

***Communio Dei* and the Mind of Christ: Relational Christological Anthropology in Psychological Perspective**

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Abstract: One view of theological anthropology that might benefit from engagement with psychological sciences is relational theological anthropology. Studies in social psychology show that humans develop personal identity through sharing in group identity. I will explore how human beings share mental states when participating in groups. This will be used to explain how Christians in the body of Christ come to share in the mind of Christ. In sharing in new identity in Christ, the community of God in the Church shares in the mind of Christ together. This new identity is shared between its members without eradicating the individual identity of each member.

Keywords: Christological anthropology, Joint attention, Group identity, Relational anthropology, Social psychology

1. Introduction

Theological anthropology is inherently interdisciplinary, concerned at once with both the divine purpose of humanity as that unique creature which is created in the image of God and the biological, neuroscientific, and psychological realities inherent to our creatureliness. One interesting account of humanity as *imago Dei* is onto-relational theological anthropology. On this view, human beings are fundamentally relational, being essentially constituted by their relations, especially interpersonal relations, with God and fellow-humans (Torrance 1992, 47). This view of human nature takes the relationality of human persons to be “the trace, echo, reflection and parallels of the divine nature . . . found in God’s free and dynamic presence in the person of Christ and the revealed Word” (Torrance 2008, 199).

Relational anthropology is often approached through the method of Christological anthropology, in which “beliefs about the human person (anthropology) must be warranted in some way by beliefs about Jesus (christological)” (Cortez 2016, 7). It is thus in union with Christ that our relationships with God and one another are reconciled. Because this view holds that human persons are ontologically dependent on their relationships with God and one another (and especially on their relationship with Christ), we ought to ask how it is that human beings (including the incarnate Christ) contribute to one another’s personal being and identity through relationship without ceasing to be distinguishable individuals.

This cuts to the heart of recent debates about the nature of human persons in union with Christ, specifically whether they continue to be themselves in this union or whether their identity is subsumed into Christ’s (McCall 2020). This is an important problem facing those accounts of human nature that see the New Humanity as being in Christ and see persons as having a new identity in union with Christ. This article will give an account of how human beings have union with the incarnate Christ, such that we come to have a new shared identity in Christ and have, as St. Paul says, “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16) without ceasing to be distinguishable individuals.

One promising approach to this particular theological puzzle is to deepen our understanding of the psychological processes involved in social interactions, that is, in our interpersonal relating to one another. Because social psychology studies the ways that human beings relate to one another, it has much to offer our understanding of our relation to Christ because Christ becomes human so as to relate to us in a human way. Thus, social psychology can offer an understanding of human-to-human relationships to help us understand our union with Christ, which is not competitive with theological understandings of those relationships.¹

In the formation of social identity, we develop personal selves in relation to the social groups in which we participate. This is generally referred to as the Social Identity Approach (SIA), a combination of two families of psychological theories: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Reicher et al.

¹For example, see, Jeeves (2015). One way this could be described is as a multi-level model. Such models are often used in psychology and cognitive science to incorporate various processes and behaviors in human and animal psychological systems in non-competitive ways and with appropriate disciplinary autonomy. On such a model, theology is just another level of explanation, which providing a *telos* or purpose for these psychological processes as communion with God and one another. See Fang (2020, 177), O’Malley, et al. (2014).

2010, 45). One way these processes are described is through “joint attention.” Despite debates on the specific function and means of joint attention, it is broadly agreed on that “in joint attention we focus on things together with others . . . Thus, joint attention allows us to share experiences about the world with others, to coordinate our thoughts and behaviors, and to cooperate successfully with others” (Siposova and Carpenter 2019, 260). This sense of joint attention is used to describe group members sharing things like knowledge, intentions, and actions while remaining distinguishable agents.²

Many theologians and biblical scholars have appealed to joint attention to describe aspects of human personhood, specifically how personal knowledge of others is acquired in relationship.³ However, these accounts often miss significant nuances of joint attention and, to my purposes here, are often isolated to developmental cases of dyadic joint attention. While these are important cases to study, understanding how joint attention operates in social group settings can give us a more robust account of how joint attention explains interpersonal relating and the sharing of identity. Broadening the scope of joint attention beyond dyadic cases with SIA provides a stronger conceptual ground for understanding unity with Christ and the Church than dyadic joint attention does on its own. This paper explores how joint attention, when operative in social identification to enable group behavior, is used to depict the sharing of mental states among members of social groups, in this case the body of Christ, and how this relates to the formation of personal identity in union with Christ.

I will begin by briefly outlining some key contours of onto-relational Christological anthropology. Such a theological anthropology is one warranted by claims about Christology in which the ontology of human beings is constituted by their interpersonal relations, especially interpersonal relationship with Christ. I will follow this by outlining the identity problem which faces Christological anthropologies, demonstrating the problem with how joint attention has been employed in past accounts of theological anthropology. I argue that an onto-relational account can address this problem through appeals to the psychological processes by which human persons form social groups. I argue that onto-relational Christological anthropology entails a change in personal identity for every human person who is in Christ, but not in such a way that their personal identity (or the

²For examples of these applications of joint attention, see: Gomez (1996); Scaife and Bruner (1957); Reddy (1996).

³ See: Eastman (2017; 2018), Stump, (2010; 2013; 2018).

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relational being to which it refers) is eradicated or subsumed into Christ's. Rather, identity in Christ is shared among members of the body of Christ in *communio Dei*.

From here, I turn to the resources of group psychology to describe the relationship between the shared identity of a group and the identities of individual group members. Drawing on recent work in the formation of social identity, I argue that individuals are necessarily socially situated, being at least partially reliant on social relationships in groups for personal identity, yet not in such a way where we can reduce individual identity to corporate identity. Identity, for the purposes of this discussion, is used to describe those features or characteristics of a given entity by which we can distinguish that entity from other entities. So a group identity is how we distinguish one group from another, just as personal identity is how we distinguish one person or individual from another. Insofar as identity describes distinctions in relational beings, personal identity corresponds to personal being in a way that lets us indicate ontological claims about human beings through epistemic claims about identity.

This understanding of identity is drawn from the psychological literature I am engaging in this paper and is not to be confused with personal identity as it is often used in philosophical discussions in reference to the conditions for persistence over time. This psychological understanding of personal identity is dynamic but assumes persistence over time. In other words, the sense in which my interpersonal relations to others change my identity does not compromise the continuity of the self across time and change. I am still me, even as I grow and change the ways in which I am distinguishable. This will be addressed at length later in this paper, but it is important that this distinction is made and that it is clear that continuity is assumed at some level by the sense of dynamic identity used in social psychology.

Understanding personal identity as bound up in group-forming social relationships will allow me to describe group members as sharing certain mental states in virtue of group participation. In the sharing of mental states, I can offer an account of personal identity in which each human person is an individual and distinguishable agent, yet their personal identity overlaps with others. In the final section, I argue that the relational entanglement to which this sense of identity refers occurs primarily in groups. This helps us to make sense of those in union with Christ having the mind of Christ without becoming Christ and ceasing to be themselves. Those in union with Christ share with one another the mental states of Christ through joint attention. This occurs in virtue of the shared identity in Christ between all members of the *communio Dei*, broadening the scope with which joint attention has been employed in the past by contextualizing joint attention within group participation.

2. Onto-Relational Christological Anthropology and the Problem of Identity

According to T. F. Torrance, a well-respected proponent of relational Christological anthropology, all human beings “are upheld, whether they know it or not, in their humanity by Jesus Christ the true and proper man, upheld by the fulfilment and establishment of true humanity in him, but also through his work in the cross and resurrection in which he overcame the degenerating forces of evil and raised up our human nature out of death and perdition” (Torrance 1976, 154). On this view, we have a stronger understanding of Cortez’s definition of Christological anthropology. Where we could take his definition as merely epistemic, so that Christ reveals to us what our humanity is and what it is meant to be, on Torrance’s account Christ’s humanity makes our humanity to be what it is. As Deddo puts it, “the ministry of Christ, as Torrance typically frames it, involves both revelation and reconciliation... persons are whole and spiritual regeneration involves whole persons—mind, soul, and body” (Deddo 2020, 150). In union with Christ, we do not simply learn what humanity is, but our humanity becomes what it was meant to be.

This New Humanity is in Christ, and so it is impossible to conceive of individual human persons in the New Humanity apart from this ontology-constituting relation to Christ. In Christ becoming incarnate, he assumes a humanity qualitatively like ours, healing it and redeeming it in his own divine-human person. As Torrance puts it, “Jesus Christ constitutes in his own self-consecrated humanity the fulfillment of the vicarious way of human response to God” (Torrance, 1992, 76). Christ’s humanity, therefore, is both particular and universal. He assumes a particular human nature, and so acts as an individual human agent in ways that sanctify and heal his own humanity, but in a way in which what happens to his human nature happens to every human nature (Woznicki, 2018, 112).

Herein lies the question that this article will address. How is it that what happens to Christ’s particular humanity happens to ours? More specifically, how does this occur without reducing our humanity to his? If Christ assumes our humanity and shares his own with us, in what ways is our humanity bound up in his vicarious humanity and in what ways are they distinguishable?

2.1. Onto-Relational Human Nature

On an onto-relational view of human nature, this sharing in the New Humanity occurs in the union between Christ’s human nature and our own. What Christ assumes when he takes on a human nature is a particular set or network of human

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relationships.⁴ Torrance, for his part, argues that it is personal relationships, or relationships between persons, which are being-constituting. (Torrance, 1992, 47) In becoming human and taking on a network of the kinds of relationships which humans have, Christ unites us to himself, so that we share in a human-to-human relationship with him. This relationship becomes being-constituting in a new way, so that Christ's healed and transformed humanity (which consists at least partially of his relationships to other humans) is shared with us and constitutes in us a New Humanity.

This union we have with Christ is a relationship which heals and redeems all our other interpersonal relationships. As Torrance puts it:

Through union and communion with Christ human society 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 humanizing activity of Christ Jesus, the one Man in whom and through whom as Mediator between God and man they may be reconciled to one another within the ontological and social structures of their existence. (Torrance 1992, 72)

This is essential to a Christological account of relational anthropology. For us to be transformed into a new creation, the New Humanity in Christ, that which is fundamental to our being must be transformed in Christ's assumption (and subsequent consecration) of a particular human nature. In the incarnation, "atoning reconciliation has achieved its end in the new creation in which God and man are brought into such communion with one another that the relations of man with God in being and knowing are healed and fully established." (Torrance 2009, 233) If what we are is discrete networks of interpersonal relationships, and if Christ's aim in assuming such a particular human nature and transforming it in himself is to heal our own fallen human natures, then what Christ is transforming and healing is our particular networks of interpersonal relations inclusive of relations with human and divine persons. Thus, Barth argues, "at the very root of my being . . . I am in encounter with the being of Thou . . . the humanity of human being is total

⁴ Traditionally, we might say he takes on a particular human body and soul. While the body is certainly essential to our relating to one another, one who takes onto-relational theological anthropology to be the case would argue that the essentiality of the body is contingent on one's *telos* for relating to other persons. See: Eastman (2017, 92–93); Torrance (1969, 52–53).

determination as being in encounter with the being of Thou, as being with fellow-man" (Barth, 2004, III.2, 247).⁵

If we follow Barth on this point, we conclude that for human beings to be what we are made to be, we not only need to be in restored relation to God in Christ, but also to one another in Christ.⁶ We are created, as Alan Torrance argues, for communion with God and fellow-humanity. (A. Torrance, 2008, 324) In our unitive relation to Christ, we share in the kind of loving communion Christ has with his Father and Spirit, so that we share in the *communio Dei*: the communion of God's people with God and one another, bound together by the Spirit. These are not two discrete ends of human existence, but are entirely bound up with one another in the single human *telos* to be in *communio Dei*. In an onto-relational theological anthropology, then, human persons are ontologically dependent on God *and* one another for their personal being. This ontological dependence is actualized in the atoning work of Christ, but is nevertheless characteristic of what it means to be human even apart from the New Humanity in Christ. Apart from the interpersonal relations, which we have with one another in *communio Dei*, we would not be ourselves as we are created to be.

Moreover, what we see in our union with Christ (and in our relations to one another insofar as all claims about human nature are warranted by union with Christ in particular) it is not merely our relation to others in the abstract sense that makes us who we are, but there is something of the other person to whom we are related that becomes a part of us. If we think of human persons as particular networks of interpersonal, being-constituting relations, then there intuitively seems to be some overlap in the being of human persons. For instance, a part or aspect of my relational network that constitutes my being is my relationship to my daughter. This relationship, likewise, is a part of her relational network, only from the other side of the relationship. Whatever we think about the content and nature of these interpersonal relationships, there is clearly overlap between discrete networks. In

⁵ This is one of the main reasons that relational theological anthropologists such as Barth and Torrance espouse that Christ assumes a fallen human nature and heals it. This paper lacks the space to discuss this point at length, and so I will only say minimally that whatever Christ does to transform or consecrate his own humanity, when applied to our humanity has the effect of healing the effects of fallenness on human nature.

⁶ Derek Nelson has pointed out that Barth does not follow through on this point to the extent which I imply in this paper. His account of relations is still relatively individualistic, amounting to ontological reliance on God but not fellow-humanity. Restored relations in *communio Dei*, on Nelson's reading of Barth, are simply a consequence of restored God-human relationships. See Nelson (2009, 9).

fact, because these relationships are what constitute my being, it is fair to say that I am sharing some part of my being with my daughter in virtue of being interpersonally related to her. That particular relationship is shared being between us, playing some role in constituting both my being and hers.

This is significant for union with Christ, so that his life, self-consecration, death, resurrection, and ascension come to transform us. It is not as if Christ lives this particularly sanctifying life which merely inspires us to live similarly sanctified lives in and of ourselves, but rather that his consecration of his own humanity is what consecrates our humanity; the transformation and regeneration of his humanity lived out in his vicarious life is shared with us in union with him.⁷ Gunton, drawing on the doctrine of the Trinity, argues that in such being-constituting relations as union with Christ, persons both divine and human “dynamically constitute one another’s being” (Gunton 2003, 164). In order to have this reconciled humanity, restored to loving communion with God and fellow-humanity, we are ontologically dependent upon our union and communion with Christ in which he shares his very being, which is constituted by reconciled relations to God and fellow-humanity.

So what is it that is being shared with us in this new being-constituting union with Christ? There are many aspects or facets of human interpersonal relationships which we might draw on to articulate the sharing of relational being. Two such aspects, which we might say are results of union with Christ, are a new shared identity in Christ and our sharing in the mind of Christ. Both of these are affirmed by the Apostle Paul, whose articulation of union with Christ calls Christians to have “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). Erin Heim’s work on adoption metaphors in Romans and Galatians similarly notes how, in union with Christ, we come to share in a new family identity as children of God by participating in the filial relationship that Christ has with his Father (Heim 2017, 104 –108). It seems, at least intuitively, that the sharing of relational being results in shared identity and mind. As Baumeister puts it, “self and identity share with [the ontology of] personhood the facts of unity, singularity, differentiation from others, and specificity” (Baumeister, 2015, 69). To this effect, Zizioulas and Gunton have both argued personal identity “has the claim of absolute being, that is, a metaphysical claim, built into it” (Zizioulas 1991, 33; Gunton 1991, 61).⁸ While personal identity and personal being

⁷ The distinctions we can draw here are many, but for now, it is only relevant that we think of Christ’s human being, that is to say his particular network of relations, as the New Humanity, which is shared with us in some significant and metaphysical way. For more, see Crisp (2019).

⁸ This touches on an important distinction in ontology and identity: what is being referred to here is not numerical identity. Rather, identity is used here in the descriptive sense indicated above. There

are not identical (pun intended), we can say that personal identity refers to relational personal being in such a way that a change in personal identity indicates or corresponds to a change in personal being, conceived dynamically in the way that Gunton has stated above. Said another way, identity is used to epistemically distinguish between personal beings by referring to those ontological features or characteristics (namely onto-relations) that distinguish personal beings at a metaphysical level. Thus, on the onto-relational account thus far asserted, to proffer any sense of personal identity is to indicate my particular being as a person. Because this sense of being is entangled with other persons, sharing the relationships that constitute my being with those to whom I am interpersonally related, identity also is shared between persons. In the *communio Dei* formed in union with Christ, Christians come to share in the identity and mind of Christ as they are interpersonally related to him. How the sharing of mind and identity are interconnected will be demonstrated later in this paper.

2.2. I and Thou: The Identity Problem for Onto-Relational Christological Anthropology

This sharing of personal being, and for our purposes here the sharing of identity and mind, is precisely where this identity problem arises for Christological anthropology. If personal identity is shared, am I as a member of the *communio Dei* now indistinguishable from Christ since I share in his identity? If I have his mind, is my agency identical to Christ's? Some Pauline scholars seem to think so. One passage commonly interpreted in this way is Galatians 2:19 –20. In it Paul claims that he has died and now it is Christ who lives in him, saying that it is “not I (ἐγώ), but Christ who lives in me.” Some apocalyptic interpreters of Paul have taken this to mean a cessation of the existence of the “I,” so that all become the single person of Christ.⁹ Gaventa, for instance, has argued vehemently that, for Paul, identity in Christ is “singular in that it is all-consuming: there is no more” (Gaventa 2014, 195). The sharing of identity and mind on this account is so absolute, that we cease to be distinguishable individuals. We lose that I-Thou-ness of relational anthropology and

is a relationship to numerical identity insofar as that descriptive identity refers to the particular being of a person and serves to distinguish our reference to that particular person as a distinct being. This will be dealt with further later in the article. For now, let us minimally say that personal identity refers to personal being in a way that assumes numerical identity over time.

⁹ See: Campbell (2009, 848); Hampson (2001, 237 –241); Barclay (2002, 143). This is similar to a problem raised by Turner, who argues that abrupt transformation entails a cessation of being: Turner (2017).

simply become “I” in Christ. This is especially damning for relational Christological anthropologies, in which we cannot even know that we are an “I” (much less the metaphysical content of that “I”) apart from encounter with a “Thou.”¹⁰ Because such anthropologies rely on the distinguishability of Christ and those who encounter him, the collapse of the Christian’s “I” into Christ’s “Thou” would render these anthropologies incoherent at best or destructive of human being itself at worst.

Yet this reading of Paul is not obviously true. In fact, many have pushed back convincingly on this interpretation, showing how Paul readily recognizes individuals as distinct from Christ and one another despite sharing in Christ’s identity. Zahl’s work on Paul’s communal view of persons repudiates the competitive way individuals and groups are conceived of by such scholars (Zahl 2021). As Eastman puts it in her work on Paul’s view of persons, “the power of God [in union with Christ] works in [Paul’s] life without obliterating his ‘self’ . . . the power of God frees Paul to be an agent, an acting subject” (Eastman 2007, 60). McCall, in a recent article on this issue, raises several concerns with reading Paul as claiming a cessation of his identity. McCall demonstrates not only how Paul consistently refers to believers as individual agents, but also problematizes thinking of our agency, which is sometimes sinful, as being conflated with the agency of Christ (McCall 2020, 15 –17). Instead, McCall proposes that we think of a transformation of Paul’s “I” that comes about through interpersonal relation to Christ’s “Thou.”

If McCall’s assessment is correct, and there is good reason to think that he is, then these more radical apocalyptic interpreters have conflated the conditions for numerical identity, the sense in which I am the same subject across time and change, with the descriptive sense of identity we are using here and its reference to dynamic personal being. If these interpreters are correct, then any change in a person’s interpersonal relationships, any new relationships, and the breaking off of any relationships would so fundamentally change the being of the person that they would cease to be themselves and become a whole new being distinct from their prior self. Yet there is no reason to think, on the dynamic view of personal being as described in the previous sections, that a change in my being entails that I am a completely new and distinguishable being.¹¹ Said another way, the “I” prior to my

¹⁰ See: Barth (2004, I.2, 42). Here Barth defends at length the revelation of human “I” in intimate causal contact with the divine “Thou,” apart from which we cannot know what it means to be an “I.”

¹¹ Evans has defended this point at length in (Evans, 2006, 264 –265). He calls this the achievement view of human nature, which, when combined with a metaphysical account, allows us to refer to a

union with Christ is the same “I” that is now in union with Christ even as Christ transforms that “I” into his image. Rather, the fact of numerical identity is assumed in reference to a particular network of relations, even as that network changes over time. The mere fact that there are subjects that relate to one another assumes the kind of continuity that McCall’s account of union with Christ demands.

Yet there is another problem that arises from this conflation more closely related to our questions here. Not only does this conflation call into question the continuity of Paul’s selfhood before and after union with Christ, but it seems to conflate Christ’s identity (and therefore personal being) with Paul’s identity (and therefore personal being). To account for the relational sharing of being and how it corresponds to sharing new identity in Christ and sharing in Christ’s mind, we must also be able to maintain the kind of ontological distinction consistent with numerical identity when describing this sharing in the being of others. This conflation of persons in the radical apocalyptic interpretation of Paul is the identity problem I would like to address. How does the “I” share in the “Thou” without becoming “Thou,” but instead remaining a distinguishable “I”?

One way that many theologians have attempted to answer this question of the sharing of identity and mind is by drawing on recent accounts of joint attention and second-personal knowing of others in union.¹² The theological appropriations of joint attention are well rehearsed and defended, and so I will only summarize them briefly for the purposes relevant to this article. On Stump’s account, for instance, the unitive love between persons “is reciprocal, and requires mutual closeness” (Stump, 2018, 17). By sharing in close second-personal presence made possible by joint attention, persons can empathetically share second-personal knowledge of one another, so that “one person has within herself something of the mind of the other” (2018, 130). The kind of knowing these accounts aim at is the knowledge of persons, often called interpersonal knowledge or second-personal knowledge. This is the sort of knowledge at play in personal identity by which we can distinguish one person from another: “for mature subjects, interpersonal knowledge typically brings with it some knowledge-who by which the known person can be individuated” (Benton 2017, 824–825). When persons mutually attend to one another in joint attention, they can read one another’s mental states through the sharing of interpersonal knowledge.

single human subject across time as that subject transforms, changes, grows, and so on in a dynamic fashion.

¹² See: Eastman (2018, 157); Stump, (2010, 113–119).

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Stump uses this to describe union with Christ, so that Christ can take on our mental states on the cross in the cry of dereliction and we can take on Christ's mental states in the reconciliation of our minds through the atonement (Stump, 2018, 164 – 166). McCall helpfully summarizes this use of joint attention for the aforementioned Pauline passages: "Paul and Christ know one another to such an extent that Paul and Christ come to share the same affections and intentions. Thus Paul comes to know—even if imperfectly, yet more and more—what Christ values, what Christ loathes, and what Christ loves" (McCall, 2020, 20). This extends, as McCall notes, to include further persons in joint attention, so that Paul can participate in Christ's relationship with his Father by attending to Christ's affections and intentions towards his Father (McCall, 2020, 20 –21). This provides a way of thinking about Paul having the mind of Christ and having a new identity in Christ without Paul ceasing to be a distinguishable agent through interpersonal knowing. Rather than Christ assuming and replacing our particular networks of relations, he becomes a part of those networks to constitute "a new system of self-in-relationship . . . embedded and bodily enacted in the new relational matrix generated by belonging to Christ" (Eastman, 2017, 105). Our networks are still distinguishable, even though they overlap in the sharing of identity and minds through relationship.

2.3. We: The Recontextualization of I and Thou in *Communio Dei*

Yet this account does not completely resolve the identity problem at hand, nor is it bereft of its own issues. For one, the way that joint attention has thus far been used in theological inquiry draws almost exclusively on developmental psychological literature. While this approach has allowed for a focused theological study of joint attention, which helpfully respects the specificity of this concept's usage across various sub-disciplines of psychology, it has limited the resources that theology can draw upon for understanding joint attention by limiting the scope of joint attention to dyadic (and sometimes triadic) relationships. Human beings are not reducible, in other words, to their early years of development. It stands to reason that as we grow and develop, so too do the ways in which joint attention influences our cognitive and social capacities. One way that we might expand the horizons of joint attention's usage in theological anthropology is by drawing to the psychology of group behavior, incorporating the place of individual agents within a larger social context into the maturation of joint attention's function. Reicher, in his work on the social identity theory (SIT), argues that psychological concepts such as joint attention and the studies they draw on are often considered in abstraction from their social context, resulting in the abstraction of individual social interactions from the social

group contexts in which they occur (Reicher, et al., 2010, 47 –50).¹³ In other words, dyadic and triadic relationships do not occur in a vacuum; they occur in thoroughly socialized contexts where groups have been formed and those groups have some influence on the nature of the dyadic and triadic relations occurring therein. For many psychologists working on these concepts, shared social identity in groups can provide a basis for these psychological processes described through joint attention: “shared social identification transforms relations between people in such a way as to enable effective co-action. Where SIT implicitly assumes that identification is the basis of collective action and social power, the work [on things like joint attention] fills in the gaps. It details the processes which produce intra-group coordination and hence social power” (Reicher et al. 2010, 57).¹⁴

Second, because joint attention has generally been used in theology without consideration for the role of social identity in the formation of personal identity, being-constituting interpersonal relations of individuals have been studied without consideration for the participation of individuals in groups. Because of this, these approaches fail to integrate the God-human and fellow-human relationships reconciled in Christ and understand how these are bound together theologically. These particular relationships are unmoored from their context in *communio Dei* and their unity in union with Christ. The lack of social context, according to Reicher, et al., is what leads to the collapse of personal identity into social identity. (Reicher, et al. 2010, 48) This parallels, I think, the misstep taken by some apocalyptic interpreters who collapse the personal identity of Paul into the shared identity in Christ of the *communio Dei*. Thus, it is not clear that dyadic joint attention alone adequately avoids the identity problem posed in this paper, because it is not clear where Christ’s mental states, now shared with Paul, stop and where Paul’s mental states begin. The distinction between the first-person perspectives of Paul and Christ is assumed by dyadic joint attention, but where that distinction lies and how

¹³Reicher, et al.’s argument is aimed at disarming accounts of social identification that see all social identification as discriminatory. Rather, they argue that contextualizing this properly demonstrates both how some social identification is negative, and thus discriminatory, while some can in fact be positive and formative in a non-discriminatory way. It is the ingroup versus outgroup hostility that causes social identification to be discriminatory as opposed to being formative. This lack of context is precisely where the reduction of personal identity to social identity occurs.

¹⁴ It is also worth noting that some accounts have forwarded a more nuanced approach to co-action through joint intention. While the nuance that these bring is important, there is not space in this article to give such accounts due treatment. What is important to note is that social identification can become a basis for a shared goal, agency, attention, or even intention. This makes it important to pay attention to the social group context of such relationships. See: Tomasello (2019, 15–18).

essential it is to Paul's sharing in the mind of Christ remains unclear. Insofar as Paul internalizes Christ's mental states and comes to love, value, and intend the same things as Christ, it is conceivable that Paul's having the mind of Christ could eventually transform his first-person perspective to be exactly identical to Christ's. Furthermore, while joint attention provides a way for describing our union with Christ and sharing in his mind, it does not account for how we share in his mind *together*, sharing the mental states of Christ with fellow-believers, and how we remain distinct from one another in that sharing. While merely dyadic accounts of joint attention rightly assume such distinction, an attention to the role of shared social identity can help us to clarify where that line resides conceptually. The addition of group psychological literature is not intended to compete with these developmental accounts of joint attention, but rather to expand our understanding of their function in larger socialized contexts.

These recent theological uses of joint attention, if nuanced by the role of shared social identity, could be helpful in describing the kind of sharing of relational being outlined in the previous section. In point of fact, the socially situated understanding of individual persons that seems native to the Second-Temple Jewish perspective of Paul seems to be able to make sense of shared identity while holding to the distinctiveness of individuals.¹⁵ Rather, on an onto-relational Christological anthropology we would say that individuals are at least partially constituted by their social relationships to others. While the identity of the individual is not reduced to the identity of Christ in *communio Dei*, the individual nevertheless depends on sharing in communion with others Christ's identity as Son of the Father for the aspect of their individual identity as a child of God. As Gunton put it, "to be a person is to be distinct from other persons, and yet inextricably bound up with them; to be 'other' only in 'relation'" (Gunton 2001, 14). Distinction between persons is indispensable to the onto-relational view of anthropology.

So what metaphysical claims about persons and identity do we need to make here? More specifically, what do we need to say about the relationship between shared identity and personal identity in the sharing of being that occurs in interpersonal relationships like union with Christ? It does not seem to be the case that personal and shared identity are one and the same; shared identity does not eclipse personal identity. Neither would it be true to say on this view that shared identity is purely accidental to personal identity. The social situatedness of persons, especially in the Hebrew Bible, which forms the basis for Paul's theological anthropology, would seem to imply that the group that shares a given identity

¹⁵ See, (Eastman, 2017; Zahl, 2021).

seems to provide the *a priori* context for the identity of individuals (Everhart, 2020, 4-5). Thus, prior to the “I” and “Thou” of human relationality, there is a “we” that provides the basis for understanding the formative causal contact between the “I” and “Thou.” Lonergan writes, prior to the “we” that results from the mutual love of an “I” and a “thou,” there is the earlier “we” that precedes the distinction of subjects and survives its oblivion. This prior “we” is vital and functional . . . It is as if “we” were members of one another prior to our distinctions of each from the other (Lonergan, 1990, 57).

Human beings, created for the *telos* of *communio Dei* in which we have restored relationship with God and fellow humanity, are what we are meant to be only in that particular group. The *communio Dei* contextualizes us, contributing to our identity and the ways that our minds work. Yet our identities and our individual mental states are not reducible, on this account, to the shared identity and mental states of the group. Rather, they constitute one (or perhaps several) of the elements that contribute to the identity and mental states of individuals. Gunton puts it like this: “we require space as well as relation: to be both related to and other than those and that on which we depend” (Gunton, 1991, 53). Contextualizing I-Thou relation in group relation provides a clear way to describe this space in the distinction between group and individual identity. For someone else to contribute something to my personal identity and mental states, it makes sense that they must contribute something that I do not already have, for their contribution to my personal being to not be trivial. Hence, this account also requires the otherness of the “I” and “Thou” in order for the social situatedness of “we” to be meaningful.

What should be clear at this point is that an onto-relational Christological anthropology, at least as it is presented here, does not need to go the apocalyptic route with respect to identity and sharing in the mind of Christ. Rather, it seems that it requires the space of otherness *as well as* the ontological sharing of being. Furthermore, this account seems to be able to build upon accounts of theological anthropology that have drawn on the psychological literature of joint attention with the incorporation of social group context that can provide a basis for joint attention in a way that protects it from the identity problem thus raised. How this basis protects an onto-relational Christological anthropology will be demonstrated further below.

As socially situated beings, we are created for relation with others, sharing in their personal being and sharing our own being with them. As such, even as we are ontologically distinct from one another we are also ontologically dependent on one another for our relational being. Humanity, insofar as it is created to be in *communio Dei* as that restored, loving communion with God and fellow-humanity that is in

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Christ, is both corporate and individual. Our individual identities and our minds through which we relate are neither reducible to a collective identity and mind, nor are our identities and minds wholly ours. To understand the fundamental sense in which we are "I's" in the context of "we," we must understand what the "we" contributes to the identity and mental states of the "I." Said another way, we need to understand the relationship between the one and the many.

3. Between the One and the Many in Group Psychology

It is at this point that I shall turn to the resources of group psychology to better understand the human psyche and its capacity for relationality in groups of persons. In looking at the basis of joint attention in Social Identity Approach (SIA) I can offer an interesting development of past uses of joint attention in theological anthropology while combatting the identity problem that Christological anthropology faces. Psychology is such a helpful tool at this point because it is precisely in our human ways of knowing and relating to one another that God relates to us, becoming incarnate and taking on a human network of interpersonal relations in order to restore our relations with God and one another. How group psychology depicts the interplay of group and individual identity will help us to understand in particular the human relations of persons in *communio Dei*. This will give us clear language to describe the Christian's sharing in the incarnate Christ's identity and mind in a human way. That is to say, Christ becomes incarnate, taking on a human network of interpersonal relations, and shares with us through this human relationality his identity as a child of God and his human mind sanctified through its union with his divinity. How this contributes to the personal identity of individual members of the *communio Dei* without subsuming their identities will allow us to bypass the identity problem for Christological anthropology.

Because this takes place in our social situatedness, the basis of our I-Thou relationality in a prior "we" for which we were created, it will be helpful to first clarify our language surrounding the nature of groups and the relation to individuals. Pettit offers two key distinctions in thinking about the nature of groups and individual agents: individualism versus collectivism and atomism versus holism. "Individualists deny and collectivists maintain that the status ascribed to individual agents in our intentional psychology is compromised by aggregate social regularities. Atomists deny and holists maintain that individual agents non-causally depend on their social relations with one another for some of their distinctive capacities" (Pettit, 1996, 118). Collectivists, therefore, might reduce Paul's identity in union with Christ to Christ's identity in the *communio Dei*, especially insofar as we

think that union with Christ occurs in *communio Dei*. A collectivist would appeal to abstract social forces to explain the formation of attitudes, identities, and agency of this group. The atomist, on the other hand, would reject that Christ's personal being, as well as those united with Paul in the *communio Dei*, could have any transformative influence in Paul's personal being. The views thus far explicated of onto-relational Christological anthropology would seem to say both that individuals exist in such a way as to not be reduced in being, identity, or agency to the social regularities of groups, but that they nevertheless depend on relation to one another as socially constituted beings. We require a view of human persons that is both individualist and holist in this way.

This implies a particular view of the relationship between groups and the individual members of groups. Collins summarizes this relationship, stating that a group's

decision is not merely the conjunction of members' decisions. The members' decisions were *to assent to the collective's doing such-and-such*. By contrast, the collective's decision was *to do such-and-such*. The collective's decision was determined by the members' decisions, but it is not to be identified with the mere conjunction of them for two reasons. First, it has a different content: the collective's decision is 'the collective will do this'. Second, the collective's decision arose out of two things: the conjunction of member's decisions *plus* the fact that they are all committed to the unanimity rule. (Collins 2019, 169)

Collins' delineation highlights our realism about the ontology of both groups and individuals by drawing a distinction between the decisions of groups and individuals while maintaining that groups arise from the coordination of individuals. Having established these distinctions, we can now proceed in understanding how the identity and shared mental states of corporate wholes, specifically the *communio Dei* united in Christ, relates to the individual identities and mental states of constituent members.

3.1. Group and Individual Identity: The Interplay of Social Identity Approach

One approach in psychology to explain human social behavior, and especially the relation between group and individual identity, has been Social Identity Approach. This approach arises from the combination of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT). "These theories are linked by their concern with the processes which surround the way that people define themselves as members of a

social group – which, here, is the meaning of the term ‘social identity’” (Reicher, et al. 2010, 45).

One thing that makes this approach so persuasive is that it draws on the actual functions of groups in society, offering practical insights applied to a number of different kinds of groups including elective groups, physical and psychological crowds, and work organizations (Reicher, et al., 2010, 46). Rather than the sort of abstract collectivism against which Pettit warns us and that would seem to reduce individual identity to that of the group, this approach is grounded in the actuality of individual persons influencing, persuading, leading, and modeling for one another in the sharing of group identity: “it provides substance to the notion of a socially structured field within the individual. It thereby explains how large numbers of people can act in coherent and meaningful ways, by reference to shared group norms, values, and understandings rather than idiosyncratic beliefs” (Reicher, et al., 2010, 48). The appeal of this approach, then, is both in its broad application to a variety of kinds of human social groups and its practicality in accounting for individual agency within those groups. This appears to fit well with the model of human relationality and ontological dependance on others in the ontological Christological anthropology offered above.

SIT contributes to our understanding of personal identity “a bridge between the individual and the social and how it allows one to explain how socio-cultural realities can regulate the behaviours of individuals . . . social identity provides a psychological apparatus that allows humans uniquely to be irreducibly cultural beings” (Reicher et al. 2010, 50). SIT was developed in light of a series of studies on group behavior in which arbitrary groups were formed in order to determine how individuals understand themselves in order to act according to group interests (Tajfel, 1972, 58). From the formation of group behavior in these arbitrary groups, Tajfel reasoned that “people come to define their selves in terms of group membership . . . break[ing] with the traditional assumption that the self should only be understood as that which defines the individual in relation to other individuals, and to acknowledge that, in some circumstances, we can define ourselves through the groups to which we belong” (Reicher, et al. 2010, 48). The development of SIT led to positive understandings of what groups contribute to the identities of individual members, seeing groups as a part of the formation of personal identity.

This usually occurs in two ways. First, we can compare ourselves with other members of our groups, identifying with our commonality. Second, we can positively differentiate ourselves from members of other groups, defining ourselves

by what we are not in relation to social groupings.¹⁶ Social identification, in this theory, is about how we as individuals see ourselves (and don't see ourselves) as members of various social groups (Neville et al., 2020, 2). One's personal identity is thus both individual and social at the same time. Reicher, et al. offer the following presentation of this simultaneity: "on the one hand, my social identities – 'I am a woman', 'I am a Scot' or whatever – speak in a fundamental way to who I am in the world. But what any of these memberships mean cannot be reduced to my own or indeed anybody else's individuality . . . social identity provides a conduit through which society inhabits the subject" (Reicher et al. 2010, 48). Hence, there are aspects of personal identity that are drawn from our participation in social groups. In social identification, we define ourselves as individuals in fundamental relation to other persons in groups. Because this is often done positively in contrast with other persons, we can already see how the significance of otherness, even in shared group identity, is essential to this theory.

This is where SCT comes into play. SCT is one way of describing the internalization of a shared group identity in such a way that it can influence personal identity. Said differently, SCT accounts for how the "I" comes to understand itself as a member of the "we." SCT was developed to clarify "the distinction between social identity and other aspects of the self concept, to explain how the self system is organized and what makes any one part of this system psychologically active in a given context" (Reicher et al. 2010, 51 –52). This protects the distinguishability of individual persons within a group by maintaining that the shared identity is not the totality of personal identity. Rather, it is a part of personal identity, interacting with every other aspect or part to constitute the individual person's identity.

As the name indicates, SCT concerns our categorization of ourselves, but also of one another. SCT is our individual recognition that we are members of a given group and the recognition by others as members of that group (Neville et al. 2020, 5). To this effect, many thinkers point out how SCT is not a purely individual construct. The identity of the group, as well as my personal identity in relation to the group, is not wholly defined by me. Rather, it is a conglomeration of many members categorizing the group and categorizing one another within the group (Neville et al.

¹⁶ Reicher, et al. point out how this is often mistakenly conflated with discrimination. They helpfully point out the differentiation is done with regard to valued social context, so that social differentiation is constrained by what is particularly valued. While this can result in discrimination, the authors proffer that this can also be positively formative, acting rather to reveal something positive about the self in relation to the other rather than positing something negative about the other simply on the basis of otherness (Reicher, et al., 2020, 49).

2020, 4). A group's shared identity, as a result, has a recursive effect, making it a rather dynamic concept. The definition of a given group grows and transforms as new members are added or as current members develop in their understanding of the group's identity. Likewise, this dynamic shared identity, as it changes, changes what it contributes to the personal identities of individual members. The result is a kind of relational feed-back loop in which groups change the identity of members, members change the identity of groups, and so on.

When combined, the resultant SIA to the concept of personal identity tells us that the self, while a distinguishable and individual self, is always defined in terms of relation to others. As Turner, an early proponent of SIA, clarifies, the self is identified in comparison and contrast to others at various levels of abstraction; one can be identified in terms of this group versus that or one can be identified in terms of this particular group member versus that particular group member (Turner 1982).¹⁷ While we can do this sort of identification at various levels of abstraction, with each level respecting different degrees or aspects of homogeneity as particular as "I" compared to everyone else or as broad as human compared to divine (or perhaps even person versus impersonal), it is nevertheless impossible to so thoroughly abstract this relationality so as to isolate a definition of the "I" from any relation to others. SCT develops the ontology of groups implicit in SIT to maintain that "(inter)personal behaviour is not simply underpinned but also *made possible by* a salient personal identity, just as (inter)group behaviour is both underpinned *and made possible by* a salient social identity" (Reicher et al. 2010, 52).

The upshot of SIA for the purposes of human onto-relationality is this:

It stresses the sociality of the construct in at least three ways. First, social identity is a relational term, defining who we are as a function of our similarities and differences with others. Second, social identity is shared with others and provides a basis for shared social action. Third, the meanings associated with any social identity are products of our collective history and present. Social identity is therefore something that links us to the social world. It provides the pivot between the individual and society. (Reicher et al., 2010, 45)

We are, as onto-relational beings, created in such a way that we are ontologically dependent on the relations to others that we have in our participation in social groups. This provides a way for us to describe our sharing in one another's relational

¹⁷ One way this is described is in terms of depersonalization and stereotyping: the ways in which we act in contrast to those we consider other and act more like those we consider similar respectively. For more specific examples across different kinds of groups, see: Turner et al. (1994).

being using the language of identity. One way that shared identity is established in individual agents is through a shared *telos* or end: many studies have shown “increase shared social identity by invoking a sense of shared fate with other passengers” (Neville et al., 2020, 14; see also: Drury 2012; 2018; Drury et al. 2009) This is not unlike the *teleological* account of personhood in the relational *imago Dei* offered in the previous sections. Insofar as the *communio Dei* is the *telos* of humanity in Christ, our shared sense of our purpose or end for communion with God and one another serves to increase the significance of shared identity in Christ for our personal identities. In the same way that, on an onto-relational account of Christological anthropology, we are dependent on our relations to one another in *communio Dei* to be what we were created to be, we are dependent on our relations to one another in social groups to be identified both from and with one another. This account of shared identity provides a way to describe both our relational entanglement with one another through shared group identity as well as how we remain distinguishable agents in that entanglement. *Communio Dei*, as that group for which we are created, is the social context of our being as human creatures.

3.2. Joint Attention and Shared Mental States: Recontextualization of I-Thou in the We

With this understanding of shared social identity in our *telos* as being for communion with God and one another, we may now return to joint attention, offering a contextualized account of I-Thou relation. This will provide for the space of otherness required for relational entanglement in onto-relational Christological anthropology.

SIA has generally been used to provide a basis for group actions and agency. Thus in SIA, “shared social identification transforms relations between people in such a way as to enable them to act together harmoniously and productively” (Reicher, et al., 2010, 57). One way that SIA has been applied in group psychology has been to give an account of human empathy via joint attention.¹⁸ Because this account of shared identity relies on SCT, it is a decisively cognitive account of identity, relying

¹⁸ While there are significant debates in psychology on the specific nature of joint attention, we can adopt a broad framework of joint attention to describe group phenomena: joint attention is when multiple persons attend to something together. We need not commit ourselves to more detailed accounts of joint attention; we need only recognize that persons in groups sometimes attend to things together and that there are psychological and neuroscientific processes which support this attending. See: Sipsova and Carpenter (2019, 60 –61); Milward and Carpenter (2018, 2).

on our cognitive capacities for the perception and recognition of various relational aspects of identity (Reicher et al., 2010, 52). As such, SIA can be used as a basis for the sharing of mental states through joint attention among group members in virtue of shared identity. This does not rule out merely dyadic instances of joint attention, but only offers the possibility of a joint attention that occurs in virtue of shared identity and is thus qualified by the character of that group.

As previously noted, joint attention has been used in the past to describe union with Christ, but not in a way that includes the role of shared social identity or group membership. Including this role can provide a stronger basis for joint attention in union with Christ because that union occurs in *communio Dei*, and thus includes both our sharing in the mind of Christ *together* and sharing in one another as members of Christ. What I have just shown in the previous section is that SIA understands social identity to come about through self-categorization and identification with groups. Thus, we ought to think of joint attention in union with Christ in terms of our participation in the *communio Dei*. This benefits our uses of joint attention in three ways. First, this develops current theological appropriation of psychological literature in an important way, respecting the nuance of a basis of joint attention in shared social identity. Second, this helps us to make sense of our relational ontological dependence on other human persons and God in Christ in order to be who we are. This integrates our relationality with God and fellow-humanity in a way that mere dyadic joint attention simply cannot. Third, by rooting joint attention in shared social identity in groups, in this case *communio Dei*, we can conceptually delineate our individual identities and mental states from Christ's even as we share in his identity and mental states.

This offers a slightly different account of joint attention than those offered by Eastman and Stump. Because this sort of joint attention is based in shared identity, and because shared identity occurs in the categorization of our selves with particular groups, then this kind of joint attention will rely on groups in order to function properly. This is how proponents of SIA avoid the sort of "great man" history which reduces the agency, mental states, and identity of groups to their leaders: "we do not identify with others through our common link to a leader. Rather, we are bound together through our joint sense of belonging to the same social category. Hence, what we do as group members is not constrained by the stance of a particular individual but by the sociocultural meanings associated with the relevant social category" (Reicher, et al., 2010, 50). Let us be clear: those who study the psychology of groups will also readily admit to the significant influence of leaders within groups in virtue of their role or position in that group. I only mean to illustrate that shared identity of a group constructed by participation of individuals in it acts as a medium

through which identity and mental states are shared. Thus, we might think that we could have a group in which a leader has absolute power and control to determine the identity and agency of the group. SIA would still require that persons self-categorize (and are categorized by others) as members of that group in order to share in that particular identity and agency.

Therefore, we cannot reduce an individual, say Paul, sharing in the mind of Christ by taking on a new identity in him to the particular relationship between Paul and Christ. Rather, this unitive relationship brings Paul into the body of Christ, that group communion of human persons and the Triune Godhead. In this *communio Dei*, we share in the shared social identity of the *communio Dei*. Now for theological reasons, we might want to say something to the effect that in virtue of Christ's particular priestly role in this group, he solely or primarily determines what that shared group identity is. In fact, this seems to be what Paul has in mind when he talks about having a new identity in Christ. This affords us a way to avoid conflating our individual identities as members of the body of Christ and the identity of the group, *communio Dei*, as it is determined by Christ. In the same way that SIA understands the distinction between shared group identity and the personal identity of individual members, so too can we distinguish between Christ's identity as it is shared with the group and our own personal identities because what is shared with us is a group identity given in *communio Dei*. We can understand, on this conception of sharing in a new identity in Christ, how relation to Christ yields a new personal identity in which we share in Christ's identity without the eradication of the "I." I might have good reason to believe that *communio Dei* is not the only group that contributes to my personal identity, even if it is the group that contributes the most to my identity or transforms my identity most thoroughly.

Because we share in this group identity in our participation in the *communio Dei* then this sort of joint attention happens as a group activity. Rather than only Paul and Christ attending to one another, Paul attends to Christ with other members of the body and Christ attends to Paul with other members of the body. The body of Christ *together* comes to know Christ interpersonally and shares with one another the second-personal knowing they have of him. As the body of Christ comes to know God interpersonally, it does so under the group agency of those brought into union with one another in Christ. Just as we might distinguish personal identity from the shared identity of the group, so too should we espouse a distinct category of mental states, those shared mental states of "the mind of Christ," which the members of the group can share in according to the self-categorization and identification with the group. So while we do want to say that, in joint attention, Paul comes to know God through Christ second-personally and share in Christ's affections, intentions, etc.

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towards his Father, we ought also to add that this is done together with the whole Church as that *communio Dei* united together by the Spirit in Christ. Before we can interpersonally know God in Christ as “Thou,” we must be brought into that *a priori* “we” that is the communion of persons in union with Christ.

4. *Communio Dei*: Sharing in the Mind of Christ

In union with Christ, the *communio Dei* comes to know God in Christ and one another in Christ interpersonally. We share in Christ’s mental states together, sharing the mind of Christ as a corporate entity. We can do this because, in unitive relationship to Christ, persons are brought into this new group, the *communio Dei*, which shares a new social identity with those persons. This identity is primarily, if not solely, determined by the personal identity of Christ, who is the Lord of his Church. In understanding our sharing in the person of Christ in this way, we offer several benefits to the onto-relational Christological anthropology with which this paper began. First, we have a way of describing the psychological realities of human embodiment as human persons share in the relational being of one another through self-categorization and social identification. Second, this description, by understanding our sharing in one another as occurring in social groups defined by group identities, allows us to describe the relational entanglement of our ontological dependence on God and one another without collapsing or eradicating the distinctions between particular networks of interpersonal relations. This is especially important for thinking about our unitive relation to Christ. Third, because these descriptions are contextualized by identification and categorization within groups, we can integrate our interpersonal knowing of God and fellow-humanity so that union with and second-personal knowing of God in Christ is something that happens together in *communio Dei*. This offers better grounds for considering how union with God heals and reconciles our relations with fellow-human beings than joint attention can offer apart from SIA. Finally, we can appeal to joint attention and the kind of interpersonal sharing of mental states as a way of describing our sharing in the mind of Christ without fear of collapsing the agency of “I” into Christ’s “Thou.” In our shared identity in *communio Dei*, the body of Christ comes to know together the affections, values, and love of Christ, loving God and one another as Christ does in communion with one another.

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