1.
BEING AND BECOMING: WHOLENESS REGAINED

Ocean, there is none
Without shipwrecks, without the drowned
Without victims
there is no
        ocean
that does not lick the shore

        like a sore
        or a wound

'Aporia,' by Tatiana Oroño[1]

When I was seventeen, shortly after coming back to the faith of my youth, I found myself in a bit of a conundrum. There I was, energized by a new-found force, a belief that electrified my heart and mind with systems of belief, glimpses of a new world, and the firm sense that finally I had found truth and that this truth would never abandon me.

Everything had changed, but then again, everything hadn't.

I remember being holed up in the dorm room the summer before my senior year. I was participating in two-a-day football camp, which, since I attended a boarding school, meant three-a-day football camp because of the time we saved not having

1 Translated from the Spanish by Jesse Lee Kercheval. Oroño, T. & Kercheval, J. L. 'Aporia, and: Elegy for the Road.' *Ploughshares*, vol. 40 no. 1, 2014, pp. 157-159. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/plo.2014.0001*

to drive home to eat and sleep. As a Navy kid, I was used to bumping around from town to town, base to base, school to school. I appreciated the idea of a hometown, but only notionally. In fact, the boarding school was actually the fourth high school I had attended, and blessedly it would be my last. I remember sitting at my desk, bored, physically exhausted; my mind sought sleep but my teenage hormones, which knew not fatigue, raged against the dying of the artificial light in the parking lot outside.

Thoughts of reckless abandon crept in to my newly-revived heart. I could not stop the flood of images from my past life, from an alternate universe where faith had not found me, and I played, therefore, freely in sundry carnalities.

With the psalmist and the martyrs, I would pray, 'How long, Oh Lord?' How long until my thoughts and actions fit the faith that I now claimed as my own? (Nothing like a little melodrama to spice up youthful religious fervor.)

It seemed as serious as an angioplasty at the time. I remember waking each morning and starting the day with review and audit of the dreams I had dreamt the night before. My primary concern was not the activities of my nocturnal imaginings, but my disposition toward them. My most urgent question: 'Was I a follower of Christ in my dreams?' This seemed the most important line of inquiry. If I was gunned down in a dreamy shoot-out (this happened at an alarming rate for a child of the suburbs), did I find hope in death? Did I pray for God to save me? Better yet, did I pray at all in my dreams? This question got to the heart of it.

Though it may sound silly now, these questions seemed poignant at the time. What else could be as important? If you aren't a Christian in your dreams, then how are you really a Christian at all? This made absolute sense to me, so of course I kept my scruples to myself.

The problem, I surmised, was that there seemed to be an inner me and an outer me, and the two had gotten along well for some time, but no more. Despite my best efforts and near-constant prayer ('pray without ceasing'), the rift between faith and life seemed unbridgeable and vast, and the irony was that I myself was standing on either side of the rift waving across the expanse like a happy fool.

Then the breakthrough.

A few years previous, a neighbor had given me a copy of a popular devotional. The neighbor was a Roman Catholic with five girls (this would figure in my later life), but the devotional was of Protestant vintage, so I decided it was trustworthy and kept it nearby. I had not cracked its bendable, blue faux-leather cover for two years, not until that summer in that dorm room during football camp.

One of the first devotional readings I stumbled upon was about spiritual surrender. I consumed the page-length treatment hungrily. That was my answer. Surrender. Surrender to God's will. Stop fretting over errant thoughts, stop auditing dreams, stop nitpicking whether I was convicted of the sins of my earlier high-school life. Stop being, as one pastor vividly described this pathology, an obsessive mole burrowing toward the center of the earth. Surrender and love God.

Even now, such an idea seems both benign and impossible, but I can still feel the fresh relief that came when I read those words, their black type upon a cool white page, the serifs and the ascenders of the letters lancing the blisters of hyper self-analysis.

SURRENDER

Months later, I would ask myself exactly what it was I was surrendering. I mean, I was still breathing, speaking, making

decisions about what to do next, eating, walking, and so on. I was not receiving secret cosmic messages about these things. What was surrendered? And who was the agent of the surrender?

What exactly was going on and what did it have to do with the rift between my inner and outer self? I would have to wait another twenty years for a satisfying answer in the most obvious of places.

In David Mitchell's novel, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, an enterprising young clerk, the eponymous Jacob, finds himself holed up in a trading colony located on a small island just off the coast of imperial Japan. There he encounters an array of criminals and saints who hail from the various western trading companies as well as the Japanese interior which is always just out of reach to his western eyes. While biding his time, and falling in love with a Japanese woman, the young Jacob befriends the godly Dr. Marinus with whom he shares an interest in learning, science, and the island country that is forever closed to them.

At one point, Jacob finds himself in the doctor's office examining a human skeleton that is on display. In his late-eighteenth-century setting, science and particularly medical science is a new and exciting field that raises many difficult questions that other disciplines had failed to answer. Jacob is struck by one question in particular.

> 'Doctor, do you believe in the soul's existence?'
> Marinus prepares, the clerk expects, an erudite and arcane reply.
> 'Yes.'
> 'Then where'—Jacob indicates the pious, profane skeleton—'*is* it?'

> 'The soul is a verb.' He impales a lit candle on a spike. 'Not a noun.'[2]

Leaving aside the anachronism of this thought emanating from an eighteenth-century mind, which would be better suited to a mid-twentieth-century existentialist, we should acknowledge that he has a point.

The soul is not a material thing; it is not a pituitary gland or a tiny man jerking the gears of the body for the desired effect. The soul is not unchanging, and therefore may be better described as a verb, an action, a force put to work in the world. Early anatomists were sorely disappointed to find that the soul could not be reduced to an organ located between the two lobes of the brain, weighing 21 grams or otherwise, nor is it the sum of the brain's individual parts. After all, in Christian theology, the soul lives on after brain death.

So, it may be justified to describe the soul as a verb, but that leaves open the question of whether Dr Marinus' complementary point, that the soul is not a noun, is similarly justified.

THE SOUL: A NOUN AND A VERB?

Is not there a *thisness* to the human identity? Every human intuits and the Scriptures teach us that the soul is a thing that has being beyond the mere activity, beyond mere existence in the philosophical sense. When we are born, and born again for that matter, the reality of our identity persists past the fleeting moment. In this way, human identity is not a series of actions, as existentialism claims, but it is the string from which each action hangs. In other words, to be human is to be deeply analogue, not merely digital.

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2 David Mitchell, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (New York: Random House, 2010), pp. 145-146.

The human soul is both a noun and a verb, and so is human wholeness. Wholeness is something that is true of a person and something that is pursued by a person. Therefore, we need to come to terms with how the Bible says we are both redeemed to wholeness and called to strive toward wholeness. Since the inauguration of the kingdom of Christ, every Christian who has internalized the gospel has felt the strain of these salvific forces, which both root us and challenge us, both stabilize us and destabilize us, so that we are able to be comforted and move forward. This is the tension inherent in the Christian life: a tension that springs from the *already-ness* and the *not yet-ness* of the salvation we have in Christ. We live between the acute angles of what has been done and what we are awaiting to be done, what is and what will be.

BEING AND BECOMING

In 1894, the systematician Herman Bavinck wrote about the Christian life in terms of two complementary elements, being and becoming. His interest was a modest one, to delineate specific aspects of the Calvinist tradition, a 'specific type among the Protestant churches and confessions' including a 'specific type in the political, social, and civil spheres',[3] in anticipation of the challenges of the coming new century.

His medium, an article in a denominational periodical, means that his discussion remains parochial (seen in his extended discussion of his contemporary Dutch church). He does, however, make forays into broader Christian experience. For instance, he describes how Calvinism teaches participation and celebration of worldly endeavours in the service of communion with God. He writes,

3 Herman Bavinck, 'The Future of Calvinism,' *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* n. 17, 1894, p. 3.

> [Calvinism] is active, points out to each man his moral calling, and urges him to labor in this with all his might. On the other hand, it is no less averse to that worldly type of Christianity which would transplant the turmoil and clamor, the agitation and strain of our times, within the pale of Christianity. Calvinism maintains the independent value of religion, and does not suffer it to be swallowed up by morality. It has a vein of deep mysticism and it cultivates a devout godliness. It considers God alone as the highest good, and communion with Him as supreme happiness. Calvinism sets the rest of being over against the restlessness of becoming, and makes us feel the pulsation of eternity in every moment of time.[4]

Bavinck's contrast between 'being' and 'becoming' cuts through so much confusion about the Christian identity and life. There are those who see the Christian life as merely a matter of being, or rather of transformed being, and redemption as a fact of Christian being, something completed, with nothing else to attain. On the other side of the spectrum, are those who see Christianity as merely becoming, something to strive for, to pursue, a kind of 'work'. Bavinck argues that his Calvinist tradition is robust because it prioritizes being, but we should note that he does not reject the reality of becoming. His point is one of priority not validity.

Bavinck didn't come up with this himself. He is giving voice to the Apostle Paul's well-known ethical system which is itself a far-reaching investigation of the intersection between being and becoming, of identity and progression, of consistency and diachronicity. This dynamic is often referred to by the label *indicative-imperative*. That which *is* undergirds and compels that which *should be*. God's redeemed are loved by God, so they ought to live as those who are loved by God. Those who

4 Bavinck, 'Future,' p. 20.

are in Christ have the essence of a 'new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17), and that essence gives birth to what we might call an existential change through personal transformation. Whatever we call it, regeneration leads to an experience of *becoming* that is rooted in, springs out of, and gives expression to the soil of *being*.[5]

Martin Luther famously spoke of the Christian life in terms of *simul justus et peccator*, 'at once righteous and sinner'. The first modifier speaks to being, while the second, or the awareness of the second, speaks to becoming. Luther did not believe this paradox to be eternal in nature. He knew that the just angels of our existence would prevail, but such hope can only be true under the generation of the self by the power of the Spirit of Christ. The paradox itself demands a progression, a becoming that results from the fact of being made just. Becoming flows first and foremost from being.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT OUR BEING AND BECOMING?

In this book, I ask certain significant biblical texts what they have to say about the being and becoming. Is such a distinction helpful and if so how do its parts relate to one another? Do these categories, being and becoming, provide a generative algebra for thinking through certain theological questions? Are they formative in thinking about wholeness in the Christian life?

5 Elsewhere, Bavinck uses being and becoming to distinguish the Creator from creature: 'The doctrine of God's immutability is of the highest significance for religion. The contrast between being and becoming marks the difference between the Creator and the creature. Every creature is continually becoming. It is changeable, constantly striving, seeks rest and satisfaction, and finds rest in God, in him alone, for only he is pure being and no becoming. Hence, in Scripture God is often called the Rock …' (*The Doctrine of God*, trans. by William Hendricksen [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977, reprint of 1951 ed.], p. 149).

This book is part of a larger discourse taking place in Christian tradition, so the discussion found here will lean heavily on the well of theory already put forward on the topic of being and becoming, and in the sphere of soteriology, justification and sanctification. The argument of this book supports the use of this dichotomy in the Christian life, not as mutually exclusive entities but rather as related both consecutively and complementarily. Being precedes becoming, and becoming fulfills being. They make up two parts seeking wholeness.

The current discussion, however, will investigate individual biblical texts, what they have to say about wholeness in the human life as related to redemption from sin and unto glory. And this study will be deliberately interested in the interaction between the Old Testament and the New.

The Old Testament Scriptures present a case study in being and becoming at the level of the nation state, a case study that gives the outline of the Christian life and life of the church like a silhouette outlines the object that gives it its shape, or a blue-print anticipates the building it describes in detail.[6] In other words, the Hebrew and Aramaic witnesses should not escape notice by those living on this side of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

In the ancient setting of the Old Testament, the twin dynamics of being and becoming are hashed out in treaties between king and subordinates, perhaps most clearly attested to in the archaeological finds from the ancient Hittite Empire unearthed in the early twentieth-century Turkish countryside. These treaties are notable for their similar structure, each establishing a historical relationship and identity of the two parties before cataloguing the behavior that should spring out

6 Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 10:11; Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 8:5; 9:11-12; 10:1.

of said relationship. The parties would then ratify the treaty by ritual mutilation of animals, effigies, or other signs representing the results of failure.

The books of the Old Testament, intelligible and relevant to their contexts as they were, articulate God's relationship with His people in a similar manner. Israel's identity is defined by her relationship to Him. They are His people; He has thrown in his lot with them, and they with Him, however falteringly, and this relationship creates for them a new identity, a new state of being. Here the situation is expressed in terms of wholeness and fragmentation. How should God's people pursue wholehearted love of the Lord? How should they resist the pull to a fragmented life? How do they mend the perforation that divides their life between family, friends, work, public, private, earthly and heavenly? Where do they find wholeness?

The Old Testament has much to say on this score, and we will look at several key passages that shed light on the question of wholeness.

In the modern setting, we have no lack of counselors. At least in America, there's always been a tendency that pulls toward wholeness and its corollary simplicity. The Puritans defined themselves around a simple life that culminated in simple worship on Sunday morning. We see it in Henry David Thoreau's deliberate self-exile in the Connecticut woods, from which he returned with the famous proclamation to 'simplify, simplify, simplify'. He was arguing that the good life is revealed in the alarmingly simple tasks needed for one to survive, and that such simplicity is better than the fragmented life complicated by the emerging technologies of the mid-nineteenth century—oh, the horror of the telegraph!

The quest for wholeness and simplicity in life is just as fervent today, particularly in the educated classes: simple clothing,

minimalist design, locavore dining, and thinking about these things while thumbing through the latest edition of *Real Simple* magazine, picked up at the local Whole Foods.

The effect is sadly limited. Many set out to eat, pray, love, but end up with binge, purge, regret.

WHOLENESS AND THE *SHEMA*

All this interest in wholeness and simplicity is fine, and a lot of it is wise, but notice the logic of it. The working theory holds that if we can simplify things outside of ourselves, we can affect a deeper simplicity inside of ourselves. In short, this simplification is aimed at our circumstances, the world around us. It focuses on the things in our lives that by definition are not we ourselves.

Biblical simplicity is different, because it springs up from the heart of the lover of a simple God.

A foundational creed of the Scriptures, the *Shema*, gives expression to the identity of God's people and the solemn but celebratory activity that must flow from it. Named for its Hebrew word, which means 'hear' or 'obey' in the imperative mood, the *Shema* can be found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

This Mosaic creed exerts significant influence over the story of the Old Testament, especially the histories of Joshua through