Christian Maturity as Loving Relationships?

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Man [sic] is but a network of relationships and these alone matter to him. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

What if we considered the Great Commandment the ultimate goal of Christian maturity? "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'"(Mt 22: 37-39). What would Christian maturity look like from the viewpoint of these two developing relationships, our *vertical* relationship with God and our *horizontal* relationship with neighbors? After all, this declaration of Jesus is the "greatest" of all commandments, and "all the law and the prophets" depend on it (Mt 22: 38-40).

There is surely no question about the significance of loving relationships. My discipline of psychology has long evidenced the value of human relationships in virtually all aspects of the field, from therapy to parenting.[ii] Research has shown the critical importance of loving relationships for our health, both physical and mental, as well as our longevity, success, and well-being.[iii] In fact, there's an oft-cited maxim in psychology: "It's the relationship that heals."[iv] And I don't think there's much controversy about the significance of loving relationships in Christianity. The Apostle Paul, as just one of many Biblical examples, reinforces the Great Commandment with an almost poetic passage that ends with the phrase, "and the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13). Loving relationships are clearly *at least* a vital factor in Christian maturity.

The purpose of this essay, then, is to explore what may be involved in a change of focus, from the maturing of Christian *individuals* to the maturing of Christian *relationships*. The Great Commandment is too often understood as pointing to the lovers rather than the loving. So, I begin this essay with the reasons a change of emphasis may be needed, including problematic cultural factors in the current focus on individuals. I then provide some necessary conceptual tools to guide us in truly fulfilling the Great Commandment. Finally, I offer some preliminary thoughts about how these tools may be used to mature these loving relationships.

The Problem

Any focus on the development of Christian relationships would need to consider both dimensions of the Great Commandment, the vertical and the horizontal. It goes without saying that the vertical dimension is crucial. But the biblical phrase preceding the horizontal — "a second is like it" — seems to indicate that both dimensions are significant. Indeed, the vertical may not even be separable from the horizontal. As Jesus put it to Simon Peter: "do you love me?… Then feed my sheep" (Jn 21: 15-17). The vertical, however, seems to have received the lion's share of attention in American Christianity. As Richard Beck observes: "we tend to focus on achieving intimacy with God [the vertical dimension] — through prayer, Sabbath, liturgy, Bible study and fasting — and routinely fail to get around to directly practicing interpersonal and emotional virtues [the horizontal dimension]."[v] [vi]

Beck also describes what he believes is a typical justification for this vertical emphasis. He calls it the Trickle-Down Theory: if we get the vertical dimension right, it will trickle down to the horizontal. Beck, however, seems to challenge the validity, if not the utility of this trickle-down

understanding of spiritual formation. His primary reason for this challenge seems to be Christianity's penchant for educational practices. He agrees with James K A Smith[vii] that our main practices of spiritual formation are "overly, even excessively education-based,"[viii] with Sunday *School*, Bible *Study*, Christian *books*, etc. In fact, Beck calls this educational emphasis the "first mistake of spiritual formation".[ix] As he notes, a psychopath could get all A's in Bible class and reflect none of its meanings in daily life. The issue isn't the head, in this sense. It's the heart, especially the heart's relationship to others.[x]

If Beck and Smith are right, then we're perhaps unknowingly not only limiting the development of the horizontal; we're also curtailing the development of whatever bond it has with the vertical. The net effect is that neither dimension is allowed to fully flourish. The most obvious way to correct this effect is to concentrate our collective efforts on loving relationships generally, vertical *and* horizontal. This simple change of focus is probably right as far as it goes. Yet I believe it ultimately underestimates the depth of the problem, especially in our Western culture. As some church leaders have recognized,[xi] Western culture frequently manifests aspects of individualism that can present important obstacles to a focus on loving relationships. Definitions of individualism vary greatly. So, I want to narrow considerably what I'm calling "individualistic" here to one of the more prominent of these obstacles, the valorizing of the *self-contained* individual.

From the individualist's perspective (as I'm now using the term), a person's identity or self is supposedly contained *within* the individual as a metaphoric storage of experiences and knowledge gained through life. This way of understanding the person can mean that the individual is relatively complete *without the need of relationships*. Relationships may be nice, but they're not absolutely necessary to a person's identity or personality. This individualistic perspective also puts the emphasis of maturity on the knowledge gained through the person's life. Because the self is a kind of container for experiences, the best way to mature people is through the quality of knowledge they receive and store in their brains. Again, relationship-building is, at best, secondary.

Consider George's identity as an illustration of this individualist viewpoint. As the valedictorian of his small high school class, George has a "bright guy" identity because he contains within his brain sufficient knowledge, capacity, and experiences. His parents encourage him to make friends, but George feels that friends are irrelevant to his "image." In fact, the individualist doesn't view the issue of friends as having much to do with who George really is. George's self, his smart-guy identity, concerns what's inside not what's outside. This individualist understanding also has important ramifications for the churches who want George to mature in his faith. Because George's self is understood as a container of knowledge, the implication is that the right knowledge should lead to a transformed identity, a spiritual rebirth — hence the present emphasis on education-based Christian practices.

At this point in our analysis of "George" and our individualist culture, all that seems to be necessary to mature loving relationships is to do something counter-cultural: deemphasize the container aspects of individualism, such as the dependence on education, and develop the skills required for loving relationships. Even so, I fear there are still other cultural issues that hamper this development. Perhaps most relevant, many theoretical psychologists have warned that the development of loving relationships depends on the understanding we have of those relationships. They describe at least two fundamentally different ways of understanding

relationships. One contains a hidden individualism, while the other is a more radically relational approach. For our purposes here, we'll label these two understandings *individualistic relationality* and *holistic relationality*[xii]. These terms are unfortunately a mouthful, but please be patient. I'm hopeful my illustrative characters, George and Sally, will make practical sense of these terms. They have important nuances about maturity we'll want to appreciate and significant misconceptions about growth we'll want to avoid.

Individualistic and Holistic Relationality

As we'll soon see, individualistic and holistic relationality have much in common, but they also differ greatly. We've already described how the individualist would understand George's self-contained identity. At this point, we need to know how an individualistic relationist would understand his interpersonal connections. Perhaps foremost, this type of relationality is labeled "individualistic" because interpersonal connections are thought to arise from the individuals involved in those relationships. George, from this viewpoint, is *first* an individual — a self-contained personality or identity — *before* he forms relationships. Relationships are secondary to or a product of self-contained persons.

George, for instance, meets Sally in high school, and they go on to form a dating relationship. George's self-contained, bright-guy identity is attractive to Sally, just as Sally's personality, her sweet vulnerability, is alluring to George. Their relationship is considered a combination of two formerly separate individuals. And it doesn't matter when they may have formed relationships, with anyone. Going back even to their infancy, the individualist understands each of them to have primitive identities from their early nature and nurture, which only later lead to their relationships. A quick example is the notion of temperament. A child is thought to come with a temperament first and then relationships are formed. Personal identities produce relationships, not the other way around.

This individualistic perspective doesn't necessarily mean that George and Sally don't value their relationship. In fact, individualistic relationists generally believe that interpersonal bonds play a pivotal role in all sorts of important aspects of life and living. Actually, individualists *and* holists prize interpersonal relationships. It's the reason they're both relationists. The terms "individualistic" and "holistic" stem not from how much they *value* relationships, but rather how they *understand* relationships. While the individualistic relationist understands relationship to arise from the individual identities involved, the holistic relationist understands individual identities to stem from the relationships involved. We'll need to flesh out these relationalities a bit, but we'll soon see they both have crucial implications for Christian maturity.

For the holist, relationships or the "betweennesses" of individuals constitute a person's identity[xiii] [xiv]. Sally would tell you, for example, that her identity has several characteristics, including daughter, neighbor, cousin, American, child of God, etc. None of these characteristics occur without relationships[xv]. Consider also that the holist does not assume the sequence of the individualist: individual *then* relationship. With Sally being a child of God, for instance, she is not first a self-contained identity and only later a child of God. The assumption of some Christian holists, for example, is that Sally is a child of God *from her inception*. Her very identity, perhaps even the most important part of her identity, has always been that of God's child. In this sense,

Sally has never been a self-contained identity.[xvi] Indeed, whatever constitutes her identity at the time is simultaneous with the relevant relationships.

The challenges that George and Sally face at their next stage of education illustrate these features of holistic relationality. George and Sally decide to attend the same institution of higher learning because marriage seems a distinct possibility. This possibility, however, appears less likely after their first few months at an elite religious school. With a higher proportion of smart people on campus, George suddenly finds that his identity as "the intelligent one" is no longer the case. Even his identity in Sally's eyes seems to change. She notices that many other guys are attractive in the same manner as George. Sally and George also recognize a change in Sally's personality. With many of the religious women of the college similarly sweet, Sally's sweetness is no longer her most distinguishing characteristic.

Sally and George may not recognize the reasons for these changes. The point from a holistic perspective is that their identities or personalities are not self-contained. Their identities arise, instead, from their relationships with their peers.[xvii] The personalities of Sally and George are not *within* them; their identities stem from their *betweenness* with those around them. They each reflect the junction of their interpersonal connections[xviii]. This holistic understanding doesn't mean that an individualist can't explain these college experiences a different way, or that the holist can't explain their high school experiences. It just means that these forms of individualism (within) and holism (between) are rival conceptions of relationship (and identity) generally.

Some readers, at this point, may find themselves resisting even the *potential* validity of a holistic point of view. In Western culture we're so used to seeing the person through our individualistic lens — like a pair of glasses we've forgotten we're wearing — that we assume we're seeing reality as it is: our identities just *have* to be contained within us. An individualistic understanding (our glasses) has become objectified as though it were reality, rather than an interpretation of reality. This confusion of objectivity and interpretation may even enter the professional realm.[xix]

Consider one more example that may illustrate the professional realm. A special educator friend was struck by the number of new-student parents who referred their children for ADHD evaluation. Were all these new students objectively ADHD? Or was there something about the situation that led to this high number of referrals? As she described to me, the answer came to her when she considered the location of her school district: the most densely Mormon county in the world, Utah County, Utah. With her prior experience in other school systems across the country, she was always pleased to see how mild-mannered and disciplined many Mormon children were. Still, she also realized what happened when a fidgety, less-disciplined child moved into the district. Teachers often interpreted the child as unruly and inattentive because of the local culture. In fact, these teachers frequently hinted to parents that they should have their child evaluated for ADHD, even though the child had no history of problems or ADHD in previous schools.[xx] The child just stood out from the other children — holistic relationality in action. Similar to George and Sally's changes when they moved to college, the identity of the new students changed with a new set of relationships.

I can only say that my friend's experience is reflective of my own, especially after I understood holistic relationality. At first, I resisted the possibility of this holistic worldview, and then I began to see (through a different set of glasses) how it made sense of a lot of

professional and personal issues. It may also help readers to know that holistic relationality is derived from a long and venerated intellectual tradition: philosophical hermeneutics[xxi]. Moreover, many Trinitarian theologians[xxii], as far back as the Patristics[xxiii] and as recent as Colin Gunton[xxiv] and John Zizioulas[xxv], have construed loving relationships in this holistically relational manner. Still, it is not the purpose of this essay to review these philosophies and theologies, or to work out the philosophical issues entailed in these ideas. (I do try to explain a few such issues in the footnotes.) I'm choosing, instead, to lead with a less abstract and hopefully more practical presentation for the purposes of this workshop.

Three Important Differences

Allow me now to formalize three of the main differences between individualistic and holistic relationality for this essay. This formalization will help us to apply these understandings to the Great Commandment and Christian maturity. The headings that indicate these differences are stated in terms of the more familiar individualist perspective: *Individual as Fundamental Reality*, *Individualistic Self as End*, and *Community as Means*.

Individual as fundamental reality. The first difference is fairly simple. As Sally and George illustrate, the primary unit of social reality for the individualistic relationist is the self-contained individual or person, whereas the main unit of social reality for the holistic relationist is the betweenness or connection among persons.[xxvi] This basic difference does not prevent the holist from valuing the individual. The holistic self, however, is not considered to be within the individual; it is, instead, the nexus of a unique set of relationships. As mentioned with Sally, she is a singular nexus of many connections with her situation: daughter, cousin, child of God, etc.

Holistic relationists, in this sense, have no problem with the particularity of individual human beings as well as Christianity's long history of recognizing and even cherishing "every hair on your head" (Mt 10:30). The self is a unique junction of relations for the holist and a unique container for the individualist. Both relationists believe that Sally has an individual self; they just differ on how to understand that self[xxvii]. Analogously, they differ on how to understand the body. The individualist assumes our bodies (e.g., brain) are the containers of the self, whereas the holist assumes the body is the connection-center of the person's relationships. Sally, for the holist, is the embodied junction of all that constitutes her identity[xxviii]. Many neuroscientists, for instance, advocate a "situated" or "interpersonal" cognition in this regard.[xxix]

Individualistic self as end. When individualistic relationists consider the individualistic self the fundamental unit of reality, it is perhaps natural they also view this self as the ultimate end of virtually any action, the ultimate purpose or reason for that action. As an example, George eventually proposes to Sally because he believes she'll make him happy. His individual happiness is the reason behind his proposal, and their marital relationship is the means to that end. Individualists may care deeply about relationships in this sense. Nevertheless, their main motive for caring is their individualistic selves — in the case of George, his emotional satisfaction. Surely George's attitude here is not uncommon in Western culture. Many people believe the main goal of marriage is to "live happily ever after." And isn't the dissatisfaction of one or both spouses often considered a sign of a failing marriage?[xxx] Many marriage researchers attribute America's high divorce rate to this individualistic expectation.[xxxi] [xxxii]

A popular variant of this individualistic understanding — sometimes viewed as an ideal — is interpersonal reciprocity: Sally will make George happy *IF* George will make her happy, and vice versa. This arrangement is, of course, the proverbial win-win, the quid pro quo. It's considered a relational ideal because Sally and George each get what they want. Indeed, it may be true that reciprocal self-benefit is about the best we can do from an individualistic perspective. I realized after many years as a marital therapist how many spouses consider this transactional approach the best they can do. Some couples actually keep track of "units of love" so they know who owes whom at the end of their day.[xxxiii]

On the other hand, it might be tempting to think that a holist would assume the spouse should be the end, the ultimate priority. Once George and Sally get married, for instance, George ought to focus on Sally's happiness exclusively. Nonetheless, this assumption is also individualist. To move from one individualist self (George) to the other (Sally's self) is still to embrace the self-contained individual. This move may be altruistic, but it isn't holistic. The *betweenness* of the spouses is the key to this perspective. George and Sally should make marital decisions based on the *quality of their marriage* — what's best for their relationship — not what's best for either or both of them individually.[xxxiv] They should prioritize relational goals, such as marital closeness or interpersonal intimacy, *even if* one or both suffer.[xxxv] A good quality of relationship can, of course, lead to happy individuals. From a holistic perspective, however, this type of happiness shouldn't be *pursued* as the ultimate object of marriage, but it may *ensue*. The relationship *itself* should always be the ultimate end, "… and the two shall become one flesh'" (Mk 10:8). Pursuing individual happiness would imply that the marriage is a means to the ends of the individualistic self.[xxxvi]

Community as Means. The understanding and purpose of community is another important distinguishing feature of holistic and individualistic relationality. Because the individualistic self is the end of individualistic relationality, groups of people — families, organizations, communities — are frequently considered an important means to that end. In other words, these communities are viewed as the instruments of whatever individual goals, whatever motives or purposes, self-contained persons may entertain. I have just discussed one type of community in this regard: marriage. Recall that George saw marriage as a means to his future individual happiness. But a country can also be understood as an instrument of the individualist self. Many people in the United States, for instance, believe that one's self-interest should be the ultimate guide to voting in government elections. The "common good" in this individualist sense is an aggregate of individuals who share the same individualistic aims.[xxxvii] George and Sally, for example, join the Young Democrats at their college to find other like-minded people.

The holistic relationist champions the importance of community in a very different way. Community is, after all, the relationship of relationships for the holist. Community cannot be considered the instrument of a self, because the self is already a kind of community. Remember that Sally is a daughter, child of God, and American, among many other aspects of her identity that require relationships. Sally is thus the connection-center of a particular set of relationships, a particular community. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." From King's holistic standpoint, there's no choice about which to favor — self or community — because the holistic self cannot be divorced from its community.[xxxviii]

The holist notion of the common good, then, is also quite different from the individualist's. If we're all part of an "inescapable network of mutuality," as King asserted, then we need to understand and serve that mutuality, that common good. Again, the key for the holist is the quality of our relationships, the quality of our mutuality.[xxxix] In fact, King referred to salient properties of this holistic quality in his writings. Central to these properties was his belief that the unity of communities includes more than merely the similarities or agreements among community members.[xl] Individualists tend to gather almost exclusively around similar goals and values, so as to maximize each person's individual interests. Community differences are typically viewed as a problem. As a holist, however, King believed that authentic mutuality requires a blend of member differences, which means that all communities must find ways to value and navigate otherness, disagreements, and discord in a loving manner.[xli] [xlii] And as we'll see, the issue of community differences can play a pivotal role in the horizontal dimension of the Great Commandment.

The Great Commandment

At this point we apply all three differences (often in combination) to the Great Commandment generally and four Christian practices specifically.

Worship of Whom. The first portion of the Great Commandment, loving the Lord, seems intended to be at least part of meaningful worship. The rhetorical lengths that Jesus goes to in describing how we should do this loving — with all our heart, soul, and mind — is surely an indicator that God is the supreme object or end of that worship. Yet, one of the assumptions of individualistic relationality is that the individualist self is the ultimate object or end of that person's actions and attitudes, not God. This assumption means that if George's motive or ultimate purpose for "worshiping" God is that it "feels good to me," "provides me with peace," or "feeds me," then *he isn't worshiping God*. The "me" in these phrases betrays George's ultimate motive.[xliii] These feelings, as I mentioned above, can always *ensue* from worshiping God, but many churchgoers may assume that *pursuing* these feelings is the actual object of worship. We should also acknowledge that many of us have mixed motives, a mixture of God and me. After all, part of the reason George may find peace in his worship is that the Holy Spirit enables some true worship. Still, the extent to which George is oriented toward himself in worship is the extent to which he's not worshiping God, which may be worthy of his attention.

Holistic relationality involves a different understanding of worship. Unlike individualistic relationality, we are not relegated to a self-contained "me" as a rival for God in worship. George is *already* involved in relationships of all kinds from a holist standpoint, including being a child of God. His very nature is that of relater. Unfortunately, however, this relational nature can be directed to all manner of things *other* than God, including idols. In this sense, George *can* worship God; he just needs to live into his already existing relationship with Him. Maybe more intriguing from a holistic perspective, both the person worshiping and the Object of worship are communities of a sort. I've described above how the holist views each human as a nexus of relationships, as Sally exemplifies. But the Object of worship, at least from the Trinitarian tradition, is *also* a community. God is the relationship among three Persons, which means we have human communities, such as Sally, worshiping the Divine Community[xliv].

Focus on Vertical. In a similar vein, individualistic relationality seems to be involved in our focus on the vertical dimension of the Great Commandment, loving the Lord. Because our self is

supposedly the fundamental reality and end of all our actions, it is sorely tempting to understand the relational issue of Christianity as primarily, if not exclusively, *God and me*. George assumes that he essentially worships alone, and his salvation is basically for him alone. Remember (in The Problem section above) that some observers, such as Richard Beck, believe that the balance between the vertical and horizontal dimensions is decidedly tilted toward the vertical. Indeed, he even challenged a frequent justification for this tilt — that the vertical would eventually "trickle down" to the horizontal.

I think holists would also question this almost exclusive focus on the vertical. Our very identity from the Christian holistic viewpoint entails *both* relationships, vertical and horizontal. Sally's identity is, as we've mentioned, *both* a child of God (vertical) and a cousin, etc. (horizontal).[xlv] Perhaps Jesus's purpose for including the horizontal in the Great Commandment is that the horizontal is pivotal to the vertical. For this reason, the holistic relationist would advocate more emphasis on Christian practices that are designed for the horizontal dimension. Few church leaders, in my experience, view the interactions before, during, and after church meetings as doing justice to the horizontal dimension. These interactions can be valuable, to be sure, but they don't typically include the range of interactions or level of engagement required to develop a love of neighbor as yourself.

Prominence of Service. Christian service is often considered a more intentional approach to the horizontal dimension of the Great Commandment. Richard Foster, for example, views service as a major "outward" spiritual discipline, a discipline directed outward toward others rather than inward toward self.[xlvi] However, service also fits nicely with the individualistic relationality of the American church. It can be done without really engaging interpersonally with the served or fellow servers. And Beck believes that service rarely addresses a host of relational issues that the horizontal dimension of the Great Commandment requires, such as the "emotional triggers" and "automatic responses" we sometimes encounter with loved and not so loved ones.[xlvii]

The Christian holist, in this sense, would probably be curious about why service is so prominent in Christianity. After all, the Great Commandment does not say to *serve* the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind, and like unto it, to *serve* your neighbor as yourself. Love and service are not the same. Love often prompts service for the loved one, but service doesn't always prompt love for the served. A truly loving relational quality may have affectional or even adorational elements that service doesn't.[xlviii] George, for instance, often experiences authentic affection toward Sally, but Sally doesn't always view his affection as a service to her. Service, moreover, can occur with a wide variety of intentions, including quite selfish motives. Sally, for example, likes serving at the local Goodwill because she feels good about herself afterward. Remember that the quality of the self is not the issue for the holist; it's the quality of the community[xlix].

Small Groups. Small church groups, in my estimation, come closer to a practice designed for the horizontal dimension. Meaningful interaction would seem to be encouraged by a small number of people in perhaps an intimate home setting. However, as I noted regarding the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., members of any size group have differences as well as similarities. Group members are thus likely to disagree about issues that could and maybe should be discussed, especially for relationship authenticity. Even seemingly trivial matters, such as how to handle member tardiness, may lead to honest disagreement. Still, my own experience as

both member and leader of many small groups indicates how often these groups avoid disagreement like the plague, and for good reasons in our individualist culture. Unity is typically considered the similarity of individual values and interests. Member differences are perceived as at least uncomfortable, if not a serious threat to group harmony.

This individualist culture also means that group leaders likely have few skills for dealing with group disagreement and conflict. Many small groups are reduced to pretending that "we all agree." To address the horizontal, however, group leaders need to be open to loving on people who are less than agreeable, maybe even conflictual. Indeed, this aspect of the horizontal points to the significance of a broad category of love, frequently called "tough love." Some have interpreted this phrase to mean harshness or stridency, but being harsh or strident is rarely loving. Tough love more often pertains to actions that don't feel warm-and-fuzzy but nevertheless attempt to improve a loved one's welfare or the quality of relationship. Examples include corrective feedback that allows for deeper love, unbidden truth that spurs personal responsibility, or conflict resolution that permits lasting peace. Most parents know the importance of tough love. Yet it's perhaps surprising how seldom churchgoers in our individualist culture consider this form of love part of the horizontal dimension.

A holistic relationist would likely make at least two points regarding small groups. First, the tough form of loving someone needs to be specifically targeted in the training of group leaders. A gentle approach to both training and application would be pivotal, given the Western wariness of this form of love. Even so, the cultural headwinds of individualism are difficult to overcome within a small group without at least some training. Second, leaders should be trained to take advantage of the "groupness" of a small group, the relationships that naturally emerge within the group. Too frequently, small groups are glorified educational forums, such as Bible study or sermon discussions. These can be valuable, of course, but they rarely address authentic relationships directly.

The groupness of groups, however, presents marvelous opportunities to capitalize on the here-and-now affinities and friendships that organically form within these groups. How did your friendship begin? Did you have fears of rejection, etc.? And what are the relevant Bible passages and lessons learned? Also sprouting in the group are relationships that aren't so warm and fuzzy. How did group members deal with those? How did you love the "otherness" of the other? Bottom line: group leaders can be trained to process relational experiences that happen naturally. These experiences are nearly always more poignant and powerful than an abstract discussion, and they can more directly address the horizontal dimension of the Great Commandment.[I]

Christian Maturity

Permit me, at this juncture, to explore maturity toward the Great Commandment from a holistic perspective. My consideration of the individualistic and holistic understandings of the four practices above lead me to wonder whether some Christian practices are primarily undergirded with individualistic assumptions, perhaps without our even realizing it. In other words, these practices are implicitly directed toward the maturing of the individual rather than the maturing of the relationship, lovers rather than loving. What if, instead, both vertical and horizontal *relationships* were the target of Christian maturity?

Capable of Maturity? One of the first issues to consider in a holistic approach to Christian maturity is the question of capability: Are humans even capable of such an approach? Do Sally and George have the capacity to *truly* love God and others? Or are they innately egoistic, always I-centered and fundamentally lacking the capacity to engage in loving relationships? Perhaps surprisingly, reviews of the psychological literature in this regard show that many psychologists would answer this last question affirmatively.[li] I obviously can't present this literature here. The easiest example[lii] is B. F. Skinner's famous assumption that reinforcement is universal, true for all time and for all animals, including humans.[liii] Recall that George married Sally because she'd made him happy, a type of positive reinforcement. If the ultimate *and* universal end of George "loving" Sally is actually George's reinforcing benefits, then he'll never be capable of caring ultimately about anything or anyone besides those benefits.

Fortunately for Christians, the psychological assumptions of egoism and hedonism are more institutionalized interpretations of data than objective knowledge.[liv] These understandings do make sense of many experiences and data, but there are alternative understandings that also make sense of these data and our experiences. One of those alternatives is the Christian belief that humans are made in the image of God. What this image means, of course, is open for debate. Yet, what it *could* mean, especially from a Trinitarian perspective, is that humans are made in the image of the Divine Community, the Supreme Relationship (e.g., Gen 1: 26). The logos of Jesus's maturity, in this vein, could be understood less as his *individual* maturity and more as his *relational* maturity, including his maturity in the Divine Community and his amazing and authentic love. Humans, as made in *this* Image, are thus completely capable of loving God and loving others.[lv] As mentioned, however, the possibility of a natural relationality does not mean that humans *inevitably* love one another. It only means they are *capable* of loving God and others. Humans can still form all sorts of problematic attachments, including attachments to idols.

Telos of Maturity. If humans are, in fact, capable of holistic maturity, what then is the telos or ultimate object of this maturity? The object is, of course, the mature loving relationship, but what is a good or even a godly quality of that relationship? The last thing I'd want to do is foreclose upon some theological answer to this question. It's too broad and deep, with no small amount of mystery entailed. Nevertheless, the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Great Commandment are surely part of the *what*, and Jesus is the *who*. What types of relational maturity did he — or rather, his relationships — epitomize or mean? Space limitations prohibit any kind of Bible study, so I'll confine myself to a brief elaboration of the conventional and tough aspects of loving. I'll then describe a person (other than Jesus) who I believe is an exemplar of this relational maturity.

Conventional aspects of love are probably the better known and understood. The apostle Paul, for instance, does a wonderful job in Corinthians (e.g., 1 Cor 13: 4-7) of describing the telos or fruits of maturity for conventional understandings of love, so I won't rehearse them here. Paul's tough love is probably less well-known, but he actually models aspects of this love in the corrective feedback he provides his churches.[lvi] And surely there's no doubt about Jesus's many displays of tough love, including with his own disciples. As just one example, "[Jesus] rebuked Peter, 'get behind me Satan…'" (Mk 8:33). Yet, there is little question that he and Paul intended all their remarks to be "tough" in the Spirit of love. Parents, again, probably best know this type of love. It's the love, for instance, of preventing a little one from playing in a busy

street. We also see many instances in the Bible of God engaging in tough love with His people, especially through the prophets. This type of love may even have been interpreted as "God's wrath," and, in fact, tough love often feels that way to those who receive it.[lvii]

Development of Maturity. How then do we foster maturity toward these relational goals? First, the holist would likely agree with Beck and Smith (above) that we can't rely solely on educational practices. Recall that the key to this educational emphasis is the individualist image of a self that serves as a container for knowledge. Fostering George's maturity supposedly depended on the quality and quantity of the knowledge he received in his individualist mind, such as through Bible study, etc. Knowledge of the Bible would obviously be important to the holist too. Still, Christian maturation would also require loving relationships to truly spawn loving relationships. After all, there's nothing other than relationships from this holistic perspective. Indeed, it is God's love for us that first taught us to love!

Another way to make this point is that there's no substitute for the Body of Christ. This Community of truly loving people needs to form an *in vivo* learning laboratory for all people who desire to mature their relationships. The individualist focus on information storage and intellectual learning can obviously be helpful. Nonetheless, the holist's emphasis would be experiential learning instead of intellectual learning, lived interaction rather than information storage. Much of this experiential learning could be accidental or incidental interactions with the Body, but some portion would probably need to involve intentional interaction. Role plays, for instance, could be designed particularly for the tough love scenarios that are so often avoided (at least productively) in our culture[lviii].

The most pivotal lived laboratory, however, is the friendships, frenemies, and even families that get seeded, grow, and mature within the Body of Christ itself. Church leaders, in this sense, are *less* those who have great knowledge of the Bible or who take on many service obligations, and *more* those who show the love of God to others and have considerable wisdom in growing and maintaining that love. Many youth pastors would likely be good resources in this regard. If they've had to deal at all with adolescent communities over time, they've had to manage the drama of people who care deeply about loving and being loved, but in a less-filtered manner than most adults.[lix]

Exemplar of Maturity. Another important way to discuss the application of holistic relationality to Christian maturity is to point to an exemplar of that maturity. I could, of course, cite Jesus Christ in this regard, but I also believe there are others among us, historically and presently, who at least approximate holistic maturity. St. Therese of Lisieux is surely one of these. St. Therese is a late 19th century French Carmelite nun whom Pope Pius X deemed "the greatest saint of modern times"[lx]. I'm sure many of you are familiar with her amazing autobiography, *Story of a Soul*. Allow me to present a few exemplary quotes in the Spirit of both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Great Commandment.[lxi] First, there can be little doubt about her effusive love for God, the vertical dimension. I only have space for just a few of the hundreds of examples: "I love You, and I give myself to you forever!"[lxii]. "… O Jesus, my Love, my Life…"[lxiii]. And "O Jesus, my beloved, who could express the tenderness and sweetness with which You are guiding my soul!"[lxiv]. "And now I have no other desire except to love Jesus unto folly"[lxv].

As for the horizontal dimension of the Great Commandment, the love of others, I believe it's easy for readers to see St. Therese's conventional (non-tough) love of her Carmelite Sisters.

She first discovered her Church Vocation: "my vocation, at last I have found it… MY VOCATION IS LOVE!"(caps original)[lxvi]. With Jesus's help, then, she found ways of not only "bearing with the faults of others" but also "being edified by the smallest acts of virtue"[lxvii]. She adopted a way of being that allowed her to be "charitable in my thoughts toward others at all times"[lxviii] And there was almost no length she would not go to help her Sisters love the Lord: "… to please Him I would consent to see myself plunged into hell so that He would be loved eternally in that place of blasphemy"[lxix].

No small part of this love for her Sisters was her willingness to engage them in tough love, something she was initially hesitant to do. I'll mention only one touching example soon after she entered Carmel at the age of 15. She was delighted to find "a companion" with whom she held "little spiritual conferences from time to time"[lxx]. Still, there were "many things in her [companion's] conduct toward the Sisters" that she would've "liked to see her change"[lxxi]. She was careful not to push the issue, but it wasn't long before God indicated to her that "the moment had come" to speak to her companion. St. Therese "begged God to place sweet and convincing words in my mouth"[lxxii]. In tears, she voiced "*everything I was thinking about her*" (italics original)[lxxiii]. And Jesus answered her prayer, because the "result totally surpass[ed] my expectation"[lxxiv]. Her companion acknowledged "with great humility that what I was saying was true, and she promised to commence a new life"[lxxv]. Soon thereafter, and much to her chagrin, her Reverend Mother had St. Therese delivering difficult conversations to other Sisters. As she put it, she reluctantly learned "the trade of correcting"[lxxvi].

Conclusion

Isn't this exemplary love at least part of our calling as mature Christians, part of our obedience to the Great Commandment? If Beck is right about our relative neglect of the horizontal dimension of that commandment, then this love and our obedience are hampered from full fruition. There are just too many obstacles in Western individualist culture, including the educational practices we may have counted on to grow this love. Most of these impediments are fairly well known in Christian circles. Nonetheless, I wonder how widely it's known that some of these hurdles are concealed in the very way we pursue loving relationships. These obstacles may not only keep us from the horizontal love we should give and receive; they may also prevent us from approximating heaven on earth with that love!

It seems imperative, then, that we root out these hidden obstacles of individualism. Merely noting or describing them, I believe, will not be enough to remove them. Individualism is too entrenched in our culture. From my perspective, we need to urge Christians to adopt a more radical way of understanding relationships. To that end, I'm proposing we consider two sets of metaphoric lens or glasses for these loving relationships, individualistic and holistic relationality. Both lenses assume the importance of the individual as well as the significance of the relationship, divine and human. Yet, the individualist puts the focus of Christian maturity on the qualities of the individual, while the holist puts the emphasis on the qualities of the relationship.

These two sets of glasses may also have significant implications for the "crisis" of Christian maturity referenced in our workshop title. Most readers will know far more than I about the causes of such a crisis. Nevertheless, I'd like to submit for consideration possible strains of individualistic relationality in Western Christianity. I can only speculate, but I do wonder if many

churchgoers unwittingly bring these strains to bear in their interpretation of Biblical relationships as well as many Christian practices. Their pastors may have even warned them against doing so. My experience, however, in teaching similarly pervasive worldviews in the college classroom is that a student never truly grasps them until they are directly contrasted with an alternative. Without something like holistic relationality, in other words, I fear that our maturity toward the Great Commandment will remain locked in a culture of individualism.

[i] I'm greatly indebted to two pastors, Joseph Doherty and David Devereaux, and two academics, Jeff Reber and Nathan Slife, who generously responded to earlier drafts of this essay.

[ii] Norcross, J. C. (2010). The therapeutic relationship. In B. L. Duncan, S. D. Miller, B. E. Wampold, & M.A. Hubble (Eds.), The heart and soul of change: Delivering what works in therapy (pp. 113 – 141). American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/12075-004; Slife, B., & Beckstead, Z. (2022). Healing in times of crisis: Instrumental versus meaningful relationships. In Dege, M. & Strasser, I. (Eds), *Global pandemics and epistemic crises in psychology*. London: Routledge Publications; Wampold, B.E. (2001). *The Great Psychotherapy Debate: Models, Methods, and Findings*. Mahway, NJ: Erlbaum.Taylor, C. (1985). Social theory as practice. In *Human Agency and Language*, Vol. 2 of Philosophical Papers (91-115). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[iii] Fowers, B., Richardson, F., & Slife, B. (2017). *Frailty, suffering, and vice: Flourishing in the face of human limitations*. Washington, D.C.: APA Books.

[iv] Yalom, I. (2012). *Love's executioner, and other tales of psychotherapy*. New York, N.Y.: Basic Books.

[v] Beck Post, 3/21/23, http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2023/03/practicing-jesus-part-4-fourth-mistake.html

[vi] As Rick Warren observes in his book of devotions:"

[vii] I also agree with James K. A. Smith that Western rationalism is a major if not ultimate culprit in the issues I'll try to describe. My focus, however, is the atomism of some forms of rationalism. [Smith, J. K. A. (2016). *You are what you love: The spiritual power of habit*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.]

[viii] http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2023/03/practicing-jesus-part-1-first-mistake.html

[ix] http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2023/03/practicing-jesus-part-1-first-mistake.html

[x] "…the heart is the existential chamber of our love, and it is our loves that orient us toward some ultimate end or telos" (p. 9, Smith, 2016).

[xi] E.g., Richardson, F. C., Fowers, B. J., & Guignon, C. B. (1999). *Re-envisioning psychology: Moral dimensions of theory and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Taylor, C. (2007). *A Secular Age.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap; Wax, 2018, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/expressive-individualism-challenge-church/

[xii] In the work of many theoretical psychologists, some of it my own, holistic relationality is also called "strong" or "ontological" relationality, whereas individualistic relationality is either called "weak" or "atomistic" relationality. In both cases, I intend the concepts to be identical. I use the current terms here in the attempt to reach a broader audience.

[xiii] As Gunton (1993) put it, "persons mutually constitute one another" (p. 169). "We are beings who exist, under God, only in mutually constitutive relations with each other and with the world of which we are part" (p. 66). Gunton, C. (1993) *The one, the three, and the many*. NY: Cambridge University Press Gadamer, H-G. (1975); *Truth and method*. NY: Bloomsbury Academic; Gergen, K. (2009). *Relational being: Beyond self and community*. NY: Oxford University Press; Gadamer, H-G. (1975). *Truth and method*. NY: Bloomsbury Academic; Heidegger, M. (2008) *Being and time*. NY: HarperCollins; Richardson, F. C., Fowers, B. J., & Guignon, C. B. (1999). *Re-envisioning psychology: Moral dimensions of theory and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self*. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press

[xiv] The Apostle Paul: "… so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Romans 12:5 NRSV).

[xv] Sally has a *shared being* in this holist sense. Other people need her as part of their own identity. As an only daughter, for example, her parents' identity *as* parents isn't possible without her, and her own identity *as*

daughter isn't possible without them[xv].[xv] These shared identities may change as their relationships change, such as George's change from "bright" in high school to "average" in college. However, George, Sally, and her parents are never without some connectedness of one sort or another. This connectedness always and already exists, waiting to be recognized and lived into[xv]. George, for example, has long felt he had a relationship with God, but only recently has he found himself living into the practical implications of this connection for his life.

[xvi] Jean-Luc Marion put it this way: "I am only insofar as I love and am loved" [Marion, J-L., (2007). *The Erotic Phenomenon*. (Trans: S. Lewis). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.]

[xvii] Just as with any part of a whole, George and Sally are each, as individuals, recognizable parts of their community. Even so, the other parts or elements of their whole or community contribute significantly to the meaning of their individuals parts.

[xviii] I'm not sure how much to discuss here regarding the holist's position. Certainly an important question, especially from the individualist's perspective, concerns the embodiment of or neurological storage of the past. I don't want to say here that the person as a nexus of relationships doesn't contribute to their relationships. They are part of the whole, to be sure. However, the meaning or role of that part is clearly formed in relation to other interpersonal parts. Moreover, many neuroscientists are increasingly viewing the brain in this manner, as a situated or interpersonal cognition.

[xix] This "glasses" metaphor may seem like a kind of relativism, but the possibility of interpretation doesn't mean that all interpretations are valid or that some interpretations are better than others.

[xx] My friend reports that this situation resulted in ADHD meds for more than a few children.

[xxi] Gadamer, H-G. (1975). *Truth and method*. NY: Bloomsbury Academic; Heidegger, M. (2008) *Being and time*. NY: HarperCollins; Richardson, F. C., Fowers, B. J., & Guignon, C. B. (1999). *Re-envisioning psychology: Moral dimensions of theory and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self*. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press; Slife, B. D. (2004). Taking practice seriously: Toward a relational ontology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, *24* (2), 157 – 178.

[xxii] Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1990) calls the Trinity the "idea of ideas" (p. 5294).

[xxiii] For example, Irenaeus and Gregory of Nazianzus.

[xxiv] What I'm calling here holistic relationality, Gunton (1993) traces to the perichoresis of the Trinitarian tradition: "In its origins, the concept was a way of showing the ontological interdependence and reciprocity of the three persons of the Trinity: how they were only what they were by virtue of their interrelation and interanimation, so that for God to be did not involve an absolute simplicity but a unity deriving from a dynamic plurality of persons" (p. 152).

[xxv] Gunton, C. (1993) *The one, the three, and the many*. NY: Cambridge University Press; Zizioulas, J. (1985). *Being as communion*. NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.

[xxvi] This difference can be extended to non-social reality. The individualistic relationist would view the objects of the world as self-contained, with their own inherent qualities or properties. The holistic relationist, on the other hand, would consider the "objects" of the world as having a shared being with their particular contexts.

[xxvii] What then is the "self" referred to in the Great Commandment? Given the implicit individualism of American culture, it's tempting to interpret it atomistically, as self-contained entity, which exists prior to and provides information for loving our neighbor. But what if the self here is a nexus of relationships, especially the nexus of God and us? The implication is that we're always and already involved in a bunch of divine and social relationships as a given. And it is this identity we lean on, not some separable identity, to give us the understanding we need to love our neighbor.

[xxviii] Merleau-Ponty, M. (1965). *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge.

[xxix] Recall that George was thought to have an intelligent identity in high school due to his accumulated knowledge and innate intelligence. His mind or brain is thought to be the organ of these functions. Many neuroscientists advocate a *situated cognition*, where no "knowledge" is *in* the brain, independent of its situation. George's knowledge, like his identity, is dependent on the activity, context, and culture from which it develops. Cognition is embodied, fundamentally social, distributed, enacted, and often works without representations (e.g., Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). *Situated cognition and the culture of learning*. 1989, 18(1), 32-42.; Roth, W-M. & Jornet, A. (2013). *Situated cognition*. https://wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/wcs.1242; Siegel,

Daniel J. (June 2006). "The mind in psychotherapy: An interpersonal neurobiology framework for understanding and cultivating mental health". *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*. *92*(2): 224–237..

[xxx] Joe Ostenson has shown that the conceptual root of the psychological measures of marriage quality is ultimately individual satisfaction with the marriage, and thus these measures are all based on individualistic relationality (Ostenson, J. A. (2009). Measuring marriage or measuring individuals: An ontological analysis of marital therapy outcome measures". *Theses and Dissertations*. 2419.https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/2419

[xxxi] E.g., Fowers, B. (2000). *Beyond the myth of martial happiness: How embracing the virtues of loyalty, generosity, justice, and courage can strengthen your relationship*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[xxxii] Indeed, many marriage and family therapists, me included (at least historically), participate in this expectation. I have a published therapy case where my supervisor directed me as a therapist-in-training to instruct my depressed individual client to divorce her husband for just this reason. The marriage supposedly wasn't making her happy; it wasn't performing its individualistic purpose. My client's individualistic self, her move from depression to happiness, was the ultimate end. Slife, B., Scott, L., & McDonald, A. (2016). The clash of liberal individualism and theism in psychotherapy: A case illustration. *Open Theology*, *2* (1), 595-604.

[xxxiii] E.g., Nakonezny, P. & Denton, W. (2008) Marital Relationships: A Social Exchange Theory Perspective, *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, *36*:5, 402-412, DOI: 10.1080/019261807

[xxxiv] The holist doesn't even separate means and ends. Both the "means" and "ends" *are* the relationship. The relationship is the "means" to the "end" of a better-quality relationship, whether the relationship is duos, such as marriages, or whole communities, such as churches.

[xxxv] I wonder if this focus on perceived closeness is also relevant to the vertical dimension. Certainly many Christians view closeness as an important goal in the quality of their relationship with the Lord. Even so, I don't want to minimize the complicated theological issues in play. As just one example, consider the number of saints in church history who have perceived some sort of spiritual distance from God, including St. John of the Cross, Mother Teresa, and St. Therese of Lisieux. Each of these presumably mature Christians experienced an apparent lack of closeness, sometimes for long periods. In no case, however, did these experiences render the closeness/distance dimension irrelevant. If anything, these saints seem to have been exquisitely attuned to this dimension for them to notice the Lord's relative distance. Indeed, they all sought fervently to close that distance, as if greater closeness was a better quality of this relationship.

[xxxvi] It's also a mark of individualist dominance in Western culture that many people presume that good relationships *necessarily* produce happy individuals. However, a bit of reflection shows us that we can have a good relationships without happy individuals, and even happy individuals without good relationships. A few examples may help. If my wife were to become chronically ill, heaven forbid, I could guarantee that neither of us would be happy. Still, this situation does not mean we couldn't continue to care for one another in ways that involve a high quality of relationship. A truly loving relationship would never have to be hindered, despite the absence of conventional happiness. Similarly, two heroin addicts who "shoot up" together could claim extreme individual happiness, but rarely would this situation mean a good quality of loving relationship.

[xxxvii] As Richardson (1999) has noted, both sides of the political aisle appear to presume this individualist politic. Many conservatives, for instance, target government regulation as the enemy of our individual freedom to pursue these individualist goals. Many liberals also embrace individualist freedom, as Michael Sandel (20xx) has demonstrated. They just target other limits to such freedom, such as moral proscriptions (e.g., abortion).

[xxxviii] "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Cor 12:25-27).

[xxxix] Because the whole of mutuality is classically thought to be greater than the sum of its parts, an individualistic collection of parts could miss important aspects of that whole. For instance, the main purpose of government in a holistic relationality is not to make us each more wealthy or self-determining. The main purpose of government is to develop *civic virtue* in its citizenry such that we care about the mutuality of community — both similarities and differences — even when we have to sacrifice personally to do so [Sandel, M. (2009). Justice: What's the right thing to do? New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux; Slife, B.D., & Slife, N.M. (2021). A hermeneutic exploration of the grounds for social justice. In Bishop, R., (ed.), *Hermeneutic dialogue and shaping the landscape of theoretical and philosophical psychology.* London: Routledge Publications.]

[xl] "Dr. King's idea of the Beloved Community is not grounded in a color-blind ideology that deemphasizes difference and chooses comfort over tension, preferring rather to live in homogeneity than living and finding comfort and rhythm in diversity, uniqueness, and distinctiveness, and as a result, authenticity. The Beloved Community is a calling to live in the tension of being comfortable with the uncomfortable" (https://www.seattleymca.org/blog/completing-dr-kings-unfinished-dream-beloved-community).

[xli] "Dr. King's Beloved Community was not devoid of interpersonal, group or international conflict. Instead he recognized that conflict was an inevitable part of human experience. But he believed that conflicts could be resolved peacefully and adversaries could be reconciled through a mutual, determined commitment to nonviolence. No conflict, he believed, need erupt in violence. And all conflicts in The Beloved Community should end with reconciliation of adversaries cooperating together in a spirit of friendship and goodwill" (https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/).

[xlii] The Apostle Paul appears to have held a similar belief: 1 Cor 12:14-31 [Slife, B. (2023). *Challenging the implicit dominance of individualist freedom: Toward a strongly relational freedom*. Paper presented to the meeting of the Society of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, Boston, MA.]

[xliii] An exclusive focus on God, rather than a focus on our relationship with God, is still individualist in the sense it treats God as a self-contained person rather than a Trinity. Indeed, if the Great Commandment includes the relationship of the lover and the loved, then an exclusive focus on God may not fulfill the Great Commandment.

[xliv] I think it'd be cool to develop the notion that our Christian faith is a kind of relational trust in this regard. In fact, as Lewis and Weigert put it in sociology: "Trust functions as a deep assumption underwriting social order and is not reducible to individual characteristics." https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1985.tb00238.x

[xlv] The holist would likely not separate the vertical and horizontal dimensions as two distinct realities, though it makes sense that they are two different emphases, two ends of the same "stick."

[xlvi] Foster, R. (1978). *Celebration of discipline: The path to spiritual growth*. NY: Harper One.

[xlvii] http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2023/03/practicing-jesus-part-2-second-mistake.html

[xlviii] Comparing the service of Simon to the prostitute in Luke, "You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet" Lk 7:45.

[xlix] If anything, there are all sorts of individualist reasons to *avoid* developing quality relationships. Aside from the obvious obligations, people who genuinely love — such as parents loving their children — make themselves incredibly vulnerable. Their children can be severely injured or even reject them. Many self-sufficient individualists would want to avoid such "entanglements" that make them feel so vulnerable.

[l] They are more poignant and powerful from a holist perspective because they are more addressed to the most important aspects of life and living, relationships. In fact, a pivotal advantage of the relationship being to blame for issues of conflicts from this viewpoint is that individuals no longer need to be "judged" or blamed. Instead, the quality of the relationship is the problem, which allows for a judgment without placing individual blame.

[li] E.g., Fowers, B., Richardson, F., & Slife, B. (2017). *Frailty, suffering, and vice: Flourishing in the face of human limitations*. Washington, D.C.: APA Books; Slife, B.D. (2000). Hedonism: A hidden unity and problematic of psychology. *General Psychologist*, *35* (3), 77 – 80.

[lii] A few other quick examples: Freud is famous for his "pleasure principle," and rarely do humanists — noted for their concept of *self*-actualization — talk about *other*- or *relationship*-actualization. Also, evolutionary psychology's "fitness" and "reproductive success" can be boiled down to a form of egoism [Gantt E. E. (2016). Critically evaluating evolutionary perspectives in psychology. In Miller H. (Ed.), The Sage encyclopedia of theory in psychology (Vol. 1, pp. 309-313). Sage]. (Try explaining to your romantic partner that your love is because he or she is a "satisfactory reproductive target.") And as I've chronicled elsewhere, positive psychologists, with rare exceptions, presume that happiness (or other individualist motives) is the main goal of humans [Slife, B.D., & Richardson, F.C. (2008). Problematic ontological underpinnings of positive psychology: A strong relational alternative. *Theory & Psychology*, *18* (5), 699-723.; Nelson, J., & Slife, B. (2017). A new positive psychology: A critique of the movement based on Early Christian Thought. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12 (5), 459-467].

[liii] Skinner, B. F. (1974). *About Behaviorism*. New York: Vintage Books.

[liv] Fowers, B., Richardson, F., & Slife, B. (2017). *Frailty, suffering, and vice: Flourishing in the face of human limitations.* Washington, D.C.: APA Books.
[lv] Children from this perspective can be viewed as naturally relational instead of innately selfish.
[lvi] In fact, Paul's tough love is probably under-appreciated for the same reasons tough love is under-appreciated in contemporary individualist America. In our current culture, love is usually confined to the warm and fuzzy. Indeed, when someone is first introduced to the notion of tough love, it's not unusual for that person to presume it means being harsh and punishing. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Tough love should not even be attempted without accurate empathy and loving understanding. In fact, tough love may require more than the usual empathy and understanding, because the lover not only must know the need for such love; the lover should seek a hearable way of saying it.
[lvii] Perhaps the more provocative question here is: Should we as mortal beings engage in tough love with God? On this question, I believe the holist is uncommitted. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, believes there's no question about the need for tough love with the horizontal dimension of the Great Commandment, given the nature of human communities. However, the Divine Community on this question clearly turns on one's theology, which I wouldn't want to presume or develop here. Of course, the answer to this question also depends on one's definition of tough love. Clearly, there are many instances of what could be viewed as expressions of frustration with God.[lvii] We find all sorts of complaints and frustrations communicated to God in the Bible, including portions of Lamentations, Job, Psalms, and even Jesus's touching question: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Some theologies would even point to biblical passages where God "changed his mind" or "relented" as instances in which the prayers of the people provided a kind of corrective feedback to God, such as Ex 32:14, Jonah 3:10, and Amos 7:3 (e.g., Pinnock, 20xx). Again, I mention these theological possibilities not because the holist would require them, but because the horizontal dimension suggests these possibilities for potential discussion.
[lviii] Intriguing to me at least, I believe these role plays (and dispensing tough love generally) would be immensely easier if the inevitable blame/judgment of individualistic relationality *toward a particular person* were not at play. Sally, for example, blames George for their lack of communication on a particular issue. He's "bright" on academic things, but not so bright on social things. However, this blaming of individual personalities or traits isn't really possible from an holist perspective. The relationship is the issue in their communication, and I have no doubt a holistic marital therapist would find Sally's part in the communication problem.
[lix] Another possible application of holistic relationality concerns David French's (4/4/24) column where he describes Tim Keller's observation (before his untimely death): "As he [Keller] put it, what he was seeing was a change from a culture in which younger Americans were intolerant of cruelty and tolerant of good-faith political differences to a culture in which people were intolerant of political differences and tolerant of cruelty — so long as that cruelty was aimed at the right targets." In other words, political differences have a higher priority than than the quality of interpersonal relationships (cruelty). This point parallels, in my experience, many so-called Christian service activities. The efficiency of this service sometimes has a higher priority than the loving of the served and fellow servers.
[lx]Descouvemont, Pierre. [in French] (1996), p. 5. *Therese and Lisieux*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
[lxi] St. Therese championed what she called the Little Way: "Love proves itself by deeds, so how am I to show my love? Great deeds are forbidden me. The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love" (St. Therese of Lisieux, 1996, 3rd Ed., *Story of a Soul*, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, p. 176-177).
[lxii] Ibid., 77.
[lxiii] Ibid., 192.
[lxiv] Ibid., 190.
[lxv] Ibid., 178.
[lxvi] Ibid., 194.
[lxvii] Ibid., 220.
[lxviii] Ibid., 222.

[lxix] Ibid., 112.
[lxx] Ibid., 235.
[lxxi] Ibid., 236.
[lxxii] Ibid., 236.
[lxxiii] Ibid., 236.
[lxxiv] Ibid., 236.
[lxxv] Ibid., 236.
[lxxvi] Ibid., 245