

BELONGING TO GOD: THE QUEST FOR A COMMUNAL SPIRITUALITY IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD

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Need a job? Looking for a lover? Feng shui can help! boasted the advertisement in a New York paper. Through the ancient principles of feng shui (Chinese for “wind” and “water”), the ad promised, “you can change your environment and change your life.” How? Nancy SantoPietro, the psychotherapist turned feng shui specialist who placed the ad, offered one example. She counsels people who are plagued by interpersonal problems to “hang a pink shui crystal on a nine-inch red string in your relationship corner.”¹

THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT: PEOPLE ON A QUEST

Relationships... This topic routinely tops the list of concerns people voice today. Why? Perhaps because relationships have increasingly come to be viewed as the one antidote for a deeper longing, namely, the craving for a sense of purpose or meaning in a seemingly purposeless world. Especially today's younger adults (those whom Douglas Coupland has dubbed “Generation X”) look to relationships to dispel what GenX writer Tom Beaudoin calls his peers’ “intense sense of aloneness” nursed by their profound “anxiety about a lack of meaning in their lives”² and the “significant emptiness...silence, and...darkness” they feel.³ Indeed, people of various ages—albeit in somewhat differing ways—are embarking on a quest to attain this elusive dream. As the headline on the cover of a recent issue of Canada’s leading news magazine, *Maclean’s*, put it, “Mainstream North America searches for meaning in life.”⁴

A Confused Quest. Where should we turn in the midst of our anxiety? Today people are plagued by uncertainty as to what they are in fact seeking, let alone where the goal of this search can be found. This uncertainty is evidenced in Alanis Morissette’s award-winning song “All I Really Want” (1996). In the dishevelled lyrics, Morissette sifts through the competing desires she finds present within and around

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her. Yet between the lines of seemingly disconnected and hopelessly superficial preferences is evidence that her genuine desires lie deeper. Living in a world of picky people, what Morissette really wants is patience and peace. Feeling herself knocked down and strung out, she longs for deliverance and some means "to calm the angry voice." Alone and frustrated by the apathy and flippancy of others, she desperately yearns for a soul-mate, a kindred spirit, someone who truly understands.

Equally confusing is the plethora of proposed remedies for our malaise. Driven by the consumer mentality indicative of contemporary society with its smorgasbord of options, dazzling array of proposals and chorus of discordant voices calling from every conceivable direction, today's seekers move en masse from fad to fad, following the crowd in a never-ending attempt to keep up with the latest "rage." Thus, North Americans gobble up the "how to" books pushed on Oprah's show and sign up for the latest therapy conferences that claim to provide the pathway to the realization of their vaguely formed hopes.

A *"Postmodern" Quest*. The new shape of the human quest is indicative of the demise of the modern world, constructed as it was upon the foundation of a deified science worshiped as the final arbiter of truth and the attendant elevation of the material as the sole dimension of existence. The twilight of modernism has given rise to a new outlook, the so-called postmodern ethos.

One subplot of an early episode of *Star Trek: Voyager* finds Kathryn Janeway musing to her second officer, Chakotay, how she senses an intense burden as the commander of a ship lost in space. Later her dutiful confidant offered a solution. Chakotay invited Janeway to join in an ancient ceremony that would put the captain in touch with her animal guide. The mantra he recited during the ritual expressed hope that "out there" might be "one powerful being" who could give the captain "the answers she seeks."

A *"Spiritual" Quest*. This cultural artifact illustrates one intriguing aspect of the postmodern situation. In a manner unprecedented in the late modern era, contemporary North Americans appear to be open to the spiritual dimension of life.⁵ People seem to have grown dissatisfied with what they consider to be the truncated, materialist focus indicative of the modern world. And as a result they are increasingly ready to search for answers beyond the realm of the material.

"Spirituality" is "in," however, precisely at the time when participation in traditional organized religion has nose-dived. Eight out of ten adult Canadians say they believe in God, eighty-two percent consider themselves to be "somewhat" or "very spiritual," and about half report that their lives have become more spiritual in the last several years.⁶ Nevertheless, less than 25% attend church regularly. The students in David Batstone's religion classes at the University of San Francisco offered a similar portrait. Although 80% claim that they are "not religious," the same percentage think of themselves as "spiritual."⁷ Tom Beaudoin puts a face on this statistic. "By the late 1980s," he reminisces about his late teenage years, "I was... alienated from official religion. Despite all this, I still considered myself unmistakably spiritual."⁸ He later explains the broader generational tendency he typified: "Xers take symbols, values, and rituals from various religious traditions and combine them into their personal 'spirituality.' They see this spirituality as being far removed from 'religion,' which they frequently equate with a religious institution."⁹

Spirituality is indeed "in." Words like "values," "soul" and "spiritual" are common par-

lance today, even among persons who care little about Christianity. This mood is evident in Joan Osborne's mid-1990s hit song, "One of Us." Picturing humankind as lost passengers on a bus headed nowhere, the lyrics raise the question as to whether God might be a co-traveller trying to find his way "back home" just as we are. But Osborne then asks if all this requires that we believe "in Jesus, the saints and all the prophets."

This, then, is the context in which we live. Ours is a "spiritual" age. The interest in the spiritual and the search for spirituality that has emerged as so important to the contemporary ethos has far-reaching implications for us as we seek to point those to whom God has called us to minister to the true well-spring of spiritual life. And it offers a hopeful context for thinking through what lies at the heart of Christian spirituality.

THE SPIRITUAL QUEST AS THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

In one sense, the current interest in spirituality is the contemporary, postmodern embodiment of the age-old human search for personal identity.

A successful professional in her late 30s, Mary had taken a leave of absence to attend seminary where she expected to find answers to the gnawing questions that kept emerging within her. At one point in her struggle, she requested an appointment with me. Thirty minutes into the session she blurted out, desperately attempting to hold back the tears: "I no longer know who I really am. And I am afraid that if I find out, there won't be a place for me."

Contemplating the vastness and majesty of the universe, the Hebrew psalmist declared in amazement, "what are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Ps. 8:4). As the Psalm suggests, the quest for personal identity is an ancient one. Yet it is taking on a somewhat different form today. We are witnessing a shift in the focal point of the search. This shift involves a rethinking of what constitutes the human person.

The Modern Self. Whereas the Psalmist placed humans within the context of creation, in the modern era the human person was pried loose from creation, now understood as "nature." And in contrast to the Psalmist who viewed human identity in connection with our "home" within the created order, the modern response to the question of human identity came in the form of the construction of the self.

In the wake of the Enlightenment, many philosophers declared that lying at the core of what it means to be human is reason or rationality. Further, in their opinion rationality entailed being endowed with the ability to disengage from one's natural environment and social context, so as to be able to objectify the world. Disengagement from the objectified world formed the foundation for the modernist ideal: individual autonomy, understood as the ability to choose one's own purposes from within oneself apart from the controlling influence of natural and social forces.¹⁰ In this manner, the paradigmatic human became the "scientist," the one who observes, categorizes and tests hypotheses about the world,¹¹ together with the technician, the one who refashions the world to create a "home."

The elevation of individual autonomy led to an atomistic understanding of the social realm. This approach viewed society as a collection of autonomous, independent selves, each of whom pursues his (and sometimes her) own personally chosen ends. In short, the modern self is self-created and self-sufficient, the highly centered, "true inner person" per-

sisting through time and standing above the vacillations and shifting relationships that characterize day-to-day living.

The Postmodern Demise of the Self. Whatever else it may be, the postmodern ethos is marked by the rejection of—or even more strongly stated, the deconstruction of—the modern self. Postmoderns realize that rather than the disengaged, isolated observer who exists prior to the construction of society and thus forms the primary building block for the purely contractual social order, the human self is in some sense constituted by social relationships.

Postmodern thinkers routinely picture this engaged human self as a position in a vast web, a nexus, a point of intersection. The postmodern self is a bundle of fluctuating relationships and momentary preferences. In a fast-changing world, this image leads to a highly unstable, impermanent self. As the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard observed, “each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before.”¹² Consequently, the postmodern condition entails the loss of the stability and consistency that characterized the self of the modern ideal. The modern self has given place to the decentered, fleeting self constructed in each moment of existence. Hence, the postmodern condition may be characterized as “psychic fragmentation”—to cite Fredric Jameson’s designation.¹³ And this splintering of the self into multiple subjectivities gives birth to what Johann Roten calls the “chaotic self,”¹⁴ which “attempts to absorb ‘alterity’ in all its forms to overcome separation and isolation, only to find itself in the end in a state of spiritual chaos.”¹⁵

The Postmodern Quest for a Self. The chaos of identity marks the contemporary spiritual quest. Viewed from this perspective, postmodern spirituality entails the chaotic self that emerged from the deconstruction of the autonomous, self-positing, centered self of modernity seeking some semblance of identity beyond the ever fleeting “now” of existence. As a nexus, a bundle of relationships, the postmodern self looks to relationships for identity.¹⁶ And this relationally based identity has a narrative character. To cite Lyotard again, “Even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course.”¹⁷

Communitarians theorize that we view ourselves, others and the world from a specific perspective. At the heart of this perspective is a set of basic categories, beliefs or fundamental ways of speaking, which together comprise what we may call our “interpretive framework.” Through this interpretive framework we experience, make sense of, and speak about ourselves and the world we inhabit. This interpretive framework is especially crucial to personal identity formation, for it provides the categories through which we “tell our story” and thereby organize the diverse aspects of our lives into what we see as a meaningful whole. But the plot line by means of which we organize the isolated events of our lived history is the borrowed plot—the paradigmatic narrative—we derive from the social group (or community of reference) in which we participate.¹⁸ In short, my sense of who I am is determined to a great extent by the group of which I am a member.¹⁹ My acceptance of this community narrative marks my participation in the social group and forms the basis of my sense of personal identity as a member of the community, which in turn provides me with at least a fleeting sense of “home.”

Modern sociologists suggest that religion often plays a crucial role in this process. Writing in 1966, Thomas O'Dea, for example, declared,

Individuals, by their acceptance of the values involved in religion and the beliefs about human nature and destiny associated with them, develop important aspects of their own self-understanding and self-definition. Also, by their participation in religious ritual and worship, they act out significant elements of their own identity. In these ways, religion affects individuals' understanding of *who they are* and *what they are*.²⁰

Similarly, Kingsley Davis noted two decades earlier that a religious community facilitates identity formation by connecting the individual with something transcendent: "religion gives the individual a sense of identity with the distant past and the limitless future. It expands his ego by making his spirit significant for the universe and the universe significant for him."²¹ More recently, thinkers such as Peter Berger have argued that all transcendent visions lying at the foundation of human societies are in a sense religious.²²

On the basis of insights such as these, we can affirm the tendency of people today to understand their search for identity as a spiritual quest. In seeking some reference point beyond their own fleeting selves from which to find meaning for their lives they are "religious," even though they may at the same time shun organized religion. In short, postmodern spirituality is the chaotic postmodern self seeking an identity in relationships with others as co-participants in a social group that is the bearer of a paradigmatic narrative.

But the question remains, What—if anything—can provide the *telos* of the spiritual quest of the postmodern self? What community narrative—if any—offers the answer to the often unacknowledged desire for a semblance of permanency the postmodern self seeks? More specific to our purpose, How can Christian faith best respond to the postmodern self and the contemporary focus on spirituality?

THE GOAL OF THE HUMAN QUEST: BELONGING TO GOD

For the first piece of this puzzle, we turn to the fifth-century church theologian Augustine. Augustine spoke for the entire Christian tradition when he concluded from his own spiritual odyssey, "Thou hast made us for thyself. Therefore, our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee, O God."²³ Christians believe that God is the *telos* of the human quest. But how can we unpack this conviction within the contemporary context?

The Postmodern Quest for God. Douglas Coupland, the best-selling writer who coined the designation "Generation X," perhaps inadvertently provided a contemporary reformulation of Augustine's conclusion. In his intriguing, postmodern novel *Life After God*, the author capsulizes the pilgrimage of the first generation raised "after God"—those who have grown up this side of the demise of the cultural dominance of Christianity and yet find themselves yearning for some sense of the presence of God. Coupland's literary journey comes to a climax with the author baring his own soul. For one brief moment he has found an openness of heart that he doubts he will ever achieve again. Speaking from the depth of his soul he voices an unexpected confession:

My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need

God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.²⁴

Coupland's confession finds echo in Tom Beaudoin's observation. He looks at the pervasiveness of sexuality found in pop culture, for example, and concludes, "How deeply GenX desires God!"²⁵

The postmodern interest in God is often sparked as well by experiences of the miraculous, that is, by events that defy explanation—a category formerly ruled out of court by the scientism of modernity. The widely followed TV series, *The X-Files*, which boasts a faithful audience of 20 million viewers has repeatedly broached this theme. One episode featured Fox Mulder and Dana Scully investigating reports of persons who supposedly carried the stigmata (or Christ's crucifixion wounds) in their bodies. The claimants turned out to be hoaxes, except for a boy whose life Scully, the scientific skeptic of the duo, saved through a series of seemingly coincidental events. Shaken by this, the lapsed Catholic visited the confessional booth and confided to the priest that this experience had awakened in her a fear. "I am afraid that God is speaking," she poignantly declared, "but no one is listening."

From the perspective of Christian theology, the contemporary quest for spirituality, reflecting as it does the desire for personal identity together with the valuing of relationships, is ultimately the search for God. As Augustine and Beaudoin concluded, and pop culture icons like Coupland and Scully evidence, we long for an identity that only God can give through a relationship that only God can fulfill. We are searching for our true identity, which according to the New Testament is God's gracious gift, freely given to us through an unimaginable relationship—becoming God's own children. In short, the goal of our quest for spirituality is a "homecoming," a coming home to God, wherein lies our true identity.

This observation suggests that one of the key theological tasks in the postmodern context is to think through what it means to proclaim that the God of the Bible is the *telos* of our human desire for spirituality. Our challenge is to articulate and to live out the belief that life in relationship with God constitutes "true spirituality," to borrow Francis Schaeffer's descriptor.²⁶

God as the Goal of Christian Spirituality. At the heart of the Bible is the narrative of God acting to bring humans into the fullness of relationship—the true spirituality—that is the goal of our existence. Christians are convinced that coming home to God is the lasting source of personal identity, the answer to the quest of the postmodern self.

Occupying center stage in the personal identity-conferring aspect of the biblical salvation drama is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the one who authors new, spiritual life in us and in this manner brings us through Jesus Christ into relationship with the one whom Jesus called "Father" (John 14:16-23). The New Testament writers refer to this Spirit-led process as "regeneration" (Titus 3:5), a word that carries the metaphorical idea of being "born anew" or "born again" (John 3:1-16). As the agent of a spiritual birth the Spirit mediates to us a special relationship with God. Through the Spirit we become God's spiritual offspring—God's children (John 1:12-13). This new status allows us to enjoy the most intimate fellowship possible. In fact, according to Paul, the indwelling Spirit brings us to address God with the same name of endearment that Jesus himself spoke—"Abba" (Rom.

8:15; Gal. 4:6). Consequently, in causing us to be born into God's family, the Spirit brings us to share in the relationship Jesus enjoyed with the one he called "Father." That is, we participate in Jesus' own sonship, for we are co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17).

The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner has argued convincingly that the interplay of the three trinitarian persons in salvation history offers us a window into the eternal divine life. "Rahner's rule"—the principle that "the economic trinity is the immanent trinity"—suggests that the basis of the dynamic evident in our salvation (our participation in Jesus' relationship with his heavenly Father) lies in the eternal dynamic of the triune God. Our salvation is the outworking of the perichoretic dance of the trinitarian persons.

Since the patristic era, theologians have taught that at the heart of this eternal dynamic is the relationship between the first and second trinitarian persons. Throughout all eternity, the Father loves the Son, and the Son reciprocates the Father's love. Actually, this is the theological meaning of the language "Father" and "Son," for in ancient cultures, the son was the heir, the one upon whom the father lavishes all his wealth.

The entire drama of creation, in turn, flows out of—or is the overflowing of—the eternal relationship the Father shares with the Son. More specifically, as is suggested by Jesus' remark in what is called his "high priestly prayer," God's purpose in creating the world arises out of the Son's desire that others see—that is, know experientially—"the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:24). The Son desires co-inheritors of the wealth his Father bestows on him eternally.

This provides the clue as to why the new birth brings us to participate in the divine love relationship in the position of the Son. Like the Son who eternally receives the Father's love, we too are the recipients of the unbounded love of God the Father. As a result, we are enabled to love God in return, after the pattern of the Son's reciprocating the divine love that has its genesis in the Father's love. As John the Apostle put it, "We love...because [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

We must take this a step farther, however. As Augustine noted, the love the Father shares with the Son is concretized in the Spirit, the third trinitarian person who "proceeds" eternally from the Father and the Son, or perhaps better stated, proceeds from the Father *through* the Son. The love binding the Father and the Son eternally, the divine Spirit, in turn, is sent into the world to complete the divine plan. The Spirit's goal is to bring us to share in the fellowship the Son enjoys with the Father. To this end, the Spirit places us "in Christ," to cite Paul's favorite designation for our new status as believers (e.g., Rom. 8:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1:30; 2 Cor. 1:21; 5:17-19; 12:19; Eph. 1:13). As those who are "in Christ" (and hence "in the Son") we come "home" to the divine life the Father intends for us in the Son, for in Christ, we are the recipients of the eternal love the Father pours out on the Son. In short, the Spirit is God at work, guiding us to our home within the divine life the Father freely shares with us in the Son.

The indwelling Spirit is able to bring us to participate in the eternal relationship the Son enjoys with the Father, because this relationship is who the Spirit in fact is. The Spirit is the personal concretization of the love the Father showers on the Son and the Son reciprocates to the Father. For this reason, when the Spirit indwells us—when we participate in the Spirit—we participate through the Spirit in the relationship the Son enjoys with the Father, as the co-heirs with the Son of the Father's love for the Son. Because we partici-

pate in the divine life in the place of the eternal Son, we truly are the beloved children of our heavenly Father. This identity—being God’s beloved children and being named by God (Rev. 2:17; 3:12)—that God freely bestows on us in the Son by the Spirit marks the fulfillment of our deepest longings and provides the *telos* of our quest for “home.”

While this is the central aspect of the story, it is not the entire story.

THE FOCUS OF THE HUMAN QUEST: BELONGING TO THE COMMUNITY

One of the most popular TV programs of the 1990s, the sit-com *Friends*, centers on a small group of GenXers who share two apartments across the hall from each other. Through thick and thin, good times and bad, these friends laugh with each other, hurt for each other and support one another. But above all the friendship they share gives meaning to their lives. The central message of the series is captured in program’s theme song, “I’ll Be There for You,” which expresses candidly the GenX experience, namely, that the reality of life is a far cry from our anticipations. What the GenXer is experiencing is a joke of a job, a hopeless financial situation and a love life that’s DOA. The chorus, however, expresses the antidote for the aloneness, suffering and brokenness of life. Each member of the little circle of friends promises always to be “there” for the other, because—to cite the last line of the song—“you’re there for me, too.”

In this way, the sitcom offers a GenX response to what Tom Beaudoin sees as the most fundamental question of his generation: “Will you be there for me?” According to Beaudoin, this query touches all aspects of life: “We ask this of our selves, bodies, parents, friends, partners, society, religions, leaders, nation, and even God.” Why? In his words, “The frailty that we perceive threatening all of these relationships continually provokes us to ask this question.”²⁷

Identity in Relationships. The popularity of *Friends* takes us back once again to the insight that we are fundamentally social creatures. In our quest to discover what we really want, we eventually turn away from things to people. Ultimately, we hope to find what can satisfy the deep yearning within us—the yearning to find the place where we can belong, and we hope to discover it in relationships with others. And this leads us to seek out friendships that we hope can provide us with the sense of “belonging” we crave.

Viewed from a Christian perspective, this “turn to relationships” is not misguided. In contrast to the popular misconception that reigned in late modernity, the emptiness—the “homelessness” we feel inside us—can never be filled by the abundance of our possessions, but only in relationships. Indeed, relationships create “place” or “home.” People go astray, however, in the poor relationship choices they make. They often look for belonging in the wrong places. They mess up their lives by getting hooked up with the “wrong crowd”; they enter into relationships that promise a sense of belonging, but in the end only deepened the feeling of isolation. This, however, is not the main problem. Even the most delightful human relationships bring us up short, for as we noted already the ultimate goal of our quest is relationship with God. Because of our finitude and failure we simply cannot create ultimate “place” for each other; we cannot confer fullness of identity.

Once again, we are led to the conclusion that the ultimate source of genuine belonging is God, that our human quest for spirituality is ultimately the search for relationship with God. Yet, there is more to the story. Although we belong to God personally, we do

not receive divine grace and personal identity alone. Rather, belonging to God is closely linked to participation in community, more specifically, in the fellowship of Christ's disciples—the church.

Unfortunately, many people today—boomers and Xers alike—sense a great distance from the church. This situation was vividly portrayed in a series of installments of the comic strip "Betty." Out of curiosity, the couple's teenage son had begun to read the old family Bible. And as a result, he told his parents that he wanted to be baptized. Having no religious background whatever, the parents arbitrarily chose a church from the Yellow Pages. In the pre-baptism interview, the pastor informed them that for the sake of this event they should choose a godparent for their son. Faced with this daunting task, Betty realized that they knew no one who was even remotely religious. In fact, the only acquaintance Betty could recall who wore a cross was her husband's free-wheeling brother.

This widespread sense of disconnectedness is in part the result of the mistaken ideas about the church. One prevalent misconception is closely tied to the individualistic character of our society. Many people—including church people—mistake the church for an organization that a person can join at will, like a civil group or a country club. This is, in fact, a modernist understanding of the church. It treats the faith community as a conglomerate of self-contained individuals, an aggregate of modern selves.

Christ's Fellowship as our Community of Reference. Rather than a voluntary organization, the church is the specifically Christian community of reference. As such it plays a crucial role in the fulfillment of our quest for identity. In fact, it is with one another that we find our identity in God.

Belonging to God entails reinterpreting our personal narrative in accordance with a new plot line. Although the details vary from Christian to Christian, the basic plot of every Christian narrative is the same. Our stories speak about past failure and the reception of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. In these narratives we employ the biblical language of the "old life" and "the new" in keeping with Paul's statement, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17). Hence, Christians resonate with the experience of hymn writer John Newton, who wrote the lyrics from images found in the New Testament: "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

In the spiritual transformation we earlier referred to with the Johannine term "new birth," therefore, we come to see ourselves from a new vantage point—from the vista of the biblical narrative of God's grace in Christ, a vantage point we share together as participants in Christ's community. By reinterpreting our story in this manner we are accepting the story of the Christian fellowship. And as a consequence we have in fact become a part of this particular people.

The Church as a Community of Belonging. The church, then, functions as a "community of belonging." Its gospel message provides us with a new framework for viewing ourselves and the world. In addition, the Christian message embodies a new set of values, especially the values Jesus exemplified (e.g., peace, justice, patience but above all love), which we now desire to live out in our attitudes and actions. This purpose not only marks each of us individually as a disciple of Jesus, it unites us with each other as the community of disciples who share the same values and the same desire to live according to them.

Belonging to God also marks a loyalty to God in Christ. Loyalties, however, are never purely personal; an allegiance always links us with those who share it. By pledging our fidelity to Jesus, we become a part of a new community, the fellowship of all who declare "Jesus is Lord." Although this new allegiance is "vertical"—it binds us to God—it also inaugurates a "horizontal" bond. Allegiance to Christ unites all who share the same fundamental loyalty. But this bond is more than merely the sense of oneness that arises when we realize that we all "love Jesus" in our own way. Rather, our common love for God and our shared allegiance to Jesus forge in us a deep commitment to each other as well. We come to pledge, I will indeed "be there for you," knowing that you are "there for me too."

Ultimately forging us into a people in relationship is the Spirit's doing. Indeed, the Spirit is the one who brings us into relationship with God as our heavenly Father through Christ. But this relationship is not a private matter; it is not something we possess as isolated persons. Instead, because through the Spirit each of us is a child of God, we are related to each other. We are sisters and brothers—a family—a people in relationship. Further, we belong to God because the Spirit draws us out of our alienation into a reconciled relationship with God. However, the biblical writers clearly teach that our sinful estrangement from God taints our relationships on the human level as well. Reconciliation with God, therefore, sets in motion the Spirit's work in bringing about the healing of these relationships as well. In this process, the Spirit transforms us from a collection of individuals into a people or "one body," to use Paul's favorite language to refer to our corporate identity. Hence, the church is far more than an aggregate of "saved" individuals. Rather, we are a people committed to God and to one another. We are a community, a people among whom we find true belonging.

But we have not yet mentioned the most foundational dimension of the relationship between the faith community and our identity. As the Triune One, God is love. God's goal for us, in turn, is that we be the image of God, i.e., that we reflect the divine nature (love). According to the New Testament, the focus of this image-bearing function is humans-in-relationship and more specifically, the church as the foretaste of the new humanity. God wills that the church be a people who in the midst of the fallenness of the present show what God is like. God desires that in our relationships with each other we reflect God's own character and thus shine as the *imago dei*. And effecting the *imago dei* among us is the Spirit's work.

The attempt to understand this dynamic takes us back to the conclusion of the previous section. In the great mystery of belonging to God, the Spirit brings us as God's children to share in the relationship the Son enjoys with the Father. In this manner, we participate in the love that lies at the very heart of the triune God. Participation in God's eternal love, however, is not ours as individuals in isolation; it is a privilege we share. The Spirit's goal, in fact, is to mold us together into one people who participate jointly in the love of God and by our loving relationships show God's great love to all.

Consequently, in contrast to the partial expressions of community we find in TV sitcoms, the family formed by the Spirit is not merely a group of friends who happen to share common experiences or even who happen to speak a common language. Despite all its faults, the church remains a community of believers who, because they participate together in the Holy Spirit, share together in the eternal communion between the Father

and the Son. Ultimately this is why God calls us to be a people committed to each other. We are to be a community of divine love, a people bound together by the love present among us through God's Spirit. And as a result we find in relationship with each other true belonging, for together we belong to God in Christ our Lord through the Spirit who is among us.

In this sense, then, John Fawcett's old hymn expresses well the essence of the communal spirituality Christians enjoy together:

Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.²⁸

NOTES

1. Sharon Doyle Driedger, "Promise of Prosperity: Fad or Fact, Feng Shui is All the Rage," *Maclean's* 110/17 (April 28, 1997):56-57.
2. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 24.
3. Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, p. 117.
4. *Maclean's* 107/41 (October 10, 1994).
5. See, for example, John Naisbitt, *Megatrends 2000*.
6. Sharon Doyle Driedger, "On a Higher Plane," *Maclean's* (Dec. 25, 1995-Jan. 1, 1996): 23.
7. Martin Wroe, "American Pie in the Sky," *Third Way* 18/7 (September 1995): 13.
8. Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 14.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
10. Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 4.
11. Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), pp. 40-41.
12. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. 15.
13. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 90.
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