

“WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?”:
THE TRINITARIAN IDENTITY OF JESUS CHRIST
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“Who do you say I am?” This question posed by Jesus to His followers remains one of the most important questions of human decision and life. It is a question that every follower—and would-be follower—needs to answer on a personal basis. Jesus’ stern rebuke of Peter’s [mis]understanding of the Messiah (Mark 8:33) exemplifies that our response to this question has radical ramifications about who we are, what we do, and how we relate with Jesus. A quick survey of available literature reveals a plethora of competing responses to this one question from all sorts of persons and communities. Many still seem to test Jesus’ patience by proposing multiple Christologies that sound semantically accurate—using jargons popular and acceptable to the church—but are erroneous in elucidation.¹ This is where Bruce McCormack’s distinction between *formal* and *material* Christology is helpful.² Although many talk about Christ at the formal level, the material content of these Christ-speeches vary from each other. The crux of the issue is: “Who is the Jesus of our Christ-speech? Is He the Christ of the Gospels or a Christ fashioned after our own imagination?”³

¹ James R. Edwards, “Who Do Scholars Say that I Am?” *Christianity Today* 40 (1996): 14-20; Eric Miller, “Who Do Your Books Say that I Am?: New Volumes Tell Us About our Lord and our Cultural Moment,” *Christianity Today* 51 (2007): 38-41; Raymond Brown, “Who Do Men Say that I Am: Modern Scholarship on Gospel Christology,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 2 (1975): 106-23; Ann Christie, “Who Do You Say I Am: Answers from the Pews,” *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 4 (2007): 181-94; Cham Kaur-Mann, “Who Do You Say I Am: Images of Jesus,” *Black Theology* 2 (2004): 19-44; and Byron L. Sherwin, “Who Do You Say I Am? (Mark 8:29): A New Jewish View of Jesus,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 31 (1994): 255-267.

² Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 453-4.

³ See Dick O. Eugenio, “Christ-centered Preaching in the Postmodern World: Problems, Challenges, and Suggestions,” *Torch Trinity Journal* 17 (2014): 214-28.

Christ of the Gospels

Before discussing the personal identity of Jesus, a few honest remarks need to be put in place. Every Christ-elucidation is guided by an unthematic or salient set of criteria. This paper is no exemption. I would like to highlight some of the already established criteria for biblical and orthodox Christology that are important in this paper.⁴ In addition to biblical fidelity, first, the personal identity of Jesus must be located in the matrix of relationships. The Gospels do not present an individualistic or detached Christ. In fact, Jesus is referred to as “Jesus of Nazareth” (John 18:5), “son of Joseph” (John 1:45), and “the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). Jesus’ personal identity is not a matter of *being as* but *being with*. Hence, secondly, Jesus’ identity must be trinitarianly conceived. As a person, Jesus must be known in relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit. We learn this from recent trinitarian proposals to move beyond substantialist approaches in favor of communion-based understandings of the Trinity.⁵ Finally, Jesus’ personal identity must meet the exigencies of the human life. A relational-trinitarian view of Christ offers rich insights about our own Christian identity and calling. This is especially true for us ministers, who, whether we care to admit it or not, form our ministerial identities based on our biblical-theological knowledge.

In the light of the three criteria above, this paper proposes that we should answer the question “Who do you say I am?” in the following manner: Jesus is the obedient Son of the Father and the dependent Human on the Holy Spirit.

⁴ See for example Roger Haight’s list in “The Case for Spirit Christology,” *Theological Studies* 53 (1992): 259-61; and Myk Habets, “Spirit Christology: Seeing in Stereo,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11 (2003): 199-203.

⁵ See Bruce D. Marshall, “Trinity,” in *Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (ed. Gareth Jones; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004): 183-203.

Obedient Son of the Father

Jesus lived on earth as the obedient Son of the Father who sent Him (John 6:38; 20:21). As Richard W. Daniels asserts, “the Son’s obedience as demonstrated in the economy of salvation has its origin in that ultimate eternal status of His as the Son of the Father.”⁶ Jesus’ obedience is an obedience of equals. When Paul referred to Jesus’ obedience to death, “even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8), he first affirmed that Jesus was “in the very nature God” (Phil 2:6), but did not take advantage of His ontological equality with God as a license to non-submission; rather, “he made himself nothing” by “taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil 2:6-7). Jesus’ kenotic obedience is a self-imposed emptying. His filial obedience to the Father goes along with His positive intention to glorify the Father (John 10:29; 14:28). In addition, the logic of His self-debasing obedience is His filial love of the Father: “I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me” (John 14:31).

It is easy to predicate the whole-life obedience of Jesus by alluding to His consubstantial relation to the Father. This, however, begs the question: “Why did Jesus have to obey if He was divine?” The concept of “divine obedience” is certainly baffling. Moreover, flat recourse to the divinity of Jesus neglects the equally important fact of His humanity. His obedience was the obedience of the God-man. Insights provided by kenotic Christology are helpful here. Even though He is God, He did not take advantage of this in His earthly life. He remained God with all the divine powers accessible to Him, but chose to pour Himself out in obedience to the Father and in service to humanity.⁷ Bruce McCormack’s proposal that *kenosis* be understood as addition, instead of subtraction, is important. Jesus did not experience a reduction of divinity in

⁶ Daniels, “‘To Fulfill All Righteousness’: The Saving Merit of Christ’s Obedience,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 5 (2013): 52.

⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letters to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 210-11.

the incarnation. Instead of deprivation of divine qualities, the Son of God added to Himself finite human nature, along with its weaknesses. He assumed our limitations. He emptied Himself by adding to Himself our human frailties.⁸

Dependent Human on the Holy Spirit

As One who assumed human finitude, how did Jesus accomplish His whole-life obedience to the Father? It is here that pneumatic Christology is helpful. The human weaknesses of Jesus is met by the strength of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' total and humble obedience to the Father is through His absolute dependence on the Holy Spirit. This is Jesus' trinitarian identity and life-mission. His obedience to the Father is impossible without His dependence on the Holy Spirit and His dependent relationship with the Holy Spirit does not make sense apart from His obedience to the Father. Who Jesus is in the Gospels revolves around these two equal relationships.⁹ Jesus' dependent relationship to the Holy Spirit, in essence, is not different from His obedient relationship to the Father. At the core of both relationships is the *kenosis* of Jesus. In relationship to the Father, Jesus emptied Himself of will and glory; in relation to the Spirit, He emptied Himself of dignity and power. It must be pointed out, however, that Jesus' *kenosis* is the will of the Father but accomplished through the Holy Spirit. Because Jesus was full of the self-effacing Spirit, He was able to empty Himself of glory and power. The self-effacing Spirit enabled the self-effacing of Jesus. Jesus' trinitarian identity is His exocentric identity.

Jesus' pneumatological resource sufficiently addresses the how of Jesus' whole-life obedience. This should not come as a surprise, since Jesus is described as one "full of the Spirit" (Luke 4:1). For Richard S. Taylor, to be "filled" is to be full of, wholly occupied with, and

⁸ Bruce L. McCormack, "For Us and Our Salvation: Incarnation and Atonement in the Reformed Tradition," *Studies in Reformed Theology and History* 1 (Spring 1993): 1-38.

⁹ Christoph Schwöbel, "Christology and Trinitarian Thought," in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act* (ed. C. Schwöbel; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 141.

completely under the influence of something. Using the contrast between wine-fullness and Spirit-fullness in Ephesians 5:18, he highlights that a person filled with wine is thoroughly influenced by wine. His physical functions, such as the simple act of walking, is influenced by wine, along with his thought processes, inhibitions, and emotions. In the same way, to be filled with the Spirit is to be thoroughly influenced by the Spirit. One's actions, ways of thinking, decision-making, conduct, and dispositions are influenced by the Spirit. Jesus' reliance on the Spirit is inseparable to His Spirit-fullness.¹⁰ In fact, the whole life of Jesus is lived in the Spirit. He was conceived by the Spirit (Matt 1:20; Luke 1:35), baptized with the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10), led by the Spirit (Matt 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1), anointed by the Spirit to minister (Luke 4:14, 18-19), and raised from the dead in the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 3:18). Even His exorcisms are in the power of the Spirit (Matt 12:28). Jesus is the *Christos*, whose life and ministry are permeated through and through by the Spirit.¹¹ As One who emptied Himself of the advantages of divinity, Jesus had to rely not on His own divinity and power but on the divinity and power of the Spirit. The paradox of the incarnation is profound: God became human to rely on God. Furthermore, it must be remembered that Jesus' filial obedience to the Father is grounded in love (John 14:31; 15:10). It is no coincidence, therefore, that the fruit of the Holy Spirit is love (Gal 5:22). As the *Christos*, He received both the gifts and fruit of the Spirit to accomplish His earthly mission.

Life and Ministry of Jesus

“Christ is able to have a relationship with God, to live in obedience, and to fulfill his messianic mission,” John R. Coulson writes, “only because he has God's Spirit indwelling and empowering

¹⁰ Taylor, *Exploring Christian Holiness*, vol. 3, *The Theological Formulation* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1985), 188-90.

¹¹ Leopoldo A. Sanchez, “A Life in the Spirit of Christ: Models of Sanctification as Sacramental Pneumatology,” *Logia* 22 (2013): 10.

him.”¹² What follows here is a theological narration of the story of Jesus while highlighting—from His conception to resurrection—the most evident moments of His obedience to the Father and dependence on the Holy Spirit.

The Word Made Flesh

Our Evangelical cruci-centricism can easily sway us to overlook the obedience of the Son in the incarnation. Our soteriological emphasis on John 3:16 easily neglects the succeeding verse that speaks of the Father’s sending of the Son “into the world” in order to fulfill His salvific work (John 3:17; 6:38; 8:42). What is crucial here is that Jesus “entered our world” (John 16:28; 12:46) *via* the incarnation. The incarnation, therefore, is the first sign of the Son’s obedience to the Father. If, as Kathleen Anne McManus argues, the incarnation is the Son’s “absolute vulnerability—vulnerability in the flesh,”¹³ then the incarnation already entails Jesus’ *sacrificial* obedience to the will of the Father who sent Him. From being with the Father in glory “before the world began” (John 17:5; also 1:1), Jesus “came from the Father” (John 1:14). He is the obedient *apostolos* of God (Heb 3:1), the ultimate Hebraic *shaliach*,¹⁴ sent by the Father to be born in the flesh and dwell among us (John 1:14). His dependence on the Holy Spirit in the incarnation is also undeniable. Jesus is conceived through the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:35). He was dependent on the “Spirit of paraphysicality,” whose creation role is to bring and sustain physical existence (Psa 104:10-14, 30).¹⁵ Even though He is God and could have come in the

¹² Coulson, “Jesus and the Spirit in Paul’s Theology: The Earthly Jesus,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 79 (2017): 95.

¹³ McManus, “Who Do You Say That I AM?” 141.

¹⁴ C. K. Barrett, “Shaliah and Apostle,” in *New Testament Studies in Honour of David Daube* (ed. E. Bammel, C. K. Barrett, and W. D. Davies; Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 89-102.

¹⁵ Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., “The Spirit Rests on the Son Paraphysically,” in *The Lord and Giver of Life: Perspectives on Constructive Pneumatology* (ed. David H. Jensen; London: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 87-95.

flesh in His own power, He chose to subject Himself to the benevolence of the life-giving Spirit (Gen 2:7; Ezek 37:1-10). Jesus is the “Pneumatized Christ” at His birth.¹⁶

Baptism

The baptism narrative does not only reveal Jesus’ trinitarian identity; it also insinuates His obedience to the Father. As the One sent to redeem the world, He underwent a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4) “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15). He came to fulfill the law (Matt 5:17) under the Father’s compulsion.¹⁷ Thus, “to fulfill all righteousness” refers to Jesus’ obedience to the will of the Father’s instituted method of forgiveness of sins revealed in the demands of the law (see Lev 17:11). In His baptism, He sacrificially placed the sins of humanity upon His shoulders as our representative and substitute. In between Jesus’ fulfillment of the prophesied “seed of the woman” (Gen 3:15) and the *proto-euangelion* (Gen 3:21) was His vicarious baptism of repentance. Furthermore, “in the waters of the Jordan,” Sanchez succinctly summarizes, “the obedient Son receives the Spirit in the flesh to begin his ministry as our Suffering Servant (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21). Christ’s reception and bearing of the Spirit gives [His] life a cruciform trajectory, [and] sets him on a path to the cross.”¹⁸ In short, the descent of the Spirit visible in Jesus’ water baptism points to His coming baptism of blood (Luke 12:50). The fulfillment of the requirements of the law requires the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Temptation

The Synoptic Gospels seem to put significant emphasis on Jesus’ victory over temptations as the immediate evidence of His messianic confirmation (Matt 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1). Luke, by

¹⁶ Y. Congar, *The Word and the Spirit* (trans. D. Smith; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986), 101.

¹⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Person and Life of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 18-19.

¹⁸ Sanchez, “Life in the Spirit of Christ,” 11.

stating that Jesus was “full of the Spirit” right at the beginning of the temptations (Luke 4:1), made the important assertion that the unction of the Spirit is the hinter ground of the victory of Jesus. Hence, when the writer of Hebrews affirmed the sinlessness of Jesus (4:15), His pneumatic enablement must be remembered. It is to be granted that the enabling role of the Spirit in Jesus’ victory over temptations is not explicitly mentioned in the Gospels, but Paul’s statements about living in the Spirit provide sufficient foundation to deduce the Spirit’s enabling role in moral action (Rom 8:12-13; 1 Cor 10:13).¹⁹ Moreover, the Old Testament is deeply aware of pneumato-conditioned obedience (Ezek 36:27; see also Deut 30:11-14). Spirit-fullness and obedience to God’s decrees are inseparable. The temptation narratives, placed within the context of His messianic anointing, are about Jesus’ messianic obedience. The devil’s temptations were geared to make Jesus act as the privileged Son of God, not as a fragile human reliant on the Holy Spirit (“If you are the Son of God, ...” Matt 4:3, 6).

Itinerant Ministry

Luke transitioned his narrative from Jesus’ temptation to His Galilean ministry by saying that “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14). Jesus is the prophesied anointed Servant of the Lord called to lift up the broken-hearted, preach the good news, bring deliverance, and proclaim God’s kingdom on earth (Luke 4:18-19; see Isa 61:1-2). He was dependent on the eschatological Spirit of Truth (Num 29:11) to be rabbi-prophet (Mark 5:35; 9:5; 14:45; John 1:38; 3:2; 20:16). He was dependent on the *Holy* Spirit to drive out evils spirits (Matt 12:28). Jesus was dependent on the Spirit of creation, beauty and life (Gen 1:2) in order to bring healing to people (Acts 10:38). In addition to His pneumatic dependency, Jesus unashamedly admitted that everything He did was by the authority of God given Him (John 5:27;

¹⁹ Coulson, “Jesus and the Spirit in Paul’s Theology,” 86.

Matt 28:18). Jesus' ministry is characterized by His "transcendent act of humiliation"²⁰ to the Holy Spirit in total dependence and to the Father in radical obedience. He did nothing by Himself other than what the Father told and commanded Him (John 4:34; 5:19, 27). He portrayed Himself as the obedient Servant of the Lord whose entire life was characterized by "self-conscious dependence and delight in the will of God" (Ps 40:8).²¹ His itinerant ministry reveals His consecration as the Suffering Servant-Son sent by the Father on a mission.²²

Crucifixion

Jesus' obedience from His circumcision in submission to the Law (Luke 2:21) to "the blood of his circumcision to the blood of his cross," John Owen writes, "was attended with suffering."²³ The logical destination of Jesus' incarnate life of obedient vulnerability is the cross. The incarnation, circumcision, and baptism narratives anticipate the crucifixion. In fact, His missional obedience to the Father finds its vivid manifestation precisely at Calvary (Phil 2:8). As the obedient *ben-ayith*, "son of the house," He was sent to suffer and die at the hands of the people He sought to serve (see the parable of tenants, Matt 21:33-39). He knew that He was under compulsion to fulfill the Father's will made known in the bloody demands of the Law (Gen 3:21; Lev 17:11; Heb 9:22). This does not mean that Jesus' obedience to death was deterministic or mechanical. His obedience was volitional. The drama recorded in the Garden of Gethsemane portrays Jesus' genuine struggle toward full obedience (Matt 26:36-44; Mark 14:32-36; Luke 22:39-44). That He bargained with the Father reveals the tension between obedience and potential noncompliance, or between compulsion and volition. Jesus' obedience was not

²⁰ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 75.

²¹ Daniels, "To Fulfill All Righteousness," 54.

²² Torrance, *Incarnation*, 69.

²³ Quoted in Urban, "John Milton, Paradox, and the Atonement: Heresy, Orthodoxy, and Jesus' Whole-Life Obedience," *Studies in Philology* 112 (2015): 826.

automatic. He chose to obey. His death on the cross was something He willed (John 10:28), springing from His perfect filial love of the Father and His unquestioning submission to the righteous judgment of the Father.²⁴ Jesus yielded to the logic of grace the Father instituted, i.e. the necessity of the shedding of blood for the sake of forgiveness (Lev 17:11; Heb 9:22). Jesus submits not only to the demand of a sacrifice, but also to the righteous necessity of the punishment of sin. Jesus surrenders to the Father's will that the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23), not complaining that it is He who must suffer and die as ransom for many (Luke 9:22; Mark 10:45).

Jonathan W. Rusnak argues that Jesus received the Spirit precisely for the cross.²⁵ Jesus' life in the Spirit is cruciform, so the cross is the natural point of convergence of the pneumatic dimensions of the Christ-event.²⁶ As Rusnak writes, "While instances of Jesus' Spirit-bearing may be cited throughout the Gospel narratives, it is preeminently at the cross where Jesus, filled with the Spirit, is the obedient Son of the Father, the Suffering Servant for the sake of the world, and the victorious Lord over Satan and all God's enemies."²⁷ The paschal mystery must find its proper place in Pneumatic Christology. This is an important corrective. Whether we dare to admit or not, our doctrine of the cross is culpable of adoptionistic Christology. This is most evident in the so-called historical models of atonement, which are all noticeably bereft of robust pneumatological features. Crucial here is that fact that Jesus is *Christos* in His life and death.

²⁴ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 80. Leroy Andrew Huizenga sees the parallel between the Isaac of the *Aqedah* and the obedient Yes of Jesus to the cross, in "Obedience Unto Death: The Matthean Gethsemane and Arrest Sequence and the *Aqedah*," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009): 507-26.

²⁵ Rusnak, "Shaped by the Spirit," *Logia* 24 (2015): 17.

²⁶ Leopoldo A. Sanchez, "Receiver, Bearer, and Giver of God's Spirit: Jesus' Life and Mission in the Spirit as the Ground for Understanding Christology, Trinity and Proclamation," (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2003), 79.

²⁷ Rusnak, "Shaped by the Spirit," 17.

While the Gospels emphasize the life of Jesus the *Christos*, the Pauline epistles emphasize the death of Jesus the *Christos*. Paul's crucicentric theology and his favorite designation of Jesus the Anointed One are inseparable (Rom 1:4, 6-8; 3:24; 5:1, 6, 8; 6:23; 9:5; 15:3, 7, 19).²⁸ The writer of Hebrews is even more explicit that it is "through the eternal Spirit" that Jesus "offered Himself unblemished to God" on the cross (Heb 9:14).

Resurrection

It is also Paul who asserts that Jesus was raised from the dead in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 6:4; 8:11; 1 Cor 6:14; 2 Cor 13:4; 1 Tim 3:16). This is to be expected. First, as a Jew, Paul shared in the prevalent Jewish expectation concerning the Spirit as the agent of resurrection (Ezek 37:1-14; Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15:12-34). Moreover, the mysterious life-giving work of the Spirit in the virgin birth naturally leads to an anticipation of the resurrection. In the Spirit, Jesus was born of the virgin womb and the virgin tomb. Jesus who emptied Himself of divine privileges is dependent on the power of God in His life, death, and resurrection (Acts 2:32; 1 Peter 3:18). It is in the light of this that Romans 1:4 should also be understood. Dunn sees Romans 1:4 as an evidence of an adoptionistic two-stage Christology, but it should better be read in the light of the obedience of the Son.²⁹ The sonship of Jesus—affirmed in the Father's voice when Jesus obediently accepted His mission to be baptized in water and blood under the power of the Holy Spirit—is re-affirmed by the Father immediately after Jesus fulfilled His baptism of blood. The Father was pleased with the vicarious obedience of Jesus even to death. The resurrection, therefore, is the tangible sign of the Father's acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus and the ultimate "Yes" to forgiveness and life.

²⁸ Coulson, "Jesus and the Spirit in Paul's Theology," 81-82.

²⁹ Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit*, vol. 1, *Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 142-3.

Conclusions

The identity, life and ministry of Jesus are all characterized by His relationships with the Father and the Holy Spirit. “The story of Jesus,” Schwöbel succinctly summarizes, is “the story of a life constituted by and conducted in the Spirit which is obedient to God the Father to the death on Calvary and to the resurrection on the third day.”³⁰ The Scriptures consistently present Jesus as the Son-Christ. This is Jesus’ trinitarian-relational identity. The primordial communion that the Triune God is, refuses to present an individualized Jesus Christ in the Gospels. In the same way that the Father is not the Father apart from the begotten Son and the Holy Spirit as the bond of love,³¹ and that the Holy Spirit is not the Holy Spirit apart from the Father and the Son who both send, the Son is not Son apart from the Father who begets and the Spirit who breathes life.³²

Jesus’ revealed identity has radical implications for our Christian lives, but I would like to leave the task of spelling these out to the respondents. It is sufficient here, as a rudimentary comment, that our understanding of Christ-likeness needs to be made faithful to the trinitarian identity of Jesus Christ. Questions that require further reflections include: What does imitation of Christ mean in relation to Jesus’ challenge that we must be born of the Spirit (John 3:5-7)? What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18) and live in the Spirit (Rom 8:1-17; Gal 5:16-18, 25)? What does imitation of Christ mean in relation to the fact that we, like Jesus, call God our “Abba” (John 1:12; Rom 8:14-16; 1 John 3:10; 5:2)? Is there a qualitative difference between us and Jesus Christ that prohibits us from obeying the Father and depending on the Holy Spirit? What does it mean to be an obedient child of the Father and to depend on the Holy Spirit

³⁰ Schwöbel, “Christology and Trinitarian Thought,” 140-1.

³¹ David Coffey, “The Holy Spirit as the Mutual Love of the Father and the Son,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 193-229.

³² Contrary to Arianism, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed says that Jesus is “eternally begotten” of the Father.

as a human today? Answers to these questions are extremely helpful in Christian spiritual formation, especially for us in the Wesleyan-holiness tradition.

I end my thoughts here to invite reflections from others.