

The Vitality of the Reformed Faith: Facing the Challenge of Individualism in Church Life

by

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SYNOPSIS

Under three headings (a description, diagnosis, and response to the challenge of individualism), the author identifies the character and consequences of modern individualism as the enthronement of the self, both in public society and especially in the church. We are helped in our reflection by paying attention to a sociological analysis of distinctive features of contemporary generations, such as Generation X and the Millennials. Within public society, egalitarianism constitutes the public religion that worships individual rights, special interests, and forced toleration. The model of therapeutic psychology often serves to supply what may be called the private religion of the self, where rights, needs, and personal happiness constitute life's core values.

No diagnosis of individualism in church life can avoid evaluating the religious phenomenon known as "evangelicalism," which is to be understood as a particularly virulent embodiment of religious individualism, many of whose doctrinal assumptions and religious practices are less than fully biblical. Especially its weak doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) constitutes a serious challenge to confessionally Reformed and Presbyterian churches. This includes its underdeveloped regard for the Bible's teaching about the means of grace, about the organization of the church, and about requirements relating to church membership.

To meet the challenge of individualism in church life, we must recover and develop a fresh understanding and practice of the Bible's teaching concerning spiritual adoption into the family of God and concerning the church as the communion of saints.

1. A DESCRIPTION OF THE CHALLENGE

1.1 The self as center

We begin our assessment of the challenge of individualism in church life by marking words or phrases associated with the topic, by mapping a field of associative ideas. Consider the following assortment:

narcissism	self-reliance	happiness	choice	satisfaction
experience	spontaneity	experience	toleration	feelings
self-esteem	rights	privacy	self-ish	sentimentality

From this list emerges an initial description of the challenge of individualism. The core of this challenge is that the autonomous self becomes the center of reality, the source of meaning and value, and the norm for good and evil; sensation becomes the goal of experience, while experience is the route to self-realization.

Within Western philosophy, politics, and culture, the self has come to define reality in terms of preference and utility. Without any objectifiable criteria of right and wrong—that is, apart from any objective moral criteria outside the self—only the self and its feelings provide moral guidance. Because rules are essentially instrumental and utilitarian, they are understood to be human constructions designed to function as means to personal goals. Utility replaces duty, and what is “good” is defined in terms of results.

One helpful way to assess the challenge of individualism in church life is to reflect on the sociological dimensions of various generations living today. Studies have characterized modern generations in terms of their relationship to authority, their self-understanding, and their contribution to society in general. Consider the following description of two important generations known in the United States as “Generation X” and the “Millennials.”

Born between 1965 and 1976, the 51 million members of Generation X grew up in a very different world than their predecessors. Widespread divorce and working moms created “latchkey” kids out of many in this generation—children who came home after school to an empty house, left on their own for hours each day. This led to traits of independence, resilience and adaptability, so that many who belong to Generation X have a strong dislike for someone “looking over their shoulder.” For them, accountability and relationships become a challenge. Yet, at the same time, this generation expects immediate and ongoing feedback, works well in multicultural settings, and exhibits a pragmatic approach to getting things done. Generation X redefines loyalty, so that rather than remain loyal to their company, they have a commitment to their work, to the team they work with, and the boss they work for. A Baby Boomer complains about his

dissatisfaction with management, but figures its part of the job, whereas a Gen Xer will send out a job application and accept the best offer available at another organization. More than Baby Boomers, members of Generation X dislike authority and rigid work requirements. An effective mentoring relationship with them must be as relaxed as possible. Giving performance feedback plays a big part, as does encouraging creativity and initiative to find new ways to get tasks done.

By contrast, the Millennial Generation was born between 1977 and 1998, and is now just beginning to enter the workplace. The 75 million members of this generation were raised at the most child-centric time in the history of the West. Perhaps because of the showers of attention and high expectations from parents, Millennials display a great deal of self-confidence. Technology has always been part of their lives, whether it's computers and the Internet or cell phones and text pagers. Often Millennials are team-oriented, banding together to date and socialize rather than pairing off. They work well in groups, preferring this to individual endeavours. They're good multi-taskers, having juggled sports, school, and social interests as children. Millennials seem to expect structure in the workplace, and seem willing to acknowledge and respect positions and titles. This doesn't always mesh with Generation X's love for independence and hands-off style. Millennials need mentoring, no matter how smart and confident they appear. Because they appreciate structure and stability, formally mentoring Millennials with set meetings and a more authoritative attitude on the mentor's part has worked well. Such mentoring is most effective by breaking down goals into steps, as well as by offering any necessary resources and information needed to meet challenges. Because they work so well in team situations, mentoring Millennials in groups seems to work best.

As we can see, such sociological analysis, while not normative, is nevertheless informative for Christian analysis. We may learn more clearly how, among today's generations, the self is shaped, how the self relates to the surrounding environment, and how the self interprets moral, social, and religious realities.

1.2 Egalitarianism as public religion of the self

This enthronement of the self has led to the crisis of personal identity. When the self is separated from family, religion, and vocational calling as sources of authority, searching for the identity of the self constitutes the essential quest for becoming human. One's identity is no longer received, but it is achieved and acquired—by one's choice.

New forms of religion, for example, embody this quest. Romantic and psychologistic pantheism, found in extreme forms of environmentalism and New Age practices, locate the identity of the self in terms of participation in the whole. There is a god within each of us, and each of us is divine. Religions that practice the idolatry of the self reject any form of hierarchy, as well as any form of external

authority and external moral obligation. All selves are equal, and the views of every self are valid.

In terms of public culture, the anomaly exists that society is simultaneously the greatest oppressor of the self and the only arena for self-expression. The impersonal quality of political and industrial institutions, where bureaucracies and markets leave the self feeling wounded and worthless, requires the invention of new ways to anchor the isolated self.

Today we are witnessing the powerful coalition between the religion of self-realization and the politics of special interests and individual rights. Historically both religion and politics have served the public order by integrating the individual within the group (church, society). But with the loss of mediating structures that once nurtured this integration (family, neighborhood schools, voluntary associations), with the accompanying loss of civic virtue, both church and state now face the challenge of satisfying the competing demands of “raw selves.”

All of this has led to a new understanding of “community.” Perhaps one of the saddest examples can be found in what is euphemistically called “the homosexual community.” Homosexual practices belong to the most narcissistic and idolatrous activities known to human beings—they are nothing less than the sexualized worship of oneself. A “community” of homosexual practitioners is an oxymoron. In such a community the self touches other isolated selves at restricted points of interest, never engaging or embracing, only touching, like marbles in a pail. By contrast, true human fellowship requires the existence of a “fellow,” an “other” with whom one communes.

1.3 Psychology as private religion of the self

Names associated with the rise of secular psychology as private religion of the self include Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Rollo May (see Bellah and Vitz). The core principles of this religion include self-esteem, narcissism, self-help (recovery groups), personal choice, and values clarification.

Perhaps the clearest parable of the modern existentialist personality is the ancient Greek legend of Echo and Narcissus. According to the legend, Echo was a woodland nymph who fell in love with Narcissus, who was an uncommonly handsome but also uncommonly vain young man. He contemptuously rejected her expressions of love. She pined away and died. The god Apollo was angered by Narcissus’ pride and self-satisfaction, and condemned him to die without ever knowing human love. One day, Narcissus was feeling thirsty, saw a pool of clear water nearby, and knelt beside it in order to dip his hands in the water and drink. He saw his face reflected on the surface of the water and fell in love with the reflection. Unable to win a response from the image in the water, Narcissus eventually died beside the pool.

Today's technology has great narcissistic potential—the mirror has evolved into the webcam, and the diary into the weblog. Psychiatry professionals have diagnosed the “narcissistic personality disorder” as a mental disorder in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance and a deep need for admiration. With apparent self-confidence they mask fragile insecurity and vulnerability to the slightest criticism. Understandably narcissism yields a number of personal and social pathologies. The isolated self, the dysfunctional marriage and family, social victimhood real or imagined, all blend together to form a public culture where commitment is scorned, tradition is despised, and transcendence is rejected.

1.4 The church as a collection of selves

In addition to the challenges to the church of Jesus Christ that individualism represents from the foregoing description, it may be added that the seeds and fruit of individualism affect the church at its heart. When people speak in marketing terms of a “loss of brand loyalty,” and in sociological terms of a “loss of external identity,” these can easily be transferred to the life of the church. For many Christians today, denominations don't matter; doctrinal precision is merely another form of power politics; authority and accountability get replaced by experience and authenticity. The biblical validity and requirement of church membership are becoming a necessary part of the church's apologetic, both to those outside the faith and to those inside the church.

Within today's church, the language of historic Christianity can easily be put in service to the idolatry of the self. The goal and message of this religion are self-esteem, self-acceptance, loving oneself, and forgiving oneself. Within a voluntarist ecclesiology, the church exists to serve the self. Christian spirituality comes to be defined apart from the church, the means of grace, and the communion of the saints. To the extent they continue to be acknowledged, under the influence of individualism the church's means of grace (preaching and the sacraments) and public worship come to be viewed more in terms of self-interest, self-expression, and self-realization.

Among our own churches, especially in the West, we are seeing the erosion of commitment to the church on several levels. Any authority asserted by leaders, whether or not it is exercised biblically, is often resisted by members. Various forms of accountability are vanishing—including accountability of leaders to members, as well as accountability of members to leaders and to other members.

This hymn to self-piety captures rather well the intersection between individualism and religion in our time (by Doug Marlette, cited by Wells):

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a stunted self-concept like me,
I once was stressed out, but now am empowered,*

Was visually challenged, but now I see.

2. A DIAGNOSIS OF THE CHALLENGE

Perhaps the most direct, albeit disheartening, description of the phenomenon under consideration is found in 2 Timothy 3:1-5:

“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people” (ESV).

For the purpose of clarity and interpretation, compare these verses from another, older English translation:

“But know this, that in the last days grievous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, haughty, railers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, implacable, slanderers, without self-control, fierce, no lovers of good, traitors, headstrong, puffed up, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding a form of godliness, but having denied the power therefore. From these also turn away” (ASV).

In these verses, Timothy and the church are being reminded that “the last days,” or the entire period of history until the Lord’s return, will be marked by people exhibiting the vices that follow. A number of these vices are mentioned only here in the New Testament, the first of which (self-loving) may be understood as the source of all the rest: people will be “lovers of self.” Such self-love inevitably and predictably leads to love of money, pride and arrogance, abusive and malicious talk, and disobedience to authority. False teachers who foster such vices may have a form of godliness, but they deny its power, by both their teaching and their conduct.

In the light of this biblical forecast, a number of causes may be identified, both in the church and its surrounding culture.

2.1 The loss of transcendence

We are living in a time when love for God is being displaced with various competitive affections. Substitute loves—for money, pleasure, even evil itself—give rise to twenty-first century idolatries just as pervasive and pernicious as those practiced during Bible times. In our day, with the idolatries of freedom and of power, people have surrendered their understanding of transcendence, their acknowledgement of a “higher Being,” which acknowledgement once served to limit the errors of both collectivism and egoism. The contemporary worship of

freedom and power are found on both the “right” and the “left,” among both “conservatives” and “liberals.” The cultures of the West have come to be marked by toleration and pragmatism—leading one writer to observe that “toleration is the pragmatist’s substitute for love” (see Conyers).

When cultures lose the understanding and practice of divine transcendence, then the powers of creation provide identity and meaning. In our day the idols of power and freedom have captured the hearts and minds of postmodern people. In addition, all areas of life tend to become politicized and commercialized; virtually all human relationships and human actions are governed by the self-interested calculations of costs and benefits. People become opportunists, relationships become utilitarian, promise-keeping serves self-interest, and law-making embodies values restricted to contemporary experience.

Losing the understanding and practice of divine transcendence affects a person’s ability to worship God, to receive truth, to sacrifice for others, and to deny oneself. It could be argued that true human community is possible only where divine transcendence, or living together *coram Deo* (before the face of God), is practiced.

2.2 Evangelicalism

Within such a cultural context, it easily happens that the language of the Christian faith comes to be redefined and re-invented. Each term in the phrase “the gospel of salvation from sin and guilt frees us for new obedience” gets redefined in terms of the self. For example, “sin” and “guilt” describe whatever injures self-esteem and lowers feelings of self-worth. “Salvation” describes whatever relieves low self-esteem and facilitates self-realization. The “gospel” consists of positive affirmations of the self and promises that everything in life will cooperate to fulfill personal desires for prosperity and well-being. The notion of “freedom” is easily absolutized; in the church, the needs and expectations of other believers are viewed as impediments to personal freedom, rather than putting Christian liberty in service to love (see Kloosterman).

Closer to home, Reformed and Presbyterian churches most often encounter the challenges of individualism in the form of what is called “evangelicalism.” Although the term *evangelical* is being debased in our day because of serious doctrinal and moral diversity among those calling themselves evangelicals, historically evangelicals generally have espoused a high view of Scripture (inerrancy, infallibility), a high view of the saving work of the Triune God (creation, virgin birth, regeneration), a high view of the need for penal substitutionary atonement, along with many features of the standard biblical *ordo salutis*.

Despite the compatibility at many points between evangelicalism and confessional Reformed and Presbyterian understanding, at least three particular

features of evangelicalism (there are more!) represent a significant challenge to Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

The first is *hermeneutical*: with regard to Scripture, the right to private interpretation, a privilege won through bloody battles during the Reformation, has morphed into the claim that every private interpretation is right. The individualism expressed in vigorous antipathy toward ecclesiastical creeds and confessions represents a significant challenge to our churches today.

The second involves *soteriology*: within evangelicalism, individual regeneration has become the starting point for spiritual autobiography. Another way of stating this challenge is to say that the activity of the Triune God *with and on behalf of a people* tends to be obscured by the emphasis on the Holy Spirit's work *within the individual* as the starting point and goal of divine redemption. Happiness, once thought to be a by-product of moral conduct, is proclaimed as the object of religious pursuit itself. Feelings are more important than character for defining reality, subjective experience more normative than objective truth, where Christian testimony is more about me-and-God than about God-for-us.

Third, directly related to this is that evangelicalism is characterized by its *voluntarist ecclesiology*, or doctrine of the church. Generally speaking, an evangelical view of the church begins with the individual and moves to the group—once a person is “saved,” he or she voluntarily “joins” a church that measures up to a set of personal preferences (Ferguson, 72). Characteristically evangelicals minimize the means of grace (preaching and the sacraments) or redefine them in terms of individual experience. This voluntarist understanding of church membership is accompanied by a strong egalitarian view of church leadership, whereby ecclesiastical offices and authority are seen at best as irrelevant, at worst as impediments, to personal spirituality.

Because it lacks a strong biblical doctrine of the covenant and of the church, evangelical worship tends to value experience over catholicity, to prize personal testimonies above congregational litanies, and to restrict piety to particular acts of individual communion with God.

2.3 The psychologizing of self as anti-Christian religion

This modern preoccupation with the self radically affects the church's message and ministry, as Ronald Wells has argued.

In response to the humanist commitment to the perfectability of the self, the Christian gospel proclaims the radical sinfulness and self-deception of the human person, and calls for continual dying to self in cruciformity with Christ.

The psychologizing of life erodes the capacity for thinking, but the Christian gospel calls people to be committed to cognitive reality and objective truth outside themselves. There exists such a thing as “the Christian mind.”

Finally, the psychologizing of life corrodes interest in the world of creation and culture, but the Christian gospel seeks to integrate creation and redemption, nature and grace, general and special revelation.

3. A RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE

Earlier we noted the description given in 2 Timothy 3:1-5 of people in “the last days.” In that context, we may not fail to notice that the apostle twice (vv. 10 and 14) emphatically calls Timothy, in the face of such degeneration around him, to remain rooted in Scripture’s patterns of teaching and morality. One important antidote for protecting the congregation from the ravages of self-lovers is the consistently biblical teaching and living on the part of the congregation’s leaders—minister, elders, and deacons.

This biblical teaching and living must involve careful attention to biblical images that describe the church’s identity and function in the world. In contrast to metaphors that possess a biblical richness and texture, today the church is seen by some as a *lecture hall* (with auditors receiving information, emphasizing *hearing*), by others as a *theatre* (viewing worship as drama, with actors, script, furnishings; emphasizing *seeing*), by still others as a *corporation* (in terms of management, marketing, and need-fulfillment, emphasizing *service*), and as a *family* (focusing on relationships, experience, and socialization, emphasizing *body life*). Now, to be sure, each of these images contains truths that we wish to preserve—the aural, the visual (think of the *visible* sacraments), service, and relationships. The challenge is to biblically integrate these images and aspects of the church’s identity and activity in the world (see Martin).

3.1 The church’s worship

Although we do not have the space for expanding this more fully, the challenges of individualism are met first of all by the church’s public worship. The Lord’s Day assembly of God’s people embodies the recognition of divine transcendence in a world committed to immanence. Worship directed to and empowered by the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reminds us that real truth can be apprehended with all our mind, heart, soul, and strength. Corporate, congregational worship is gladly governed by God’s Word and self-consciously shaped by confessional truth about God, creation, humanity, sin, covenant, grace, Christology, pneumatology, and eschatology (to name a few dimensions). Such biblical worship enlists every dimension of human personality—mind, will, and emotions.

Most importantly, the means of grace administered in weekly congregational worship nurture the congregation as it lives out of the Bible’s ongoing story of creation—fall—redemption—consummation, of sin—salvation—service. Such worship, because it is directed to and empowered by the Triune

God, integrates the “one” and the “many” in concrete fellowship and mutual identity. The “self” is nurtured as an essential part of the “whole,” while the body is nurtured by the growth of its members. Both the self and the body are nourished in their identity, calling, and function through the God-appointed congregational means of grace, viz., preaching and the blessed sacraments.

3.2 The church’s confession

As part of our response in terms of our description and diagnosis of the challenge of individualism to the church, we are selecting from a large number of confessional and doctrinal truths only two for elaboration and emphasis. These are the doctrines of *adoption* and of *the communion of the saints*.

3.2.1 *Adoption as fruit of justification and bridge between the one and the many in Christian experience*

It was Cyprian who insisted that he cannot have God as Father who refuses the church as mother. The church is the mother of believers, said John Calvin, because she brings them to new birth by the Word of God, educates and nourishes them all their life, strengthens them, and finally leads them to complete perfection (commentary on 1 Tim. 3.15).

For further orientation within Scripture, we cite the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 12, Of Adoption:

I. All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption,[1] by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God,[2] have his name put upon them,[3] receive the Spirit of adoption,[4] have access to the throne of grace with boldness,[5] are enabled to cry, Abba, Father,[6] are pitied,[7] protected,[8] provided for,[9] and chastened by him, as by a father:[j] yet never cast off,[11] but sealed to the day of redemption:[12] and inherit the promises,[13] as heirs of everlasting salvation.[14]

1. Eph. 1:5; Gal. 4:4-5

2. Rom. 8:17; John 1:12

3. Num. 6:24-26; Jer. 14:9; Amos 9:12; Acts 15:17; II Cor. 6:18; Rev. 3:12

4. Rom. 8:15

5. Eph. 3:12; Heb. 4:16

6. Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:6

7. Psa. 103:13

8. Prov. 14:26

9. Matt. 6:30, 32; I Peter 5:7

10. Heb. 12:6

11. Lam. 3:31-32; Psa. 89:30-35

12. Eph. 4:30

13. Heb. 6:12
14. I Peter 1:3-4; Heb. 1:14

In addition, consider this summary from the Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 74:

What is adoption?

Adoption is an act of the free grace of God,[1] in and for his only Son Jesus Christ,[2] whereby all those that are justified are received into the number of his children,[3] have his name put upon them,[4] the Spirit of his Son given to them,[5] are under his fatherly care and dispensations,[6] admitted to all the liberties and privileges of the sons of God, made heirs of all the promises, and fellow heirs with Christ in glory.[7]

1. I John 3:1
2. Eph. 1:5; Gal. 4:4-5
3. John 1:12
4. II Cor. 4:18; Rev. 3:12
5. Gal. 4:6
6. Psa. 103:13; Prov. 14:26; Matt. 6:32
7. Heb. 6:12; Rom. 8:17

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q/A 34, teaches this:

What is adoption?

Adoption is an act of God's free grace,[1] whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the Sons of God.[2]

1. I John 3:1
2. John 1:12

When these confessional formulations are understood together with those brief references to the believer's adoption in Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 13, Q/A 33 and Lord's Day 46, Q/A 120, it seems clear that adoption is a biblical distinctive emphasized mainly (though not exclusively) by the Reformed confessions.

We note that the apostle Paul used the term *huiiothesia* (adoption as sons; *huios* = son + *tithēmi* = to place) on five occasions: Rom.8.15, 23, 9.4, Gal.4.5, and Eph.1.5. Moreover, there is no corresponding use of *huiiothesia* in the LXX. This is only one of several terms Paul used to denote the filial relationship with believers and God, since he also used phrases like "sons of God" (Rom.8.14,19, 9.26, 2 Cor.6.18, Gal.3.26, 4.6), "children of God" (Rom.8.16-17, 21, 9.21, Phil.2.15), "children of promise" (Rom.9.8, Gal.4.28), and "daughters" (2 Cor.6.18). The word *huiiothesia* was one of the most common terms for adoption

in Hellenistic Greek (see Scott). There is no other term in either Pauline or biblical usage which has the same connotations as “adoption.”

The apostle John did not use this term. His most frequent phrase to describe believers was *tekna theou*, or “children of God” (1 John 3.1, 2, 5.2), whereas John usually employed the term *huios* in reference to Jesus Christ. This term *tekna* relates to the verb, *tiktein*, to beget, engender, procreate, give birth to. These words emphasize origin, where “child” has implications for family likeness.

Thus, we may observe that the soteriological idea of *huiiothesia* (adoption) is related to, but different from, that of *tekna theou* (children of God). The latter involves the idea of birth into the family/kingdom, along with the concept of family likeness. The former involves the idea of adoption into the family *and focuses more on the status and freedom of an adopted son or daughter within the family*. The importance of this difference lies in the fact that so often the Pauline usage has been conflated with the Johannine usage, such that adoption comes to be identified with regeneration. This ambiguity often leads in turn to the individualistic application of a term whose very essence consists in relationships that transcend the individual! To echo John Murray (2: 226-228): “[I]t is quite apparent that adoption is quite distinct from regeneration. We may never think of sonship as being constituted apart from the act of adoption.”

With the metaphor of adoption, Scripture provides a comparison picture of reality. This soteriological metaphor communicates the gospel in terms accessible to us. The key to its “success” lies in its Christocentricity, since this reality of adoption consists not first of all in a new existence, but in a new filial liberty through Jesus Christ. Only in Christ is adoption effectuated. Only through participation in Christ’s Sonship do we come to a knowledge of God the Father, and only in possession of the Spirit of Christ can we call upon God as our Father (Gal.3.26-28, 4.6). As Gal.4.4-6 makes clear, it is through the sending by the Father not only of the Son into the world, but of the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, that we are enabled to cry “Abba, Father!” Thus, adoption is fully Trinitarian: “Adoption proceeds according to the eternal purpose of the Father, upon the merits of the Son, and by the efficient agency of the Holy Ghost” (Hodge, 519). Sonship is the focus of the Father’s work in creation, the goal of Christ’s work in redemption, and the telos of the Spirit’s work in sanctification. In the covenant of grace, adoption depends on union with Christ. Especially in Gal.3-4 and 4.1-7, Paul sets *huiiothesia* within a redemptive-historical perspective, one in which the Old Testament provides the key to a clear understanding of the connection between redemption and adoption as displayed in both the first and the second exodus. Israel is described in Gal.4.1-2 as *nēpios* (infant, baby) during their Egypt sojourn; as *nēpios* Israel was also a slave, little more than a minor. Yet at the same time, Israel was Yahweh’s son, heir to the Abrahamic promise. The redemption of Israel was activated by God’s calling Israel out of Egypt to experience the blessings of the relationship of sonship (cf. Hos.11.1): redemption *from* bondage and adoption *to* sonship (Rom.9.4).

Similarly, in Jesus Christ the new Israel is both son and heir, redeemed from bondage to sin and adopted into God's new humanity.

Summarizing conclusion: redemption and adoption are correlative, and each ought to be considered a primary metaphor of the gospel, especially given that adoption, in completing redemption, serves as its climax or apex. Adoption always presupposes redemption, and we cannot fully understand redemption apart from adoption. Too often, the direct link between the two has been severed. The atonement has both a *retrospective* aspect (what we are saved *from*) and an equally essential *prospective* aspect (what we are saved *to*).

This has great benefit for our understanding of, and living as, the church of Jesus Christ. Preaching, counseling, pastoring, and living the Christian life are all informed by the communal, family identity supplied with the Bible's teaching on adoption. This teaching on adoption deepens our filial experience and communal enjoyment of salvation, and therefore a thoroughgoing doctrine of adoption provides an antidote to religious individualism. The gospel creates personal identity in union with Christ Jesus and his people. The church as family of God shares the features of creational human families, where structure provides security, where individuality is nurtured within relationships, where service and sacrifice pave the way to fulfillment and happiness.

3.2.2 *The communion of saints (communio sanctorum) and the church's body life as the integration of the self within the life of God's people*

The second doctrinal truth that we select as part of our confessional response to the challenge of individualism belongs to the Apostles' Creed: "I believe a holy catholic church, the communion of saints" (*credo . . . sanctam ecclesiam; sanctorum communionem . . .*). Once again we seek our orientation to Scripture's teaching by reviewing several Reformed confessional statements. The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21, Q/A 55, teaches:

What do you understand by the "communion of saints"?

First, that believers, one and all, as members of the Lord Jesus Christ, are partakers with Him in all His treasures and gifts;[1] second, that each one must feel himself bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the advantage and welfare of other members.[2]

1. I John 1:3

2. I Cor. 12:12-13, 21; 13:5-6; Phil. 2:4-6; Heb. 3:14

Similarly we find this fulsome confession in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 26, Of the Communion of Saints:

I. All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory:[1] and, being united to one another in love, they

have communion in each other's gifts and graces,[2] and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.[3]

1. I John 1:3; Eph. 2:5-6; 3:16-18; John 1:16; Phil. 3:10; Rom. 6:5-6; 8:17; II Tim. 2:12

2. Eph. 4:15-16; I Cor. 3:21-23; 12:7, 12; Col. 2:19

3. I Thess. 5:11, 14; Rom. 1:11-12, 14; I John 3:16-18; Gal. 6:10

II. Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification;[4] as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.[5]

4. Heb. 10:24-25; Acts 2:42, 46; Isa. 2:3; I Cor. 11:20

5. I John 3:17; II Cor. ch. 8-9; Acts 2:44-45; 11:29-30

III. This communion which the saints have with Christ, doth not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of his Godhead; or to be equal with Christ in any respect: either of which to affirm is impious and blasphemous.[6] Nor doth their communion one with another, as saints, take away, or infringe the title or propriety which each man hath in his goods and possessions.[7]

6. Col. 1:18-19; I Cor. 8:6; Psal. 45:6-7; Heb. 1:6-9; John 1:14; 20:17

7. Exod. 20:15; Eph. 4:28; Acts 5:4

We begin with the observation that especially in the New Testament, the church's "fellowship" (*koinōnia* and related words: *koinōnos*, *koinōneō*, *syngkoinōnos*, and *syngkoinōneō*) is a Christ-given, Spirit-driven reality, pointing to the common life that believers share by virtue of their union with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, rooted in grace and empowered by the Holy Spirit of fellowship (1 Cor.1.9, 2 Cor.13.13, 1 Jn.1.3, 1.6-7). In the church it consists additionally in fellowship or partnership in the gospel (Phil.1.5), fellowship in Christ as Jews and Gentiles (Rom.3.29-30, 11.17; Gal.3.26-29, 4.28-31), along with fellowship in suffering for Christ's sake (2 Cor.1.7; Phil.3.10) and sharing with the saints for Christ's sake (2 Cor.8.4). The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a fellowship in the body and blood of Christ (2 Cor.10.16). Notably, the early church spent much time in fellowship (Ac.2.42, 44).

In this connection, perhaps the most instructive passage dealing with the integration of the one and the many within the life of the church is 1 Corinthians 12, especially verses 12-26. Already in verses 4-7 we are taught that this integration is a sovereign and spiritual gift of the Triune God, who enlists everyone (v. 6) in service to the common good (v. 7).

The apostle's argument consists of three sections: (1) vv. 12-14, (2) vv. 15-20, and (3) vv. 21-26. The first section sets forth the basic teaching or premise,

emphasizing both diversity amid unity, and unity amid diversity. Verse 13 picks up the opening claim that the body is one, and explains how the many members became one body: they drank of the one Spirit. Verse 14 then picks up the second notion of unity as context for diversity. Then follows the second and third paragraph sections (vv. 15-20 and 21-26, respectively), which illustrate and apply the two concerns of the first section, viz., diversity and unity.

We may identify and summarize several important and relevant teachings from this passage for meeting the challenge of individualism.

1. According to v.12, there is no such thing as true unity without diversity; hence, unity is essentially different from uniformity. A human body consists of many different members, whose differences do not contradict the essential unity of the body. Note that the body is Christ himself—he is the Head of the church and the church is the body *of Christ*.
2. According to v.13, this unity originated from the Holy Spirit; it is thus a Spirit-given and a Spirit-driven unity, symbolized by the sacrament of baptism. The same Spirit, the one Spirit, dwells and works within each Christian and within all Christians together.
3. According to v.18, the composition of a congregation's diversity (foot, hand, eye, ear) originates from God's sovereign arrangement. The church's composition, in terms of diversity, is not haphazard, but heaven-originating.
4. According to vv.24-25, the goal of God's sovereign composition of the congregation's diversity is that the members may have the same care for one another (*to auto hyper allēlōn merimnōsin*). Notice that within these verses we encounter the nearest thing to an exhortation or command, softly introduced by the phrase "in order that"—the divine composition and arrangement of the body aim at the unity and mutual care of its members.
5. Verse 27 presents the summary: "Now you [plural] are body of Christ and members in particular." No individual is the whole, and the whole excludes no individual.

Summarizing conclusion: In contrast to self-centered religious experience, Scripture enjoins the self-giving and self-denying mutuality of living in the family of God, the body of Christ, the church. Among the most powerful biblical metaphors that can help us address the challenge of individualism in church life today is the word picture of *the church as the family of God*. As in every well-functioning family, in the family of God mutual relationships embodying accountability and service are inescapable. This reality is found already at creation (Gen. 1.27-28, 2.18-24) and forms an essential thread in the story of Scripture. The church as the family of God, the new humanity born of water and the Spirit (Jn.3.5-8), is the goal and crown of divine redemption.

What this generation (whether Gen X or Gen Y, whether Baby Boomers or Millennials) needs is what every generation needs: the kind of caring, serving, discipling community that is to be found only in the church of Jesus Christ. Every activity of the church must be intentionally directed and serviceable to *community*, to family life. The best response to the challenge of individualism is to be(come) an Acts 2.42 church: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Of course, doctrine and worship belong to the church’s identity and essence, but so do fellowship and festivity, communion and celebration. These are not automatic by-products of the Christian faith, but rather activities to be cultivated for the sake of the formative blessings they impart. Fellowship fosters accountability, communion serves collaboration, and the church-as-family provides the necessary religious socialization of the individual believer.

The church-as-communion lives together as a teaching/learning, worshiping/serving, discipling/mentoring, and needy/caring community. The family of God celebrates baptism as the sacrament of *incorporation*—literally, the in-body-ing of the one baptized into the body of Christ. The Lord’s Supper is celebrated intentionally (with form and format) as a sacrament symbolizing not only union and communion with Christ, but also union and communion with other believers.

The church-as-communion invents and manufactures activities that foster and enhance the *belonging* of each member to all other members. By means of such historic practices as home visiting (cf. Acts 5.42, 20.20), small group ministry, congregational meals (cf. Acts 2.47), and mentoring relationships (cf. Titus 2.3), the church-as-communion will seek to foster “one anothering” and “togethering.”

Attending to the sociology of the church will aid the pulpit in applying the Word of God concretely to those diverse relationships in the congregation. With all of the strains and demands being placed today upon the home, the school, and the public square, the church-as-family must assist by intentionally cultivating Christian virtues (self-denial, sacrifice, suffering, service) as part of the church’s witness to the watching world. Within the church-as-family, the confession that “each one must feel himself bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the advantage and welfare of other members” must be translated into conduct. Members are obligated to give, to serve, to match resources to needs—and for this the officebearers must provide leadership, counsel, and example.

CONCLUSION:

What shall we say then, brothers, of the emergent church, of postmodernism, of globalization, and all such movements that impact the debate between individualism and collectivism? Time would fail us to tell of recent

theories in sociology, anthropology, psychology—to say nothing of religion and ethics.

Many Christian thinkers are comparing today's situation to that faced by the early church, and are emphasizing the church's calling to live in pilgrimage, to suffer, and to witness by lifestyle. The challenge of individualism in church life must and can be met only when the church of Jesus Christ demonstrates its unique identity in the world in terms of solidarity among its members. The church is God's new creation, where diversity serves unity and unity is enhanced through diversity, and where our old natural fear of differences among people (varieties of languages, cultures, backgrounds, habits, etc.) is replaced with the Spirit's gift of fellowship in Christ. Through the gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of his Spirit, within the church authority can dwell peaceably with authenticity, diversity will serve community, and the integrative life of our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, may be exhibited in our time and space.

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PROPOSITIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. To respond effectively to the challenge of individualism in church life, we must recover and teach a fully biblical doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit as confessed in the Apostles' Creed, especially regarding "a holy catholic church, the communion of saints, and the forgiveness of sins."
2. To respond effectively to the challenge of individualism in church life, we must distinguish clearly and carefully between uniformity and unity in the church.
3. To respond effectively to the challenge of individualism in church life, we must identify and forsake common alternatives to Spirit-given and Spirit-driven unity in the congregation.
4. It would be helpful to discuss "fellowship" as a mark of the true church, in order to nurture fellowship as an indispensable component of the church's life for integrating the church's worship, service, and witness.
5. For the sake of healthy church life in our time, we must cultivate a biblically balanced assessment of evangelicalism.