

On Human Flourishing: A Theocentric Perspective

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Gloria Dei vivens homo.

Irenaeus of Lyons, *ad haer* 4.20.7

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Christian theology has a large stake in making it clear that its affirmations about God and God's ways of relating to human beings underwrite human beings' flourishing. It has been especially important to emphasize this claim in the context of "late modernity," in which Friedrich Nietzsche is often cited as the most powerful spokesman for a widespread and deep suspicion that Christians magnify God and God's power and dominion by systematically minimizing human beings, making them small, weak, and servile—anything but flourishing.

The challenge to Christian theology has been to develop conceptual and argumentative strategies by which to show that, properly understood, human flourishing is inseparable from God's active relating to human creatures such that their flourishing is always dependent upon God. That is, on the assumption that human beings' powers are maximized when human beings flourish, the challenge has been to develop theological strategies that show how human flourishing correlates with, rather than excludes, an appropriately robust understanding of God's power in actively relating to human beings. The maxim of such strategies is captured by this essay's epigraph from Irenaeus, which

may, perhaps, be translated thus—albeit not without a certain interpretive spin: “The glory of God is human beings made fully alive.”

Every effort to devise such strategies must address two questions: (1) Theologically speaking, what counts as “fully alive” human being? That is, on what criteria should a theocentric account of human flourishing rely in order to discern when human beings are in fact “flourishing”? (2) What counts as an “appropriately robust” understanding of God’s power? This essay only outlines a response to the first of these questions. With regard to the second and very contentious question I content myself with identifying, without attempting to defend, several themes in a doctrine of God whose validity is thereafter simply assumed. Following a stipulation concerning the meaning of “human flourishing” and an identification of some of its key assumptions about God, the essay is devoted to developing a proposal in answer to the first question.

1. “Human Flourishing”

Following the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we may say that in general “to flourish” means both “to blossom” and “to thrive.” There are connotations of each of these two senses of the term that are useful here; there are other connotations that must be excluded. So my use of “to flourish” and related terms must be somewhat stipulative. Theologically speaking, “to blossom” is to manifest the type of beauty of which a given life is capable by virtue of God’s relating to it. “To blossom,” in a metaphorical sense, is also to be on the way to providing both fruit, on which contemporary others’ flourishing may depend for nurture and support, and seed, on which a subsequent generation’s life may depend. These senses of “flourishing” as “blossoming” may be used metaphorically to characterize a certain type of human life. But, “to blossom” and “to bloom,” used

metaphorically, may also connote maximal good health. I shall argue that health, whether physical, emotional, intellectual, social, or cultural, is at best a problematic metaphor for what is meant theologically by human flourishing. I shall seek to restrict that connotation radically in theological use of “flourishing.”

As for “to thrive,” its root is Old Norse, “*thrifask*, to have oneself in hand.” Used metaphorically of a certain type of human life, “to flourish” as “to have oneself in hand” is also theologically appropriate. Used metaphorically, however, “to thrive” may also connote both “to grow luxuriantly” and “to prosper.” I shall seek to exclude both of these senses, the first because it unqualifiedly re-introduces health as a metaphor, and the second because it inappropriately introduces wealth and achievement as metaphors definitive of human flourishing.

Focus here falls specifically on the thriving of human beings. The essay assumes that human beings are best considered as living psychosomatic wholes that typically exhibit a distinctive, very complex array of interrelated capacities and powers, each of which admits of different degrees from one human being to another.

2. Some Assumptions About God

In the interests of clarity it will also be useful to be as transparent as possible about this essay’s key working assumptions concerning God. These assumptions include at least the following:

(1) This understanding of God is “Christocentric” in the sense that it is in large part generated out of, and governed by, reflection on implications concerning God of Christian claims that the God who relates to create human beings also relates to them to draw them to eschatological consummation and, when they are estranged from God, to

reconcile them to God, by giving them Godself in an exceedingly odd way, namely, in the concrete personal life and particular personal identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

(2) In historical terms, what is assumed is a “Nicene” Trinitarian understanding of God. “Nicene” does not identify any one doctrine of God. Rather, it designates a conceptual field whose parameters are paradigmatically summarized in the so-called “Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.” It is a field on which differing doctrines of God engage each other. The understanding of God assumed here seeks to be congruent with the parameters of that “field.”

(3) The triune God is understood to relate to all that is not God, including human beings, in three ways that are logically distinguishable from one another, irreducible to one another, and ordered to one another in a definite pattern: God relates to *create* all that is not God; God relates to draw all that is not God to an *eschatological consummation*; God relates to all that is not God to *reconcile* it to God if it is estranged from God. The latter two ways in which God relates presuppose the first (no creating—nothing to consummate or reconcile); but the first does not necessarily entail either of the latter two (they are “grace,” not “creation”). God’s second way of relating (to consummate eschatologically) does not presuppose creatures’ estrangement from God; the third (to reconcile) does. Accordingly, the odd way in which God goes about relating to draw all else to eschatological consummation—namely, drawing them to a creaturely participation in God’s own life by giving them Godself in and through the concrete life and particular identity of Jesus and his unique relationship with God (the way of “Incarnation”)—does not presuppose creatures’ estrangement from God. Were there no estrangement (i.e., no sin), God would relate by Incarnation anyway (eschatological “supralapsarianism”). On

the other hand, whereas God's relating to consummate eschatologically by way of Incarnation is in no way dependent on God's relating to reconcile (because it is not contingent on creatures' being estranged from God), given that creatures *are* estranged from God not only is God's relating to reconcile contingent on the fact of sin—the concrete way God *goes about* relating to human beings to reconcile them is itself dependent on the way God relates to consummate eschatologically, namely, by the way of Incarnation. God's relating to reconcile presupposes God's relating to consummate eschatologically, whereas the latter does not presuppose the former.

(4) It is the triune God as such who relates to create, consummate eschatologically, and reconcile. All three “persons” of the immanently triune Godhead are “perichoretically” involved in each of God's three ways of relating to all that is not God in the “economy.”

(5) Each of the triune God's three ways of relating to all that is not God entails both God's radical “otherness” from all that is not God, and God's immediate and unrestricted “involvement” with all that is not God, where “otherness” and “involvement” are understood to be directly rather than inversely correlated with each other.

As Kathryn Tanner points out, on the view that God's “otherness” and “involvement” are directly correlated, “divinity is said to express its power in founding rather than suppressing created being, and created being is said to maintain and fulfill itself, not independently of such agency, but in essential dependence upon it.”¹

Accordingly, if power and efficacy are perfections of created being, then a “created cause can be said to bring about a certain effect by its own power, or a created agency can be

¹ Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 85.

talked about as freely intending the object of its rational volition, only if God is said to found that causality or agency directly and *in toto*—in power, exercise, manner of activity and effect.”² On this view, the “otherness” of God’s being than creaturely being is *radical* in that *God’s* being is in no way constituted by its relations to all that is not God, and God’s “involvement” with all that is not God is *unrestricted* in that it is a direct involvement in creatures that is not restricted by the capacities of any intermediaries and its scope includes every aspect of creaturely being.

Finally, (6) this view of God entails two rules governing how to speak of the triune God’s threefold active relating to all that is not God:

(a) Given its radical “otherness” than all that is not God, the triune God may not be conceived, nor its active relations characterized, in ways that construe the triune God as one being among many beings interacting in a common field or on the same plane. Creatures share a field constituted by complex patterns of interactions and marked by relatively stable regularities, in which they exercise their creaturely powers in relating to one another. Their powers may in varying degrees cooperate, compete, and conflict with one another within rules set by the “regularities” of their shared field of interaction. However, the triune God may not be conceived as one more item in that field precisely because (in one of God’s ways of relating) God’s creative relating is the condition of the possibility of their being a “field” for creaturely interaction in the first place. Hence the triune God’s power must not be construed in such a way that it would be coherent to conceive of it as in competition or conflict with creatures’ powers. As Tanner observes, that implies a two-part rule in regard to God’s “otherness”: “avoid both simple univocal

² Tanner, p. 86.

attribution of predicates to God and world and simple contrast of divine and non-divine predicates.”³ Attributes that are attributed to both God and creatures should be attributed to God metaphorically, “analogically,” or, perhaps more accurately said, by “controlled equivocation,” rather than univocally. When predicates are attributed univocally to God and creatures, God is necessarily, if implicitly, construed as just one more item on the inventory list of the created universe. Moreover, when predicates are ascribed to God and creatures contrastively, God’s “otherness” is not radical enough, because contrasts are always contrasts relative to some common conceptual framework (e.g., discourse about causes and effects, or about parts and wholes, or discourse about time and eternity, or about matter and spirit, or about matter and form, or about being and non-being, etc.). Characterizations of God’s ways of relating to all that is not God need to be framed in non-contrastive terms.

(b) Given its unrestricted involvement in all that is not God, the triune God may not be conceived, nor its active relations characterized, in ways that construe God’s active relating to all that is not God as necessarily indirect and restricted in scope. On one hand, in their interactions in a shared field, creatures’ exercise of their powers and agency is constrained by other creatures’ exercise of their powers. As often as it is immediate and direct, creatures’ “involvement” in the complex networks of interactions that constitute their shared lived-world is at least as often indirect, mediated through their influence on others through cooperation or through various kinds of pressure, manipulation, and coercion, which then in turn influence still others. In any case, it is always an involvement limited in scope, dividing up the “field” among fellow creatures who are each acknowledged to have their own appropriate “fields of influence.” On the other

³ Tanner, p. 47.

hand, God's active "involvement" in all that is not God cannot be conceived as restricted either in its scope or by the limitations of necessary mediators of that involvement, precisely because (in one of God's ways of relating) God's "involvement" by way of creative relating is the condition of the possibility of there being a "field" for creaturely interaction in the first place. In regard to God's "involvement" that implies a second rule: "Avoid in talk about God's creative agency all suggestion of limitation of scope or manner. [This] second rule prescribes talk about God's creative agency as immediate and universally extensive."⁴

3. Flourishing as "Well-Being"

Suppose that (1) one holds a theocentric anthropology in which human being is understood in terms of (a) God's relation to human beings, and (b) human beings' relations to God, where (2) "God" is understood along lines sketched above, (3) human "flourishing" is understood, with restrictions stipulated above, as both "blossoming" and "having oneself in hand," and (4) one wishes to make clear how maximal affirmation of the power of God's ways of relating to human beings does not entail minimizing human beings' powers and agency. How should a theological account of human flourishing be framed?

One strategy for framing such an account is immediately at hand because in the modern period it has been taken to be self-evident common sense in both popular piety and academic theology. This strategy construes human flourishing as human "well-being." That is, it construes human flourishing in terms of human beings' "healthiest" relationships to fellow beings, to their shared contexts, and to themselves.

⁴ Tanner, p. 47.

In popular piety human well-being is routinely characterized as human being that is “happy” and “healthy,” “self-fulfilled” or “self-realized” or “fully actualized.” These culturally accepted informal indices of biological, psychosomatic, psychosocial, societal, and cultural “well-being” are widely adopted as definitive of human flourishing, Christianly understood. These indices are analyzed more formally by scientific biological, psychological, social scientific inquiries that theorize the health of biological, psychological, social, and cultural dynamic systems in terms of the systems’ capacity both to function internally and to adapt to their larger contexts in ways that maximally satisfy their needs and preserve their homeostasis as dynamic systems.

In modern academic theology analyses of human flourishing construed as “well-being” have commonly been framed in terms of a human subject’s relating to itself by an interior subjective act. Arguably, the abstract template for this otherwise diverse array of theological anthropologies is outlined by “Anti-Climacus,” the pseudonymous author of a manuscript “edited” by S. Kierkegaard and published as *Sickness Unto Death*.⁵ A human subject or “spirit” is not a “given” but a project to be realized, because it is constituted by a set of three relations that it enters only by freely deciding to enter them: (1) A subject is a relation between body and soul (or consciousness?), i.e., a synthesis of the two, but this first relation is not yet a subject. (2) A subject is constituted by the fact that the soul-and-body relation (first relation) relates to itself (second relation) in an act of free decision about *how* to relate to itself. In this decision a subject is set into and oriented toward its lived-world in a particular concrete way that may be called its “existential how.” In choosing a particular “existential how,” it is choosing itself, i.e., the concrete version of

⁵ S. Kierkegaard, ed., *Sickness Unto Death* (trans. Walter Lowrie; New York: Doubleday & Co., 1954), p. 146.

itself it decides to be. However, this relation of the relation to itself is not yet necessarily a subject. If the (first) relation fails to relate to itself (in the second relation), or if it fails to relate to itself in a way that holds the two terms of the first relation (body and soul) in proper equipoise, the subject is on its way to losing itself by constituting itself improperly as a *disrelation*. A certain type of anxiety is a subject's consciousness of itself as a relation that is constantly at risk of failing to actualize itself by falling into a disrelation. This anxiety is a structural feature of subjectivity, and not a pathology to be cured. The more extreme the disrelation, the more intense the anxiety will be. The most intense degree of anxiety is utter hopelessness, i.e., despair. (3) The (first, body-soul) relation's relation to itself (second relation), and therewith its "existential how," can hold the first relation in equilibrium only "by relating itself [a third relation] to that Power which constituted the whole [first] relation"⁶ to begin with. Theologians have construed "that Power which constituted the whole relation" to be God. The name for the subject's "relating itself to that Power" is "faith." Mediating one's relation to oneself through faith as a relation to God is the only way of relating to oneself that keeps the two terms of the first relation in equipoise and avoids the slide to self-loss. It is this entire structure of three interrelated relations that defines what counts as a human subject's "well-being." Such "well-being" comes only through a relation to God, i.e., faith.

Especially in the twentieth century, many influential theologians have developed various philosophical elaborations of this template in their accounts of human flourishing. Each construes in a significantly different way the nature of the subjective act by which the relation relates to itself properly through its relation to the Power that constitutes the

⁶ Kierkegaard, p. 147.

relation. Reinhold Niebuhr's account in volume I of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*,⁷ perhaps the closest to Anti-Climacus's pattern, construes it as an act of self-transcending acceptance of oneself *as* one who is finite, dependent on God for well-being. Karl Rahner construes it as an act of self-affirmation, saying "yes" to oneself as one to whom God has said "yes" by bestowing Godself upon one.⁸ Edward Farley construes it as an act of courage in which converge a relativizing of finite goods, consent to finite goods that are at hand, including consent to their tragic character, and a risk that "ventures the self amidst the perils of the world."⁹ Rudolf Bultmann construes it as an act of "self-understanding" that is authentic because in it a subject is in fact constituted in genuine freedom.¹⁰ Paul Tillich construes it as an act of "ecstatic," if ambiguous and fragmentary, self-actualization.¹¹ Each of these variations on Anti-Climacus's template postulates some type of event in which the subject encounters God concretely, occasioning the subject's relating to God in faith by responding to some type of given object: a religious symbol representing the person of Jesus, a concrete act of the proclamation of the Gospel, or a concrete event of the experience of grace (however "anonymous").

It is not hard to see the attractiveness of this theological strategy of construing human flourishing as existential self-relational "well-being." It seems to promise to maximize both God's "involvement" in human being and God's "otherness" than human being in such a way that God's relation to human being does not threaten to minimize human beings' powers and agency.

⁷ New York: Charles Scribners, 1953.

⁸ *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), chaps. I, IV.

⁹ *Good & Evil* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 150.

¹⁰ *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (trans. Schubert Ogden; New York: Meridian, 1960), pp. 58–91, 92–111, 226–40.

¹¹ *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), vol. I (1951), pp. 111–14, 126–27; vol. III (1963), 111–37.

On one side, this strategy seems to maximize God's "involvement" in human being by construing it in two ways. First, God is "involved" in human being structurally: God's relating to human beings is the condition of the possibility of the type of consciousness without which there can be none of the acts of self-relating that constitute a human "subject." Hence a God-relation is universally inherent in the structure and dynamics of subjectivity. Second, God's concrete address universally to all human subjects, construed in any of the ways listed above (religious symbol, act of proclamation, experience of grace, etc.), is the occasion for, and hence the condition of the possibility of, the act of faith in which a subject's "well-being" is constituted when the subject-as-a-relation properly relates to itself in a way that holds the terms of the first relation in equipoise and thus avoids self-loss. Correlatively, God's radical "otherness" than human subjects is maximized by being characterized in terms that make clear that God is not one more competitive power-center in the field of interactions shared by human subjects. God is not a "cause" of anything, but rather the condition of the possibility of healthy subjectivity.

On the other side, human subjects' power and agency seem to be maximized by the very structure of "subjectivity": Subjects are constituted as subjects only by their own free acts of self-relation, whether understood as acts of self-transcending self-acceptance, or self-affirmation, or courage, or self-understanding, or ecstatic self-actualization, etc. Subjects' structural "God-relation" does not imply a violation of the freedom of their self-constituting-in-self-relating. Rather, God relating to a subject-as-relation as "the Power which constituted the whole relation" is the condition of the possibility of a consciousness capable of an act of free relating to itself as a relation; and God self-

presented to a subject in some concrete way is the condition of the possibility of that subject-as-relation mediating its free self-relating through an act of freely relating to God in faith, thereby being properly constituted as a subject in a self-relating that preserves an equipoise between the two terms of the (logically) initial relation. God's ways of relating to a subject are the conditions of the possibility of its being a subject, but it is the subject alone that freely constitutes itself as a proper subject that enjoys the well-being constituted by healthy relations to itself, fellow creatures, and their shared lived-worlds.

Like the rhetoric of much popular Christian piety this type of academic theology construes human "well-being" on the model of "health," albeit at an extremely high level of abstraction. To be sure, it is theorized in philosophical, sometimes explicitly ontological, categories rather than in the more nearly empirical categories used by the several biological and human sciences to analyze the well-being of the biological, psychological, social, and cultural dynamic systems that constitute human beings' lives. Nonetheless, it too explains human beings' flourishing by an analysis of the capacity of a dynamic system, in this case a system consisting of three nested dynamic relations, both to function internally as a relation-relating-to-itself and to adapt to its larger contexts in the existential "hows" that it constitutes by the ways in which it relates to itself, in ways that maximally satisfy the system's needs and preserve the equipoise of the two terms (body and soul) of the relation as it relates to itself, i.e., its existential "homeostasis" as a dynamic system.

There is nothing problematic, of course, about a theological affirmation of the importance of human physical, psychological, social, cultural, and existential health. As was noted, affirmation of God's goodness is customarily taken to imply the affirmation

that God “intends” the “well-being-as-overall-health” of human creatures. Health may fairly be said to define human “well-being.” Further, it is clear that since “health” allows of degrees, there is some minimal degree of health below which there is no living human being “there” whose flourishing one might seek to understand theocentrically. “Well-being as health” is surely part of the content of a theological account of human flourishing.

But it is a good deal more problematic theologically to define human *flourishing* as human well-being understood as “health.” A theological account of human flourishing needs to be framed in such a way that it is consistent to say *both* that (a) sister Simone or brother Soren is flourishing and that (b) sister Simone or brother Soren is, at least in certain important respects, decidedly *unhealthy* and so does not enjoy “well-being.” Whereas the criteria of well-being, understood as “health,” rightly lie in the dynamics of human beings’ various types of relations to themselves, to fellow creatures, and to the lived-worlds they share, the criteria of a theocentric account of human flourishing properly lie in the dynamics of human beings’ relations to God and God’s relations to them. In a theocentric account of human flourishing, God’s relations to human beings and their relations to God are the larger context within which the meaning of their relations to themselves, fellow creatures, and their shared lived-worlds is defined and their significance assessed.

The suffering in which unhealth is experienced is, perhaps, the test case. Given this essay’s assumptions about God, a theological account of human flourishing cannot value for its own sake any suffering that ill-health brings, much less horrendous suffering, nor can it imply that suffering is to be sought for the sake of flourishing. Given the same

assumptions about God, however, a theological account of human flourishing cannot identify suffering as a decisive criterion of a human being's non-flourishing, even though it is a criterion of severe ill-health and non-well being, nor can it imply that the elimination of suffering, even horrendous suffering, is a necessary condition for any human flourishing theocentrically understood.

The theological strategy that makes affirmation of the power of God's "otherness than" and "involvement in" human beings' lives compatible with affirmation of human agents' freedom to exercise power by construing human flourishing as "well-being" fails to provide the conceptual space needed for consistent joint affirmation of a human being's unhealth and its flourishing precisely because it defines "human flourishing" as "well-being" understood as "health." That suggests that it is somehow theologically inadequate, failing to fulfill its apparent promise to show how maximizing God's agency and power is consistent with maximizing human beings' agency and power.

This failure derives, I suggest, from its insufficiently radical accounts of the "involvement" and the "otherness" that characterize God's relations to human beings. In its effort to show that affirmation of God's "involvement" in human subjects' well-being does not entail minimization of human subjects' agency and power, it characterizes God's "involvement" in human subjects' free self-constitution in two ways, both of which correlate with the same conceptualization of God's "otherness" than human beings.

As we have seen, the first way in which this strategy characterizes God's "involvement" in human subjects' free acts of self-constitution construes God's relation to subjects as the condition of the possibility of subjects' self-constitution in free acts of

self-relating. God's relating to subjects is conceived as a structural feature of human subjectivity, a necessary (although not sufficient) condition of subjectivity that is "involved" in subjectivity in the sense that it "grounds" subjectivity, but not in the sense that it "does" anything in or with subjects. Conceived in this way God is "other" than human subjects in that God is absolutely excluded from the dynamics of any given human being's subjectivity. These construals of God's "involvement" and "otherness" are insufficiently radical because they tacitly frame the God-human subject relation in terms of a shared field of interaction and because they restrict the scope of God's "involvement."

This is brought out by noting how these construals of God's "involvement" and "otherness" violate both of the two "rules" (noted in 2. Some Assumptions about God, number 6, above) governing adequately radical characterizations of God's "otherness than" and "involvement in" human beings. As "ground," not "cause," of human subjectivity, God relating to human subjects is "other" than they in that God is excluded from any "involvement" in their autonomous exercise of their finite agency. This is to conceptualize God's relation to human beings in both univocal and contrastive terms, violating the first of the two rules. It assumes that if God is said to be "freely involved" in human beings' free acts of self-relating, "free" must be used univocally of both God and human subjects, and then that the term "free" must be used contrastively of human subjects and God, respectively. (Human subjects exercise their powers for free agency; God does not exercise powers for free agency.) That rests on the implicit assumption that God and human subjects share a common field of action in which God's exercise of power to relate freely to human subjects can only be conceived as entailing a restriction,

or even violation, of human subjects' autonomy. To avoid that undesirable result, the strategy characterizes God's "otherness than" human beings contrastively: Human subjects are autonomous agents; by contrast, God is not to be conceived as an agent, autonomous or otherwise. The consequence is that the scope of God's "involvement" is restricted. God may be "involved" as the ground of human subjectivity; but God cannot be said to be "involved" in human subjectivity. That violates the second of the two rules governing adequately radical characterizations of God's "otherness than" and "involvement in" human beings: Divine "otherness" ought not to be conceived contrastively (as it tacitly is by this strategy) because contrasts are always contrasts relative to some common conceptual framework. But God and human subjects cannot be compared and contrasted coherently as instances of any such conceptual scheme.

The second way in which we have seen this strategy characterize God's "involvement" in human subjects' free acts of self-constitution construes the concrete occasions for human subjects to relate to God in faith as events of God's self-presentation through religious symbols, or acts of proclamation, or experiences of grace, etc. They are the objective conditions of the possibility of subjects' responsive subjective acts of faith: nothing objective to respond to in faith, no faith. Here too God's "involvement" is not conceived in an adequately radical way because it is restricted: God is "involved" in human beings' lives in that God's self-presenting provides the concrete possibility of the subjects' responding by relating to God in faith, but God cannot be said to be "involved" in the subjects' responsive relating itself. Correlatively, God's "otherness than" human subjects is characterized by contrastive use of a univocal concept of "free relating": God's objective relating to human subjects through various media does not threaten to

violate human subjects' exercise of their powers for "free relating" to God because, in contrast to human relating to God in faith, it is not an exercise of divine powers for "free relating."

By its restriction of the scope of God's "involvement" with human subjects and its contrastive use of attributes that it ascribes to God to characterize God's "otherness than" human subjects, the strategy's second way of characterizing God's involvement risks construing it as one more item in a field of different types of objective possibilities for "healing" human beings' ill-health and restoring their well-being. Where what is at stake is the nature of human flourishing, this strategy risks suggesting that affirmation of God's relating to human beings is affirmation that God's relating makes for human well-being by offering one more analgesics to ease the pain of human subjects' existential ill-health: You have tried rock and roll, sex, booze, and drugs, and they didn't bring well-being; now try Jesus, or religion, or spirituality. If characterization of God's "involvement" with human subjects consists of God's "grounding" their subjectivity, i.e., as the condition of the possibility of their subjectivity, seems to move in the direction of a very subtle and conceptually sophisticated Deism, characterization of God's "involvement" with human subjects as events of divine self-presentation that constitute objective occasions for human subjects' relating to God in faith is the road to not-so-subtle but thorough trivialization of theological claims that God's ways of relating to human subjects grounds their flourishing.

4. The Basis of Human Flourishing, Theocentrically Considered

In order to clarify the contrast, I have urged that whereas the basis and criteria of human "well-being" (understood as various kinds of "health") lie in human beings'

relations to themselves, to fellow creatures, and to their shared social and natural contexts, the basis and criteria of human “flourishing” (if it is understood theocentrically) lie in human beings’ “God relation.” Left at that, however, the key phrase “God relation” is inadequate because its high abstraction obscures the complexity of its referent. Given this essay’s assumptions about God, “God” in “God relations” is to be understood in a Trinitarian way. “God relation” may be used to refer to two distinct kinds of relation between the triune God and human beings, in related but different senses of “relation,” and each kind of relation has several different versions. Thus the basis of flourishing is complex. Accordingly, the criteria of what counts as human flourishing are multiple and complexly interrelated when it is understood theocentrically.

I shall outline a theological account of the complex basis of human flourishing here and elaborate it a bit in successive subsections of the balance of the essay. Since what follows is largely warranted by assumptions about God noted above in section 2 (Some Assumptions about God), the proposals outlined here can only have a hypothetical cast: *If* one accepts the assumptions about God, then should not the following theological claims about human flourishing follow?

The phrase “God relation” covers two kinds of relations: (a) God’s relations to human beings, and (b) human beings’ relations to God. Given the assumptions outlined in section 2, it must be kept in mind that “relation” is used here in two different ways. Both kinds of relation are understood to be dynamic. But “relation” cannot be used univocally. The nature of God’s “dynamic relating” to human creatures is a function of God’s unconditioned (except and unless *self*-determined and therefore self-conditioned) reality and capacities, in consequence of which both God’s “reality and capacities” and God’s

“dynamic relating” can be described only in metaphorical or analogical ways. The nature of human creatures’ “dynamic relating” to God, on the other hand, is a function of finite, i.e., profoundly conditioned, human reality and capacities, and their relating to God can be described in more straightforward ways. Given this distinction between two kinds of “God-relation,” there are two broad kinds of human “flourishing,” theocentrically understood. Call them respectively “type A flourishing in virtue of God’s relating to human beings,” and “type B human flourishing in virtue of human beings’ appropriate responsive relating to God.”

There may be an indefinitely large number of kinds of relations God has to human beings. Given this essay’s assumptions about God, the relations that God has to human beings and that concern us here are dynamic. They are constituted *in concreto* by God’s active relating to all that is not God, and especially, for the purposes of this essay, to human beings. Further, God’s relating to human beings is itself crosscut by another set of distinctions. It is assumed that *in concreto* there are three irreducibly different but inseparable types of the triune God’s active relation to human beings that are of fundamental theological importance: to create them, to draw them to eschatological consummation, and when they are estranged, to reconcile them to God.

Hence, inasmuch as the basis of human “type A flourishing” is God’s relating to human beings, there are three distinct varieties of “type A” human “flourishing”: flourishing in virtue of God’s relating to create, in virtue of God’s relating to draw to eschatological consummation, and in virtue of God’s relating to reconcile. The criteria by which each of the three ways in which God relates is distinguished from the other two lie in the concrete way in which God goes about “relating.” That is, they lie in the specific

way God is at once “other than” and “intimately involved with” human beings in each of the three basic ways of relating. Hence the criteria of what counts as human flourishing in virtue of each of these three basic ways in which God relates to human beings also lie in the peculiar way in which God is at once “other than” and “intimately involved with” the human beings in each of the three ways in which God actually relates to them *in concreto*.

The second kind of “God relation” is constituted by human beings’ relating to God. There is an indefinitely large number of classes of this kind of relation. Granted that human beings have a distinctive and complexly interrelated array of distinctive capacities and powers, our interest in the second sense of “God relation” focuses on human beings’ ways of relating to God in their exercise of all their powers. Whether or not they are consciously intended as responses to God’s ways of relating to them, human beings’ exercise of their powers in the context of God’s threefold relating to them can be assessed as to their appropriateness to the fact that God has “already” (a logical, not chronological priority) related to them in three distinct ways, as though willy-nilly they were responding to God’s ways of relating to them.

Human “type B” flourishing lies in this second kind of “God relation,” i.e., in the ways in which human beings relate actively to God. Such relating divides into three distinct types of flourishing in response to God’s ways of relating to them: flourishing in virtue of appropriate response to God’s relating to create, in virtue of appropriate response to God’s relating to draw to eschatological consummation, and in virtue of appropriate response to God’s relating to reconcile. I propose to characterize the three generally as, respectively, relating to God responsively, and thus flourishing, in faith, in

hope, and in love. The criteria of what count as the “adequate” responses to God’s threefold relating in which human beings flourish (“type B”) lie in the details of the peculiar ways in which God is at once “other than” and “intimately involved with” human beings in each of the three ways in which God actually relates to them *in concreto*.

5. Human Flourishing and God’s Relating to Create

Human beings flourish (“type A” flourishing) simply in virtue of God’s relating to them creatively, regardless of what they believe, say, feel, or do. Simply in virtue of God’s ongoing relating to create them, human beings flourish as the “glory of God,” to use Irenaeus’s phrase, simply by being the creatures they are. This is probably the most counterintuitive sense of human flourishing. Nonetheless, it is warranted by an understanding of God’s creativity as inherently expressive of the divine life that is God’s “glory” in the strict sense of the term. As Donald Evans pointed out long ago,¹² Old Testament Hebrew terms usually translated in English as “glory,” especially *kabod*, are often used with “expressive” force in connection with God’s relating to create. Used this way, “glory of God” has three different but related kinds of logical force in different contexts.

“Glory” is an “inner divine quality.”¹³ This is the first and “strict” sense of “glory of God.” As the “glory” of the “living God,” “glory” often particularly characterizes the quality of God’s “life.” The “glory” of God’s life is its intrinsic unconditional and unsurpassable value and dignity, value and dignity that is not a function of God’s effect on or utility for any reality other than God. As unconditional and unsurpassable dignity

¹² Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (London: SCM, 1963), esp. pp. 174–204.

¹³ Evans, p. 175.

and value, its “glory” makes God’s life “jealous,” distancing, i.e., excluding and relativizing, every possible alternative claimant to the status “unconditional and unsurpassable value.” Correlatively, as unconditional and unsurpassable dignity and value, its “glory” makes God’s life “attractive,” i.e., desirable and (in one sense of the term) “good,” drawing every reality to which God relates creatively toward God. Thus in relating creatively God is related to creatures in a way that is at once radically “other” than they and intimately “involved” in them, drawing them toward God’s glory.

In a second and derivative sense, the terms of God’s creative relating, i.e., “the creatures,” are themselves expressions of God’s “glory” precisely in their finitude. “God glorifies the world” means that the world of creatures just is itself “the glory” of God. Human creatures in particular flourish (“type A”) in being the “glory of God” in this sense of the phrase. “God is glorified” in creatures’ sheer existence *as* creatures of God. Conceived and experienced precisely as creatures, they are experienced as the (derivative) glory of God in their here-and-now quotidian finitude, not in respect either to a “glorious” paradisiacal past that transcends the present nor in respect to a “glorious” eschatological future that transcends the present. Of course they may well be, and generally are, conceived and experienced in abstraction from God’s creative relating to them. In that case they are conceived and experienced in abstraction from their concretely actual reality, to which God’s creative relating is essential, and so in abstraction from their (derivative) property of glorifying God.

Each creature flourishes (“type A”) in the sense of “blossoming” insofar as it manifests the “glory” of the God who relates to it creatively. This is one kind of human flourishing. Human flourishing in this sense of the term admits of many variations

because actual concrete human beings vary so widely in the capacities and powers, and their relative degrees of strength, that each actually has here and now. Each human creature *as* related to creatively by God flourishes as the glory of God here and now simply as the concrete creature she or he actually is with the set of capacities and powers she or he actually has here and now. The meaning of “human flourishing” in this sense of the term is relative to the concrete particularity of each human creature. It is not measured by its degree of approximation to any ideal standard of the “perfect” human specimen and his (sic) “perfect” set of capacities and powers, neither pre-fall Adam nor Christ. For all of its variability, human creatures’ flourishing *as* the “glory of God” is part of the theological warrant for the judgment that human beings are of unconditional value, a dignity deserving unqualified respect such that they must be treated as a good in itself, an end and never only a means to other ends.

This is the most counterintuitive sense of human flourishing, theocentrically understood as the “glory of God,” because it entails the claim that in this sense a human being “flourishes” as the (derivative) “glory of God” simply in virtue of God’s relating to it creatively even if it is most extremely unwell, biologically, psychologically, socially, or culturally ill, wounded, broken and in excruciating, personality-destroying suffering. Two points must be kept in mind, however. First, the concrete way in which a human creature flourishes in this sense of the term, i.e., as the “glory of God” purely in virtue of God’s creative relating to it, is relative to whatever capacities and powers it actually exercises here and now, no matter how diminished or even extinguished its capacities and powers may be, but it is not a function of the creatures’ exercising those capacities and powers. Second, a human creature’s “flourishing” as (derivatively) the “glory of God” partly

grounds the conviction that it has a dignity that deserves unconditional respect no matter how “diminished” it may be.

This leads into the second broad kind of human flourishing (“type B” flourishing). It is grounded in the second sense of the phrase “God related,” namely, human beings’ own relating to God in response to God’s relating creatively to them. Insofar as they are conceived and experienced as manifestations of the “glory of God,” creatures, including human creatures, are what Evans calls “impressive Observables”¹⁴ (sic). They are “impressive” in that, insofar as they are they conceived and experienced *as* the creaturely “glory of God,” they tend to evoke a human response to them of acknowledgement of God as glorious. To the extent that it is appropriate, such response expresses the “glory of God.”

Human beings flourish (“type B”) in appropriate human responses to God’s relating creatively. Such responses are enactments of faithful practices, where “faith” in God is understood, following H. Richard Niebuhr,¹⁵ as at once trusting God as the ground of their being and value and being loyal to God’s own project, namely, all that to which God relates creatively. Human creatures’ responses to God’s relating creatively are inappropriate when they in fact enact trust in something other than God as the ground of their being and value (say, their observance of conventional standards of good citizenship, good parenting, good neighborliness, an admirable life-project, outstanding achievements, etc.), or are disloyal to God’s creatures’ well-being (say, by neglecting, hoarding, or degrading them), or a combination of the two. Inappropriate human responses to God’s creative relating are deformities of faith. They are one form sin takes.

¹⁴ Evans, p. 175.

¹⁵ *Radical Monotheism* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), pp. 16–23.

On the other hand, appropriate responses in faith to God's creative relating constitute one way in which human creatures flourish, both in the sense of having themselves in hand in a certain way, i.e., thriving, and in the sense of nurturing others' flourishing, i.e., blossoming.

Thus in addition to flourishing ("type A") as the "glory of God" purely in virtue of God's relating to them creatively, human beings flourish ("type B") in enactments of practices of faith that glorify God as they relate to God in response to God's relating to create them, including ways in which they relate to fellow human creatures and to their shared creaturely contexts so as to be loyal to their well-being. Practices of faith, i.e., of trust in God as the ground of human beings' reality and value and as loyalty to God's own project (the creation), are enacted by the exercise of whatever capacities and powers, and in whatever degree of strength, a given human being happens to have. Hence what it means in practice for that human being to "flourish" ("type B") is relative to the particular set of capacities and powers he or she has. In every case of enactments of practices expressive of faith as trust in God as the ground of their reality and value, human beings flourish in the sense of "blossom" in freedom from the multiple forms of bondage with which they are oppressed when they trust instead in their own achievements, or the support and evaluations of others, or the life-long project of actualizing themselves, to ground their reality and value. And they flourish in the sense of "thrive" in that they "have themselves in hand" precisely by handing themselves over in trust in God to ground their reality and value. So too, in every case of enactments of practices expressive of faith as loyalty to God's own project, human beings flourish in the sense of "blossom" in interactions with fellow creatures that sustain and nurture their

well-being and the well-being of their shared worlds, to which God faithfully relates creatively. Since they are integral parts of those worlds, the interactions in which they “blossom” also sustain and nurture their own well-being (one loves one’s neighbor “as oneself”). Far from negating one’s own well-being, “type B” human flourishing in faith as loyalty to God’s own project entails enactments of practices making for one’s well-being. One’s “type B” flourishing, however, does not consist in achieving or enjoying well-being. On the contrary, inasmuch as it lies in responding appropriately to God in enactments of faith in God’s relating creatively, it is compatible with severe ill health and intense suffering.

It should be noted that on this construal of the upshot of the Christian claim that God relates *creatively* to all that is not God, history makes no difference to human “type A” flourishing. The created realm may be conceived as an unimaginably vast and complex dynamic network of interactions among finite creatures. A very great deal “happens.” Both creatures and the many ways in which they interact change in innumerable ways, both small and great. The changes seem to be unidirectional and cannot be reversed. We seem to have some grasp of the dynamics of patterns of something like evolutionary development through those changes at both the cosmic level and the level of forms of life. In one sense of the term “history” this patterned movement of change across time may be called “natural history.” The inherent finitude of creatures brings with it the possibility of the ultimate *finis*, not only of individual creatures but also of the natural history of the creaturely realm as such. The Christian theological claim that all of this is radically dependent on God for its very reality and value brings with it the further claim that God is faithfully committed to the well-being of the creaturely realm for as long as it

exists. What is urged here, however, is that this claim about God's commitment to the well-being of the creaturely realm does not entail the claim that creation will never terminate. God's commitment to its well-being need not entail with necessity that creation will not have a *finis*. Moreover, it does not entail with necessity that creation has a *telos* which is actualized in and through creation's unidirectional "evolutionary" history of cosmic and life-form changes. It does not entail that that history has a "meaning" which lies beyond itself in a goal that is actualized by a process which is worked out through that history. Rather, creation's "meaning" as a whole is its value as that in whose creating God delights (Proverbs 8:30) for its own sake in and of itself, and not for the sake of something beyond it. Creatures, and creation as some kind of whole, including human creatures, flourish as the glory of God (one form of "type A" flourishing) simply in being creatures, i.e., in virtue of God's relating to them creatively. Their flourishing does not lie in the actualization of some state of affairs or value through their histories as creatures. That history makes no difference to this form of their "type A" flourishing.

On the other hand, on this construal of the upshot of the Christian claim that God relates creatively to all that is not God, history does make a difference to human creatures' "type B" flourishing in their own active relating to God in appropriate responses to God's creative relating to them. Here "history" is used in the sense of the narrative of the shaping of human creatures' quotidian personal identities within the histories of the social contexts of those lives. Their personal identities are "who" (rather than "what") each of them concretely is. These personal identities are constituted by what they do, what they undergo, and how they respond to what they undergo in their interactions with fellow creatures. They are shaped in many ways. The theological claim

made here is that, more fundamental than their quotidian identities, human beings have *basic* identities. One aspect of their basic personal identities is decisively shaped by the concrete ways in which they respond, whether appropriately or inappropriately, to God's relating to them creatively. It is only *as* the concrete quotidian personal identity each human being is in community with others that that human being may flourish (or not) appropriately (or inappropriately) in *faithful* responses ("type B" flourishing) to God's relating creatively. Here a "history" in one sense of the term makes all the difference.

6. Human Flourishing and God's Relating to Consummate Eschatologically

Human beings also flourish simply in virtue of God's relating to them to draw them to eschatological consummation, regardless of what they believe, say, feel, or do. The canonical Gospels present Jesus' ministry as a proclamation in word and action of the imminent inbreaking of God's long-promised eschatological rule. Arguably their accounts of the crucified Jesus' resurrection appearance construe those appearances as the concrete way in which God inaugurates fulfillment of that promise. The same accounts, including Acts as the second half of Luke, and reflections by the Apostle Paul on the implications of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection for the life of communities of Christian faith, make clear their judgment that while fulfillment of God's promised eschatological reign has actually been inaugurated it is not yet fully actualized. The promise of God's eschatological rule is open-ended. Not only do the Gospels' accounts refuse any timetable for the fulfillment of the promise, the Gospels' accounts also offer very little by way of description of the content of the promised eschatological rule of God. The highly metaphorical rhetoric of the accounts strongly suggests that with the inauguration of fulfillment of the promise in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus,

human creatures are being drawn toward a future participation of the distinctive relation Jesus has with the One he calls “Father.” This rhetoric seems to assume further that location in something analogous to social and physical contexts is essential to the human beings to whom such rule is promised, so that full actualization of eschatological consummation is inherently communal and includes a “new creation,” a “new heaven and earth.” Moreover, it suggests that eschatologically transformed human communal life is marked by reversal of unjust power arrangements and relations, by unbroken interpersonal communion, and by unqualified joy. That, however, is at most an outline of characteristics of the not-yet-full actualization of eschatological consummation, not of the lived-worlds in which it is now actually inaugurated.

Because our concern is to explore a theocentric account of human flourishing here and now, our concern is not with the situation of those whose eschatological consummation is fully actualized but with the situation of human beings who are now being drawn toward eschatological consummation by the actual inauguration of fulfillment of the promise of God’s eschatological reign but for whom that promise is not yet fully actualized. It is a situation marked by tension and ambiguity. God’s eschatological rule is not in continuity with human creatures everyday lived-worlds, as though it had evolved out of cultural and political resources that have been developed through human history. Rather, as it is commonly characterized in recent theology, in the resurrection of Jesus God’s eschatological reign has been “proleptically” intruded into the quotidian human lived-worlds that are constituted by God’s creative relating. The actual inauguration of God’s promise to draw creatures to eschatological consummation is not logically or ontologically necessitated by God’s creative relating. It is a gift freely given

to the finite quotidian. It does not presuppose that creatures are estranged from God. It is “grace” relative to what God relates to creatively, but not relative to what is estranged from and hostile to God. (That is another sense of “grace.”) It is not an antidote to sin, nor is it a release from creaturely finitude. Although its actual inauguration may be reflected in creaturely lived-worlds in occasional communities and events that are “parables” of God’s eschatological rule, the inauguration of God’s fulfillment of the promise of eschatological consummation does not “transform” those lived-worlds. The two are constantly in tension.

Nonetheless, human creatures flourish (“type A”) simply by virtue of this grace, i.e., simply by virtue of living between the “now actually inaugurated” and the “not yet fully actualized” glory of the eschatological kingly rule of God and being drawn toward the latter. Related to by God in two concurrent ways, they flourish in being bound for (eschatological) glory as they also flourish in a different way in being related to by God creatively. Human beings flourish in this way within lived-worlds that they experience as deeply ambiguous, both because of the tensions between their being related to by God creatively and being related to by God drawing them to eschatological consummation, and because of the tension between the “now actually inaugurated” and “not yet fully actualized” eschatological consummation. Hence their “type A” flourishing is unavoidably coincident with experience of an array of social, cultural, emotional, and intellectual confusions that persistently erode and undermine their sense of well-being.

Human beings also flourish in a second, “type B,” way in responding appropriately to the concrete way in which God relates to draw them to eschatological consummation. Appropriate human responses to God’s relating in this way are enactments of hopeful

practices, where “hope” is understood as hope in God’s relating proleptically in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus to inaugurate fulfillment of the long-standing promise of the advent of God’s eschatological rule. Hopeful practices seek to be signs in human creatures’ ambiguous quotidian lived-worlds that show, contrary to much evidence that those lived-worlds offer no ground for hope, that by virtue of God’s inauguration of the fulfillment of the promise of God’s eschatological reign they are nonetheless hopeful contexts for human flourishing. Always in particular concrete circumstances, they are practices that seek, for example, to liberate human creatures from various types of unjust oppression, to make arrangements of social and cultural power more just, to end hostilities and to reconcile antagonists, to create communities marked by genuine communion. They are practices that seek to discern where there are concrete events, social movements, and living communities that are such “parables” of God’s eschatological rule, to celebrate them as such, and to participate in them.

There are two major types of criteria by which to assess whether concrete enactments of hopeful practices are indeed adequate as human responses in hope to God’s relating to draw all else to eschatological consummation. First, they are practices that express a hope that is grounded in, responsive specifically to, and thus shaped by the concrete *way* in which God inaugurates fulfillment of the promise of eschatological consummation, i.e., in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. They are not optimistic practices that are grounded in the assessment that sufficient resources are at hand to change the world for the better, and perhaps also that a reliable ideology is in hand to explain how to go about changing the world for the better. Hopeful practices, on the other hand, do not “build the kingdom.” They are instead responses to God’s own way of relating proleptically to

inaugurate long-promised eschatological consummation. Second, hopeful practices are appropriate only when their enactments hold in tense balance response to both the now actual inauguration of God's eschatological rule and the not-yet of its full actualization. They may neither be triumphalist, an inappropriate response to the "not yet," nor futurist-utopian, an inappropriate response to the "now actual." Inadequate responses to God's concrete way of relating to draw all else to eschatological consummation are deformities of hope and, in addition to deformities of faith, are a second form sin takes. On the other hand, appropriate responses in hope to God's relating to consummate eschatologically constitute "type B" human flourishing, both in the sense of having themselves in hand in a certain way as they enact such practices—i.e., they thrive—and in the sense in their enactments of such practices they nurture others' well-being—i.e., they blossom.

It should be noted that on this construal of the upshot of the Christian claim that God relates to draw all that is not God to *eschatological consummation*, history itself makes no difference to human "type A" flourishing. That is not because "history" has no "meaning." Here "history" is used in the broad sense of the story of the successive creation and dissolution of human societies, with their cultures, arrangements of political, economic, and social powers, and their interactions with one another. It is a story in which a hugely complex network of things happen in human societies and in the societies' interactions across time. And "meaning" is used in the sense of "having value in virtue of a valued *telos*" for all that happens in and to human societies across time, a *telos* that is somehow actualized through those happenings. Considered theocentrically, however, it is precisely God's relating to human history in a promise to draw it to an eschatological consummation that gives human history "meaning." History may be said

to be “going somewhere,” to have a valued *telos*, not in virtue of dynamics inherent in “history” itself that drive it toward progressive realization of an innate goal, but in virtue of the blessing or gift of God’s relating to it to draw it to eschatological consummation. This distinct way in which God relates to all that is not God by itself constitutes a second form of “type A” human flourishing. The unpredictable changes for better or worse, the persistent traditions and institutions, the creativity and destructiveness, the occasional genuine *novum*, that make up human history in the broad sense of “history” intended here, are *that which* is being drawn to eschatological consummation. Their here-and-now condition of being drawn to eschatological consummation is a form of “type A” flourishing. Granted, they have to occur for there to be anything to flourish in this way. Their history, in the sense of the term intended here, is the necessary condition of their “type A” flourishing. But because God’s promise to draw all else to eschatological consummation has actually been inaugurated in resurrection of the crucified Jesus but is not yet fully actualized, the *relation* of the happenings that make up human history to the *telos* that is being actualized is itself inherently ambiguous: On one hand this *telos* is not being actualized by dynamics inherent to history itself, and in fact seems regularly to be resisted by history’s dynamics. On the other hand, history’s meaning-giving *telos* is being actualized in and through the happenings that make up history precisely in their concrete particularities. Nonetheless, precisely because history does not ground its own “type A” flourishing, the concrete human social happenings that make up history (in the sense of “history” intended here) make no difference to the *fact* that they flourish in just this way.

On the other hand, on this construal of the upshot of the Christian claim that God relates to all that is not God to draw it to eschatological consummation, human history

does make a difference to human creatures' "type B" flourishing in their relating to God in appropriate responses to God's relating to consummate them eschatologically. The histories of the social contexts of human creatures' lives profoundly shape the quotidian personal identities that the creatures construct by all they do, all they undergo, and how they respond to what they do and undergo. Their personal identities are "who" (rather than "what") each of them concretely is. In large part these quotidian personal identities are made the concrete particular identities they are by the histories of the social contexts with which human creatures interact and within which they constitute their personal identities. It is *as* just those quotidian identities in all their particularity that they are drawn to eschatological consummation. The theological claim made here is that, more fundamental than their quotidian self-constituted personal identities, persons' *basic* identities are decisively shaped by the concrete ways in which they respond, whether appropriately or inappropriately, to God's relating to draw them to eschatological consummation. It is only *as* the concrete quotidian personal identity each human being is in community with other creatures that a human being may flourish (or not) in appropriately (or inappropriately) *hopeful* responses ("type B" flourishing) to God's relating creatively. And the "histories" of the social contexts within which they constitute quotidian personal identities who respond to God's relating in hope (or do not) makes immense differences in who it is that does or does not flourish in responsive hope.

7. Human Flourishing and God's Relating to Reconcile

Finally, human beings flourish ("type A" flourishing) simply in virtue of God's relating to them to reconcile them to God when they are estranged from God, regardless of what they believe, say, feel, or do. If the canonical Gospels' accounts of the crucified

Jesus' resurrection appearances may be taken as accounts of the concrete way in which God relates to inaugurate fulfillment of the promise of eschatological consummation in God's kingly rule, it is also the case that their accounts of the life, ministry, betrayal, trial, passion, and crucifixion of Jesus, who then appears to his disciples as one "risen," are framed as accounts of the concrete and very odd way in which God relates to reconcile human beings who are estranged from God. The relation between the two ways in which God relates is not symmetrical. God's relating in and through the entire trajectory of the life of Jesus to reconcile presupposes God's relating in the same way to draw to eschatological consummation. God's relating to draw to eschatological consummation, however, does not presuppose estrangement. As we noted above, it is "grace" in relation to God's relating creatively in that it is not logically or ontologically necessitated by God's relating creatively. God's relating to reconcile, on the other hand, *does* presuppose estrangement. Hence God's relating to reconcile is "grace" in the radical and proper sense of the term: God's relating to human beings in the face of and *despite* their rejection of God's relating to them and their refusal to relate appropriately to God. It is *agape* incarnate, concretely enacted in and through the entire movement of the particular bodily life of Jesus of Nazareth. This is *agape* in the strict sense.

As narrated in the canonical Gospels' accounts, in and through the entire movement of Jesus' life God relates to reconcile estranged human beings in a double way: by entering into solidarity with them as one among them in the midst of the drift toward ultimate disintegration that is the ultimate consequence of estrangement; and concurrently, by placing estranged human beings within the context of the nonestranged and, indeed, uniquely intimate relation Jesus has with the One he calls "Father," so that

even as estranged they are placed in the status and dignity vis à vis God of those who are, we might say, “structurally” reconciled to God. That is, by relating to estranged human beings in this odd way, God reconciles them to God “while they are yet sinners” (Romans 5:8) by making their objective condition and status vis à vis God to be, as the Apostle Paul sometimes says, a condition and status they have “in Christ.” Being in that condition and status defines who they are: Those who are reconciled to God despite their estrangement from God. In that status, simply by virtue of God’s relating to them in this peculiar way, estranged human beings flourish (“type A” flourishing) in that, freed from the self-destructive consequences of estrangement, they “have themselves in hand,” i.e., they “thrive.”

Human beings also flourish in a second, “type B,” way in responding appropriately to the concrete way in which God relates to reconcile them to God. Appropriate human responses to God’s relating to reconcile in the concrete way of *agape* incarnate are enactments of practices of love where, following the double love commandment, human responsive “love” is both love to God and love to neighbor, and “love to neighbor” is understood through the lens of the parable of the Good Samaritan as “love as neighbor.” Inasmuch as a human practice is a socially established cooperative human activity, these practices of love to God and love as neighbor are fundamentally communal. In their case the “community” comprises all those who acknowledge that, in relating by way of incarnate *agape* to reconcile them, God has already, i.e., preveniently, placed all human creatures as a “body” in the situation and status vis à vis God characterized as being “in Christ.” Solitary enactments of these practices are possible of course, but only as parasitic on their fundamentally communal nature. Practices of love to God and love as neighbor

are two interrelated sets of responses that are appropriate to God's incarnate *agape* insofar as they reflect God's *agape* indirectly.

Enactments of human practices of love “reflect” incarnate *agape*'s enactment of God's passionate desire to be in communion with human creatures in a solidarity with them as one among them even when they are estranged from God, one another, and themselves, even when communion with them entails solidarity with them in the consequences to them of their estrangements. Accordingly, human beings flourish (“type B” flourishing) in enactments of practices of love to God expressive of human passionate desire for communion with God, and in enactments of practices of love for neighbor expressive of a human passionate desire for communion with fellow human creatures in solidarity with them in the midst of the consequences of their shared estrangements. “Passionate desire” is not to be construed as an episodic feeling. Nor is it an abiding mood that gives a certain affective color to acting and thinking across a period of time. Rather, a “passion” is a long-lasting preoccupation that engages the psychosomatic whole of a human being and defines the shape of its life by orienting it and its energies to the object of the passion. To that object a passion subordinates and orders all other interests, pursuits, personal relations, energies and activities. Hence a passion does not episodically interrupt or color one's life; it orders it and gives it shape. One is “possessed” or “occupied” by it. It is to will one thing.

As appropriate responses to God's relating in incarnate *agape* in order to reconcile, however, enactments of both kinds of human practices of love can only *indirectly* “reflect” incarnate *agape*'s enactment of God's passionate desire to be in communion with human creatures because the human enactors of the practices have the condition and

status they have “in Christ,” namely, the status of estranged human creatures “structurally” reconciled to God. That status yields criteria by which to assess the adequacy of human responses to God’s relating to reconcile.

For example, in regard to love to God: Enactments of such practices may be considered as enactments of practices of worship in a broad sense. Human love to God cannot directly reflect God’s incarnate *agape* for estranged human beings because, unlike God’s love, human love to God is not “in spite of” anything. Whereas God’s desire for communion with estranged human creatures is the ground of their desirability in the midst of their estrangement rather than a response to their desirability—indeed is “in spite of” their undesirability in their estrangement and hostility—creatures’ desire for communion with God is nothing but a response to God’s goodness, and is born of need. In addition, human love to God cannot directly reflect God’s incarnate *agape* because, whereas God is self-determined to “assume humanity” in incarnate *agape*, living as one among human beings, human creatures are incapable in virtue of both their creatureliness and their estrangement of “assuming divinity” by sheer self-determination. Their practices of love to God must be practices of love to God as God present among them in *agape*, incarnate as one of them. It is only as they are “in Christ” that they enact practices of love to God. Accordingly, practices of love to God that patronize God in their casualness, inconstancy, and arbitrariness, as though their enactments did God a favor—perhaps the favor of attributing (after due and disinterested consideration) significant value to God—and practices of love to God, in whose enactments estranged human beings seek to escape their creaturely finitude and be transferred to “the realm of the divine,” moving “beyond” their status “in Christ,” must both be considered inappropriate

responses to God's relating to reconcile estranged human beings to God. Such inadequate responses to God's concrete way of relating in incarnate *agape* to reconcile are deformities of love to God and, in addition to deformities of faith and of hope, are yet another form sin takes.

So too, for example, in regard to practices of love as neighbor to fellow human creatures: Enactments of such practices aim at sustaining, strengthening, and consoling fellow human creatures' suffering under the consequences of their estrangements and at nurturing their flourishing as ones "structurally" reconciled. Because human beings are inherently social creatures, and furthermore "in Christ" are "one body," these aims of practices of love as neighbor also entail aiming at changing unjust social arrangements that deepen their suffering under the effects of their estrangements and constrain their flourishing as already reconciled human creatures. But human love as neighbor cannot directly reflect God's incarnate *agape* for fellow estranged human beings because, unlike God's love, estranged human beings' love as neighbor cannot reconcile fellow estranged human beings to God, to themselves, or to one another. They are in no position to reconcile anyone. It is only as equally estranged human creatures that they can enact practices expressive of passionate desire for communion with fellow estranged human beings. It is only in the midst of shared consequences of their common estrangements, and not as ones who stand outside those consequences, that they can enact practices expressive of passionate desire to be in communion with fellow human beings by entering into solidarity with them. Furthermore, it is only as fellow human beings who are *already*, "in Christ," structurally reconciled estranged human creatures that they can relate to fellow human beings in enactments of practices of love as neighbor.

Accordingly, enactments of practices of love as neighbor must be assessed as inappropriate responses to God's relating in incarnate *agape* when: They presume to "save" estranged fellow human creatures; or the practices assume that love as neighbor consists in those who are already "structurally" reconciled to God "bringing" fellow human creatures who are not yet structurally reconciled into the status "in Christ" in which they too will become reconciled; or the practices aim to establish reconciliation with fellow human beings by "forgiving" them in order to create reconciliation, rather than forgiving them as an acknowledgement that both they and their fellows have already been reconciled; or the practices construe hostile others as merely enemies, and not as human creatures who are already reconciled to God by God; or the practices assume that enactors of love-as-neighbor necessarily know best what would count as genuine solidarity with fellow human beings in their particular concrete circumstances. Such inadequate responses to God's concrete way of relating to reconcile by way of incarnate *agape* are deformities of love to God—one type of a third form of sin.

It should be noted that, unlike the construals outlined above of the implications of the Christian claims that God relates to all that is not God both creatively and to draw it to eschatological consummation, on this construal of the Christian claim that God relates to *reconcile* all that is not God by way of incarnate *agape* if it is estranged from God, history does make a decisive difference to human "type A" flourishing. Here "history" and "meaning" are used in the same broad senses in which they are used in section 6 above. The theological claim made here is that God's relating to reconcile takes the odd form of the incarnation of *agape* in and through a particular human life in history. This distinct way in which God relates to all that is not God by itself constitutes a third form of

“type A” human flourishing. The history in and with which it occurs has “meaning” precisely (as outlined at the end of section 6 above) because it is blessed, i.e., gifted, (whether or not it is estranged from God) with the promise of a valued *telos* (eschatological consummation) whose fulfillment is actually inaugurated in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and whose not-yet full actualization is worked out in and through history. Although the actual inauguration of the fulfillment of this promise occurs within history, the promise itself is not an historical event. In contrast to that, the particular human life of Jesus of Nazareth in and through which God concretely relates to reconcile estranged human beings is an historical event. In all that Jesus does and undergoes, God enters into solidarity with estranged human beings on their own terms as one of them in the full consequences of their estrangement from God to draw them into the uniquely close relation Jesus has with the One he calls “Father.” By God’s solidarity with them in incarnate *agape*, estranged human creatures are resituated into what we may call their “structural reconciliation” with God. Being placed in this situation by God’s concretely relating to reconcile them in this particular and very odd way simply is one more form of their “type A” flourishing. The historical occurrence of the particular human life in which God relates to reconcile is essential to this type of human flourishing.

In addition, on this construal of the upshot of the Christian claim that God relates to all that is not God to reconcile it, history makes a great difference to estranged human creatures’ “type B” flourishing in their relating to God in appropriate responses to God’s relating to reconcile them to God. By the concrete way in which God relates to reconcile, estranged human beings are resituated in a “structural reconciliation” with God simply as

the particular quotidian personal identities that they are. Their personal identities are “who” (rather than “what”) each of them concretely is. Their respective histories within the contexts of the histories of the societies in which they live decisively shape each of their personal identities in unique ways. History makes profound differences in who each of them concretely is. Despite the uniqueness of each quotidian personal identity, however, they all have in common that all of their quotidian personal identities are profoundly deformed in one way or another in consequence of their estrangement from God. It is *as* the particular deformed personal identities they are, and not apart from their deformed quotidian personal identities, that they are reconciled to God. The theological claim made here is that, more fundamental than their quotidian self-constituted and deformed personal identities, one aspect of human beings’ *basic* personal identities is decisively shaped by the concrete ways in which they respond, whether appropriately or inappropriately, to God’s relating reconcile them to God. But the deforming consequences of the history of their estrangement from God and fellow creatures are not eliminated by their being “structurally reconciled” to God. It is only *as* the concrete, quotidian, structurally reconciled *estranged* personal identity that each human being is in community with others that a human being may flourish (or not) appropriately (or inappropriately) in *loving* responses (“type B” flourishing) to God’s relating to reconcile. Not only the historically particular human life of Jesus in and through which God’s reconciling *agape* is incarnate, but also the concrete historically particular ways in which structurally reconciled estranged human creatures respond to God’s relating to them in reconciling incarnate *agape* make all the difference in *who* it is that concretely flourishes (“type B” flourishing) in relating to God in love (or does not).

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To summarize: Understood theocentrically, “human flourishing” is said to happen in many senses that fall into two broad types. In the first (“type A”), simply in virtue of God’s relating to them in three different ways, human beings flourish in several senses of the term. In each sense of the term, human beings flourish as the particular concrete human beings they are with whatever capacities and powers they have, not in abstraction from or rejection of those capacities and powers. In the second broad type of senses of flourishing (“type B”), human beings flourish when they relate to God in enactments of practices that are, objectively speaking, appropriate responses to God’s ways of relating to them. Enactments of such practices, in which human beings flourish in this second way, engage and exercise the entire array of capacities and powers that human beings have as psychosomatic wholes, rather than denying or diminishing them. Moreover, while “type B” flourishing does not consist in achieving or enjoying well-being, and is consistent with severe unhealth and intense suffering, it necessarily entails the investment of human beings’ capacities and powers in enactment of a very large array of practices that actively make for the enhancement of the well-being (construed in terms of “health” broadly understood) of fellow creatures and their shared everyday lived-worlds and work against their diminishment and negation. Thus “human flourishing” understood in terms of God’s relating to human beings and human beings’ responsively relating back to God in ways appropriate to God’s ways of relating to them does not entail a diminishing or negating of human capacities and powers, nor does it entail privileging of human unhealth, weakness, and suffering.