TOGETHERNESS: THE TRANSFORMATIVE WORK OF THE SPIRIT
A Response to In the Power of the Spirit – Holy Spirit"
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The Holy Spirit's indwelling of believers in this world is a sign of the new world to come.[1] The conference papers of Dr. Svetlana Khobnya and Rev. L. Felipe Borduam challenge readers to grasp and embody the full transformative work of the Holy Spirit. Khobnya highlights the neglected role of the Spirit as the creative source of human togetherness.[2] Borduam challenges understandings of the Spirit's function impacted by "Pentecostalisms" and social theologies and returns the focus to the Holy Spirit's "primary sanctifying mission."[3]

This response paper reflects primarily on issues elicited by Khobnya's paper, namely, "What is this togetherness?" "How does the Spirit create togetherness?" and "What (or who) is the extent of togetherness?" It engages Khobnya's answers and expands on them. In doing this, it implicitly affirms the necessary transformative work of the Holy Spirit spoken of by Borduam while interpreting it primarily through John Wesley's perspective of holiness as love.[4]

What is Togetherness?

The alienation that separates "us" from the "other" is a significant problem of humanity, exacerbated recently by the pandemic. Khobnya concurs with theologian Graham McFarlane that there is no room for human alienation in the context of the Gospel.[5] A power greater than the brokenness must overturn it. McFarlane asserts that the gift of togetherness was accomplished by Christ on the cross and is brought into reality—in relation to both God and neighbour—through the Spirit.[6] For Khobnya and McFarlane, the reality of human togetherness exists in the here-and-now.[7] Practically, this togetherness makes the kingdom of God visible in the present as a sign of the new world to come.

Both scholars use the term "togetherness" rather than "unity" or "fellowship." Positively, this removes it from a purely religious domain, and allows us to reflect on it anew. Adversely, labelling a relationship existing only among those "in Christ" as "togetherness" denies the wider problem of human alienation. As Khobnya admits, "the claim does raise questions concerning

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[1] Svetlana Khobnya, "In the Power of the Spirit: Holy Spirit," *Didache Faithful Teach.*, *Global Theology Conference (2024) Papers* 22.1 (2022): 12.
[2] Khobnya, "In the Power of the Spirit," 10–11.
[3] Luis Felipe Nunes Borduam, "In the Power of the Spirit: Holy Spirit," *Didache Faithful Teach.*, *Global Theology Conference (2024) Papers* 22.1 (2022): 9.
[4] Distinctions between the "substance" of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in Wesley's thought and the "circumstances" of it in the American Holiness Movement can be found in H Ray Dunning, "Sanctification and Purity," *Wesley. Theol. J.* 48.2 (2013): 44–59; and Paul M. Bassett et. al., "A White Paper on Article X," *Didache Faithful Teach.* 10.1 (2010): 1–29.
[5] Graham W P McFarlane, "Towards a Theology of Togetherness--Life through the Spirit: Spirit and Christ in the New Testament and Christian Theology: Essays in Honor of Max Turner," in *The Spirit and Christ in the New Testament and Christian Theology: Essays in Honor of Max Turner* (Grand Rapids, Mich, 2012), 326.
[6] McFarlane, "Theology of Togetherness," 333.
[7] Khobnya, "In the Power of the Spirit," 3; McFarlane, "Theology of Togetherness," 324.

the extent the Spirit makes the gift of togetherness possible according to Scripture."[8] McFarlane warns that this togetherness is not "a mandate to create parallel religious worlds,"[9] yet he applies it only within the diversity of the Body of Christ. The question of the extent of this Spirit-empowered gift of togetherness will be explored further after examining how this togetherness is fashioned.

How does the Spirit Create Togetherness?

Khobnya explains that the shared experience of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, in fulfillment of prophecy, shaped togetherness in the early Church. This collective memory and common narrative shaped their identity.[10] Other studies in collective memory concur that shared narratives foster group identity.[11]

Khobnya asserts that the Spirit also initiates a "transformational process" and creates "a new spiritual disposition" in those who are in Christ.[12] This results in sharing resources, taking care of each other, and welcoming others. It disallows viewing spirituality in Christ as primarily a personal experience. Togetherness in Christ through the Spirit transcends narrow collective identity categories, while simultaneous celebrating diversity. Aaron Kuecker—a scholar focusing on identity formation in Luke-Acts—attributes such transformation to the Spirit's formation of an allocentric identity—one centred on other persons. Regarding the community summaries of sharing and togetherness found in the book of Acts, he says these "describe group norms which, in their economic practice, fellowship, personal devotion and concern for the out-group, are collective expressions of the allocentric identity characteristic of those influenced by the Spirit."[13] By contrast, the untransformed, egocentric identities of Ananias and Sapphira were a threat to the community and to togetherness (Acts 5:1-11).

The Extent of Togetherness

Khobnya asserts that the Spirit creates an "inclusive fellowship that embraces differences, crosses boundaries, empowers the powerless and helps the helpless."[14] As such, being in Christ surpasses other categories of gender, ethnicity, language, etc. Those who are "in the Spirit," with their minds set on God, should experience an ever-increasing sense of togetherness that reduces alienation. Khobnya focuses on togetherness in Christ and not necessarily human togetherness in general. McFarland also explains that the togetherness of the Trinity is replicated in those "who

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[8] Khobnya, "In the Power of the Spirit," 3.
[9] McFarlane, "Theology of Togetherness," 326–32.
[10] Khobnya, "In the Power of the Spirit," 7.
[11] Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," New German Critique 65 (1995): 125-133. Coleman A. Baker, *Identity, Memory, and Narrative in Early Christianity: Peter, Paul, and Recategorization in the Book of Acts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011). Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, eds. *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Atlanta; SBL, 2005).
[12] Khobnya, "In the Power of the Spirit," 7–11.
[13] Aaron Kuecker, *The Spirit and the "Other": Social Identity, Ethnicity and Intergroup Reconciliation in Luke-Acts*, Library of New Testament Studies 444 (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 135.
[14] Khobnya, "In the Power of the Spirit," 11.

faithfully place their hearts, souls, and energy over to the Father and love their neighbors as they have been loved."[15] The question, however, is whether the togetherness experienced among those who are in Christ might extend—at least in part—to those who are not yet in Christ, and who also experience alienation as part of their human condition. If not, does not the exclusive togetherness of those in Christ create the "parallel religious world" that McFarlane warns against?[16]

Khobnya acknowledges that the obedience, devotion, and genuine fellowship of those who are in Christ "has tremendous consequences for the community as a whole."[17] But neither she nor McFarlane admit that those who are *not* in Christ can experience *togetherness* with those who are in Christ. Must one fully believe before belonging? Must one fully believe before the problem of alienation can be addressed? Can one begin to experience transforming love in the presence of a believing community before experiencing perfect love? These issues are of concern to post-modern, post-Christian contexts where people tend to be suspicious of institutions such as the Church. They long to see beliefs expressed in practice, in love and transformation, rather than in theory. Belonging before believing permits them to experience the incarnation of the proclaimed Gospel.[18] Because their knowledge of the Christian faith is often limited, conversion becomes a process and longer journeys to faith are anticipated.[19] Thus Murray asserts, "for those journeying toward faith some sort of belonging may be crucial."[20]

While Khobnya does not explicitly discuss belonging before believing, she calls us to modify the "tactics of Christian presence" and to recognize the Spirit's work that is beyond our imagination and personal experience.[21] Kuecker's study emphasizes that togetherness in Christ is a proclamation of the Gospel. He says, "properly reconciled intra-communal life (available only by the transformational identity-forming work of the Spirit) is itself an expression of witness."[22]

Khobnya recognizes that "embracing others under the guidance of the Spirit beyond one's close and desirable circle prevails in Acts."[23] Peter's experience with Cornelius (Acts 10–11) and his subsequent theological reflections (Acts 15) emphasize the Spirit's empowerment of the Christ-follower to express love and belonging to the alienated and not-yet-converted. This pushes the boundaries of togetherness beyond those who belong to the "bounded-set" model (i.e., "saved," "converted," "in Christ").[24] The Spirit compels Peter to connect with Cornelius, and

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[15] McFarlane, "Theology of Togetherness," 328.

[16] McFarlane, "Theology of Togetherness," 333.

[17] Khobnya, "In the Power of the Spirit," 7.

[18] Williams Stuart Murray, *Church after Christendom* (Crownhill, UNITED KINGDOM: Authentic Media, 2006), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=4573092, chapter 1.

[19] Mario Weyers and Willem Saayman, "'Belonging before Believing': Some Missiological Implications of Membership and Belonging in a Christian Community," *Verbum Eccles.* 34.1 (2013): 8 pages, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v34i1.834.

[20] Murray, *Church after Christendom.*

[21] Khobnya, "In the Power of the Spirit," 12.

[22] Kuecker, *The Spirit and the "Other,"* 134.

[23] Khobnya, "In the Power of the Spirit," 9.

[24] Daniel M Duffis, "Creating Communities of Belonging for Authentic Youth Evangelism," in *Mobilizing Our Youth for Evangelism* (digitalcommons.andrews.edu, 2019), 57–63,

forbids him to use labels of exclusion, or make a "distinction between them and us" (Acts 15:9). They enjoy table fellowship together prior to the conversion of the "others." The Spirit accomplishes what Murray calls a "double conversion" in which both the "others" and the Church are transformed.[25]

Paul encourages those who have received the Spirit to practice table fellowship with unbelievers (1 Cor 10:27) and to "work for the good of all" (Gal 6:10a). The example for both Peter and Paul was the Spirit-filled Jesus who apparently spent sufficient time dining together with tax collectors and sinners that he was labelled "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Lk 7:34; Mt 11:19). The burden for creating togetherness lies with those who are in Christ. Their "new spiritual disposition" and "allocentric identity" make togetherness possible. Transforming and filling those who believe is just one role of the Spirit. The Spirit is also working, drawing, and transforming those who do not yet fully believe. And the Spirit connects those who are in Christ with those who are not. Being in the sphere of the Spirit permits those who are in Christ to avoid using negative labels of non-belonging ("unclean," "unsaved," "lost," etc.) with others. The Spirit connects believers and non-believers in situations in which the latter can journey with the former toward faith in a context of togetherness. Daniel Duffis discusses the importance of such togetherness in youth evangelism. He says, "this approach imagines both young believers and unbelievers walking side by side as they explore faith within a community that invites doubt, is open to question their own doctrinal beliefs, and is less judgmental towards those who are on a different point on the path."[26]

Churches in the Wesleyan tradition must attune themselves to the work of the Spirit among those in Christ and those still on the journey. The Spirit enables those in Christ to express love and cultivate togetherness both with other believers and with those who are yet to believe. "The distinction between the internal and external orientation of the group is unnecessary. Spirit-formed allocentric identity moves a person away from a self-center to a focus on the 'other,' both inside and outside one's own group."[27] The Spirit-empowered capacity to cultivate togetherness, demonstrated by the early Church, is "a subversion of normal intergroup identity processes and is nothing less than a different way of being human in community."[28]

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https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1083&context=cye-pubs; Murray, *Church after Christendom*; Weyers and Saayman, "'Belonging before Believing.'"

[25] Murray, *Church after Christendom*. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=4573092, chapter 1.

[26] Duffis, "Creating Communities of Belonging," 61.

[27] Kuecker, *The Spirit and the "Other,"* 135.

[28] Kuecker, *The Spirit and the "Other,"* 134.