

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I. THE PROBLEM INTRODUCED

I do not know precisely when it happened, but I am no longer the same person I used to be. I contribute this change to three factors.¹ In the summer of 2000, I read a dissertation called, *Veni Creator Spiritus: De meditatie en het preekproces*.² During 2001, I began visiting the author's website and read his "Meditatiebrieven."³ During 2002, I read his book, *Op het spoor van meditatie: Biddend luisteren naar Gods Woord*.⁴ In January, 2005, I started translating the author's meditations "Time with Jesus" for my congregation.⁵ During this same year, I read his book *Jezus ontdekken: 33dagenboek*.⁶ The next year, I read his *Jezus uitstralen: worden als hij*.⁷

¹ These three factors, of course, did not appear in a vacuum, but were embedded in a particular history. With regard to this history, it may be beneficial to know that I graduated from the Theological University in Kampen, the Netherlands in 1980. During my stay in the Netherlands, I was a member of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated). After our family (my wife, two children at that time and myself), moved back to Canada, I kept abreast with the theological developments in my former Dutch denomination. Of particular interest to me were the developments that took place with regard the role of the listener in the preaching process, a renewed desire for spiritual growth, a new emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit and the centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ. Regarding the role of the listener in the preaching process, see C. Trimp, *Klank en Weerklank. Door prediking tot geloofservaring* (Barneveld: de Vuurbaak, 1989); C. J. de Ruijter (ed), *Preken en Horen. Op weg naar een eigentijdse gereformeerde preekvisie* (Kampen: Vakgroep Praktische Theologie, 1998). Regarding a renewed desire for spiritual growth, see Aad Kamsteeg, *Amerika: Sommigen noemen het een opwekking* (Barneveld: Nederlands Dagblad, 1995); Ibid., *Dit is mijn passie: Hartstocht voor God* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2005); J. Wesseling and E. Brink, *Alles in Christus: De wissel om bij Watchman Nee?* (Bedum: Woord en Wereld, 1997). Regarding a new emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, see the dossier "Het werk van de Geest," at <http://www.nd.nl/het/dossier/Geest/index.htm>; the website "Gods Geest werkt" at <http://www.godsgeestwerkt.com/>; Gert Hutten, *Verrast door de Geest* (Heerenveen: Barnabas, 2004); H. ten Brinke and J.W. Maris et. al., *Meer dan genoeg: Het verlangen naar meer van de Geest* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2004). Regarding a new emphasis on the centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ, see the works of Jos Douma. Recently, Koert van Bekkum characterized these developments as a desire for tangible or touchable grace. Moreover, he noted that this desire for tangible or touchable grace had always characterized the Reformed Church community albeit that this desire expressed itself in different ways. See Koert van Bekkum, "Verlangen naar tastbare genade," *De Reformatie* 81 20 (Feb. 18, 2006) at <http://www.dereformatie.nl/websites/scholma/hb.nsf/3de6f79b7d03133cc1256cf700323807/be770efef1b42369c125710f0043816e?OpenDocument>.

² Jos Douma, *Veni Creator Spiritus: De meditatie en het preekproces* (Kampen: Kok, 2000).

³ Ibid., "Meditatiebrieven," at <http://www.josdouma.nl/meditatie/index.html>.

⁴ Ibid., *Op het spoor van mediatie: Biddend luisteren naar Gods Woord* (Kampen: Kok, 2002).

⁵ Ibid., "Spending Time with Jesus" at <http://www.tijdmetjesus.nl/overdenkingen/prayingthepsalms.html>

⁶ Ibid., *Jezus ontdekken: 33dagenboek* (Kampen: Kok, 2004).

⁷ Ibid., *Jezus uitstralen: worden als hij* (Kampen: Kok, 2005).

In addition to being influenced by Jos Douma, I was also influenced by James A. Fowler. During 2004 and 2005, I would regularly visit Fowler's website.⁸ I read some of his articles and books, including *Man as God Intended*, *Christianity is not Religion*, *Union with Christ*, *Spirit-union & Soul-rest*, *Christ at Work in You*.⁹

Sometime during this five-year period a transition took place in my life. I began to understand what Jesus meant, in a way I had never understood before, when He said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). In addition, texts like, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20), "For you have died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3), "To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27) and "But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17) took on new meaning for me. Moreover, I noticed that the more I lived in faith union with Jesus by being receptive to his life through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit, the more He was working out his life in and through me. The fruit of the Spirit began to manifest themselves in my life as never before. My relationship with my wife and children became more Christlike. I focused less on doing and more on being that leads to doing, experiencing a tremendous rest in my soul. I drew the conclusion that I was now living embedded with Christ in God in a way that I had never known or experienced before. I felt like I was embedded in a maternal womb, united with the mother's life-blood inside of

⁸ James A. Fowler, "Christ in You Ministries" at <http://www.christinyou.net/>

⁹ Ibid., *Man as God Intended* (Fallbrook: C.I.Y. Publishing, 1998), *Christianity is not Religion* (Fallbrook: C.I.Y. Publishing, 1998), *Union with Christ* (Fallbrook: C.I.Y. Publishing, 2003), *Spirit-union and Soul-rest* (Fallbrook: C.I.Y. Publishing, 2004), *Christ at Work in You* (Fallbrook: C.I.Y. Publishing: 2005).

me, yet distinct from the mother's body outside of me. The words of Abraham Kuyper came to mind who wrote:

[the mystical union in which Christ indwells us] . . . has a nature peculiar to itself; it may be compared to other unions, but it can never be fully explained by them. Wonderful is the bond between the body and soul; more wonderful still the sacramental bond of holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper; equally wonderful the vital union between mother and child in her blood, like that of the vine and its growing branches; wonderful the bond of wedlock; and much more wonderful the union with the Holy Spirit, established by His indwelling. But the union with Immanuel is distinct from all these . . . It is a union invisible and intangible; the ear fails to perceive it, and it eludes all investigation; yet it is very real union and communion, by which the life of the Lord Jesus directly affects and controls us. As the unborn babe lives on the mother-blood, which has its heart-beat outside of him, so we also live on the Christ-life, which has its heart-beat not in our soul, but outside of us, in heaven above, in Christ Jesus.¹⁰

This living embedded with Christ through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit continues to fill a void in my life.

While I was preparing the workbook for the ten-week learning experience and facilitating this learning experience, I discovered the centrality of what I would call God's Father-Son love. I realized as never before that at the heart of the Scriptures is the relationship between the Father and the Son and the Son and the Father through the Holy Spirit also known as the Spirit of sonship¹¹ or the Spirit of his Son (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). And the incredible good news is that when Jesus calls us to live in union with Him through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of sonship, He is calling us to share in his own Father-Son love relationship. I began to understand that this is what Jesus meant when He prayed, "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in

¹⁰ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 337. See also Gannon Murphy, *Consuming Glory: A Classical Defense of Divine-Human Relationality Against Open Theism* (Eugene, Ore: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 205.

¹¹ Or adoption.

order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them” (Jn. 17:26). I also began to understand that when Jesus said that if anyone loves Him and obeys his teaching, he will be loved by his Father and He and his Father will come and make their home with him (Jn. 14:23).¹² Jesus is saying that the more we surrender our lives to Him in the loving obedience of faith, the more we will participate in his Father-Son love. I sensed that this is what having our lives “hidden with Christ in God” involves (Col. 3:3): it’s having our lives hidden with Christ in God’s Father-Son love through the Spirit of sonship. I also sensed that this is what becoming partakers of God’s divine nature involves (2 Pet. 1:4): it’s participating in God’s Father-Son love through the Spirit of adoption and participating in the eternal love life of the Father and the Son through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit. I now understand better than before that Jesus’ glory is being a partaker of the divine nature by being embedded in the Father and consequently participating in a reciprocal love relationship with the Father. I now see that He gives this glory to his church and calls her to embrace and surrender to it in faith (Jn. 17:22).¹³

II. THE PROBLEM DEVELOPED

A. A lacuna in my contemporary Reformed ecclesiastical culture

Why was there this void in my spiritual life? To begin with, after reading Fowler’s *Christianity is not Religion*, I was left with some searching questions. Fowler states, “Religion emphasizes precepts, propositions, performance, productivity, programs, promotion, percentages, etc.” Christianity, however, “emphasizes the Person of Jesus Christ,

¹² I.e. through the Holy Spirit.

¹³ In a personal email, Jos Douma affirmed this insight. Having asked him for his take on becoming partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), he writes that it is best to think this theme through from the fact that Jesus has already given us his glory (“Ik zou de thematiek liever willen doordenken vanuit het gegeven dat we de heerlijkheid van God al hebben ontvangen [Joh. 17:22]”).

and His life lived out through the receptive Christian believer.” Moreover, “Religion has to do with form, formalism, and formulas; ritual, rules, regulations and rites; legalism, laws and laboring.” The good news of Christianity, however, is that “it’s not what we do or perform, but what Jesus has done and is doing in us.”¹⁴

Fowler stresses that Christianity is not a book-religion, for “Our faith is not in the Bible. Our hope is not in the Bible.” On the contrary, “our faith, hope and love are in Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ According to Fowler, “Book-religion creates a mechanistic system, a belief-system or ethical-system. Such systematized religion depersonalizes and devitalizes God, as well as dehumanizes man.” Consequently, we do not function as God intended us to function “unless the Living expression of the Word of God in Jesus Christ is functioning in us.”¹⁶

Fowler asserts that Christianity is also not morality. According to him, morality is based on three premises: “(1) ‘Good’ exists in itself. (2) ‘Good’ is knowable in itself. (3) ‘Good’ is do-able by oneself.” Christianity, however, asserts the following three premises: “(1) ‘Good’ exists only in God. (2) ‘Good’ is knowable only as God reveals Himself. (3) ‘Good’ is do-able only as the character of God is activated and expressed in human behavior by the grace of God.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Fowler, *Christianity is not Religion*, 20-21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41. This does not exclude the fact that Christ comes to us in the garment of the Scriptures and “sweetly allures” us to behold and contemplate his glory in this multi-coloured and multi-faceted garment. In this sense, Christianity can be said to be a “religion of the book” although I do not like calling Christianity a religion, but faith in the Person of Christ. Commenting on the word “Christian,” John Stott writes, “The word ‘Christian’ occurs only three times in the Bible. Because of its common misuse we could profitably dispense with it. Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul never used the word, or at least not in their recorded teaching. What distinguishes the true followers of Jesus is neither their creed, nor their code of ethics, nor their ceremonies, nor their culture, but Christ. *What is often mistakenly called ‘Christianity’ is, in essence, neither a religion nor a system, but a person, Jesus of Nazareth.*” Emphasis added. See John Stott, *In Christ* (Washington: National Prayer Breakfast, 1983), a. Cf. Timothy Dudley-Smith, *Authentic Christianity: From the Writings of John Stott* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 346.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

Fowler emphasizes that Christianity is not a belief-system. According to him, “Christianity is not just another religion propagating an ideology. Christianity is not just another religion remembering the teaching of its founder. Christianity is not just another religion reiterating the propositional tenets of its founder’s teaching, and calling such ‘truth.’ Christianity is not just another religion demanding conformity to a particular ‘belief-system’ or data-base of doctrine.” On the contrary, “The essence of Christianity is Jesus Christ. All of Christianity is inherent in Jesus, His Person and His continuing activity. Christianity functions only by the dynamic of the risen and living Lord Jesus. Christianity is the function of the Spirit of Christ as He continues to live in Christians.”¹⁸

Fowler highlights that Christianity is also not epistemology. To be sure, he does not deny that there is “an epistemologically based understanding that is foundational to Christianity.” But “Epistemological understanding [as such] is inadequate to comprehend the divine reality that is the essence of Christianity.” For “The objective of the Christian message is not to encourage people to receive and accumulate and assent to information, but rather to receive the very Being of God into themselves (John 1:12) and allow Jesus Christ to be their life (Col. 3:4).”¹⁹

Fowler states that Christianity is not problem solving. According to him, the “teleological purpose of Christianity is not utilitarian solutions to perceived problems, but receptivity to the ontological character of God expressed in behaviour that glorifies God.” This does not mean a “passive acceptance of the status quo.” What it does mean is that the reality of the life of Christ is lived out in and through Christians in the midst of the problems of this world. Perhaps, it may please God to solve some problems. Perhaps, it may be God’s

¹⁸ Ibid., 86-87.

¹⁹ Ibid., 96-97.

will that some problems remain.²⁰

It would not be difficult to discern an emphasis on form, formalism, and formulas; ritual, rules, regulations and rites; legalism, laws and laboring in my ecclesiastical culture. Moreover, it would not be hard to illustrate how a deep respect for the Bible fostered more trust in the Bible than in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it would not be difficult to identify all sorts of exhortations to “do good.” In fact, as a preacher and pastor, I have made many of these exhortations myself. Yet, I do not recall sufficiently emphasizing or hearing a sustained emphasis that any good we do can only come from the Christ-life inside of us when we become partakers of the divine nature through faith. In addition, it would not be hard to illustrate a stronger emphasis on right doctrine and the receiving, accumulating and assenting to information in my ecclesiastical culture than on the centrality of living in union and communion with the crucified, risen and ascended Lord in the Father through the Spirit. Likewise, it would not be difficult to illustrate a tendency to see the primary purpose of Christianity as solving personal and societal problems instead of emphasizing that Christians are channels through which the crucified, risen and ascended Lord lives out his life and ministry in the midst of the problems we encounter. Thus, the question Fowler left me with is: “To what extent did all of these misrepresentations of Christianity in my ecclesiastical culture contribute to living a life that was void of an affective awareness of living a God-generated life by being embedded with Christ in Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit.”

²⁰ Ibid., 129, 135-136.

B. A gap in contemporary Evangelical ecclesiastical culture

It appears that the gap in my Reformed ecclesiastical culture is present in contemporary Evangelical ecclesiastical culture too. In their book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton share the main survey and interview findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion conducted from 2001 to 2005 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.²¹ The study revealed the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents. Thus, the best social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents *do* look like. Moreover, the study showed that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism appears to have established a significant foothold among very many contemporary U.S teenagers. The de facto creed of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism the authors distilled from their interviews has the following tenets:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.²²

This creed reveals that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about “inculcating a moralistic approach to life.” This means that if you want to live a good and happy life, you have to be a good and moral person. Concretely this means, “being nice, kind, pleasant,

²¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also The National Study of Youth and Religion at <http://www.youthandreligion.org/research/index.html>

²² Smith and Denton., 162-63. The authors stress that no teenager actually described himself or herself as a Moralistic Therapeutic Deist, but that this terminology is their summarizing term.

respectful, responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one's health, and doing one's best to be successful.” Moreover, this creed reveals that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not a religion of “repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of being a servant of a sovereign divine, of steadfastly saying one’s prayers, of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering, of basking in God’s love and grace, of spending oneself in gratitude and love for the cause of social justice, etcetera,” but about “feeling good, happy, secure, [and] at peace.” Furthermore, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about “belief in a particular kind of God: one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one’s affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved.” Often this God is described as “watching over everything from above” or “the creator of everything and . . . just up there now controlling everything.”²³

The authors gave their book the title *Soul Searching*. This title was intentionally given to suggest three meanings. First, the National Study of Youth and Religion was a sociological searching of the souls of American teenagers. Second, the study revealed that the teenagers themselves were “engaged in a kind of search for their own souls—trying to sort through their life and faith identity, beliefs, commitments, and practices in their long passages from childhood to adulthood.”²⁴ Third, since the study revealed that teenagers and adults have much in common, the authors intend the title of their book to have adults and communities of faith search their own souls with regard to their place and function in the spiritual and religious lives of teenagers today.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 163-64.

²⁴ Ibid, 259.

²⁵ While not researching through the lens of Therapeutic Deistic Detachment, Reginald Bibby and Donald Posterski have come to similar conclusions regarding Canadian teenagers and Denton and Smith. See Reginald

Smith and Denton are not the only ones who have written about religion that has degenerated into a form of Deism. In his booklet, *Union with Christ*, James Fowler does the same. He laments how modern evangelicalism is preoccupied with “productivity in precepts, procedures and programs for ‘doing’ God’s work.”²⁶ With this preoccupation, “success in the accomplishment of ‘doing’ has become the basis for significance and identity.”²⁷ He further bemoans how “the vast majority of those who call themselves ‘Christians’ today are essentially deistic in their understanding of God.”²⁸ According to Fowler, “Jesus is likewise regarded as far removed in His transcendence, seated at the right hand of God the Father.”²⁹

Fowler believes that “this detachment of God and man has been fostered by a theological paradigm that has over-objectified the Person and work of Jesus Christ.”³⁰ Instead of “an indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ allowing for a new spiritual identity, evangelicalism has offered identification with the historical and theological Jesus, and more tangibly with the church organization.”³¹ Members of the church are “assured that they have received a static deposit of impersonal ‘eternal life’ which will serve as a ‘ticket to heaven’ for future union and intimacy with God.”³² There is “no sense of a spiritual union-identity with the living Lord, only a sense of identification with a belief-system cause or an institutional entity.”³³

W. Bibby and Donald C. Posterski, *The Emerging Generation: An Inside Look at Canada’s Teenagers* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1985), 115-128; *Ibid.*, *Teen Trends: A Nation in Motion* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1992), 247-271; Reginald W. Bibby, *Canada’s Teens: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Toronto: Stoddard, 2001), 125-28, 131-32.

²⁶ Fowler, 13

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

Dallas Willard laments the same situation. In an interview with *Christianity Today*, he shares:

There are really three gospels that are heard in our society. One is forgiveness of sins. Another is being faithful to your church: If you take care of your church, it will take care of you. Sometimes it's called discipleship, but it's really churchmanship. And another gospel is the social one—Jesus is in favor of liberation, and we should be devoted to that. All of those contain important elements of truth. You can't dismiss any of them. But to make them central and say that's what discipleship is just robs discipleship of its connection with transformation of character.³⁴

In his book *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life with God*, Willard calls the first gospel a gospel of sin management. Those who embrace it believe that Jesus has forgiven their sins and that consequently they can look forward to living with Him in heaven. However this gospel misses the whole point that Jesus invites us to enter the life of the kingdom of God now already.³⁵ This life of the kingdom is a life that is hidden in Christ with God.³⁶ Consequently, the message of the gospel is not just for the life hereafter, but living in a kingdom way today already. With regard to the life hereafter, this is simply “a natural extension of the faith we live now and the life in which we now participate. Eternity is now in flight and we with it, like it or not.”³⁷

In their book, *The Rest of the Gospel: When the partial Gospel has worn you out*, Dan Stone and David Gregory refer to this gospel of sin management as the partial gospel.

Commenting on this gospel, they write:

The vast majority of believers only know one half of the gospel. The first twelve years that I pastored, I only knew one half of the gospel. I preached a steady diet of *Christ died for the forgiveness of your sins*. Week after week I

³⁴ Agnieszka Tennant, “The Making of the Christian” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 49 10 (October 2005) at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/010/9.42.html>

³⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 35-50.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 208

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii.

gave the same basic message. The problem was that my audience had already been saved; their sins had already been forgiven.³⁸

According to the authors, this partial gospel inevitably leads to legalism and the performance syndrome. Commenting on this connection, they write:

The only other message I had to offer was telling them what they ought to be doing: external compliance with commandments. I was handing out my own version of legalism. The people's hearts were like mine. We wanted to serve God; we wanted to do the right thing. So we would accept those ought-to's and try to do them.³⁹

In order to escape the treadmill of legalism and performance we have to become aware of the other half of the gospel. This other half is Christ living his life in and through us as we learn to rest in Him. Commenting on this other half of the gospel, the authors write:

When Jesus said, 'Learn from Me,' He meant to learn from Him how He lived. And how did He live? He lived out of the Father. He didn't have any other secret . . . He didn't have a Bible at home to read; He didn't have a prayer group to go to. He let the Father live the life through Him. He learned how to live out of the resources of the Father, which are not of this seen and temporal realm, but of the unseen and eternal realm.⁴⁰

For us this means the following:

The life of the Son was the Father, and the life of the sons is the Son. So how do you live the life? You learn to live out of the Son and the Father. To learn to live out of the Son and the Father, though, you have to know where the Son and the Father live—in you. It's a miracle. It's amazing. It can't be fully explained. But it can be witnessed in the life of Christ.⁴¹

Larry Crabb has made a similar discovery as Stone and Gregory. In an interview with *Christianity Today*, Crabb shares how he began to lose faith in the standard evangelical means of spiritual growth. He says: "Daily devotions, no drinking, faithful church attendance, busyness with church programs, performance-oriented Sunday worship and

³⁸ Dan Stone and David Gregory, *The Rest of the Gospel: When the partial Gospel has worn you out* (Corvallis: One Press, 2000), 35.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 35-36

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 60

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

preaching [did not lead him to] a dynamic enjoyment of God.”⁴² In his book, *The Pressure’s Off*, Crabb identifies two approaches to life. One creates pressure; the other provides freedom. One is built on the flesh; the other on the Spirit. The one built on the flesh reasons like this: (1) I live to be blessed; (2) I must get it right so blessings come; (3) I will figure out what to do and do it; (4) I expect good things to follow; (5) My will be done. The one built on the Spirit reasons like this: (1) I live to know Christ; (2) I come to Him to celebrate his glory; (3) I will trust his provision; (4) I expect to become like Jesus; (5) Thy will be done.⁴³

III. THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY DEFINED AND ESTABLISHED

A few years ago, a number of ministers in my former denomination in the Netherlands began reflecting upon what constitutes a good model for church growth.⁴⁴ They came to the conclusion that any reflection for church growth ought to have a solid theological foundation in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This Christ-centered theological approach would form a healthy corrective to defining church growth primarily in practical terms such as connecting, purpose driven, equipping, emotional health, mission, attractiveness, community, natural development, and postmodern culture.⁴⁵ Since January 1,

⁴² Agnieszka Tennant, “A Shrink Gets Stretched: Why psychologist Larry Crabb believes spiritual direction should replace therapy” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 47 5 (May 2003) at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/005/7.52.html>.

⁴³ Larry Crabb, *The Pressure’s Off: There’s a New Way to Live* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2002), 221-22.

⁴⁴ Werkgezelschap Christocentrische Gemeente” at www.Christocentrischegemeente.gkv.nl/

⁴⁵ Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Sue Mallory, *The Equipping Church: Serving Together to Transform Lives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); Darrell L. Guder (ed.), *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); J. Hendriks, *Een vitale en aantrekkelijke gemeente: Model en methode van gemeenteopbouw* (Kampen: Kok, 1990); David Ferguson, *The Never Alone Church* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998); Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: How your congregation can develop the eight essential qualities of a healthy church* (Carol Stream: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996). Leonard Sweet, *Aqua Church: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today’s Fluid Culture* (Loveland: Group Publishing, 1999); Brian

2005, these ministers formed a think tank called the “Christ-centered Congregation Study Group.”

In its vision statement, the study group defines a Christ-centered congregation as “a local church that in every aspect of its life explicitly wants to be guided by and focused on the Lord Jesus Christ who said, ‘Apart from me, you can do nothing’” (John 15:5).” The study group also wants to draw out the theological and practical implications of the Reformed catchphrases *Solus Christus* (Christ alone) and *Totus Christus* (Christ completely) for the congregation in all its spheres and tasks. The group emphasizes that its focus on Christ is a Trinitarian Christ-centeredness because “Jesus Christ is the Son of the Father who governs his church through his Spirit (and Word).” Subsequently, “Christ is central through the power of the Spirit to the glory of the Father.” The study group plans to meet three times a year and address at least the following topics: Christocentric leadership, pastorate, prayer, preaching, worship, community, catechism instruction, congregational development, deaconate, evangelism, spirituality, theology and ethics.⁴⁶

About halfway through the learning experience, I serendipitously discovered the declaration “Union in Christ: A Declaration for the Church” adopted by The Confessing Church Movement within the Presbyterian Church (USA) at its third gathering in Dallas, 1998.⁴⁷ The intent of this declaration is to show that union with Christ ties together the church’s confession regarding discipleship, authority, mission and church unity. As the Holy Spirit unites believers with Jesus Christ, their discipleship becomes an outgrowth his life

McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

⁴⁶ See “Gereformeerde kerk van Jezus zijn in de 21st eeuw: basis document,” at <http://www.christocentrischegemeente.gkv.nl/>

⁴⁷ For more on this movement, see <http://www.presbycoalition.org/aboutus.htm>. For the declaration, see Appendix 11.

within them (Gal. 2:20), their understanding of the Scriptures an expression of the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), their mission in this world a participation in and extension of the mission of Christ's own mission (Jn. 20:21) and their unity together as the fruit of their being joined together in union with Christ (Rom 12:5). In short, the declaration affirms that "the whole of the Christian life is a process of our coming to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, and of our sharing through the same Spirit in the life and ministry of the Son given from the Father."⁴⁸

My intent to cultivate a God-generated life of living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit should be seen in the light of this movement in the Netherlands to work towards a Christ-centered congregation that is Christ-centered in its theology and praxis. Moreover, it should also be seen in the light of the declaration "Union in Christ."

IV. PURPOSE, HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to examine the nature and significance of living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit and to sow some seeds for cultivating this kind of a life. My general hypothesis is that based on personal experience and discussions with Christians in my former Reformed denomination⁴⁹ and my present one,⁵⁰ it appears that many Reformed Christians not only do not experience what living a God-generated life of living embedded with Christ in the Father through the

⁴⁸ Andrew Purves and Mark Achtemeir, *Union in Christ: A Declaration for the Church: A commentary with Questions for Study and Reflection* (Louisville, Ky.: Witherspoon Press, 1999), 7.

⁴⁹ The Canadian Reformed Churches, see <http://www.canrc.org/>

⁵⁰ The United Reformed Churches of North America, see <http://htdconnect.com/~bethany/URC.htm>. Interestingly, the United Reformed Churches of North America and the Canadian Reformed Churches are in phase two of merger talks.

advance installment of the Holy Spirit is, but also do not intentionally live this kind of life. It is my suspicion that this situation would be the same in many Evangelical denominations. Instead of intentionally living God-generated lives with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit, many Christians appear to live self-generated lives. However, going through a ten-week learning experience meant to equip (young) adults to live a God-generated life will serve as a stepping stone in moving them from this kind of self-generated, dis-embedded living to more God-generated, embedded living with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit.

In order to test this general hypothesis I developed a workbook in which I introduce participants to the nature and significance of living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit. My first research question is: “To what extent is or was the spirituality of (young) adults in my congregation and in a neighbouring congregation of a denomination with which our denomination is having merger talks characterized by various forms of detachment between Christ and themselves?” My second research question is: “To what extent do Reformed Christians live self-generated, dis-embedded lives?” My third research question is: “Will going through a 10-week spiritual learning experience meant to equip (young) adults to learn to live a God-generated life of living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit serve as a stepping stone to move Christians from living self-generated lives of detachment from God in Christ to God-generated live of living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit?”

V. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The biblical foundations for this study are organized around the nature and significance of living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit.⁵¹ The nature of living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit is subdivided into six specific ways of living this life. First, living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit is a covenantal relationship. Second, it is a relationship made possible and deepened through the incarnation. Third, it is a relationship personally embraced through faith. Fourth, it is a relationship enriched and strengthened by the sacraments. Fifth, it is a relationship that affects every area of life. Sixth, it is a mysterious relationship. The significance of living embedded with Christ in the Father is subdivided into four specific ways this significance manifests itself. First, living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit involves representing Christ. Second, it entails being in Christ. Third, it involves conformity to Christ. Fourth, it entails resting in Christ.

The theological foundations concentrate on John Calvin's understanding of living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit. The reason for focusing on Calvin is because living embedded with Christ in Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit or union with Christ is a central motif in his theology. While my denomination is proud to trace its roots back to the teachings of Calvin, it appears that his teaching on union with Christ no longer functions as it ought. Thus, by removing the weeds and moss that has grown over and obscured this beautiful teaching over the centuries,

⁵¹ These organizing principles are adapted from those found in Alister McGrath (gen. ed.), *The NIV Thematic Reference Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 1860. They are meant to be inclusive and not exclusive. Thus, another organization is also imaginable. I chose this one because of its biblical accuracy and comprehensive scope.

I hope to expose my denomination to what was once central in its theology and should once again be.⁵²

The theological foundations do not make an exhaustive study of everything John Calvin has written on union with Christ, but focus on what has been discovered in the biblical foundations. Thus, the theological foundations use the same principal of division or *principium divisionis* as the biblical foundations. Consequently, the theological foundations first illustrate what Calvin wrote about the nature of union with Christ as it pertains to this relationship being a mysterious, covenantal relationship, made possible and deepened by the incarnation, personally embraced by faith, enriched and strengthened by the sacraments. Second, they illustrate what Calvin wrote about the significance of union with Christ as it relates to this relationship involving representing Christ, being in Christ, conformity to Christ and resting in Christ.

Of particular interest for this study is what Calvin taught regarding becoming a partaker of God's divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). According to Calvin, becoming a partaker of God's divine nature entails an ontological union with God that is a sort of deification (*quasi deificari*). To be sure, believers do not share in the essence of God, but they share in the properties of this essence. This deification or ontological union with God appears to be presupposed in what Calvin taught regarding the image of God, union with Christ, engrafting, glorification and the Trinitarian life.

⁵² The metaphor of weeds and moss is a slightly adapted version of a metaphor Gordon Smith used to summarize what I was planning in the historical chapter of my study to do when I discussed my dissertation project with him. I have already done a first draft of the Scriptural and theological foundations focusing on John Calvin in an integrative paper I submitted for DMN 915: "Theology and History of Spiritual Formation." Needless to say, this first draft was significantly revised for my dissertation project.

VI. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Usually, the literature review is a consideration of what four or five key *contemporary* scholars are saying about the issue under discussion. Because deification also known as theosis is an important theme in patristic and Eastern Orthodox theology, this chapter gives a *historical* theological review through church history of how deification or theosis has been argued, nuanced, understood and applied.

It organizes the literature on living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit according to church families from which one representative is studied.⁵³ Thus, after having studied one representative from the second century church, a representative from the Western liturgical family (Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism), one from the Eastern liturgical family (Eastern Orthodox), one from the Lutheran family, one from the Pietist-Methodist and Holiness family and one from the Baptist family is studied. Pinnock was chosen because living embedded with Christ in the Father is experienced through the advance installment of this life in the Holy Spirit. Pinnock develops this pneumatological theme in a way that few others have done before.⁵⁴

VII. PROCEDURES AND RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Description of the Research Project

The research project primarily consists of facilitating a ten-week learning experience of learning to live a God-generated life of living embedded with Christ in the Father through

⁵³ For an overview of these families, see J. Gordon Melton (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of American Religions: A Comprehensive Study of the Major Religious Groups in the United States and Canada* (Tarrytown: Triumph Books, 1989).

⁵⁴ While officially in the Baptist church family, I realize that many points in Pinnock's theology are not representative for this church family. However, this disclaimer does not need to be made with regard to his doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

the advance installment of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵ The learning experience will focus on the following ten aspects of learning to live this kind of life:

- (1) Being embraced by God's Father-Son love through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit;
- (2) Surrendering to God's Father-Son love through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit;
- (3) Receiving God's Father-Son love through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit;
- (4) Visualizing God's Father-Son love through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit;
- (5) Radiating God's Father-Son love through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit;
- (6) Discovering God's Father-Son love through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit;
- (7) Representing God's Father-Son love through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit;
- (8) Living embedded with Christ in God's Father-Son love through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit;
- (9) Conforming to God's Father-Son love through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit;
- (10) Resting in God's Father-Son love through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit.

B. Subjects identified

Since the primary ecclesiastical context of my theological reflection is my local congregation and congregations who are associated with it through denominational affiliation or otherwise, the subjects of the research project are 27 adults (13 males and 14 females) drawn from my own congregation, the Covenant Reformed Church in Surrey and the

⁵⁵ For why this process was chosen as opposed to others, see chapter five.

Canadian Reformed Church in Langley. The subjects met in two different focus groups. One group met on Friday evenings; the other on Sunday evenings.

C. Design of the study

At the outset of the learning experience, the participants filled out a questionnaire to help them assess the extent to which they are living embedded in God's Father-Son love.⁵⁶ They then participated one evening per week for 10 weeks in various learning processes designed to cultivate living embedded in God's Father-Son love through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit. As part of the learning experience, the participants were asked to do weekly assignments⁵⁷, including making journal entries designed to keep track of what they are feeling, thinking, desiring and doing with regard to living embedded in God's Father-Son love.⁵⁸ These journal entries did not need to be handed in. After completing the 10-week learning experience, the participants were asked to fill out a similar questionnaire to see what changes took place since they first filled it out. They were encouraged to comment on how the learning experience impacted them in space provided in this second questionnaire. A debriefing of the course was provided. A copy of the final chapter of the study was sent to each of the participants showing the results and conclusions of the project. They were invited to respond to the results and conclusions.

⁵⁶ See chapter five for the rationale for the design of the questionnaires.

⁵⁷ These assignments included memorizing and praying the Scriptures as well as daily singing the worship song included with each lesson.

⁵⁸ For the nature of these assignments, see the participant's workbook.

D. Independent and dependent variables⁵⁹

One independent variable is the different learning styles of the participants. Some learn better through concrete experience while others learn better through reflective observation. Some learn better through abstract conceptualization while others learn better through active experimentation. The learning experience controlled this variable by offering a learning experience that integrates all four different learning styles.⁶⁰ A second independent variable is the unfamiliarity of some of the concepts in learning experience workbook. The learning experience controlled this variable by having the author of the workbook teach and facilitate the learning experience. A third independent variable is the risk of feeling pressured or embarrassed to reveal one's level of spiritual commitment.⁶¹ The learning experience controlled this variable by assuring the participants in the consent form that any information that is obtained in connection with this study will be anonymous. Consequently, all documents were identified only by a code number of the participant's own choice, unless he or she chose to identify him or herself. Either way, participants were assured that they would not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. A fourth independent variable is the level of open-mindedness a participant brings to the learning experience.⁶² The

⁵⁹ Independent variables are "those presumed to cause, effect or influence the outcome but are independent of the outcome itself." See Larry Perkins, "Doctor of Ministry Dissertation Manual" (Langley: ACTS, 2005), 18. Dependent variables are "those on which the outcomes are directly dependent, depending on how they are managed or manipulated." See *ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁰ Since males predominantly tend to analyze and structure, reason logically, use common sense, are abstract and theoretical and think in concepts, while females predominantly tend to give meaning, reason associatively, trust intuition, are concrete and practical and think in images, these four different learning style incorporate this gender difference.

⁶¹ While the participants were encouraged to share with others what God was doing in their life both during the learning sessions and between them, because of personality and temperament some shared more than others. I did not observe any outright unwillingness to share.

⁶² The level of open-mindedness may be connected to the stage of faith development. Fowler, for instance, distinguishes between seven stages of faith: (1) primal faith; (2) intuitive-projective faith; (3) mythic-literal faith; (4) synthetic-conventional faith; (5) individuative-reflective faith; (6) conjunctive faith; (7) universalizing faith. See James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for*

learning experience controlled this variable by offering a communal learning experience in which each participant participated in the learning experience of the other. One dependent variable is the gender ratio in the focus groups. The learning experience controlled this variable by having an equal mix of 14 males and 14 females. A second dependent variable is the varying ecclesiastical traditions participants bring to the learning experience. The learning experience controlled this variable by limiting the learning experience to two local Reformed denominations with the same background that are in the process of merger talks. The three participants from an Evangelical background were tabulated separately. This reduced the Reformed group to 13 males and 12 females. A third dependent variable is that each participant did not attend all ten sessions. The learning experience controlled this variable by encouraging those who missed a lesson to read the lesson in the workbook at home and reflect on the learning activities. A fourth dependent variable is that the participants may not have completed the weekly assignments. The learning experience could not control this variable.

VIII. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

A. Findings

The findings of the research project are presented in the final chapter. First, the results of the questionnaires indicating the various forms of detachment or not being embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit and the increase in being embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit the learning experience made are presented and applied to the individual hypothesis of each of the ten lessons. Second, the overall results are presented, broken down and applied to the

Meaning (San Francisco, Cal.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 117-213. It is beyond the scope of this study to explore this connection or any other connection relating to stages of faith development.

three research questions and the general hypothesis. In both cases, evaluation and analysis of the data was given and conclusions were drawn. Charts and diagrams are used to visualize the findings. The quantitative and qualitative data is correlated.

B. Delimitations and generalization

It is not the intent of this study to try to verify the hypothesis for all Reformed denominations, but only for a cross section of members in my own congregation and a neighbouring one. Nevertheless, the findings could be a stepping-stone to verifying the hypothesis in other congregations and denominations. In addition, the findings could indicate whether this kind of learning process is one effective way to move Christians from an objective, propositional detached spirituality of detachment or disembeddedness from Christ to a more subjective, relational embedded spirituality of living with Christ in the Father through generating work of the advance installment of the Holy Spirit.

IX. OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter one gives an introduction to and an overview of the dissertation. Chapter two outlines the biblical and theological foundations of living embedded with Christ in the Father through the advance installment of the Holy Spirit. Chapter three analyzes selected portions from the writings of John Calvin to discern how he interprets these biblical and theological foundations. Chapter four selects representative literature from various times in the history of the church and various segments of the church to discern how the nature of Christian experience has been defined particularly with a view to deification or theosis. Chapter five outlines the design and procedure of the research project. Chapter six presents the findings of the research. Chapter seven gives the contours of a subjective or theotic spirituality and offers suggestions for further study and development of the learning research project.

X. THE NATURE OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Since this study offers a biblical-theological solution to the problem of detachment or being dis-embedded from Christ, a summary description of my understanding of the nature of theological reflection is beneficial.

Theology is faith seeking to understand what the church believes about God and the world and how she is to live in the light of this understanding both as a church community and members of this community.⁶³ As such, theology is a multidimensional discipline involving a number of complementary disciplines.⁶⁴ I consider theology to be an ongoing conversation between the Scriptures, tradition and culture for the purpose of listening to the voice of the Spirit speaking to the community of faith today.⁶⁵

The Scriptures are the norming norm for the conversation because they are the primary vehicle through which the Spirit addresses God's covenant community and embeds

⁶³ Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1996), 10. See also Stanley J. Grenz and Roger Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 37-38. For my own tradition, see Hans Boersma, "The Relevance of Theology and Worldview in Postmodern Context" in Hans Boersma (ed.), *Living in the LambLight: Christianity and Contemporary Challenges to the Gospel* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2001), 2.

⁶⁴ John R. W. Stott, "Theology: A Multidimensional Discipline" in Donald Lewis and Alister McGrath (eds.), *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honor of J. I. Packer* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 3-19.

⁶⁵ For the demise of foundationalism, see Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 3-54. For theology as an ongoing conversation, see Stanley J. Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism" in John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (ed.), *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 107-136. For a critical but appreciative response to Grenz's emerging theology and proposed theological method, see Archie J. Spencer, "Culture, community and commitments: Stanley J. Grenz on theological method" *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 57: 3 (2004): 338-60. For response by Grenz, see Stanley J. Grenz, "The virtue of ambiguity: a response to Archie Spencer" *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 57:3 (2004): 361-65.

her into the Father by making her a member of Christ's body.⁶⁶ As such, the Spirit uses the Scriptures as a guide, a guard, a compass and an example.⁶⁷

Since I am not the first to read the Scriptures, I also listen to the voice of the Spirit as that comes to the church in the tradition of the church of all ages.⁶⁸ Today, this means that I also listen to the voice of the Spirit as He speaks through the traditions of church communities in Third World countries.⁶⁹ This catholic hermeneutical trajectory shows how the Spirit addressed and formed the people of God as Christian communities in the past and continues to do so in the present. Listening to the voice of the Spirit in the tradition of the church alerts me to potential dangers and points out promising possibilities.⁷⁰

Since the Spirit's speaking is always a contextual speaking, He also speaks through our contemporary culture. This was already the case when the canon was formed and in the subsequent history of the church.⁷¹ Thus, this continues to be the case in the present.

Moreover, since all truth is God's truth, I should listen to the voice of the Spirit in all human

⁶⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, "Conversing in Christian Style: Toward a Baptist History and Heritage 35/1 (Winter 2000): 82-103. This article was posted on ecourses.twu.ca. In this version, the reference can be found on page 10.

⁶⁷ J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1996), 367-376.

⁶⁸ Alister McGrath, "The Importance of Tradition for Modern Evangelicalism" in Lewis and McGrath, *Doing Theology for the People of God*, 159-173. See also his "Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition" in Stackhouse, *Evangelical Futures*. For a book-length treatment highlighting the importance of engaging the Great Tradition, see D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition & Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Helpful in engaging the great Tradition while reading the Scriptures and doing theology are, for instance, Christopher A. Hall's, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) and *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2002). See also David Neff, "Don't Read the Bible 'Alone': Christopher Hall talks about how evangelicals should approach the church fathers" in at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/0111/3.56.html>. For a commentary series engaging the Great Tradition, see Thomas Oden (gen. ed.), *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Series* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity).

⁶⁹ See, for instance, William A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). For a year's devotional reading of listening to voices from the Third World, see Charles Ringma, *Cry Freedom with the voices from the Third World* (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1998).

⁷⁰ Grenz, "Conversing in Christian Style," 12 (ecourse edition).

⁷¹ Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 115-118.

knowledge.⁷² When listening to the voice of the Spirit in culture, I should remember, however, that the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit who inspired the Scriptures. Thus, I should never think that the Spirit is leading me away from following Jesus Christ or acting contrary to the teachings of the Scriptures.⁷³

In view of the fact that I consider theology to be an ongoing conversation between the Scriptures, tradition and culture, I regard all Christian theology to be local or specific,⁷⁴ albeit with universal intent.⁷⁵ Philosophically, this draws upon my own tradition.⁷⁶ Theologically,

⁷² For a classic treatment of different ways in which the theology has engaged culture, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). For other typologies that describe the relationship between Christianity and culture see Robert Webber, *The Church in the World: Opposition, Tension, or Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 81-144 ; John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution* (Scottsdale, Herald Press, 1971), 18-26 and Leonard Sweet, *AQUAchurch: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture* (Loveland: Group, 1999), 75-81. For an analysis of a critiques of Niebuhr's typology, see Glen Stassen et al, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). For a general overview of the relationship between Christianity and culture in my own Reformed tradition, see Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959). For two classics on Christianity and culture in my tradition, see Abraham Kuiper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931) and K. Schilder, *Christus en Cultuur*. 5nd ed., Franeker: Wever, 1978). For a critique of Schilder's view of Christianity and culture, see J. Douma, "Cultuur en Vreemdelingschap," in J. Douma, *Algemene Genade: Uiteenzetting, vergelijking en beoordeling van de opvatting van A. Kuiper. K. Schilder en Joh. Calvijn over 'algemene genade.'* 2nd ed., (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1974), 369-390.

⁷³ Grenz, "Conversing in Christian Style," 15 (ecourse edition).

⁷⁴ For a Roman Catholic perspective on the dynamic interaction between Scripture, tradition and culture, see Robert J. Schreiter, 2nd ed., *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986).

⁷⁵ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 311; Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

⁷⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?" in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Faith and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 155. For a recent essay on Reformed Epistemology, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Reformed Epistemology" in D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 39-63. For a full-orbed defense of the rationality of the Christian faith even though it is historically and personally situated, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

however, this may be considered to be a theology from below⁷⁷ or experiential religion.⁷⁸ It may, however, also be considered the right way to do theology.⁷⁹

While I regard all theology to be local or specific, I do believe that all local Christian assertions share a common pattern that makes them uniquely Christian. Thus, the structure of my theological reflection is Trinitarian, its focus Christ-centered communitarian and its orientation eschatological.⁸⁰ Since the first source of the theological conversation is the “norming norm” of the Scriptures, this study now turns to this source to allow the conversation to be normed by this norm.⁸¹

⁷⁷ See, for instance, Gregory Johnson, “Theology from Above and Theology from Below: The Systematic Theology of Charles Hodge and Stanley Grenz” at <http://gregscouch.homestead.com/GregsBench.html>

⁷⁸ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Reformist Evangelicalism: A Center Without a Circumference,” in Michael S. Horton (ed.), *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 140-141.

⁷⁹ For promising indications in my own tradition, see Michael Goheen, “Charting a Faithful Course amidst Postmodern Winds,” in Boersma (ed.), *Living in the LambLight*, 19-31 and Frederika Oosterhoff, *Ideas Have A History: Perspectives on the Western Search for Truth* (Latham: University Press of America, 2001), 295-327.

⁸⁰ Grenz, “Conversing in Christian Style,” 16 (ecourse edition). See also his and Franke’s *Beyond Foundationalism*, 179-273.

⁸¹ A glossary of theological terms can be on pages 411-13.