual change. If we simply preach forgiveness,
respect, and cooperation, then we repeat “foolish Western individualism” in which “a
changed heart means a changed world.” When we assume we suddenly have it all
figured out without changing any of our practices or habits of life together, we deny
“any christological mediation that would shape the way we live.”

Instead, like Bonhoeffer, Jennings wants to see new communities of practice. If
our theology is to take our current context seriously, then we must engage practices
that are “central to forming Christians” even when that means standing “in a complex
and critical relationship with cultural and social contexts” so much so that our identities*
actually change.* Jennings calls for real disciples who reject racial politics, the
privileges of whiteness, and black stereotypes—a generation of Christians “who would
know themselves only through the power of resurrection and the call of the cross of

---

77 Jennings, “Wandering in the Wilderness,” 47.
78 Ibid., 45.
Christ.79 In effect, Jennings brings Bonhoeffer up to date by way of a sociopolitical yet thoroughly theological account of the racial imagination as formed through land-alienation, Gentile forgetfulness, and the colonial-imperial machine. And, at times, Jennings appeals to Torrance’s theology and especially Torrance’s account of Israel to do so.

To summarize, our hope in Christ includes returning to land and the space of Jesus, where we become a pneumatically formed family among diverse cultures and perform practices that reject the idol of whiteness. In this space, Christians reconnect with the land, Gentiles reconnect with Israel through the path of humility, and diverse peoples form new identities together through the process of enfolding. Christ’s centrality is evident in that he is the “space” of joining, while also serving as the center who “reorders” our realities “around himself.”80 The incarnation itself signals God’s invitation for us to join God in God’s work of “reclaiming the world through communion”81—an invitation to go and do likewise.

In “The Desire of the Church,” Jennings issues two provocative challenges for Christians. First, he calls for us to “rediscover communion”—the actual communion of needing each other before God, of informing each other’s identities—a communion of

79 Ibid., 48.
80 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 263.
81 Ibid., 267.
“mutual subordination...in how we know and see both the world and ourselves,”
echoing divine perichoresis.82 This first challenge echoes what this section has detailed
so far. His second challenge brings this chapter’s Part 2 to a close even as it pushes us
toward this dissertation’s Part 2. If our problem is largely funded by a form of idolatry in
which a false image of perfect humanity facilitates our desires and how we see
ourselves and others, then Jesus as our hope functions as our redemptive focal point—
that is, Jesus Christ is “the holy icon.”83 The concept of Christ as the Holy Icon who
confronts the idol of whiteness will animate the final substantive chapter of this
dissertation.

3.2.3 Christ the Holy Icon

Before evaluating Jennings’s contribution to this dissertation’s nigh-complete
argument, we will benefit from considering what he means by “holy icon.” In contrast
to the idols that distort desire, Christ as the Mediator and Holy Icon comes between to
reorder desire within himself. This understanding leads Jennings to recommend that we
confront the production of idols (which would include the idol of whiteness) with the
production of “holy icons.”

---
82 Jennings, “The Desire of the Church,” 250.
83 Ibid., 246.
3.2.3.1 Idols and disordered desire

Returning to his Bonhoefferan theological diagnosis of the problem of the Christian-racial imagination, we can understand how whiteness distorts our desires for ourselves, others, God, and the rest of creation so that we cannot desire anything for its own sake or for its own good, but only for our own. This is a variant of the Augustinian notion of *incurvatus in se* that recurs in countless theological accounts of sin, including Luther’s and Barth’s (and therefore unsurprisingly in Bonhoeffer’s, Torrance’s, and Jennings’s). Yet it takes on new spin here by way of its role in broken relationships that fundamentally injure us because of the intersubjective, interpersonal nature of the existence God intends for us.

In this account, too, these relationships corrode in the solvent of an idol that facilitates our desires to turn them back in on ourselves. When we desire “immediacy,” or unmediated contact with others, we are actually allowing a false mediator to come between us. Whiteness as an idol filters our sight so that we literally see others, ourselves, and creation through a very distorted lens. We see higher and lower. We see individuals, peoples, and land as useful for one purpose but not another, as more and less expendable or consumable, as more and less suitable for learning, teaching, preaching, marrying, all according to a colonial-imperial imagination that itself relies upon a fundamental alienation between human and land and between Gentile and Jew.
3.2.3.2 The Holy Icon and redeemed desire

In this account, too, Christ’s mediation takes center stage, and here we finally have the language of the *Holy Icon*. According to Jennings, in our fallen state, “Our desires lack a central *redemptive* focus,”⁸⁴ but Christ is the Holy Icon “who comes *between*...to replace (and reverse) the powerful effects of the unholy icon. Jesus is from the beginning *in-between*.” In our experience of his contest with idolatry, Christ’s own body becomes the new Icon to reorder our desire into its *telos* within God’s primary, generative, trinitarian desire.⁸⁵

How does Christ alter the course of our desire? Just as idols come between us and refract desire, the Holy Icon takes desire into himself and reforms it, redirects it, restores it, and redeems it. By desiring Christ, we desire God, others, and the rest of God’s creation in a new way. According to Jennings, he captures desire in Israel (as the representative of humanity) and redirects it for the sake of all creation. More specifically, Jesus leapt into the middle of the matrix of desire and formed “a new Israel in the midst of Israel,” reforming biblical Israel’s misdirected desires for what the Gentiles often seemed to have—safety, security, power—and therefore to be like a nation among the nations.

Jesus, as it were, captured the power of consumptive practices to form collectives and imagine the social by positioning himself as the object of desire, individual and collective. He was the bread that must be eaten.

---

He was the source of living water that must be asked for. Jesus placed his body between the many and their desires. Indeed, he understood unordered desire as being bound to Gentile existence.  

Jesus placed himself *between* Israel and their desires, and Christ made himself the *object* of desire, meaning desire gets transformed *in* him. If we desire life, then we must desire Christ’s body. Christ’s body breaks “the power of the tempter who played in the desires of the many,” the desire that “trapped” nations in its “chaos.” Christ placed himself between “Israel and the world, between Israel and Gentile (ethnic) existence,” and “called the people of God into the scandal of choosing him and thereby choosing a new reality of kinship”—a reality that drew Gentiles out of the shadows as they heard that Israel had life-giving bread, of which they might eat the crumbs. Thus, from within Israel, Jesus reorders desire from the space often occupied by idols, reframing it so that we can desire God, others, and the rest of creation in healthy, holy ways, by desiring him who loved us first.

3.2.3.3 Producing idols and icons (a preview of Part 2)

To understand how idols work in opposition to the redemptive work of the Holy Icon, we must grasp how desire, consumption, and production integrally relate to one another. In the logic of Jennings’s argument, to desire as a “Gentile” means to desire to be a certain kind of self-constituted entity, whether individually or collectively: to be

---


87 Ibid., 265.
independent of others even if that very independence requires the consumption of others (e.g. by destroying enemies) and the consumption of creation (e.g. by amassing and mastering property). Contemporary societies are often marked by endless iterations of creating and directing desire for consumable, reproducible products that capture us in a process of self-production through constant consumption. We function ourselves as products, desirable and consumable by one another. This means that Bonhoeffer’s “immediacy,” too, is a form of consumption, in that we desire unmediated contact with the person in our sights to consume them for self-gratification and self-creation rather than out of love for them in accordance with God’s love for all.

We encounter idols in this economy not only because they facilitate distorted desire, but because we participate in their (re)production. Although idols like the idol of whiteness live within social imaginaries, they take concrete form and propagate themselves in cultural artifacts such as literature, film, television, posters, and advertisements. In the case of whiteness, its perverted image of perfect humanity gets imaged over and over again, so that we are all urged to imagine over and over again that whiteness facilitates our belonging to humanity. Whiteness is, after all, the “central...reality...that makes sense of...the world” by instructing us “to approximate fabricated white images of humanity” and urging us “to participate in the process of self-invention through consumption.”

---

identity inside of which all other identities [can] be imagined.”

The idolatrous image “at the center of our relational imagination” is the “body of a powerful, white, Western man, the image of self-sufficiency, social power, and self-determination.” In short, we make idols of idols—or artifacts that reflect and perpetuate the true idol’s power over our shared imagination, and these idols of idols frequently exalt a type of powerful, white, Western man as our ideal.

Although Jennings despairs that the church is caught up in the market of idol production and consumption, he nevertheless thinks we can fight back by encouraging the contemplation of Jesus’s life by way of icons. Just as the idol of whiteness takes visible form in cultural images, so too can the Holy Icon be imaged in ways that transform us. For Jennings, depictions of Christ’s life can have the capacity to transform our imagination in positive directions. Jennings recommends that we create more “icons” of the Holy Icon as part of our rejection of the work of idols upon us. He not only refers to “icon” in the Eastern Orthodox sense but also “icon in its most basic theological sense—as an artistic rendering that helps facilitate a sense of the divine life revealed in Jesus Christ.” He continues:

The icon exists in the midst of a constellation of participatory nodes within the life of the church. In their rendering of bodies, icons reach out to those looking at them, extending artistic lines into the lines of their

---

90 Ibid., 286.
91 Jennings, “The Desire of the Church,” 249.
existence that connect them to the multiple acts within the spiritual life, for example, prayer, worship, and liturgy. ⁹²

Exploring exactly what such icon production might mean, however, requires far more consideration than this chapter can provide. The seeds that Jennings here plants for engaging our culture’s propagation of whiteness, especially through the popular arts, are so full of potential that this dissertation will give them multiple chapters to germinate.

### 3.3 Summary and Evaluation

With Jennings’s help, this chapter has proposed that when Christ is seen between us as our Holy Icon, then we are living together into our true identities in God—in what Jennings would call the *space* of Christ. In conjunction with Jennings’s account of whiteness and its historical and theological underpinnings, we can identify the specific idolatry of whiteness that infects our current social imagination and how we have hope in Christ as the true Mediator and Holy Icon.

Part 1 reviewed the primarily sociopolitical, historical dimensions of Jennings’s account of colonialism and whiteness—an account that Bonhoeffer lacks. In the colonial-imperial era, Gentile forgetfulness and the loss of land-based identities together fed the rise of whiteness and its way of construing identity as skin-deep and of

---

ranking humans (individually and collectively) based on criteria that favored the bearers of the White Man’s Burden.

Part 2 went deeper into Jennings’s account of the Christian-and-racial imagination by exploring its thoroughly theological dimensions. The problem with race-as-we-know-it is ultimately a problem of sin and supersessionism, such that whiteness can be understood as an idol that facilitates distorted relationships among all parties (women and men, one people and another, humans with the rest of creation and with God—and with our particular selves). The problems of Gentile forgetfulness, of severing land from identity, and of relying on whiteness to mediate our identities all indicate that we lack adequate or proper desire for one another, creation, and God.

Part 2 then considered our hope in Christ, which includes returning to land and the space of Jesus, embracing a pneumatologically formed family among diverse cultures, and performing practices that reject the idol of whiteness in favor of the Icon of Jesus. Although Christians are caught in up a racial imaginary driven by the idol of whiteness, the church can still foster communities of enfolded identities by way of concrete practices. In the “space” of Christ, we can reconnect with the land, Gentiles can reconnect with Israel through the path of humility, and diverse peoples can form new identities together through the process of enfolding. As our center, Christ reorders
reality “around himself” and directs us outward as part of God’s pattern of “reclaiming the world through communion.”

Jennings challenges Christians to “rediscover communion”—the actual communion of needing each other before God, of informing each other’s identities within Christ, of entering into the pattern of trinitarian perichoresis. This will mean concrete practices of life together that reject the operations of whiteness as far as we can identify them at work among us, including re-evaluating how we inhabit specific locations and treat land and place as reduced to property. To the end of whiteness-rejecting life together, Jennings also recommends a heightened focus on “the holy icon” of Jesus Christ, including the contemplation of portrayals of Christ’s life as it stands in contrast to our current idolatries.

With Jennings’s contribution joining those of Torrance and Bonhoeffer, we can conclude that seeing Christ between us as our Holy Icon is necessary for living together into our true identities in God. Far more so than Torrance and Bonhoeffer, Jennings exposes whiteness as constitutive of our current racial imagination, as well as whiteness’s historical-theological underpinnings, and Jennings offers a corresponding account of our hope in Christ for a better way of seeing and being in the world together.

---

93 Jennings, ibid., 263.
94 Ibid., 267.
95 Jennings, “The Desire of the Church,” 250.
In the process, Jennings has expanded our vision of the created world, the place of Israel, and our eschatological siblinghood with diverse peoples, and he provides more resources for appreciating particularity, diversity, and unity in ways that will not repeat the problems of whiteness. Although questions arise at each turn, on the whole Jennings propels us into a deeper appreciation of Christ’s mediation of social identity in contrast to the idol of whiteness.

3.3.1 Whiteness

Jennings is not the first to do a genealogy of the theological or Christian underpinnings of the racial imagination. Although Edward Blum might oversimplify Jennings’s argument, he points out that others have preceded Jennings in indicting Christianity for spawning imperialism, colonialism, and racism.96 For sure, even if Jennings does not engage the specific scholars that Blum mentions, he certainly builds upon those foundational arguments as found in prior works of liberation theology, black theology, and postcolonial and decolonial studies.

---

That said, Jennings uniquely makes several theological connections between the problem of whiteness and our need for enfolded identities of mutual subordination, of mutual learning and sharing and growing together. Like no one before him, Jennings draws out threads of thought that weave through figures like Torrance and Bonhoeffer and uses them to indicate Christ as the space of genuine togetherness in contrast to the divisions that inhere in whiteness.

Some, like Blum and David Lantigua, have accused Jennings of failing to account for the seeds of anti-racism in the Christian tradition or sub-traditions. However, these critics do not bring that criticism face to face with Jennings’s clear longing for the seeds of incarnation-patterned intimacy to grow as we work to improve their soil. Of Jennings’s reviewers, Jonathan Tran comes closest to describing this hopeful bedrock of

---

Jennings’s account, summarizing that a “better option was there all along in the church’s affirmation of Jesus’ humanity (a particular, Jewish humanity) and divinity”\textsuperscript{98}—meaning that an orthodox understanding of the incarnation affirms our human particularity as we join the particular, Jewish body of Christ and are thereby intimately reconciled to God, each other, and the rest of creation.

3.3.2 The Created World

In comparison to Torrance and Bonhoeffer, Jennings offers an ever wider vision of the created world as part of God’s holistic redemption. Torrance and Bonhoeffer both move in this direction, but Jennings explicitly carries their logic to its conclusion that the rest of creation is so wrapped up in God’s plan of redemption that it, too, is a part of who we are meant to be as we join together in communion with God. Land, animals, and the entire cosmos are in view not as the backdrop but as equally pulled into God’s perichoretic love.

That said, Jennings’s argument would benefit from a slower, more detailed account of the relationship between the “space” of Christ and “land” as a place or space, because speaking of these in one breath can be confusing. For example, if Christ is the primary “space” of our identity-(re)forming relationships, then why must other

places also have a fundamental influence on who we are, and how do we determine what those dynamics should be? Although a Bonhoefferan reading of Genesis and relationality does suggest that we ought to have better, Christ-mediated relationships with the rest of creation, it is harder to conceive of what this would look like in the proposed model of cultural or interpersonal enfolding, given that we do not usually think of land as having cultural or personal dimensions. These are live questions given the heated theological and sociopolitical debates about environmentalism, sustainability, stewardship, partnership, and animal rights activism. Nevertheless, we can conclude that the space of Christ must for us creatures include our relationships not only with other humans, but the creation in which we live.

3.3.3 The Place of Israel

Like Bonhoeffer and even more like Torrance, Jennings maintains Jewish exceptionalism, yet surpassing Torrance he does so as part of a maneuver that explodes the categories of race-as-we-know-it. Jennings appeals to Torrance for much of his understanding of Israel, and Torrance himself suggests that divisions like race fundamentally stem at least in part from the Christian-Jew split in the early church. Jennings’s logic tracks with this but provides a far deeper analysis of this phenomenon by tracing supersessionist tendencies alongside the alienation from the land as they together grew monstrous in the colonial era. He also explodes racial categories in at
least two senses. First, by emphasizing Gentile humility in the face of the “original
relation” in which Israel alone is God’s covenant partner, Jennings relativizes all Gentile
“races” as those huddled together under Israel’s table.99 Second, by accounting for the
historical emergence of the modern racial imagination, Jennings exposes race-as-know-
it as a human fiction and sin-ridden invention.

Although several reviewers charge Jennings for exhibiting some form of
supersessionism,100 such a charge will always fall (perhaps quite ironically) on those who
maintain Jewish exceptionalism from a Christian perspective.101 Any such charge must
account for Jennings’s emphasis on the urgent need for Gentile humility as learners—
those who must better learn from Israel to enter into the Jewish space of Christ and
who must better learn from others as they reach out of that space to welcome others,

---

99 As Tran puts it, “Carter and Jennings undercut racism by positioning Jewish
particularity as the keystone, rather than the barrier, to salvation.” Ibid., 26.
100 See Blum, “The Christian Imagination,” 420. Victor Anderson’s critique on this front
is subtle and gentle in Victor Anderson, “The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of
Race,” Modern Theology 28, no. 2 (2012): 350, especially when compared to Mark Lewis
Taylor’s, which goes further to suggest that Jennings is proposing a renewed Christian religious
imperialism that would ignore the contributions of those of other religions (see Mark Lewis
(2012)). In partial answer to Taylor’s criticism, the cultural enfolding that Jennings proposes is
one that should indeed include those of other faith traditions—that their logics should inform
Christian identity. The space of Jesus is not a stable religion called “Christianity” but a pattern of
relating that does nevertheless depend on the reality of Jesus the Christ of Israel and Son of
God. If reliance on Christ is supersessionist, then in that sense supersession is not here avoided.
101 See the brief concluding chapter in Haynes, Post-Holocaust, 145-148.
engaging in a process of enfolding that will necessarily yet unpredictably change their identities and what Christianity looks like.

Jennings’s unique account of the Jew-Gentile relationship, especially as it should be in the “space” of Christ, raises pressing questions about the significance of “Jew” and “Gentile” within that shared space. How do we account for Galatians 3-styled claims that such divisions cease in the body of Christ? Are “Jewish” and “Gentile” permanent features of every individual’s or groups’ identity? While Jennings sees this distinction as essential to the gospel, he also argues that in Christ we are supposed to find a Spirit-directed joining of peoples” who constitute “a new space for Israel” even while “drawing out of Israel a new identity for both Jew and Gentile,” and eventually we should witness “a rebirth of peoples in the expression of a new cultural politic.”102 We are left wondering if this means that Jewish and Gentile identity could change over time during the process of enfolding, to the point that there truly is neither Jew nor Gentile, and how best to explain this in relation to Israel’s permanent significance to the gospel. This is likely something that remains to be seen because enfolding is as unpredictable as the wind that blows where it will.

3.3.4 Eschatological Siblinghood

Jennings speaks of “kinship networks,” but this dissertation has adopted the simpler language of “family” to describe one possible way of imagining how we relate to others in the body of Christ. Torrance and Bonhoeffer both pointed in a similar direction by suggesting that all humans are God’s children when seen from the perspective of God’s desire and intention. Putting us all in the place of the “child” works well for Jennings’s account, in that it indicates a position of humility, trust, and mutual subordination, all in accordance with God’s guiding love.

Jennings rarely uses the language of eschatology, and perhaps his theological claims about the “space” of Christ would make more sense if he explained its eschatological character. If we enter the “space” of Christ eschatologically, then its already-not-yet character sheds light on how we imperfectly participate in it here and now. Jennings does, however, use eschatology to contend that in baptism we put to death our false ideals of humanity and any “longing for human liberation bound in sexual, cultural, or socio-political desire,” so that we instead seek an eschatological hope for the re-creation of all by God as made real in Jesus’s body. This eschatological hope for re-creation accords with Bonhoeffer’s desire for the church to think “from the end” and Torrance’s take on eschatological participation in what Christ has already

---

accomplished, and both Jennings and Bonhoeffer would want to do so alongside an incisive analysis of our present situations. Given how much Jennings’s account of sociality derives from Bonhoeffer’s, there is no reason it cannot retain the eschatological spin that Bonhoeffer first gives it.

3.3.5 Particularity, Diversity, and Unity

To appreciate Jennings’s contribution on this crucial point, it will help to review what Torrance and Bonhoeffer have already offered. Torrance set us on the path to appreciate diversity and unity, first, by suggesting that having one’s identity “in” Jesus, or becoming the human persons we are meant to be by sharing in his perfected humanity, does not damage our creatureliness but fulfills it. By sharing in Christ so that we ultimately share in the communion of the Trinity, we do not melt into divinity but are instead humanized and personalized. This move celebrates creaturehood and rejects the ranking of humans based on relative divinity-proximity. Second, Torrance’s doctrines of the hypostatic union, homoousion, and the Trinity prepare us to appreciate a delicate balance of difference-in-unity. Just as we do not lose ourselves in God, so too we do not lose ourselves among one another. Torrance does not spend time reflecting
on this, but he would likely extend his understanding of the Spirit as enabling union-with-distinction on the horizontal plane as well as the vertical.104

As an aside, Jennings may spend little time with traditional doctrine or developing a trinitarian framework for his arguments, but his work intersects with that of Torrance beyond their mutual interest in the singular importance of Israel. Both highlight Christ’s mediation alongside and as part of their understanding of Israel’s importance, and Jennings’s appeals to participating in trinitarian perichoresis echo Torrance’s, which are a part of his larger project in trinitarian theology.

Using trinitarian theology to affirm proper relational identity likewise accords with Bonhoeffer’s appraisal of difference-in-unity even if he prefers to frame it specifically in reference to the Son. For Bonhoeffer, in Christ and Christ alone can we receive who we are meant to be by way of a true union with (the triune) God and therefore others-in-God. Christ prevents the immediacy that destroys individual particularity while concomitantly fostering the unity required for us to be our truest selves. With Bonhoeffer, we have a nigh-perfect model for appreciating how particularity and unity coinhere in a specific formulation. Only in Christ do we have one another, but in Christ we really do have one another. We need union with others in

104 Habets, Theosis, 43, drawing on Torrance, “Knowledge of God and Speech about Him According to John Calvin,” Theology in Reconstruction, 96-7. See also Molnar, Theologian of the Trinity, 187-189. This topic will recur in Chapter 4 (which concludes this dissertation’s Part 1: Theological Anthropology).
Christ to be our particular selves, and we need Christ to particularize us if we are to have genuine communion.

Bonhoeffer also helps us identify racism as a rejection of God-given limits and God-given diversity in favor of a false ideal that ranks us. He even gestures at the idolatrous nature of the Aryan ideal and the projection of sicut deus egoism into the social sphere. However, Bonhoeffer does not show us how best to think about diversity, sameness, and the nature of the socially constituted idol that sustains our racial imagination.

Enter Jennings. First, Jennings helps us see that diversity is not a good in itself. “Appreciating” racial distinctions is often a front for policing, enforcing, and maintaining the sinful hierarchies that flow from the idol of whiteness, keeping everyone in their respective places. Second, his critique of the endless contextualizations of Christianity further indicts any vague valuation of diversity.

God’s love of diversity is not unqualified. Racism is not just the problem of “sameness,” even if that diagnosis rightly captures how whiteness pretends to be totalizing and universal and the means by which all must imagine their access to humanity. Jennings instead speaks of a diversity of particular persons and cultures, languages and customs in ways that respects them as complex, messy, and subject to change. He explains:

A Christianity born of such realities [of submission, desire, and transformation] but historically formed to resist them has yielded a form
of religious life that thwarts its deepest instincts of intimacy. That intimacy should by now have given Christians a faith that understands its own deep wisdom and power of joining, mixing, merging, and being changed by multiple ways of life to witness to a God who surprises us by love of differences and draws us to new capacities to imagine their reconciliation. Instead, the intimacy that marks Christian history is a painful one, one in which the joining often meant oppression, violence, and death, if not of bodies then of ways of life, forms of language, and visions of the world.  

God loves differences—differences of bodies, ways of life, forms of language, worldviews—but God also brings us into a space of reconciliation—of joining, mixing, merging, and changing that yields new ways of life and new identities. We must find a way of imagining these two realities at once. Torrance does not venture into this territory, but his entire way of thinking is amendable to the project (e.g. his anti-dualism and nuance for holding seemingly contradictory realities together). For Bonhoeffer, it is a matter of particularity received through relationship as guided principally by Christ. For Jennings, it can be summed up as “enfolding.”

What differences, if any, should we protect? Are there boundaries that we should not cross, mixing that we should not do? None of our three theologians give a definitive answer, although Jennings might place “Jew” and “Gentile” in this category, at least until these two groups enter into far deeper communion. Jennings’s account also helps us identify that racial distinctions in their current form are not in themselves to be

---

treated as permanent components of our social identities. Instead, we should interrogate how our current distinctions may result from the work of idols in our midst, and likewise we should look instead at cultural logics and practices that can undergo the process of enfolding as we grow together in Christ.

On this topic, at times Jennings comes across as more concerned with our lack of adequate desire and joining than about wrongful forms of joining (a.k.a. Bonhoeffer’s “immediacy”). That is certainly the tenor of his startling conclusion:

My hope is for a joining of peoples not only to each other but also to the God who calls them to touch his body. For some, this deeply erotic image is disturbing. But it should be far less disturbing to us than bodies that never embrace, that never walk together on a moonlit night awaiting the dawn of a new day.106

Bonhoeffer’s model offers more by way of interpersonal limits or boundaries, giving us conceptual balance between unity and particularity. For Bonhoeffer, Christ simultaneously unifies and particularizes, at once protecting us from each other and uniting us together. Speaking bluntly, some joining is rape, whereas other unions go further to honor others, uplift them, or invite them to lead and play within the love of God. That said, all three theologians would affirm the biblical wisdom that we must lose ourselves to find ourselves, which only takes place in Christ.

We still must work to know what it means to honor difference, lose ourselves to find ourselves in Christ, and seek holy joining in our current contexts. As women and

106 Ibid., 288.
men, as Jews and Gentiles, as those who live within diverse cultures that are themselves profoundly shaped by the racial imagination and other idols, we need examples of positive joining, growth, mixing, and transformation. We need to focus on the example of Christ himself, who embodies that life-giving logic of love, which in turn best makes sense in light of God’s inherent, triune, creative, loving relationality. We need practices that heal and depictions of Christ that point us beyond the idol of whiteness to the Holy Icon who defeats all idols in his body so that we might truly live together in him.

3.4 Conclusion

Jennings’s primary contribution to this dissertation consists of his critical analysis of whiteness as a theological problem and his account of the Holy Icon as the antidote to idolatry. He exposes whiteness as constitutive of our current racial imagination, its historical-theological underpinnings, and our hope in Christ for a better way of seeing and being in the world together. He also develops the work of Torrance and Bonhoeffer and offers a wider vision of the created world, the place of Israel, and our eschatological siblinghood with diverse peoples. And he gives us yet more resources for appreciating particularity, diversity, and unity in ways that will not repeat the problems of whiteness.

We leave Chapter 3 with a few questions. What exactly is the relationship between the “space” of Christ and “land”? What do we make of “Jew” and “Gentile” within that shared space, and how might we articulate its eschatological character?
Finally, when undergoing the process of enfolding, can we know if there are any differences we should protect, as a means of protecting against sinful tendencies toward immediacy? The eschatological, already-not-yet nature of the venture for intimacy within Christ would suggest that the effects of idols, sin, and death still remain, giving us reason to anticipate such transgressions. Yet it remains possible that we should simply have faith that whatever the outcome of enfolding, we will in fact find ourselves even as we give ourselves to God, one another, and the rest of creation.
Chapter 4. Conclusions about Christological Anthropology

Having reached the end of this dissertation’s Part 1, a short overview is in order. Taken together, these three theologians weave a thread of christological anthropology that pulls us to recognize Christ as our Mediator and Holy Icon in contrast to the idolatry of race-as-we-know-it. In the process, they equip us to see ourselves and others in a truer light and to be more like our true, eschatological selves.

After reviewing what our three theologians contribute to this dissertation’s theological anthropology, this brief chapter will consider some remaining concerns.

4.1 Overview

4.1.1 Torrance

Chapter 1 concluded that T. F. Torrance’s highly integrated framework supports a theological anthropology based on Christ’s role as Mediator. Christ mediates the divine-human relationship, fulfilling God’s covenant with Israel from both sides so that human creatures can participate in the communion of the Trinity. Such communion is what God intends for all creation—it is our eschatological telos accomplished by Christ in which we may participate even now by the Spirit. Our humanity and personhood are
secured in Christ, who has vicariously provided the way for us to receive our identities in God. To become who we are meant to be, we need God and all others within the Body of Christ.

Torrance also initiated a few helpful trajectories. First, all humans are children of God, at least when seen from the perspective of God’s desire and intention, meaning that if we see ourselves and others from the lens of God’s will, then we see others as siblings, as family. In the same vein, he also points out to us that God desires to restore all creation into an intimate, familial relationship, which means that our eschatological identities in part depend upon that familial restoration.

Second, conceiving of Christ as our singular Mediator between us and God, between us and others, and even between us and our particular selves exposes the sin of self-centeredness. This dissertation takes Torrance one tiny step further by recognizing the move from rightful God-centeredness to self-centeredness as “idolatry.” Likewise, Torrance’s gentle suggestion that racism can be traced to our loss of our true center—and Israel’s place there—reappears in Jennings’s own argument in a far more developed form while still retaining much of Torrance’s unique account of Israel.

Third, having one’s identity “in” Jesus, or becoming the human persons we are meant to be by sharing in his perfected humanity, does not damage our creatureliness but in fact fulfills it. This claim about particularity in Christ reappears in Bonhoeffer’s work, and, through that work, in Jennings’s.
Lastly, Torrance’s doctrines of the hypostatic union, *homoousion*, and the Trinity all provide resources for imagining difference-in-unity. While neither Bonhoeffer nor Jennings focus on these doctrines, their own more developed accounts of difference-in-unity nicely intersect with Torrance’s—most notably, Jennings’s Bonhoeffer-heavy theology suggests that particular individuals and groups are invited into an ever-expanding intimate communion based in the perichoretic relationality of the triune God.

### 4.1.2 Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s primary contribution lies in his spatial metaphor for christological anthropology that places Christ as the one true Mediator of social identity so that we can each receive who we are from God, and in turn from within that space receive who we are from each other. Christ stands *between* us as a barrier against sinful trespassing and yet precisely by standing between, Christ is likewise our common bond, our *limit*-generating *center* and eschatological *goal* who enables genuine life together, which in the end is the only path to genuine life, period. As the true center, Christ topples the idols that would otherwise dictate who we are. In the space of Christ’s church, we live from this end, embracing others as siblings and accepting God’s good will and purposes for our mutual end together, thereby becoming who we really are, at the end of the world as we know it.
Bonhoeffer also leads us to identify racism as a rejection of God-given limits and God-given diversity in favor of a false ideal that ranks us. He even gestures at the idolatrous nature of the Aryan ideal as the projection of sicut deus egoism into the social sphere. Like Torrance, he helps us think of all people as God’s children from the perspective of God’s desire, and he wants to affirm true creaturely particularity. Although he never develops a robust trinitarian theology like Torrance does, such a theology would appear to stand in the background, making Torrance all the more relevant of a conversation partner. Similarly, although Bonhoeffer’s life suggests he intuitively saw something important at stake in the relationship between Christians and Jews, both Torrance and Jennings turn this glimmer of insight into a revealing spotlight. Bonhoeffer also requires Jennings’s assistance to answer questions about diversity, sameness, and the nature of the socially constituted idol that sustains our racial imagination.

Especially as he gets taken up in Jennings and developed by this dissertation, Bonhoeffer reveals that Christ the Mediator topples the idol of Self and enables healthy identity-constituting relationships. In so doing, Christ competes with the social externalizations of ideal humanity (such as whiteness) and protects us against those who would seek to distort our identities for the sake of their own gain. While we can have false centers in our sicut deus selves and much grander false mediators, God has given us a true ideal for humanity in the form of the crucified God-man who died to bring all into communion with God, each other, and the New Creation. Christ is our true
limit-granting center, Mediator, goal, and Icon, exposing the falsity of the White Man, Imperialist, Colonist, Master, Superman, and cinematic Hero of popular entertainment.

4.1.3 Jennings

Willie Jennings completes this dissertation’s mission to show the ongoing contest between the idol of whiteness and Christ the Mediator. Although we inhabit a racialized social imaginary that places a false ideal of humanity between us, Christ remains our one true Holy Icon and eschatological “goal” who frees us for each other, for true intimacy, and ultimately for becoming our truest selves together in Christ. While Torrance provides the trinitarian, ecumenical, and more traditional framework for the project, Bonhoeffer and Jennings fill in the details about Christ’s mediation of social identity with an eye to practical and ethical action, with Jennings revealing its relevance for specifically racial identity.

Jennings in particular exposes whiteness as constitutive of our current racial imagination, its historical-theological underpinnings, and our hope in Christ for a better way of seeing and being in the world together. In the process, he furthers the trajectories begun by the other two to offer a yet wider vision of the created world, the place of Israel, our eschatological siblinghood with diverse peoples, and how to construe particularity, diversity, and unity in ways that will not repeat the problems of whiteness.
4.2 Questions

Having traced a crucial line of christological anthropology, we are still left with several questions, some of which we must carry beyond this dissertation’s limits. At this point, readers may still wonder about how best to conceptualize the spatial metaphor as found especially in Bonhoeffer’s theology. We also left prior chapters with lingering concerns about distinction and intimacy. Lastly, these chapters left us wondering how we might better recognize the role of the Spirit in the (re)formation of our identities together in Christ, a question energized by increased interest in pneumatology¹ and the Spirit’s role in mediating unity, particularity, and eschatological realities.

4.2.1 Spatial Metaphor(s) Redux

How Christ can at once be a center, a limit, a space, a mediator, and a Holy Icon?

On the one hand, the conceptual problem here arises because Christ is each of these in multiple senses, and these multiple senses are not always clearly compatible with one another if we are trying to use a visual-spatial model to think it through. More

¹ E.g., describing the turn of the millennium, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen contends that “a pneumatological renaissance concerning the doctrine and spirituality of the Holy Spirit has in these days stirred much interest and even enthusiasm from all theological corners.” He attributes the trend in part to growing charismatic and Pentecostal movements and to the Eastern Orthodox churches inclusion in the World Council of Churches. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2006), 11-12.
fundamentally, spatial models—like all models—fall short of capturing the reality, revealing that these figural concepts are limited even if temporarily useful tools.

For example, Christ as “limit” and “center” has multiple meanings here, and not all work together. Christ is the “limit” to our old, sinful selves so that we can be re-centered around him in our new, eschatological selves. He is also a limit in that he lives on the “margins” as one pushed aside in fallen sociality, so that we must be de-centered and re-centered, moving us from sinful to redeemed existence. And Christ is a limit in that he is a boundary line between us, as a means of protection against immediacy. In each of these, Christ’s existence as a limit is due to the presence of sin. Yet we also know that limits are not always bad, in that Christ also helps us embrace our proper, God-given limitations as creatures—as those who are not-God but made to commune with God. Limitation in this sense is a property of the creature, whose life depends upon and orients toward its source. Similarly, Christ as the “center” has multiple meanings, in that Christ is the center of individual lives and individual identities but also of social existence together as the one who resides between us as the Mediator.

That said, there is a way in which these descriptors of the one Christ can conceptually cohere in some of their senses if we expand our imaginations ever so slightly. Something can be both a center and limit, for example, when serving as a space that has a specific pattern to it—like the space created by a willow tree or arching water fountain, or a heater that sends heat all around at a certain strength so that it also sets its own limits. Or again, a vector can in itself indicate origin, direction, and magnitude.
Or perhaps we can imagine how the DNA resides in the nucleus of a cell, containing in itself the information that determines the boundaries of the cell and everything between. Or we can think of it as the gravity of an object that compels all else to take orbit around it.

Or perhaps a musical metaphor works best. As Jeremy Begbie suggests, “music can often offer ‘something better’” to help us “re-imagine a too familiar theology.”

Appealing to Bonhoeffer’s own love of the musical concept of polyphony with a cantus firmus, we can say that we each must make our love of Christ the cantus firmus (or center) around which the rest of our lives take shape, and yet that same Christ serves as the target of everyone else, so that our very lives are communally revolving around Christ the center in a polyphonic fashion, meaning that while we are independent of one another in one sense, in another sense we are united “in” Christ, who organizes the sonic space of our joining. And this song we are together weaving grows just as our identities change in light of Christ and each other, achieving new forms of counterpoint together as we anticipate the future of Christ’s song—meaning that we are together living into our eschatological selves. And by shaping our melodies and enabling them to work well with other melodies, a cantus firmus functions much like a Holy Icon as described by Jennings, which reshapes desire so that it benefits all parties.

---


Still, none of these metaphors capture the full truth. When Christ is the Mediator, Christ facilitates us to ourselves and others, making it possible for us to have true communion and to live into our true selves. Christ is between us as the center of our communion, Christ is around us as our space of communion, Christ is central to our various particular selves because we are in fact de-centered, Christ is the Icon we look to and who shapes us, and Christ is the goal of human being. When we look at another, we see Christ between us and see them in terms of what God wants for them. We gaze upon and desire Christ as the Holy Icon, and, through him, we gaze upon and desire one another. In this way our desire is healed, and all because God first desired us.

It may seem counterintuitive that having something between us actually unifies us, but in truth this is our only hope. If we see each other through the lens of Christ our Mediator, then we see what God desires for each and every one of us. This is a gaze of love that really sees someone. This is what happens when we see as through a Holy Icon. This medium between us, our Mittler, brings us together precisely by placing himself between, that we can be one in his Body even as we not only remain our particular selves, but become them even more so. This is the mystery of Christ’s Body.

It is possible that more pneumatology in this christological anthropology would help clarify some of the conceptual problems with the model. In trinitarian theology, the Spirit takes the principle role in uniting and particularizing, and perhaps even more helpful would be appealing to the Spirit as the one who enables our eschatological participation even in the midst of our proximate, broken realities. That said, this way of
understanding Christ’s mediation goes a long way to clarify our already-not-yet social existence together and how we might better embrace God’s good, loving will for us all.

4.2.2 Distinction and Intimacy

Chapter 3 ended by asking what to make of “Jew” and “Gentile” within the shared space of Christ, and how we might articulate its eschatological character. Are there differences or distinctions that we should protect—like that between Jew and Gentile—or should we simply have faith that whatever the outcome of the process of enfolding, we will find ourselves even as we give ourselves to God, one another, and the rest of creation? It would seem the latter carries more weight, but we might also want to cling to some differences even if we may ultimately let them go. By way of tentative conclusion, this dissertation prompts us to hold together our need for intimacy without immediacy, which can also be described as our need for unity in holy community without erasing good distinctions or true particularity.

4.2.2.1 Intimacy without immediacy

At the heart of Willie Jennings’s argument in *The Christian Imagination* we find the driving conviction that God made us for intimacy. The logic of the incarnation reveals both God’s deep desire for communion with creation and the joining that bore Christianity. “That intimacy should by now have given Christians a faith that
understands its own deep wisdom and power of joining, mixing, merging, and being changed by multiple ways of life to witness to a God who surprises us by love of differences and draws us to new capacities to imagine their reconciliation,” but instead, time and again Christian “joining often meant oppression, violence, and death.”

Bonhoeffer gave us theological tools for understanding the problem as that of immediacy. Immediacy seeks the wrong kind of intimacy—the kind that prioritizes the sicut deus Self, which tries to bypass Christ’s mediation between us. Idolatry does not simply refer to self-exaltation, in which the Self attempts to supplant Christ, but to social externalizations of false ideals, such as that of whiteness. Such idols disrupt, refract, and poison our otherwise good, God-intended intimacy. Yet we need each other to be who we are meant to be. Torrance brings this back to the work of the Trinity, suggesting that our vertical relationship with the triune God enables our horizontal communion in the Body of Christ, and the more we conform to Christ, the deeper we enter into both horizontal and vertical communion. For our intimacy to breed true life and love rather than death and destruction, we need to displace our idols and to enter the space of Christ together. As Bonhoeffer argues, only in Christ do we have one another, but in Christ we really do have one another.

---

5 Habets makes a similar observation in Habets, Theosis, 47.
4.2.2.2 Community with particularity

We are not only made for community and need community to be who we are meant to be, but we also need others in Christ in order to be our particular selves. When scripture and the Christian tradition speak of conforming to Christ, we might mistakenly believe that we are all growing more alike and losing any distinctiveness or particularity. However, we need union with others in Christ to be our particular selves, and we need Christ to particularize us if we are to have genuine communion.

Part of the problem lies in our inability to imagine the possibilities, a future that is yet unknown to us. For example, the distinction that Jennings recognizes between Jew and Gentile is one that might in fact disappear over time within the “space” of Jesus. In this living space we find “a Spirit-directed joining of peoples constituting a new space for Israel, but drawing out of Israel a new identity for both Jew and Gentile.” If we allowed the Spirit to continue its work, “there would be a rebirth of peoples in the expression of a new cultural politic.” If this new identity and new cultural politic does not destroy particularity. Rather, it reconfigures it, and, if Torrance and Bonhoeffer are right, it brings one’s identity closer to its eschatological goal. We cannot know what we will be in the end—but we can open ourselves more and more to holy intimacy so that we can find out.

---

4.2.2.3 Practical concerns

Practical questions remain regarding how we welcome good forms of community that avoid immediacy in favor of true intimacy, and how we foster good forms of distinction and particularity while rejecting those that perform the work of idols. Are there any differences we should protect, and for how long? For example, the distinction between male and female as two sexes—and perhaps as two genders—seems to be upheld in Jennings’s “The Desire of the Church,” in light of his appeals to the Genesis story of their creation and his injunction that women and men need those of the other sex to learn what it means to be male and female. That said, perhaps that polarized distinction follows a path similar to the Jew-Gentile division—a path that might see something altogether new come about. (Note that this is not to imply that racial identity and gender identity are perfect analogs, but to reconsider them both from within the same new imagination.}

---

7 Jennings, “The Desire of the Church,” see esp. 250.
Related to this, how do we go about forming communities or kinship networks of enfolding across well-established barriers? How do we form generations of Christians who defy sinful stereotypes and who seek to learn from each other across institutional and cultural divides such as those between Protestants, Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox, or even deeper chasms such as those separating Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, atheists, and others, especially when these chasms chart with other forms of division such as race, place, and nationality? Certainly, Christians—and Western Christians in particular—need a spirit of humility, of learning and of gentle invitation that counters a long history of aggressive forms of engagement.

4.2.2.3.1 Jews and Gentiles

This dissertation has encountered one such divide over and over again: the divide between Jew and Gentile. The place of Israel in God’s plan for the entire cosmos and the problem of supersessionism has arisen in the work of each of the three theologians. In the face of rampant Aryan anti-Semitism, Bonhoeffer stood alongside Jews and paid the price. Torrance chastised his peers for thinking that God would not uphold God’s promises to the living Israel, including modern day Jews, and instead argued that we cannot have Christ without Israel to this very day. And Jennings continues what Bonhoeffer and Torrance began by arguing that Gentile forgetfulness has stunted Christianity nearly from the very start of the Christian church.
Jennings might leave behind some of Torrance’s formulations, especially the notion that Jews had to suffer throughout the past two thousand years as part of their God-given destiny. He might also diverge from Torrance’s distinction between the *ethnic* (cultural and familial) and *laic* (as the People of God) aspects of Jewish identity, in that Jennings would consider the ethnic aspect as something that can disappear in a new cultural politic because of the possibilities of joining opened up by Jesus Christ.

Lastly, Jennings tracks with Torrance’s reading of the covenant between God and Israel, in which Israel serves as humanity’s representative, yet he is less inclined to speak of Israel as representative of humanity in its *sinfulness*. He does follow Torrance on this matter, but he executes most of the discussion in footnotes. This difference in stress likely reflects Jennings’s concern to heal Gentile-Jew relations and to foster Gentile humility. On the one hand, Gentiles begin as outsiders to the covenant struggles between God and Israel, so it sounds presumptuous for Gentiles to declare that Israel’s

---

9 Jennings does, however, reiterate Torrance and others’ belief that Israel suffers vicariously on behalf of humanity, both in terms of suffering as a result of sin and faithlessness within Israel’s intimate covenant with God and in terms of the hatred that Israel inspires among Gentiles whose own sin gets exposed by that same covenant. Moreover, he seems to affirm the suggestion that the Shoah (or Holocaust) can be interpreted in light of Israel’s vicarious suffering. That said, he falls short of suggesting that such ongoing representative suffering is integral to Israel’s covenantal destiny. See Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 258 and esp. 345-236n31-33.

10 Jennings describes the concept of “ethnicity” as “softer” than that of race but as nevertheless taking “its modern cues from the racial imagination.” Although superior in many respects to the concept of “race,” we still do harm by imagining Israel as an *ethnicity*, as it still severs identity from land and space, and it still is “often tied implicitly to their racial characteristics.” Ibid., 343n18; see also p. 254.
sin must be judged—and centuries of brutal anti-Semitism make it sound altogether horrific. On the other hand, such an understanding fits naturally into theories of atonement in which God redeems all of creation through God’s covenantal relationship with Israel that Christ fulfills from both sides, in part by bearing God’s judgment of sin for and in Israel and, through Israel, for the whole world. In Christ and Christ alone is our sin judged and overcome, or, to use Barthian terminology, is God’s “yes” stronger than humanity’s mixed “yes” and “no.”

That said, this difference is a difference of degree. Again drawing on Torrance, Jennings speaks of Israel’s struggle to live into its covenant destiny, of Israel’s sin as it gets exposed by the light of God’s commandments, and of Israel’s suffering that results from YHWH’s rebuke. Therefore when we place Torrance’s and Jennings’s concerns together, we gain a respect for Israel’s role as humanity’s representative and the people through whom God has chosen to redeem the world. Christ’s life, death, and resurrection only make sense in this context. Most importantly, all three theologians affirm that we cannot have Christ without Israel, and Torrance and Jennings add that Israel remains central to God’s covenantal love. In light of a long history that opposes such an affirmation, we need a new imagination in order to be who we are meant to be in the capacious body of Christ.

---

11 Ibid., 345n31; see also pp. 262-264.
In this imagination, Jews and Christians are not necessarily the two goats offered on the Day of Atonement—one marked by victory and the other by death—as Torrance has put it. Rather, perhaps a healthier imagination sees how the older brother, who knew the father first, never left his father’s side even if he, too, struggles to accept the father’s grace. As dogs enjoy the scraps from the table, and as lucky day laborers get paid a full wage for working a few hours, so too we rejoice at our good fortune with the humility that reflects the truth of the situation. This is Gentile humility.

4.2.3 The Holy Spirit

Each chapter of this dissertation concluded that its discussion would benefit from greater attention to the role of the Holy Spirit. Of the three primary theologians, Torrance may have had the most developed pneumatology—which is no surprise given that he is the most systematic of the three and pays special attention to trinitarian theology. That said, Torrance’s pneumatology or lack thereof has garnered criticisms that are especially relevant for this dissertation’s purposes. In short, Torrance gives some guidance but does not fully provide a pneumatological account of human particularity, including its eschatological dimensions.

The most influential criticisms of Torrance’s pneumatology come from Colin Gunton, who levels similar criticisms against Karl Barth (as appropriate) even as he

---

12 See Chapter 1 and Torrance, The Mediation of Christ, 37.
builds upon many of Torrance’s and Barth’s theological insights. The heart of his most relevant criticisms considers the importance of the “person” or what it means to be “personal.” The problem, as Gunton finds it in Torrance’s work, exists on two levels: that of the Trinity (or the intratrinitarian relations), and that of humanity. On the first level, Gunton proposes that we must consider whether Torrance’s “immense stress on the **homoousion** does not run the risk of flattening out the particularities, so that divine being tends to be stressed at the expense of the divine persons.”¹³ Torrance inherits this stress from early church fathers who needed to defend the Spirit’s full and equal divinity. Yet Torrance does stress the importance of the “person”—both in the Trinity and in humanity. Gunton suggests that Torrance rightly appreciates how “the Fathers contributed centrally to the development of a new concept of the person,” but Gunton nevertheless concludes that Torrance’s discussion of this is “rather limited, particularly with respect to what it might mean for human personhood. For it is there that our culture is in desperate need.”¹⁴ Thus Gunton moves from the one level to the next: we need to think more about human personhood, and to think about it trinitarianly.

Torrance points us in this direction. For example, he articulates how the “**personal or inter-personal structure of humanity**...image[s] the ineffable personal relations of the Holy Trinity,” such that we find our destiny in a communion that is at

---

¹⁴ Ibid., 131.
once vertical and horizontal.\textsuperscript{15} He also provocatively suggests that both Christ and the Spirit dually mediate one another and both function as the “personalizing person.” As Torrance puts it, “Far from crushing our creaturely nature or damaging our personal existence, the indwelling presence of God through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit has the effect of healing and restoring and deepening human personal being.”\textsuperscript{16}

Yet Torrance does not do much more than provoke when it comes to exploring the Spirit’s activity in particularizing us as persons. Myk Habets shares Gunton’s critique that Torrance does not adequately explore the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of personalization, humanization, or how we together live into our \textit{particular} eschatological identities. Habets concludes that “surely the solution is to speak more of Christ’s human experience than Torrance has done.”\textsuperscript{17} If Habets is right, then perhaps Jennings’s wish for more contemplation of Christ’s life can actually help generate the pneumatological perspective we need. Even Gary Deddo, who valiantly champions Torrance’s assailed pneumatology, agrees that Torrance’s “understanding of the

\begin{footnotes}

\footnote{Torrance, “The Soul and Person in Theological Perspective,” 109-10. See also “Goodness and Dignity of Man,” 320.}

\footnote{Torrance, \textit{The Trinitarian Faith}, 230.}


\end{footnotes}
humanizing and personalizing nature of the Spirit” could stand to be developed for the sake of unpacking the “‘practical’ implications of his work.”

In conclusion, the christological anthropology here outlined needs to partner with a stronger theology of the Spirit as it encourages proper forms of particularity—particularity that is not based on our attempts to ‘better’ ourselves at the expense of others or to approximate a false ideal but based on what we receive from God and others for the sake of living into our true eschatological identities together. To this end, Jennings’s account of the Spirit at Pentecost, as inspiring bilingualization and enabling interpersonal and intercultural enfolding, may prove useful even if it, too, does not fully articulate the Spirit’s role in particularity.

Along these lines, we would also do well to further unpack the relationship between the Holy Spirit and eschatology. As Colyer summarizes Torrance, “Through Jesus Christ and in the ineffable and transcendent Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, we come to live and move and have our being in and for God, and for others, brokenly in this life, fully in the next.” How do we live with this tension between what remains broken and what we will be and, in some sense, already are through the power of the Spirit? Can we identify the movement of the Spirit not only in Christ’s particular life, but

---


in ours, so that we can celebrate it and all the better give ourselves over to its holy work? Grasping the eschatological dimension is critical if we are to appreciate the difference between holy and unholy forms of particularity.

4.3 Conclusion

In the final analysis, these three theologians help us see Christ as our one and only Mediator, goal, and Holy Icon who invites us into an altered Christian imagination that rejects race-as-we-know-it for more appropriate forms of distinction and intimacy.

From these three theologians we also have a few guideposts to show the way forward. From Torrance, we have the initial intimation that we cannot have Jesus without Israel. From Bonhoeffer, we know that we need intimacy without immediacy; in Christ we find the co-inherence of genuine particularity and community. From both Torrance and Bonhoeffer, we have tools for thinking “from the end.” From Jennings, we know that we cannot know what we will be in the end without one another, which will inevitably require an uncomfortable yet generative openness to each other and the land. From all three in different ways we learn that we can and should have community with each other in God without erasing all forms of distinction or particularity. Rather, race-as-we-know-it must die even as group and individual differences live on in the true
Body of Christ. If “race” itself continues, we can only hope it will be so different from what it is now that it will be unrecognizable.

The practical ramifications of such a view of Christ’s mediation are too many to count. Jennings calls for a generation of Christians who reject all the privileges, stereotypes, and poisonous relational patterns that flow from the idol of whiteness through an intentional form of life together that is fundamentally characterized by Gentile humility, learning, and invitations to life-altering intimacy that changes everyone involved. How else might this christological anthropology help us address, confront, mitigate, undermine, or subvert the contemporary idolatry of racial identity?

With Jennings, this dissertation further concludes that we need images and stories that hold up the true Icon in the face of the idol of whiteness so that we might foster a better social imagination. Part 2 of this dissertation illustrates how this way of thinking can help us spot the idol of whiteness at work in popular entertainment and thereby discern ways we might subvert this idolatry for the sake of a better imagination.
PART 2: EXPOSING AND SUBVERTING THE IDOL OF WHITENESS IN ART

Now that we have a working understanding of Christ’s mediation of social identity in hand, how might this christological anthropology help us confront or subvert the idolatry of our contemporary racial imagination? Willie Jennings indicated several avenues for moving forward in the last two chapters, but now Part 2 of this dissertation will pursue one of these avenues by venturing a twofold answer. First, this christological anthropology enables us literally to see the idol of whiteness at work in popular art, which in turn enables us consciously to question and interrupt its influence on us; and second, having seen the idol at work, we can develop corresponding tactics of subversion through those same channels.

To make this argument, Part 2 first offers a case study (Chapter 5). The operations of whiteness can be seen in nearly all spheres of contemporary social life, but this chapter focuses on examples from “popular art” because popular art is so widely distributed and so clearly embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of many of this dissertation’s readers. Like any good case study, it serves as a specific example that readers can recognize as part of a much larger trend. Given the pervasiveness of
whiteness and its residence in our current social imagination, we should expect it to appear in many forms of popular art. And among the most popular of all arts is film. Therefore, this case study hones in on the most popular movies of recent years and their posters, in which, when equipped with our spatially charged christological anthropology, we literally see whiteness at work. And, having identified it so clearly, we can weaken its grip on our imagination.

Chapter 6 will consider ways we might develop corresponding modes of subversion through the arts, popular or otherwise. Jennings calls us to challenge the work of idols in our midst by way of creating “icons” of the Holy Icon.¹ Chapter 6 will consider this and related possibilities for improving our engagement with popular media, all with the ultimate goal of better living into our true, eschatological identities together. Chapter 6 then concludes with a summary and an indication of the road ahead.

¹ Jennings, “The Desire of the Church,” 249.
Chapter 5: Seeing the Idol in Popular Art

_Hollywood movies are one of the main instruments for establishing the apartheid mind-set that leads people of all colors to automatically consider white to be superior. Hollywood spreads the fictions of whiteness around the world._

--Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon, _Screen Saviors_, 1.

This case study reviews the most popular films of recent years to identify whiteness undeniably at work in our visual culture. We could study nearly any other popular segment of cultural artifacts that portrays humans, visually or otherwise. For example, we could study popular fiction and consider the attributes of those characters who receive pride of place, the attributes of the other characters, and how these characters are shown to relate to one another. Or we could study children’s cartoons, which tend either to limit girls and people of color to sidekicks or to brand those cartoons with “minority” protagonists as niche rather than for general consumption.

But fiction is not as popular as movies, and children’s products are not as widely recognizable. By the new millennium, the average U.S. American spent over 577 hours watching television, 13 hours in theaters, and 55 hours watching videos at home per year.¹ This represents nearly a third of their waking time and over five times the hours

---

¹ Veronis Suhler & Associates, “Table 909: Media Usage and Consumer Spending” (New York 1999), in their annual Communications Industry Report; based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau.
dedicated to reading books, magazines, and newspapers.² The North American box
office sells between 12 and 16 million movie tickets each year. In 2009, global cinemas
seated over 60 million viewers for Avatar. In the 2010s, Jurassic World, Star Wars:
Episode VII, and a host of superhero and animated movies have joined the blockbuster
ranks. These movies not only grace the big screen, but they appear on every other size
screen and generate all manner of paraphernalia long after the cinema-focused box
offices tally their totals. By studying something so massively popular, we can have no
doubt that these films both feed and reflect the popular social imagination.³ In this
way, we can have confidence that we are in fact uncovering a dimension of the
dominant social imagination.

This case study further focuses more on the films’ posters than on the films
themselves, although always with the films in view. Why? Films present unique
challenges for analysis, combining music, moving visual images, and narratives as they
do. But these movies’ posters open up avenues of analysis that are more

² Vera and Gordon, Screen Saviors, 8.
³ Writing for Consumption, Markets, and Culture, Jonathan Schroeder and Detlev Zwick
make a similar point regarding advertising discourse, which they argue “both reflects and
creates social norms.” Jonathan E. Schroeder and Detlev Zwick, “Mirrors of Masculinity: 
Representation and Identity in Advertising Images,” Consumption, Markets and Culture 7, no. 1
(2004): 24. They cite another critic to flesh out their claim: “the ways in which individuals
habitually perceive and conceive their lives and the social world, the alternatives they see as
open to them, and the standards they use to judge themselves and others are shaped by
advertising, perhaps without their ever being consciously aware of it.” Richard Lippke, Radical
straightforward. They function simultaneously as advertisements and symbolic
distillations of the stories in singularly visual form, both simplifying our toolkit and
amplifying those aspects of the story that are most relevant to our analysis—that is,
how the characters relate to one another. The singularly visual nature of these posters
also nicely corresponds to the visual-spatial metaphors of social identity and
relationality presented thus far, drawing most on Bonhoeffer’s account of social identity
and how whiteness functions in those visual-spatial terms. That said, analyses of
popular films can (and do) likewise show the powerful presence of whiteness,4 and the
following analyses frequently appeals to other aspects of the films (such as their
narratives and contexts).

5.1 Method

Images like these movie posters are cultural artifacts. According to visual culture
scholar David Morgan, such images “can be studied as media in which people form,
transmit, and modify their self-understandings, and in which they encounter other
groups and form, transmit, and convey (mis)understandings of them.”5 In other words,

4 As, for example, in Vera and Gordon, Screen Saviors.
5 David Morgan, The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 149.
they are a part of how we form, transmit, and modify our social identity by way of our shared social space.

This is likewise true of the films these images illustrate. As film theorists Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon put it, “films implement ways of looking at class, gender, and race differences” that not only carry “the individual and social biases of the filmmakers but also the biases and standpoints of the culture of the people for which films are produced, the culture to which the film belongs,” and we in turn recognize or misrecognize ourselves in movies.6

Scholars in multiple disciplines have come to understand “art” as consisting of cultural artifacts that are situated in social practices, such that the artifacts and the practices themselves participate in social imaginaries. Although their preferred terminology may vary, we find this approach not only in material culture studies (which claims the likes of David Morgan), but also in philosophy, as in Nicholas Wolterstorff’s recent work,7 and among art historians such as Robin Jensen who take seriously how what we often call “artworks” are culturally embedded.8 Those who study

---

8 According to Jensen, “learning to ‘read’ art works...means learning to read a visual language,” a “visual idiom” that is no “less historical, contextually determined or theologically sophisticated than the verbal.” Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 5-6.
advertisements deploy similar methods. For example, for Jonathan Schroder and Detlev Zwick, “advertising both creates and contributes to culture.”

Almost everyone knows how to “read” the visual discourse of these images. The problem, however, is that this is an implicit, often subconscious skill. Let us here make it explicit.

The method of analysis first and foremost considers the style and content of the images, primarily exploring the selection and arrangement of the human (or humanoid) characters. These compositional cues about selection, placement, and arrangement align with the narratives of the films they portray, often by indicating a character’s importance by way of size, centrality, and location on the vertical axis. The greater the character’s relative importance, the larger, higher, and more central they will be (and sometimes their actor’s names may appear more to the left). These compositional choices are likely conscious decisions on the part of the artists or designers, who want or need to portray essential aspects of the film to make the poster a fitting advertisement.

Note that this spatial arrangement roughly corresponds to this dissertation’s spatial metaphor of social identity. In the posters, the most important characters are most central; in the metaphor, the mediator (the Icon or an idol) is central. In each

---


10 This is a subtle form of priority, reflecting our instinct to “read” from left to right.
case, the most ideal human occupies a central position and informs how we imagine ourselves and others in light of this central ideal, making it a mediating reality for us. As this chapter attempts to show, these central characters may not be idols in and of themselves, but they represent an iteration of the idol of whiteness. That is, these characters often take the form of a central, white male messianic figure around and beneath whom characters of other social positions take their places, mapping out something that looks suspiciously like the racially charged social imagination as it grew in the colonial-imperial era, but now in the context of movies with central heroic protagonists. Movies invite us to see ourselves in, through, and in relation to this heroic white messiah figure, who is much like the “centered white man” Jennings identifies as the false ideal of whiteness. In this way, the posters show the influence of the idol of whiteness on our popular imagination.

To avoid the charge of cherry picking, I will consider the ten highest-grossing films as of April, 2016, including both domestic (North American) and worldwide rankings, which expands the list from ten to fourteen films. With only two exceptions,

---


12 I will not consider rankings that attempt to adjust for inflation for three reasons. (1) Adjusting for inflation is a difficult and inexact task with debatable results. (2) These figures are only available for North American box offices, because while North American adjustments are difficult, worldwide ones are impossible. (3) The movies that top the inflation-adjusted lists span too many decades for this case study, which needs recent movies to indicate the ongoing, present power of this social imagination.
these films also all have release or re-release dates after 2007, meaning these are not only popular but recent. Lastly, among the multiple posters that exist for each movie, I will focus on the versions that (i) show multiple characters together and (ii) are the most commonly available online.

5.2 The Movies and their Posters

Given their massive popularity, millions of people have seen these top films’ posters, which portray often-diverse casts in certain spatial arrangements that reflect the narratives of the films and the logics of whiteness. Before reading what follows, I encourage readers to conduct their own initial overview by flipping through the

---

Multiple sources confirm these lists, including Box Office Mojo (used also by the International Movie Database), The Numbers (conducted by Nash Info Services), and the AMC Filmsite.

13 The purpose is to consider how characters are visually related to one another.

14 Based on multiple Google Image and Shopping searches using variants of the movie’s name, with and without the term “poster” included in the searches, as well as poster availability on Amazon.com.

15 The images of posters in the following case study fall under the Fair Use Policy, as the dissertation (1) directly comments on the products for (2) non-commercial and (3) educational purposes, which (4) does not compete with the owners’ ability to earn revenue from the images. The logic is similar to that used to justify appearances on Wikipedia, e.g., in the online summary here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Avatar-Teaser-Poster.jpg. All official poster images here referenced are available in high resolution online at “Internet Movie Poster Awards,” http://www.impawards.com/, except for the Dark Knight Rises poster.
following pages and glancing at the collection of images as a whole. This exercise should leave a distinct impression.
5.2.1 Avatar (2009)

Figure 1: Avatar Poster 1

Avatar reigns among worldwide blockbusters and comes in second in the domestic ranks, falling just behind James Cameron’s other titan, Titanic (discussed next). The advertisements wisely tie the 2009 movie to Cameron’s smash hit from 1999. And like Titanic, the images prominently feature the romantic pair of the film to the exclusion of all other characters. The poster images follow distinct trends in which the leading male and female’s faces dominate either the center of the poster or, more

---

17 Poster design by The Refinery, “Avatar 2 Sheet [image],” http://therefinerycreative.com/#/l/project/3847. Film distributed by 20th Century Fox. (See footnote 15 on page 285 for Fair Use disclosure.)
often, flank it so that we see half of a face on either side. Right away, we should suspect
that the movie highlights a romance between a white man—who might also be a blue
humanoid man—and a blue humanoid woman.

The fairly unique motif of splitting the face does not make us notice the face any
less—it takes up far too much of the visual field for that (see Figure 2). Instead, this split
references key elements of the narrative. First, the film depicts a sci-fi colonial
encounter between technologically superior, greedy, colonial-imperial Earthlings and
feather-wearing, half-naked, blue-skinned Pandora natives whose princess might as well
be named Pocahontas. When the split-face motif opposes a white man’s face with a
blue face—either a blue version of his face or that of the blue princess’s—then perhaps
it alludes to this encounter between two peoples. Second, the split faces allude to the
movie’s eponymous plot feature. The hero and protagonist of the story—a disabled, ex-
military, attractive white man from Earth—regains his physical dexterity and rescues the
humanoid natives by assuming a flesh-and-blood “avatar,” eventually merging with the
new body and leaving his broken human body behind. Figure 2 above shows the
contrast of his original face and his avatar face. Is whiteness visible in these posters that
often feature blue people? The intent of this case study is not primarily to accuse any
one film or poster of reproducing whiteness but to allow readers to see whiteness at
work for themselves among all of the posters and films when taken together.

Nevertheless, we can name features of each that likely reflect whiteness’s influence and
that certainly participate in its operations. For example, although some of the Avatar
posters visually indicate the female heroine as equally dominant—as in Figure 1, in which her face is behind yet larger than the hero’s—nevertheless, most versions that show them together do in fact feature the hero more by making his image larger and in front of hers. Similarly, when the actors’ names appear on the posters, the male actor’s name (Sam Worthington) comes first even if the image of the princess (played by Zoe Saldana, an actress of color) is left of the hero’s. Although male superiority is not unique to whiteness, it is a central component, as is white superiority.

The white man’s prominence in the posters reflects his dominance in the story. In the posters, his non-avatar eyes are unmistakably blue. Although he condescends to take the form of the natives, trading his blue eyes for blue skin, he does not become “one of them” like one among many. Instead, his innate superiority saves the day. He wins the princess, whose prior suitor conveniently dies in battle; and although he submits to learning from them for a time, he ends up being their unanimously respected leader, the one who alone tames their planet’s wildest creature and around whom they all bow. He is, in short, their savior.

Yet Avatar’s participation in whiteness is somewhat nuanced. Earth in the story is a clear analog for Western empires during the colonial era. The blue-eyed savior carries the White Man’s Burden to new lands—or new planets—even if means going native and turning on the greedy, militarized corporations that drive conquest. Avatar vilifies that which we would most readily associate with imperial-colonialism and romanticizes the visually stunning, alluring, and immensely desirable natives and their
equally stunning, alluring, and desirable world. Such romanticization is a double-edged sword, given that it plays on fantasies of the “noble savage” and “benevolent imperialism.”\(^{18}\) The prior chapter’s explanations of whiteness did not clarify the connection between whiteness and the belittling “feminization” of women, land, and non-white peoples (specifically those considered “natives” by Europeans during the colonial era). Yet the connection is clear for those who keep an eye for it. Women, land, and “natives” are often romanticized in the whiteness-infected imagination as being vulnerable, exploitable, and desirable.\(^{19}\)

Adding more nuance, the word “Avatar” on the posters appears in an Eastern-influenced script, alluding to the non-Western origins of the concept. And the film and posters promote interracial, intercultural mixing. In these ways, Avatar repeats the tropes of films such as *Dances with Wolves* and *The Last Samurai*, in which a white man joins a nonwhite people as their savior in battle against his former people. Like those movies, Avatar questions yet perpetuates the patterns of whiteness. We can see this in the posters, which visually strive to make the heroine of equal importance but

---


\(^{19}\) For an insightful study on this, see Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003). With this in mind, films like Avatar, *Dances with Wolves, Pocahontas*, and *The Last Samurai* are far from breaking the mold. Carter’s review of Avatar likewise explores the connection of women, land, and natives in the colonial imagination. Carter, “Avatar: An Amazing and Troubling Film.”
ultimately fail; the film persists in offering the standard white male as her lover and her and her people’s heroic savior.


The messianic white self is the redeemer of the weak, the great leader who saves blacks from slavery or oppression, rescues people of color from poverty and disease, or leads Indians in battle for their dignity and survival. This is a narcissistic fantasy found in many Hollywood movies. Often the white messiah is an alienated hero, a misfit within his own society, mocked and rejected until he becomes a leader of a minority group or of foreigners. He finds himself by self-sacrifice to liberate the natives. White messiahs are overwhelmingly male; women do not seem to qualify for this exalted status. Often the white outsider is instantly worshiped by the natives, treated like visiting royalty or a god. This is presented as to be expected, as no less than he deserves. The messiah is marked by charisma, the extraordinary quality that legitimizes his role as leader and that of the foreign population as followers.20

20 Vera and Gordon, *Screen Saviors*, 33-34.
*Avatar*’s protagonist leads natives in a battle for dignity and survival. On Earth, he had been a broken man, but on this new planet he can redeem himself by redeeming an alien tribe. *Avatar* only diverges from Vera and Gordon’s description in that the white male hero is not instantly worshipped but must earn the trust of his future followers. His sacrifice, moreover, makes him one of them even in his very body—which is a feature missing in films like *Dances with Wolves*, *The Last Samurai*, and those that Vera and Gordon interrogate—but he still has such innate superiority that he naturally deserves to be their leader.\(^{21}\) As theologian J. Kameron Carter puts it in his incisive review, “White existence continues as the space of redemption” but now subsumes even multicultural existence.\(^{22}\) The hero’s multiracial, native body does not destroy his white superiority; rather, his white superiority saves all native bodies.

One might object that these posters clearly indicate that the film is hyper-fictional (with floating islands and ridable pterosaurs and shiny blue humanoids), thereby undercutting any criticisms of how it portrays social identities. What is the harm in depicting the patterns of whiteness in such a fake world? Would not viewers refrain from connecting the fake world to our real world? In answer, we are first and foremost here exploring the ways in which whiteness has infected our social imagination—and therefore we see it at work in the fictitious worlds produced by our

\(^{21}\) That said, these other films employ other methods of suggesting just how much the white hero becomes “one” with his new people—for example, *Dances with Wolves* derives its title from its white hero’s newly given Sioux name.

\(^{22}\) Carter, “*Avatar*: An Amazing and Troubling Film.”
infected imaginations. Second, fiction invites us in so that the imaginary world links with our own, with endless connections forming between the two. As many of the *Avatar* posters say, “Enter the World” (see Figure 2). *Avatar* further facilitates this suspension of disbelief for imaginative entry by way of an intense 3-D IMAX experience.

Indeed, even fiction’s act of invitation often participates in whiteness. Recall that, for Jennings, whiteness entails an “invitation, a becoming, a transformation” into “a way of being in the world and...seeing the world” in which “the one” represents the “many” as “normative humanity.” Fiction as a whole tends to reinforce this pattern by repeatedly offering up an endless host of White Man protagonists through whom we are meant to journey through fictional worlds that wrap back around to our own. What

---


might otherwise echo a theological truth instead becomes idolatrous, in that our protagonists so often resemble a certain idol that tries to replace the true Icon.

For its part, *Avatar* invites us to enter this particular fictional world through the figure of its white male hero, in that he is not only the protagonist but the main representative of us Earthlings, and his avatar-enabled experience as both one of us and one of them better allows us to imagine making their world our own through him. We enter a new, better world of communion through him. Although *Avatar* plays off the Eastern concept of “avatar,” the christological resonances here are deafening.
5.2.2 Titanic (1997, 2012)

Figure 3: Titanic Poster\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{25} Design by BLT Communications, “Titanic Key Art [image],” http://bltcommunications.com/Project/titanic, made for Paramount Pictures. Film produced and distributed by Paramount and 20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox. (See footnote 15 on page 285 for Fair Use disclosure.)
Although the historical 1912 Titanic sank in the frigid Atlantic, becoming a well-known international tragedy, James Cameron’s 1997 Titanic sailed into the sunset as an international success. In 2012, it set sail once again in theaters for a victory lap. Titanic comes in second in the worldwide box office charts and third in the domestic.

Like Cameron’s other darling, Avatar, this movie’s posters all feature a man and a woman, yet unlike Avatar’s posters, these all put the couple in physical arrangements that clearly connote a romantic (i.e. sexually charged) relationship. The most popular posters float their likenesses above an image of the notorious ship. As with Avatar, no other characters make the cut, further indicating that this movie fits the romance genre. Even if we know nothing of the history of the Titanic, we can further infer that this is a romantic, action-packed drama, not a romantic comedy, from the ominous pairing of the slogan, “Nothing on earth could come between them” with the image of the ship’s looming prow on the verge of cleaving the couple’s embrace.

In this sense, we see three characters: the white man and the white woman (both of whom are young and attractive, which is no surprise to anyone who has seen many movies), and the ship. The ship, after all, lends its name to the movie’s title. From seeing the movie, we confirm that the ship is not only the setting that brings the couple together but a villain that threatens to divide them.
The initial impression of the poster fits the pattern that, on the whole, confirms whiteness at work in popular culture. That is, it posits the attractive young white couple as the center of its universe.

The subtle and not-so-subtle clues in the poster carry through in the film, which deepens *Titanic*'s similarities to *Avatar* but with crucial differences that might reflect their different genres. The fundamental plot feature of *Titanic*, aside from this couple falling in passionate love with each other, is that the ship sinks, putting the man in the position to save the woman by sacrificing his life. The ship succeeds in coming between them. Thus, like *Avatar*, the white male hero truly is a savior of the “vulnerable” through self-sacrifice, but unlike *Avatar*, the hero does not survive the end of the movie to reap the spoils of his victory. In this sense, *Titanic* more resembles tragedies in the proper sense of the word in a way that heightens the romantic elements of the film. Heterosexual women are the primary target of mainstream romantic dramas, so it makes sense that the woman character lives a long, happy life because of her sacrificial lover-hero who lives on in her heart (an explicit metaphor used by the movie and its soundtrack). His beginnings as someone of a lower class, his rise to claim the prized

---

26 Even the coat that Kate Winslet wore while portraying the woman was several sizes too large to make her look more “vulnerable” in the sinking scenes. See IMDB, “Titanic,” http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120338/trivia, and “This coat was...,” Recycled Movie Costumes, 2013, http://recycledmoviecostumes.tumblr.com/post/46084051168/this-coat-was-first-seen-in-james-camerons-1997.

27 That is, this theme interweaves the film’s narrative by way of the Celine Deon song, “My Heart Will Go On” (which claims that he lives on in her heart), and by way of the heart-
woman, and his effective sacrifice on her behalf all fit the general model of Vera and Gordon’s white messiahs but now in the key of a romantic drama. The romantic savior dies for his beloved yet lives on in her heart. However much we distinguish this fictional account from Christology-proper, *Titanic* strands us in the inhospitable waters of our common social imagination, and its christological allusions that bear the stamp of whiteness simply cannot keep us afloat.

shaped diamond necklace that serves as the impetus for having the elderly woman recount her story of young love on the Titanic.
5.2.3 *Jurassic World* (2015)

![Jurassic World Official Poster](image)

*Figure 4: Jurassic World Official Poster*\(^\text{28}\)

\(^{28}\) Design by Bond, “Jurassic World Print Campaign [image],” http://www.wearebond.com/#/jurassic. Film distributed by Universal Pictures. (See footnote 15 on page 285 for Fair Use disclosure.)
Figure 5: *Jurassic World* Fan-made Poster

In 1992, *Jurassic Park* teasers claimed it was 65 million years in the making, and audiences could almost believe it given the massive innovations in realistic computer graphics that it debuted. Anecdotally, the film was so realistic for its time that a particularly exciting scene in which a velociraptor leaps up to bite a girl’s dangling leg incited my aunt to throw her own leg over the theater seat beside her. Technology continues to advance, making 2009’s *Avatar* the closest recent analog in this respect. That said, twenty-three years after its forebear, *Jurassic World* benefits from the fan base and fame generated by *Jurassic Park* and its string of sequels, dominating those sequels to claim fourth place for both worldwide and domestic all-time box office rankings. Like *Jurassic Park* and *Avatar*, *Jurassic World* used the latest and greatest in filming and editing technology to make a visually striking, engrossing experience to wow audiences around the world. And, like both *Jurassic Park* and *Avatar*, it has more than succeeded.

*Jurassic World* stands apart from the other films here studied in that the vast majority of its movie posters do not show any human characters. The most common poster variants feature a highly stylized logo that directly plays on the original logo for *Jurassic Park*, both tying it to its famous predecessor and also implying it could be a real theme park (which was also part of what made the original so compelling).\(^{30}\) The other

\(^{30}\) As another anecdote, as a nine-year-old I saw a cleverly vague advertisement with the logo and the tagline in a scientific magazine well before the film's release, and I believed there
most common posters feature one of the fictional theme park’s main attractions—the paleo-monsters—or the white male protagonist in the pose of an action hero, driving a motorcycle among a pack of running “velociraptors” (a.k.a. “raptors”; see Figure 4, which is also the image on the DVD boxes).

A number of fan-generated posters try to correct this oversight on the part of the official *Jurassic World* poster repertoire by incorporating more of the human cast, and always in ways in that reflect the common patterns of relationships in the stories and the posters of many popular movies. One such poster making the rounds online appears above (Figure 5). Still, many fan-made posters for *Jurassic World* limit their characters to the dinosaurs—especially the raptors—and the white male hero played by actor Chris Pratt. The following analysis will first discuss the official posters and then briefly turn to the unofficial ones. Regardless of who originally designed them, these posters reflect both the film’s story and the influence of whiteness.

The official poster that shows the Indiana Jones-esque white man driving a motorcycle with raptors succinctly captures key aspects of the narrative, in which this talented, attractive white man assumes the role of “alpha” among the pack of intelligent, ferocious predators. Although the velociraptors and the *Tyrannosaurus rex* are still portrayed as highly dangerous as they were in *Jurassic Park*, they are no longer the primary threat that drives the suspenseful action of the film. That role now falls to
the formidable *Indominus rex*, a newer, bigger, and badder dino. The genre of *Jurassic World* moves more toward a campy summer blockbuster, perhaps aware that the creativity and intellectually provocative nature of *Jurassic Park* would be difficult to replicate. And perhaps befitting this shift in genre, the dinosaurs are more anthropomorphized. It therefore makes sense that posters would feature the dinosaurs. But how does this fit with the prominence of the white male hero?

To understand the relational dynamics at work, we must first evaluate the anthropomorphization of the dinosaurs. The *Indominus rex* gets characterized as a murderous sociopath flawed by her very nature who gets loose using her raptor-like wits in order to kill as many creatures as possible, all for the fun of it. The film also personalizes the four raptors by giving them names, distinguishing physical characteristics, and special forms of relationality with each other and their trainer, the hero of the story. In a witty review, Laura Bradley quips that the best female character of the movie is Blue, the most authoritative of the raptors who, with the *T. rex*, helps defeat the *Indominus rex* at the end of the film.31 And yet even Blue is not the *alpha*. A major plot element is the hero’s ability to treat the raptors with respect and successfully competing with the *Indominus rex* to be the raptor pack’s alpha leader. In these ways, the posters capture key aspects of the story either by focusing on the dinosaurs

themselves as key attractions and characters of the film, and by exhibiting the insanely exceptional charisma of the white male leader. The point bears repeating: neither the indomitable carnivore nor the clever raptor are alpha of their all-female pack of terrifyingly dangerous monsters. Instead, the white hero leads his pack, dominates the indomitable, and saves the day.

The fan-made poster, like the other fan-made posters that show multiple human characters, follows a common visual pattern. In this pattern, the hero or protagonist occupies a visual-spatial position that includes (and usually combines) being in front, on top, and in the center. The importance of other characters is indicated by their relative sizing and positioning, revolving around, beside, and below the protagonist. And sometimes the villain or threat looms large, partially obscured from view. We see this perfectly executed in this sample fan poster (Figure 5). Above, in the shadows, lurks the *Indominus rex*, threatening the humans. The powerful white man alone occupies front and center, looking determined, confident, and “centered.” Below his chest floats the attractive, somewhat large and slightly fearful face of a white woman who we can correctly surmise is his love interest. Behind him (both further in the background and at his backside), we find small images of two white boys who are secondary characters in the film, and, above the boys, the bust of a man of color—the proprietor of the theme park. White women, white children, and men of color all revolve around the white man.

If this were just one instance, or if it had nothing to do with the actual plot of the movie, we could dismiss this spatial dynamic as random or coincidental. Maybe race
and gender and the differing attributes of the various characters have nothing to do with their spatial arrangements here. But as this case study shows, this poster’s portrayal is not an isolated instance. It accurately captures key aspects of the film, meaning we cannot dismiss it as the work of an insane fan gone rogue. If anything, the fact that fans can so faithfully reproduce these patterns of portrayal suggests just how influential and widespread they have become.

Notably, in the story, all of the white characters in the fan poster survive (even if an absurd number of people—including white people—get chomped, stomped, and ripped to death). We could say this is understandable because, after all, a good summer action blockbuster needs action and happily-ever-after romance, and it absolutely cannot kill any child characters. But the quirky proprietor—the man of color—does not get to fly off his island like his quirky predecessor did in Jurassic Park. Interestingly, the aging white male proprietor of the earlier Jurassic Park dies in Michael Crichton’s book, getting eaten by chicken-sized dinos at the end of that story as a fitting punishment for his greedy presumptions. When translated to film, this white male character (played by Richard Attenborough) is just too likable and grandfatherly despite his flaws, and he survives. In Jurassic World, the proprietor’s lovable quirks apparently are not lovable enough. Instead, he attempts a daring rescue mission that is not only ineffective but

32 The poetic justice here is that in the book Jurassic Park, these dinosaurs were among the proprietor’s first creations. He knew all along that they used venom to kill wounded prey, which he accidentally becomes as he takes a stroll while dreaming of making another park.
makes the situation worse, leading to many other deaths at his disastrous theme park. Incredibly unlike the white messiahs described by Vera and Gordon, this man of color not only plays second fiddle to the protagonist, but he just does not have what it takes to make his sacrifice count.

5.2.4 Typical Franchises with the Typical Pattern: *Harry Potter* and *The Dark Knight* Movies

*Jurassic World* is the first of the movies discussed so far that exists as part of a popular franchise. (However, rumor has it that *Avatar* has several sequels in the works.) Its fan poster also best captures the various elements of the common pattern that, on the whole, clearly reflects the influence of whiteness. With the exception of *Frozen*, all of the remaining films to be discussed are likewise representatives of lucrative franchises, and all have posters that reflect some aspects of the general pattern.

Those that most obviously fit the bill include the last of the Harry Potter films (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part II* in 2011), which comes in at number eight worldwide, and *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), members of the recent Batman franchise that hold the eighth and tenth places on the domestic chart.

In some sense, the names of the franchises say it all. Harry Potter, we know, is a white male wizard with stunning innate talent. Batman is not just a white male hero—
he is a *superhero*. They are the namesake protagonists of their franchises, case closed.

That said, maybe their stories and visualizations could surprise us. Below is a representative poster for each movie.
Figure 6: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part II* Poster

Figure 7: The Dark Knight Poster

34 Used with permission from Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved. Design by BLT Communications, “The Dark Knight Key Art [image],” http://bltcommunications.com/Project/the-dark-knight, for Warner Bros. Pictures. (See footnote 15 on page 285 for Fair Use disclosure.)
Figure 8: The Dark Knight Rises Poster\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{35} The poster’s design greatly resembles a series attributed to Ignition Creative and LA (seen here: \url{http://www.impawards.com/2012/dark_knight_rises_gallery.html}), but its provenance remains unclear. Film distributed by Warner Bros. Entertainment, which holds the copyright to such material. (See footnote 15 on page 285 for Fair Use disclosure.)
These three posters have much in common. The *Harry Potter* and *Dark Knight Rises* posters both feature a lineup of three characters, with the eponymous protagonist front and center. On one side stands a white woman, and a white man on the other. All three posters have a grim atmosphere, achieved through dark and gray tones, and, in the case of the first two, elements of fire and smoke. The characters’ expressions and body language suggest that all have serious business to finish. Clues of ongoing violence litter the posters, cued by combinations of fire, rubble, debris, and besmirched clothing or advanced body armor. Although all characters are some combination of young and in good physical shape, none are as obviously attractive as those featured in the posters of the movies discussed above. From these elements, we gather that these are all action movies in which any romance takes a back seat and that can be described as “gothic.”

The white male heroes of these movies clearly face intense adversity and will be called upon to undergo equally intense sacrifice. These movies’ plots resemble those that Vera and Gordon labeled as “white messiah” movies. Yet there are some differences, perhaps hinted at by the posters. First, the stories do not show the white messiah primarily saving a group non-white people, but all people (either all people of Gotham city, as with Batman, or all people everywhere, as with Harry Potter). This may explain why the posters do not prominently feature non-white characters, since the beneficiaries are not just non-white people, but this does not entirely explain why the movies have very few non-white characters to begin with. This is especially true of the
Batman movies, the makers of which might have been uneasy showing a decidedly white Batman beating up non-white criminals.36 Second, Batman never seems to come out completely on top, as seen in the rather surprising plot twist at the end of The Dark Knight. But he keeps trying even in the darkest of circumstances. This seems to suggest a mitigation of the ways in which the films perform whiteness, all while heightening their gothic darkness. This may also have something to do with the franchise’s interest in setting the stage for more sequels.

While Batman’s inability to win a decisive victory may undercut his status as a full-fledged white messiah, Harry Potter’s status as a Christ figure is so well known that books have been written about it.37 Out of love, the white male hero (Harry Potter) willingly dies to save everyone else, and yet he soon lives again because of a special facet of that fictional world’s reality. Even if we prefer to think of these Harry Potter and Batman films as diverging from those that tout a white messiah, they cannot escape the fact that they are about a talented, white male savior. All other characters are secondary, revolving around him as sidekicks, enemies, and the faceless masses in need


of a savior. The posters visualize this, with subtle adaptations to fit the films’ violent, gothic genre. Even with the extra dose of pessimism found in the Batman series, for all their gothic darkness, these movies and their posters do little to tone down the standard patterns of whiteness.

5.2.5 Marvel Movies: *The Avengers (2012) & Co.*

Like a shapeshifting phoenix, the Marvel of comic book fame rose from the ashes of bankruptcy to become a powerhouse of the entertainment industry at the turn of the millennium, launching several interrelated franchises that integrate all manner of media (film, television, cartoons, books, etc.) in ways that enable them to endlessly recycle the stories of the superheroes and supervillains that Marvel comics established in prior decades. In 2009, Marvel Entertainment shifted shape once again, becoming a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company. Since then, its films and related paraphernalia have taken over the world. In this section, we will briefly consider *Iron Man 3* (2013, tenth worldwide), *The Avengers* (2012, fifth worldwide and domestic), and its sequel, *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015, seventh worldwide and ninth domestic).
5.2.5.1 *Iron Man 3* (2013)

![Iron Man 3 Poster](image)

**Figure 9: Iron Man 3 Poster**

The most common poster for *Iron Man 3* (not pictured) resembles others that feature the white male hero by himself, looking embattled yet determined in a scene of action and danger. The poster above, however, is the most available that includes other characters. It fits the common pattern that places its white male hero front and center, favors white characters in general, and places women and characters of color in “lesser” positions beneath or peripheral to the hero.

In this particular instance, the white male hero protectively embraces his worried love interest—an attractive, blond, white woman who looks all the more vulnerable when surrounded by men wearing weaponized armor. The angled perspective renders her all the more below and beneath her protector. His attention cannot rest on her as he prepares to defend them from a threat over the viewer’s shoulder. Despite his injuries, he remains on task. As in the other franchise posters above, the image here resembles a war scene but with skewed perspective to place the characters in their proper symbolic relationships. Peripheral to the couple we see a black man in armor like the protagonist’s and a mostly obscured white man, both of whom look young and attractive. Above yet behind the protagonist, we see a white man who looks older and who sports atypical hair and clothing—we can rightly surmise he is the villain. All of the men are looking at the same thing, while the woman glances in another direction, suggesting that much is going on and perhaps that she is not a legitimate part of the battle. That most characters are shown at a slight tilt adds to the
sense of instability and danger, as do the lighting, smoke, background indications of war, and the foregrounded rubble.

Can the protective hero overcome the odds? By watching the movie, we get the expected answer: with the help of his sidekicks, the superhero comes out victorious yet again. There is little left to say.
5.2.5.2 The Avengers (2012) and The Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015)

Figure 10: The Avengers Poster

39 Design by BLT Communications, “The Avengers,” http://bltcommunications.com/Project/the-avengers, for Walt Disney Motion Pictures. (See footnote 15 on page 285 for Fair Use disclosure.)
Figure 11: The Avengers: Age of Ultron Poster

---

More interesting are the posters for *The Avengers* movies, which pose a unique challenge to this case study. *The Avengers* and its sequels use characters that have their own mini-franchises: Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, and the Hulk. More so than the other films discussed so far, *The Avengers* and its sequels (including *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*) rely on an ensemble cast of characters that are often white male hero protagonists in other contexts. The challenge here, then, entails figuring out just who, if anyone, is the protagonist among protagonists. Related, a difficult fallout of this particular ensemble approach is that one can find endless posters available that put the characters in slightly different configurations; or, if looking for posters of the franchise itself, you can even purchase posters that feature one character at a time, including those that get marginalized on most of the ensemble posters. Despite their ensemble cast of heroes, however, the Avengers cannot free themselves from the grip of whiteness.

The secondary challenge of having too many posters to choose from disappears once we look more narrowly at movie-specific posters available for sale on Amazon.com, where we can confirm that the two shown above are the most common. Additionally, many of the fan-made posters follow similar overall patterns in terms of differentiating between primary and secondary characters. The problem posed by an ensemble cast leads to a blurring of the standard pattern because now the image must accommodate a large number of story-critical characters, and they do not just have one
white male hero in the middle, surrounded by sidekicks and other secondary
customers—now they have between two and four central figures. Yet this too is a
temporary problem.

Look again at the posters above. They bear a striking resemblance to the Iron
Man 3 poster but now with more characters. In the poster for The Avengers, all of the
characters have the postures, expressions, and body language we have come to expect
of central heroes. But now the hero of Iron Man 3 appears to be the hero among
heroes, larger and more foregrounded than the others. The white male figure to his left
(“Thor” in the Marvel Universe) is only slightly behind the Iron Man hero, and is more
peripheral, making him just a notch behind in prominence. In the background of the
image, we see a slew of characters that are hard to decisively distinguish in terms of
prominence: two white men, a huge green man, a white woman, and a black man.
Although these all bear the marks of heroes, they here seem less important. The only
characters who are clearly not white men exist in the smoky background.

In the poster for Avengers: Age of Ultron, the Iron Man hero remains central, but
now he is slightly supplanted by another white male hero popularly known as “Captain
America.” Although he stood in the background of the first poster, he now holds pride
of place. Next in terms of size and placement come another white male hero (Thor) and
the huge green man (the Hulk). Note that in the Marvel storyline, the huge, green Hulk
character is a white man who “hulks out” when angry, thus complicating his status as a
white male hero. He does not retain the look of a beautiful white messiah, and perhaps
this is why he often appears alongside yet just behind the other three white male heroes who get the most prominence in Avengers posters on the whole (Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor). These are the four who have their own mini-franchises, and thus it also makes sense that they would receive pride of place as a group among the other, more secondary heroes.

In the next tier down, in the bottom left, we find three slightly smaller figures who wear all black (meaning their costumes are not as distinctive as those of the main four). Here we find a white woman, a white man, and, the most peripheral on this half of the poster, a black man who alone appears unprepared for battle. Yet smaller than this group of three are a white woman and white man in the upper right corner.

Given their postures and arrangement, we can surmise that these nine characters are the united front of heroes. The faint figures flying in the sky likely represent their enemies. The posters accord with the whiteness-imbued pattern, in that the central figures remain standard white male heroes. Peripheral to these two-to-four main heroes are the only women (all white) and only people of color (just one man).

The movies themselves validate the basic claim, even if they also complicate the precise ranking of the heroes relative to each other. Clearly, the Iron Man and Captain America heroes are the most important, and this plays out in the two movies, in which they dominate in terms of screen time (with times similar to one another). Thor and the Hulk actually have less screen time in both movies than one of the white female characters (called Black Widow—the red-headed woman in black clothing in the
posters). Perhaps these two characters (Hulk and Thor) have a disproportionate prominence in the posters because they, unlike Black Widow, have their own mini-franchises, or because the makers thought this would be a better advertisement, or both. In this very narrow regard, the posters are more deeply repeating the patterns of whiteness than the movies themselves (but this is not the conclusion of a global comparison of the posters and movies, given how many factors would have to be considered).

Is the ultimate hero Iron Man or Captain America? If limiting the study to these two movies, Captain America gets about five more minutes of total screen time. But as the Collider’s Dave Trumbore puts it, the Avengers “franchise no doubt revolves around Robert Downey Jr.’s Iron Man,” so much so that an official Marvel infographic timeline


Nick Fury—the black male character of the posters—does not have his time reported in these.
of the movies makes “him into a pseudo-Christ figure by demarcating the timeline with
BIM (‘Before Iron Man’) and AIM (‘After Iron Man’).” Likewise reflecting how Marvel
brands these characters, the film credits at the end of The Avengers lists the actors who
played Iron Man, Captain America, the Hulk, and Thor in that order, followed by the
actress who played Black Widow. The list of actors for The Avengers: Age of Ultron
likewise begins with Iron Man but then mixes up the order of the other three uber-
superheroes, and again lists Black Widow just after these four leading white men. It
would seem that Iron Man is the overall winner, with Captain America taking a
comfortable second.

At least one aspect of the Avengers movies works against the overwhelming
flood of ways in which they participate in whiteness. We might justly hope for this, too,
in light of director Joss Whedon’s avowed feminism and criticism of Jurassic World as
sexist. Perhaps Whedon struggles with the momentum of the institution that employs
him and all the Avengers baggage that he inherited, so that he must content himself

42 Dave Trumbore, “Marvel Releases THE AVENGER’S Movie Timeline,” Collider, May 17,
44 IMDB, “The Avengers: Age of Ultron,”
45 For more on that story, see Gregory Wakeman, “Joss Whedon Offers Jurassic World
an All-Star Non-Apology for Calling It Sexist,” CinemaBlend, April 2015,
http://www.cinemablend.com/new/Joss-Whedon-Offers-Jurassic-World-An-All-Star-Non-
Apology-Calling-It-Sexist-70876.html.
with small victories.\textsuperscript{46} And, logically speaking, having feminist sympathies is not the same as dedicating oneself to eradicating the imprint of whiteness. Regardless of how it came about, the one black character of the Avengers is a paradox. In the credits for these two movies, the name of the actor who plays this one black character (Samuel L. Jackson) does not appear until the eleventh and ninth names listed, respectively, and last on the DVD cover. The marginalization of this character in the posters and in the credits may befit his race (if squarely operating within the patterns of whiteness) and his screen time. But the Avenger storyline indicates that he is the ultimate leader of the Avengers, a group of superheroes brought together by this black character’s initiative and sustained by his ongoing leadership. Moreover, earlier Marvel versions of this character were white. In this sense, the recent Avengers franchise attempts to undercut the dominant paradigm that participates in whiteness even if it fails to escape its grasp.

In the final analysis, the Avengers movies, like their posters, feature a host of white male heroes next to whom all women and people of color are secondary, tertiary, or not in the picture. And despite the innovative potential latent in the ensemble cast option, this cast is not there. Instead, the cast is both saturated with white male heroes

and still has a central figure around whom others are peripheral. Just as Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, Iron Man is Hero of heroes.

5.2.6 The Star Wars Saga

Despite the success of Marvel’s franchises, the Stars Wars franchise has taken the film universe by force with its most recent iteration, Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens (2015). At the time of this writing, The Force Awakens comes in third worldwide but continues to climb as it finishes its initial run in theaters. It already holds a comfortable lead on the domestic charts as well as numerous box office records. If that is not enough domination for one franchise, the original Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope (1977) comes in eighth on the domestic chart, just behind its prequel, Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace (1999).

This chapter waited to discuss these films and their posters because we are now better positioned to appreciate their evolution. While the posters for the first two (along with their corresponding films) fit the predictable model, this most recent (and most dominant) film and its poster break from tradition in key respects. Let us therefore consider the posters in chronological order.
5.2.6.1 Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope (1977)

Figure 12: Star Wars Poster\footnote{Artwork by Tom Chantrell, 1977. Film distributed by 20th Century Fox. (See footnote 15 on page 285 for Fair Use disclosure.)}
The poster for the original *Star Wars* predates all others in this study, yet it fits right in, signaling that the pattern has been around for decades. This poster may in fact be paradigmatic. For instance, the fan-made poster for *Jurassic World* is described as imitating that of *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*, a style that some commenters dub too “generic” but that others admire.\(^\text{48}\)

For our purposes, the arrangement of characters is indeed generic, displaying the white male hero flanked by white sidekicks, one man and one woman, who come close to sharing the central figure’s prominence. In this way, it resembles the *Harry Potter* and *The Dark Knight Rises* posters. Here, all three are relatively young, shooting laser beams from guns, and wearing a lot of white clothing, which further sets them apart. Smaller and more peripheral are three non-human characters. On the other side of these we find the floating busts of two older white men. As with several of the other posters, in the background looms the villain; here, the masked villain wields a futuristic sword in an iron fist. Littering the outer periphery are further indications of intergalactic warfare.

---

\(^{48}\) Originally posted on Facebook by Reel Tours Hawaii with the caption, “I don’t know about you but I would love for them to do an Indiana Jones/Star Wars style poster for Jurassic World! Fan Poster by Dody YW.” This was available at Reel Tours Hawaii, https://www.facebook.com/ReelToursHawaii/photos/pb.193164237394762.-2207520000.1456844575./919775621400283/?type=3&theater in early 2016, but the business has since restructured its online presence.
Upon seeing the movie, we confirm that the signals sent by this spatial arrangement accurately convey the basic relationships among the film’s characters. We can further deduce from the poster a primary theme of the movie (and all of the movies in this franchise): the battle between the “Dark Side” and the good guys. The poster’s lighting demarcates which characters belong to which side: the cool hues indicate the villains (including their spherical “Death Star” in the background), and the heroes appear in a golden light of warm hues. This functions within the standard pattern of highlighting heroes. This color scheme, along with the white clothing, positioning, and sizing, makes the one white male’s ultimate centrality unmistakable. In the original Star Wars trilogy, this central protagonist (the well-known Luke Skywalker) proves to be the primary hero who overcomes the Dark Side, even if he can do so only with the help of his team of auxiliary heroes or heroic sidekicks.
5.2.6.2 Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace (1999)

Figure 13: Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace Poster

49 Artwork by Drew Struzan, design attributed to New Wave Creative, now “New Wave Entertainment,” http://nwe.com/. Film distributed by 20th Century Fox. (See footnote 15 on page 285 for Fair Use disclosure.)
The three “prequel” movies of the Star Wars franchise debuted much later, at
the turn of the millennium, and yet they persist in some of the same dominant patterns.
In the poster for *The Phantom Menace*, the villain looms in the background as a large
and partially unseen threat. On the periphery and lower down we find the nonhuman
characters in small sizes. Slightly more central and larger is a young white man ready for
battle. The face of the woman character—played by a white actress—is even larger.
She wears an exotic headdress and make-up to set her apart, which signals a slight shift
from the poster for the original *Star Wars*, in which the white woman was more like the
other characters. Another subtle variation appears in the form of a contest for
centrality between two white male characters—an older white man whose bust is by
the far the largest and who alone looks directly at the viewer, and a young white boy
who stands in the clear foreground and whose blond hair shines bright in the strongest
backlight of the image.

Again, all featured characters are white or non-human, and again, the ones who
are up for central protagonist are white males. Here, the boy and older man share the
spotlight, almost as if they can together approximate the standard hero. The contest
between the boy and the older man plays out in the films, in that the boy may be the
protagonist, but he does not remain the “hero” of the prequels. Instead, the prequels
present an origin story for the great villain, Darth Vader. It turns out that the woman of
the poster is a love interest of this character once he is a young man (in the second
movie of this trilogy). In the first film, the prominent white man of this poster dies at
the hands of those following the Dark Side. In the last of the three prequel films, the
white man who in this poster is marginalized becomes the one with whom the grown-up
boy battles. In short, these movies replace a clear white male hero protagonist with a
contest between white males, innovatively splitting “hero” and “protagonist” but
keeping both safely in the sphere of young white men around whom all else revolves.
5.2.6.3 Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens (2015)

Figure 14: Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens Poster

At the time of this writing, *The Force Awakens* continues its first run in theaters. Much like the *Phantom Menace* (and *The Deathly Hallows: Part 2* and *Jurassic World*), the timing, advertising, and promise to deliver on an extremely popular franchise helped propel this film into stardom. Audiences were primed to storm the theaters. But unlike these other movies, *The Force Awakens* proves alert to the standard pattern of whiteness and rails against it even if it cannot fully escape its gravitational pull. And even with its nontraditional casting, it stands a chance at overtaking *Titanic* in worldwide box office totals.

That which sets it apart should stand out. Like the other Star Wars posters, this one presents a colorful layout in which primary and secondary colors pop on a black background. Like the others, a villain lurks in the background of a compilation image of several other characters. Other similarities abound. Most strikingly different for our purposes are the two most prominent characters aside from the masked villain. In the middle, in the traditional position and pose of the white male hero, we find instead a white female hero. Among the movies considered in this case study, this is entirely unique.

The black male character at her back, also in the pose of a hero, is similarly unique, but less so in light of the secondary or tertiary male heroes of color in the Marvel posters, the fan-made *Jurassic World* poster, and the blue woman of color in...
some of the *Avatar* posters.\textsuperscript{51} Still, there remains something unique about the black male character’s placement. Several other movies in this case study give the white male hero a leading lady as his love interest, and she often appears in the second position in terms of character rankings based on prominence in posters—as in the *Iron Man 3* poster and the *Jurassic World* fan poster—or in an equal or slightly secondary position as with the two Cameron movies (*Avatar* and *Titanic*). Here, a black male comes in a definite second to the hero but larger than everyone else.

And these two most prominent characters of the poster are, unsurprisingly, the most prominent of the movie. The female hero fits the approximate pattern already set by a long history of white male heroes in which the hero rises from obscurity and overcomes obstacles with skill, determination, and efficacy. Her love interest explodes the stereotypes by taking the form of a black male hero, who seems at every step the almost-equal of the central hero. In this sense, the film has yet to break the mold of offering weaker love interests for the primary hero, but perhaps the next two movies will develop him into an equally competent character.

This innovation in casting did not escape the public’s notice. Ever since leaks about casting and early trailers came out, *The Force Awakens* has inspired what many have called racist and sexist backlash,\textsuperscript{52} which in turn has sparked further debate. In

\textsuperscript{51} Not only is this character blue, but the actress who plays this character is herself a famous woman of color.

\textsuperscript{52} Ny MaGee, “John Boyega to Racist ‘Star Wars’ Critics: Your ‘Agenda Has Failed,’” *Lee Bailey’s Eurweb: Electronic Urban Report*, Dec 19, 2015,

The charge of lingering racism in the movie has a legitimate foundation. In both the movie and its poster, the innovation in casting does not fully subvert the dominant pattern of whiteness in that the characters of color still come in second or third to at least one white hero. This scenario raises an important consideration for both our methods of analysis and our methods of subverting whiteness. Given that whiteness consists of diverse constitutive elements that include racism, sexism, Eurocentricism or Westernism, and a host of other factors, then what do we do when these elements seem to compete with one another? In this case, the movie struggles with its otherwise subversive combination of a mixed race romance in which a white woman is also the dominant figure. In other words, the precise pairing of a white female hero protagonist with a black male quasi-sidekick and love interest cannot invert both the traditional \textit{gender} roles and the traditional \textit{race} roles. The best solution in this precise scenario seems to be equality rather than inversion.

One last fact about this film’s poster merits discussion. Intriguingly, the Chinese version of the official poster altered the configurations of the characters so that, most

\url{http://www.eurweb.com/2015/12/john-boyega-to-racist-star-wars-critics-your-agenda-has-failed/}. 

notably, the black male character shrinks to the point that finding him is like playing “Where’s Waldo?”. Other alterations further send the poster back toward the standard patterns of whiteness. Putting aside the question as to whether or not these changes reflect actual differences in racism or the power of whiteness in China, the reactions to these changes are themselves revealing. Some decried the alterations as “racist”—meaning they clearly know how to “read” the visual signals sent by these posters. This in turn confirms this case study’s assumption that most readers and viewers already interpret posters as this case study does. Moreover, that these changes are retrograde rather than progressive further suggests that whiteness continues to have a powerful influence on this movie—whether in its casting, advertising, or reception—despite its creators’ attempts to rebel.

At the very least, *Episode VII* wakes global audiences to some of the forces of whiteness even if some refuse to join the rebellion. And some have been wide awake all along, whose best hope for the films lies not in the eventual triumph of the white Jedi but in the possibility that the next installments will, somehow, finally escape the lure of whiteness.

---

5.2.7 Other Divergences? *Frozen* (2013) and *Furious 7* (2015)

Of the fourteen movies that made the cut for the case study, only two remain. *Frozen* (2013) comes in ninth worldwide, and *Furious 7* (2015) comes in sixth. They appear last in this case study, on the heels of *The Force Awakens*, in light of the ways in which their posters and films subvert the dominant pattern. As this section will suggest, however, while both have subversive elements, neither actually escapes the dominant paradigm of whiteness.
5.2.7.1 Frozen (2013)

Figure 14: Frozen Poster

The leading characters of *Frozen*, as seen in this popular poster, are all white if they are human. These human characters are not only white, but very clearly so in light of their hair colors and traditionally European garb. The oddity here lies not in the race of the characters, but in the layout of the poster and the content of the storyline itself.

In the poster, a moose and “snow man” character hold the center position, flanked by two mixed-sex couples. The effect is comical. Those familiar with Disney films will rightly suspect that the nonhuman characters are sidekicks—like the Little Mermaid’s seafood companion Flounder or Aladdin’s monkey pal Abu and carpet named Carpet. These sidekicks are not the protagonists or the heroes. Instead, the three leftmost humans are the leads, with the rightmost playing the villain. The two women take center stage in the movie as royal sisters. In one sense, the movie is a film about their relationship. Yet alongside this storyline is another about the poster’s most central woman and her romance with the most central man. These two storylines coexist, and perhaps they compete. In the poster, the romance may be slightly privileged, in that the sisters are not side-by-side, and the romantic couple is most central. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the white women are, overall, the dominant characters. After all, among the three heroes, two are women.

Along with the atypical layout of the poster, the dominance of female characters in the film itself subverts the usual pattern. The film is otherwise not only very “white” in casting but rooted in a distinctive European culture and mythology. This is not in and of itself problematic. In fact, this feature may help reveal the cultural diversity among
“white” people that otherwise gets obscured by the contemporary racial imagination, thereby exposing its absurdity. Yet this feature also keeps the film from crossing the boundaries demarcated by our whiteness-shaped social imagination that privileges “white” modes of existence. Moreover, as further evidence of the power that whiteness may exert on this film’s creation, presentation, or reception, the fact that it promotes two female protagonists gets undercut by the ways in which it therefore becomes a “girl” movie. While plenty of Disney films that feature a male protagonist target both sexes, those that feature a female lead rarely achieve such status. Just walk into any store that sells Frozen paraphernalia: it all appears in the “girls” section. The problem, of course, is not just targeting and marketing—often these correctly gauge popular reception. The problem instead resides within our dominant social imagination.
5.2.7.2 *Furious 7* (2015)

*Furious 7* is the seventh installment of the *Fast and Furious* franchise of action flicks about illegal heists and street racing. The *Furious 7* poster stands apart from the pack in several respects. First, the racial diversity of its characters surpasses that of every other poster and film in this case study. Although the characters form a front of determined comrades as the superheroes do in the *Avengers: Age of Ultron* poster, here only one of the seven is unambiguously a white male. Second, the layout implies an ensemble cast by obfuscating which character, if any, is the central protagonist. And

---

third, if we had to choose such a protagonist based solely on the poster, then the central character must either be the first man shown on the poster’s far right, or the most centrally located man (central both to the poster and in the lineup of characters)—and both of these characters are played by actors whose mixed racial heritage is well known (Dwayne Johnson and Vin Diesel).  

By itself, the poster points to possible methods of undercutting the power that the idol of whiteness holds over our social imagination—that is, through popular art and media that utilizes diverse ensemble casts. Yet the film itself cannot fully deliver on the poster’s promises. Upon seeing the film, we learn that the character played by Vin Diesel is the leader of this crew of seven characters. This comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with the Fast and Furious franchise, and the posters for the prior movies fit the usual model. For example, the *Fast and Furious 6* poster places Vin Diesel’s character front and center with a white man and a man of color on either side and with the women and darker-skinned men in the background. Why alter the layout of the poster for this seventh installment? Perhaps it has something to do with the movie’s driving theme of familial solidarity among the characters, made all the stronger by the unexpected death of one of the actors (Paul Walker) before the end of filming.

---

57 Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas suggest this as part of their larger argument that being “mixed” has “taken on new meaning in U.S. popular culture” so that “multiracial models, actors, and film and television characters seem to be everywhere” and are no longer relegated to being purely “tragic and/or villainous figures in cinema and other media.” Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas, “Introduction: Mixed Race in Hollywood Film and Media Culture,” 11.
When the poster and film are taken together, then, it winds up in much the same location as *Frozen* and *The Force Awakens*. Like *Frozen*, the poster tones down the spatial logics usually used to showcase a model of sociality contaminated by the idol of whiteness, yet it still retains some of those features. Just as *Frozen* and *The Force Awakens* offer protagonists who are not white males, so too does *Furious 7*. Yet in each case, the central protagonist is either a white woman or a non-white man—indeed, a non-white man who could technically “pass” for white when viewers are unfamiliar with the actor’s self-proclaimed racial identity. Still, it points us ahead to some possible avenues of confronting whiteness rather than simply identifying it.

### 5.3 Conclusion: Theological Analysis Redux

Part 1 of this dissertation traced a line of christological anthropology that diagnoses “whiteness” as idolatry. In this account, Christ competes with idols to function as the mediator of social identity. Our current social imagination includes ways of displacing Christ-centered sociality with its perversion, in which we place a false ideal of humanity between us. This false ideal has some variability through time and place, but its general form has held constant for four centuries. Whether the White Man, Colonist, Imperialist, Master, Aryan, or the Heroic White Messiahs of popular film, we have all been invited to imagine our individual and communal existence in, through, and in relation to this false ideal.
To grasp the theological relevance of this case study, we first must appreciate what it means for a fictional character (or character type) to instantiate the idolatrous ideal as the one in, through, and in relation to whom we imagine our individual and communal existence. Grasping this is fundamental to grasping how whiteness functions as a false ideal, as an idol. Second, we must bear in mind that the false ideal is not just that which is identified by whiteness studies, which can function as a secular discipline; rather, the false ideal identified as whiteness is innately theological. Without our theological perspective—especially our spatial metaphor of social identity—we cannot fully appreciate whiteness’s origins or its theological significance specifically as an idol, an antichrist, a false ideal in contrast to the true ideal, goal, and Mediator.

5.3.1 Center and Periphery: With Whom do we Identify?

What does it mean for a character to be central, the one through whom we imagine reality, our representative, or the one with whom we identify? This chapter has asserted that these are all connected, leaving it up to readers to recognize the intrinsic coherence of these concepts based on their own experiences of engaging literature, movies, and other forms of storytelling in media. The above analysis of Avatar first initiated this line of thought and therefore serves as an example of this phenomenon. Yet Avatar is not fully paradigmatic in this respect, in that its protagonist is clearly the one who ‘represents’ the film viewers due to his status as the most important Earthling
of the story (and all viewers of the film are Earthlings). One might ask if some viewers or readers—especially those who are not white males—would not more readily identify with characters who share their respective sexes, races, or other attributes—characters on the fringe rather than the middle? If so, then does this not undercut this dissertation’s contention that the common protagonist figure—and even whiteness itself!—functions as a false ideal, representative, and mediator of social identity?

The answer requires a more nuanced account of how whiteness operates and the intricacies of how we approximate the ideal, deploy multiple strategies, and diversely identify within the overall social imaginary that whiteness provides.

First, what is approximation? In the theory proposed by this dissertation, the ideal of humanity put forth by whiteness is unattainable (which immediately distinguishes it from Christ’s own real and full humanity), including for white men. There is a very deep truth in Daniel Bernardi’s quip that “There are no whites, only those who pass for white.” Still, some have better chances for more closely approximating it than others. The game of approximation means that people from every social position can draw nearer or fall farther from the ideal by, for example, dressing, speaking, or acting more like some variation of the ideal. When it comes to protagonists and their sidekicks, a woman character can be the heroic protagonist of blockbuster movies when

---

she better approximates the ideal than the other characters, as in *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*. (The same is true of the popular *Hunger Games* trilogy.)

Second, aside from pure approximation, we can also deploy multiple strategies to claw closer to the center or climb toward the hierarchy’s apex, whether by imitating the ideal White Man or by accepting a lower position that nevertheless enjoys privileges based on its position above others. A prime example of this would be the Beautiful Woman—which can function as an idol apart from whiteness, for sure, but which can also join whiteness’s operations as a kind of “second place” just beneath the White Man, as with the love interests of the heroes of the above movies.59 In this example of a compromise, women weigh their options between the glass ceiling of second place given to those holding the position of Beautiful Woman and purer forms of approximating the White Man. The protagonist of *The Force Awakens* is portrayed as beautiful but also dresses and acts more like the traditional white male hero, thereby charting a middle course between these two options.

Third, not only can we can simultaneously combine various modes of approximation and strategies adopted in light of our more immutable features like assigned race and sex, but we can also diversely identify. We can—and do—at once try

59 The connections between the idols of the Beautiful Woman and whiteness are worth considered study but are beyond this dissertation’s modest purview. In the imagination colored by whiteness, it is the White Man on top, in relation to whom all other peoples of the world are considered effeminate and childlike. These idolatries intersect while still retaining a measure of independence. This concern recurs in the dissertation’s Conclusion.
to approximate the ideal humanity and take our assigned places in the hierarchy. We all, at some level and to some degree, are torn. Recall how Jennings defines whiteness. Whiteness is the “central...reality...that makes sense of...the world” by instructing us “to approximate fabricated white images of humanity” and urging us “to participate in the process of self-invention through consumption.” Whiteness has become for us “that form of identity inside of which all other identities [can] be imagined.” The idolatrous image “at the center of our relational imagination” is the “body of a powerful, white, Western man, the image of self-sufficiency, social power, and self-determination.” Whiteness beckons us to imagine reality in light of that dominant white Western man, and to approximate this false image. Yet that image is also “that form of identity” in which we imagine all other forms, including the forms more available to us. We at once imagine ourselves as the White Man—the hero, the protagonist, the center of the universe—and yet also as one or more of the other options—the funny sidekick, the pretty love interest, the loyal servant, the nerdy asset, the supportive friend, the sage old teacher, the arch-villain, the disposable body, or any of the other secondary and tertiary options that may vary over time but are always reserved for those furthest from being front and center.

62 Ibid., 286.
63 Along these lines, Vera and Gordon note that while the images and type-casting of black people evolves over time in U.S. films, the portrayal of the white hero remains constant,
Whether we understand the phenomenon of diversely identifying in terms of W. E. DuBois’s “double consciousness” or Frantz Fanon’s extension of DuBois’s concept, or as a function of the multiple “selves” posited by recent identity theories, the result is the same: we imagine ourselves in, through, and in relation to the false ideal of whiteness, including its manifestations in stories that utilize the standard protagonist model. Because it exists in the center of our “relational imagination,” it dictates the range of possibilities for how we can be in relation to one another, including the configurations available for who stands front and center and who must occupy the margins.

If we imagine ourselves in, through, and in relation to the false ideal of whiteness, then we must also have a true ideal available to us. When we say that someone is central, the one through whom we imagine reality, our representative, or

so that “the African Americans remain secondary characters coded to enhance the white self. In contrast to this changing representation of blacks, there is a persistence across time in the representation of the ideal white American self” (Vera and Gordon, Screen Saviors, 2).

DuBois’s “double consciousness” refers to the experience of having a split self, or two selves, due to constantly trying to see oneself through white eyes as well as one’s own, which relates to trying to identify with two groups (in DuBois’s original use, these are “American” and “Negro”). See Mitchell Aboulafia, “W.E.B. Dubois: Double-Consciousness, Jamesian Sympathy and the Critical Turn,” in The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy, ed. C. J. Misak, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 179-181.


Such as the phenomenological, interactional, material, and ideological selves, or the various identities variably described as social, personal, biographical, situational, and ego identity. See Scott, Negotiating Identity, 3.
the one with whom we identify, we are using a theological vocabulary. These movies and their posters reflect and participate in a phenomenon that is innately theological and is therefore best understood in theological terms. The next sections review this innate theological connection and then reconnect our theological view of whiteness to the case study, whose theological dimensions will carry over into the next chapter.

### 5.3.2 Whiteness and Theology Revisited

So far, much of the argument in this chapter seemingly stands without theological support. That said, whiteness is fundamentally theological in two interrelated ways. First, although whiteness is generally studied in disciplines beyond theology, it is nevertheless best understood theologically because, second, whiteness has strong theological underpinnings. Part of why we can understand whiteness theologically is precisely the fact that it emerged as a perversion of theological truths. As we saw in Chapter 3, whiteness came into its recognizable form during the imperial-colonial era when Christendom increasingly reimagined identity in ways that placed white Christians on top of an imaginary hierarchy. Using Bonhoeffer’s language, the *sicut deus* “Self” operated on the level of people-groups so that the peoples of Christendom saw themselves as approximating (and in some ways replacing) Christ, burdened with the improvement and salvation of all other peoples of the world. Identity not only shifts away from land and others in the shared space of Christ, but it
gets reconfigured so that Christ himself is displaced as the ideal human and mediating reality of social identity, replaced by an idol that conveniently suggests that European Christians are closer to God, God-like, and the means by which others access God.

Our whiteness-shaped social imagination today is both very “Christian” and very unchristian. Our theological diagnosis recognizes its Christian roots and also its idolatry. Therefore, when we see whiteness at work in our contemporary social imagination, we at once know it to rely upon historical perversions of theological truths and know it as an idol that undermines the kind of identity and life together that God desires for us all.

5.3.3. Theologically Charged Movie Posters

This broken way of imagining ourselves and all people of the world gets reflected and refracted in cultural artifacts and popular media. From this case study, we can recognize the truth in Willie Jennings’s suggestion that “From the beginning of the colonialist moment, being white placed one at the center of the symbolic and real reordering of space. In a real sense, whiteness comes into being as a form of landscape.”67 Jennings here echoes Bonhoeffer, who provides us with a spatial metaphor of social identity in which a mediator—either Christ or an idol—facilitates how we see, desire, and relate to God, other people, ourselves, and the rest of creation. We imagine ourselves in, through, and in relation to this mediator because that is the

---

kind of creatures we are. And with our theological understanding of whiteness as an idol in hand, we literally see it at work in popular art.

In this case study, we see the idol of whiteness in the preponderance of white characters, the dominance of white male heroes, and the centrality of these protagonists around and beneath whom lesser humans (and non-humans) take their respective places, which are themselves determined by how well they approximate the ideal. Even if we prefer not to label any individual film, poster, or other cultural artifact as instantiating the false ideal of “whiteness,” we nevertheless must acknowledge its reality on the whole. Of the fourteen movies and sixteen posters examined above, all more or less portray the “landscape” of whiteness. As film theorists Vera and Gordon conclude, from such movies we learn that “the world revolves around the white messiah.”68 This white messiah takes the place of the real Messiah, standing between us in the middle of our imagined social space, serving as our false ideal and distorting our vision, desires, relationships, identities, and life together.

If our world revolves around the white messiah, then how can we shift gears and revolve instead around the one true Mediator, the real Messiah? Once we identify whiteness at work around us, we can in turn interrupt its influence and develop corresponding tactics of subversion through those same channels. The next chapter—

68 Vera and Gordon, Screen Saviors, 50.
the second half of Part 2—maps out the way ahead, a path that leads us well beyond this dissertation’s last page.
Chapter 6: Subverting the Idol through the Arts

The case study in Chapter 5 raises at least three follow-up questions, each of which sheds light on how we might subvert whiteness in how we engage the arts. First, what does it mean for movies and their posters if we imagine Jesus, rather than the false ideal of whiteness, as our “center”? Second, are protagonists innately problematic regardless of their characteristics, and are ensemble casts a viable solution? Third, what kind of education, catechesis, or re-formative practices might cultivate ways of participating in popular practices that weaken whiteness’s power? Let us consider these in turn before reviewing a few examples of art that subverts the idol of whiteness.

6.1 The Place (and Race) of Jesus in Popular Art

A quick reading of Chapter 5 might leave one wondering if this dissertation advocates replacing all fictional white male heroes with Jesus. If Jesus should be our true center and mediator, if whiteness conceptually replaces Jesus with the false ideal of the White Man, and if we literally see whiteness at work in these posters, then should we not make this simple swap? The answer is “No” for at least three reasons.

First, it would be absurd to ask all creators of art to make Jesus the protagonist of their fictional (or quasi-fictional) stories. Putting aside the many ways in which this
move would be impractical and silly, \(^1\) it would also require that we assume Christian superiority in ways highly dissonant with the model of kinship, learning, and mutual enfolding that Jennings espouses—a model thoroughly in line with the theological anthropology built in Part 1.

Second, the relationship between these posters and whiteness—and therefore between these posters and a better way of imagining social identity—is too complex to allow such a facile solution. These posters and their movies are not simply and directly illustrating how the dominant social imagination construes social identity, meaning they are not pure illustrations of whiteness. Rather, they illustrate specific characters, narratives, and movies, which in turn rely upon tropes that reflect whiteness’s influence on our social imagination. Neither would the posters necessarily be free of whiteness’s influence if the characters lacked this particular positional patterning (as somewhat evident in the cases of Frozen, Furious 7, and The Force Awakens). Instead, the struggle between the “icon” of Christ and the “idol” of whiteness takes place at a deeper, or higher, level.

Third, historically speaking, imagining “Jesus” in the center in ways analogous to these posters’ standard white male hero has been part of the problem, due to the close historical association of Jesus with whiteness. Recall how, according to Jennings, whiteness emerged as a Christian invention with entrenched theological roots. These

---

\(^1\) For example, although this dissertation does not have time to prove it, this would constitute a needlessly stifling constraint on artistic expression, popular or otherwise.
roots include forms of supersessionism combined with land-alienation and colonial-imperial interests, which enabled European Christians to imagine a false ideal of humanity that is at once superficial, tied inextricably to their own people, and standing in the place of Christ—hence pedagogical imperialism and the White Man’s Burden.

Sandy Brewer’s article “From Darkest England to the Hope of the World” examines one popular instance of this in the form of Harold Copping’s 1915 *The Hope of the World* (Figure 17, below), created for the London Missionary Society in part to raise support for their missionary endeavors.\(^2\) In this and related images (also available in Brewer’s article), Jesus appears as a white man around whom we find children who represent the races and cultures of the LMS’s missionary theaters. Here we find a visual convergence of Jesus with the White Man burdened with spreading culture, civilization, and the gospel around the world to child-like peoples who are visibly peripheral and mostly non-white in flesh and garb.

Figure 16: Harold Copping’s The Hope of the World (1915)³

³ Available online: “The Hope of the World,” CardCow.com, http://www.cardcow.com/154319/hope-world-religious/. Copyright, London Missionary Society. (See footnote 15 on page 285 for Fair Use disclosure.) Note that in this version the presumed African boy is not entirely nude, as he is in the original. Note too that the blond girl very likely represents the London Missionary Society’s “domestic” efforts to uplift their nation’s poor.
With these qualifications in mind, we should nevertheless consider better ways of representing Jesus in our art. In the last chapter, Jennings challenged us to make icons of Christ’s life. We might add—as Jennings would surely do—that these representations would do well not only to highlight Christ’s life, but to subvert whiteness by disassociating with the popular renditions of the White Man Jesus in all of his various manifestations. In fact, if we take the conclusions of Chapter 3 seriously, we should consider ways in which we can celebrate or otherwise indicate Jesus’s fundamental Jewishness (as we see in the work of Marc Chagall) and to learn new options of representation from those with experience in non-Western-dominated traditions (including South African artist Jackson Hlungwani, who drew upon nonwestern concepts of space and place for his sculpture work). At the end of this chapter, we will consider in greater depth how the artworks of Marc Chagall and Jackson Hlungwani subvert the idol of whiteness.

Imagining Jesus as our center, mediator, ideal, and Holy Icon does not require that we replace white male heroes with portrayals of Jesus. It does mean we should (1) recognize whiteness in its various permutations, (2) disassociate the false ideal presented in our art with our conception of Christ, and (3) participate in art practices that familiarize us with Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, including or especially those aspects that stand in stark contrast to the idol of whiteness. These conclusions recur in the sections below.
6.2 Protagonists and Ensembles?

6.2.1 Protagonists

The case study noted that a preponderance of protagonists are white male heroes or what Vera and Gordon call “white messiahs.” Although the obvious problem here would be how these protagonists perpetuate the central, ideal White Man, perhaps the problem goes deeper into the very nature of narratives with protagonists.

Some suggest that the form or genre of the modern novel principally emerged from Christendom,⁴ and in the stories written by the “greats”—the substance of classic literature—we find that the protagonists, secondary characters, and tertiary characters fit the general pattern we saw in the case study. In other words, the grand genre of stories with protagonists, love interests, sidekicks, and tertiary characters may have taken root principally within cultures already immured in the ways of whiteness. The standard novel and the standard movie that the novel inspired may have grown within tainted soil.

---

With this backdrop in place, one might wonder if simply having protagonists and a cast that revolves around them is an innately problematic structure for our fictional and quasi-fictional stories. The hierarchy that placed idealized white Christians front, top, and center corresponds to the hierarchy in the common form of stories that emerged from this perversion of the Christian social imagination. In this sense, the standard protagonist model may have begun as a corruption of good Christology that recognizes the centrality of Christ. Instead, in our Western stories of recent centuries we time and time again hear, read, or watch various white messiahs enact countless variations on theme.

Notice, too, how these stories often lend themselves to christological readings if we simply accept the invitation to take the protagonist as a potential Christ-figure. For example, in the films above, *Titanic* offers a romantic Christ who sacrifices his life not out of love for the world, but for his love interest—which could either lead us to suspect the movie prizes sexually charged love over other manifestations of love, or that the woman character represents the world. In this film, the Christ-figure lives on in her heart, almost echoing theologies that posit Christ’s ongoing presence in the hearts of believers or in the church. The *Avatar* and superhero Christ-figures offer a different version (or perversion), in that the great Hero need not sacrifice so dearly or remain in obscurity; he not only wins the day, but commits great excesses of physical violence to
do so.\textsuperscript{5} It remains common, though, for these characters to possess a special \textit{charisma}, imitating Jesus Christ’s unique relationship to \textit{the Spirit}.

We must finally ask, then, are stories that have protagonists doomed to perform bad Christology, whether in the form of whiteness or some other perversion? The answer is no. The reasons are similar to the reasons why protagonists need not be replaced with Jesus. Staying within the scope of this case study, the real danger lies in limiting protagonists to characters who approximate the false ideal better than the rest.

Although contemporary storytelling may have grown in tainted theological soil, there is no reason in theory that we cannot (1) weaken the link between protagonists and Christ-figures, (2) otherwise appreciate the difference between Christ and fictional Christ-figures, and (3) use the motif in innovative ways to confront the shortcomings of its long partnership with whiteness, as with unconventional Christ-figures. For example, Toni Morrison’s literary masterpieces not only offer unconventional protagonists but play with the protagonist structure and the nature of Christ figures, as in \textit{The Bluest Eye}, which this chapter will consider alongside artworks by Chagall and Hlungwani, and the film \textit{Whale Rider}, as examples of art that subverts whiteness.

\textsuperscript{5} The contrast between Christ and concepts of the heroic are often stark. As Jennifer Herdt puts it when discussing Baltasar Gracián y Morales (a Spanish Jesuit who wrote about Everyman Christian’s pursuit of heroism), “the humble, crucified Christ might appear to Gracián as the gullible, foolish good man, suitable perhaps for a simpler age.” Jennifer A. Herdt, \textit{Putting On Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 234.
The key problem is not that we have protagonists, but that we regularly encounter protagonists as Christ-figures and protagonists who approximate the false ideal. This lethal combination perpetuates the idolatry of our social imagination.

6.2.2 Ensembles

Based on the above analysis, the typical protagonist model tends to participate in whiteness even if it could theoretically subvert it. The ensemble model offers another option for bypassing at least some of whiteness’s influence on our story-based art and entertainment. With an ensemble cast of characters, we do not need one central character to be more important than all others, through whom we should see reality, and who represents us. In this way, the ensemble structure opens up possibilities of subversion. Even so, caveats abound. For example, the ensemble could not simply consist of typical white male heroes—like another Avengers movie that gives equal honor to the franchise’s favorite four superheroes. Giving the leading hero a demotion so as to be the equal of the others only represents a small departure. Ensembles can go farther by lacking any good candidate for the role of white male hero and close approximations. In conclusion, the ensemble model does not necessarily subvert the standard patterns of whiteness, but it nevertheless possesses great possibilities.
Let us end this section by reviewing our options of subverting the idol of whiteness within either the protagonist or ensemble model. From its consideration of protagonists, this section concluded that we should (1) weaken the link between protagonists and Christ-figures, (2) otherwise appreciate the difference between Christ and fictional Christ-figures, and (3) use the motif in innovative ways to confront the shortcomings of its long partnership with whiteness, as with unconventional Christ-figures. One viable way to undercut the partnership of whiteness with Christ-figure protagonists is through the ensemble structure, which can jettison protagonists in favor of reconfiguring the standard social patterns commonly portrayed in popular media. Other options include exploding the protagonist model by way of diversifying just who protagonists can be, which in turn can include completely inverting the model’s typical social arrangements or positions. We also stand to learn from nonwestern cultures and their forms of storytelling and artmaking, to see if they offer any other ways of repurposing our popular art-forms to work against, rather than for, the idol of whiteness. The next section will explore one way we might achieve these ends.

6.3 Sanctifying Perception with Media-critical Education

The first half of Part 2 (Chapter 5) offered a case study to see whiteness at work in popular art. The second half (this chapter) has asked how we might subvert the operations of whiteness in popular art. The prior sections outline elements of better
ways of producing, reproducing, circulating, receiving, and consuming popular art—or better ways of participating in the practices of popular culture. So far, the dissertation has offered suggestions that entail a considered approach to such practices, but it is now time to state the obvious: such a considered approach requires awareness, altered perceptions, and motivation or desire. One way to foster awareness, change perceptions, and instill desire is through education or re-education.

Advocating education may sound ironic in light of the role that pedagogical imperialism plays in generating whiteness in the first place. But not all efforts to educate or re-educate require an imperial pattern of relationality between teachers and learners. Instead, the kind of education here in view undercuts the standard top-down models of education, in that it aims to improve the ability of all to see the operations of whiteness, to weaken its hold on us, and to imagine something better in its place. Calls for such forms of education or re-education come from multiple sectors, too, including film theorists and theologians alike.

Some film and cultural theorists call for the intentional study of popular media precisely for the sake of resisting the ways in which whiteness (and other undesirable frameworks) have already shaped us through avenues like film. Joe R. Feagin describes movies’ basic educational role, noting that “Hollywood movies are much more than a matter of entertainment. Hollywood has become a major educational institution. For the majority of Americans, Hollywood’s movies are a constant source of images, ideas,
and ‘data’ about the social world.”6 (And surely the phenomenon is not bounded by “American” borders.) Similarly, Douglas Kellner contends:

Radio, television, film and the other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Movies manufacture the way we see, think of, feel, and act towards others.7

In light of media’s instructive and formative power, Vera and Gordon believe that “we need to study movies because ordinarily we do not want to think about the influence that they have on us and on our society. We tend to dismiss the cinema as mere entertainment; yet it has profound effects, shaping our thinking and our behavior.”8 They express their corresponding desire for re-education at length:

We do not advocate censorship or codes of political correctness from the left or the right. Such a route is dangerous and does not work. Instead, we believe we need to educate ourselves and our children to view media critically so that we can move toward cultural democracy, toward a society that communicates actively and proactively. This can be done in part through group discussion. All schools of education should train future teachers on how to conduct discussions of film and other media with their students. Not just in schools, but in other social organizations as well it is vital to create forums to foster in all citizens a critical consciousness of media. More radically, some educators have called for a “media-based pedagogy” that would inform all school learning. The use

---


8 Vera and Gordon, Screen Saviors, 8.
of film and video would empower students to rewrite Hollywood scripts from different perspectives.9

Cultural theorist Norman Denzin places his hope more narrowly in “the current generation of college students,” which he believes “has the opportunity to make a difference in the race relations arena,” and “that difference will be defined, in part, in terms of its opposition, resistance to, and acceptance of the media’s representations and interpretations of the American racial order.”10 Analyzing key films, his book traces how each decade of the 1900s in America “has articulated its version of the white man’s burden,”11 and he hopes the book will aid college students in their opposition, resistance to, and acceptance of the media’s portrayals of race.12 To the extent that Denzin has hope in book-reading college students, he too advocates critical media studies alert to issues of whiteness.

Calls for media-critical education also come from theologians such as Willie Jennings and James K. A. Smith. Jennings calls more broadly for practices that are “central to forming Christians” even when that means standing “in a complex and critical relationship with cultural and social contexts” so much so that our identities

---

11 Ibid., 38.
12 Ibid., 11.
change. Such formative practices can coincide with media-rich and media-critical education, especially if we think of education itself as including formative experiences beyond those of didactic pedagogy taking place in traditionally conceived classrooms.

What other criteria for education might we glean from Jennings? According to Jennings, our hope in Christ includes returning to land and the space of Jesus, where we become a pneumatologically formed family among diverse cultures and perform practices that reject the idol of whiteness. In this space, Christians reconnect with the land, Gentiles reconnect with Israel through the path of humility, and diverse peoples form new identities together through the process of enfolding. Media-critical education, especially in group discussion, fits well in this model. It can be a practice that rejects the idol of whiteness by critically exposing it at work in media. It can be a means by which Western Gentile Christians learn humility, both by acquiring the intellectual and emotional skills to be critical of something that has given them great privilege over the centuries, and by providing a space in which they can learn from diverse others, including Jews, through readings, conversations, alternative forms of media, and group discussions. Settings of media-critical and media-rich education can also provide spaces in which diverse people challenge the dominant paradigm in favor of imagining new options together. Such group-inspired exercises of the imagination can in turn be part

---

of the process of cultural and interpersonal enfolding that helps us live into our
eschatological identities together in God.

Jennings also commends a specific form of education in “The Desire of the
Church,” where he points Protestants to the wisdom of the Eastern Orthodox and their
use of images in the form of icons. Just as images can serve as idols, they can also serve
as icons that point to the true Icon. “The only way to overcome idol production is with
the icon.”14 Icons are cleansing images that “facilitate a sense of the divine life revealed
in Christ Jesus,”15 whose life, death, and resurrection reorder our perceptions and desire
so that they run toward life rather than death.16 Although not all such “cleansing
images” need to be images of Jesus the Holy Icon, or “icons” of the Eastern Orthodox
variety, Jennings nevertheless desires that Protestants learn how to pray before Eastern
or Eastern-inspired icons. Drawing from John de Gruchy’s accounts of the iconoclastic
controversies, Jennings concludes that Protestants, in their fear of images, have lost
access to the desire-reforming capacity of holy images. Thus Protestants need to learn
from the Eastern Orthodox how to pray before icons and “what form of church life is
necessary for the use of icons.” Yet Protestants need not give up their love of the word,
especially of scripture. Instead, we must keep “word and image” together, because

“The word of God prepares us to see rightly and seeing rightly (aided by icons) helps organize our desires.”

Theologian James K. A. Smith adds to this particular conversation not by way of addressing whiteness, but by describing our need for (re)formation in light of what this dissertation has described as a diseased social imagination, and to (re)form the entire person rather than just her thoughts or beliefs on the intellectual, conceptual, or cognitive level. In several respects, he resonates with Jennings and with this dissertation even if he does not share our diagnosis of whiteness as a specifically Christian problem. Despite this divergence, he leaves us with helpful terminology.

Smith joins Jennings in advocating ways of (re)educating and (re)forming our imaginations that go beyond the mere intellectual consideration of ideas. Like Jennings, he wants formation through Christian practices, especially Christian worship and life together. In *Imagining the Kingdom*, Smith argues that “we need nothing less than a Christian imagination” to counter the negative effects of the dominant imagination we find in popular culture. He believes “our imaginations need to be caught by—and

---

17 Ibid., 250. Jennings’s appeals to Eastern Orthodox practices of icon veneration may prove challenging for Eastern Orthodox Christians who might not want to relate “word” and image together in the way that Jennings proposes. His subtle privileging of the “word,” even if that “word” is the scriptures, may run counter to more traditional Eastern doctrines that treat the icon tradition as co-authoritative; likewise, the level of authority that the Eastern Church gives its *specific* tradition of specific images may prove problematic for many Protestants. This tension does not negate the need for more ecumenical humility, learning, and sharing, but it does indicate some rocks on road ahead.
caught up into—the Story of God’s restorative, reconciling grace for all of creation. It won’t be enough for us to be convinced; we need to be moved, ” to be “transformed.”

Gaining this kind of imagination means “sanctifying perception,” which “involves re-story-ing our being-in-the-world” and “restoring rightly ordered perception.” The term “sanctified perception” nicely captures the point that we need the Holy Spirit to change our imaginations, even on the scale of a shared social imagination.

Like this dissertation, Smith also identifies the importance of the arts in our formation and the ways the arts participate in social imaginaries. He appraises popular practices that reflect the dominant social imagination with grave suspicion but finds hope especially in the reformative power of Christian worship. His solution of intentional, reflective engagement in Christian practices, including worship and education, does not seem to recognize the extent to which idols like that of whiteness have substantial theological roots deep inside Christian communities. This means that there is no safe reserve within the church or Christian practices. In some ways, the critical eye that Smith wants Christians to turn on what he dubs “secular” practices must equally critique our own “Christian” practices and cultural artifacts in order to weaken whiteness’s hold on us. In fact, we need to heed Smith’s call for “reflexive intentionality about what we’re doing and why” but for the sake of uprooting whiteness within

19 Ibid., 161.
20 Ibid., 189.
Christian contexts. With this small revision in place, Smith joins the chorus of those who call for thoroughgoing, intentional, and critical forms of education that reveal the deep problems with our current social imagination, all in the hopes of developing something better.

To summarize, film and cultural theorists seek new forms of education and formative practices that teach students or people of all ages to be critical of media, especially in light of its power to form and deform our social identities. They are especially excited about group discussions within schools, colleges, and other social organizations. Some echo Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s call for a form of pedagogy rich in media so that participants can wield that power for themselves and thereby create new perspectives in media.\(^\text{21}\) Such efforts attack not only whiteness’s ideology, but also “the social conditions that make it possible” by changing popular art practices. Media-critical and media-rich education can thereby equip people to “de-invent” whiteness in “our post-colonial age.”\(^\text{22}\)

\(^\text{21}\) Vera and Gordon, *Screen Saviors*, 193. Shohat and Stam advocate “pedagogic jujitsu” in which “Eurocentric texts can be snapped out of their original context to be reread and even rewritten by teachers and students” and which “could at the same time empower ‘minorities’ and build on privileged students’ minimal experience of otherization to help them imagine alternative subject positions and divergent social desires.” Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, 357-58.

\(^\text{22}\) Vera and Gordon, *Screen Saviors*, 191.
Theologians like Jennings would advocate such media-critical and media-rich education, but more specifically, Jennings calls for increased production of cleansing images, quality portrayals of Christ’s life, and icons of the Eastern Orthodox variety, as well as the host of practices in which Eastern veneration of icons makes sense. These forms of “spiritual life” and “communal and personal devotion” must first be learned. Therefore, Christians in particular are in need of educational opportunities and related practices that prepare us to produce and “use” holier, more cleansing artworks and Eastern icons. James K. A. Smith likewise advocates specifically Christian education and other formative practices that prove aware of art’s power and that will ultimately transform us and our social imagination.

Combining the various concerns of the people discussed above, this dissertation further concludes that we need our media-critical education to equip us with “bifocal vision,” so that we can, in layperson’s terms, discern the good from the bad. This echoes the calls of those scholars who contend that audiences can learn to enjoy popular media “oppositionally” and negotiate otherwise harmful images so that, by processes of resistance, they might mitigate the negative impact that popular media has on them.24 We can disrupt idol production in favor of producing better, holier, and

---

healthier cultural artifacts only if we realize that all sociocultural products—products of
the human imagination—will necessarily have both desirable and undesirable aspects.
This is both a logical and theological assertion. Whatever specific form it takes, within
or beyond Christian communities, media-critical education at the very least must teach
us to appreciate the complexity of any cultural artifact, to reject the ways in which it
reflects distorted desire, and to embrace the ways in which it may push us toward
better forms of life together in lights of God’s good desires for all of creation.

6.4 Summary

This chapter has considered ways we can subvert the idol of whiteness
particularly in the practices surrounding popular art and media by way of exploring
three concerns ignited by Chapter 5’s case study. Imagining Jesus as our center,
Mediator, ideal or goal, and Holy Icon does not require that we replace white male

Yuanyuan Zhang, “Controversial Rap Themes, Gender Portrayals and Skin Tone Distortion: A
134-156. For similar themes, see also Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and
Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) and Catherine R. Squires,
*African Americans and the Media* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009). Hooks describes how many
black women attend the cinema feeling “on guard,” unwilling to be “seduced by narratives” that
negate their existence or value, but that part of this guardedness can entail watching
“mainstream movies over and over again for the pleasure of deconstructing them,” with “added
delight if one happens, in the process of interrogation, to come across a narrative that invites
the black female spectator to engage the text with no threat of violation” (126).
heroes with portrayals of Jesus. Instead, we should recognize whiteness in its various permutations and disassociate the false ideal presented in our art with our conception of Christ.

Disassociating the false ideal from our conception of Christ includes weakening the link between protagonists and Christ-figures, appreciating the difference between the real Christ and fictional Christ-figures, and using the protagonist model in innovative ways to confront the shortcomings of its long partnership with whiteness, as with unconventional protagonists or Christ-figures.

Another way to undercut the partnership of whiteness with Christ-figure protagonists is through the ensemble structure. We also stand to learn from nonwestern cultural forms of storytelling, artmaking, and different ways of engaging these. Lastly, we benefit from art practices that familiarize us with Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, highlighting the stark contrast with powerful contemporary idols like that of whiteness. One step toward realizing these goals would be through media-critical and media-rich education, as called for by cultural theorists and theologians alike.

Before concluding this chapter, let us consider four examples of artworks that already function along these lines, reflecting some combination of alternative representations of Christ, unconventional protagonists and Christ-figures, and nonwestern cultural forms. Moreover, the discussions of these examples model a way
to approach art that proves alert to the idolatry of whiteness and the potentialities for something better.

6.5 Positive Examples

This chapter has considered artworks as part of larger networks of practices related to production, circulation, and consumption, arguing that these practices can change for the better. Much of the aim of media-critical education would be just that—to improve how we engage the arts around us, especially in our consumption or reception of popular media. Yet this chapter also advocates that we circulate and produce art that subverts whiteness—that we search for and create artworks that encourage a better social imagination. This last section now expands on four examples of whiteness-subverting artworks.
6.5.1 Chagall's *White Crucifixion* (1938)

![Figure 17: Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion* (1938), Art Institute of Chicago](image-url)

Figure 17: Marc Chagall’s *White Crucifixion* (1938), Art Institute of Chicago

---

Marc Chagall’s work weds Jewish and Christian symbols in ways consistent with, or amenable to, the perspectives of our three theologians. As a Jew in the early and mid-twentieth century, Chagall (1887—1985) very easily could have railed against Christianity. Instead, his art displays a stunning generosity of spirit and presents a thoroughly Jewish Jesus, crucified in solidarity with modern Jews. This is precisely the view of Jesus that our three theologians, to varying degrees, commend to us as a counterweight against the idolatry of our racial imagination.

According to Lawrence Cunningham, “an important element in Chagall’s iconography [is] the mixture of Jewish and Christian symbolism.”26 Much of Chagall’s art, including White Crucifixion, incorporates images of his Jewish homeland and references to the Jewish suffering he witnessed firsthand. As Chagall puts it, “In all my pictures three is not one centimeter free from nostalgia for my native land.”27 Chagall longs for Vitebsk every time he paints a collection of small buildings with simple windows along a street; as in White Crucifixion, they blaze with fire. Chagall laments the tragic seizing of small towns like his childhood Vitebsk. Chagall painted White Crucifixion in Paris in 1938 on the heels of the “Kristallnacht,” yet another pogrom

27 Marc Chagall and Jacob Baal-Teshuva, Chagall: A Retrospective ([New York]: H.L. Levin Associates, 1995), 25. According to Marc Scheps, a former director of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Chagall’s portrayals of Vitebsk were universal, so that “Vitebsk was the whole world and the whole world was Vitebsk.” Quoted in ibid., 25.
against Jews in Chagall’s lifetime; this pogrom functioned as an immediate precursor to the Final Solution and the Holocaust.

Chagall regularly includes a set of Jewish characters in his paintings, such as a man clinging to the Torah, a woman carrying a baby, a wanderer, and a fiddler. All appear in *White Crucifixion*, fleeing the violence, along with a man wearing a sign that read “Ich bin Jude” until Chagall painted over the words. Chagall also painted over the swastika on the armband on the soldier burning the synagogue in the upper right quadrant of the painting.

Christ in this image embodies, or shares in, Jewish suffering. Not only does he wear the Orthodox Jewish prayer shawl (tallit), headcloth, and male facial hair, but he is crucified between two scenes of contemporaneous Jewish persecution, with communist soldiers seizing a village on one side and Nazi soldiers burning a synagogue beneath a Lithuanian flag on the other. Chagall also translates the INRI above Christ’s head into Hebrew, further explicating Christ’s embeddedness in Judaism.

This is not only a thoroughly Jewish Jesus, but a Christ who shares in the ongoing suffering of God’s chosen people, just as described by Torrance and Jennings. Such a Christ cannot be confused as the embodiment of some variation of a racially superior Christendom, as in Harold Copping’s rendition above (Figure 16), but instead this Jesus

---


calls our attention to his fundamental Jewishness, his ongoing connection to Jews, and the link between his suffering and Gentile persecution of Jews. According to Jennings, reflecting on Jesus’s Jewishness through such visual media should work against the forces that have distorted our Christian imagination in order to restore our desire for God, others, and the rest of creation.

Not only does *White Crucifixion* prove a useful example, but so does Marc Chagall himself. Not that we should mimic his life *in toto*, but we might learn from his willingness to incorporate diverse cultural logics out of love even if doing so came with a price. In art like *White Crucifixion*, Chagall navigates Jewish and Christian symbols, customs, and conflicts to expose evil and promote healing. As one coming from a Hasidic background, he bent the rules for the sake of such art. Hasidic Judaism disapproved of graven images, but Chagall stayed true to the injunction against images of God (which he works around by evoking God’s presence through discs of light, hands, rainbows, or angelic messengers\(^\text{30}\)).

Chagall’s navigation of Christian symbols in a world ripped apart was no easy task. At first, Chagall hesitated to use Christian symbols or accept commissions to make art for Christian settings. He was proud of the Jewish people and their accomplishments and had “ideological hesitations about crossing religious boundaries” in his art. Chagall writes, “I would not want the people of Israel to think that in my heart or mind—not to

speak of my art—I have anything in common with non-Judaism. With my ancestors I shall always be bound to my people.”

Twice, he asked for advice from Jewish leaders; twice, he was told to judge for himself.

Chagall made his choice. His decision to use Christian symbols was controversial. Some Jewish critics “were puzzled, even outraged by the use of Christian motifs” in his works. His permanent installments in Christian settings were even worse because “a church is not a museum, but is instead a place where religious dogma rather than abstract artistic truth exists.” Yet the main Christian theme Chagall used was the crucified Christ, and “Jesus was seen in secular Jewish culture as an historical figure, a Jew, attractive because like contemporary Jews he revolted against the religious establishment and its rituals, such as praying three times a day.” In this sense, Christ crucified was a bridge for Chagall.

For Chagall, “the Crucifixion represents the suffering of the Jewish people through the ages,” including the Holocaust. Jesus was “one of the great Jewish prophets” and “a universal symbol.” Thus Chagall saw Christ as a complex Jewish

---

31 Marc Chagall, “Letter to President Weizman,” 1962, in Chagall and Baal-Teshuva, 
Chagall: A Retrospective, 316-317. Translated into English by Ida Chagall from Chagall’s original Yiddish. According to Baal-Teshuva, it was “appended to Chagall’s letter of March 22, 1950, to his friend in New York, Yiddish writer Yosef Opatoshu.”

32 Harshav, Marc Chagall and the Lost Jewish World, 221.

33 Ibid., 216-217.

34 Baal-Teshuva in Chagall and Baal-Teshuva, Chagall: A Retrospective, 29.

35 Ibid., 29.
figure of embodied suffering and hope on behalf of others, and universally so. During the years of WWII, Chagall intently studied the crucified Christ through his art. It would appear as if Christ crucified as a specifically Jewish figure ministered to Chagall during the horrors of the Holocaust, providing a witness to God’s love in ways that Gentile Christians often failed to do.\(^\text{36}\)

According to Jacob Baal-Teshuva, Chagall’s critics “failed to understand...that the artist’s vision” for accepting such commissions “was grounded in an abiding love that was broad enough to embrace all people and passionate enough to celebrate the love of God everywhere.”\(^\text{37}\) “The figure of Christ,” writes Chagall, “was always near to me, and I was determined to draw it out of my heart.”\(^\text{38}\) For Chagall, Jesus was “a great poet”\(^\text{39}\) and, in the era of WWII, Jesus “served as the individual who embodied the suffering in his own personal myth.”\(^\text{40}\)

Chagall’s desire to draw together his past and the Jewish and Christian traditions into artworks for Christian settings is, in the words of Cunningham, an “undiminished witness to the steadiness of his religiously humanistic world view.”\(^\text{41}\) Jean Bloch

---

\(^{36}\) Although this is speculative in nature, it is not unmerited. For a corresponding description of these years during which Chagall intensely painted crucifixes, see Jackie Wullschläger, *Chagall: A Biography*, 382.


\(^{40}\) Ibid., 221.

\(^{41}\) Cunningham, “Marc Chagall’s Religious Vision,” 252.
Rosensaft similarly contends that “Chagall’s biblical message is transmitted to people of all faiths in the hopes of fostering human understanding, peace and love.” Yet Chagall’s own religious inclinations do not delimit the possibilities for his artworks—they are not explicit humanist propaganda. His religious humanism does not undermine either Judaism or Christianity, even if people of both traditions sometimes puzzle over his allegiances. Chagall considered himself “something of a Christian,” bearing “an unconditional love for other beings.” He never “found it difficult to reconcile his personal beliefs and private imagery with the general truths of Christianity,” and he focused on those parts of Christianity he found favorable, such as the biblical accounts of God, peace, love, life out of death, and the Jewish Jesus who suffers with his people.43

To summarize, Chagall’s works like White Crucifixion creatively wed Jewish and Christian iconography in such a way that they invite us to imagine anew how the crucified Christ mediates between Jew and Gentile. Because Chagall was willing to engaging in something akin to enfolding, we have valuable resources for a renewed Christian imagination in which we better love God, others, and the rest of creation, all due to the power of the Jewish Messiah.

43 Bidermanas Izis and Roy McMullen, The World of Marc Chagall (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), 171.
6.5.2 Jackson Hlungwani’s Altar-spaces

Figure 18: Jackson Hlungwani, Altar to God, New Jerusalem, ca. 1984; photo by Susan Cole

While Marc Chagall’s artworks remind us of Christ’s fundamental Jewishness, Jackson Hlungwani’s altars show us one way of appreciating land and space as inspired in part by nonwestern Christianity. Jackson Hlungwani (1923–2010) was an artist in South Africa with a Venda-speaking, Tsonga-Shangaan background. According to Anitra Nettleton’s review of Hlungwani’s altar sites and interviews with the artist, Hlungwani’s “New Jerusalem” in Mbokoko combines “Tsonga-Shangaan religious elements with biblical elements” all while displaying the influence of “Pentecostal theological precepts.” His New Jerusalem sculptural site “negates the divide drawn by European

missionaries between Christian practices in Africa and indigenous African ancestral veneration.”45

Before starting his own church at New Jerusalem, Hlungwani participated in a Pentecostal African independent church (the Zionist Christian Church). These Pentecostal churches were initially amendable to incorporating originally African practices, in contrast to traditionally white, mainline denominations in South Africa. The mainline denominations, for example, focused on erecting buildings, whereas the African independent churches incorporated the African “practice of congregating in a landscape” with “particular natural features,” which comes from “African traditions of identifying locations through which one makes contact with the (ancestral) spirits.”46

It is therefore fitting that Hlungwani created Christian altar sites that were open-air, conforming to this African pattern.47 Hlungwani’s enfolding of Western Christianity with African ancestral customs is evident in his choice of location for New Jerusalem, which is not only open-air but built on the ruins of an ancient settlement of Venda-speakers. According to Nettleton, Venda-speakers believed such sites to have “powerful traces of ancestral presence,” and this, in turn, “suggests that he used it to

46 Ibid., 52-53.
47 Ibid., 58.
demonstrate...the possibility of uniting the ancestral and the Christian aspects of his
religious belief in a converted space.”

The altar sculptures themselves combine African and biblical themes, as in how
Hlungwani’s eminent Cain figure “is cast as an African warrior.” In Hlungwani’s work,
his figure of Cain (considered the ancestor of blacks) had a place of prominence, and his
Abel (considered the ancestor of whites) was more peripheral yet included. In this
sense, Hlungwani inverts the spatial logics embedded in the imperial imagination by way
of a subversive, African Christian imagination.

Do Hlungwani’s sculptures and religious spaces fully undercut the logics of
whiteness, or do they repeat some of its problems by validating contextualized
Christianities that co-exist alongside the Christianities of other peoples without ever
craving true, holy intimacy? Does the name “New Jersualem” imply that Israel is simply
one among many peoples whose election is endlessly transposable? Perhaps. Indeed,
Nettleton repeatedly observes that Hlungwani operated in a fairly individualistic,
idiosyncratic way, even communicating with the “two beings” of “God and Christ” by
way of an epiphany and an antenna. Regardless, we can learn from his altar-spaces.

48 Ibid., 55.
49 Ibid., 63.
50 Nettleton, “Homeland Artists and the Contemporary Artworld: The Politics of
Authenticity,” in Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art, ed. Ian
McLean (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 269, 273. See also
“Jackson Hlungwani’s Altars,” 53.
First, his work displays a bold convergence of Christian cultural forms that began as Western (like seeing Cain and Abel as racial ancestors), indigenous sensibilities about space (such as the preference for open-air sites of worship), and Tsonga-Shangaan ways of thinking about specific sites (as in the ancestral site of New Jerusalem). Second, this in turn invites us to reimagine how Christianity can look “different” from what we expect, how space and land might be more important for us all, and how we might incorporate diverse cultural logics in ways that serve the aim of bringing people together to worship God.

The examples of Chagall and Hlungwani improve our ability to connect Christ to Israel, space, and diverse cultural logics. The next two examples invite us to reimagine social relations by way of unconventional protagonists and Christ-figures who necessarily confront some of the problems embedded in whiteness. The first of these, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, works explicitly with theological tropes and maintains a mostly grim outlook, whereas the second, the film *Whale Rider*, forgoes direct engagement of Christianity but still subverts whiteness for the sake something better.
6.5.3 Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970)

Figure 19: The Bluest Eye cover, 1972 Washington Square Press edition

Pulitzer and Nobel prize-winning Toni Morrison (1931—present) published her debut novel, The Bluest Eye, in 1970. The Bluest Eye is a devastating tale that subverts the idol of whiteness in countless ways but especially by reconfiguring the standard relationships between Christ, protagonists, and Christ-figures. The story’s structure lies

between the protagonist-focused and ensemble approaches; its best candidates for protagonists are black girls; there are several Christ-figures, the most central of whom is likewise one of the little black girls; and the Christ-figures themselves are drawn in such a way as to make their distinction from Christ painfully clear.

An African American female character, Claudia, serves as the primary narrator of the story as both a child and adult, excavating one tragic year of her childhood. In this sense, she could serve as the protagonist. Yet the book blurs the lines by focusing on a large cast of complex, well-drawn characters, all of whom participate in the demise of the one character who is truly central to the story: Pecola Breedlove. A guilt-stricken Claudia announces at the start of the tale that she must recount the story of Pecola’s demise, and in the process, the blame falls on all of the characters as well as on the readers of the story. As Morrison puts it:

In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to. That is, I did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse...[or lead] readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing.52

We learn from the foreword and opening pages that The Bluest Eye is a story recounted primarily by one little African American girl about the destruction of another little African American girl, with a cast of humanized characters, most of whom are likewise

---

52 Toni Morrison, Foreword to The Bluest Eye (New York: Plume Book, 1994), xii.
African American. In short, the very structure of the cast of characters and their arrangement around two black girls represents a subversion of the standard pattern.

The inversions do not stop with how Morrison undercuts the standard White Messiah protagonist structure. Several characters likewise take on the status of Christ-figures, with Pecola bearing the full weight of the sins of others to the point that she breaks, making her the most central Christ-figure. In this way, Morrison inverts the standard pattern by placing a black girl in the position of “major protagonist” and major Christ-figure, by offering other candidates for these roles, and by making her Christ-figures singularly tragic (e.g. Pecola is also Morrison’s “symbol of utter human desolation”). Among the many other characters who take on a Christ-figure or God-like status are Pecola’s parents, Pauline and Cholly, who respectively fail her and rape her.

Cholly, who could not accept the popularly offered image of God as a bearded white man, and who was never sought by or taken into the church, assumes a “godlike state” in order to survive. It was in this state that he met his to-be wife Pauline—and Pauline, who herself had a distorted view of God, accepted him as a god. For her part, Pauline had mixed her pubescent romantic desires with a Christ-figure. She had

---

54 Ibid., 64.
fantasized of a Presence, a Stranger who would fulfill her (confused) needs. Cholly was this Stranger, but his godlike state was unsustainable. When their marriage eroded, Pauline assumed the role of Christ herself. “Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross.” Pecola’s parents’ distorted visions of Christ in turn fell upon Pecola; she is to Cholly a peculiar creature and to Pauline a cross to bear.

Lastly, Morrison’s wretched Christ-figures reveal the distance between Christ-figures and the real Christ. Morrison forces readers to realize that, if there is a real Christ at all, then these Christ-figures who take on the place of Christ for themselves cannot possibly be much like the genuine article, and most certainly not in the ways these characters think. Morrison further drives home the point by showing us the impotence of popular images of Christ, such as one portrait hanging in the home of Geraldine, an upwardly-mobile black woman who strives to live into the ideals of whiteness (or what Morrison calls “the bluest eye”). When Geraldine unexpectedly finds Pecola in her home, she demands that Pecola get out of her house. Geraldine, a churchwoman, does not share of her home, her goods, or her love. As Pecola flees, she sees “Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes, his long brown hair parted in the middle, the gay

56 Ibid., 113.
57 Ibid., 126-127.
paper flowers twisted around his face.”\textsuperscript{58} This Jesus is little more than a well-kempt, papered-over lie.

If these Christ-figures and other images of Christ in the story embody a lie, then what is the truth? Now that we see the idol, with whom do we replace it? Morrison’s book offers subtle clues but withholds explicit answers.\textsuperscript{59} Nevertheless, it does more to subvert whiteness than rearrange how it relates Christ, Christ-figures, and protagonists in contrast to the traditional pattern: the story itself is a direct exposé on certain aspects of the idolatry of whiteness, of “the bluest eye.” When we are all together held under its sway and scrambling to climb to the top, then some of us will, like Pecola, be trampled and crushed by our collective weight. Morrison also identifies the distortion of desire, and in language not too far from this dissertation’s. At the close of the story, Claudia laments how they failed Pecola and then explains:

\begin{quote}
Oh, some of us ‘loved’ her…. Cholly loved her. I’m sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 93.

\textsuperscript{59} Literary critics often comment that \textit{The Bluest Eye} has both a bleak outlook and a few shreds of hope. What they find hopeful about the text, however, varies by critic. E.g., compare Demetrakopoulos, “Morrison’s Bleak Vision and Its Redemption,” and Allen Alexander, “The Fourth Face: The Image of God in Toni Morrison’s ‘The Bluest Eye,’” \textit{African American Review} 32, no. 2 (1998): 293-305.

\textsuperscript{60} Morrison, \textit{The Bluest Eye}, 206.

391
Cholly’s selfish love craved immediacy and yielded more death than life. (Pecola loses the baby and goes insane.) Yet those who kept their distance from Pecola and used her to feel superior—they not only failed Pecola, but they failed themselves. In both cases, intimacy and particularity could not find healthy expression due to the false mediator’s distortion of their desires.

To conclude, Morrison’s story is filled with inversions that reveal the underside of the typical pattern that places the false ideal of whiteness front, top, and center—and the underside is hard to look at. *The Bluest Eye* subverts whiteness through nontraditional protagonists and Christ-figures, a partial ensemble approach, and the disassociation of Christ from Christ-figures. In these moves, the story quite naturally takes on whiteness in its storyline, too, by bearing witness to what happens to “the least of these”—those whom traditional stories often fail to truly see, acknowledge, or love. Our stories, our images of Christ, and our images of ideal humanity are exposed as poweful forces. The power of *The Bluest Eye* lies not just in its literary genius, but in this truth-telling that implicates us all, leaving us desperate for something better.
6.5.4 Ihimaera and Caro’s *Whale Rider* (2002)

Figure 20: *Whale Rider* Poster

---

61 Artists and designers unknown. Available online: http://www.impawards.com/2003/whale_rider.html. Film distributed by Pandora Film (Germany) and Newmarket Films (USA).
On the surface, *Whale Rider* (2002) has little to do with Christianity. Yet it stands out as a shining example of art that subverts the idol of whiteness and offers instead a vision of improved life together. It subverts whiteness most notably in its nontraditional protagonist, its integration of indigenous Māori sensibilities (especially as they relate to land-based identity), and by offering an alternative vision of social reality. In this alternative vision, the merging of people and cultural logics comes from love rather than violence, and leadership comes not from a White Messiah but rises up from within the tribe. Although the film does not attribute this better social reality to the body, space, or mediation of Christ, nevertheless Christians can see in this a model of Christian enfolding.

First and foremost, the star of *Whale Rider* is a prepubescent, nonwhite girl (named Paikea). The author of the book upon which the film is based, Witi Ihimaera, made this move intentionally. In the film’s production notes, Ihimaera explains that his daughters asked him why boys were heroes and girls were helpless in movies, so he “decided to write a novel in which the girl is the hero.”62 Not only is the hero a girl, but the story belongs squarely in the province of a New Zealand Māori tribe, and the hero is not a foreign white girl who comes in as a White Messiah; instead, she rises from within. Yet like a White Messiah, she possesses an innate calling to lead, a special charism that qualifies her. In the context of her people, she is the twin sister of the boy who was

---

destined to be their next leader, but her brother and mother tragically die the day she is born. She must prove to her grandfather, Koro, that she should be the next chief of the people. In this sense, *Whale Rider* inverts the standard pattern by persisting to offer a hero, but a hero who is very conspicuously nonwhite, non-European, and non-male.

This was no easy move. Ihimaera also set the story within the culture, traditions, and mythology of his Māori tribe, which required that he face the issue of sexism and female leadership (or lack thereof) head-on. Sexism is not unique to whiteness, historically European cultures, or our current Western social imagination. *Whale Rider* at once addresses Māori sexism and Māori struggles with acculturation, or the threat of dwindling indigenous identity in the face of strong outside influences that reflect the dominant Western social imagination. Perhaps Koro’s resistance to Paikea assuming leadership relates to his fear of giving in to Western influence (that having a female leader would somehow constitute a compromise with Western egalitarian ideals), or perhaps instead his own prejudice reflects a condescending outlook that was itself already influenced by the judgmental, stratifying gaze of whiteness. However we conceptualize the relationship between Koro’s sexism, Western influence, and Māori tradition, the film’s treatment of them undercuts the social and cultural stratification that the idol of whiteness fosters.

*The Whale Rider’s* roots reach deep into a Māori people’s culture even as it branches out to face the challenges of globalization, cross-cultural encounter, sexism and prejudice, and the evolution of a marginalized people’s tradition. New Zealand
director Niki Caro masterfully adapts the book by Ihimaera, the first-published Māori novelist. Many of the actors, too, are from New Zealand with Māori background, and the movie was filmed in the book’s actual setting of Whangara, Ihimaera’s hometown.

Many of the extras in the film are locals. Producer John Barnett explains:

This novel was set in Whangara and it would almost have been heresy to shoot anywhere else. There are very physical things that are described in the book—the sweep of the bay, the island that looks like a whale, the meeting houses, the number of houses that are present and of course, the people whose legend we were telling.63

Not only do these factors give the film an air of authenticity, but they also allow the film to capture some of the indigenous identity as tied to that particular landscape and location. In this way, Whale Rider resembles how Hlungwani’s work subverts some of whiteness’s operations by emphasizing the particular ties between a particular people and their particular landscape. The story of Whale Rider further celebrates the intimate connection of this Māori tribe with whales, evident in the Māori legend of Paikea. In the film, the girl-hero, also named Paikea, hears whales calling her to stay on the island when she attempts to leave to live with her father in Germany; her grandfather Koro calls to them to save his people’s dwindling tradition, and they come; and at the climax of the story, young Paikea climbs atop the largest beached whale and rides it out to sea.

Lastly, not only does Whale Rider subvert whiteness by way of its nontraditional protagonist and its integration of indigenous Māori sensibilities but by offering an

63 Ibid.
alternative vision of social reality. The story’s resolution does not rely on a white
messiah, but it does require humility, love, and interdependence of all of the major
characters. Koro finally sees the special charism of his granddaughter and repents of his
stubbornness, realizing that his people’s tradition is not his alone to steward. In
humility he kneels beside his rescued, whale-riding granddaughter, saying, “Wise leader,
forgive me. I am just a fledgling new to flight.” With his vision broadened, he can
likewise accept that his son—Paikea’s father—has a true calling as an artist, even
though this means a merging of cultural forms and people by way of his son’s Māori-
influenced art in the Western art-world and his son’s romance with a white German
woman. By the end of the film, Koro welcomes this white woman, whereas before he
would have seen her as a destructive Western outsider.

Meanwhile, Paikea’s father achieves a deeper integration in his own life of his
Māori heritage, ending the film on a waka (tribal canoe) in traditional garb with his
father and his daughter, the new leader of his people. (This is the same waka he leaves
unfinished at the start of the film, now finished using his artistic abilities.) On the coast,
his new wife watches them, pregnant with Paikea’s new sibling. And Paikea finally has
the loving support and presence of her father and grandfather that she needed to fulfill
her destiny. Her leadership is not all about her, but about empowering her evolving
people. Her voiceover gets the closing lines of the film: “My name is Paikea Apirana,

and I come from a long line of chiefs, stretching all the way back to the whale rider. I’m not a prophet, but I know that our people will keep going forward, all together, with all of our strength.” She humbly denies that she is the “prophet” that Koro had once hoped her twin brother would be, and they are strong as they go forward “all together.”⁶⁵

Although the film does not attribute this better social reality to the body, space, or mediation of Christ, it models the respectful, loving enfolding of personal lives and cultural logics that we as Christians should pursue. James K. A. Smith likewise takes Whale Rider as a model, although he focuses on how this community creatively recovers its tradition in and “for” a postmodern culture—something he wants Christians to do with the Christian tradition.⁶⁶ Yet the film inspires not only love for tradition in general, the traditions of one’s own people, or the Christian tradition, but for this people—the people who ride whales. For our purposes, Whale Rider not only models creative cultural retrievals but the interweaving of both cultural forms and personal lives, where the driving motivation is not the recovery of tradition alone, but a love that heals the web of relationships between persons, peoples, cultures, land, and animals. Even if he meant something else by it, we can affirm Smith’s provocative intimation that “the church would do well by learning to ride whales.”⁶⁷

---

⁶⁵ Ibid.
⁶⁷ Ibid., 116.
By way of conclusion, the *Whale Rider’s* poster indicates the main ways in which the film subverts the idol of whiteness. In this poster, we see three non-white characters—an older man, a middle-aged man, and a girl—none of whom are front and center. The only visual indication here of a clear protagonist comes from how the girl alone is speaking or singing, and how she alone wears a special object around her neck. From the film, we learn that these are in fact distinguishing features that set her apart as the rightful chief: she sings the traditional songs for her grandfather, and she alone passes the test of retrieving the special necklace from the ocean as proof that she is the next chief. The poster’s tagline likewise names her as the hero: “One young girl dared to confront the past / change the present / and determine the future.” Her grandfather and father embody the past and present, respectively, while she embodies their future. As the hero, however, she brings her people together—especially her father and grandfather, who carry the line of the chiefs with her into a communal future together. Therefore, the poster subtly celebrates the film’s nontraditional protagonist, its integration of indigenous Māori sensibilities, and its alternative vision of social reality in which personal lives and cultural logics join to make something better.

This section has surveyed four of many possible examples of extant art that subverts the idol of whiteness by way of the tools, tactics, and characteristics recommended in this chapter. We would do well to find, promote, and create art that follows their lead. We need more cultural artifacts that inspire a new imagination, just
as we can draw inspiration from Marc Chagall’s Jewish Christ, Jackson Hlungwani’s African Christian altar-spaces, Toni Morrison’s alternative protagonists and Christ-figures, and The Whale Rider’s vision of enfolding as initiated by a nontraditional hero.

6.6 Conclusion to Part 2 of the Dissertation

A conversation on a television show between a fictional actor with Indian parents and a white executive captures several of the dynamics revealed in Part 2’s case study. In this episode, titled “Indians on TV,” the actor character is upset that he and his Indian American actor friend cannot both star on the same TV show. He brings up the issue with one of the show’s executives, a well-dressed, middle-aged white man.

Actor: “…why can’t there be two Indian people in the show? You know, why is it me or Ravi? Why can’t there be two?”

Executive: “Okay, look, I’ll be frank with you. If I do a show with two Indian guys on the poster, everyone’s gonna think it’s an Indian show. It wouldn’t be as relatable to a large mainstream audience.”

Actor: “Yeah, but you would never say that about a show with two white people. Every show has two white people. People don’t say that—people don’t watch ‘True Detective’ and go, ‘Ugh, there’s that white detective show.’ You know?”

Executive: “But just to be clear, that’s not me, okay? That’s the public. [I], you know, would love to see two Indian people on a show. Who cares? Right? But...we’re just not at that point.”

Although a fictional account, the conversation rings true. It suggests that the executive does not want to associate with the way of seeing and being in the world that would marginalize a television show just because it centrally features two nonwhite characters on its poster. Yet he nevertheless participates in maintaining the status quo because it is what he thinks enough of his potential audience would want from mainstream entertainment. And he is right. From Chapter 3 and the above case study, we know that our dominant social imagination posits a certain range of idealized white males as the figures through whom, in whom, and in relation to whom we all imagine ourselves. Only characters who approximate this ideal can be front and center and serve as protagonists with whom we relate, whether or not they are especially messianic or heroic.

We must ask ourselves: who stands between us, before us, and above us as our ideal, goal, mediator, and Holy Icon? Is it Christ? A false ideal like that of whiteness? Or perhaps both? Part 1 of this dissertation traced a line of christological anthropology that exposes an ongoing contest between Christ the Mediator and the idol of whiteness as the one who serves as the ideal human, our eschatological goal, the mediator of social identity, and the icon constantly held before us and between us. Our current social imagination includes ways of displacing Christ-centered sociality with its perversion. Although this false ideal of whiteness has some variability, its general form remains constant. Whether the White Man, Colonist, Imperialist, Master, Aryan, or the
Heroic White Messiahs of popular film, we have all been invited to imagine our individual and communal existence in, through, and in relation to this false ideal.

Part 2 has sought out one practical ramification of this theological diagnosis by targeting practices of popular media that have a substantial impact on our world today. There are other practical ramifications, to be sure, some of which were outlined in Chapters 3 and 4. Part 2 has not even exhausted the ways in which we can identify and subvert whiteness through the practices of popular media. We need to do more than change our engagement of popular media to uproot whiteness from our social imagination, from our social identities. That said, awareness is a first step on a journey that must be an eschatological one, all in the power of the Spirit as we grow together toward the particular people we are meant to be in Christ.

This dissertation encourages Christian institutions in particular to evaluate their practices with a view to uprooting or otherwise subverting the influence of whiteness. This can take place through revised curricula in pre-existing structures, like Sunday School and seminary curricula, but it could also mean alternative avenues such as book clubs, movie review groups, and media-training seminars. Education is one way to encourage Christians who produce, reproduce, circulate, and consume cultural artifacts to confront whiteness’s influence. Such media-critical and media-rich education should not be limited to Christian contexts, either, but in these contexts we should as Christians own up to whiteness’s theological roots and recognize the problem not only violates some vague sense of social justice, fairness, ethics, or morality, but that it constitutes a
powerful form of idolatry. This idolatry obstructs our love of God, ourselves, others, and the rest of creation, which is another way of saying that it hinders our ability to grow into who we are meant to be.

Christians must also go beyond a critique and appropriation of popular forms of media. Such activities serve the holistic end of “sanctifying perception” and changing the dynamics of social identity.\(^6^9\) If the christological anthropology laid out in Part 1 is at all right, then we need a drastic change in how we see. Right now, we see people as if much of who we are is instantly perceptible, and this merely perpetuates the extent to which this optic functions as a self-fulling prophecy on a massive social scale (i.e. part of a grand social imaginary). We therefore can see the movies and their posters in the above case study in a way that legitimately privileges factors such as race and gender as major, readily available indicators of value-laden, socially positioned identity.

Our hope is for a future in which identity and desirability are not so summarily measured, where we are not ranked against a false ideal, and where we do not vie for social position in the first place. In this eschatological “future,” we instead get to know

\(^6^9\) New images and stories are not enough, but they are critical. As bell hooks puts it, “little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking,” yet nevertheless “the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo” but of “transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of image subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews,” because “making space for the transgressive image...is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation.” See hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 4.
each other. We embrace and are embraced for all of our wonderful complexity. We
desire others and are desired to be known. We are connected to where we live and to
those who live with us, inviting others to share the space of Christ with us even as we
accept their own invitations, becoming enfolded into one another’s identities and
cultural logics. We thereby come to “imagine the world differently.”70 Jennings echoes
both Torrance and Bonhoeffer when he longs for “a generation of Christians who would
know themselves only through the power of resurrection and the call of the cross of
Christ,”71 which means taking Christ’s singular mediation seriously. In short, we need
Christ and Christ alone to mediate between us and God, each other, ourselves, and all
creation. As Bonhoeffer might say, this requires living from the future, discerning the
gap between what remains broken and what constitutes our present hope in Christ.

70 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 274.
Conclusion

Part 1 of this dissertation traced a line of theological anthropology that exposes the presence of an idol that competes with Christ to function as the mediator of social identity. Christ is the one true and proper mediator between us, God, each other, and the rest of creation; as Mediator, Christ is also our goal, ideal, and Holy Icon, in that he is not only the perfect and most human of humans but is the one who personalizes and humanizes us such that we become more who we are meant to be together in him. This way of seeing and being in the world accepts Christ as our personal and communal center, making it possible for us to have true freedom, true communion, and true particularity. Ever since the colonial-imperial era, however, a perversion of these theological truths has corrupted the dominant social imagination in which Christ gets replaced with a false mediator and ideal that is therefore an idol—the idol of whiteness.

In Part 2, we saw this idol at work in popular entertainment and considered ways we might undercut, confront, or otherwise subvert this idol through engaging the arts, popular or otherwise. These subversive measures include media-critical education and engaging art with nontraditional protagonists and Christ-figures.

Having reached its end, this dissertation can now name some further avenues to explore in light of its overall theses and conclusions.
7.1 Further Avenues

This dissertation raises questions even as it answers others, serving as a springboard for further action. For example, this dissertation invites us to develop a more robust theology of the Spirit’s role in particularity and eschatology, as articulated in Chapter 4. Other opportunities include interdisciplinary endeavors that might clarify some of the social and cultural dynamics identified in this dissertation, like the study of intersectionalism. Another promising avenue would be to find, describe, and build upon positive examples of interpersonal and cultural enfolding, whether in Christian contexts or beyond, and more examples of art and art-practices (popular or otherwise) that might help heal our diseased imaginations.

7.1.1 Intersectionalism

Especially in its early chapters, this dissertation spoke of racial identity, our racial imagination, and race-as-we-know-it, but it eventually turned to the language of “whiteness” and inevitably touched on issues of sex and gender, as well. As became apparent in Chapters 3 and 5, it is hard to speak of our current racial imagination without also speaking of forms of sexism, classism, nationalism, Westernism, and so on, which are all implicated in whiteness. For example, as played out so masterfully in Avatar, the colonial imagination views “natives” as feminine, desirable, and vulnerable;
it also views nonwhite peoples, especially those with the darkest skin tones, as being childlike and in need of instruction. The demotion implicit in such feminization, emasculation, and rendering childlike, as well as their role in racial identity, invites us to explore the theory of intersectionalism.

Intersectionalism, intersectionality, or intersectional theory refers to the ways in which aspects of our social identities intersect. Categories like race, sex, gender, class, caste, age, religion, sexuality, and so forth can and do interact. For example, being a black woman is more than simply the combination of being black and being a woman.¹ As the author of one anthology puts it, “race, class, and gender are interlocking categories of experience that affect all aspects of human life”; they are “different, but interrelated, axes of social structure”² or “interactive systems.”³ The original plan for this dissertation entailed a joint exploration of both sex and race. After all, one name for the idol of whiteness is the White Man, making clear that both race and sex play key roles in the false ideals of our current social imagination. That said, not all historical tensions between the sexes, sex identity, and gender identity can reduce to whiteness, and to explore sex and race equally together proved too much for just one dissertation. Given that whiteness entails a complex way of imagining the social world, however, further exploring it through the lens of intersectional theory could round out our

¹ See Vivian M. May, Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries (Florence: Taylor & Francis, 2015), esp. p. 32.
² Ibid., xi.
³ Ibid., xiv.
understanding of whiteness as an idol and help us identify more concretely how it works in conjunction with other forms of idolatry and systemic sin.

### 7.1.2 Positive Examples

This dissertation also uncovers our need for positive examples of both the process of enfolding and of art (and art-practices) that subvert the ways of whiteness. Although Torrance and Jennings lament that Jews and Christians split the One People of God in the first and second centuries, we can nevertheless look for the ways in which Jews and Gentiles began processes of enfolding in the time of the early church, a struggle partly recorded in the New Testament. Likewise, what can we learn from today’s Messianic Jews without brashly holding them up as the only path to the One People of God? We can also look elsewhere, using the skill of bifocal vision to discern between the good and the bad in any number of encounters, relationships, mergers, and mixings. We can even return to the examples that Jennings provides in *The Christian Imagination* with a view to emphasizing that which we wish to emulate and celebrate and that which we reject.

This dissertation likewise suggests we would benefit not only from new art and media formed with the advice of Chapter 6 in mind, but also for nuanced analyses of what is currently available and recommendations for art that inspires a better, healthier, and holier imagination—an imagination that frees us for truly life-giving, identity-
changing intimacy. That said, no cultural artifact or human product can be perfectly salubrious in this sense, which simply further encourages us to learn to sift the wheat from the chaff. Chapter 5 noted the slightly subversive features of some of the blockbuster films, and Chapter 6 offered four examples of more thoroughly whiteness-subversive artworks, but a few drops in the bucket are not enough to quench our thirst.

7.2 A Final Image

If this dissertation could make only one proposal, it would be this: we need a renewed imagination. We need better images and better stories to help us displace the idols that live between us and hold us back from each other, from God, from all creation, and from the particular selves we are meant to be. We need to hold up the true Icon.

Along these lines, changing how we engage popular media can be a part of those practices that Jennings call for, practices that change us by changing social relations. “Theology and the Arts” curricula in Christian institutions can respond to the ways in which the arts are cultural artifacts that bear the marks of social imaginaries that are often tainted by fallen ways of seeing and being in the world. We therefore need training to identify these dynamics, and also to identify the work of the Spirit in the here and now so that we can join its work or more fully give ourselves over to it. Such
“bifocal vision” allows us to navigate the already-not-yet, discerning the good, the bad, and the in-between in concrete, ever-changing contexts.

What might not yet be clear about this new imagination is that it also requires a dear cost. To continually de-center and re-center around Christ means death to our old selves. Just as the Holy Spirit drove Christ into the wilderness, to the cross, up from the grave, and to the right hand of the Father, so too must we die in order to live. When idols have infected the core of our being, then the death of an idol and the reorganization of our lives around a new source of life requires a form of death for the sake of new life, even if our new life retains features of the old in reconfigured fashion. This new imagination must therefore be a work of the Spirit.

We need a new imagination, and we cannot know exactly what it will be. Yet we know it demands humility, death to our old sicut deus selves, and an appreciation for what Christ has done and wills to do in all people and in all creation. Such an imagination breeds life in the Spirit. We find it by looking first to Christ between us, in the center of our world and the world to come. By dying to whiteness, we better love God, one another, creation, and ourselves, so that we can never again call our own flesh “nasty.”

This brings us to a final image that at once points us back to the beginning, up to the cross, and forward to the end of the story. Bonhoeffer writes, “The tree of life, the
cross of Christ, the center of God’s world that is fallen but upheld and preserved—that is what the end of the story about paradise is for us.”

Holy God, let us die to idols that we might live in you. With the crucified and risen Christ of Israel as our goal and Holy Icon, may we see as you see and love as you love, and together be who we are meant to be in you, by the power of your Spirit. Amen.

---

4 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, DBWE 3: 146.
Bibliography


———. “Essay and Discussion on Church Communion.” DBWE 14: 656-78.


———. “What is Church?” DBWE 12: 262-68.


420


Biography

Jacquelynn (Jacki) Price-Linnartz was born in Kissimmee, Florida, on February 21, 1983, to Don and Mitzi Price. After growing up in the woods near Boone, North Carolina, she received all of her degrees from Duke University and Duke Divinity School, which include a Bachelor of Science (*cum laude*, May 2005), a Master of Theological Studies (*summa cum laude*, May 2008), a Master of Theology (May 2009), and finally, a Doctor of Theology (December 2016). Aside from book reviews and guest blog posts, her publications include “Bonhoeffer’s Musical Metaphor of the Christian Life” in *Word & World* and the short story “Mud Runs Red” in *Relief: A Christian Literary Expression*.

Since obtaining her bachelor’s degree, she has received generous support from A Foundation for Theological Education as a John Wesley Fellow, from the United Methodist Church as a Dempster Fellow and recipient of the General Scholarship, from Resurrection United Methodist Church as a recipient of the Lucile Palmer Scholarship, and from Duke Divinity School in the form of Doctor of Theology Fellowship funds, Aldersgate Scholarship Endowment funds, and Doctor of Theology stipends. She has also been honored with a North Carolina Libraries mini-grant and the NC Religious Studies Association Student Presentation Award. She lives in Durham, NC, with her husband, Isaac, and her daughter, Miriam.