THE CHALLENGE OF SPIRITUAL INDIVIDUALISM (AND HOW TO MEET IT)

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In the "nation with the soul of a church,"[1] interest in religion has always been high. More people in America attend religious services than in any other developed country, and in recent years increasing numbers are taking a personal interest in religion. According to one poll, 14 percent of Americans belong to a Bible study group.[2] In the wider culture, the figure of Jesus has never been more popular. His picture appears almost regularly on the cover of national magazines. In the weeks after it opened in early 2004, Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ" set all kinds of box office records.[3] And for months, the best-selling hardcover book in America was *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, a mediocre murder mystery, whose back story rests on the speculation that Jesus married and had children.

All this interest in religion, however, does not translate into enthusiasm for conventional Christianity. Instead, many traditional Christian communities are in decline. In *Reclaiming the Church*, John B. Cobb Jr. suggests that the mainline churches of the past are now better described as "oldline," or even "sidelined," institutions.[4] To a greater degree than ever before, people today are more interested in *religion* than in *religions*. They are not aligning themselves with established denominations. They are not looking for a tradition to follow or an organization to join. Instead, they are looking for something that will help them in their personal spiritual quest. For them, the function of religion is basically "therapeutic." Its purpose is to help us feel better about things and cope more effectively with life's challenges.

As is often the case, California provides vivid examples of what is happening on the broader social scene. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* illustrates these developments. "Spiritual Blend Appeals to People of Many

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[1]G. K. Chesterton's expression.

[2]Diane Cole, "Hooked on the Book," *U.S. News & World Report,* March 15, 2004, 78.

[3]As of April 9, 2004, the film, which had grossed $355 million in the U.S.A. and over $100 million in other countries, was well on its way to becoming one of the highest-earning motion pictures of all time (*Los Angeles Times,* April 9, 2004, E8).

[4]John B. Cobb Jr., *Reclaiming the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

Faiths," reads the headline. The story begins with a woman who describes herself as "a nice Jewish, Southern Baptist, Buddhist girl," who relishes this "customized spiritual arrangement." "It works for me," she says. "I literally feel like I am at a buffet." The article goes on to describe the current scene with expressions such as "do-it-yourself religion," "mix-and-match spirituality," "cutting and pasting," and the "smorgasbord approach." The combination of religious diversity and extreme individualism means that "each individual is ultimately the arbiter of personal fulfillment and personal meaning."[5]

Not surprisingly, mix-and-match religion results in some strange combinations. There are born-again Christians, who believe in reincarnation, communication with the dead, and earning salvation through good works. And there are atheists and agnostics, who believe in life after death and the value of accepting Jesus Christ. This approach to religion appeals to people because it makes things so convenient. Those who are religious on their own terms don't face the constraints and demands that established religions make of their adherents. "People can pick the pieces that make them feel good without having to make any changes."[6]

These examples may be extreme, but within American Adventism there are parallels to these general developments. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is going strong, and growing strong, in many parts of the world; but in the U.S.A., the country of its origins, these seismic religious shifts have had an impact, particularly on the younger generation. Young Adventists seem to be more open to religion than at any time in recent memory. They are taking religion seriously and assuming responsibility for their own religious life. But for many of them, this interest does not translate into denominational loyalty. They are looking for a satisfying religious experience wherever they can find it—outside as well as inside Adventism. And many of them have serious questions about the church—not necessarily about specific beliefs and practices, but about the whole idea of corporate religion. As they see it, religion is deeply personal, and that means it is essentially private. Whether or not your religion involves the church is purely discretionary. It is entirely up to you.

This attitude is characteristic of large numbers of the young people I work with—university students, mainly from an Adventist background. In fact, during the thirty years I have taught courses in Adventist beliefs and Christian doctrines, the doctrine of the church consistently meets with more resistance than any other topic we cover. I suspect that this reaction is

⁵K. Connie Kang, "Spiritual Blend Appeals to People of Many Faiths," *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 2003, B2.

⁶Ibid.

characteristic of large segments of younger Adventists, particularly those with the sort of talents and training that the church will sorely need in the years to come.

To distill this challenge to a single expression, let us describe it as the challenge of *spiritual individualism*. It is a challenge that takes at least two forms. One is the conviction that religious beliefs are merely matters of personal preference, which leads people to pick and choose the ones they like and mix them as ingredients of a tossed salad. Another is the conviction that religion is essentially a private matter, which leads people to concentrate on inner experience and to pursue religious goals entirely on their own. Each side of the individualistic challenge is formidable, and each deserves a serious response. This discussion addresses the second one. After briefly tracing the development of this cultural phenomenon, we will explore some ways to respond to it.

The Road to Individualism

One of the things that makes individualism such a formidable challenge is the fact that it is hard for us to see it as a challenge. In fact, it's hard for us to see it at all. The fundamental assumptions of any age or culture occupy a level of our cognitive architecture so deep that it seems unnatural to question them. They are so deeply woven into the fabric of our thinking that we typically think *with* them, not *about* them.

Individualism is one such concept. It is one of the most influential and pervasive categories of Western consciousness, so ingrained in our thinking that it is characteristic of the way we think. Yet individualism is not intrinsic to human existence. Like many of our cultural assumptions, it has a history, and its roots reach deep into the soil of Western tradition.[7]

By all accounts, "the inaugurator of the modern concept of the self"

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[7]The emergence of the self in Western thought, as well as its subsequent demise, has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. The most comprehensive discussion to date is no doubt Charles Taylor's magisterial account, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). A number of works deal with various aspects of the modern and/or postmodern self, including Adam B. Seligman, *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). An influential sociological study of the self in contemporary America is Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Stanley J. Grenz provides a readable and reliable account of the self's long history in *The Social God and the Relational Self* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 2001). The affective domain of our experience has recently received considerable attention. See, for example, A. R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994); and Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

was Augustine, the great Latin father, who sought God by journeying into the soul. Several centuries later, Boethius defined a person as "the individual substance of a rational nature," placing the center of personal identity within us, in an "inner self." Coupled with Augustine's introspection, Boethius's elevation of the individual eventually led to the familiar concept of the self as "the stable, abiding reality that constitutes the individual human being."[8]

Once this notion of the self was established, the big question was how to understand it. What is this inner reality? The answer of the Enlightenment was *reason.* For Descartes and his successors, the self-conscious, rational self, certain of its own existence, was the essential principle in reality and the final arbiter of truth.[9] Kant's careful analyses of reason completed the long progression to radical individualism, the view that the essential humanity is the thinking individual, self-conscious and detached, the master of an objective world. For Romanticism, the self is particular rather than universal, and it consists of feelings, rather than reason.[10] Instead of self-mastery, the goal of Romanticism was self-expression.[11] The key to happiness was to embrace oneself, to celebrate one's own nature. The self of Rousseau is thus the self-absorbed self, devoted to itself, affirming of itself.[12]

Certain religious developments are closely tied to this narrative of the self. Martin Luther found assurance in the soul's trust in God, the personal experience of faith. And we see inwardness and individuality in the understanding of religion that followed the Reformation. For Puritans, Pietists, and their heirs, true religion is essentially internal. We experience it individually, and we feel it so deeply that it transforms our behavior. Furthermore, we can test our religious growth and know with certainty whether we have received salvation.[13]

[8]Grenz, 63-67.

[9]"While I thus wished to think everything false, it was necessarily true that I who thought so was something. Since this truth, *I think therefore I am, (or exist),* was so firm and assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were unable to shake it, I judged that I could safely accept it as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking" (Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations,* 24; cited in Grenz, 69).

[10]Grenz, 105.

[11]Ibid., 99-100.

[12]Eventually the Romantic quest for self-expression "opened the door for the loss, dissipation, or deconstruction of the self that developed in the twentieth century." For radical postmoderns, the self is not an object in the natural world, but a cultural artifact. All that's left is a de-centered, fleeting self, constructed at each moment of its existence, splintered into multiple subjectivities (ibid., 118, 134, 136).

[13]Ibid., 82-85.

Ever since Augustine, then, Western thought has been preoccupied with the discovery and the fulfillment of the individual human being—discovery by introspection, by turning within ourselves, and fulfillment either through the rational self-mastery, or through a celebration of personal uniqueness. Throughout its variations, however, the idea persists that the real person, the true self, is something that lies within us, and the essential unit of human reality is the individual by him- or herself. In other words, the modern self is the solitary self, detached and disconnected from others.

On this atomistic concept of humanity, society is nothing more than "a collection of autonomous, independent selves, each of whom pursues his own ends."[14] People may still form relationships, but they do so only to meet their individual needs. If they don't need the group in order to reach their private goals, they feel free to leave. The object of their commitment is the self, not the community.

It is not hard to see why individualism poses a formidable obstacle to religious community. If the individual is the center of religious life, and the essential function of religion is to help individuals face their challenges and enhance their private experience, then the value of corporate religion—communities, organizations, institutions, traditions—is problematic. For some, religious communities are unnecessary. When people say, "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious," they usually mean that they seek a private connection with the divine, but they have no interest in religious organizations. Others believe that religious organizations have value, but only because they can help people to meet private spiritual needs. Someone I know compares the church to a twelve-step program. It's there for those who need it, he opines, but it is not necessary for everyone, and it is not required for anyone.

Responding to Spiritual Individualism

Religious individualism poses a tremendous challenge to Christianity in the Western world today not just because it leads people to discount the importance of the church, but because it makes it virtually impossible for them to comprehend the meaning of the church. As we saw, the problem is not that people today are uninterested or uninvolved in religion. The problem is the way they think about it. From Augustine onward, the broad sweep of Western thought, secular and religious alike, elevates and isolates the individual as the fundamental unit of humanity. From this

[14]Ibid., 99.

perspective, religion is intensely private.[15] It belongs to the sphere of inner life that we can access only by ourselves. Others may advise and encourage us as we take our journey, but we must ultimately take it alone.

The Adventist Church has made great strides in the developing countries of the world. But it has a future in developed countries, in so-called "First World" countries, only if we grasp the magnitude of this challenge and find effective ways to respond to it. Here are some things that may help us to counteract the serious and insidious challenge that individualism poses for biblical Christianity.[16]

Think Seriously about the Church

The first step is to make the church an object of careful theological reflection. Over the years, Adventists have not thought a great deal about the church, at least not in a careful, systematic way.[17] If we review the standard list of doctrinal themes—revelation, God, humanity, salvation, church, and last things—it is apparent that Adventists have given the church less consideration than any of the others. We have a good deal to say about the Sabbath and the Second Coming—elements in the denominational name. Adventists have also written in depth about human nature.[18] We are known for our position on the "state of the dead," and for the wholistic view of human existence that goes with it.

Disagreement often stimulates discussion, so Adventists have had a lot to say, mainly to each other, about topics related to salvation. The condition of Christ's human nature, the source of his sinless life, the

[15]According to Richard Sloan of Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, for example, healthcare givers have no business getting involved in the spiritual life of their patients because religion is essentially a private matter (Claudia Kalb, "Faith and Healing," *Newsweek*, November 10, 2003, 50).

[16]For further discussion of the following points, as well as a more extensive treatment of the topic of this article, see Richard Rice, *Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Finding New Love for the Church* (Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2002).

[17]Two articles in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Raoul Dederen, ed. [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000]) help to redress this deficiency (although it is interesting that just two of twenty-seven articles are devoted to this theme)—"The Church," by Raoul Dederen, and "The Ordinances: Baptism, Foot Washing, and Lord's Supper," by Herbert Kiesler. The bibliography to Dederen's article illustrates how little Adventists have written on the topic. Only three of thirty-one entries refer to Adventist authors, and two of these are primarily historical in nature.

[18]The Adventist position on this doctrine is sometimes described as "conditional immortality," i.e., immortality is conditional on the atonement of Christ, as opposed to "natural immortality," the idea that the soul is immortal and never ceases to exist. For the definitive examination of this issue, see L. E. Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers*, 2 vols. [Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1965-1966]).

meaning of his death—we have considered all of them. We have also written a good deal about the meaning of justification and sanctification, and particularly the possibility of perfection. In the last few decades, Adventist scholars have devoted great attention to the nature of biblical inspiration. From the 1950s to the 1990s, the church conducted a number of Bible conferences and special General Conference sessions devoted to biblical hermeneutics.

This leaves the doctrine of the church, and here we find a notable lack of activity. We have always been interested in the remnant, and we have had a lot to say about spiritual gifts. But the church as such is seldom discussed, and certain facets of the doctrine have received scarcely any theological attention.[19]

Why has the doctrine of the church generated so little attention among Adventists? One reason may be a long-standing suspicion of ecclesiastical institutions. The Millerites did not intend to create a new denomination. They felt that they had a message for people in all denominations. When early Adventists turned to church organization, they did so reluctantly. They were acutely aware of the flaws of organized religion, and some feared that organizing was a first step on the road to Babylon.

Another factor that has hindered us from developing an ecclesiology may be our preoccupation with last things. Adventists, by definition, believe that the end is near and eagerly anticipate the soon return of Christ. Yet the word "church" suggests something that lasts over a long period of time—long enough to develop an elaborate structure with numerous traditions and layers of organization. So, the notion of church seems to conflict with a sense of immediacy.

Time has passed and times have changed. The vibrant community that characterized early Adventists has become a worldwide network of more than fourteen million people in widespread and diverse cultures. If we are to remain one church, we need to understand what is means to be the church, particularly where the church is challenged by spiritual individualism.

Clarify the Nature of Christian Community

Once we have decided to give the church serious attention, we come to the most important and most difficult step in counteracting spiritual individualism: demonstrating that the church is unlike anything else in human experience. We may find analogies for the church in other human groups, we may find precedents for it in other religious communities, and we may find metaphors to illustrate it throughout our experience. But there are

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[19]The statement of Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists did not even mention the Lord's Supper until the 1980 revision.

things about the Christian church that distinguish it from every other dimension of human existence. So, what is it that makes the church so special? What sort of community does the NT describe? What is the nature of its corporate life?

The Bible's most important descriptions of the church come from the chronological bookends of the NT—the letters of Paul and the Fourth Gospel. According to these sources, the church is the creation of the Holy Spirit, who extends Christ's saving work in the world, and the central dynamic of the church is the love that Jesus' life perfectly exemplified.

The "farewell discourses" that culminate in Jesus' "high-priestly" prayer, John 14–17, reveal that the purpose of Jesus' ministry was to create a community whose inner dynamic reflects God's inner reality. In fact, the church is the means of embracing human beings within God's own life. These important chapters show that Jesus sought to bring his disciples into the love that radiates between the Father and the Son—the endless circle of affection that is central to God's life, the affection that *is* God's life. Thus Jesus says: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."[20]

The goal of Jesus' mission to the world is thus to incorporate his followers within the fellowship that defined his own relation with God.[21] Following his earthly life, the Spirit that unites the Father and the Son unites Jesus with his disciples, and this same Spirit joins Christ's followers to one another. The relationships among Christians arise from the spiritual power that Christ's ministry makes possible.

By virtue of its connection to God, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, the church represents a unique social reality. The Holy Spirit unites its members into a community unlike any other. The Spirit generates distinctive modes of human relationship, and in their togetherness-in-Christ, people experience new and unprecedented forms of fellowship.

Central to the NT concept of church, then, is the conviction that Christ creates a new "communal consciousness," a new way of thinking, feeling, and relating. The cultivation of this communal consciousness was the overriding concern of Paul's letters. Their purpose was to help early Christian congregations understand their identity in Christ and fulfill that identity in the way they lived, particularly in their relations

[20]John 15:9-10. Cf. John 14:16-17, 23; 15:12; 16:27; 17:20-23.

[21]Wolfhart Pannenberg describes it this way: the Spirit connects believers with the Son, and in so doing incorporates them into God's own life. Consequently, believers' relation to God reflects Christ's own relation to God. The same mutual love that unites Father and Son in eternity appears in them. As a result, they share in Jesus' own sonship and participate in God's own life (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991-1997], 3:11).

with one another. (Paul's letters say very little about the relations between Christians and non-Christians,[22] and there is a notable lack in them of any instruction to evangelize.[23])

Accordingly, his letters typically divide into two parts—theological and paranetic. The apostle first tells his readers about the wonderful blessings that salvation brings. Then he tells them how to live lives consistent with their spiritual identity. Ephesians provides a good example of this format. After a glorious description of the church, Paul transitions to a discussion of various practical matters with this statement: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:1-3).

What are the features of this communal consciousness? How, in fact, do Christians relate to one another? In his most famous statement on the topic, Paul identifies the central elements of Christian existence as faith, hope, and love, and asserts that love imparts to the Christian community its unparalleled quality of life (1 Cor 13:13). Because they belong to a loving community, members of the church share one another's experiences, both positive and negative. "Carry each other's burdens," Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians, "and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). Members of the Christian community reach out and share each other's sorrows and difficulties. In the church as in the body—Paul's famous metaphor—"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it" (1 Cor 12:26).

In the life together that Christ makes possible, mutual suffering leads to mutual comfort. "For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. . . . We know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort" (2 Cor 1:3-7). There are deep channels of sympathy and support that connect us to one another in the Christian community.

Because the church is a loving community, its members also tend to each other's needs. "As we have opportunity," says Paul, "let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal 6:10). The NT devotes considerable attention to this theme, and it

[22]According to Robert Banks: "Nothing in Paul's writings suggests that the gathering of believers has a *direct* function vis-à-vis the world." The famous "body" metaphor "basically refers to the interaction of the members with one another, not with outsiders" (*Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*, rev. ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], 64).

[23]See Terence L. Donaldson, "The Absence from Paul's Letters of Any Injunction to Evangelize" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Nashville, Tennessee, November 19, 2000).

was a prominent feature in the way the earliest Christians lived. Members of the Jerusalem community cared for their own. They ate together daily (Acts 2:46). They shared everything they had. In fact, "no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own" (Acts 4:32). As a result, "there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need" (Acts 4:34-35). There was apparently a "daily distribution of food" to provide for those, such as widows, who needed assistance (Acts 6:1).

According to the letter of James, professions of religious devotion are worthless unless we care for others within the community of faith. "What good is it, my brothers," James demands, "if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (Jas 2:14-17). So, true faith comes to expression in the way we care for fellow Christians.[24]

As a serving community, the church reenacts and extends the ministry of Jesus, who "did not come to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). In a vivid demonstration of his willingness to serve, Jesus washed his disciples' feet, and told them to follow his example (John 13:12-15). And of course, the ultimate act of service was his death on the cross (Mark 10:45). As he told his disciples: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Important as suffering and serving are, the respect in which the church most closely resembles the mind of Christ lies in the fact that it is a forgiving community. Forgiveness, as one theologian puts it, is "the final form of love."[25] Paul's letters underline the importance of forgiveness in a number of places. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph 4:32). "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col 3:13). Forgiveness also appears in the Lord's prayer. "Forgive us our debts," Jesus instructs us to pray, "as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 6:12).[26]

[24]There is evidence that Christians cared for those outside the community too. Gal 6:10 encourages believers to do good to all men. Bruce Winter argues that the early church taught a civic consciousness among its members (*Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 3).

[25]Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner's, 1952), 63.

[26]The church is a forgiving community because it is a forgiven community. And there

Christ's saving work thus reaches its culmination in the unique quality of Christian corporate life. The remarkable relationships that characterize the Christian community arise directly from the spiritual power of Christ's ministry as it continues through the Holy Spirit. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples," Jesus said, "if you love one another" (John 13:35). The church, then, is a unique social reality. The Holy Spirit draws its members into a community unlike any other.

Emphasize the Relation between Salvation and the Church

Once we have established the unique character of Christian community, the next step in combating spiritual individualism is to show that church and salvation are integrally connected. From a biblical perspective, participating in Christian corporate life—in other words, entering into church membership—is intrinsic to the experience of salvation.

According to the NT, the salvation that Jesus Christ makes available to us involves two dimensions. One is a new relationship with God. On the objective side, we are adopted into the family of God. Thanks to Jesus' work, God treats us as his own children, and we have all the legal privileges and inheritance rights that natural children have. As Paul asserts, we are "heirs of God and co-heirs of Christ" (Rom 8:17). On the subjective side, we have a new experience of God. Jesus' personal connection to God surpassed anything human beings had known before. He spoke to God as openly and trustingly as a little child speaks to its parents. He addressed God as *Abba,* an expression of familiarity and affection. Furthermore, Jesus taught that the same relationship he enjoyed with God is available to us. Like him, we can think and speak of God as "Father." We can come to God openly, confidently—without a trace of fear. For this reason, the opening of the Lord's prayer summarizes the entire gospel. The words, "Our Father," embody the new relationship that Jesus came to establish.

Just as his relationship to God opens up a new way for us to relate to God, the way Jesus related to people creates and models new possibilities for human relationships. When people participate in this community, they find their lives opening to one another in astonishing ways. They can confess their faults to each another without fearing condemnation or rejection. They can share their burdens with one another, knowing they

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are those who believe that it is a greater challenge to live as the community of the forgiven than the community of the forgiving. To quote Stanley Hauerwas: "The fundamental orientation of Christian life is that we are forgiven. . . . More important than our learning to forgive is our learning to be forgiven" (cited in L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 148).

will receive nothing but help and encouragement. They can even entrust their money and their property to one another, confident their gifts will be appreciated and properly used.

Once again, no one speaks more vividly of the effects of salvation on human relationships than the apostles John and Paul. In words reminiscent of Jesus' farewell discourses, 1 John talks about the transition from sin to salvation as a dramatic change in our relationships with each other. "God's love was revealed among us in this way," he says. "Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. . . . If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. . . . God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. . . . Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (1 John 4:7-21). To paraphrase, the love that God poured into the world through Jesus fills and vitalizes those who respond to it. God's love for us awakens a love for him in return, and this love also flows into our relationships with each other. God's love *for* us creates a love *within* us that embraces other people.

For Paul, the connection between salvation and community is just as close as it is for John. Indeed, as Paul describes it, the Christian community is not just integral to the plan of salvation; it is the goal of the entire process. As we typically think of it, the central concept in Paul's account of salvation is righteousness by faith, the idea that we are saved entirely by God's grace, not by success in keeping the law. This idea was certainly revolutionary for Paul, since he grew up regarding the law as a means of salvation.[27] But there was something else that amazed him even more, and that was the unique community that righteousness by faith makes possible.[28] Paul described it as a radically inclusive community that overcomes all the barriers that naturally separate people—the division between Jews and Gentiles, of course, but also the divisions between male and female, slave and free, the moral and immoral, even sinners and sinned-against.

For Paul, the culmination of God's saving work is this radically inclusive community. The reason righteousness by faith is so important is the fact that it makes this community possible. For no matter how different the members of the church may be in other respects, they are identical in the one respect that ultimately matters: they are all saved by grace through faith. And because this one great fact is true of all of them, they all belong to the same community. For Paul, then, righteousness by faith is important because it makes community possible. It brings together

[27]Paul describes the dramatic shift in his perspective on legal righteousness in Phil 3:4-9.

[28]"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom 11:33).

people from every conceivable background and overcomes all the obstacles that divide them. Righteousness by faith is the means; Christian community is the end.

We see this trajectory in familiar passages like Eph 2. Paul begins by assuring his readers that they are saved from sin by trusting in God's gracious gift, not by relying on their good works (vv. 8-9). Then comes his main point. He reminds his readers, "Gentiles by birth," as he calls them—that they were once without Christ—far off, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now they are one with God's people. Christ Jesus, he emphasizes, "has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall" between them. He abolished the law "that he might create in himself one new humanity" and "reconcile both groups to God in one body" (vv. 12-16). As Paul sees it, the ultimate effect of Christ's work is to bring diverse people together to form one radically inclusive community. Salvation by faith is important: it provides the basis for this community, a community open to Jew and Gentile alike.

We find the same strategy in Gal 3. Paul asserts that faith, not the law, is the basis of salvation (vv. 10-14). "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith," he summarizes (v. 26). Then he draws this momentous conclusion: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). Because all are saved on the same basis, all belong to the same community. Christ levels all the factors that typically divide people so they can participate in one inclusive community.[29]

As the NT describes it, then, the church is not incidental to the experience of salvation; it is integral to it. Indeed, it is central to it. The culmination of Christ's saving work is the creation of a community that bears his name and embodies his love. Consequently, no one can be a Christian—not in the full and fundamental sense of the word—and *not* be part of the Christian community.

From Theory to Praxis

Following the general strategy of Paul's letters, let's move from theory to praxis. Having discussed the nature and importance of the church, let's look for some things that will help us to become the church.

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[29]Paul's most famous letter follows the same pattern. In Rom 1-8, he presents a detailed explanation of righteousness by faith. And in chaps. 9-11, he shows what this means for human community: people of all backgrounds, Jews and Gentiles alike, are incorporated within the fellowship of God's love.

Find Effective Ways to Portray the Church

Theology goes only so far. Telling people what the NT says about the church and insisting that salvation and church membership go together probably won't change many minds. As the NT describes it, the church is both a spiritual community and a concrete reality in the world. To show how concrete Christian communities can embody the sort of relationship that the Spirit of Christ makes possible, we need to develop a perspective on congregational life that truly incorporates, or incarnates, their spiritual identity. And to make this connection, we need to find a metaphor that effectively portrays the central dynamic of Christian community. As scholars have demonstrated, most people do their thinking in concrete rather than in abstract terms. They use metaphors rather than concepts.[30]

The Bible employs a great many symbols for the church,[31] and over the years Adventists have used a variety of metaphors to describe the church and its activities.[32] Nevertheless, certain metaphors are more basic to the NT portrayal of the church than others. Those that are closest to the spirit of the NT, and most helpful in promoting community, are drawn from the bonds that unite husbands and wives, parents and children. The most fundamental and pervasive biblical metaphor for the Christian community is the family.

The OT ascribes both maternal and paternal functions to God.[33] In the NT, the significance of the word "Father" expands to become the divine name par excellence. We find it in the greeting that appears in all Paul's letters—"Grace to you and peace from God our Father"—and in important passages dealing with baptism and prayer (Matt 21:19; 6:9). Moreover, Jesus himself characteristically referred to God as "Father."[34]

[30]Metaphors are the most natural means we have of expressing ourselves. We never simply *see*, we always *see-as*. We instinctively attribute to one thing the characteristics of something else (see, e.g., Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980]).

[31]One encyclopedia article on the church lists four basic meanings of the Greek word and ten additional "cognate ways of expressing the church idea" (P. S. Minear, "Church, idea of," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1962], 1:608).

[32]Two that have been particularly influential among Adventists are military and economic metaphors. The army church appears in many of the songs we sing, the organizations we form, and the activities we engage in, such as ingathering and evangelistic "campaigns." The business church has become particularly influential in recent years, with calls to greater accountability and the development of strategic plans and behavioral objectives intended to help us run the organization more efficiently. There are biblical precedents for both metaphors, of course, in both OT and NT.

[33]Gen 49:25; Deut 32:18; Ps 103:13; Isa 9:6; 49:15; 66:13; Hos 11:3, 4.

[34]According to the Gospels generally, Jesus spoke of God as "my Father" and used

Although all people are God's children by creation (cf. Acts 17:28-29), they become his children in a special way through Jesus. Through his ministry believers become part of God's family and enter the sort of relationship to God that he enjoys (cf. John 20:17). In effect, Jesus extends his own relation to the Father to include us. Connecting with him connects us with the Father too.

Paul refers to the action that brings us into God's family as "adoption,"[35] which was widely practiced in the Greco-Roman world. "Under Roman law an adopted child became a new person. He received a new name, a new identity, . . . and was given a legal right to the wealth and fortunes of his new family."[36] According to Paul, the presence of the Spirit in our lives enables us to cry, "Abba, Father," and "testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." This means that we are God's own children, with all the rights and privileges of God's "natural" Son. Consequently, everything that belongs to him also belongs to us: we are "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (Rom 8:15-17; cf. Gal 4:6-7).[37] Our new relationship to God brings with it a new relationship to others. In contrast to ancient Mediterranean society, which was filled with different social strata, the Christian family acknowledges no differences in rank or prestige. "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:26, 28).

In this family, there is unity as well as equality. The most important things about its members are things they all have in common. "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-6).

Of all the metaphors applied to the church, none is more helpful than the family. At least, that was the choice of the apostle Paul. According to one scholar, Paul's use of family terminology is so frequent that "the

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"Father" in his prayers (John 12:27-28; 17:1). In Matthew and Luke, Jesus refers to God as "your Father" in a number of passages: Matt 5:16, 48; 6:1ff.; 7:21; Luke 6:36; 12:30. In John, he characteristically speaks of "the Father" (14:6).

[35]Rom 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5.

[36]George E. Rice, "Adoption," *Ministry*, March 1987, 13.

[37]Since many people today question the use of patriarchal language for God, it is helpful to note that the NT does not conceive of God as a heavenly version of an earthly parent. "God as Father" means first "God-as-Father-of-Jesus" and then "God-as-our-Father-through-Jesus." It takes its content from Jesus' relation to the Father, not from our biological fathers. According to Banks, 49, "All Paul's 'family' terminology has its basis in the relationship that exists between Christ, and the Christian as a corollary, and God. . . . In a unique sense Jesus is God's Son, and it is only through his identification with humans and his actions on their behalf that they are able to 'receive adoption as children' (Gal 4:4-5, NRSV; cf. 1 Thess 1:10)."

comparison of the Christian community with a 'family' must be regarded as the most significant metaphorical usage of all. . . . More than any of the other images utilized by Paul, it reveals the essence of his thinking about community."[38] To reorder our thinking about church, then, we need to take family as our central metaphor.

Find Ways to Cultivate Community

Once we have a basic metaphor for church, we need to find ways to cultivate spiritual community within Adventist congregations. The family metaphor has important implications for church growth, to cite one example. When we talk about church growth, we typically think of growth in numbers. But there is another kind of church growth, and that is relational growth. If we make relational growth basic to our numerical growth, we will build stronger communities and we can bring our converts into a community that will sustain and support them in their Christian experience. Paul seldom talks about church size (though he marvels at the spread of the gospel), but he often talks about relationships. And if we follow Paul's thinking, we will make community building basic to everything the church does.

Take evangelism, for example. A recent cover article in *Ministry* describes fellowship as "our greatest witness."[39] Several years ago, a general field secretary of the General Conference called for Adventists to move to "a relational model of outreach." Consequently, we should try to fellowship with people first and then indoctrinate later. "The way it works best," said Gary Patterson, "is to bring people into our fellowship; then they will want to learn our doctrines."[40]

The family metaphor also has implications for worship, and even for church architecture. The shape of a church and the arrangement of its furnishings can promote or hinder fellowship among its members. A family-oriented congregation may seek more appropriate architectural forms than an auditorium or lecture hall.

It is also possible to create programs designed to promote community within a congregation. Relational skills can be learned and taught, and we should avail ourselves of those who can help us develop them. People can learn how to listen carefully to each other, how to support those with special needs, and, most important, how to extend forgiveness and achieve reconciliation. The primary role of the pastor in the family church is building

[38]Ibid.

[39]James Coffin, "Fellowship: Our Greatest Witness," *Ministry*, April 2004, 5-8.

[40]Gary Patterson, "Is Our Upbringing Defining Us?" *Adventist Review*, September 19, 1996, 27.

community, and pastoral training should give as much attention to this responsibility as to pulpit ministry and theological study.

Avoid Individualism and Affirm Individuality

There are helpful and harmful ways to affirm the value of individual human beings. The distinction is critical, but it is easy to miss. In fact, spiritual individualism is so pervasive that we often use language that unwittingly supports it. Evangelistic appeals frequently encourage people to think of their religious experience in individualistic terms. When preachers urge people to decide for Christ in solitude—with heads bowed and eyes closed—they send a powerful message: your salvation is strictly between you and God. It is highly personal, and it is very private. It really doesn't involve anyone else. The same is true when they deliver sermons like "God Has No Grandchildren." Their message is that you can't be saved through someone else's devotion. You may have devout parents, missionary grandparents, godly teachers, and spiritually minded friends. God doesn't save us in groups. He saves us only one by one.

A lot of moral instruction also emphasizes the importance of individual behavior. We tell our children to go against the crowd, to stand for the right even if no one else does, and we point to those who withstood the forces of darkness all by themselves, such as Joseph, Elijah, Daniel, and Martin Luther. Adventist mission stories often feature people who overcome the pressures of family and culture in order to become Christians. They tell of children who are disinherited for accepting Christ and wives whose husbands beat them for attending evangelistic services.

Nothing moves us like a solitary figure who resists the world's pressure to conform and remains loyal to God whatever the cost. These examples are certainly valuable, but their overuse reinforces the view that moral and religious qualities apply primarily to individuals. It encourages people to think that what you are by yourself is what counts the most.

When people ask, "Why is going to church all that important?" a typical reply consists of individualistic reasons. "You may think you can make it on your own spiritually," pastors often say, "but you really can't. Without Christian fellowship, you will lose your own experience. It's like a bed of coals in a fireplace. Take one coal away from all the rest and it will soon go out. To stay hot, it needs others around it." Another tack is to remind people of their responsibilities. "Maybe you are one of those rare people who can make it on his own," we may say, "but most people aren't. And they need the strength and encouragement that you can provide. You still have a responsibility to come."

Look carefully at these arguments and an astonishing fact emerges.

They ultimately depend on the very individualism that they are supposed to combat! They defend attending church on the grounds that it either meets an individual religious need or fulfills an individual religious duty. In each case, the ultimate court of appeal is the individual and his or her personal experience. Unless church attendance makes a difference here, apparently, it has no value.

This ironic fact demonstrates how serious our problem is. Our thinking is literally saturated with individualism—so much so that even those who try to counteract it instinctively talk as if it's true. To meet the pressing challenge facing the Adventist Church today, we must somehow overcome the deep-seated conviction that religion is essentially a private matter.

Individualism is the nemesis of community, but individuality is not. There is nothing in Christian faith that denies the significance of individual human beings. In fact, our modern appreciation for the individual, and our insistence that each human being has unalienable rights, is arguably the fruit of biblical principles.

The Bible affirms the value of the individual in various ways. One is by emphasizing personal responsibility. Certain passages insist that God will not condemn people for the sins their parents committed.[41] The biblical concept of the resurrection also affirms the individual. Citizenship in God's kingdom is not just for the generation that happens to be alive when it finally arrives. Every human being is important enough to participate in the fulfillment of God's plan for human existence. The Bible's most important affirmation of individual value is the way Jesus specifically invited people, such as Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, to mention just two, to enter the kingdom of God.[42] The point of these Gospel stories is not that entering the kingdom is a private experience, but that the kingdom is open to everyone. Jesus assured people that God's kingdom was meant for them no matter what their background or social connections were.

From a Christian perspective, then, there is nothing wrong with individuality. The problem is individualism. Individuality affirms the value of the person; individualism exaggerates and ultimately undermines it. To do justice to the biblical view, we need to replace individualism with individuality. More accurately, we need to replace individualism with individual-in-community. Only if we do this can we become, individually and communally, everything that God wants us to be.

To conclude, spiritual individualism presents Adventism with a formidable challenge in the developed world today, but there are ways to

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[41]A notable passage is Ezek 18, where the word of the Lord asserts, "It is only the person who sins that shall die" (vs. 3; cf. vs. 20).

[42]John 3 and 4.

respond to it. In fact, we can draw on the increased interest in religion to remind people of one of Christianity's greatest themes: Christ creates a community to which all are welcome and in which all that divides and separates us is overcome. In the final analysis, participating in the fellowship of God the Father, Son, and Spirit is the ultimate gift of salvation.