

# There's No Such Thing as Alone: From 'Bounded Being' Accounts to the Confluence of the Saints

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## Abstract

In *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*, American psychologist Kenneth Gergen explores the Western characterization of the self as autonomous, discrete, and separate from others, and identifies the pathological consequences and societal costs of such a view. Gergen's intent is to open the reader to a more holistic understanding of the self as completely dependent on relationships, and to replace a "bounded being" conception of the self with the image of a confluence, or "self with others." This essay examines traditional Christian thinking about standing before God to give an account of oneself in light of Gergen's ideas, and concludes that standing before God "alone" is epistemologically problematic. Drawing primarily on ideas from Gergen, John Calvin, and theologian Bryan Stone, this essay promotes the view that the Church is the primary agent offering an account before God, and that the individual believer is inseparable from the confluence of the Saints and the testimony of the Church.

**Keywords:** bounded being, self, confluence, accounts, church, John Calvin, alone, identity

*"Are we not enchanted by a world of nouns to believe in a world of separation?... If we used dance to teach our children about the world, the world might not appear to us as separate entities" (Gergen 2009:30).*

*"All that we take to be real, true, valuable, or good finds its origin in coordinated action" (Gergen 2009:31).*

*"If we wish to generate more promising futures, the major challenge is that of collaboratively creating new conditions of confluence" (Gergen 2009:58).*

## Working Alone?

As I write this, I'm sitting at home alone. While I work, I wonder if I'm spending my time well. Am I forgetting something my wife asked me to do? Probably. I just returned from taking

my daughter to a doctor's appointment and I'm sure there was something I was supposed to pick up. But what? Writing this has been weighing on my mind a bit. I like to write, but I also feel a bit worn out from an exhausting semester, and frankly, I'd rather be mowing the lawn. As I write I wonder if what I put on the page will fit well with other, similar literature. Will it simply be one more redundant article in a sea of publishing? Will it have even a solitary helpful insight? I wish I knew more philosophy. What if one of my colleagues in Biblical studies or philosophy reads this? What if I've inadvertently missed the mark because I was ignorant of an entire philosophical tradition in Western thought? It's quite possible, even probable! Let's face it, I'm no Christian Smith! Will someone reduce my best efforts (if I can call anything my best effort in the midst of raising a family, earning a living, and keeping my house from falling apart) to something juvenile and trivial? If so, what to do? I'm 47 and not really qualified to do much else. How depressing.

And so I sit alone, working, except there's music on—something by Don Henley I think. I like him. He raises more than a few sociological issues and is a bit of an activist. I use his song *Dirty Laundry* (Henley 1982) in the Jürgen Habermas lecture I give in *Contemporary Social Thought* class. "She can tell you 'bout the plane crash with a gleam in her eye. It's interesting when people die... give us dirty laundry." I wonder what other faculty and the administration at my college would think about Don Henley. It's a conservative college and he's fairly liberal and some of his word choices wouldn't play well in my classroom. Don Henley is about my dad's age, I think. No wonder my daughter can't relate to any of the music I like!

My mind (whatever that is) turns to raising my kids. It's tougher than I thought it would be. I have joked that I'm raising our son, while my wife is raising the girls. Our son is the easy one with what seems like a "naturally" generous and winsome personality. Then again, he's nine, and things change a lot from nine to my oldest daughter's fifteen. Perhaps I'll change the joke later. In a way my kids are such a clear reflection of me. I sense this resemblance most when I receive a note from a principal or teacher about some supposedly inappropriate behavior at school. "But dad, it's a reasonable question to ask why the teacher doesn't have to wear a uniform too!" That's the sort of comment I might make. But what about more important things? Will my kids grow up to share my faith and other commitments? Will the things important to me be important to them? I hope they will.

I try to clear my so-called mind, because, as anyone can plainly see, this introduction isn't shaping up very well. Maybe they're right; we college professors really don't work in the summer. But what does it mean to "clear one's mind?" Does it mean that I render myself unable to access memories, or to think about what I'll do this afternoon? Do I, for the moment, forget or bracket that I'm a husband, father, colleague, son, brother, advisor, teacher, shepherd (we raise sheep), or child of God? To clear one's throat means to push something aside. Is clearing one's mind a similar sort of operation, a rearrangement of cognitive phlegm? If so, what is that phlegm? Perhaps it's the residue of my relationships.

So here I sit... alone. I better enjoy it while it lasts, because it's 1:15 p.m., and in two hours I'll have to pick up the kids from school, and any chance of clearing my mind will have irrevocably faded away. Should I watch some TV or read part of a novel? That's what I like to do when I'm alone. Perhaps I'll choose a comedy. No, that's hard to enjoy when you're alone. Actually, I think I'll go on a motorcycle ride. What's more alone than that?

But am I really alone, ever? Is there any such thing?

## **Bounded Being: A World of Relentless Evaluation**

This essay draws on ideas gleaned from Kenneth Gergen's (2009) book, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community* in an effort to reconsider and perhaps better understand what it means for us to stand before God and give an account of ourselves. For me, perhaps for you, verses suggesting such things (e.g., Matthew 12:36; Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 4:13) contain a substantial dose of existential terror. Stand before God? Offer an account of *myself*? Can I bring a friend along who can vouch for me? My efforts here are not primarily a tactic to reassert Christian doctrines of justification. The intent is not to remind the reader that Christ stands in as intercessor. Rather, this excursus has as its major objective a sociological reframing of what it means to stand before God and give an account. It examines the possibility that there is no such thing as an individual standing "alone." How, for example, might a feral child—the closest thing we get to "alone"—give such an account? Gergen quotes Dizzy Gillespie, who when speaking of Louis Armstrong, said, "No him, no me" (Gergen 2009:136), delightfully illustrating how it is within relationship that we become somebody and are sustained as that somebody.

In the end I will consider the possibility that *we* stand before God as a *confluence*—Gergen's term for self *with* others, where self is dependent on others for being, actions, motives, intelligibility, morality, and even a conception of the deity. Furthermore, I hope to draw attention to the ways in which Western individualism has distorted our understanding of what it means to give an account, in the hope that we can embrace a more holistic view of the relationship between God and humanity, where the "we" of the church is profoundly more than just a means to an end used by individuals. Seen this way, individuals emerge from the Church, the parts from the whole, and not the other way around. The question considered is whether the individual (member) can be dislodged or disconnected from the collective (ecclesia, or body) to provide stand-alone testimony about anything. Christian testimony, arguably, is the testimony of the Church. The so-called individual doesn't leave the Church, standing apart from it, to give testimony or account, as though the fellowship of believers was just a preparatory agency turning out the product "Christian." Might not the entity *Church* "stand" before God to give account? Paul's analogy of the Church as a body from which parts should not be dismembered (1 Corinthians 12:12ff) provides an example of the point I wish to

make. The thought of excising a foot so that the foot can “stand alone” is unthinkable, and has devastating implications both for the foot and for the body as an organic whole. A foot has no meaning apart from the body, and a surgeon properly discards a foot if irrevocably separated from the body.

In *Relational Being*, Kenneth Gergen (Gergen 2009) contests what he calls our “bounded being” conception of the self—the idea that at our center exists a “stand alone,” discrete and individuated self. Steeped in Western individualism, and reinforced on every conceivable social platform (school, sports, church, employment, politics, economics, consumerism, and on and on), our thinking about the self as a discrete, isolated, and atomistic entity, vivifies an endless stream of pathological consequences. This dominant vision of the self sees humans as fundamentally separate and alone. From this perspective, we’re born alone, we live alone, we die alone, and to go a bit beyond Gergen, we stand before God’s judgment throne alone, and perhaps face eternity... alone. Alone with our selves; alone with our lives; alone with our dreams; alone with our accomplishments; alone with our sin.

As children, we learn the social priority of standing alone. Notice how tirelessly parents work to bring children to a place of “self-sufficiency” (an absurd notion if ever there was one), especially male children who are labeled and chastised should they need their mothers longer than a few short years—a maladaptive approach to child development explored in psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Chodorow, 1978). For adults, we see the effects of bounded being in higher suicide rates among those who are most able to “stand alone,” those best able to distinguish themselves from others, those best at acting out the deception of self. Put simply, we are drowning in the aloneness of the self as bounded being—the self as its own iron cage. Gergen (2009) hopes to:

... generate an account of human action that can replace the presumption of bounded selves with a vision of relationship. I do not mean relationships between otherwise separate selves, but rather, a process of coordination that precedes the very concept of the self. My hope is to demonstrate that virtually all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship. (xv)

About the aim of his book, Gergen explains that “My attempt here is to reverse the order, and to treat what we take to be the individual units as derivative of relational process” (xxi). The point isn’t simply stronger and better connection between discrete units, but a fundamental rethinking about the self, personhood, and the civil sphere. It is for this reason that, while still admiring Martin Buber’s well-known *I-It* and *I-Thou* distinctions, he writes, “... they still retain for me what are problematic vestiges of the individualist tradition” (xxiii).

As I watch my children's lives colonized by competition, fear of failure, self-directed striving toward imagined future careers, and the existential terror that so often accompanies religion, Gergen's ideas resonate with me and I find myself hopeful. Perhaps there is another way. But if there is, it involves a profound undoing of business as usual in the world in which we live. For Gergen, this "other way" is to consider the world in terms of relational confluence—self with others. And, if the idealized center of the Christian life is fellowship (*koinonia*), this idea should interest people of faith.

In his quest, Gergen contests the notion that humans are fundamentally self-motivated and wired for self-gratification. Reading his book, you quickly pick up on his misgivings about exchange and rational choice theories as adequate paradigms for understanding human behavior, hesitations echoed in Christian Smith's (2010) *What is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up*. Writes Gergen:

That humans are fundamentally motivated to gratify themselves is a cultural construction. And as such, we are scarcely obliged to incorporate this belief into our ways of life. And why should we wish to? To the extent that I believe you are fundamentally out for self-gratification, your actions become suspect. All your expressions of affection, nurturance, commitment, and personal concern cease to be genuine—from the heart. Rather, they raise questions about what you are trying to get from me. Aren't I simply being enlisted in the service of your pleasure, your needs, your desires? And if you try to assure me that your expressions are genuine, is this simply another layer of ruse? Should we hunger for another's love, such suspicion is poison. (Gergen 2009:15)

This "suspicion" frequently manifests itself in downward comparison, scanning the social environment to ensure we are "better than all." The development of this idea was, for me, the most absorbing part of *Relational Being*. Working in higher education, and raising children, I've felt the burdensome weight of looming failure—my own, my students' and my children's. If I am fundamentally alone, if my actions originate in me, then what is to be said of failure? To be sure, there are events outside my control, but by and large, we tend to assume my failures are of my own doing (Gergen 2009).

The possibility of personal inferiority begins as early as a child's first experience with competitive games. "My failure" is not taken lightly. Upon entering school, the "self in question" becomes institutionalized. From that day forward the individual exists in a state of continuous evaluation: "am I good enough," "will I fail," "how will I be judged by my teachers, parents, and classmates?" "have I sinned?" The stakes become higher as one's career is on the line. There are the SATs, IQ scores, GREs, MCATs, LSATs. ...And

then the college graduate enters adult professional life to find semi-annual performance evaluations, promotion evaluations... a life replete with threats to one's worth. (8, 9)

A graceless world, is it not? An existence where you and I stand alone, succeed alone, fail alone, die alone, are judged alone. Seen thus, community is little more than something we harness as an *accoutrement* to the self, a means only to self-ish ends, while the central reality of life is aloneness and separation.

### **Bounded Being as Employed by the Church**

Most of the churches I've belonged to have employed some version of Vacation Bible School—an ecclesial staple in the American South. For the most part, these churches purchase and utilize published curricula. While these products differ thematically, many of them utilize what I call a John Bunyan *Pilgrim's Progress* approach (Bunyan 1949). In *Pilgrim's Progress*, the plucky protagonist "Christian," makes a journey, alone, from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City (the place of reward). VBS programs using this general approach can be obtained containing "Olympic" themes, "Mountain Climbing" themes, and "Space Exploration" themes, just to name a few. Lamentably, no "Encountering God through Sociology" programs have yet been made available!

While these programs vary in the route taken to "get to God" (whether through space, up a mountain, or under the sea), many employ a "bounded being" concept of the person, an approach that prepares each of them to stand alone before God and give an account. The curriculum typically confronts the child with his or her need for God and yet distance from God, and then outlines a plan that routes them through the (scripted) protocol of acknowledging their (personal) depravity and confessing their individual "sins," then receiving God's grace, and ultimately entering into some variant of a "Jesus and me" relationship with the deity.

One summer our church canvassed inner-city neighborhoods, searching for children from disenfranchised situations. This wasn't a bad thing. It came out of heartfelt kindness and concern for children, many of whom came from very difficult circumstances. Part of our protocol was to have counselors (like me) engage with individual children during free-time, listen to their stories, and give them the attention and support of a concerned, caring college student or adult. So far, so good. And in their stories we heard a great deal of brokenness, mostly stemming (it seemed clear to me) from the "sins" of their parents. After this informal sharing time, when we returned to the "program proper," these same children were invited to encounter God, who was described as being rightfully angry with them, and to whom they must give an "account" of their sin, whereupon they would receive pardon, and get to go to heaven when they die.

What made this problematic for me, I now realize, was that it largely dislodged the children from the relational narrative within which their lives were situated and in which they were sustained, as though they could cast it off and leave it behind. “But what of my mother?” “What of my father?” They’re on their own! We’re all guilty on our own; confessing on our own; receiving grace on our own; going to heaven or elsewhere on our own. No wonder when we hear accounts of near death experiences in the popular media, they are almost without exception framed in terms of bounded being. We’ve imagined no other way. Within this paradigm there is in truth no “we.” I stand alone; you stand alone. Except there’s no such thing as alone.

The Scriptures hold in dialectical tension the “individual” and the “collective” (for purposes here, the “Church”). Each defines and is sustained by the other. However, to me, the Church is presented as primary and fundamental, while the individual or “self” is often presented as something to be subordinated to the collective. Jesus and the writers of Scripture seem less concerned with promoting self-actualization (certainly as we understand that idea) and more with the practice of pouring out, and “losing” the self as part of belonging. For example, Matthew 10:39 records Jesus as saying, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (NRSV, 1993)—a wonderfully counterintuitive perspective on identity. Furthermore, the context in which these Scriptures were given was far more collectivist than what we take as normal in contemporary Western society. For example, the concept of “conversion” seems less a matter of individual will, decision, and (personal) identity, and more a family phenomenon in the Acts 16 account of the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his family. Were one of the jailer’s children called to give an account of her conversion, she would likely have little more to say than her family name—a stronger sense of “we” and a lesser sense of bounded being. All of this, of course, stands in contrast with the notion of the celebrated self (celebrity) which figures so prominently in contemporary Western culture, and which drives the relentless evaluation and culture of narcissism decried by Gergen, Christopher Lasch, and others.

One of my wife’s elderly relatives recently died. While mourning this with my in-laws, I noticed how many times people referred to Joan’s aunt as being in a better place. The idea of “place” factored more heavily than the idea of being a meaningful part of any sort of community. Furthermore, the idea of what happens after death seemed negotiated at the individual level. She feels no pain; she wants for nothing; she is with Jesus; she’s no longer ensnared in our suffering. While I certainly understand and resonate with this impulse, what seems missing is continuity with the community of God’s people—the deceased as somehow engaged with the ongoing witness and work of the church, a witness replete with the full complement of human emotion as the church struggles on (perhaps calling into question the idea that all is sweetness and light after the death of one’s body). Such an understanding suggests that here on earth we subordinate ourselves to the needs of the Church and

community, finding and negotiating identity within a body of people, but after death the person is defined primarily in terms of an individual experience of God while awaiting the “accounting” and judgment. We seem to envision a line of disconnected individuals standing before a God who calls “Next.” Death, seen this way, returns us to the primacy of the individual and bounded being. The person as having meaning in a confluence of others is minimized or even lost.

## Accounts before God

Seen one way, this aloneness, this existence outside the community wherein the person can “stand” apart from the body collective, fits with scriptural references to giving an account before God. Several texts offer some variant of this idea. For example, Matthew 12:35, 36 credits Jesus as saying, “The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

The sense of the passage can be seen as individual in focus, and seems to echo our understanding of bounded being. Another passage, Romans 14:10-12, states, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.’ So then, each of us will be accountable to God.”

In these and other passages, the community—the Church—seems peripheral. These verses seem to position the individual apart from the community in providing an “account.” But what if we think of the Church—the confluence of bended knees—as the entity giving an account before God? “What have you [collectively] done with this world I’ve entrusted to you?” “You are its caretakers, and it is your relationships with one another that bear witness to my reign and my gospel.” “What have you to say?” Or, can the hand disconnect from the body and bear disembodied witness? With an acceptable bit of hermeneutic maneuvering (perhaps more comfortable to the sociologist than to some theologians!), these passages suggest the possibility that the Church, the people of God, is/are the one(s) who must appear to give account.

## Theological Leanings in Reformed Tradition

John Calvin’s *Institutes* (Calvin and Beveridge 1979) evidence concern with the dialectic between the individual and the collective. On one hand, Calvin demonstrates concern with the individual and with individual concerns about justification, sanctification, and one’s “relationship” with God. On the other, his writings suggest the irreducibility of the Church for the believer’s life and identity and proclaim a communitarian vision of God in relationship with



groups such as Israel and the Church. *Institutes* (1.1.1) begins with Calvin's acknowledgement of the dialectic between self and other, namely God. Under the heading, *Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God*, he writes, "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." He continues saying, "For quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God." Though not explicitly about God's people, the Church, this suggests in foundational ways that the self is not bounded, and cannot be seen as self-existing, self-sustained, or self-defined—a move away from bounded being and instead rooted in relational being. The next subsection acknowledges the other side of the dialectic and offers the heading, *Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self*. "Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself." To know oneself, one must be located in relationship, a concept elaborated by Cooley, Mead, and the whole theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism.

Later in his *Institutes*, Calvin underscores what could be taken as the inseparability of the individual from the Church. In 4.1.3, in discussing the Apostles' Creed, and under the heading, *The communion of saints*, Calvin writes that, "each of us should keep in brotherly agreement with all God's children, should yield to the church the authority it deserves, in short, should act as one of the flock." He continues,

The clause 'the communion of the saints' ...ought not be overlooked for it expresses what the church is. It is as if one said that the saints are gathered into the society of Christ on the principle that whatever benefits God confers upon them they should in turn share with one another. This does not, however, rule out diversity of graces, inasmuch as we know the gifts of the Spirit are variously distributed... But a community is affirmed, such as Luke describes, in which the heart and soul of the multitude of believers are one [ACTS 4:32]; and such as Paul has in mind when he urges the Ephesians to be 'one body and one Spirit, just as' they 'were called in one hope.'

Furthermore,

First, it [the Church] stands by God's election, and cannot waver or fail any more than his eternal providence can. Secondly, it has in a way been joined to the steadfastness of Christ, who will no more allow his believers to be estranged from him than that his members be rent and torn asunder. ...So powerful is participation in the church that it keeps us in the society of God. In the very word 'communion' there is a wealth of comfort because, while it is determined that whatever the Lord bestows upon his

members and ours belongs to us, our hope is strengthened by all the benefits they receive.

The editor's footnote below this material states, "Calvin's thought of the functioning church as a communion in which the divine gifts are shared is close to that of Luther." (cf. Luther's *Treatise on the Sacrament and on the Brotherhoods*)

## **Conversion, Salvation, and Relationship with God: Alone Again?**

In his absorbing book, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness*, theologian Bryan Stone (2007) explores the (devastating) effects of Western individualism on Christian evangelism and the Church. At the heart of his analysis he situates the "narrative of the self," a concept that sounds quite like Gergen's bounded being. Stone is concerned with the ways in which the socially constructed split between "public and private," "organizational and personal," "society and individual" lays the groundwork for a similar bifurcation in our understanding of the relationship between the so-called individual and the church, one in which they are fundamentally separate. "The modern notion of the self invented by the Enlightenment is essentially autonomous, abstract, empty of any 'necessary social content,' detached from its social context, and 'entirely set over against the social world.' It is created by deliberately shedding the constraints of social bonds and the accompanying ordering of human life to a particular end or purpose (*telos*), which is now understood to be a merely superstitious and oppressive relic" (133). Stone continues, writing, "The self is now thought of as lacking any necessary social identity, because the kind of social identity that it once enjoyed is no longer available" (134). In other words, modernity has furnished us with a modal self that is distinct, separate, disconnected, autonomous, and self-referential, and any alternative to this "way of being" has become unthinkable. The dialectic between the self and the social has been definitively severed.

While Stone's focus falls on the Church's practice of evangelism, his inquiry parallels our concern with bounded being and accounts before God. Just as we harbor and internalize the distinction between our work/public life and personal/private life, we maintain a similar distinction between Church and individual. Accordingly, the Church becomes understood as a sort of voluntary agency of socialization that the individual believer can use to achieve personal and private ends, but which is ultimately separable from individual identity and self-hood. For Stone, this reflects the Enlightenment belief that the believer's self can even exist, let alone offer an "account," apart from the Church. He observes:

As the church in modernity is increasingly shaped by this bifurcated social imagination, it becomes, on the one hand, a bureaucratic institution directed by expert managers or therapists called 'pastors' and, on the other hand, a mere aggregate of individuals each

of whom determines the character and *telos* of his or her own personal and essentially private relationship with God. Evangelism likewise becomes either a matter of rational technique, planning, and strategy aimed at promoting and defending the rationality, effectiveness, or usefulness of the gospel or a function of one's winsome personality and skills in rhetorical persuasion. ... But in both cases, the means and end of the Christian life are severed from one another, and so also is the self from that Spirit-created social body from which Christians derive what it properly means to be a self in the first place—namely the church. (Stone 2007:135)

Under this bifurcation, the notion of salvation becomes deformed into a stand-alone Enlightenment product that one achieves or attains, and which one possesses as one might own property.

Salvation in such a world is transformed into an essentially private, one-by-one affair, while evangelism becomes a practice based almost entirely on individual personality and persuasion, an attempt to lead individuals into a private decision to 'have personal relationship with Jesus' or to join the church, much as one might join any other club or association. The modern Western model of church and salvation, especially in its Protestant forms... is largely predicated upon this *narrative of the self* (emphasis added)... The salvation to which evangelism is an invitation and into which baptism stands as an initiation is not to be distinguished from the church's practices, patterns, and politics; salvation does not somehow stand behind the latter *as the end through which they are the means*. Neither are the church's practices, patterns, and politics the social application of a prior and individual, saving faith. *Rather, Christian salvation is our being made a part of a people and incorporated into the practices, politics, and economics of that people.* (emphasis added) (Stone 2007:138)

For the people of God then, there really is no such thing as alone. We are an inseparable part of a confluence. There is no self apart from the whole, and selves derive from the collective whole, not the whole from individual selves. Accordingly, we people of faith ought to reframe our understanding of what it means to give an account to God by moving away from Enlightenment bounded being conceptions that distort the primacy of the Church, toward the identity and "selves" of the people of God. Playing off the Dizzy Gillespie/Louis Armstrong quotation given earlier, "No him, no me," the believer might say, "No us, no me." C. Wright Mills (1959) famously developed the distinction between private "troubles" and public "issues," demonstrating that they are inextricably related. To resolve troubles, we must address issues—connecting the two is the heart of the sociological imagination. It seems a similar understanding is required here. Holding a person alone accountable for her sin or actions, denies the reality of

what the church is and does, denies what a person is and does, and assumes a bifurcated reality that leaves us, at best, with a fragmented self and a disposable church. A decontextualized person is no person at all—existence is inseparable from context. Can a person, as bounded being, give an account of their politics? Of their economics? Of their morality? Of anything? All such questions assume, require, and address the body collective. As Stone (2007) rightly concludes, “Salvation is impossible apart from the church, not because the church has received salvation as a possession and is now in a position to dispense it to or withhold it from others. It is instead because salvation is, in the first place, a distinct form of social existence. To be saved is to be made part of a new people and a new politics, the body of Christ”(188). For such a “new people,” there’s no such thing as alone. If we must, as believers, think of the self, and if it is to be, for us, a useful concept at all, we might, as Stone suggests, question Enlightenment presuppositions of the subject as self-positing, self-possessed, and self-sufficient, and think rather of the self as a “doxological subject,” created in ecstatic openness and always receiving itself as a gift (140). Give an account of myself? No, my testimony is the testimony of the church—here’s *our* account. There’s nothing outside of that, just as there is no salvation apart from the Church. Thanks be to God!

### **Toward a New Beginning**

And so we come full circle, back to the title of Gergen’s second chapter: *In the Beginning Is the Relationship* (Gergen 2009:29). As we think about how we might begin to retract our bounded being conceptions of person, faith, church, community, and nation, and supplant such reified individualism with the notion of confluence, it should not escape our attention that the church, those 71% of Americans (and falling) who claim the label “Christian” (Pew Research, 2015) has fallen so decisively on the bounded side of the dialectic. In a world of rabid nationalism, finely split and even vicious denominationalism, no-fault divorce, a relentless consumer culture, environmental degradation, the mind numbing violence of commercial sports, and the unrelenting drive to distinguish ourselves from others, perhaps we might more seriously question what bounded being is costing us. And, perhaps the first move might come from the Church, where the beauty of holiness and the witness of the Church never stand as some bounded “thing,” but always as a bride collective. The now and future Kingdom of God, then, is not a place, nor is it the fulfillment of self-directed fantasies. It is, instead, the fullness of relationship, the entrance into and engagement with the triune God, which represents not loss of self, but fullness of self, a self inextricably joined with others in endless doxology, always receiving itself through grace, as a gift.

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