



## Creative Tensions Inherent within Contemporary Ministry

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### Abstract

This paper will explore the creative tensions that inherently exist at the interface between the biblical revelation of a righteous and holy God and the lived reality of humanity created in his image, who are called to collaborate with God in his redemptive mission of personal, communal, and global reconciliation and transformation.

We will trace the creatively tensile nature of the kingdom of God as experienced on earth, particularly as portrayed in the Genesis account of creation, and see the necessity of these tensions for the growth and development of humanity in God's image. We will also explore the evidence of these elements in the incarnation and ministry of Jesus, Paul's use of the indicative-imperative dialectic, and the insights of some noted adult educators in relation to how we learn as adults.

This will be supported by one of the six transformational themes, that of Personal Bible Engagement, that emerged out of my own doctoral research with four local congregations in the Ringwood area of Melbourne, Australia. I will endeavour to show that the creative tensions inherent within the nature of both God's kingdom and human life in this world are essential for God's transformational purposes for his image bearers, and are part of the processes of collaborating with him in his mission of global reconciliation and transformation.

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### Introduction

When Jesus began his preaching ministry, he made the astounding announcement that the kingdom of God had arrived – “The time has come!” God's ‘good news’ was that

his kingdom was now open and available to humanity through his Son, Jesus Christ; which he then proceeded to demonstrate throughout the rest of his earthly ministry:

14“After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15The time has come! The kingdom of God is near! Repent and believe the good news!” (Mk. 1:14-15, NIV).

There is a radical element to this good news:

The God of love and justice had entered our world in Jesus the Son  
and is once again engaging directly and personally  
**with** the human condition from **within** the human community!

There are questions that this announcement provokes:

- If Jesus was announcing the time of the kingdom’s arrival, where had it been prior to the announcement?

And the corollary:

- Had there ever been a time when the kingdom of God was truly demonstrated on earth?

Undoubtedly, Israel foreshadowed the concepts God’s kingdom on earth (Glasser 2003, pp. 91-92). But I suggest we must go back to the Garden of Eden, prior to The Fall, to see the clearest evidences of what God’s kingdom on earth actually looks like – the eternal kingdom that Jesus was announcing as God’s ‘good news’ and is ‘prepared for you since the creation of the world’ (Mk. 1:14; Matt. 25:34; Dan. 7:13-14).

Genesis 1:26-28 states,

27 “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

This passage gives us an amazing insight into the nature of God; what it means to be created in his image; and how he intends to relate to his image-bearers. In this article, I will consider just the two specific elements of God’s ‘image’ and God’s ‘blessing’.

## 1. The Dialogical and Dialectical Nature of the Kingdom of God

Throughout church history, there has been a variety of interpretations on what it means to be created in God’s image. From early in the twentieth century to current times “a virtual consensus has been building ... among Old Testament scholars”, in contrast to some systematic theologians’ interpretations, regarding the “predominantly royal flavour of the text.” This implies, first, that humanity is seen as a bodily representation of God’s image on the earth. Second, that this concept is a reaction to contemporary Ancient Near Eastern creation myths which also conceptualised the idea of the image of God/gods; and third, that the concept of the image of God reveals the inherently relational nature of God and his creation (Middleton 2005, pp. 25-27).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also - Fretheim, T. E. (2005). *God and World in the Old Testament – A Relational Theology of Creation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, pp. 13-22, 48-60; Brueggemann, W. (1982). *Genesis – Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, pp. 11-39; von Rad, G. (1963). *Genesis*. (rev. ed.) London: SCM Press, pp. 57-61;

Claus Westermann gives an excellent overview of this development of thought over time, but because of limitations of space and time, let me simply adopt his definition of the meaning of God's image within humanity as:

Persons created to be God's counterparts on earth, to act as his vice-regal representatives with the capacity to freely correspond with God and each other, in the collaborative maintenance and development of his creation (1994, pp. 148-158).

We are also given a clear indication of how God intends to relate to his image-bearers when we consider the manner in which God blessed Adam and Eve. A blessing is an invocation spoken over the ones being blessed. The first recorded activity of God, having created Adam and Eve in his image, was to *speak* this blessing over them – this is the God who *speaks!* (Gen. 1:28).

There are several significant implications inherent in this amazing portrayal of personal, spoken address, which demonstrate elements of the invoked blessing:

- i. They could hear him – he is relational
- ii. They could understand him – he is rational
- iii. They could respond in obedience; or disobedience as it turned out later – he is reciprocal

Based on the information that has been gathered from Genesis 1:26-28, there are a number of things that I am suggesting can be said about the nature of God's kingdom demonstrated on earth prior to the debilitating incursion that sin brought on humanity:

*Firstly*, it is a **conversational kingdom** – God enjoys dialogue with his image-bearers – one need only look at the way God calls people; a fact that is borne out through both Old and New Testaments in God's personal interactions with his people (Noah, Gen. 6:8-22; Abram, Gen. 12:1-4; Jacob, Gen. 28:10-18; Moses, Ex. 3:1-22; etc.). Through conversational dialogue, God self-reveals his relational nature. Brueggemann provides an excellent insight, "Dialogue ... is not merely a strategy, but it is a practice that is congruent with our deepest nature, made as we are in the image of a dialogic God" (2007, pp. 73-74).

*Secondly*, it is a **collaborative kingdom** – historically God calls through conversation, but the conversation inevitably involves an invitation to partner with him in the unfolding of his mission in the earth at that particular time. Collaboration with God requires participatory action on our part. Throughout Genesis God reveals both his relational nature and his participatory intent. In a New Testament application of this point, Paul states this clearly to the Corinthian church in his comments about himself and Apollos, and their ministry among them in 1Corinthians 3:5, 9: <sup>2</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe — as the Lord has assigned to each his task ... <sup>9</sup> For we are God's fellow-workers ..."

In short, the kind of kingdom that Jesus was announcing as 'God's good news' is a relational kingdom grounded in his love for his creation and, supremely, for his image-

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Eichrodt, W. (1967). *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2, London: SCM Press, pp. 120-131; Erickson, M. J. (1998). *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, pp. 518-536.

<sup>2</sup> 1Cor. 3: 9, regarding the perceived ambiguity by some regarding what Paul meant by "God's fellow workers," Paul and Apollos were both fellow workers together *for* God and *with* God, since it was the same God who had called each. Θεοῦ is gen. masc. sing.

bearers, which functions collaboratively through dialogical conversation. Elements of this understanding are powerfully expressed in the First Article of the *Edinburgh 2010 Common Call*,

... we are called to incarnate and proclaim the good news of salvation ...  
in such a way that we are a living demonstration of the love,  
righteousness and justice that God intends for the whole world  
(Prevette, White, Ewell & Konz 2014, p. vii).

We have been created in his image in order to interact with him and each other as communicating and collaborative ambassadors of his kingdom on earth toward the fulfilment of his mission of global reconciliation and transformation.

### **Understanding the Dialectical Tensions of Human Life**

We have little trouble understanding the dynamics of dialogical interaction – reasoned discussion – even if we sometimes fail to comprehend the thoroughgoing implications of this gift inherent within the image of God in us. However, “dialectical tensions” is a more difficult concept to grasp. Etymologically they mean the same thing: ‘to speak between two’ (Webster 1977),<sup>3</sup> but they have come to have quite distinct emphases.

Blöesch gives us a helpful historical overview of dialectic’s use from Socrates: the art of question and answer,<sup>4</sup> through Aristotle: a pattern of logical reasoning; Hegel: the dynamic process of universal reality through thesis, antithesis and synthesis; Kierkegaard: a method of holding together affirmations that are diametrically antithetical, and Barth: polar pairs held together in the response of faith, such as infinity and finitude, eternity and time, judgment and grace; and we can also add, divinity and humanity (1992, p. 76).

More explicitly, in the way that I intend applying it, *dialectic* describes the nature of dialogical communication between two persons, poles of thought, or functional roles, which although not necessarily opposite, are certainly different. These poles coexist in a creative tension that is mutually beneficial but requires intentional engagement by both parties in order to overcome their inherent differences, becoming increasingly interdependent and mutually enhanced in the process.

Some good examples of this are:

The marriage relationship between a husband and a wife, where two differing genders, roles, personalities, and preferences find complementary fulfilment in mutual and reciprocal interdependence – a creative tension if ever there was one;

The learning relationship between a teacher and a pupil, in which the teacher creates a learning environment and facilitates the discovery of knowledge within the learner through dialogue and directed exploration, evoking and allowing questions and answers that provoke engagement, producing “... critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire 1996, p. 62), rather than simply downloading information;

The cognitively transformational relationship between action and reflection (Freire

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<sup>3</sup> ‘dialect’ and ‘dialogue’.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, a student of Socrates’ thinking via Plato, described Socrates as the originator of the ‘dialectic argument’ method of question and answer, becoming known as the Socratic Method; citing Reed & Prevost 1993, pp. 30-31.

1972, pp. 31, 54; Freire 1976, pp. 144-149). The genius of action-reflection is best described as the functioning of a feedback loop, much like a guided missile system. This 'feedback' clearly reveals the action-to-reflection-to-corrected-action that creates the dialectical tensions inherent within the continual dialogue between aspirational intentions, reflected on outcomes, and adjusted practices;

Finally: the revelatory relationship between the written word of God and the spoken voice of God. The word of God is almost always spoken before it is written and must be re-energised by the Holy Spirit in order for the letter to become the voice of God again to our spirits and minds (Deut. 5:4-22; Is. 8:1-5; Jer. 30:1-2; Hab. 2:1-3; Rev. 21:1-5).

The key to understanding dialectical relationships is seeing their inherent 'both-and' nature, rather than as a conflicted 'either-or' dualism.

### **Adult Educational Insights**

Adult educators, Jack Mezirow and Paulo Freire, affirm that from an educational perspective, the cultural context of language in learning is of supreme importance. One's social reality is shared, sustained, and continuously negotiated through the dialogical and dialectical processes of communication throughout one's lifetime, and it is through this social communication that the individual's *subjective self* is built up in a unique way, enabling meaning to be made out of the experiences of life (Mezirow 1991, pp. 1-3; Brueggemann 2007, p. 191).<sup>5</sup>

Our human capacities for language development and reflective reasoning, both fundamental to learning, are abilities inherent within the privilege of being God's image-bearers. Mezirow points out that at one level, "learning is a dialectical process of interpretation in which we interact with objects and events, guided by an old set of expectations," whereas at a higher level, "In transformative learning ... we interpret an old experience (or a new one) from a new set of expectations, thus giving a new meaning and perspective to the old experience (1991, p. 11).

This gives an educational insight into the radical perspective transformation that Paul experienced on the road to Damascus, requiring him to go away to Arabia for a time, to process the implications of this new meaning (Gal. 1:11-24).<sup>6</sup>

Adult learning, according to Freire, involves the necessity of inviting engagement, reflection, and action on social reality, thereby "problematizing ... their existential situations" (Freire 1972, p. 37). "Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking" (Freire 1996, pp. 73-74; Vella 2002, pp. 5, 9). Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk explore this idea further:

As questions emerge people need to dialogue with one another, go deeper into the issues, and explore the meaning of what they are learning through face-to-face interaction ... the back and forth of quality dialogue ... that goes over the same material, but each time the richness of the understanding deepens and broadens (2006, p. 93).

It is in the dialectical "... back and forth of quality dialogue ..." as Roxburgh and Romanuk put it, that these creative tensions operate, creating the dissonance required

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<sup>5</sup> Mezirow cites Bowers 1984, pp. 35-44.

<sup>6</sup> See Bruce, F. F. (1977). *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, pp. 80-81.

within the participants' thought processes to discover, critique, and clarify the underlying issues, and finally arrive at more constructive and effective understandings that lead to transformational changes.

This is precisely the approach used by the early church fathers in hammering out their solutions to the Trinitarian and Christological debates through "... the fruit of deep and prolonged reflection by the best and most respected theologians across the centuries ..." (Giles 2002, p. 9).

Freire insists, "... education *is* communication and dialogue. It is not the transference of knowledge, but the encounter of subjects in dialogue in search of the significance of the object of knowing and thinking" (1976, pp. 137-138). This is achieved through the teaching/learning interaction, a dialectical process of "... dialogue between those who are participants in the process," which Peter Jarvis describes as an Incarnational approach in which teacher and learner interact in a reciprocal co-learning, and co-teaching process (Jarvis 1987, p. 272; Mayo 2004, p. 51).

These adult educational insights reflect the inherent and continuous creative tensions that exist within the 'now but not yet' nature of the kingdom of God, so well explored by Ladd in his book *The Presence of the Future* (1974, pp. 195-217).

## **2. The Journey of Humanity: From the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane**

The biblical account of creation foreshadows this same 'now but not yet' nature of the kingdom of God in that Adam and Eve, created in God's image, were sinless, but not perfect, in the sense that perfection implies completion. However, they were not yet 'complete' because they were expected to learn how to maintain the creation and grow through relationship with their creator God (Fretheim 2005, pp. 41, 52; Middleton 2005, pp. 294-295). This is reflected in the commission to 'fill the earth' – collaborative and communitarian exercises on their part; and 'subdue it' – in the sense of harnessing its resources in sustainable and God-honouring ways, requiring personal and social growth and development (Brueggemann 1982, pp. 32-33; Fretheim 2005, pp. 48-56; Middleton 2005, p. 295; Westermann 1994, pp. 228-229).

Now, we understand that the serenity of the Garden of Eden was shattered by the tragedy of humanity's sin of rebellion in listening and responding to another voice, resulting in The Fall, requiring Divine intervention on our behalf.

Since that fall, it is always at the interface between the 'conversation' and the 'collaboration' – the *hearing* and the *doing* – that we experience the reality of 'tension' in the Christian life. This is the necessary point where we now discover our need for growth in character, requiring an inner wrestle, a dialectical back and forth, between God's revealed, conversational will and our own desires (Matt. 7:21-27; Rom. 7:7-25; 2Cor. 4:4-18; Jam. 1:22-25).

This is the very reason Jesus had to come into our fallen world in his incarnation as the living Word of God, to proclaim and demonstrate his liberating truth – the arrival of the kingdom of God in himself (Mk. 1:14-15; Jn. 8:31-32; Heb. 1:1-2). Only Jesus could do this since only he could truly become both God and Man.

The dialectical tension inherent within this divine-human relationship is clearly portrayed in Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, particularly when a

comparison is made of the connecting points between Matthew's account (Matt. 26:39-46) and Paul's insights (Phil. 2:5-9).

Matthew uniquely portrays the pathos and tension that was inherent within Jesus' decision-making process, where we only hear his side of the conversations that he has with his heavenly Father. What is revealed is a progression within Jesus' thought processes:

v.39 "My Father, **if it is possible**, may this cup be taken from me yet not as I will, but as you will."

v.42 "My Father, **if it is not possible** for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

vv.44-46 "... prayed the third time ... Then he ... said to them, "**Rise, let us go!**"

Jesus is clearly wrestling within his own humanity on behalf of fallen humanity through three successive prayer conversations with his Father, in which there is a definite progression in his thinking – finally leading to a genuine decision that he came to of his own choosing.

Paul is able to give us some expanded insights in Philippians, as he theologically unpacks the broader processes behind the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus, alluding to two quite separate and personal decisions that Jesus made.

Philippians 2:5-9 states,

<sup>5</sup>"Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ: <sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup>but **he made himself nothing**, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness".

Historically, there has been conjecture as to whether Paul intends the Son's pre-existence in eternity past or Christ's divinity in his incarnate state as his meaning. Fee (1995, pp. 202-215) and Dunn (1989, pp. 113-128) give excellent overviews of opposing positions. On the premise that one must *be something* before one can personally decide to *be nothing*, the position I am taking is that this was a personal decision the Son made in eternity past, echoed in the revelation of the Lamb slain before creation and inferred in other references (1Pet. 1:19-20; Rev. 13:8; Heb. 10:5-7; Jn. 1:1-2, 14; 2Cor. 5:21; 8:9).

<sup>8</sup>"And being found in appearance as a man, **he humbled himself** and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!"

The second personal decision that Jesus makes is processed in the drama of the Garden of Gethsemane. The writer of Hebrews makes a clear reference to this agonising decision, culminating in the statement: *He learned obedience through the things he suffered* (Heb. 5:7-8). Having taken on human form, Jesus wrestled with his decision in light of the prospect of the multi-levelled trauma that the cross would mean for him but came into settled agreement with his Father's will – confirming his prior heavenly decision in eternity past. He learned the consequences of his obedience through his experience of death – and resurrection.

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place ...

The Garden of Gethsemane decision, therefore, presupposes another conversation that had already taken place in eternity past before the creation of the world. This is

now where we see the tension between Jesus' dual natures – the decision that was made in eternity past having to be validated on earth, in his humanity, in order for his sacrifice to be effective for humanity. This was a real-time decision and genuine struggle that Jesus, the God-Man, encounters – a creative dialectical tension on our behalf. This becomes paradigmatic for Christian life in the dialectical tension between 'being' and 'doing' – creatively relating 'who we are' with 'what we do', highlighting, and confirming the inherently dialectical nature of the kingdom of God.

### 3. Paul's Use of the Indicative – Imperative Dialectic

Paul's combination of *indicative* and *imperative* moods is a device he uses to explain his understanding of the Christian life being lived in a fallen world as a 'both-and' dialectic, rather than an 'either-or' dualism.

This needs to be understood to clearly follow his line of argumentation via the dialectical character of his thinking (Furnish 1968, p. 217; Ladd 1993, pp. 536-537, 563, 565, 568-569; Bultmann 1955, pp. 203-207, Vol. 2; Kümmel 1974, pp. 224-228). Paul considers believers 'in Christ' to have already passed into the eschatological new eon – each is "... a new creation in Christ" (2Cor. 5:17; 1993, p. 568; Fee 1994, p. 602); but, problematically, we are also still living in the old eon of the fallen creation; we are *both* new creations in Christ *and* still living in the old fallen creation (1968, pp. 215-216, 224-227). In Jesus' terminology we are '*in* the world' but not '*of* the world' (Jn. 17:11, 16).

For Paul, the realm of the *indicative* is the faith-conviction of the new reality and identity 'in Christ.' However, since we are also still living in the old eon, we are susceptible to temptations and sin, and therefore need to be "... on guard ... with the help of the Holy Spirit" (2Tim. 1:14), in order to continually "... live by the Spirit, and not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Gal. 5:6).

This is the realm of Paul's *imperatives* – the human responsibility of "... standing firm in the faith" (Gal. 5:1); "... staying filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18); "... setting the heart on things above"; "... letting the peace of Christ rule in the heart"; and "... letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly" (Col. 3:1-2, 15-16); in order to "... be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2Tim. 2:2); etcetera.

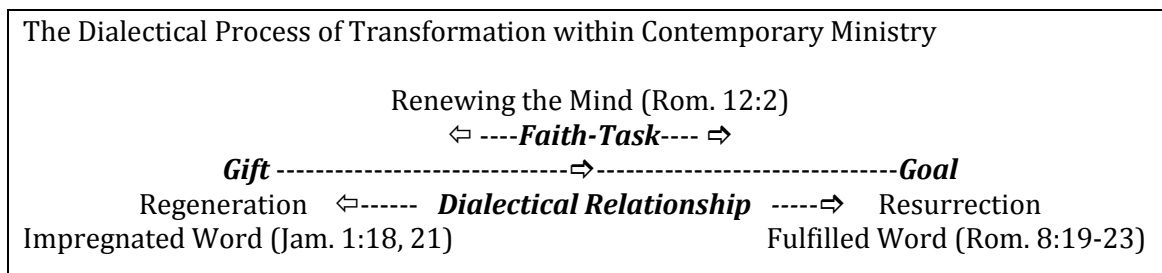
However, the *imperatives* of human responsibility can only be fulfilled in obedient, willing cooperation because the *indicatives* of the new identity and status 'in Christ' have already been secured by Christ through his incarnation, death, and resurrection, and are implemented by the transforming presence and power of the Holy Spirit within the collaborating believer. As Brunner comments, "The indicative of grace is never without the simultaneous imperative of discipleship" (1962, p. 297, Vol. III). Simon Chan draws on Thielicke and Calvin, recognising the need for the two concepts of grace as *both* divine unmerited favour *and* empowering gift (Chan 1998, pp. 79-83).

This brings us to a key element in Paul's approach- the fundamental importance of how we 'think'. Sandwiched neatly and necessarily between the *indicative* of our new identity in Christ – our *being*, and the *imperatives* of how we live – our *doing*, is the crucially pivotal element of our *thinking*.

Paul deals with this very practical issue in numbers of places, but none more clearly and uniquely than in Romans 12:2 which states, "... but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." An exegetical analysis of 'transformed': voice, tense and mood – *Metamorphousthe* - passive (a gift), present (a goal), imperative (a task) (Moulton 1978, p. 266; Cranfield 1985, pp. 296-297; Robertson 1931, pp. 402-403).



This can be schematically portrayed as:



Therefore, the process of spiritual transformation that should be continually taking place in contemporary ministry is simultaneously a *gift*, a *goal*, and a *task*. The reception of the Word and the Holy Spirit in regeneration on the basis of Christ’s atoning ministry is a powerfully transformative *gift* of God’s grace which renews the inner person both *relationally* in the capacity of believers to communicate with God, and *perspectively* in how they see themselves in relation to both God and the world around them.

The *goal* is the replication of the image of Christ within believers, which will only be fully realised in the resurrection (Rom. 8:28-30; 1Cor. 15:49-54; 2Cor. 3:18).

The *task* element (albeit a faith-task), inherent within this gift of grace, is the need to live repentantly within the community through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Not just as a once-only acknowledgement of sinfulness before God, asking his forgiveness, but a daily renewing of the mind, aligning the thoughts and desires of the heart to the will of God in the context of personal devotion to God among a missional community of faith that is a witness in our fallen world.

This can only be achieved through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, placing believers within a creative dialectical tension between the Divine will and the human will yielded to his, which, as we saw, was supremely demonstrated by Jesus at Gethsemane, as the result of the conversational and collaborative relationship between him and his Father.

Once again, this demonstrates the dialogical and dialectical nature of the relationship between our Trinitarian Creator-God and humanity created in his image in the context of contemporary ministry that seeks to nurture the replication and expression of *imago Dei* in our daily living as the norm for Christian discipleship – the continuous process of ‘becoming’ the image of God in Jesus’ ‘now but not yet’ kingdom.

#### 4. Practical Implications for Contemporary Ministry

The notion of ‘contemporary ministry’ must be more than just a pragmatic ‘what-seems-to-be-working’ approach, but a deep awareness of and commitment to the profound insight that Ray Anderson espoused on a number of occasions: “... all ministry is God’s ministry” (1979, p. 7; 1997, p. 5; 2001, p. 62). Necessarily, this statement includes the larger understanding of seeing all ministry as the continuation of Jesus’ mission outworked through his ministry of reconciliation, which is continually moving toward his mission of personal, collective, and global transformation in fulfilment of his ministry to the Father (Ac. 1:1-2; Rev. 21:5).

Lesslie Newbigin makes the deeply challenging claim that “... the only effective hermeneutic of the gospel is the life of the congregation which believes it” (1989, p. 234). With this understanding in mind, he goes on to pose the questions, “What kind of

ministerial leadership is required?” and, “What is the task of the ministry?” (pp. 235-241).

These are very challenging questions and are close to the nub of what my doctoral research attempted to uncover, as reflected in its title, *Developing the Ministry of Adult Spiritual Transformation – Andragogy<sup>7</sup> meets Theology*.

The connection between *spiritual formation* and *adult spiritual transformation* is to be understood as the dialectical relationship between *process* and *result*, the result being the ongoing transformation of attitudes and behaviours in Christ-likeness over time. Through participation in the Christian disciplines of *spiritual formation*, they become the “... means of grace ... in order to grow in the life of faith ... they become part of who we are” (Dykstra 2005, pp. 44-46), thereby, becoming part of the *evidence* of spiritual transformation.

This is a direct outworking of God’s “... incarnating dynamic”, his desire to extend himself in love through his divine image being *embodied* in human lives (Langmead 2004, pp. 20-21; 46-47). This is the crowning purpose of creation, and supremely revealed in Jesus’ incarnation, and extended through “... Christ being formed ...” (Gal. 4:19) within believers as part of the *missio Dei*,<sup>8</sup> resulting in transformed lives (Bosch 1991, pp. 389-392; Boff 1985, pp. 2-4).

This can also be expressed as the dialectical relationship between the work of the church and its spiritual disciplines on and with a believer on the one hand, and the supernaturally transformational work of the Word and the Spirit within a believer on the other hand (Bloesch 1992, pp. 14-15, 202-203).<sup>9</sup> As Rosemary Haughton has put it so succinctly, “Without the long process of formation there could be no transformation, yet no amount of careful formation can transform” (1980, pp. 31-32) – it is a collaborative work of grace.

This brings us to my ‘Holy Discontent.’ We know we have the best message in the world – The Gospel of Jesus Christ. So why are we not seeing more transformation taking place in Christians’ lives?

The methodology I settled on in an attempt to address this question was to research four local congregations in the Ringwood area, which were deliberately diverse in denomination, style, and function, but each strongly evangelical in core beliefs and mission. Using Grounded Theory and Narrative Research, I interviewed 25 people in all; at least six people from each congregation, including each senior leader. My purpose was to hear their journeys of faith and discover, if possible, the elements that had been transformational in the living out of their faith to that point.

For those interested in the processes involved in moving from raw interview information to the formulation of my six transformational themes, I first distilled 17 primary headings from what my interviewees were saying. These were then broken down into a further 44 substantive responses, from which emerged the six recurring themes of personal Bible engagement, small-group interaction, empowering leadership, missional expressions, conversational prayer, and Holy Spirit encounters.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Andragogy’ means adult education, in distinction from ‘pedagogy’, which is strictly child education.

<sup>8</sup> *Missio Dei* is the Latin form of ‘mission of God’, or God’s mission through Christ in the Spirit.

<sup>9</sup> Rom. 1:16-17; 12:1-2; 2Cor. 3:17-18; Gal. 4:17-20; Eph. 4:1-16; 1Thess. 1:1-10; 2:6-13; 4:1-12; 1Tim. 6:11-16; 2Tim. 2:14-26; 3:16-17; Tit. 3:3-7; Heb. 4:7-16; 5:11 – 6:3; 10:12-14; 2Pet. 1:3-11; 3:18.

For the sake of space in this article, we will limit ourselves to the findings of one emergent transformational theme, that of Personal Bible Engagement, to establish the inherent nature and necessity of creative dialectical tensions that provoke transformational change in any contemporary ministry setting around that theme.

## **5. The Emergent Transformational Theme of Personal Bible Engagement**

One of the several things that caught my attention during the interview process was the number of times people mentioned the impact that reading the Bible had on them, in some cases, directly bringing them to faith in Christ, bearing out the Christian understanding that the "... word of God is alive and powerful" (Heb. 4:12).

As we have seen, there is an inherently dialectical process occurring when personal Bible engagement produces an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ through the words of the Bible, allowing his grace and passion to grip one's heart and mind as the Holy Spirit causes the words to come alive. This 'revelation' creates an inner tension, provoking a personal wrestling with the text's meaning, which is fundamentally necessary in order to challenge our preconceived and taken-for-granted assumptions about God, life, and ourselves and confront us with its implications and expected applications for our lives. A couple of examples from my interviewees help to make this plain.

One man, a committed atheist who had never read the Bible, was challenged by a minister not to criticise something he had no knowledge of. His scientific mind was struck by the pure logic of the challenge, and he began what became a near twelve-month process of challenge and change. This is what he told me:

I started reading the Bible. I started with Matthew and I read through to the end of the New Testament, and then I started at Genesis and I read through to the end of Malachi. I had just such a hunger to read God's Word.

An older woman, having been a 'nominal' churchgoer for many years, reported after having started to read the Bible for herself:

And in reading that Bible, it was like my eyes were opened to what was in the Scriptures. I suddenly realised Jesus ... it was not a religion, it was a personal relationship, and that he had died for me.

One of the senior pastors made specific comments regarding the way reading the Bible transformed his understanding of the gospel, and biblical ministry:

I began to read just the parables, and all of a sudden discovered that Jesus was talking about a kingdom Gospel ... we've actually only got half of the Gospel. We've had one that said more about what we've been *saved from* rather than what we've been *saved for*. So this Gospel of what we've been *saved for* ... that's actually the predominance of Jesus' message.

Another senior Pastor explained:

I remember reading the story of the woman whose son died; the widow woman in Luke 7 ... it says that his heart broke for this widow woman. And I realised in reading this story that my heart had never really

broken for somebody else ... and something broke; finally, something broke for me; and it was around caring enough.

One other participant spoke in terms of two forms of God's word – being instructed by reading the Bible as God's word, and receiving direction by hearing a word from God:

I read the Bible and it's the instruction book, and I've really got to use that: is this the right thing? And you've got the Spirit side of it when you're asking for a more individual personal thing, and you're asking for something and waiting for an answer; so I can see the value in both of those sides.

*Interviewer:* One's subjective and the other's objective?

Yes, you've got this hard copy thing and the other one's a bit more intangible and they work together.

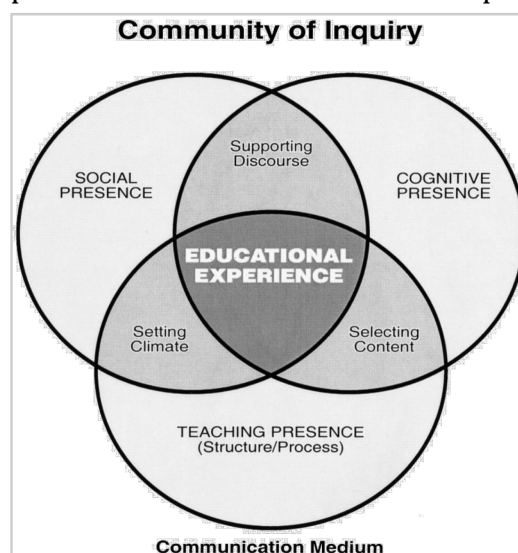
In each of these examples, there is a process going on behind the simple reporting of what their experiences had been. For some it was an encounter with the truth that disturbed their preconceived ideas, requiring time to assess and assimilate into a new understanding that then led to new ways of behaviour. In the last case, it was the realisation that there needs to be a willingness to wait to hear what God is saying, often a time of tension.

It is this 'process', which brings about transformational change that adult educators have been interested in identifying and understanding. It is always a 'learning process' – "a dialectical process of interpretation" (Mezirow 1991, pp. 11, 163). Mezirow builds on the work of James Loder, a theologian, and psychiatrist, who maintains that all true learning creates a tension because we must move from what is known to a new understanding (1989, pp. 37, 115). This exemplifies the dialectical relationship inherent within a good teaching and learning interaction.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's chart<sup>10</sup> explains this as the dialectical interplay between the teacher, the social, and the cognitive presences in their '*Community of Inquiry*' methodology.

While not specifically interested in personal Bible engagement, adult educators are interested in genuine engagement with texts in general, with group dialogue around those texts, and a vested interest in the empowering leadership of good teaching. We see hints here of the interplay between some of the different emergent transformational themes of my research.

Mezirow sees communicative learning as "... sharing ideas through ... the written word ..." (1991, p. 75), or alternatively, a "... substantive set of resources ..." (Vella 2001, p. 10) from which learners are able to respond through open questions. Where people bring their own life experiences and personal worldviews to the text, we must "... invite



<sup>10</sup> Garrison, R. D., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). "Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education," *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), pp. 87-105.

learners to examine it, question it, refute it if they have the means, and make it theirs through a real struggle” (2001, p. 44).

‘Engagement with texts’, which includes wrestling with the text’s meaning, holds a fundamental place within good andragogical practice. It is only this dialogical and dialectical process that can create the required dissonance between where one’s thinking *is* as opposed to where it *needs to be* in the light of biblical truth, which the Holy Spirit is able to energise into genuine ongoing spiritual transformation with appropriate willing collaboration.

## Conclusion

We have explored Jesus’ stunning announcement that the kingdom of God had arrived in his Person, acknowledging that God’s ‘good news’ had had its roots in the Garden of Eden, revealing the dialogical and dialectical nature of conversational communication embedded within the fabric of the kingdom of God. The creative tensions seen in Jesus’ experience in the Garden of Gethsemane are consistent with what was seen in creation, and what are observed by Adult Educators as a necessary part of human growth and learning.

When these creative tensions are recognised and engaged with consistently in our contemporary ministry contexts, they become part of the process of Christian growth toward the replication of the image of Christ within us through his transforming life and power inherent within his Word and Spirit, as part of his redeeming and reconciling mission of global transformation to be fulfilled in the final resurrection of the faithful.

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