

Love as Redemptive and Creative Energy: A Christian Perspective

*Young-Ho Chun*¹

A Self-exile in Alien Culture

In 1995 at a youth conference, I met a 16 year-old girl, a bright high school student who came to the United States at the age of 5 with her three older siblings, as their parents emigrated from South Korea. Their parents reasoned with them that they came in order to secure a better education for their future. Both mother and father earlier completed their college education. The father had already secured a well paying job in Seoul. When the family immigrated to the United States of America, no one in the family had a functional proficiency in English. Every body had to do a fast learning on various jobs. The first member, however, to reach the level of proficiency was “Yu-Mi” (not a real name). She is now a maturing teenage girl, intelligent, sensitive, yearning for recognition and acceptance. Indeed, she is most readily recognized by others among the family members, since she speaks English virtually with little trace of an accent. And BUT....

As Yu-Mi went through the public school system from kindergarten to high school, she noticed that white blonde girls mostly attract boys’ attention. Even her own family members tended to choose such a girl as the winner of a beauty pageant. Then Yu-Mi gradually developed a silent envy—wanting to be like a white blonde. She frequently found herself trying in the bathroom to scrub herself white with a white soap. Her mother noticed this and severely chided her for spending an inordinate amount of time in the bathroom, and not devoting enough time to study. Her mother obviously surmised that Yu-Mi was too preoccupied with her vanity. She was, however, very proud of Yu-Mi excelling academically at school. In fact she was at the top of her class. She was much admired by her peers and teachers for her piano performance. She writes good poetry. She was obviously headed for one of the prestigious colleges on the East Coast. Her only abiding wish, however, was to have a different physical appearance! She feels “dis-eased” in and with her own body. But the more desperately she tried to become the other than herself, the more acutely she realized that she could not become what she yearned to be. The more resolutely she applied her will to become the “other,” the more inescapably she remained the “other” to whom she liked to be. These two “others’ would never seem possible to merge! She feels permanently *exiled* from her own desired self.

¹ **Young-Ho Chun** is Professor of Systematic Theology at Saint Paul School of Theology, Kansas City, MI, USA.

When I first heard this story from Yu-Mi, my heart sank in dark sadness. I could see that she was desperately trying to escape from herself and to become someone else. But, one cannot get out of one's own skin, so to speak! Knowing that I am a theologian and an ordained pastor, Yu-Mi literally bombarded me with questions: "Why didn't God create me as white and blonde?" "Why didn't God create me as one who can be adored by boys?" "Doesn't God love me?" "Did God really create this world that is so unfair?" "Pastors told me that 'God loves us!' What does that really mean?" "Is life worth living?" "What kind of love does Jesus really inspire us to practice in this world?" She asked these questions and many more with tears streaming down her face.

I could not then say to her anything satisfactory. What could anyone really say to her at that moment that would put her in peace with herself? What she needed was an unconditional acceptance and love—a love that no human being can truly give. She was not asking those questions for any concrete advice that would ultimately satisfy her tormented soul. All that I could do was to silently weep with her, being unable to find adequate words to express my deep sympathy with her suffering. I could only say that God does not desire her suffering; God does not want her to feel excluded and rejected. God created the world, everything and everyone in it, gazed upon it, and said, "It is good." God rather wants to embrace her, the whole of her, unreservedly.

What is significant about this story is that it reveals to us a false view, practice, and expectation of human love. It indicates that we do not have an appropriate angle to love. Love is often confused with desire, sentiment, feeling, emotion, yearning, affirmation, striving, and sex. When love is conflated with these other human sensualities, it is, as is often the case, ultimately conflated with sex. This is the sign of our time that is detached from true love. We dwell in the "Pandemie"² of sex which seems to impress our current scene. This situation further demonstrates the condition of our life as "inflation on love."³

In order to guide Yu-Mi and many like her who are mired in this maze of multiple senses of love, it is deemed important to distinguish and sift through them to find a right way to God's love that is qualitatively different from humans', i.e., authentic and fundamentally redemptive.

Now and here, albeit perhaps late, yet hopefully not too late, I want to give my theological response in a fuller manner to my friend "Yu-Mi" which I could not do in 1995 when she first confided in me her deep pain. I also hope that anyone who suffers in a similar manner from self-doubt (self-exile and self-estrangement) with a low-self-esteem may find here some clues to (re)discover

² See Julius Evola, *Metaphysik des Sexus* (Frankfurt/M.: Ullstein Verlag, 1983), originally published in Italian: *Metafisica del sesso*, 1958, cited from Werner Schüssler, "Eros and Agape," in *Theology Digest*, vol. 52, no. 1, (Spring, 2005), 27-34.

³ Bernhard Welte, *Dialektik der Liebe. Gedanken zur Phaenomenologie der Liebe und zur christlichen Naechstenliebe im technologischen Zeitalter* (Frankfurt/M, 1973), 50, quoted from Schüssler, *op. cit.*

themselves in God's unfailing love

A Clue to Self-Recovery?

According to the Christian Bible, "God is love."⁴ In the early Christian era, this probably sounded very odd and offered a radically new message to the educated Greek. For Plato such statement was philosophically untenable. The Greeks understood love in terms of *eros*. *Eros* for Plato meant being indigent: poor and wanting. But God is considered to have neither need nor want. God is "fullness" itself. Therefore God does not love. To the contrary, humans love. We lack. Hence we desire. But the Bible declares that "God is love"! In the Greek Hebrew Scripture (known often as Septuagint), the word *eros* appears only twice, and never appears in the New Testament. Among the three Greek words for love, *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*, the New Testament writers preferred the last one. This already indicates a new development in the understanding of love in the New Testament. We shall discuss more on various implications and nuances of these words later.

What does it mean to declare that God is love? It may mean among others that God does not merely love some and hate others. Since love is intrinsic to God, God does not hate nor love arbitrarily. It may also mean that love is not simply one of the many attributes of God, but the central one. Love manifests the essential nature and character of God. Love, however, is not God, even though a genuine loving may reveal one's nearness to God, or dwelling in God. Love, if it is genuinely practiced, unfolds the kind of life God inspires and upholds for us to achieve. What is amazing to this proclamation, "God is love" is that this very God is incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:17-18; cf. Phil. 2:1-11), who is "the Word," that gives life (John 6:25-27a). Jesus is the love of God *incarnate in* this world. Hence he can be encountered concretely in history; he is not a vague notion, or an idea, but is embodied in the earthly life. He was experienced by his disciples as having fully lived so that they confessed that he was the life (John 11:17-44). Here we see love and life are inseparably linked. This linkage between love and life is grounded in the reality of God incarnate. This is what is beautifully illustrated in the fourth chapter of 1 John. It further means that God's love is first "given." *God's love is not reactive but pre-active.*

Christians confess that God is the redeemer and at the same time the creator.⁵ This is our deep conviction. Many scholars maintain that Scripture

⁴ 1 John 4:8: "God is love." This indicates that love is the decisive Christian word with fundamental importance. See Pope Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter on Christian Love Deus Caritas Est*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006).

⁵ Some theologians such as Gerhard von Rad (*Theology of the Old Testament*) and Dorothee Soelle (*To Love and To Work*.) held that God is first a redeemer, and then a creator, and not the other way around. Being the creator does not necessarily demonstrate God's redemptive character. The Book of Exodus points out that God revealed Godself as the Lord in history through the act of rescuing

mightily witnesses to God who unfailingly responds to the cries of the needy and the oppressed,⁶ rescues them from dangers and redeems them as the people of God. These bespeak the mercifulness and affection of the caring God. Because God first saves, God is confessed to be the creator. When God redeems, God does not merely restore to the old order, but rather to a new possibility---not just once but repeatedly. This notion is a counter-thesis to the Greek notion of love. For them *eros* denotes want, and God is free of want. But Christians confess that *God loves not because God wants to fulfill what is lacking in Godself, but rather God's fullness in love is directed to the world.*

God is not only the creator who redeems, but also sustains all that God created and still creates. God's redemptive act recreates the lost ones in such a way that they become "better" than what they used to be. The redeemed ones may become more truly alive, if and when they acknowledge and embrace God's redemptive love as its source. This indicates that *God creates from the future*⁷, *not from the same past where God once created.* God does not use the prototype of all that were once created but rather use the proleptic type—a destiny of God's image and likeness—in light of which the present state of being is being remolded in a gradual process of perfecting.

Why did God create the world and us? Because God is love! There is no other reason besides it. Christians believe that God created the world *out of* God's love, without having any ulterior *selfish* motive or agenda. Theologians wanted to express this *freedom* of God as a state of being not dependent upon any precondition and any pre-existing constraint. As an iconic expression for this, early theological writers adopted an axiom, *creatio ex nihilo*.⁸ God created the world in love and freedom.⁹ I occasionally hear, "God created the world because He [God] was lonely." Such notion is a psychological projection. God

people (*Habiru*) out of slavery in Egypt where they were "nobody" and made them into an amphictyony, a federated people whom the Lord claimed to be God's. They now belong to God, not to the Pharaoh in Egypt and know who they are called to be. This theme is magnificently reflected in Psalm 82 where God is portrayed as the One who responds to the cries of the oppressed and the needy, and who chastised other gods for failing to do the same. This is the *locus classicus* which pinpointed the unique character of the Judeo-Christian God who differentiates Godself from the idols.

⁶ Read Psalm 82 and also the historical accounts in the Book of Exodus.

⁷ Ted Peters, *God-The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

⁸ English translation: "creation out of nothing." Here "nothing" does not stand for any ontic substance, as it has often been misinterpreted. It refers to the fact that God's creative act is not dependent upon any pre-existing thing or idea, visible or invisible. It expresses the radical freedom of God from everything other than Godself.

⁹ Karl Barth makes a magnificent characterization of God in a simple statement: God is One "who loves in freedom." See Karl Barth, "The Being of God as the One Who Loves in Freedom," in *Church Dogmatics II/1: The Doctrine of God*, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, eds. (New York and Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark International, 2004), 257. See also Karl Barth, *Here and Now*, trans. by Paul M. Van Buren (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 4.

is the Triune God, already engaged in a rich communal relationship among the three persons. God did not create the world in order to use it for quenching God's thirst for companionship. There are no "ifs" and "thens". God's love is not case-dependent. It is universally and unconditionally given. We are born into that world which was created and is being created by God in freedom and love. More specifically, we are created in the "image and likeness of God" (Genesis 1: 26). In this light we affirm that the love of God is deeply inscribed into the structure of being itself. Love precedes everything that is, since it brought into being what exists everywhere. Love has "ontological dignity" as Paul Tillich affirms it.¹⁰ Tillich also characterized love as "the moving power of life,"¹¹ life's "inner dynamics,"¹² the foundation of all social and political power structures, the "ultimate moral principle" and "the source of moral norms,"¹³ "the ultimate which is given to the finite," and the power that "rescues life from death."¹⁴

The Trinitarian expression of God: "God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit" has been used in the Christian doxology, the liturgy of the Baptism, the Lord's Supper as well as the Benediction. It was an integral part of the *Christian grammar* in worship and devotional life.¹⁵ God is not a *solitary* being, but rather a "*communal* being."¹⁶ The triune God is not alone but dynamically engaged in relationship with one another in love. The Trinity expresses an eternal exchange of love among three persons in God. This exchange is not confined to the internal relationship among the three persons, but rather extends to the whole created world in whose ongoing creation these three persons are inextricably involved in freedom and love. Love is the ontological matrix in which the three persons relate to one another. The Greek theologians used a word, *perichoresis* to characterize this intimate and reciprocal relationality among *three persons* equally participating in *one* divine reality. This is a mystery of the divine life that is being internally shared in eternity. It is in itself a mystery since it defies a linguistic exactitude both in explanation and interpretation, due to its abysmal richness in meaning. Nevertheless, it is richly experiential.

The doctrine of the Trinity corresponds to the conviction that 'God is love.' If God were a solitary being, God could not be love. Love is inherently relational. If love is a manifestation of a selfish desire—which tends to use the other to

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1954), 21.

¹¹10. *Ibid.*, 25.

¹²11. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 137.

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Morality and Beyond* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 42.

¹⁴ Alexander C. Irwin, *Eros Toward the World: Paul Tillich and the Theology of the Erotic* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg/Fortress Press, 1991), 8.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Wainwright, "Trinitarian worship" in *The New Mercersburg Review* No.2 (Autumn, 1986), 3-11; revised in Alvin F. Kimel (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 209-221.

¹⁶ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 27-65.

satisfy one's over-riding desire, then it cannot be experienced as redemptive and creative (life-giving and life-affirming). God's love must be other than or more than what we usually experience among human beings, even among the lovers. Hence the New Testament writers and editors rarely used the prevalent Greek terms, *eros* and *philia*¹⁷, for God's love and instead adopted a new term, *agape*, as we have noted above.

A Deeper Analysis and Differentiation

Libido, *eros* and *philia* are kinds of love that are usually connected with human desire. As a matter of fact, it can be said that everyone is governed by desire: nearly everyone does care about something. Nearly everyone cares about staying alive, and about avoiding severe injury, disease, hunger, various modes of distress and disorder. Nearly everyone cares about their children, their livelihoods and about how others think of them. They care about many other things. This attitude is expressed through their preference and choice making. What is implicit in these activities is that an object of human care is normally considered worthy of concern. That is why one is preferred over another. Ordinarily, love is often understood as a response to the perceived worth of the beloved. We are moved to love something, on this account, by appreciating something that is regarded to be of value. The appeal of that value is what captivates us and turns us into lovers.

These three forms of love derived from classical philosophy and theology, namely *libido/epithymia*, *philia* and *eros*. Paul Tillich rang a right chord when he wrote: "Love as *libido* is the movement of the needy toward that which fulfills the need. Love as *philia* is the movement of the equal toward union with the equal. Love as *eros* is the movement of that which is lower in power and meaning to that which is higher."¹⁸

In contrast, love as *agape* is a form of love that transcends the other three kinds of love. For Tillich, *agape* is the type of love that characterizes Divine Love. The other three kinds of love become redemptive to the extent that they are connected to the self-transcending power of *agape*. Otherwise they each may lead to the dark side of human love—its demeaning and degenerating dimension that we often see and experience. For instance, *eros* may degenerate to become merely sensual, instead of being the energy or force that would direct what is the lower, the finite and the merely temporal toward what is the higher, the infinite, and/or the eternal.

Hence *agape* is qualitatively different from other types, though connected

¹⁷ This concept, *philia*, is first encountered in Aristotle's works and has mostly been translated as "friendship love." But it should be understood more as "love between the likes or love among the peer." Hence it should be interpreted as love between or among persons. The term, *philia*, not *eros*, was used in John's Gospel as a metaphor of an intimate friendship between Jesus (hence God) and his disciples, whereby the Incarnate presence of God in the world of human affairs is signaled.

¹⁸ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 280.

with them. We get a glimpse of this quality through the love of parents for their children. As for me, for instance, I do not love my child because of some value in her. The fact is that I loved the existence (real or imagined) of my child even before she was born—even before I had any information about her personal traits or her particular merits and virtues. I doubt that any particular data about her would have had any more effect upon my love for her. The *agape* love, thus viewed, is not predicated upon the quality or worthiness of the beloved. In fact, *agape* makes a thing/individual a beloved reality or person. It brings the beloved into being. *Agape* is a *creative* power in that sense. Other forms of love primarily address themselves to the already existing thing/individual that is worthy of their attention, but *agape* brings a thing into a new reality—a change *brought into* the previous state of being. A change here does not mean that it becomes new without any relation to the previous state, but rather it brings a thing/individual into being in such a way that the untapped potentiality in the old state becomes more fully actualized to the extent that it is now new.

Other forms of love are acquisitive in nature, while *agape* is bestowal. *Agape* is not a love that loves something or someone because it or he/she is lovable or useful, but rather a thing or person becomes lovable and valuable because they are loved first. *What* is ironic in this process about the work of *agape* is that it calls the other types of love into service in that *agape* taps into the intrinsic power of each type of love—*libido*, *eros* and *philia*—as they are also already inscribed in the human nature, albeit warped due to sinful propensity. As a consequence, each of these types of love may become a formative factor in human lives. God may use all forms of life for divine purposes. To that extent, everything *can* become a medium of revelation and transformation.

The story at the beginning of this article reveals that Yu-Mi desperately tried to make herself worthy (attractive, beautiful, desirable, etc.) by becoming other to herself in the eyes of others, and not by accepting who-she-is. She was desperately trying to be ‘herself’ according to her own measure and thereby she was exiling herself from herself in the process. At the same time she was vaguely yearning for her authentic self, and looking for help by which she can find her own self. But she was misdirecting her energy and mis-directed in following the criteria prevalent in the society. She was looking for herself where she was not. She probably thought that she could find herself accepted in the playing field of *libido*, *eros* and *philia*. What she needed is to experience the true love that helps her affirming herself in spite of the forces of rejection and indifference.

*Eros*¹⁹ is often regarded as love energy operative in the relationship between

¹⁹ In Plato, *eros* is described as a movement from the separated toward the union where a separated becomes ‘complete’ by virtue of the union. See his dialogues: *The Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Phaedo* for instance. Hence it has a philosophical (ontological) significance, rather than sexual overtones as in much literature. Thus viewed, *eros* is inherently a dynamic of attracting or being attracted

man and woman, while *philia* as love among friends. The former is often related to sexual attraction, the latter often active in friendship among the equals and the peers. But Yu-Mi must open her eyes to see and realize that she has been, *already and always*, loved by God who created the world with strong affirmation and invested deeply in rescuing it from perishing.

The love of God is inherently creative, namely carries the power of bringing something-that-was-not-there-before (nothingness, non-being) into being (as something that is identifiable, relatable, nameable, and experience-able as good and beauty). It does not merely bring 'nothingness' into being something, but also under-girds as well as sub-stantiates it. The love of God is that power and primal energy which sustains the existence of what-came-into-being in time and space. The creating God is a gracious God as well. Being authentically human thus has to do with the capacity to genuinely love, i.e., giving of love for the other as inscribed in human nature. That is what human beings were meant to be—i.e., loving others without condition so that others may also become life-giving beings.

What Difference?

The very first Christians did not have to articulate a doctrine of God, since they were faithful Jews. They simply took for granted the basic tenet of the faith of Israel that there is only one God. This was in their spiritual bones, so to speak. As their belief was criticized, and consequently, needed to be defended, they had to account for the very fact of the advent of Jesus Christ, and articulate their conviction about him and his relationship to God. They were monotheists, but they could not abandon their spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ. This led to debates. If Jesus Christ was at the center of Christian worship, this had to be discussed in earnest as to his relationship with the Divine. Why Jesus, indeed?!

The Christian tradition maintains that the *love* of God is most transparently manifested and embodied in the *life* and person of Jesus of Nazareth. Whosoever came in contact with his life experienced an uncanny (holy?) presence and the work of the Spirit that drove people out of their former ambiguous lives into a *new dimension* of life. Jesus brought something new out of the old life that was held in isolation. Persons come out of oblivion to their hatred-laden rejection and exclusion of strangers and neighbors (race, ethnicity, culture, style of life and thought). Jesus' unconditional love and

to the other. It is often connected to the desire, ambition, acquisitive appetite, without which one may not have any interest in approaching the other. Hence it is essential for any relationship, even the relationship between God and human beings. But it has to be matrixed in the Divine Love that transcends the self-centered orientation. Otherwise *eros* seduces others to revolve around itself. Consequently no genuine relationship may ensue. Therefore, *agape* and *eros* should not be set in opposition against each other. Ontically they are to be in complementary relation, but ontologically *agape* should be regarded *ultimate* while *eros* as *pen-ultimate*.

acceptance radically exposed to many the unmitigated view of brokenness of their humanity; alienation and estrangement from their own true goal in life. The light of his gracious love enables them to see and discover their real state of being. From there they cry out of the authentic human relationship. This is all wrapped up in the confession that God is incarnate in Jesus Christ who was conceived in the Holy Spirit. This never puts itself in conformity to the existing order. It is certainly subversive in nature. This love is certainly what Warren Carter calls a “dangerous love.”²⁰ This kind of love would destabilize the existing societal structure and power distribution allegedly set up for the well-being of all citizens. Such destabilization would not be welcome. A threat is normally thwarted by force.

The Incarnation signifies that something is “given” prior to our experience. It also implies that something has been “given” to us in a way that we are inherently capable of experiencing and interpreting it. This “given” is correlated to the “image” of God in which we were and are being created. The image of God has two dimensions in our lives: first, it is “given” proleptically, namely it is our destiny to be the true and full image of God into which we may grow in grace. Secondly, the image of God is like the calm surface of a lake which clearly reflects the perfect shape of the moon. From the divine point of view, it is the indelible mark of being human. From the point of view of the human condition, it fluctuates, as the surface of the world is in turmoil. One is an ontological view while the other is an existential and functional view. The former commends us to accept ourselves as having being loved first. The latter shows the consequence of the former.

According to the first view, one may draw comfort that God will never abandon us but will draw us towards the final fulfillment of the image and likeness of God. According to the second view, one may say that if one is in right relationship with God, he/she is an image of God, but when the relationship is broken, the image is also broken. There may be a reminder of it through its warped form—longing for a meaningful relationship with the Ultimate, the Absolute, god, idol, some ‘Ersatz’ godhead. Nonetheless, we may never lose the trace of what is given. Emil Brunner calls it “man’s capacity for language,” which may provide humanity with a fragile “point of contact” with God.²¹ Left to our own device, we can do little in pulling ourselves towards God. Hence the gracious God permits us a sneak preview of what it is to be a true human being in Jesus Christ (the second person of the Trinity). That is the Incarnation.

This is why some Christian scholars consider Jesus Christ as an Icon of an

²⁰ See Warren Carter, “Love God, Love Neighbor. Social Vision in Matthew 22:34-40,” in *Loving God, Loving Neighbor: Ministry with Questioning Youth*, ed. by Sondra Matthaei (forthcoming in 2007), 1-2. 4; and 9. On page 7, Mr. Carter states, “to love God is to be loyal to God’s loving purposes that offer life to all people. Such love is inevitably closely connected with love for neighbor.”

²¹ Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964); also see *Natural Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1946), 23; 25; 58-59.

unambiguous expression of the divine love (*agape*). One of the important *ways* of being-in-the-world that Jesus *showed* is *his way* of interacting with people—people across all sectors in society; not just with the familiar and the clean and the acceptable, but also more importantly with the strangers, even the outcast, the despised, the sick, and the “sinners.” The Gospel stories repeatedly tell how Jesus loves God whom he calls “abba” and how he loves people in all stations. He fully embodies the passage in Deuteronomy 10:12-13²² where the commandment to love God with one’s total being: “heart...soul...mind, is issued.” Through this, one returns to oneself—a home-coming experience of peace and rest—no more wandering in the wilderness searching for oneself.

Jesus is said to be an Icon of divine love in that if you see his love, you see God’s love. As we have seen earlier, the love of God is inseparably linked with the love of one’s neighbor. Otherwise either love is not complete and not fulfilled in its intended spirit. As we can see in Psalm 82, the love of God necessarily (since it is inevitable?) involves what God loves, i.e., reaching out to the people in distress around us. The command to love God and one’s neighbor is invitation to participate in the on-going redemptive creation of the world God is lovingly engaged in. *The secular love that we are familiar with in the world is often grounded upon the value of the beloved, whereas divine love inspires us that such love makes the beloved valuable to the lover.*

This is what we repeatedly see in Scripture that God is in search of humanity who does not know how to reciprocate God’s love. God’s search for humanity is not an obsession, but rather is a gentle, caring reaching-out *in freedom and love* simply for the sake of the flourishing of the beloved. Without divine care, human’s warped arrow of love would miss the mark. As Augustine aptly characterized, a misdirected energy of love manifests the human sinful condition. In Christ one may hit the mark because its hitch-hiked ride is stable and straight to the point. God’s love is not like a philosophical love that is *disinterested love*, but is God’s ultimate concern manifested in concrete care for the well-being of the humanity. God shows in Christ that we become valuable to God as we, albeit unworthy, are first loved.

One of Jesus’ *ways* with people is his way of *hearing* them. He tells them, “Do not let your heart be troubled” (John 14:1)²³. This signals that he hears the voice of the afflicted. He is Emmanuel. He also hears their stories—really hears them. His presence with them pronounces to them, “I hear you!” A genuine “love” usually does not consist in professing, “I love you,” but rather in unconditionally accepting those who are rejected as well as those who are accepted with censor or bargain. Such acceptance of the other confers vibrant energy upon its existence. Our acceptance of others is often a result of our sifting through aspects that are being judged to be unacceptable. It is not a total

²² See also Carter’s chapter above (page 7) for his exegetical elaboration.

²³ John 14:1, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust in me.”

acceptance. It is always a conditional acceptance, never unconditional. Those who are not fully accepted feel unwelcome, subjugated, and still “isolated.”

“Hearing the other into being”²⁴ is itself an act of creative power of love (*agape*). It means unconditional and sustained attention given to the other. In this act of ‘hearing,’ ‘the other’ now emerges from the realm of voiceless invisibility. His/her ‘being’ is now in public space. It therefore explicates the love of neighbors. It takes a form of justice in the best sense of the word, since many are subject to conditions of the alienated, the estranged, the marginalized, the exploited, the excluded, the disempowered and the dehumanized. Justice is a public form of the *agapeic* love. Restoring human dignity to those who are forced to become the others or strangers to themselves is a justice. It helps those who are “exiled” from themselves return home. But this justice is ultimately rooted in the love for uniting the separated into the whole. Love of one’s neighbors must express this commitment to restoring human dignity. Jesus’ command to love one’s own enemy expresses an ultimate horizon of the universal love of God for all humanity.

Love and justice calls for the establishment of a just structure, of a society, of a system, of an organization, and of a policy in this world. In this light, we now come to realize that love is *not* to be confined to the arena of personal and private feeling and sentiment. Love practiced by many today, however, is basically framed with self-interest. Thus viewed, all human love takes on an ambiguous character from the broken nature of our lives. All forms of colonialism (national, cultural, personal) comes with a seemingly persuasive façade of “love for others”. But it is ultimately rooted in self-enhancing interest. It is foreign to making others flourish on their own terms. Relational self is construed by many these days as a “self-is-embedded-in-its-interest-laden-project,” and does not likely lie in correspondence with others’ interests. Such relationship is stifled in itself, not open to someone or something exterior. The aim of life is often sought within a secluded self, not in an interaction with the others beyond oneself. In such a case, the range of love is framed subjectively. There is no ‘transjective’²⁵ view of love. Hence my love is weightier than any other’s! Love itself should serve “me”—me alone. I am the one who determines the meaning of life and even life should exist for me. There is no space for any

²⁴ The present expression, “hearing others into being” is my own modulation of “hearing each other to speech”, discussed by Nelle Morton in “The Rising of Women’s Consciousness in a Male Language Structure,” in *Andover Newton Quarterly*, 12, no. 4 (March, 1972), 177-190, and “Bring[ing] the other person to speech” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Spiritual Care*, trans. Jay Rochelle (Fortress Press, 1985), 40. “Hearing the other into being” leads those who were muted, unheeded and thrown in on the underbelly side of the society more firmly to an ontological self-affirmation than other expressions.

²⁵ I prefer this term to the term ‘inter-subjective’ since ‘transjective’ carries with it the dynamics of moving across both ways and of moving upwards to the ‘third’ mode that is new. The ‘inter-subjective’ and reciprocity move two-dimensionally, and shifting internal furniture horizontally, not sufficiently transforming them all.

other measure. This way of thinking dries up the human spirit, since it leads to withering of the relational sap of life...

Contrary to this, God has proleptically “shown” how life should be lived and flourished through the person of Jesus the Christ. This helps us imaginatively draw a true “picture” of God in Christ—“being for other.”²⁶ This has a significant theological implication for a Christian living. I like to remind us of the monastic rule, “*lex orandi, lex credendi*”. The law of prayer is the law of faith holds true. If I use a distant and remote image to speak of God, then I will imagine that God is distant and remote. If I use an image of love to pray to God, then I will believe in a God who loves. Hence the image of God I believe in may truly reflect the kind of God I hold in my heart. That is crucial to the way my spiritual journey of faith and prayer proceeds. Is God primarily a judge or a savior for me and for the world? Do I expect God to be a ruler or lover? Is God faithful and interested in my world (hence in everybody’s world)?

A paradigmatic example may be found in the Franciscan approach to spiritual life. It shows a way to discover the love of God in the world. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) comes from the merchant class. In his early formation, he was exposed to the world, coming in contact with many different types of people—farmers, craftsmen, artists, bakers, merchants—people who worked with their hands and valued material things of the earth. Material and sensible things were not regarded by him as inferior or obstacle to spiritual journey. Francis met God of compassionate love, the God “bent over” in love in the wounds of the Crucified Christ. The God whom Francis discovered in the Cross of Jesus Christ was a God “who delights to be with the simple and those rejected by the world.”²⁷ Francis tried to find God in relation to the fragile creatureliness of the other: his neighbors and even the tiny creatures of nature. He regarded earthly life as possessing a positive potential as God’s creation. Some regard him, therefore, as “the first materialist” in the best sense of the word. For Francis, the journey of Christian life is the discovery of God at the center of human lives. Franciscan spiritual path does not regard the relationship with God as acquiring something that did not previously exist. Rather Franciscans pray that the image of God in which they are created, the God within them, will be disclosed. The encounter with Christ as other imparted to Francis a new openness and freedom. Embraced by the compassionate love of God, he was liberated within and went out to embrace others in love.

We learn from the story of Francis that God loves us as we are with our frailties, weaknesses and insecurities. He understood that while God was

²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (New York: HarperCollins, 1960 and 1978), 47-48 basically portrays Christ as “being for others.” Because Christ is radically *pro me*, Christ is radically for others.

²⁷ Thomas of Celano, “The Life of Saint Francis,” 12:31, Engl. Trans. in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, volume I. The saint, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1999), 210.

incomprehensible and ineffable, God at the same time “bent over” in love for us, in and through the Son, Jesus Christ. God is infinite in love and intimate in friendship, far beyond us yet intensely close to us. But Christian love is much more than this, that is, it encompasses all human interactions—politics, economic activities, scientific research and application, aesthetics, psychology, medical technology of healing, moral discernment and ethical deliberation, theological interpretation and visioning, and church’s care and proclamation of the Word of God against and for the world in mission and evangelism. Christian love, modeled after the love of God, concretely exemplified in Jesus Christ, is a counter-love to the presently colonizing force in our lives masqueraded as love. Jesus’ love liberates, not enslaves people. It does not make people pretend to be worthy, but instead emancipates them with an honest self-acceptance. This love of God in Jesus still inspires a lot of people to emulate it.

The *union* with God does not erase one’s own ontic being, but rather heightens the awareness of one’s own ontological dignity as “persons” in God. As the Trinity opens our vista to the difference in unity, we know that God accepts the different others and helps them fulfill in relation to each other in God. God does not reject the world even though it is radically different from God. In fact God creates human beings, that is, who are radically different from Godself! God bestows existence on others. God loves them, but does not smother them in love (Cor. 13). Love is connected with the fullness of life. It affords us the courage to be. It enables us to anticipate in confidence what is not yet. It therefore instills in us a hope, even beyond death, hence a hope of resurrection. It opens us from short-sightedness to a broader view of the world—a view as God views. It widens our horizon of life, extending beyond what is knowable.

If one is truly oriented to the “wholly Other” God, then one is derivatively sensitized and directed to the pen-ultimate “others” in this world without tailoring them to the alterity we are comfortable with. That is the life that would be richly tinged with God’s justice and love. This manifests the presence of the spirit that binds all things to a meaningful consequence.

As God emptied Godself in order to be truly with us in this world (Phil 2:1-11), we should likewise empty our prejudices, our own pet agendas, projects, value orientation, evaluative standards, etc. so that we may truly affirm and dearly love each other. That is the only way we may encounter each other in love. The true encounter in love requires each and everyone to be *vulnerable*. There should be no pre-designed defense mechanism put forward before any dialogue, encounter, meeting, loving occurs. Yu-Mi found her true identity after strenuous seeking over time. She engaged herself in a mission of the church in one of the Meso-American tribal villages where she shared the love of God exemplified in Jesus the Christ. Upon return to the U.S. she enrolled herself in one of the reputable graduate programs in the field of sociology of

religion. She is now on the faculty of the department of social sciences at one of the state universities on the East Coast.

God is God who brings into being what is not yet. What comes into being is always better than what it used to be!